



We sat on some wicker lawn furniture, but there was a tension between us

LITTLE PIECES

By C. S. MONTANYE

*Don Wheeler, Pyrotechnics Expert, is in on Plenty of Fireworks
—and Learns That Revenge is a Two-Edged Sword*

I USED to think I, Don Wheeler, was a pretty smart guy. That was when I was keeping company with Marge Kelsey, before I met “Frenchy” Bergdorf and his crowd. Three years ago next September. There were a lot of things I didn’t figure—for instance, that the dame, Paula Drew, would spill to the cops and that they could tie me into it like they did.

I guess I’m lucky at that. If I hadn’t listened to my lawyer, and pleaded the way he said, I wouldn’t be here. I wouldn’t be anywhere!

I liked Bridgetown. It was the right size city. Not too big, but big enough. A lot of factories, mills and warehouses. I understand it’s important

now, turning out planes and guns to lick the Axis. But when I was there it was a peaceful burg. That is, until Frenchy Bergdorf and his friends moved in.

I was working for the Star Pyrotechnics Company. It was a steady job. Some people think you only use fireworks on the Fourth of July, but that’s a mistake. The company sold them all the year round.

For instance, we’d always get a big order from the Mardi Gras crowd in New Orleans, around February. Florida always kicked through with big orders. You’d be surprised at all the holidays, the religious festivals and county fairs in

the country. South America, too, kept us busy.

I worked in the powder room. I got more dough than the other guys—the boys on the machines who made the casings, tubes, fuses and so forth. Maybe you'd call my job dangerous. I guess it was. I know the insurance company wouldn't give me a policy.

Nearly every night that summer I used to take Marge over to Lake Waseka. There were boats and canoes for rent. It was nice drifting around in the dark. Some guys brought mandolins. There was a little island halfway up the lake. We used to paddle up there sometimes and watch the stars shine on the water.

I was crazy about Marge. She was eighteen, swell looking. A real blonde, too. Not one of these black-at-the-part babes. She had the best figure in Bridgetown. All curves, soft and cuddly. And speaking of curves, Marge knew all the angles, believe me!

AROUND the end of July, I met Frenchy Bergdorf for the first time. He, Clint Oster and some other lugs were at the boathouse one night when Marge and I came down from the island. Her yellow hair was a little mussed up and I had lipstick on my cheek. Before we went in to get a Coke Marge dipped her handkerchief in the lake and cleaned my pan.

"You look terrible, Don," she whispered. "Like you'd been peppered with buckshot."

She was close to me. I tried to reach out and grab her, but she laughed and pushed me away.

I knew Clint Oster fairly well. He never had a steady job, but he always seemed to have plenty of cash. He was tall, with a bad complexion and a couple of front teeth that needed fixing. He got up from the table where he was sitting with the others and spoke to us.

"Hello, Don. Howdy, Marge. Come on over and sit in. I want you to meet my friends. This is Frenchy Bergdorf and Eddie Milton. They'll be in town for awhile now."

I didn't pay much attention to Milton. He was just a sappy looking bird in a striped suit. The mustache he was wearing didn't add much to his appearance. Bergdorf was different.

Frenchy was big, big all over. He had jet-black hair, and sharp eyes that looked at and through you. His skin was dark like he was always

sunburned. That made his teeth seem even whiter than they were. A neat dresser, too. His linen suit looked expensive. It didn't have a spot on it.

I shook hands with him and we sat down. Frenchy shoved a lot of nickels in the juke box. We gaggled and kidded around. Frenchy asked Marge to dance with him, but she shook her head. She said she was tired, that she'd have to be getting on home.

Frenchy kept looking at her. I didn't object. In fact, it made me feel kind of proud. Marge was my girl. To have people admire her made me feel I was lucky, that I knew how to pick 'em.

"Glad to have met you," Frenchy said to Marge and me when we stood up to go. "Be seeing you around."

"What's his grind?" Marge asked, when I started my '35 flivver and we headed for home.

"Search me. What is he, a Greek or a Spick?"

"If they call him Frenchy," Marge said, "I guess he's that. Did you notice what nice teeth he has?"

I ran into Bergdorf a couple of nights later. Marge had to stay home and mind her kid sisters while her old man and lady went to the movies. I dropped in at the Omega Bowling Alley to pick up a game. Frenchy, Eddie Milton and Clint were there.

Between strings, I asked Clint what Frenchy did for a living.

"Haven't you heard?" Oster looked at me as if I was dumb. "He's the head guy of the Associated Florist Society."

"What does that mean?"

Clint laughed. "Try and open a flower shop or greenhouse or run that kind of a business without signing with Frenchy's society and see what happens."

Still, I didn't understand exactly what Bergdorf's racket was.

HE TOOK a liking to me. It was mutual, because I liked Frenchy. I liked the way he dressed, the way he talked, the way he acted. He'd been around. He had a big city polish. He never got excited, always kept his voice quiet. But when he got sore about anything, and turned on the pressure, it showed in his eyes and the way a muscle twitched in his cheek.

From what he dropped, Frenchy was quite a

ladies' man. But particular. He didn't run after dames just because they were dames. If they didn't have class and looks, he never gave 'em a second glance.

After all, why should he? He had money. He didn't have to bother with the riff-raff and the janes that only liked a guy for what they could get out of him.

He opened an office in the Manning Building on the corner of Second Street and Congress Boulevard. It was furnished in red leather and mahogany. He had a girl working for him by the name of Paula Drew. Miss Drew had been with Frenchy in Chicago. He told me she knew the business backwards, that he paid her sixty bucks a week.

Paula Drew was a nice, clean-looking girl. Not as attractive as my Marge, but different. She was older, more sophisticated. Any time I dropped in at Frenchy's office, she was always busy on the books.

When Miss Drew worked on them she wore horn-rimmed spectacles. They made her look like a school teacher. She boarded with the Klausmeyers on Valentine Lane. Sometimes in the evening, when I was coming back from the fireworks' factory, I'd meet her crossing Second Street. She'd always give me a funny little smile and a nod.

It was in August that I began to have trouble with Marge.

One night she stood me up. We had a date to go to the lake. When I stopped by to get her it was her mother who came to the door.

"Don, Marge went to see her cousin Ella," Mrs. Kelsey told me. "She said to tell you she's sorry. She'll call you up tomorrow."

Marge called all right, and I saw her that Thursday. But Saturday night it happened again. This time she rang me at the plant. Jackson, the foreman on the second floor, told me I was wanted on the phone.

"And don't make this a habit, Wheeler," he said. "You know what the rules are about personal calls during business hours."

Marge, on the wire, said: "Don, I'm terribly sorry. I'll have to break tonight's date. Don't be sore, Don. Ella's been sick and there's no one else but me to take care of her."

"Why don't she get a trained nurse?"

"Please don't be angry, Don. You can't help sickness. I'll see you Monday, positively. Come over at eight—earlier. And Don—haven't you anything nice to say? Tell me something sweet."

I stood there for a minute, the receiver like a piece of ice in my hand. Then I blurted out: "Okay, babe. You know it. I'm nuts about you. All day I've been thinking about you—the island, the stars—"

"Oh, Don!" Marge's voice was soft and shaky. "You even thrill me over the telephone!"

IT WAS lonely Saturday night with no date. I stopped at the bowling alley. There was no sign of Frenchy or Clint. Eddie Milton was there, playing pool with the kid who did the cleaning. He put the six-ball in the side pocket, ran off the other two and racked his cue.

"Busy, Don?"

"No. Where's everybody? Where's Frenchy?"

Eddie shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Want to roll across town with me? I've got a man to see. It'll only take a few minutes. Then we can have a drink, grab a flicker—or something."

He didn't have a car so I took him to Water Street. We stopped in front of a small florist's. It was run by a Greek. The name on the window was Andropopolos. Inside there was a light and I saw a guy cutting flowers and putting them in a white ice box.

"Won't take but a minute," Eddie Milton said, climbing out of the car. "I've got to see this guy."

He went in. I could hear their voices through the screen door.

Eddie spoke first. He said, "Well, what's the answer, Andropopolos? Did you sign that membership blank?"

"Get out of my store!" the Greek ordered. "I told you I ain't interested."

"Listen, brother." Eddie Milton's voice was silky. "I'm not used to this kind of treatment. I—"

"Get out! Crooks, grafters! I know all about you kind of fellars! You bother me again and I'll tell the police!"

I saw Eddie move closer. "Tell the cops? Tell 'em—what? That we're giving you protection at a cheap rate? That we're trying to keep prices regular in this town the same as we do in all the

big cities? You punk! I'll send the boss around to have a talk with you Monday!"

Andropopolos picked up the scissors. For a minute I thought he was going to use them on Eddie.

"Get out!"

Milton came back to the car. He was cursing under his breath. When he got in he said, "That dirty Greek! Wait'll I tell Frenchy! He'll make him squirm plenty!"

I went up to Marge's on Monday night. I waited in the front parlor. She had finished the dishes and was taking a bath. There were a lot of flowers in vases. Roses, other stuff. So many they made the room smell like a funeral home.

I didn't like the perfume so I went out on the porch. Marge came down about ten minutes later. She had a white dress on, sandals, but no stockings. Her hair was damp from the bath and it made little curls around her forehead.

I took her in my arms. She was soft, softer than she had ever been before. Usually, when I hadn't seen her for a few days, her arms would wind tight about my neck and she'd be as anxious as I was for a kiss.

Tonight it was different. She kissed me, her arms went around my neck, but I noticed a change. It was funny, yet I couldn't explain exactly what it was. Not the way she acted, or what she said. Just something was missing.

We sat on some wicker lawn furniture like so many other nights. But there was a tension between us. Marge didn't say much. She kept her head resting on my shoulder, looking out through the honeysuckle at the street. Once or twice I heard her sigh.

"Where'd you get all the posies, hon?" I asked, after awhile. I could even smell them out on the porch.

"It's ma's birthday. Didn't I tell you?"

"No. How's your cousin?"

"Not so good. I might have to go out Wednesday and stay with her for a few days. Oh, Don. There's always something, isn't there?"

GENERALLY, it was after twelve before I'd leave. But that night I said goodbye at ten to eleven. On the way home I thought about the difference. I tried to figure it out. Even after I was

in bed, and I couldn't sleep, I kept trying to decide what had happened between Marge and me.

Wednesday she phoned to say she was going to her cousin's, but that she'd be back Saturday—she hoped. The same afternoon, when I left the factory, I saw a brand new convertible Buick parked outside the wire gate.

"Hey, Don!"

Frenchy Bergdorf whistled to me. He was sitting at the wheel. He leaned and opened the door for me. I got in and sat down on blue leather upholstery.

"Your heap, Frenchy?"

"Yeah, I bought it yesterday." He stepped on the starter. "Listen to that engine. Purrs like a cat with a saucer of cream, eh?" Got a few minutes to spare? I'd like to gab with you."

"Sure."

"Then let's take a ride."

Frenchy pressed a button on a trick gadget. A cigarette popped up, lighted. He handed it to me and got one for himself. We rolled down Congress Boulevard toward the river and the suburbs. Bergdorf didn't say much for awhile.

"Look, Don," he began, all of a sudden. "We're pals, aren't we?"

"I hope so."

"I like you a lot, kid. I've always liked you, from the time I met you at the lake. Someday soon, when I get my business running smooth here in Bridgetown, I'm going to fix you up with a nice job."

"That'll be swell."

"Right now," Frenchy continued, "I want you to do me a favor. It's a big favor and I'm willing to pay for it. I'll pay you a hundred bucks."

I looked at him, puzzled. "What for?"

"Here's the story. I've got a stupid Greek I want to throw a scare into. He won't do business with me and he wants to make trouble. I've got to teach him a lesson. I don't want to hurt him, but I want to show him that he can't outsmart me. Get the idea?"

"What else?"

"You work in that fireworks factory. I've got a diagram. How to make a time-bomb. You can get the powder, fuses and stuff there. I'll furnish the rest. What do you say, kid? A bomb for a century note."

I could feel my heart beat faster. "What are

you going to do with it?"

Frenchy laughed. "Plant it in the Greek's backyard and scare hell out of him." He turned his head. "I know what you're worried about. That they might trace back and find you were mixed up in it. Forget it. Nobody'll ever know a thing about it. This is guaranteed air-tight."

"How do you mean?"

"A bomb goes off, and where's your evidence?"

We stopped at a tavern and had a couple of drinks. I began to feel normal again. After all, if nobody was going to get hurt what difference did it make? And a hundred bucks! I needed the cash. I'd been saving up for the day Marge and I were to be married. It was slow work on my wages. A C note would help a lot.

"Well, what's the answer?" Frenchy asked, when we were back in his new car again.

"I'll do it," I said. "As a favor to you—on your word that nobody will get hurt."

"I'll meet you tonight." Frenchy pressed the button on the cigarette gadget. "I'll want the thing ready Saturday at six o'clock. Tomorrow I've got to hop out on a business trip. You have it all ready to deliver and I'll take care of the rest."

I WORKED Thursday and Friday nights—in the cellar. There wasn't much else to do with Marge at her cousin's. I smuggled the powder and fuses out of the factory without trouble. The diagram Frenchy gave me was easy to follow.

I made the time-bomb up in a small, cheap suitcase. It had three compartments. The middle one was for the alarm clock. I wired the whole business and left it so all I had to do was wind the clock, set it for whatever time Frenchy wanted, hook it up to the wires and lock the suitcase.

On Saturdays I only worked a half-day. On the way out Jackson stopped me.

"Here's a phone message, Wheeler." He gave me a crooked grin along with the slip of paper. "I thought I told you to lay off having dames buzz you here. One more call and I'll take it into the main office."

I thought the message was from Marge. Instead, it was from Miss Drew. She said she wanted to see me at the Manning Building as soon as I quit work.

After I washed up and changed my clothes, I

got the car and went across town. There was no one in the Associated Florist Society's offices except the girl who had telephoned me.

Paula Drew was sitting at her desk, staring out the window. She had smoked a lot of cigarettes. The ashtray beside her was piled with them. I shut the door and sat down in the chair near her.

"What's on your mind?" I asked.

She looked at me. She didn't seem as young as I thought she was. Her face was kind of drawn, kind of blank. But her eyes had a glitter. They looked strange.

"We've both been a couple of suckers," she said. "It's about time you found out."

Something in her voice made my breath catch in my throat. I kept watching her. Her horn-rimmed glasses were on the blotter. Her fingers, pushed them around nervously.

"I don't get it," I muttered.

"It's easy." I could hear the breath she drew. "Your girl has been two-timing you the same as Frenchy has me! That's the whole thing in a nutshell!"

I sat there, suddenly feeling sick at my stomach. My head buzzed. My throat felt dry, as if I'd been filling Roman candles all day without a nose-protecting sponge. I remembered the flowers in the front parlor the night I'd gone out on the Kelsey porch. I remembered a lot of other things.

"I don't believe it," I heard myself say.

"Where do you think your girl friend has been all this week?"

After a long silence I got up. I didn't say anything more to Paula Drew. I went down to the street and got in the car. It was fourteen miles out to Blauvelt, the town where Marge's cousin Ella lived....

I felt like I wanted to cry but I couldn't. I went back to my place. What I needed and wanted was a lot of liquor, but I didn't take a drink. I had to keep my head clear, to know what I was doing.

But the time until six o'clock was like a knife stabbing me in the heart!

AT SIX to the dot, Frenchy Bergdorf rolled up in the new Buick. It was pretty dusty, as if he'd done a lot of mileage. The white-walled tires were muddy.

"Everything okay, Don?"

When I nodded, he slipped two fifty-dollar bills in my hand. "Set it for nine o'clock," he directed, when I told him the suitcase was ready.

I locked the suitcase and brought it up from the cellar. Frenchy was in the front seat. He told me to lay the suitcase on its side in the rear. I did that and he shook hands with me.

"Thanks, Don. You're a real pal. Don't forget, I'll have a job for you around the middle of next month. That's a promise."

He laughed and drove off. I stood and watched the car until it disappeared.

I knew I'd never see it again—or Frenchy, either. Instead of nine o'clock, I'd set the time for fifteen minutes after six!

I couldn't eat any dinner. I didn't think about Frenchy Bergdorf; all that was in my mind was Marge. Now, I told myself, maybe she'd be mine again. Maybe we'd go out to Lake Waseka like we used to. I could see the island and the stars. I could feel Marge in my arms, soft and cuddly, her blond hair tickling my face. I could feel her arms

around my neck, the kisses we had shared.

I was going upstairs when I saw a car stop outside. Then I caught a glimpse of Eddie Milton. I opened the screen door and went down the path to meet him.

One look at his face was enough to tell me what had happened. But I waited for him to speak.

"Haven't you heard, Don? It's been on the radio! *The Sentinel* has a special extra out."

Away up the street I could hear the newsboys shouting. Eddie's face was the color of skimmed milk. The hand he put on my arm was shaking. He kept swallowing and breathing with his mouth open.

"No, I didn't hear anything," I answered. "What happened?"

Eddie made sounds in his throat. "Frenchy—at a quarter after six! The whole car blew to pieces, little pieces! Quarter after six—not five minutes after he stopped at Marge Kelsey's house and picked her up!"