

Red Goose

by Norbert Harrison Davis, 1909-1949

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IT was a long, high-ceilinged hall, gloomy and silent. The air was musty. Tall, barred windows on one side of the hall let in a little of the bright sunlight where it formed waffle-like patterns on the thick green carpet. There was a polished brass rail, waist-high, running the length of the hall on the side opposite the barred windows.

Shaley came quietly along the hall. He was whistling softly to himself through his teeth and tapping with his forefinger on the brass rail in time with his steps.

Shaley was bonily tall. He had a thin, tanned face with bitterly heavy lines in it. He looked calm; but he looked like he was being calm on purpose—as though he was consciously holding himself in. He had an air of hardboiled confidence.

A door at the end of the hall opened, and a wrinkled little man in a grey suit that was too big for him came hurrying out. He carried a framed picture under one arm, and had dusty, rimless glasses on the end of his nose. He had a worried, absent-minded expression on his face, and mumbled in a monotone to himself.

Shaley stepped in front of him and said: "Hello."

"How do you do," said the little man busily. He didn't look up. He tried to side-step around Shaley.

Shaley kept in front of him. "My name is Shaley—Ben Shaley."

"Yes, yes," said the little man absently. "How do you do, Mr Shaley." He tried to squeeze past.

Shaley put out one long arm, barring his way.

"Shaley," he said patiently. "Ben Shaley. You sent for me."

The little man looked up, blinking through the dusty glasses.

"Oh!" he said. "Oh! Mr Shaley. Of course. You're the detective."

Shaley nodded. "Now you're getting it."

The little man made nervous, batting gestures with one hand, blinking. Apparently he was trying to remember why he had sent for a detective.

"Oh, yes!" he said, snapping his fingers triumphantly. "The picture! Yes, yes. My name is Gray, Mr Shaley. I'm the curator in charge. Won't you step into my office?"

"Thanks," said Shaley.

Gray trotted quickly back down the hall, back through the door. It was a small office with a big, flat desk next to another barred window. Gray dodged around the desk and sat down in the chair behind it, still holding the framed picture.

Shaley sat down in another chair, tipped it back against the wall, and extended his long legs comfortably.

Gray held up the picture and stared at it admiringly, head on one side. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, turning the picture so Shaley could see it.

"Too fat," said Shaley.

Gray blinked. "Fat?" he said, bewilderedly.

"It's a picture of a dame, isn't it?" Shaley asked.

"It's a nude," Gray admitted.

Shaley nodded. "She's too fat. She bulges."

"Bulges?" Gray repeated in amazement. "Bulges?" He looked from the picture to Shaley. "Why, this is a Rubens."

Shaley tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "I suppose you had some reason for calling me?"

Gray came out of his daze. "Oh, yes. Yes, yes. It was about the picture."

"What picture? This one?"

"Oh, no. The one that was stolen."

Shaley took a deep breath. "Now we're getting somewhere. There was a picture stolen?"

"Of course," said Gray. "That's why I called you."

"I'm glad to know that. When was it stolen?"

"Three days ago. Mr Denton recommended you. Mr Denton is one of the trustees of the museum."

"Denton, the lawyer?"

Gray nodded. "Mr Denton is an attorney. He said something about setting a crook to catch a crook."

"I'll remember that," said Shaley.

"I hope I haven't offended you?" Gray said anxiously.

"You better hope so," Shaley told him. "I'm bad medicine when I get offended. There was a picture stolen from the museum, then, three days ago. What kind of picture?"

"The *Red Goose*, painted by Guitierrez about 1523. A beautiful thing. It was loaned to us by a private collector for an exhibition of sixteenth century work. It's a priceless example."

"What does it look like?" Shaley asked.

Gray peered at him closely. "You never saw the *Red Goose*?"

"No," said Shaley patiently. "I never saw the *Red Goose*."

Gray shook his head pityingly.

Shaley took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead. "Listen," he said in a strained voice. "Would you mind giving me a description of that picture?"

"Certainly," said Gray quickly. "It's twelve inches by fifteen. It's a reproduction of a pink goose in a pond of green water lilies. A beautiful work."

"It sounds like it," Shaley said sourly. "How was it stolen?"

"It was cut out of the frame with a razor blade. I never heard of such an act of vicious vandalism! They cut a quarter of an inch off the painting all around it!"

"Terrible," Shaley agreed. "When was this done?"

"I told you. Three days ago."

Shaley took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "I know you told me three days ago," he said in a deceptively mild voice. "But what time of the day was it stolen—at night?"

"Oh, no. In the afternoon."

"Where were your guards?"

"They were stopping the fight."

Shaley made a sudden strangling noise. He took off his hat and dropped it on the floor. He glared at Gray. Gray stared back at him in mild surprise. Shaley picked up his hat and straightened it out carefully.

"The fight," he said, his voice trembling a little. "There was a fight, then?"

"Why, yes," said Gray. "I forgot to mention it. Two men got into a fight in the back gallery, and it took four of the guards to eject them from the premises. And then we noticed that the picture was gone."

"That's fine," Shaley told him sarcastically. "Now would it be too much trouble for you to describe these men who fought?"

Gray said: "I noticed them particularly, because they seemed a trifle out of place in a museum. One was a big, tall man with long arms and short legs. He had four gold teeth, and he was bald, and his ear—" Gray stopped, hunting for the word.

"Cauliflower?" Shaley asked.

Gray nodded quickly. "Yes. Thick and crinkly. The man interested me as an example of arrested development in the evolutionary process."

Shaley blinked. He scratched his head, squinting.

"You mean he looked like an ape?" he asked.

Gray nodded again. "He had certain definite characteristics—the small eyes sunken under very heavy brows, the flattened nose, the abnormally protruding jaw—that have come to be associated with the development of the human race in its earlier stages."

"That's nice," Shaley said blankly. "What did the other one look like?"

"A nice-looking young man. A trifle rough-looking—but quiet and self-effacing. He had red hair and big pink freckles. The thumb on his left hand was missing."

"That's enough," Shaley said. "Have you notified the police of the theft?"

"Oh, no. Mr Denton advised us not to. He said the thieves might destroy the picture if they thought the police were after them." Gray shook his head sadly at the thought of such an outrage. "Mr Denton said to tell you to get it back for nothing if you could; but that the museum was willing to pay up to five thousand dollars. The picture must be returned undamaged. It's a matter of honour with the museum. It would be a terrible blow to our reputation if the property of a private collector should be lost while in our possession."

Shaley stood up. "I'll see what I can do."

"Mr Denton said he would take care of your fee."

Shaley said: "I'll take care of him. Calling me a crook."

SHALEY drove his battered Chrysler roadster into Hollywood, entered a drug-store and went into one of the telephone booths in back.

He took a leather-covered notebook from his pocket, flipped through the pages, found the number he wanted. He put a nickel in the phone and dialed.

"Yeah?" It was a thin, flat voice.

"This is Ben Shaley, Mike."

"Oh, hello, Ben. Wait a minute." The voice pulled a little away from the telephone. "Turn that radio down. How the hell do you think I can hear?" The voice came closer again. "How are you, Ben? Long time no see."

"I'm okay, Mike. How you doing?"

"Damn good. I got the place all redecorated. I got a real bar now—a swell one—mahogany. Come on out, sometime, Ben."

"Thanks, Mike. Listen, is that guy that writes for *Ring and Turf* there—Pete Tervalli?"

"Yeah. He's upstairs playin' blackjack. You want him?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'll call him. Hold the phone."

Shaley waited, tapping out a complicated rhythm on the mouth-piece of the telephone and humming softly.

"Hello, Ben. This is Pete Tervalli."

Shaley said: "Pete, I want to ask you about a couple of guys. Number one is a big gook that looks like an ape. He's got gold front teeth, a flat snozzle, a thick ear, and he's bald. Know him?"

"Nope," said Pete. "He's a new one on me."

"All right. Here's the other one. He's red-headed and sort of quiet, and he's got big pink freckles on his face. He's minus his left thumb."

"Sure," said Pete. "Sure. That's Fingers Reed. He fights in prelims at the Legion stadium sometimes. Been on at the Olympic a couple times, too. Had a semi-final down to Venice once—got knocked out."

"Where can I find him?"

"At Pop's gym down on Main."

"Thanks a lot, Pete."

SHALEY went up a flight of long, dark stairs littered with white blotches that were ground-out cigarette butts. He went along a short, dirty hall, through swinging double doors with frosted glass panels.

He was in a big high-ceilinged room that smelled strongly of tobacco, liniment, gin and sweat. A youth in a greyish sweatshirt was jumping rope in the middle of the floor. He skipped expertly and solemnly, first from one foot and then the other, counting aloud. In one corner a punching bag battered back and forth in a stuttering roar under the quick fists of a small, bow-legged Filipino. In another corner a fattish man made a rowing machine creak mournfully.

Shaley walked along the wall and entered an open door. It was a small office with a dusty desk in one corner. The walls were papered with the pictures of fighters in various belligerent poses.

Shaley said: "Hello, Pop," to the man sitting at the desk.

Pop was a small man with a shiny bald head. He wore a celluloid collar so high that it took him just under the ears and made him look like he was always stretching his neck. He had a dead brown-paper cigarette in one corner of his mouth.

"Hello, Ben," he said without enthusiasm.

"Where can I find Fingers Reed?"

"Fingers Reed?" Pop repeated absently. "Fingers Reed? I wouldn't know him. He a fighter?"

Shaley grinned. "Come on, Pop. Don't pull that stuff. I just want to give him twenty bucks. Which one is he?"

"Give me the twenty," Pop requested. "He owes it to me for gym fees. He's in the ring."

Shaley went out of the office, through another door and into a small room with seats in high, close tiers against three of its walls. There was a ring in the middle.

Fingers Reed, in a heavy sweatshirt and helmet, was sparring with a tall, spider-legged middleweight. The middleweight danced around very fancily, stepping high. Fingers Reed shuffled after him, his left poked out in front of him, his right held back shoulder high. He was much too slow for the middleweight. He crossed his right again and again—long, heavy blows that the middleweight slipped easily.

A little man in a chequered cap stood beside the ring. He had a watch in one hand and a string in the other. He pulled the string as Shaley watched. The gong boomed.

Fingers Reed and the middleweight patted each other on the back and started walking back and forth in the ring, breathing deeply and swinging their arms.

Shaley said: "Fingers!"

Fingers Reed stopped and looked down at him.

"I want to talk to you a minute," Shaley said.

Fingers Reed nodded. He slid through the ropes, jumped down on the floor. With the thumb of his right boxing glove, he hooked a rubber tooth protector out of his mouth. He spat on the floor and ran his tongue over his front teeth.

"What?"

Shaley said: "Who paid you to put on that fracas at the museum?"

Fingers Reed pulled up the front of his sweatshirt. He had an inner tube, cut open, wound tightly around his stomach. He loosened the inner tube a little. Then he rubbed his nose with the back of one glove, squinting sidewise at Shaley.

"I had an idea there was something sour about that."

Shaley said: "I don't want to get hard about it, but there was a picture lifted while you were having that little to-do, and I want to know about it."

"Sure," said Fingers. "Somebody tells me that they got some pictures of some old fight scenes over in his museum in Pasadena and, me not having nothing to do, I think I will go over and take a look at them. So I do, and they are pretty good pictures, too. After I am done looking at them I walk around to take a look at the rest of the stuff, and while I am looking up comes this big monkey and steps on my foot." He stopped and nodded at Shaley.

"So what?" said Shaley woodenly.

"Well, so I ask him what the hell he thinks he is doing, dancing with me? And then he hauls off and pops me, so I pop him back, and pretty soon a few guys in monkey suits come along and toss us both out on our ears." Fingers gestured with the boxing gloves. "So that's that."

Shaley said: "You wouldn't know this big monkey's name?"

Fingers shook his head. "Never saw him before or since."

Shaley took a twenty-dollar bill out of his vest pocket and folded it lengthwise and looked at Fingers calculatingly.

"That's too bad," he said regretfully. He poked the twenty back into his vest pocket. "Well, I'll be going, then. Thanks."

"Wait, now," said Fingers. "Wait a minute. Don't get in a rush."

Shaley took the bill out of his pocket and gave it to him.

Fingers said: "Here, Jig. Keep it for me." He tossed the folded bill to the timekeeper.

"Let's have the real dope," Shaley requested.

"Well, it's like this. The big monkey's name is Gorjon. He's the stooge for a gent by the name of Carter. The two of them come around the gym here a couple of times, and then they put this proposition up to me. Would I put on a phoney fight at the museum for ten bucks? I was flat, so I said sure, why not? So I did."

"Where can I get hold of these boys?"

Fingers shrugged. "By me."

Shaley said gently: "You wouldn't try to be smart with me, would you, Fingers? You wouldn't try to shake me down?"

Fingers held up one gloved hand, palm out. "So help me. I never see them but three times."

Shaley said: "It'd be worth a hundred to me if I could locate them."

Fingers blinked thoughtfully, rubbing his nose with the glove on his right hand. "Hm. The big boy is a fight fan. You might stake out the stadiums around here."

"You do it. You might get some of your pals to help. I could make it fifty for the guy that found them and a hundred to you."

Fingers nodded. "Okay."

WHEN Shaley came into his office, Sadie, his secretary, was tapping away briskly on the typewriter with glossy, pink-nailed fingers.

"Hi-yah," said Shaley, tossing his hat on the hat-rack and heading for the inner office.

Sadie raised her sleek, dark head and watched him. She didn't say anything.

Shaley got to the door of the inner office, then turned around and came back to her desk.

"Well, what's your trouble?"

Sadie said: "A woman called you up. Who is she?"

"How do I know who she is? Who'd she say she was?"

Sadie sniffed. "She wouldn't tell me her name. Talked like a blonde though."

"How'd you know she was blonde?"

"Humph! I can tell, all right. Talking baby talk—all about a red goose. Who ever heard of a red goose?"

"Did you get her number?" Shaley demanded.

"Certainly I did. I always remember to ask people their number."

"Hell—Give me that number."

Sadie shoved a pad of paper along the desk. Shaley picked up her telephone and began to dial the number.

"And my mother was saying just last night," said Sadie righteously, "that she didn't think this office was the proper place for a young girl to work. All these questionable people coming in and out all day long and you swearing and yelling at me all the time and—"

"Shut up," said Shaley absently.

"Hello." It was a nice voice—small and clear and sweet—shyly innocent.

"This is Ben Shaley. Did you call my office?"

The nice voice said: "Oh, yes."

"About the *Red Goose*?"

"Yes, Mr Shaley. I called the museum, and they told me you were in charge. Are you looking for the picture?"

Shaley said suspiciously: "Who're you? A reporter?"

"Oh, no. I'm the one that has the picture."

Shaley nearly dropped the telephone. "What?"

"Well, Mr Shaley, I haven't exactly got it right here. But I can get it for you. Do you want it?"

"Where are you?" Shaley demanded. "When can I see you?"

"I'll be home tonight at seven-thirty. It's the Hingle Manor apartments on Harcourt just south of Sunset, in Hollywood. Apartment seven. The name is Marjorie Smith."

"I'll be there, Marjorie," Shaley said cheerfully, hanging up.

He put the telephone slowly back on Sadie's desk, frowning thoughtfully. He picked up her pencil and drew a pattern of squares on the desk-pad, still frowning.

"You know," he said absently, "some way or other I didn't like the sound of that. It sounded just a little screwy. I wonder if somebody is trying to lay me an egg?"

"Humph!" said Sadie. "Blondes!"

HINGLE MANOR was a long, neat, two-storey stucco building with turrets on the four corners and blue pennants on each of the turrets. Floodlights placed

on the front lawn and slanted up made the building look larger and newer than it was.

Shaley found the card that said: "Marjorie Smith," and buzzed the bell under it. After a while the latch clicked. Shaley pushed open the door and was in a small, narrow hall, thickly carpeted.

He looked around, then went up a short flight of stairs. At the end of the hall an open door made a yellow square of light that was like a picture frame for the young woman standing there.

Shaley was reminded of an old-fashioned tintype he had once seen in a family album. The woman wore a neat blue dress, modest and plain. She had wide blue eyes and corn-coloured hair wound around her small head in thick braids. Given a sun-bonnet and a slate she would have been a perfect copy of a school girl of fifty years ago.

She smiled and curtsied a little and said shyly: "Won't you come in, please?"

Shaley went into a small, well-furnished living-room and stood there holding his hat in his hands and shifting from one foot to the other uneasily.

The woman came into the room, shutting the door. She sat down on a couch and folded her hands neatly in her lap.

"I'm Marjorie Smith," she said, smiling nicely.

"I'm Ben Shaley."

Marjorie Smith smiled up at him with admiring blue eyes. Shaley watched her uncomfortably. Something was wrong with all this. Marjorie Smith didn't fit in with the rest of the picture—with Fingers Reed and Carter and Gorjon.

"Who lives here with you?" he asked.

She shook her head, wide-eyed. "No one."

"Are we here alone?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes."

Shaley grunted. He scratched his head, scowling. He said:

"Listen, Marjorie, I'm just a nasty man with mean suspicions. The only kind of fairy stories I believe are the kind they tell about the boys who carry handkerchiefs in their cuffs. Just sit right here while I sniff around."

"Oh, surely," said Marjorie.

He nosed through the rest of the apartment—kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, closets. He shot the bolt on the back door. He came back into the front room, opened the front door, peered out into the hall. He sat down in a chair and stared at Marjorie Smith.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said blankly.

She put her hand up over her mouth. "Why, Mr Shaley!"

"Excuse me," said Shaley. "But this is over my head like a tent. Let's talk business."

"Oh, yes," said Marjorie Smith. "Oh, yes. Business." She leaned forward and watched him with big blue eyes.

"You've got the painting I want—the *Red Goose*?"

She nodded earnestly. "Yes."

"Where'd you get it?"

"A man gave it to me—a man by the name of John Jones."

"That was nice of him," Shaley said.

"He said you would pay me two thousand dollars for it."

"He's an optimist," Shaley said sourly.

"It seems like a lot of money, doesn't it?" Marjorie Smith asked earnestly. "But John Jones assured me that it was worth that much. Have you got the money, Mr Shaley?"

"Huh!" said Shaley. "Where's the picture?"

"John Jones said I was not to give it to you until you gave me the money."

"John's a smart fellow," said Shaley. "But I can't give you the money until I know if you have the picture."

"Oh, but I have got it."

"Yes, yes. But I want to see it. Where is it?"

She shook her head regretfully. "Not until you give me the money. Then I'll give it to you. Really I will, Mr Shaley."

Shaley took a deep breath and held himself in. "Listen, Marjorie, I don't want to get hard with you, but if I were you I'd hand over that picture right now."

"But, Mr Shaley, I explained—"

"Once more—will you give me that picture?"

"But, Mr Shaley—"

Shaley jumped for her. He grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled her off the couch and shook her.

"Now, you little dummy—" he snarled.

She made no resistance. Her body was soft and relaxed in his hands. She moved just enough to bring her right hand up under Shaley's nose.

She held a small bottle in her hand, uncorked.

Shaley got one whiff of the contents of that bottle. He choked suddenly. He let go of Marjorie Smith and jumped backwards, gasping.

"Acid!" he said, one hand over his nose.

"Yes," she said, smiling just as nicely as before. "Touch me again, and I'll throw it in your face."

Shaley swallowed hard. The picture wasn't out of focus any more. Marjorie Smith fitted right in.

"Wow!" said Shaley in an awed voice, backing away from her warily. He backed clear to the door, keeping his eyes on the bottle.

"Now listen, boob," said Marjorie Smith in her clear, childlike voice. "Let me tell you something—"

THE door behind Shaley opened suddenly, bunting him forwards. He whirled around, one hand inside his coat, and looked squarely into the blunt, round muzzle of an automatic. His hand came out, empty.

"Take it easy, baby."

Gray had given a good description. This man Gorjon looked like an ape. He had enormously broad, sloping shoulders, hunched forwards. He stood there, swaying a little easily. The gold front teeth gleamed as he grinned at Shaley.

Another man was standing in the doorway behind Gorjon. This man didn't look at Shaley. He was looking at Marjorie Smith.

"Double-crossing little tramp," he said levelly.

He stepped around Gorjon and went towards her, walking springily on the balls of his feet. He was short and round and plumply dapper. He had thick red lips and a small black moustache. He wore a soft white felt hat. He was smiling a little.

Marjorie Smith had hidden the hand holding the acid bottle behind her. She watched the fat man. She waited until he put out a plump, white hand, reaching for her, and then she said something to herself in a tight whisper and hurled the acid at him with a quick sweep of her arm.

The fat man was astoundingly quick. He dropped into a crouch, ducking his head. The acid missed him, spattering on the wall in a bubbling brown stain.

The fat man bounced up again instantly and hit her with his fist. Marjorie Smith fell over a chair and lit on her hands and knees in the corner.

Gorjon hadn't moved either his eyes or the automatic from Shaley. He reached out one big hand and shut the door.

"Sit down, mister," he said to Shaley.

Shaley sat down slowly and tensely in the chair in back of him.

The fat man picked up Marjorie Smith effortlessly and planked her down on the couch. He was still smiling.

She didn't say anything. She watched the fat man expressionlessly. There was a red mark on her face where he had hit her.

The fat man turned to Gorjon. "Take his gun."

Gorjon reached inside Shaley's coat and pulled out the big automatic Shaley carried in a shoulder-holster. He hefted it, grinning.

"It's a .45. He goes loaded for bear. Maybe he's one of these here rough characters you read about in the papers."

The fat man said: "Who is he, Marj?"

Marjorie Smith said sullenly: "Ben Shaley. He's a private peeper—from the museum."

Shaley said: "And you are Carter."

The fat man smiled at him. "So you found Reed, did you? I knew that dead-head would blab all he knew. Yeah, Carter is one of my names. Take a good look at me. Me and Gorjon are gonna be your shadows until you get that money from the museum." He turned back to Marjorie Smith. "Where's the picture?"

"Try and find it."

Carter said: "I will," softly.

He picked her up by the front of her dress and slapped her in the face—quick, sharp slaps that rocked her head back and forth.

"Hey!" said Shaley.

Gorjon pushed his automatic into Shaley's neck. "I wouldn't poke my head out, boy."

Carter said: "Well?" and stopped slapping Marjorie Smith.

She spat at him. He hit her in the mouth with his fist and knocked her back on the couch.

"Rap that boob on the nut," he said calmly to Gorjon, "and take her shoes off. We'll have to get rough with her."

Marjorie Smith wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Her lips left a little smear of blood on her hand.

"I'll tell you," she said thickly. "Tannerwell has it."

Carter watched her thoughtfully. "Tannerwell, huh? You wouldn't fool an old Civil War vet, would you, Marj?"

"Tannerwell has it."

Carter moved his plump shoulders. "So it was that artist sap, huh? I didn't think he had it in him. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

Carter said very gently: "Where is he, Marj?"

She shrugged impatiently. "I tell you I don't know. I've got his telephone number. I can get him to come here."

"That's just dandy," said Carter. "What's the number?"

"Rochester 2585."

Carter went over to the stand near the door and picked up the telephone. "I'll talk to him first, and then I'll let you. You tell him to come over here—and make it good. I'm going to be mad if you try something funny."

Marjorie Smith said: "He'll come."

Carter dialled the number. He waited, listening. Then he said:

"Hello, Tannerwell? This is Carter." He listened, grinning at Shaley. Then he said: "Yes. Your dear old pal, Carter. Now listen, smarty, while I tell you something. I'm over at Marj's apartment. You get that picture and come over here, or something sudden will happen to her. She's going to talk to you."

He held the mouthpiece of the telephone in front of Marjorie Smith.

She said brokenly: "Bill—Bill. Come quick. Bring the picture." Then she screamed suddenly, so loudly it made Shaley jump.

Carter pushed down the receiver hook with his thumb and put the telephone back on its stand. "Dandy, Marj. You should go on the radio."

"He'll be here in about fifteen minutes," Marjorie Smith said, still sullen.

Carter pulled up a chair and sat down. He tipped his hat back and began to whistle softly and patiently between his teeth, watching Marjorie Smith unblinkingly. Gorjon stood just behind Shaley's chair.

Shaley said: "How about sitting down? You make me nervous."

Gorjon chuckled. "Don't get too nervous, because if you start jiggling around this thing is liable to go off."

"Do you think you're going to put this over?" Shaley asked Carter.

Carter stopped whistling long enough to say: "I think so," and then began again. He stopped and looked at Shaley. "Just keep your nose out of this, baby. When I get that picture, then you and me will have a little talk. Until then you're just a kibitzer. Don't get the idea that anybody has dealt you a hand."

Marjorie Smith moved impatiently on the couch. "Can I have a cigarette?"

Carter said: "I don't smoke, dearie. You know that."

"There's some cigarettes in my right-hand coat pocket," Shaley said.

Gorjon fished the package out and tossed it on the couch. Marjorie Smith took one and used the lighter on the table at the end of the couch.

Carter got up and turned on the radio. He found a dance orchestra, nodded approvingly, sat down, and began to whistle in tune with it, tapping his foot.

They waited.

IT took Tannerwell sixteen minutes. His footsteps came up the hall noisily, running. He rapped loudly on the door.

Carter got up quickly and got against the wall beside the door. He nodded at Marjorie Smith.

She said: "Come in, Bill."

Tannerwell came in with a rush. Carter pushed the door shut behind him.

Tannerwell didn't pay any attention to him. He went straight to Marjorie Smith and stood over her anxiously.

He didn't look like an artist. He looked more like a football player. He was tall, and he had wide, square shoulders. He was blond, and his features were evenly handsome, except for his nose, which had been broken and set crookedly.

"You screamed," he said to Marjorie Smith.

She sniffed a little, sadly. "D-did you bring the pic-picture, Bill?" She looked woebegone and bedraggled. She looked like a hurt child, crying there on the couch.

Tannerwell jerked a roll of parchment from inside his coat. "Sure. Here." He tossed it over his shoulder at Carter. He never took his eyes from Marjorie Smith.

Carter unrolled the parchment and examined it approvingly.

"Well," he said pleasantly. "Here we are at last."

"Marjorie," Tannerwell said. "Over the telephone. You screamed. Did they hurt you?" He put his hands out in front of him. He had big hands with long, thick fingers. He moved the fingers a little. "Did they hurt you, Marjorie?"

She sobbed. "Y-yes. Look." She pulled aside the neck of her dress and showed a round, ugly burn on the white skin of her shoulder. "Carter burned me with a cigarette to make me scream. He laughed when he did it."

Carter looked up from the picture. "Here!" he said, blankly amazed. "What—"

Tannerwell stared at the burn on Marjorie Smith's shoulder. Suddenly his face twisted crazily. He spun around and grabbed Carter by the neck with both big hands.

"Hey!" said Gorjon, starting around in front of Shaley.

Shaley braced his arms on the chair and kicked him savagely in the stomach with both feet. Gorjon doubled over, grunting.

Shaley jumped out of the chair. He got hold of the barrel of the automatic and twisted it out of Gorjon's hand.

Gorjon straightened up. He was grinning. He hit Shaley's wrist with the edge of one palm and knocked the automatic on the floor. He reached for Shaley.

Shaley swung on him with both fists, backing away. He hit Gorjon five times as hard as he could, squarely in the face. Gorjon shook his head, still grinning. He shuffled after Shaley, reaching.

Shaley hit him some more. It was like pounding on a wall. Gorjon didn't even try to block the blows. He let Shaley hit him. He even chuckled a little, his gold teeth gleaming. He was like a cat playing with a mouse. He had forgotten all about Carter and Tannerwell. He kept shuffling after Shaley, one hunched shoulder pushed forward, sidling a little.

Shaley bumped into a chair, and Gorjon got him. He got one big hand in the front of Shaley's coat. He pulled him forwards and hit him with the other hand.

Shaley's coat ripped, and he went backwards. He bounced off the table, fell over a chair. He got up quickly. He was breathing in gasping sobs. Over Gorjon's shoulder he caught a quick glimpse of the rest of the room and realised that all this was happening in seconds instead of hours.

Tannerwell was still shaking Carter by the neck. Carter's plump face was beginning to turn purple. He was trying to get a revolver from his pocket, but apparently the sight had caught in the cloth and, with Tannerwell shaking him, he couldn't get it free.

Marjorie Smith was still sitting on the couch. And she was laughing. She was laughing at Carter, pointing her finger mockingly at him.

Shaley slipped along the wall away from Gorjon's reaching hands. Gorjon got too close, and Shaley began to hit him again, putting everything he had in each blow. Gorjon grinned and shuffled after him.

Shaley tripped over a stool and fell. Gorjon dropped on him. He got Shaley by the neck, loosely, and began to pound his head on the floor slowly and methodically, chuckling gleefully to himself.

The room rocked in front of Shaley in a red haze. His fingers scrabbled on the floor, touched the barrel of Gorjon's automatic. He twisted and squirmed, scraping at the automatic with stiff fingers.

The red haze began to get black slowly. Gorjon's face was a long way above him—like a gleaming pin-point that nodded and bobbed and leered.

Shaley got his stiff fingers around the butt of the automatic, pushed the muzzle against Gorjon's side.

At its blasting report the room suddenly cleared in front of Shaley's eyes. Gorjon fell over sideways, very slowly, and hit the floor and lay there without moving.

Shaley got slowly to his feet, staggering a little. His nose was broken. He could feel the blood running down his face. He started towards Tannerwell and Carter.

Carter saw him coming and finally got his pistol free. He slapped Tannerwell on the side of the head with it. Tannerwell dropped him and bent over, holding his head.

Carter took a quick snap shot at Marjorie Smith that pocked the plaster just above her head. Then he whirled and ducked towards the door. He still held the roll of parchment in his left hand.

Shaley dived for him. He hit Carter's knees just as Carter was going through the door. They rolled out into the hall.

Carter was amazingly strong and quick. It was like trying to hold a squirming ball of soft rubber. He got one leg loose, kicked Shaley in the face. He hit Shaley's broken nose, and Shaley writhed on the floor, swearing thickly, losing his grip on Carter's legs.

Carter bounced to his feet instantly. He ran down the hall towards the stairs.

"Carter!"

It was Marjorie Smith. She was standing in the doorway, and she had the .45 automatic Gorjon had taken from Shaley in one small hand.

Carter whirled around like a dancer and jumped sidewise crouching. Marjorie Smith shot him.

The bullet caught Carter and slammed him back and down in a limp pile. His arms and legs moved aimlessly. After a second he got slowly to his feet and staggered down the hall.

Marjorie Smith shot him again, deliberately, in the back. Carter collapsed weakly and slid down the stairs, bumping soddenly on each step.

A woman was screaming somewhere close by.

Shaley got up off the floor. He walked down the hall, guiding himself with one hand on the wall and trying to keep his feet from walking out from under him. He got to Carter and leaned over to pick up the picture. He fell down and got up again slowly, holding the picture.

Marjorie Smith came running down the hall. She was pulling Tannerwell along behind her. She looked calm, sure of herself, as if she knew just where she was going. Tannerwell was shaking his head foggily, and he staggered a little as he ran.

They went by Shaley without even looking at him.

Feet were pounding up and down the hall overhead. A half dozen people were screaming for the police into telephones and out windows.

Shaley climbed the stairs, shuffled slowly towards the rear entrance.

A man opened a door, looked at him blankly, said: "Good God! He's all blood!" and slammed the door.

Shaley got out the back door into cool darkness. He fell over a hedge, got up, and ran heavily through a weed-choked lot, swearing to himself in a mumbling monotone. A siren began to moan in the distance.

SHALEY had a piece of white court-plaster over his nose. It made his tanned face look darker and thinner. He had his hat tipped forward over his face because the back of his head was swollen.

He walked down a long, gloomy hall and found Gray at the end of it. Gray was on top of a high step-ladder carefully dusting a painting with a brush about an inch wide. He dusted in quick, dabbing strokes, stopping every minute to squint sidewise at the picture through his thick, dusty glasses.

Shaley said: "Hello!"

Gray said: "How do you do, Mr Shaley?" without looking around.

Shaley leaned against the brass railing and watched him. "Well," he said. "It's a long story. Want to hear it?"

Gray dabbed busily at the picture. "Certainly, Mr Shaley."

"A guy by the name of Carter stole the picture. The fight was staged by a pal of his and another bird they had hired, to attract the guards' attention while Carter got the picture. Carter had spotted this scatter as an easy one to crack, but he didn't know anything about pictures. So he hired an artist to pick out the right one to steal. The artist selected the *Red Goose*."

Gray nodded. "A good choice, I must say. It's a very beautiful painting."

"Carter didn't care whether it was beautiful or not. He wanted something the museum would want back in a hurry—something that couldn't be replaced. So he took the *Red Goose*. But Carter had a girl by the name of Marjorie Smith. The artist fell for her. She got ideas. She stole the picture from Carter and lit out with it and the artist. She got in touch with me, intending to sell me the picture for the museum. But Carter found her, just about that time. Are you listening?"

"Yes, yes," said Gray absently. "Go on."

"The artist had the picture. Carter had Marjorie Smith. She pulled a fake screaming act over the telephone to get the artist to bring the picture to Carter. Then, when the artist got there, she double-crossed Carter again. She told the artist that Carter had actually tortured her to make her scream over the telephone. She had burned herself with a cigarette to make it look better. The artist is nuts about her, and he went screwy and tackled Carter. Carter and his pal got themselves killed in the excitement, and I got a broken nose, and Marjorie and her friend Tannerwell got away."

"Tannerwell," said Gray thoughtfully. "Tannerwell. Oh, yes! He's the man that brought back the picture."

There was a long silence.

At last Shaley said: "Brought back—the picture?" in a strained voice.

Gray looked down at him. "Oh, yes. I must have forgotten to notify you. A man by the name of Tannerwell came around yesterday afternoon some time after you left. He had the *Red Goose*, and I paid him three thousand dollars for it. We had promised not to ask any questions about how he happened to have it—we only wanted the picture back."

Shaley took the roll of parchment from his coat pocket with fumbling fingers. "What's this, then?"

Gray trotted down the step-ladder. He examined the picture, holding it up to the light and nodding in a pleased way to himself.

"Yes. Nice work. Of course it hasn't the depth, the colour blending of the original, but it's very nice work."

Shaley said thickly: "It's—it's a copy?"

"Oh, yes. Couldn't you see that? Mr Tannerwell told me, after it came into his hands he had made a copy of the picture to keep for himself."

Shaley said: "That little tramp. She had Tannerwell copy the painting, intending to shake me down with it. Then when Carter butted in, she just switched her plans a little."

Gray smiled at him. "I'm sorry you were deceived, Mr Shaley. You could say that the *Red Goose* was a sort of red herring, couldn't you?"

"I could say a lot worse than that," said Shaley.

