Bertina Beedle would have been a quite insupportable wife, if George Beedle had not been an efficiency expert with special emphasis on the conservation and use of time. Of course, when Bertina took on a homicidal lover, the problem became a bit trickier

the timekeeper

by Michael Young

EXACTLY FOUR SECONDS BEFORE eight o'clock on the morning of the murder, George Beedle pushed away the dark-haired Spanish girl.

He opened his eyes, blinked twice. He reached over the mottled pink and white back of his wife and slapped the alarm clap just as it began to toll the hour with the asthmatic churning of metal striking metal. The only sound to escape the time-consumed instrument was a crystallic tinkle, not unlike the far-away church bell one might hear any morning on Spain's Costa Brava.

The following thirty-five seconds of George Beedle's life were spent in a carefully regulated return to this dimension. He studied his wife's abundant back. A back like that, he thought, should be buttered and salted and sold for popcorn.

In a single, not-ungraceful movement—a carryover from a far more glamorous era when his air force was winning a war—George Beedle swung his pale legs from under the covers. As his feet made contact with the gritty floor, he winced.

Six minutes for a shower. Four minutes for tea. Seven minutes to get dressed. Finished, he sat by the side of the bed, ignited his pipe, looked again at the woman who planned his murder.

Her mouth hung open and she whistled discernibly through broad flaccid nostrils. Glinting clamps emprisoned yellow frizzes of hair. White grease masked her face. Scabs of lipstick adhered to her lips like paint on a weathered barn.

Her narrow pig eyes forced aside layers of flesh and she looked

out at George. She reached one paw down into her bed and extracted a handful of white sand.

"Sand again," she said. "In my

bed."

"I'm sorry," George said.

"Sand. Jeezo! Whazzatime?"

"Eight-thirty."

Bertina rolled from the bed and padded to the bathroom like a great blonde polar bear. She rubbed pink into her cheeks and red onto her lips. She put a cigarette into her mouth.

"You're late for work," she said as she selected one of her circus tent dresses from the closet. "Some efficiency expert! Pro'ly the only efficiency expert in the world that's late for work."

"I'm not going to work."

"Not going? Of course you're going. There's nothing wrong with you."

"I've retired."

"Retired? Forty-five years old —you can't retire. Think you're gonna live off my inheritance. Buddy, you got another think comin'."

"You keep your money," George said. He exhaled a cloud of pure blue smoke. "It's just that I've worked too long for time. Save ten minutes, fourteen steps, three man-hours. Now, time will work for me."

"Oh Jeezo-you are a kook."

In moments of crisis, Bertina plugged in the vacuum cleaner. She was somehow able to think

more clearly when the machine roared.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

The vacuum cleaner's monotone whine was an extension of Bertina's voice, the aluminum hosing, an addition to her arm. The machine, like everything Bertina touched, assumed her personality. It whined loudest when George came home from work, shrieked when he napped, reached new cacophonic heights during the Saturday afternoon football game.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"George!" She shouted over the mechanical roar. "You might as well know this. I'm leaving you."

"Really?"

"I can't stand this drab life any longer. I need excitement, glamor, interesting people. I'm moving to New Jersey."

"I guessed you would leave," George said. "I checked the bank account yesterday. Who's the other man?"

"It's Herbie," Bertina said.
"Herbert Devereux."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Poor Devereux. Didn't he have eyes? Of course, he was a psychiatrist and that might explain it. Renting temporary love, monetary understanding. Male prostitute to a universe of middle-aged women. Ideal husband for one hour a week. Forty bucks a throw.

"I shouldn't have thought Dr. Devereux would want our savings," George said. "His bills took most of

it. Didn't the inheritance cover the tab?"

"Don't be small, George."

"Is there any chance of my speaking to Devereux on a manto-psychiatrist basis?"

"Don't be cute, George. Of course you can talk to him. I'll call

him now."

Bertina picked up the telephone. Even the phone was infused with Bertina's personality. It had never been a phone, not in the ordinary sense. Bertina had selected a pale lavender extension and wore it around her neck like a gaudy piece of costume jewelry. Then, too, it soon lost all receiver characteristics. Bertina used it strictly for transmitting. It allowed her to seep into countless homes. George imagined that the listener momentarily became part of Bertina—a finger or even a limb-amputated only by the click of the phone returning to its cradle.

That wounded Bertina. She bled internally as the phone went dead. She suffered when the vacuum cleaner was switched off. She almost collapsed when George left the apartment. George Beedle, the most intricate of Bertina's many tools. The reflector for her personality rays, the amplifier of her sound waves, the moon to her sun.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Dr. Devereux did not bother to knock. He ignored George, walked directly to Bertina, wrapped her in his gray cashmere arms. George Beedle coughed. The psychiatrist turned around and offered his hand.

"Sorry chappy," he said. "Didn't

you see there."

"Don't apologize." George ignored the outstretched hand. "Most people don't notice me. It's a trend."

"I see." Dr. Devereux tapped his horn-rimmed glasses on the back of his left hand. "Just how long have you felt inferior to other people?"

"It's not that at all. Other people are usually so self-centered

that

"Of course," the doctor said.
"It's the rest of the world that's crazy."

"In a sense."

"You didn't come here to analyze George," Bertina said.

"No I didn't, pet," Dr. Devereux said. "I came to kill him."

George Beedle stiffened in his chair. He hadn't considered that eventuality.

"Kill me?"

"Quite right," Dr. Devereux said. He reached into his pocket and extracted a snub-nosed revolver with pearl-plated handle. He leveled it at George. From his other pocket he extracted a small vial of barbiturates.

"But why kill me?" George protested. "I won't fight the divorce."

"Just to collect on an insurance policy," the young doctor said. "Bertina took it out a year ago, you

remember? The payments have be-

"Don't talk about it," Bertina

said. "Do it."

"Quite," the doctor said, "but I'd like to give George a choice."

"A choice?"

"I could shoot you," Dr. Devereux said. "But that would be so messy. On the other hand, if you would like to take these barbiturates it would make things ever so much easier for us all."

Then it happened.

From the wall next to George came the muffled sound of a woman laughing. It was young laughter, rich with desire, throaty, impatient.

"What was that?" Bertina turned off the vacuum cleaner.

"Sounded like a girl laughing,"

George ventured.

"But on the other side of that wall is the street," Bertina said.

"Sound carries," Dr. Devereux explained. "No more delay, George. Which way will it be?"

"The pills," George decided.

"I'll take the pills."

He looked for a long moment at the deadly vial. Bertina handed him a glass of water. He dumped the pills into his mouth and washed them down with water.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"I want to say, Mr. Beedle, that you're being terribly decent about all this. Barbiturates are the most common suicidal agents today. Tasteless, painless, ideal medica-

tion for a sick world. Yes, quite decent."

"Not at all," George said.

"Probably correct," the psychiatrist went on. "Twentieth century man has lost the will to revolt. He has been mentally disciplined into patterns of timidity, accepting even death over violence."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.

Bertina's metallic arm scraped grime from the Venetian blinds, cleared cobwebs from the corners, sucked dust from the curtains.

"You've got about ten minutes of life," the doctor said. "One thing I'd like to bring up. We withdrew your savings yesterday—pitiful amount for a man your

"I never did understand money," George said evenly. "My business was time. I'm a timekeeper, you know. Tell other people how to save time—where to install the water cooler, how to design a firstrate efficient lavatory, what machines will replace ten men."

"But time is money," the doctor

said.

"There is no market value to time," George protested. "It is far too pure and its value is a constant."

"Not at all. Eight more minutes. Think of the value of time to a man in your position."

The feminine laughter again echoed through the small apartment. It seemed to come from the bedroom. High pitched at first, it

danced down the scale one note at a time. It was no longer muffled. It was followed by a single word that came from the wall directly behind Dr. Devereux.

"Caritol"

"Mas tarde," George answered.
"What was that?" Bertina asked.

"It's Spanish," George explained. "It means later."

Bertina ran into the bedroom. "There's nobody here," she said. "There must be," Dr. Devereux said. "The voice came from there."

"Let me explain," George said. His head buzzed with the poison of the pills. "That was Maria."

"Jeezo. By you that's an ex-.

planation?"

"It's over your head, Bertina," George said. "But maybe Dr. Devereux will understand. Our expert on matters of the mind. Maria belongs to time. Time, as you know, is the controller of all space. Maria is as real as any of us and once occupied space just as we do. But her qualities supersede space just as time does. Consequently, she survives in time."

"I don't get it," Bertina said.

"George, has there been some hanky-panky around here?"

"Extraordinary." Herbert Devereux polished his spectacles on a monogrammed handkerchief. "The most extraordinary case of thought-transference I've ever encountered. George has dreamed up a mythical creature, just like a little boy seeking escape from his

parents. She has become so vivid to him that he is able to mentally recreate her for us. He imagines she laughs and we actually hear her laugh. I've seen Polgar accomplish similar stunts—but never with the absolute fidelity . . ."

"You don't understand," George said. His head felt heavy and it was an effort to support it.

"Your clocks tick but that is not the sound of time. Thirty blank squares on the page of a calendar show no true picture of time. Time is passing right now and we are not aware of it."

"Your time is running out," Dr. Devereux consulted his wrist watch.

"No, my space is running out. But time defeats space. For you, time is an incurable disease. You caught it when you were born and it will prove fatal to you. But I have spent a lifetime holding time in my hands. I know it."

"I wish you weren't going to die," Dr. Devereux said. "If you were my patient, I could write a book about this. Reduced rates, of course."

"Reduced rates." George began to laugh but wound up yawning. "Money. Big houses. Space. Two-week vacations, more space. Never time. Time is everything. Maria is there. So is Cleopatra—there was a woman who gave up space for time. It's all there you know. Sunshine from a million days.

Epic loves. Lost worlds. All a part of time."

"He's crazy," Bertina passed judgment. "He's off his kook."

"Shut up you," Dr. Devereux snapped at his accomplice. "Let him finish."

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnn.

"I'm afraid you miss the point,"

George said.

"No, no," the doctor said. "Extraordinary. Escapism complicated by schizophrenia and a manic inferiority complex. Yet, no signs of depression. I had a patient who pulled a blanket over her head and refused to leave her bed for an entire month. But this? It's something new, something . . ."

George Beedle stood up. His eyelids were insupportable. The echoing waterfall of the vacuum cleaner splashed into the very recesses of his brain. He hoped he had not delayed too long. Time.

"Where do you think you're go-

ing?"

"Bertina, I know where I'm go-

ing. Do you?"

George leaned heavily against the wall. His head seemed to float. He kicked off his shoes and struggled vainly to remove his stockings.

"Afraid to go with your boots

on?" the doctor asked.

"It's just . . . just . . . that Maria likes to go . . . likes to wade in the water."

"Stop him, Herbie!" Bertina put

her hands to her mouth.

"He's not going anywhere," the
doctor said.

"Aqui," the voice came from behind the wall. "Aqui, Carito."

"Extraordinary realism," the

doctor said.

The room spun drunkenly away from George. Even the walls of the room slid from his hands.

Maria, unable to wait any longer, plunged her arms through the plaster wall. Dr. Devereux dropped the revolver. Slender arms, bronzed under a million Mediterranean suns, reached out to George. Golden bracelets were the only decorations on the arms other than a fine coating of sun-bleached down. George reached for the arms and they caught him. He could feel himself being drawn through the wall, pulled by the strength of all time.

Dr. Devereux lunged clumsily and grabbed George Beedle's left leg. Bertina held the other leg.

"You can't get away with this,"

the doctor shouted.

"Don't go!" Bertina pleaded.

"The insurance money!"

The only answer was the distant hush of sea water breaking gently over sloping black rocks on Spain's Costa Brava. George Beedle was gone. No trace of George remained on their empty hands. On their hands, they had only time.

Whannnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.