

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 crystalline 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 imprisoned 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

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 explanation?"

"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.

"Go on," Dr. Devereux pleaded.

"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.

