

LEASE
TO
DOOMSDAY

By LEE ARCHER

The twins were a rare team indeed. They wanted to build a printing plant on a garbage dump. When Muldoon asked them why, their answer was entirely logical:

"Because we live here."

It was the lack of sense in the ad that made him go back to it again. He was having his breakfast coffee in the cafeteria next to the midtown hotel where he lived. The classified section of the New York Times was spread before him.

WANTED: Live wire Real Estate broker--No selling--30-40. Room 657
Silvers Building--9-12 Monday morning.

The ad made no sense for several reasons. One: you just don't go around advertising for brokers with four pages of them in the classified phone book. Two: how can one be a live wire broker, without having to sell? Kevin Muldoon shook his head. Just no damn sense. The Silvers Building--H'm! Not too far off. He looked at his strap watch. Fifteen minutes of nine. He could walk it in that time.

"Don't be a fool," he said to himself. "It's obviously a come-on of some kind."

He got up, paid the check and went out. It wasn't till he was on Third Ave. that he was conscious he had started to go crosstown when his office was in the opposite direction. He smiled wryly. Might as well investigate, he thought. Can't do any harm, and it won't take long.

There were four others waiting in the small anteroom. The outer door bore no legend other than the room number, and the inner door was blank altogether. Muldoon made a quick appraisal of those waiting. Three were obviously past middle-age, the fourth about Muldoon's age. The inner door opened and Muldoon looked up. A tall man came out first, a man in his early sixties, perhaps. Immediately behind him came a slightly shorter man, but very heavy and with a head that was bald as a billiard ball. The older man marched straight to the door, opened it and went out without a second look back. The fat man looked around, his face beaming in a wide smile, eyes almost closed behind fleshy lids

"And now, who's next?" he asked.

The one who was about Muldoon's age stepped forward. The fat man motioned for the other to precede him. The door closed. Not more than a minute went by, and the door opened again and the same act as before with the older man was gone through.

"And now, who's next?" the fat man asked.

Muldoon noted even the inflection was the same.

So it went with the three who were left, until it was Muldoon's turn. And now there were six others beside himself also waiting to be interviewed.

It was a squarish room, simply furnished, with a couple of desks set side-by-side with a narrow space between them. A chair was set up facing the desks, obviously meant for the one to be interviewed. Seated behind one of the desks was the twin of the man now coming to seat himself at the other desk. Their smiles were identical as they waited for Muldoon to make himself comfortable.

For a moment there was a blank silence. Muldoon studied them, and they, smiling still, studied him. Muldoon broke the silence.

"You know," Muldoon said, "your ad didn't make sense to me."

The twins hunched forward slightly at their desks. Their eyes brightened in anticipation. "No-o?..." said the one who had been waiting for Muldoon. "Why?"

"With some four pages of brokers in the classified directory, you don't have to advertise for one. And a live wire broker gets that reputation as a salesman. Without selling, the wire is dead."

The twins beamed at each other.

"Evin," said the one to the left, "I think we've found our man. Will you go out and tell those waiting?"

They waited for the twin to return.

"I am Robert Reeger, my brother Evin," said the first twin.

Muldoon introduced himself. There was no handshaking.

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"You are right about the ad," Robert Reeger said. "We worded it that way for a reason. We wanted a man of quick intelligence. Mind you, now, we do want a broker, and one who will do no selling. The 'live wire' part was my brother Evin's thought. He does sometimes have clever ideas."

Robert stopped to beam at his twin. "Just now," Robert returned to Muldoon, "I won't go into full discussion of our plans. Briefly, however, we are buyers, buyers, we hope, of a particular area. Because of what we have in mind to do we would rather it was done quietly and without any publicity. Had we engaged the services of a large agency this would not be possible, for, if I may coin a phrase, the trumpet

must blow strongly to announce the coming of genius." He smiled, stroked his chin, looked up at the ceiling and his lips moved silently as if he enjoyed repeating the phrase.

"I like that, Robert," Evin said.

"Yes, I thought it was good," Robert said.

They both looked to Muldoon.

Muldoon said nothing.

The twins sighed audibly, in unison.

Robert's lips came forward in a pout. The look of a pouting cherub, Muldoon thought, one trying to look stern, and only succeeding in looking naughty-childish. Muldoon suddenly knew of whom the twins reminded him. Twin Charles Laughtons, without hair.

"You are free to work for us?" Robert asked.

"With you," Muldoon said. "I have the license." He gave them a quick smile, as if to lessen the sharpness of the tone he had used. "A broker acts for a client in the purchase or sale of property. He can't be employed by them."

"Of course," Robert said quickly. "I did not mean to imply any other action. Now suppose you tell us briefly about yourself."

Muldoon gave them a thumbnail sketch of his career. He noted their pleased look that he was a one-man agency. At the conclusion, Robert stood up and came around the desk. He thrust a hand at Muldoon.

Like shaking hands with a piece of warm dough, Muldoon thought.

"I do believe," Robert said as he placed a heavy arm around Muldoon's shoulder, and walked him to the door, "that we shall have a mutually happy relationship. You will not be unrewarded, moneywise." He opened the door, paused, still with his arm around Muldoon, and looked steadily into Muldoon's eyes. "Yes, I think there will be mutual benefits in our relationship. Now, in conclusion, will you pick us up at this office tomorrow morning at nine?"

Muldoon nodded.

"Good! Then 'bye now, Mr. Muldoon, and thanks so much for coming by in answer to our ad."

The answer to an irritating thought came to Muldoon while he was waiting for an elevator to take him to the ground floor. He knew where he had seen the same kind of look as was in Robert Reeger's eyes when they had parted. In the eyes of a cat Muldoon had once seen toying with a mouse the cat had caught....

Deena Savory was a redhead, a green-eyed redhead with a kind of patrician look about her face that came off very well in the photographs they took of her. Deena was a model, and made three times the money Kevin Muldoon made.

It had always been a sore point between them, and more than once the

reason for their worst quarrels.

She was also the worst cook in New York.

Monday evenings were spent in Deena's small apartment on East Fifty-Sixth Street, and she usually cooked dinner for Muldoon. Invariably it was steak. Deena had no imagination when it came to food. Even in restaurants she ordered one or another kind of steak.

They were together on the couch, she stretched full-length, her head in Muldoon's lap. He was telling her about the Reeger twins and what had happened that morning. His hands caressed her lightly as she spoke, now across her cheeks, now more intimately.

"... I don't dig them, Honey," he said, as if in recapitulation. "The Robert twin, f'r instance. 'You will not be unrewarded, moneywise.' Madison Avenue and Nineteenth Century English...."

She gently took his hand from where he seemed to find most comfort, and put it up to her cheek. "What's the difference?" she asked. "So long as there's money in it?"

"Broker's commission," he said. "No more or less."

"You've been getting so much of that, lately?"

"N-no."

"Okay, then. Stop fighting it. What do you care what kind of English they use? Or whether they used sign language. The buck, kid, the buck."

"Deena," Muldoon said gravely, "you have the grubbing soul of a pawnbroker. Or real estate broker," he added. He bent his head and kissed her lips.

Her lips opened to his with that familiar warmth, a hunger for him which never failed to thrill. This time she did not remove his hand when it returned.

"... Kevie, baby--darling ... oh, my darling," she whispered.

Strange, he thought, that at a moment like this, I should be thinking of those fat twins....

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Muldoon hated the pirate prices of midtown parking lots, and so was late. It had taken him ten minutes to find parking space for the Plymouth. As he started to open the door of room 657 he heard the voice of one of the twins. The words or sounds were in a language completely foreign to him. He thought to knock, but changed his mind. To knock would have made it obvious he had been listening. He barged right in.

The twins were in the anteroom. Muldoon got the impression they knew he had heard them, and an even stronger impression, that the fact was of no importance. That bothered him, for some reason.

"Ah, there you are," the twin to the left said. "Evin was wondering whether you would show up, but I told him he was putting himself to useless aggravation."

That damned mixed-up phrasing again, Muldoon thought. "Took a little time to find parking space," he said.

"Shall we be off, then?" Robert asked.

"All right with me," Muldoon replied. There was another odd thing. Evin Reeger seemed to have so very little to say.

Their destination was a place halfway down the Island. Muldoon's brow had lifted when they gave him the area. So far as he knew there hadn't been any development in the area. It was just a bit too far off the highways and rail lines for housing developments, and even more badly located for industrial requirements. He wondered what the devil they had in mind out there.

Traffic was light and the drive took little more than an hour and a half on the main highway, and another fifteen minutes of blacktop side road before Evin told him to "Turn left here," onto a rutted path off the blacktop. The path led through some scrub growth that ended on the edge of an acre or so of dump heap. Rusted heaps of broken cars were scattered about. A foul odor came from the left as though garbage, too, had been dumped and left to rot. There was a flat one-storied wooden shack close by to which Evin directed him to drive up to.

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Evin produced a key and opened the door to the shack. There was a partition separating the place neatly into two sections. There were a couple of straight-backed wooden chairs and a leather sofa in the near room. The door to the other room was closed.

"Sit down, Muldoon," Robert Reeger said. He waited for Muldoon to make himself comfortable on the sofa, then continued: "First time we've ever been out here during the day. But Evin's sense of direction is unfailing." He shook his head, smiled brightly. "Ah, well, we must each have some factor to make for validity of existence, eh?"

"I don't follow," Muldoon said.

"No matter. Now, to the business at hand. I wanted you to see the area involved. Evin, the plot plan, please."

To Muldoon's surprise Evin Reeger went into the next room and returned after a moment with a plot plan of the lower third of the Island. He gave it to Muldoon who spread it at his feet.

"That red-pencilled area I've marked off," Robert Reeger said, "is what we'll be concerned with. As you notice, the dump and this shack are at the approximate center. What I have in mind to do is buy all the land in the marked-off area."

"_Buy_ it!..."

"You seem surprised."

"Shocked, would be the better word. Have you any idea what this could cost? You've marked off an area of approximately a square mile. Even out here that would run into millions. And once news got around that someone was buying parcels of this size--well, you'd have more publicity than

you might want."

"About the cost we won't worry. There will be enough money. But the attendant publicity could mean not being able to get the land we want. Is that correct?"

"Could be. Suppose we get options, or leases on these pieces ..."

"That was a good phrase," Evin broke in unexpectedly. "Don't you think so, Robert?"

"Yes!" Robert said sharply. He seemed to have suddenly lost his smile. He gave Evin a hard look from under down-drawn brows. He turned to Muldoon. "We are renting this, this tumbledown structure. A two-year lease. H'mm! I see your point. Spending millions in a sudden buying move would make unneeded difficulties. No! Options to buy, but lease for the present. Evin, the list of names, please."

Evin didn't have to go anywhere for the list. He had it with him. Muldoon looked it over. There were thirty-three names, including the County and State.

"Well?" Robert said.

"I'll have to know what you want to lease it for, the name or names of corporations, and so forth."

"Will my own name do?"

"It will. But you can go into the County Court and register a business name under your own, what they call a D.B.A. name--doing business as--name. Register as many as you wish. Doesn't cost a great deal. Or form a corporation, you and your brother."

"No. Let the leases come under my own name. As for what I intend doing, well, I intend to concrete surface the entire area."

"A square mile of concrete?..."

"Yes. There is a government plan to use this end of the Island for a huge missile depot. They will have to come to me."

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Pretty shrewd, Muldoon thought. That is if it's true. "All right," Muldoon said. "When do you want me to start?"

"Right now. That was one reason for bringing you out here. Evin, will you get the brief case, please?"

Once more Evin Reeger went into the other room. And closed the door carefully behind him when he came out. He handed the brief case to Muldoon.

"You may open it," Robert said.

Muldoon's fingers became suddenly nerveless, and he dropped the brief case. It was crammed with money, packets of hundred-dollar bills.

"There are fifty packets of hundred-dollar bills, totalling a million

dollars," Robert said.

"What the hell did you want me to do, carry the case around with me?" Muldoon asked.

"No. It will remain here. I merely wanted to show you I will be able to stand behind any price you may have to meet. From now on report here, no matter what time. And, since time has a definite value in this matter, do not stand upon it."

"I like that," Evin said, suddenly. "That was good, Robert."

Muldoon nodded. Evin had a value, too. The same value any yes-man has. But it bothered Muldoon. This just wasn't the way of twins. At least none he knew. Well, one thing was certain; the Reegers had the ready cash....

"This may take some time," Muldoon said. "Weeks, certainly, maybe months. The County and State, alone ..."

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"We don't have that much time," Robert broke in. "Evin must return in ten days...."

"Return? Where?" Muldoon asked.

It was as if Robert hadn't heard. "The State and County properties are small areas, and on the very edge. Suppose we forget about them for the time being. Work on the private parties."

"Anything you say. But it may still take weeks."

"Then don't quibble. Lease at any price. If a show of cash is necessary, let me know. Now I think you'd better start. Good luck, Muldoon."

It was Wednesday night before Muldoon saw Deena Savory again. Nor had he seen the Reeger twins since leaving them Monday morning. Deena and Muldoon seldom saw each other during the middle of the week; they were her busy days and she needed the nights for complete rest. But he had called her and asked to see her. They were at dinner in a small Italian place close to her apartment.

He had briefly brought her up to date on what had happened since she had seen him last, and was at the moment finishing the last of the lasagna he had ordered.

"They're phonies, honey, real phonies," he said. "I'll bet my last buck on that."

She was looking at the last piece of steak on her plate. With an almost defiant gesture she speared it and put it in her mouth.

"Atta girl," he said.

"Mind your own business," she said. "How do you mean they're phonies?"

"I spent all Monday investigating them!"

"A fine way to make a dollar," she said. "What do you care who they

are?"

He gave her a knowing smile. "That's my fat-headed girl. Like to visit me in a nice jail, wouldn't you? One with a prestige address, of course. Let me tell you. They rented that shack, and the dump heap next to it for a pretty fancy figure. Robert Reeger said they were going to do printing in that shack. They paid in full for the two years rental, in nice crisp hundred-dollar bills...."

"I get it! They were phony," she exulted.

"How can you be so stupid? I know. For you it's easy. Of course the bills were genuine. But the printing business--what were they going to print with, typewriters? Another thing. There's no business record I could find on them; they're not listed. So how did they get a million dollars, and Robert said more. 'Report here, no matter what the time.' I don't get it. I drove them out. There was no garage, no car I could see, and the place is miles from food. How do they live out there?"

"Maybe they have friends who pick them up," Deena said.

"Maybe. Robert also said there was a rumor or something about the government going to use the area for a missile depot. I tried to run it down. Nothing."

"Which proves nothing," she said.

"True. But I couldn't even smell smoke. No, the whole thing just smells bad. So I think I'm going back there and tell them to forget it."

"Oh, don't be an idiot," she said. "This is your big chance to make some real money, get a reputation, and because you're chicken, you're going to throw it up."

"I won't get into anything crooked!" his voice rose.

"The way you're thinking you couldn't follow a straight line."

"They can't draw a straight line."

"Well, you do what you want. Only, the next time I have to pay for a dinner don't give me that martyred look."

"Okay. Okay. What do you want for dessert, spumoni?"

"After this, bicarbonate."

"Very funny."

And for the first time in several years she did not kiss him good night, when they parted.

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He turned off the blacktop and started down the rutted path. He switched the headlights off about halfway to the shack, and parked it a hundred or so yards away from it and walked the rest. The shack was dark.

Instead of knocking, Muldoon walked around to the back and peered through the single window at the rear. He could see nothing. Now isn't

this just dandy, he thought. Drive all the way out here, and nobody's at home. Damn! He went around to the front and started back to the car. His attention was caught by a greenish glow of light from the far end of the dump heap.

His curiosity aroused, Muldoon warily made his way through the metal litter until he was close enough to make out the source of the light. It came from the center of a shallow area that had been cleared of rubble. A rusted misshapen mass of metal lay in the center of the cleared space. The greenish glow was coming from an opening in the mass.

Muldoon crept closer until he was able to make out details. Not too many but enough to give him an idea of the size and general shape of the thing. But what really held him were the figures of Robert and Evin Reeger.

He saw them quite distinctly.

One of the twins was bent over a machine of some sort. There were levers, gears, and rollers mounted on a webbed platform no larger than a rather oversized typewriter. Muldoon's eyes went wide at the sight of the greenbacks coming in a steady stream from the interior of the machine and falling into a box at the side. He could see very little else that was in the room, other than the brother of the twin at the machine. He was on the far side of it, fiddling with something hidden.

Muldoon stared in fascination for another minute, then carefully made his way back to the car. He had parked it within the growth of scrub trees and bushes. He started it, turned the headlights on, and drove slowly out into the open and up to the shack. He honked his horn loudly a couple of times and got out of the car and walked up to the shack and tried the door. It was closed.

Presently the figures of Evin and Robert Reeger came into view from the direction of the dump heap. Muldoon's figure was outlined in the glow of the headlights. Muldoon noticed the brief case one of them was carrying.

"Ah, there, Muldoon," Muldoon had recognized Robert's voice.

"Hello, Mr. Reeger. Thought I'd come by and let you know how I've been doing."

Evin, who was carrying the brief case, unlocked the door and switched on the light. The other two followed him into the room. Robert Reeger motioned for Muldoon to take the sofa. Evin went into the other room.

"Well, my boy," Robert said heartily. "How is it going?"

"Slowly," Muldoon said casually. "But the first of this sort of operation has to go that way. Kind of feel things out, if you know what I mean?"

"Of course. How does it look?"

"I think it's going to go all right. I've got plans."

"Splendid! Do you need money?"

"Yes. About ten thousand."

"Evin! Do bring the case out," Robert called loudly.

In a couple of seconds, Evin Reeger appeared. He brought the brief case to his brother, turned, and went back into the other room without saying anything. He walked slowly and stiffly, his feet slapping heavily on the bare boards.

"What's wrong with him?" Muldoon asked.

Robert Reeger was pulling money from the brief case. He looked up with an expressionless face. "Nothing. You said ten thousand?..."

"Yes."

Reeger passed two of the packets to Muldoon. "Sure you won't need more?"

Muldoon put the money away, got up from the sofa, and started to the door. "No. Just what I need. Uh, I'll see you Friday night."

"Fine! And don't forget. We must get all this done quickly."

"I won't forget."

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Robert Reeger waited till the sound of the Plymouth was no longer heard. Then he went into the other room. Other than for two army cots the room was empty. Evin was stretched full-length on one of the cots.

"You're certain he knows?" Evin asked.

"Yes. I saw him on the visio."

"But he couldn't see all the interior?"

"No. Just the duplicating machine. We must get rid of it tonight."

"What do you think he will do?"

"What can he do? He knows nothing. The money is genuine, and with the destruction of the machine he can't prove anything. Nevertheless it might be the wisest course to get rid of him. We might have been too clever with that advertisement."

"Possibly. But, we must move quickly, then. I must leave this planet in seven days now. And we must have this area under lease by then. Three musts!"

Robert smiled thinly. "We will. If not through Muldoon, then through another means. When you return in a year with the space fleet you will find the landing area we need."

"And after that ..."

They smiled at each other.

"We said we would not fail. This planet will fall to our weapons like ripe fruit from a tree."

"But first I must return to tell them," Evin said. "If I do not return

they will know we have failed, and will seek another planet."

"We won't fail," Robert reiterated. "Right now, let's get back to the space ship and the duplicating machine."

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Muldoon spent a busy Thursday. A newsbrief in the Times financial section which told of a public utility wanting Island property gave him an idea for one thing. He spent all morning bringing the idea to a head, after he had verified the truth of the item. Then, after a late lunch, he went to the Treasury Department's headquarters and spent a couple of hours with the head of the local investigation department.

He was quite pleased with himself by nightfall, as he headed out to the Island. This time he parked the car at a considerable distance from the shack. There were lights on, this night. He walked boldly up and knocked at the door. It opened wide and the thick figure of one of the twins darkened the opening.

"Well, Mr. Muldoon. I did not think to see you till Friday."

"I thought I'd come and see you tonight," Muldoon said as he stepped into the room.

"I didn't hear the car."

"Oh. Parked it back a bit," Muldoon said. He turned toward the other twin as the inner door opened. "Hello."

"Hello."

"You know, Evin," Robert said, "I'm rather glad Muldoon stopped by tonight. We might as well conclude our business with him now."

"An excellent idea, Robert. Excellent."

"What do you mean?" Muldoon asked. "I no longer am acting for you?"

"Not for us, for yourself. I'm afraid your services, in any capacity, will no longer be needed."

Muldoon caught the undercurrent of menace in Robert's voice. It told him they were not only suspicious but ready to act on it. He started to edge toward the door, but Robert suddenly reached out and took his arm. There was power in the fat man's grip. Evin moved swiftly for his size, and took up a position before the door, which he kicked shut.

Muldoon twisted sharply and was free of the other's grip. He stepped back a couple of paces. "What the hell's this all about?"

"Come now, Muldoon," Robert said softly. "You didn't think your prying went unobserved, last night?"

"So I was nosey. But what's this rough stuff you're trying to pull?"

"Merely making sure your curiosity will end tonight."

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Muldoon took a couple of more retreating paces. "You mean you're going to get rid of me? Well, maybe you will, and maybe you won't. But even if you do ..."

A smile broke through the grim lips of the twin threatening Muldoon. "You mean the duplicating machine? Just another piece of rusted scrap among the rest of the junk."

Muldoon paled. The evidence he was going to need, gone.

"And of course the money is genuine. We made sure of it. Ink, paper, everything. We made sure of it long ago. It will be a pity you won't be here to see how efficient we can really be. But the rest of the planet will know. As soon as Evin returns."

Muldoon's mind was working swiftly. "You got rid of the machine. But what about the junk shop it was in. I'll bet there are more important things there."

"Indeed there are. But no one will find it. It will be just another rusted piece of large junk to them."

It was then Muldoon made his move. He lashed out with a fist. The blow staggered Robert. And Muldoon was crashing his shoulder against the inner door. It burst inward, but before he could get through Robert grabbed him. The whole side of Muldoon's face went numb as Robert crashed his fist against his jaw. Muldoon knew he didn't stand a chance in a straight-up fight, not with these two. Robert's hands were reaching for him, now.

Muldoon grabbed one of the hands with both of his, twisted outward as he grasped two fingers in each hand. Robert's face went putty-grey as the bones snapped. Muldoon no longer cared about fair play. His knee came up where it could do most damage, and Robert sank grovelling to the floor.

Muldoon whirled. Too late. The world exploded in a thousand flashes of pain-filled lights. He went crashing backward into the wall. Evin hit him again before he stumbled blindly away from the terrible fist.

"Let me kill him," Robert groaned.

Muldoon pulled himself up from the pain-filled world he had been sent into. There seemed to be two Evins facing him. Then there was only one. A twisted grin came to Muldoon's lips. "Come ahead, you rat," he mumbled.

Evin came forward. And swift as an adder Muldoon kicked him just below the knee cap. Evin screamed, and collapsed. Muldoon staggered out of the way of the falling body, only to fall into the clutches of Robert's sudden reaching fingers.

He fell to the floor.

Robert tried to get his good hand up to Muldoon's throat. Muldoon beat at the thick face with both hands. But the other seemed not to feel the pounding fists. Slowly the fingers managed to reach their goal. Muldoon felt the darkness of death closing over him as his breath became a tortured dying gasp. His hand found Robert's face, came gently over it until his thumb pressed on one eyeball. And Robert screamed as the thumb

became a hooked instrument to blind him.

Muldoon rolled away from the other, staggered somehow erect, but knew his strength was gone. He couldn't make it to the door. And now Evin had him....

And the door burst open and men poured into the room. Muldoon recognized only one, the head of the Treasury's investigation department, before he blacked out.

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Deena Savory stroked his forehead gently. "Does it hurt much, baby?"

The nurse had left them alone when Deena came into the hospital room.

"Not now," Muldoon said.

"What are they going to do to those men?" she asked.

"Oh, twenty years, according to Phillips. Counterfeiting, you know, carries heavy penalties."

"But I thought the money was good? After all, they had paid rent with C-notes."

"A slip-up on the bank's part. You see they made one mistake. The machine they had, turned out perfect bills. Every one with the same serial number...."

Deena's eyes widened.

"And the junk shop or whatever it was?" she said.

"I thought I'd let well enough alone. You see I took care of that during the day. The twins, being criminals, had automatically broken their lease. They also made it possible for me to change clients. Well, there's going to be a huge tank covering that dump and shack, a tank holding an awful lot of natural gas. I got together with the owner of the property and the utility people yesterday afternoon and worked out a deal. They're going to dump all that junk into the ocean."

"I'm sorry about the other night," she said suddenly.

"Is that how you say you're sorry?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," she said, as he reached for her. "There's a time and place for that."

"Promise."

Her lips agreed.

THE END

