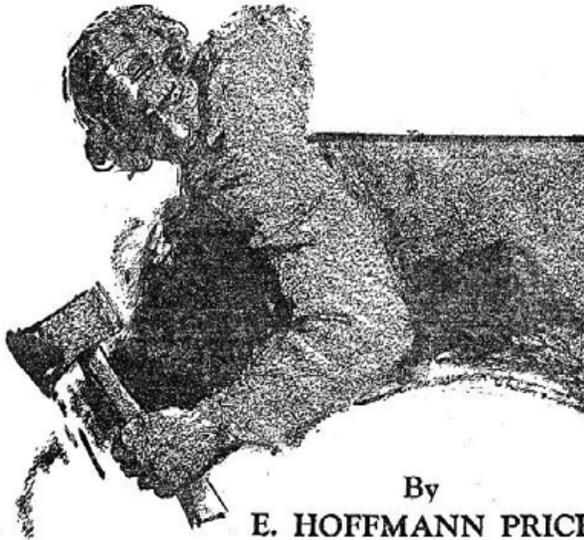


PRUNE PICKING PATRIOT



Though his skull had been hacked three times, he still lived long enough to utter his damning last words.

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Honest John hated prunes, but the army wouldn't take him and the work of a private detective is non-essential. So here he was in the prune orchard, not knowing that hate strong enough to cause arson and murder was just around the next tree!

THE SANTA CLARA VALLEY sun blazed down through the foliage; the dead calm air was heavy with the scent of prunes freshly shaken down, and by now, Honest John Carmody hated prunes with a bitterness theretofore reserved for Grade A enemies.

His round face, always ruddy, had become beef-red. Shade or no shade, the sun got him. Sweat trickled in a steady stream as he scrambled about on hands and knees, picking prunes from the ground and putting them into

the ten-quart pail.

His knees were pounded and bruised. His back was ready to break. Knives and flaming arrows seemed to tear between his shoulders.

How many million prunes to the ton? How many aches can you jam into a man's carcass, a three hundred pounder?

But for the war, Honest John would have had his number twelves planted on the agency desk, and a long black cigar stuffed into his face, and a bourbon and soda wrapped up in a ham-sized fist. Private dicks, however, were a

non-essential industry.

Each ten-quart pail weighed a ton. The Okies and Mexicans didn't mind it. Neither did the high school kids, who had a lot of fun pelting each other with Santa Clara nuggets until crusty Virgil Bean threatened to boot them till their noses bled.

Orchard after orchard: mile after mile, and not enough help to go around.

When he heard voices near at hand, Honest John painfully straightened up. A file of pickers were coming from Gunnar Agard's place, across the road. Virgil Bean was pointing, telling them where to start work, after they had made camp.

A bit of labor piracy, huh?

And then he saw Gunnar Agard: a lean, long-legged and leathery farmer with a white mustache; he was past seventy, the neighbors said, but he moved with quick, clod-hopping strides, and there was nothing senile about his voice when he shouted, "You rat, you can't take my pickers!"

Virgil Bean was some twenty years younger; he was heavy, muscular, square-jawed. When he answered, he mocked Agard's trace of Scandinavian accent: "They are coming because they want to; I didn't ask them. Vat you got is marbles, not prunes."

That last was pretty nearly the truth. Agard's fruit was smaller, it wedged in between lumps of earth; twice as much effort was necessary to pick a ton.

HONEST John rose. The final straightening knifed him until he almost groaned. The ancient Swede's bitter blue eyes blazed. His fists were knotty. Honest John, though sorry for the old fellow, was thinking, "I'd sure not want to've tangled with him thirty years ago!"

"I bust your damn' head!" Agard yelled, and ploughed in.

He asked no odds for his years, and his first punch rocked the solid Virgil Bean. But Agard was bucking the calendar. He soaked

up the first punch. He tried to come back after the second. His own wallop had lost steam, and then—

Whop!

Bean laid him out. "Get off my ranch, or I'll fill your pants with shot!"

Agard tried to get up and fight some more. His hands closed about a clod. Bean booted him, laid him out cold.

Honest John said, "You know he wasn't going to heave that clod and if he had, what of it?"

"You don't like it, huh?"

Honest John was just tired and griped enough to have but one answer: it popped like a pistol, and Bean toppled, glassy-eyed. The newly arrived prune pickers cheered, and so did some of the old crew. Honest John boosted Agard to his feet. The old Swede muttered, "Keep your hands off, I don't need no help—"

"I'm going to pick your prunes, irregardless." He turned on those who had walked out. "And you, you heels, how are you going to play it?"

"Who's a heel?" someone demanded.

"Aw, go get your zoot suit!" Carmody kicked over his bucket of prunes. "Let's go, Agard, we're working for you."

Half a dozen of the deserters trailed after them.

The Swede grumbled, "All these years, we been friends, he lent me money, too; now this turns up, you never know what kind of stinker a man is till he's dead."

When he got a look at Agard's prunes, Carmody saw that he had talked himself into something worse than he'd expected. And that evening, as he limped to his jalopy, Honest John faced more grief. It kept him awake in his tourist cabin, just outside of San Jose. Alma, old man Bean's daughter, would be griped when she heard about the quarrel.

ALMA ELWELL, after quitting a no-good husband, had come back home, and now she was working on the night shift at the

cannery. Each morning, on his way to work, Honest John had been detouring to pick her up when the night shift ended at six. That beat the crowded bus.

Well, the gal was still married, and anyway, she was young enough to like 'em tall and handsome, instead of dumb-looking and baldheaded. Nevertheless, he decided to get in a first word. Alma, having gone to town that afternoon, and then directly to work, had not heard of the quarrel.

Some of the girls who came from the cannery wore their white uniforms. Others had changed, mostly to slacks. But Alma, who was blonde and shapely enough to get away with slacks, was still smart enough to have voted for skirts.

"Oh, hello!" She waved, left the chattering crowd of fillies and battleaxes, and headed for the car. "You look tired."

"You don't. Wish I were your age."

He meshed the gears. Alma eyed him, speculatively, then retouched her make-up. After a moment, she said, "I hope you weren't really annoyed because I couldn't go to the movie with you last night."

He forced a chuckle. "After all, you're bound to have dates."

Alma sighed. "Funny calling that a date. I met my husband." Silence for some yards. Then, "The usual sales talk."

"Going to try it again?"

She shook her head. "The folks say I'd be crazy to."

Near the end of the short run, Carmody pulled up beside an orchard, and told her about the quarrel. He concluded, "So I socked your father, which was just about as lousy as him socking old Agard." Then, leaning over to open the door: "We're almost here, and I guess you'll want to hoof the rest of the way."

"So that's what made you act so funny. Well, I'm sorry it happened, but I certainly won't refuse to ride with you; don't be silly! Dad's just hot-tempered."

They were swinging into the drive when

Alma screamed. Though orchards blocked the view, a column of flame rose high above the trees. Virgil Bean's house was ablaze. From a distance, Carmody heard the yells of the prune pickers, who were dashing from their distant camp.

Agard, a pail of chicken feed in one hand, came running from across the road. Carmody booted the throttle.

The house was just about gone. A man in an old fashioned night shirt lay in the dusty clearing. He was bloody and scorched; he twitched as though trying to get further from the heat.

Honest John bounded from the wheel. "Stay where you are," he said to Alma. "I'll handle this."

Then Agard joined him.

Though Bean's skull had been hacked three times with an axe, the man still lived. His eyes opened, dazed and unfocused. He made a warding gesture as Carmody and Agard bent over him. In a vacant monotone he muttered, "Come back to finish me—you—you—"

The half a dozen prune pickers who had arrived heard all too clearly, and eyed each other. Honest John didn't like that, but he didn't skip a beat: "Phone for an ambulance, he's still alive. Bean, who did it?"

No answer. Alma was screaming, "Mother! Where are you? Someone look for her!"

THERE was a rush of spectators, some braving the heat to look in the tank house, others to the eucalyptus grove, to which Agard and Carmody took Virgil Bean. While moving an injured man is bad business, the heat made it necessary.

And he saw that he had been wrong in moving the man. Another gesture of protest, a mutter, and Bean conked out.

They could not find Alma's mother. Carmody had an idea, but he kept it to himself. Some of the searchers were returning,

looking rather sick. "Get that girl away!" Carmody commanded.

The breeze shifted. The odor of burning flesh confirmed his guess. He was glad when the ambulance and the sheriff's deputies arrived.

Bean's own axe had felled him. The initials stenciled on the helve clinched that.

There were no fingerprints, just a smudge. According to the interne who took over, Bean had been hacked down some three hours before Carmody's arrival with Alma: this opinion was based on the condition of the wounds, and of the blood on the weapon. The fire, however, had roared up suddenly, explosively. Agard, the prune pickers, and the other near neighbors had apparently noticed it at about the same time.

Very oddly, not one of the axe blows had cut in as deeply as it should have.

Even a light smack would normally split the toughest skull.

Questioning neighbors and prune pickers was an all day job, and Carmody, just for a change, was at the receiving end. The Mexicans and Okies, on the defensive, made the most of Virgil Bean's last words.

Two deputies went to Agard's place. The hatchet-faced one, Hapgood, stayed for further talk with Carmody. "So you're Honest John, huh? I heard of you. What's the *Honest* mean, dumb or crooked?"

"If it meant either, every cop in the country'd spell his name with an 'H', including you."

Hapgood grinned. "All right, I spell mine with an 'H'! Everyone heard Bean say to you and Agard, so you come back to finish me. And we'd like to know which one he meant."

"Quit horsing around. Where do I stand? Either you mean it, or you don't."

Hapgood lit a cigarette. "I am just glad old man Bean wasn't looking at me when he sounded off his last will and testament."

Then the other deputies brought Agard from across the street, and headed for the car.

He was handcuffed. That quarrel had done the job up brown.

Late that afternoon, when the ruins had cooled, they found what remained of Mrs. Bean. There was a shattered gallon jug, and a distinct trace of gasoline odor. She had been shot to death with a .32-20 Winchester. A neighbor, looking at the metal parts fished from the debris near the back door, said that the weapon was Bean's.

Having gone to bat for Agard in the matter of prunes, Carmody could not dump the old man now; and the recollection of Alma's face, when she saw what happened, forced him to action.

Honest John went to the county jug, to take Agard a plug of chewing tobacco. The old man said smoking was a silly habit, but that chewing was good for the teeth.

"Pop, who's your lawyer?"

"You think I'm going to have a mortgage on my place the rest of my life?" the Swede flared up. "Look how they hooked—"

"A lawyer won't necessarily—"

But Agard shouted him down: "It is a hell of a note when an innocent man has to prove he's not guilty, lawyers are to protect crooks, you understand?"

THERE are times when you can't argue with a Scandinavian, and this was one of them, yet Carmody made another attempt: "But why's Bean say, *you come back to finish me?* Pop, this ain't play."

"You talk like a cop."

"Well, I used to be one. Maybe I can help you."

Agard mulled this over. "All right, stay at the house, save tourist court rent, and take care of those prunes."

"Haven't you got any alibi?"

The Swede's jaw clamped on the plug of tobacco. "Hell, no. That proves I'm innocent, only crooks have alibis."

Carmody groaned, "Oh, what a client!"

"Son, if you were any kind of detective,

you'd be detecting, you'd not be out here working." Then, grinning amiably. "And quit calling me Pop, I'm not so old. Going to tend those prunes?"

"They're about all I can salvage, the way you cut up!"

As he headed for the Sinclair, where Alma had dug in to get away from sympathetic and curious neighbors, Honest John began to wonder about Agard. Maybe the old fox was betting on his age to influence a jury, and never mind arguments.

Alma had done a better job of pulling herself together than he had expected, though her eyes told him that shock still kept her from knowing how badly she had been hurt.

"If you ask me any questions, I'll go wild!"

The room was cluttered with dress shop boxes. Every stitch she owned, except the clothes she'd worn from the cannery, had been burned. She saw his glance take in the display, and went on, "I hated shopping, but I had to."

"And I hate to butt in like this, but I have to."

"Why? Haven't I answered enough questions today?"

"Do you believe Gunnar Agard really did it?"

Alma passed her hand over her eyes. "I can't even believe it happened. Oh, go home! I know you mean well, but do go! *Please!*"

Unless Alma played ball, Carmody was stumped. "I'm representing Agard," he declared, gruffly, "and they're not going to railroad him. Who are you covering?"

She jerked back as though he had slapped her. "What do you mean?"

"I've worked on these apple knocker cases before. You folks are all rooted in the earth, you're afraid of making enemies in the neighborhood, so you all dummy up. Your father had no enemies, not at all, so all of a sudden some one flings a gallon of gas into the bedroom, chops your dad down when he comes running out, and then—"

"Will you get out! Before I call—"

She snatched the phone. Honest John twisted it from her grasp, and caught her wrists. He said, gently, "You think you don't want this cleared up, but you really do." He edged her toward a chair, patted her shoulders, and after a moment, when she seated herself, he continued, "Was there any jealousy around the house? Some romance stuff? It happens, you know."

He barely kept her from bouncing to her feet. "Why, you—you dirty bum! If you mean mother and Gunnar Agard—"

Honest John blinked, and put on the dumb look which had won him his handle, years previous. It worked again: Alma relaxed. "Oh, I know, detectives can't get out of such ways of thinking, you meet so many awful people."

He went on with his whipsawing: "Your husband was in town last night, you as much as said he tried to sell you the idea of going back to him."

"Well, what of it?"

A bit more bluff: "If it wasn't so easy for you to go home, maybe you'd go back to him. Your folks didn't think much of him."

ALMA flared up, "The only difference between you and the police is, they're twisting everything to fit Gunnar Agard, you're twisting things to fit Orrin!"

"One of the neighbor kids picking prunes told me how your dad run Orrin Elwell off the place account of loafing and borrowing dough from him. Heck, it's no secret, your trying to stick and them talking you into your senses."

"That doesn't mean he'd do such a horrible thing. Any of the pickers might've done it. Wrangling about pay, or working conditions, or just plain robbery."

"Where'd you and Orrin go, that night?"

"We ate at Latour's, on Fountain Alley, and he asked me to go out to Coyote with him; he lives above the Eldorado Bar, where he works; it was his night off."

"What'd he do after you went to work?"

She said triumphantly, "I was late, he got the last southbound bus at eleven, I took a cab to the cannery, and did I have a time finding one! And you can check all that."

"He should've been with a strange woman. A wife can't testify against her husband, and her testimony for him doesn't pack much weight."

"Well, ask the bus driver, ask the waiter! Ask the cab driver! And now get out, leave me alone!"

The cops had all the evidence. Honest John's only chance was his old stand-by, "Keep 'em irritated." When people get griped enough, they blow up. And so, instead of heading back to the Agard farm, he drove to Coyote, some ten miles out of San Jose.

The hamlet consisted of a few ancient trees, a general store, a freight station, one filling station, and a saloon; the customers were mainly farmers, and the cowpunchers who came down from the Mt. Hamilton range.

Honest John was not surprised to find the Eldorado empty, and the bartender reading a magazine. Not enough business here to cause fallen arches. He was young and husky, a tall, good-looking fellow, except for the griped and sullen expression of eyes and mouth.

"You Orrin Elwell?"

"Yeah, and if you're John Carmody, you might as well get out of here."

"You sure welcome customers. Yeah, this is easier than pitching hay, all right," Carmody observed amiably. "Bourbon. And have one yourself."

"You quit ribbing my wife, wise guy, you understand?"

Carmody chuckled. "Hell, I'm through with her, I come out here to pick on you. Irritating people is my hobby."

Elwell scowled, set out a bottle, and did not take one himself.

"Sure a nice job, knocking off your in-laws," Honest John observed cheerily, "Too bad about the old lady, but he was a crusty fool, I guess you feel better now, huh?"

"Listen, pot-gut, I read the papers. Go back to your prunes."

Carmody poured himself another. "Not till I get through picking around the ruins and the barn and everything. Ten to one, Gunnar Agard didn't do it."

"Who the hell did?"

"Wouldn't be surprised if you did. Like I told your wife."

ELWELL had had just about enough. He rounded the end of the bar, and headed for the moth-eaten pool table. He was quick enough, but he moved as though bartending had given him sore feet. His shoes had knife slits to keep them from pinching. Honest John got all that as he grabbed the bottle and said, "Easy! Don't try using that cue, or I'll cold-caulk you proper."

Elwell halted. Wrath reddened his face. Two long scars became plainer, one on the cheek, one on the forehead.

Carmody set down the bottle. "You better move to town and keep on the job, or I'll be seeing more of her."

Elwell cursed, made a lunge, whacking down with the butt of the cue. Carmody slipped on a wet cigar stump and lost time getting clear. The blow missed his head, but cracked him at the angle of neck and shoulder. That should have paralyzed him, and plenty, yet while it hurt more than enough, it didn't have the steam that Elwell's size and build should put behind it.

Carmody continued his pivot, moving in. He stamped down with his heel, catching Elwell on the instep. And that was paralyzing. The cue dropped to the sawdust. The man groaned in misery. Carmody knocked him back against the cue-rack.

"Come on out to Agard's and see me. Next time, do it right."

IT was midnight when he parked in the drive, and stepped into Agard's farmhouse. For a bachelor's dump, it was very neat. The

uniform cap, the binnacle, and the framed pictures on the walls explained that Agard had spent years at sea.

In the cooler was one of Mrs. Bean's whooping apple pies. The size, the pattern of slashes knifed into the crust, and the tang of lemon peel all contributed to the identification. That pie which she had taken to her neighbor, the day before the murder, made Honest John think of the slabs the old lady had handed him.

He started to eat a hunk, then decided to make some coffee. After scouting for a moment, he found a box of matches and without too much fumbling, got the gasoline range going. It made for speed; but in Winter, a wood stove kept the place warm. For all his years, Agard split knotty chunks of oak. "Swinging an axe," he told Carmody, "keeps you young."

"Quit calling me Pop, I'm not so old . . ."

For her age, Mrs. Bean had been an attractive woman.

And that's the motivation behind a good many rural murders.

Carmody's pie choked him. Ashamed of his logic, he repeated, "But it has happened, it does happen, the D.A. knows all about that sort of funny-business, and he's got a man in jail . . ."

He needed rest, and needed it badly; but that apple pie prodded him. So despite the hour, he crossed the road, and walked down the long drive through the orchard and past the deep blackness of Bean's eucalyptus grove.

Trifles now pulled together; since he had worked on the farm, he could find meanings which the cops might have missed.

Honest John headed for the barn, which now housed tractor and truck, instead of horses. The gas barrel, sitting on a saw-buck frame, had a chain and lock gadget to secure the filling plug and the outlet faucet. From all he had been able to gather, there had been no effort to learn the source of the fuel.

Suppose there had been a family quarrel. Those shallow axe-cuts might have been made by a woman. If Mrs. Bean had gone wild, as farm women have been known to do, she might have tried to conceal the crime. And instead of returning to a corpse, she came back to face the rifle in the hands of a dazed and dying man.

Or, wounded, Bean might have shot his wife, and then, hours later, started the fire.

CARMODY noted that the lock had been jimmed. This was not apparent except on close scrutiny, for the shacklebolt was partially thrust back into its seat. Lying against the wall was a pinch bar, dust coated, except for one end, which had been wiped clean. There was no trace or blood anywhere.

In the tool room, there were nails where the bar had hung. Its shape was outlined on the wall. On the floor he found three match stumps, carefully ground out: paper matches.

Carmody spent some minutes scrutinizing the place. In the corner nearest the door was a forge and an anvil, and a sack of blacksmith's coal, and some plowshares which were to be welded.

The old burlap bag had rotted from age. Some of the granulated coal, a grade selected because it was free from sulphur, had leaked to the floor; a fresh leakage, a fresh break. He looked at the pinch bar again. The dustless end had bits of powdered coal on it. Someone had wiped the metal on the slack of the half emptied bag.

On the way back, the weariness Carmody had been fighting swooped up in an overwhelming wave. He was just short of walking in his sleep. How he got to Agard's was not entirely clear to him, for he'd passed the eucalyptus grove without having been aware of its foreboding darkness, nor its smell.

Yet there was a compensation, an unveiling of perceptions normally buried. He knew, suddenly, that he was being hunted.

Worse than that, the hunter had him wide open.

Panic-fumbling saved him. He tried to sidestep and whirl when a man lunged from the shadows of the porch. Instead, he fell flat. His utter helplessness shocked him, and when he knew that the whisking axe had whacked into the veranda column, instead of into his skull, he yelled: an explosion of terror, relief, fury, all in one.

That cross between shriek and bull-bellow shook Carmody as a man's own cry arouses him from a nightmare, leaving him more shaken by his own voice than by the horror which had pursued him. And the axe-man, expecting a knockout and getting a blow-off of sound, dropped his weapon.

Carmody's reserves rushed into action. He snatched the axe and yelled, "I can cut meat, too!"

He bounded in pursuit, and stumbled over an irrigation dike. And then, as he picked himself up, a flashlight blazed full in his eyes. Too late, he understood why footfalls had seemed to be receding and at the same time retreating. Where one had fled, another had advanced.

Carmody flung himself sidewise, and got a short grip on the axe. A man commanded, "Drop it! What the hell you prowling about for?"

"Why, you dope, get the guy that tried to conk me!"

"Drop it, quick!"

It was Hapgood, the deputy. "Drop it now!"

And by the time Carmody explained, there was not a Chinaman's chance of overtaking the prowler.

"Sure," the deputy growled, "I heard something funny, but when you hollered, I figured you were going amuck again."

"Again?"

"Referring to last night's axe work. What were you snooping around the barn for, huh?"

"Criminal always returns to scene of

crime, huh? That was your game, I guess."

"You haven't answered me."

"You were watching, and saw me."

"Sure."

"All right, you saw all I did, and if you can make any more out of it than I can, you're smart. You think I faked that mixup by the porch?"

Hapgood shook his head. "I wasn't close enough to see, but I could hear. Yeah, there was someone."

Carmody mopped his forehead. "You're telling *me!*"

Hapgood grinned sourly. "Old man Agard was released on bail early this evening. Maybe he don't want a dick snooping."

"So that's why you came out?" When the deputy didn't answer, Carmody went on, "Well, I am a prune picking patriot, and I got to get some shut-eye. If you're going to prowl, I'll risk sleep."

WHEN the sun awakened Honest John, Hapgood had left, but the aches had not. And the prune pickers had not yet shown up.

He was just finishing his coffee when Gunnar Agard stepped in. He had arrived on the second bus. The old fellow chuckled. "Surprised you, huh? Well, I figured I'd better keep an eye on things, principle or no principle." Then, when he learned that the pickers had not showed up: "They'll be back, they got pay coming. What do you aim to do?"

"I got to look around. I'll be back later."

"Don't be too long. I got a surprise when you come back."

"Everyone seems to have," Carmody grumbled. "Don't pick too many prunes."

"I'll split some oak to get limbered up first."

He headed for the wood pile.

Honest John was gunning the engine when Agard yelled, "Hey, where'n hell's that axe?"

Pretending not to hear, he went helling

down the drive. Carmody wanted to call Alma, but he resisted the urge. He had his badge with him; he'd brought it for sentimental reasons, and now it came in handy.

His first stop was the Coastline Bus Station. There he learned from the check sheets that two tickets for Coyote had been sold the night of the murders, but that only one had been taken up. And he found the cab driver who had taken Alma to the cannery.

"Yeah, she was with a tall, good-looking guy in a gray suit, and he was trying to kiss her good-night and she was saying, hurry, hurry, your bus is about leaving, and then she says to me, get going, I'm late for work."

"He didn't go with her then?"

"Nuh-nh. And I am damned if I know whether he made his bus."

Carmody drove to Coyote again, which was tough on his "A" card.

The Mexican proprietor of the Eldorado, wiry man with twinkling eyes and wavy black hair, was on duty.

"Where's Elwell live?"

"Go by the side stairs, mister."

Carmody went. He knocked. He rattled the knob. There was no answer. Honest John returned to report his luck. The boss smiled. "I think maybe he quit. He is up too early, mos' time he sleep till noon. You are the police?"

"Uh-huh. Take me up, will you?"

"With pleasure, sir. Is one lousy bartender anyway, and too much police yesterday."

So Hapgood had been on the job, and plenty. As they went up the stairs, Carmody cursed solo plays.

"Where do you live, Mr. Lopez?"

"Nex' door in the yellow house."

He used his pass key. The bed was rumpled. Match and cigarette stumps littered the floor. The clothes closet was empty. Lopez went on, "Nice fellow, only he jerks down too much from the cash, every bartender does, a little is all right, too much is not. Bot the worst, he don' like heavy work with the cases

of beer."

"Weak back?"

"Joost lazy. Maybe the truck crackup. When he go through the windshield to get cut up—I don't know."

CARMODY spent some moments looking at the dusty floor. Then back at the bar he bought a couple drinks, and asked, "What time'd he come in from his night off?"

"Is lousy business, I close early. I do not know, bot he was sleep late, like always."

All of which proved zero. The only thing that did count was Elwell's taking a powder. Maybe Agard's release—Alma could have learned of it, and told Elwell—had made him think that since the Swede was not in deep enough to be held without bail, the cops would nail someone else. A mere runout, however, doesn't by a long shot prove guilt, yet Carmody was good and griped, for he wanted more conversation with Alma's ornamental husband.

On the way back, he debated the matter of going to Hapgood and telling all. The deputy wasn't a bad egg. "And I'm losing my punch," Carmody muttered, somberly. "Prune picking does something to a fellow."

But first, he wanted to think it out.

Back at Agard's, he found the old man riding herd on the pickers. The predicted surprise had materialized. Glancing at the wood pile, Carmody saw that the Swede had split his quota.

So Honest John got to work. Like all these murders in the farm belt, it would take time, and lots of it. Since a flash finish seemed out, the only move was to work, meet more neighbors, and finally get the answer. An answer is usually available, when the tight mouthed apple knockers finally decide to tell all.

The ground became rougher, and the prunes smaller, and the sun hotter. Agard finally said, some while before sunset, "You knock off, you being here counts more'n what

you pick, it's the example."

So he hobbled after the Swede.

The local bus, jammed with cannery workers, was pulling up in front of Agard's. A blonde girl, and a tall man in a gray suit got out. The Swede said, "That there's the surprise."

"That," Carmody said when he was through gaping, "is gospel. What are they doing, heading for here?"

They were Alma and Orrin Elwell. The ex-bartender had two suitcases, one new, one battered. Alma had a bag.

"She's come back to keep an eye on her orchard," Agard explained, "and she talked him into getting out of a non-essential job and coming out to help her. Even if he ain't worth a damn working, having a man around helps, with the pickers. And they're going to stay here, it's the handiest."

In other words, Alma was now convinced that Gunnar Agard had not killed her parents; and her move would do more for the old Swede than the foxiest mouthpiece possibly could.

Alma was pleasant as though she and Carmody had not swapped words. Elwell made a good stab at pretending that Carmody had not socked his jaw. As for Carmody, he was still wondering which of the two men had hunted him with an axe. This was all too dizzy. He preferred his crimes straight, with a beer chaser.

ALMA cooked supper. This wasn't a game. Her eyes glowed. She was proud of Elwell, coming back to the farm. She did not look at all like the beaten and dazed girl who had flared up in anguish when Carmody deliberately knifed and ribbed her. Elwell had an alibi. Maybe Agard also had one. Everyone was at ease but Honest John, and he sat on the edge of his chair.

Alma refilled the coffee cups. Carmody broke out cigarettes. Then, as he fumbled for matches, the Swede said, "Some in the

kitchen."

"I'll get them!" Alma was nearest the door.

But Elwell produced a book, and struck one. For his own, the third light, he took another. "Not that I'm superstitious."

Alma piped up, "Orrin, must you always drop them on the floor!"

"Sorry, honey, I'm not behind a bar now."

And then Carmody got it. He jerked his chair back. "But you damn' soon will be behind bars."

Elwell jumped up. "What's that? By God, again?"

"You ground those match stumps into the floor, I heard you. Like you ground them in your room. And in the tool room, when you went to the gas barrel."

His words shocked the three into a silence which gave him all the chance he wanted. "You flung that gas into their room. Because he—they—convinced your wife, you'd always be a bum."

Elwell had cleared the table. His laugh was loud and shaky. "Because I grind matches. God, lots of people do!"

He started to swing at Carmody. He landed. The punch had no steam. Honest John came back, laying him flat and goggle-eyed. "Get back! The both of you, stand back!" he commanded. "He asked for that one, and this is business."

The back door opened, just as Carmody stepped toward the ex-bartender. Hapgood stomped in. "Funny business, huh?"

Carmody knelt at Elwell's feet, looked up, grinned. "For the second time, H, you're not a pest. I'm betting this guy has blisters on his feet, and coal dust in his pants cuffs. Smithing coal from Bean's tool room. And you look at the nail prints on the floor where he twisted his hoof on the matches."

"That's what you were looking for last night?"

"Uh-uh." Carmody yanked off a shoe. "Look. Too much walking." He ripped

Elwell's sleeve. "Scar on arm, glass cuts like on his face. Husky but no muck, glass cuts are nasty to muscle. That's why that axe last night didn't bite deep into the pillar when it missed my head, and that's why he had to take three chops at old man Bean. Shake out his cuffs, Hapgood! That's the payoff."

And all the while, Alma stood there, color receding, eyes widened with horrified understanding. When Elwell sat up, blinking, she cried out, and ran from the room. "Bean said," he croaked, "*you come to finish me.* You, Agard."

"Bean was chopped dizzy and cross-eyed," Carmody said. "The cops figured that out, and began wondering about prune pickers. So did Alma, or she'd never have come to this place. You probably didn't want to come out here, but this was the chance to horn in on a nice farm and no work."

Then, to Hapgood, "Take it away, he's yours. I'm sick of all this, it's worse'n prunes. I'll be at the tourist court."

When Hapgood left with his prisoner, the Swede asked in a low voice, "That late fire? That's what nearly sunk me."

"Just as a guess, he pulled the window down, cut off the draft. It took a while to break out and to the air. What set me thinking was the man taking gas from the barrel. If you'd done it, you'd brought your own gas, you got plenty. He hoofed from San Jose, instead of taking the bus for Coyote. He hoofed back to San Jose, making eight miles. No more bus to Coyote that night, he either hoofed or hitched a ride. Then last night, to conk me, he musta walked to and from San Jose."

"No vonder he has blistered feet." Agard cocked his head toward the bedroom. A pillow was muffling Alma's sobbing. "Like he figured, she did give him a chance. Look here, you better start detecting again, you are no damn' good picking prunes anyway. Too fat."

Carmody straightened a kink out of back. "I'm picking 'em. There's a war on. But not your prunes, Pop. I am getting out of here before I have to face her. She's glad I done the trick but I don't look good to her, and never will."

The Swede nodded. "You are a good fellow. But quit calling me Pop, I ain't so old."