The automobile that stopped in front of Aaron Hacker's real-estate office had a New York license plate. Aaron didn't need to see the license plate to know that its owner was new to the elm-shaded town of Ivy Corners. The car was a red convertible. There was nothing else like it in town.

The man got out of the car and headed straight for the door.

"It seems to be a customer," said Mr. Hacker to the young lady at the other desk "Let's look busy."

It was a customer, all right. The man had a folded newspaper in his right hand. He was a bit on the heavy side and wore a light gray suit. He was about fifty with dark, curly hair. The skin of his face was flushed and hot, but his narrow eyes were frosty-clear.

He came through the doorway and nodded at Aaron. "Are you Mr. Hacker?"
“Yes, sir,” Aaron smiled. “What can I do for you?”

The man waved the newspaper. “I saw the name of your agency in the real-estate section of the newspaper.”

“Yes. I take an ad every week. Lots of city people are interested in a town like ours, Mr—”

“Waterbury,” the man said. He pulled a white handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his face. “Hot today.”

“Unusually hot,” Aaron answered.

“Doesn’t often get so hot in our town. We’re near the lake, you know. Well. Won’t you sit down, Mr. Waterbury?”

“Thank you.” The man took the chair, and sighed. “I’ve been driving around. Thought I’d look the town over before I came here. Very nice little place.”

“Yes, we like it,” said Aaron.

“Now I really don’t have much time, Mr. Hacker. Suppose we get right down to business.”

“Suits me, Mr. Waterbury. Well, then, was there any place in particular you were interested in?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I saw a house at the edge of town, across the way from an old deserted building.”

“Was it an old yellow house with pillars?” asked Aaron.

“Yes. That’s the place. I thought I saw a ‘For Sale’ sign, but I wasn’t sure. Do you have that house listed?”

Aaron chuckled softly. “Yep, we got it listed all right.” He flipped through a loose-leaf book, and pointed to a typewritten sheet.

“But you won’t be interested for long.”

“Aaron turned the book around. “Read it for yourself.”

The man did so:

**AUTHENTIC COLONIAL:**
Eight rooms, two baths, large porches, trees and shrubbery. Near shopping and schools. $75,000.

“Still interested?”

The man stirred uncomfortably. “Why not? Something wrong with it?”

“Well.” Aaron scratched his temple. “If you really like this town, Mr. Waterbury—I mean if you really want to settle here, I have any number of places that’d suit you better.”

“Now, just a minute!” The man looked indignant. I’m asking you about this colonial house. You want to sell it or not?”

“Do I?” Aaron chuckled. “Mister, I’ve had that property on my hands for five years. There’s no house I’d rather collect a commission on. Only my luck ain’t that good.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you won’t buy. That’s what I mean. I keep the listing on my books just for the sake of old Sadie Grimes. Otherwise, I wouldn’t waste the space. Believe me.”

“I don’t get you.”

“Then let me explain. Mrs. Grimes put her place up for sale five years ago, when her son died. She gave me the job of selling it. I didn’t want the job—no sir! I told her that to her face. I mean the old place ain’t even worth $10,000!”

The man swallowed. “Ten? And she wants $75,000?”

“That’s right. It’s a real old house. I mean old. Some of the beams will be going in the
next couple of years. Basement's full of water half the time. Upper floor leans to the right about nine inches. And the grounds are a mess."

"Then why does she ask so much?"

Aaron shrugged. "Don't ask me. Sentiment, maybe. The house has been in her family since the Revolution. Something like that."

The man looked at the floor. "That's too bad," he said. "Too bad!" He looked up at Aaron and smiled sheepishly. "And I kinda liked the place. It was—I don't know how to explain it—the right kind of house."

"I know what you mean. It's a friendly old place. A good buy at $10,000. But $75,000?"

He laughed. "I think I know Sadie's reasoning, though. You see, she doesn't have much money. Her son was supporting her, doing well in the city. Then he died, and she knew that it was sensible to sell. But she couldn't bring herself to part with the old place. So she set a price tag so high that nobody would buy it. That eased her conscience." Mr. Hacker shook his head sadly. "It's a strange world, ain't it?"

"Yes," Waterbury said thoughtfully.

"Then he stood up. "Tell you what, Mr. Hacker. Suppose I drive out to see Mrs. Grimes? Suppose I talk to her about it, get her to change her price."

"You're fooling yourself, Mr. Waterbury. I've been trying for five years."

"Who knows? Maybe if somebody else tried—"

Aaron Hacker shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows, is right. It's a strange world, Mr. Waterbury. If you're willing to go to the trouble, I'll be only too happy to lend a hand."

"Good. Then I'll leave now . . ."

"Fine! You just let me ring Sadie Grimes. I'll tell her you're on your way."

Waterbury drove slowly through the quiet streets. The trees that lined the avenues cast peaceful shadows on the hood of the car.

He reached the home of Sadie Grimes without once passing another moving vehicle. He parked his car beside the rotted picket fence that faced the house.

The lawn was a jungle of weeds and crabgrass, and the columns that rose from the front porch were covered with flaking paint.

There was a hand knocker on the door. He banged it twice.

The woman who came to the door was short and plump. Her hair was white and her face was lined. She wore a heavy wool sweater, despite the heat.

"You must be Mr. Waterbury," she said. "Aaron Hacker said you were coming."

"Yes." The man smiled. "How do you do, Mrs. Grimes?"

"About as well as I can expect. I suppose you want to come in?"

"It's awfully hot out here." He chuckled. "Hm. Well, come in then. I've put some lemonade in the ice-box. Only don't expect me to bargain with you, Mr. Waterbury. I'm not that kind of person."

"Of course not," the man said, and followed her inside.

They entered a square parlor with heavy furniture. The only color in the room was in the faded hues of the worn rug in the center of the bare floor.

The old woman headed straight for a rocker, and sat motionless, her wrinkled hands folded sternly.
"Well?" she said. "If you have anything to say, Mr. Waterbury, I suggest you say it."

The man cleared his throat. "Mrs. Grimes, I've just spoken with your real-estate agent—"

"I know all that," she snapped. "Aaron's a fool. All the more for letting you come here with the notion of changing my mind. I'm too old for changing my mind, Mr. Waterbury."

"Er—well, I don't know if that was my intention, Mrs. Grimes. I thought we'd just—talk a little."

She leaned back, and the rocker squeaked. "Talk's free. Say what you like."

"Yes." He mopped his face again, and shoved the handkerchief back into his pocket. "Well, let me put it this way, Mrs. Grimes. I'm a business man—a bachelor—never married, I live alone. I've worked for a long time, and I've made a fair amount of money. Now I'm ready to retire—to somewhere quiet. I like Ivy Corners. I passed through here some years ago on my way to—er, Albany. I thought one day I might like to settle here."

"So?"

"So, when I drove through your town today, and saw this house, it just seemed—right for me."

"I like it too, Mr. Waterbury. That's why I'm asking a fair price for it."

Waterbury blinked. "Fair price? You'll have to admit, Mrs. Grimes, these days a house like this shouldn't cost more than—"

"That's enough!" the woman cried. "I told you, Mr. Waterbury, I don't want to sit here all day and argue with you. If you won't pay my price, then we can forget all about it."

"But, Mrs. Grimes—"

"Good day, Mr. Waterbury!"

She stood up, indicating that he was expected to leave.

But he didn't. "Wait a minute, Mrs. Grimes," he said. "Just a moment. I know it's crazy, but—all right. I'll pay what you want."

She looked at him for a long moment. "Are you sure, Mr. Waterbury?"

"Positive! I've enough money. If that's the only way you'll have it, that's the way it'll be."

She smiled. "I think that lemonade'll be cold enough. I'll bring you some—and then I'll tell you something about this house."

He was mopping his brow when she returned with the tray. He gulped at the frosty yellow beverage greedily.

"This house," she said, easing back in her rocker, "has been in my family since 1802. It was built fifteen years before that. Every member of the family, except my son, Michael, was born in the bedroom upstairs."

"I know it's not the most solid house in Ivy Corners. After Michael was born, there was a flood in the basement, and we never seemed to get it dry since. I love the old place, though, you understand."

"Of course," Waterbury said.

"Michael's father died when Michael was nine. There were hard times then. I did some needlework, and my own father had left me some money which supports me today. Not in very grand style, but I manage. Michael missed his father, perhaps even more than I. He grew up to be, well, wild is the only word that comes to mind."

The man nodded with understanding.
"When he graduated from high school, Michael left Ivy Corners and went to the city. He went there against my wishes, make no mistake. But he was like so many young men—full of ambition, wild ambition. I didn't know what he did in the city. But he must have been successful—he sent me money regularly. However, I didn't see him for nine years."

"Ah," the man sighed, sadly.

"Yes, it wasn't easy for me. But it was even worse when Michael came home. Because, when he did, he was in trouble."

"Oh?"

"I didn't know how bad the trouble was. He showed up in the middle of the night, looking thinner and older than I could have believed possible. He had no luggage with him, only a small black suitcase. When I tried to take it from him, he almost struck me. Struck me—his own mother!"

"I put him to bed myself, as if he was a little boy again. I could hear him crying out during the night.

"The next day, he told me to leave the house. Just for a few hours. He wanted to do something, he said. He didn't explain what. But when I returned that evening, I noticed that the little black suitcase was gone."

The man’s eyes widened over the lemonade glass.

"What did it mean?" he asked.

"I didn’t know then. But I found out soon—too terribly soon. That night, a man came to our house. I don’t even know how he got in. I first knew when I heard voices in Michael’s room. I went to the door, and tried to listen, tried to find out what sort of trouble my boy was in. But I heard only shouts and threats, and then . . ."

She paused, and her shoulders sagged.

"And a shot," she continued, "a gunshot. When I went into the room, I found the bedroom window open, and the stranger gone. And Michael—he was on the floor. He was dead!"

The chair creaked.

"That was five years ago," she said. "Five long years. It was a while before I realized what had happened. The police told me the story. Michael and this other man had been involved in a crime, a serious crime. They had stolen many, many thousands of dollars. Michael had taken that money, and run off with it. He wanted to keep it all for himself. He hid it somewhere in this house—to this very day I don’t know where. The other man had come looking for my son, looking to collect his share. When he found the money gone, he—he killed my boy."

She looked up. "That’s when I put this house up for sale—at $75,000. I knew that, someday, my son’s killer would return to look for the money. Someday, he would want this house at any price. All I had to do was wait until I found the man willing to pay much too much for an old lady’s house."

She rocked gently in the chair.

Waterbury put down the empty glass and licked his lips. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open, and his head was growing very very dizzy.

"Ugh!" he said. "This lemonade is bitter."