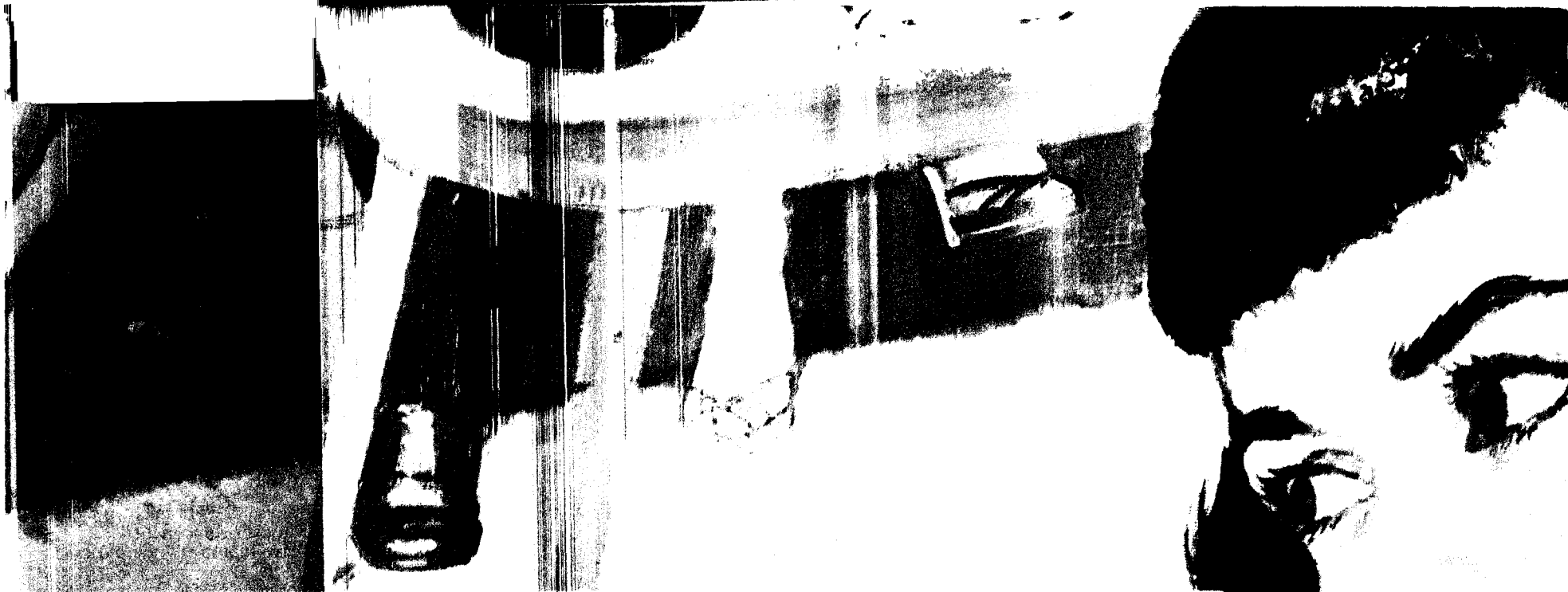




By the time the buffet dinner was over, "poor old Owen" and Peggy were sitting cozily on the floor together. At first Liz had been mildly amused by Peggy's performance. Now she was getting annoyed

Robert L. Taylor



IN A PINCH

The two couples were friends as well as neighbors. None of them would have believed that two hundred dollars could turn their houses into enemy camps

By VIRGINIA and EDWIN GILBERT

IT WAS one of those matchless evenings when the wind touched you with its gentle warmth and the sun's afterglow endowed the lawns and flower beds with a new vividness. It was the kind of night, Liz Kendall mused, when only good can happen. But it was on that perfect evening, she thought afterward, that the telephone call came that started all the trouble.

"Who was it, Liz?" Owen asked when she returned to the flagged terrace at the back of their house.

"Peggy." She nodded toward the Midgley house next door. "They're coming over." She paused. "Something's up, I think."

"Oh?" He closed the sailing magazine he'd been reading.

"I'll go put on some coffee." Liz opened the screen door. She was a slender young woman with dark hair cut in bangs, and candid light-blue eyes.

"What makes you think something's up?" her husband asked, a look of amused skepticism on his tanned face.

"I don't know. Just the way she talked."

"Probably," Owen said, "Pete wants to feel us out on another gadget of his." Though Peter Midgley was in the insurance business, he was by nature a chronic inventor, and his gadgets were legion.

"No," Liz said. "I think it's more serious. She said they wanted to have a talk with us."

He smiled over at her affectionately. "Trouble with you is you have a nose for disaster. You smell the house burning and it turns out to be a cigarette in the ash tray."

Liz laughed. "Well, anyway, she's bringing over half a coconut cake, you'll be glad to hear."

From the kitchen she saw the Midgleys come out of their back door. She picked up the tray with the coffee and dishes, and carried it out to the terrace. Watching the couple start across the lawn, she thought how extremely attractive Peggy looked in her summer dress, and how little she'd changed since they'd both gone to Blacksville High. Her hair was the same smoky blonde, and though she'd gained some weight, it had filled out her small heart-shaped face and given her a softness that was particularly engaging.

"Hiya, skipper!" Pete Midgley called to Owen.

He stepped over the low hedge that separated the two lawns, and held up the cake on the palm of his right hand. "Share and share alike is the Midgley motto," he said, grinning.

"Have a seat, Peggy," Owen said, pulling up a wicker chair. He turned to Pete. "Take a load off your feet, man. You look done in. Don't tell me business is that bad."

Pete Midgley laughed a little nervously and then sat down. "No," he said, bringing a measure of heartiness to his voice, "business is great." Liz noticed that Peggy quickly glanced over at him, and he lapsed into an abrupt silence—a rare state for him.

"That's quite a corral our kids are building over there, isn't it?" Liz finally ventured.

"Umm. Certainly is," Pete replied distractedly, and opened the collar of his green sport shirt.

Peggy fingered her bracelet.

To cut short their discomfort, Liz began, "You said you had something you wanted to talk over with us, Peggy—"

"Oh, that's right. I did, didn't I?" Peggy said with extreme casualness.

"Yes," Pete said. He cleared his throat. "Owen—" He started, paused, and then consulted his wife. "Maybe Peggy—you're better at this than I am—"

"You know how I hate to talk about money!" Peggy burst out involuntarily. "That is, I—"

"Money?" Owen asked.

"Well," Pete said and ran a hand through his thick russet hair, "we hate like the dickens to air our troubles here, but as I said to Peggy, if we can't discuss it with the Kendalls, who can we talk to?"

"Of course!" Owen said.

"Naturally," Liz assured them warmly, for the Midgleys were not only good friends but the most ideal neighbors.

"The fact is—" Pete plunged on, "well, there's no use beating around the bush. Could you, would you be able to lend us—two hundred dollars?"

Owen sat up and looked at Liz.

She put down her coffee cup. Money. She'd never have dreamed it would be that. Pete had a good job, they lived well, and—well, you just didn't think of the Midgleys having to borrow. (Continued on page 55)

ILLUSTRATED BY PRUETT CARTER

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ILLUSTRATED BY MAXWELL SCHWARTZ

Reluctantly George took the gun out of his pocket. The dog looked up at it curiously

Music Hath Charms

BY KEN KOLB

THE party noise died out suddenly at the insistent knocking. George set his drink down, hurried to the front door and threw it open, shouting, "Come in! Come in, whoever you are!"

The old man on the porch had backed off nearly to the steps. In the glare of the naked overhead bulb he looked gaunt and tired. His white beard covered half his chest, and the weight of it seemed to pull great hollows in his cheeks. George saw at once that he was blind.

"I beg your pardon," George said. "What can I do for you?"

The old man stood nervously caressing the keys of the accordion which hung in playing position from a strap over his shoulder. Finally he said, "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I heard the noise from the street. I'm afraid I'm lost."

"Well, we can fix you up," George said. "Where are you going?"

"I'm trying to get back to Taft," the old man said.

George hesitated. "Well, I'll tell you," he said after a moment, "that's four miles and there are no more busses tonight. Why don't you come in and rest a while? Then one of us can drive you over."

"Oh, no," the old man said. "I won't trouble you. I just heard your party from the street and thought I'd ask."

"It's no trouble," George said. "You can earn your ride by playing something for us." He glanced quickly over his shoulder into the living room, and several voices echoed his invitation.

The old man smiled slightly. "Would you really like me to play?"

"Sure we would," George said. He guided the old man through the door to a chair, and the old man sat down wearily. "I'm going to mix another round of drinks," George said. "You can play whenever you're ready."

There was an awkward silence after George left. Finally the old man made a few tentative noises on the accordion. "Perhaps you'd all like to sing something," he said timidly. He began playing *There's a Long, Long Trail A-Winding*, singing softly in a rich baritone voice. By the end of the first chorus

everyone was singing with him. When they finished they asked the old man for a solo number, and he played *Without a Song*, holding his head proudly erect and smiling a strange, sad smile.

When George returned with the drinks, they all drank to the old man, telling him how well he played. He said, "Thank you, thank you," very quietly, ducking his head and feeling his great beard to hide his emotion.

"Well," George said finally, "I guess you'll be wanting to get back to Taft. It is getting pretty late."

The old man raised his head slowly. "No," he said, "no, I don't really want to go back at all."

"Why not?" George asked.

The old man was quiet, thinking. He squeezed the accordion gently, and it let out a heavy sigh. "Where are all you folks from?" he asked abruptly.

"We all live here in town. Why?" George said.

"I wouldn't want this to get back," the old man said. "You'll promise not to tell anyone else?"

"All right, we'll promise," George said.

"It's King," the old man said. "My dog."

He didn't go on, so George said, "What's the matter? Is he sick?"

"No," said the old man. "I'll tell you. King was given to me by the people of Taft. He's a Seeing Eye dog. They took up a big collection and bought him for me. They even sent me to school to learn how to handle him. It cost them a lot of money."

"That was a very fine thing for them to do," George said.

"Yes, it was," the old man said. "That's what makes it so bad. Because after I got him home I found out that he can't stand the accordion. The first time I began to play, he began to howl. It made me mad and I played louder and louder. And the louder I played, the louder he howled. I finally had to stop playing because I was afraid someone would think I was beating him."

The room was very quiet while the old man breathed deeply. He looked worn and tired. "I've been blind for sixteen years now," he said slowly. "I don't have anything in life except music. Ever since I lost my sight I've been playing the accordion. I haven't got anything else to hang on to."

"Can't you tell them?" George asked.

"Tell them what?" the old man said. "That they wasted their money? That they should send me to school again to train with a new dog? I can't tell them that. And now what can I do? I've just got a small place. There isn't anywhere I can play without him howling. Lately I've been taking walks, like today, but I get lost, and I'm afraid of meeting someone from Taft and having them ask where King is. I don't know what to do."

The old man's voice cracked at the end of his speech. He sat slumped in the chair, fingering the accordion. No one said anything for a long time.

Finally George cleared his throat and said, "Uh—your dog might have an accident."

The old man wiped the corners of his eyes, felt of his beard for a moment, then said slowly, "Do you think he might?"

"It's possible," George said. "He might get out of the house and get run over some night."

"I wouldn't like to have him hurt," the old man said quickly.

"Of course not," George said. "Do you have any near neighbors?"

"No," the old man said. "No, I don't."

GEORGE went to get his coat and was gone for quite a long time. When he returned, everyone glanced at him uneasily, then looked away at the rug or into their drinks.

The old man got up and thanked everyone for the privilege of playing for them, and they in turn thanked him for playing. Then George took his arm and led him out to the car. Everyone stood on the porch, watching in silence as they drove away.

It was very quiet in the car. George could feel the cold weight of the gun against his side, and it made him incapable of conversation. The roadside telephone poles flashed steadily in and out of the headlights and the two men kept silent for the four-mile trip.

They found the old man's isolated cottage without any trouble. George pulled the car off the street and parked on a dirt road behind the house. The two of them got out and stood together in the darkness.

"You're sure it won't hurt him?" the old man asked anxiously.

"I'm sure," George said quickly. "Listen, this will be the best way. You bring King out here. One shot will do it. Then I can put him in the street out front and go over him to make it look like an accident. Someone will find him tomorrow."

The old man listened and nodded, then went up the back walk and into the house. George gripped the gun in his pocket tightly and bit his lip, trying to think how he had got so deeply involved in this. He could see no way out of it.

In a few moments the old man returned with the dog. He still had the accordion hanging over his shoulder, and it made him walk slowly and awkwardly. When they reached George he leaned down and patted the dog and spoke softly to it. The dog sat down, looking poised and alert. The old man straightened up, wiping his hand across his face to remove the tears that seeped out from under his closed eyelids.

"Now I can go in and play," he said. "Stay here, King." He turned and walked as far as the back gate, where he stopped.

Very slowly and reluctantly, George took the gun out of his pocket. The dog looked up at it curiously. George flicked the safety off and the click seemed to echo down the dark road. His finger tightened on the trigger.

"Stop," the old man said quietly.

George exhaled the breath he had been holding, flicked the safety on again and put the gun away. He felt suddenly weak.

The old man came back and put his hand on the dog's neck. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't do it. I mean my music doesn't—"

"Sure," George said. "I know."

"I'm sorry to have been all this trouble."

"No trouble," George said. "Please come and play for us again."

The old man smiled tiredly. "I'd be happy to," he said. "Any time at all."

"Thank you," George said softly. "Now good night." He climbed into the car and drove away quickly, leaving the old man standing there in the darkness, one hand on the neck of the dog, the other gently fondling the keys of his accordion. THE END