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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Today's Son

by Louis Weinstein

AND MORE EXCITING CRIME STORIES!

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

DEPARTMENTS

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

As we had space to mention only briefly in the last issue, it's Edgar Awards time again—the time of year, that is, when the annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards for the best in crimewriting during the preceding year are bestowed by the Mystery Writers of America. (We were glad to be able to say then that Chet Williamson had been nominated in the Short Story category for "Season Pass.")

In this issue we can bring you the winners—their names are starred below—and all the nominees for everything.

But first, the big news: it seems yet more congratulations are in order! Bill Crenshaw, author of "Poor Dumb Mouths" (May 1984) is the recipient of the Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Short Story published in 1984, and we are as pleased as punch. Since that first publication, which featured freelance insurance company investigator Adameus Clay and his brother-in-law, Fat Chance, Crenshaw has brought us another Adameus Clay story, "Good Fences" (March 1985), and a non-series tale, "Dead Man's Switch" (January 1985). All of them, in our view, have been excellent stories indeed, and we'll look forward to many more with considerable pleasure.

And now, back to that list . . .

BEST NOVEL OF 1984:

The Black Seraphim by Michael Gilbert (Harper & Row)

The Twelfth Juror by B. M. Gill (Scribners)

Emily Dickinson Is Dead by Jane Langton (St. Martin's)

Chessplayer by William Pearson (Viking Penguin)

* *Briarpatch* by Ross Thomas (Simon & Schuster)

BEST FIRST NOVEL OF 1984:

A Creative Kind of Killer by Jack Early (Franklin Watts)

Foul Shot by Doug Hornig (Scribners)

Sweet, Savage Death by Orania Papazoglou (Doubleday Crime Club)

* *Strike Three, You're Dead* by R.D. Rosen (Walker)

Someone Else's Grave by Alison Smith (St. Martin's)

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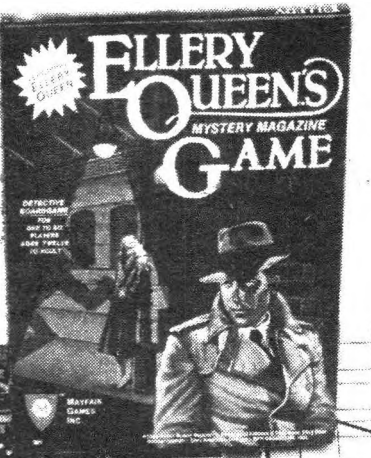

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BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF 1984:

The Keys to Billy Tillio by Eric Blau (Pinnacle)

The Seventh Sacrament by Roland Cutler (Dell)

Words Can Kill by Kenn Davis (Fawcett Crest)

Black Night in Red Square by Stuart H. Kaminsky (Ace/Charter)

* *Grandmaster* by Warren Murphy and Molly Cochran (Pinnacle)

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1984:

* "By Dawn's Early Light" by Lawrence Block (*Playboy*, August, and *The Eyes Have It*, The Mysterious Press)

"The Reluctant Detective" by Michael Z. Lewin (*The Eyes Have It*, The Mysterious Press)

"Breakfast at Ojai" by Robert Twohy (EQMM, September)

"After I'm Gone" by Donald Westlake (EQMM, June, and *Levine*, The Mysterious Press)

"Season Pass" by Chet Williamson (AHMM, October)

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1984:

Murder at the Met by David Black (Dial)

Evidence of Love: A True Story of Passion and Death in the Suburbs by John Bloom and Jim Atkinson (Texas Monthly Press)

Earth to Earth by John Cornwell (The Ecco Press)

The Molineux Affair by Jane Pejsa (Kenwood Publishing)

* *Double Play: The San Francisco City Hall Killings* by Mike Weiss (Addison-Wesley)

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK OF 1984:

The James Bond Bedside Companion by Raymond Benson (Dodd, Mead)

* *Novel Verdicts: A Guide to Courtroom Fiction* by Jon L. Breen (Scarecrow Press)

Ross Macdonald by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)

One Lonely Knight: Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer by Max Allan Collins and James L. Traylor (Bowling Green State University Popular Press)

Inward Journey: Ross Macdonald edited by Ralph B. Sipper (Cordelia Editions)

BEST JUVENILE NOVEL OF 1984:

The Third Eye by Lois Duncan (Little, Brown)

Chameleon the Spy and the Case of the Vanishing Jewels by Diane R. Massie (Harper & Row/Thomas Y. Crowell)

* *Night Cry* by Phyllis R. Naylor (Atheneum)

The Ghosts of Now by Joan

L. Nixon (Delacorte)

The Island on Bird Street by Uri Orlev, translated by Hillel Halkin (Houghton Mifflin)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1984:

Beverly Hills Cop, story by Danilo Bach and Daniel Petrie, Jr.; screenplay by Daniel Petrie, Jr. (Paramount)

* *A Soldier's Story*, screenplay by Charles Fuller from his play *A Soldier's Play* (Columbia)

The Little Drummer Girl, screenplay by Loring Mandell from the novel by John le Carré (Warner Bros.)

BEST TELEFEATURE OF 1984:

Fatal Vision, written by John Gay (from the book by Joe McGinnis), NBC-TV

Celebrity, written by William Hanley (from the book by Thomas Thompson), NBC-TV

* *The Glitter Dome*, written by Stanley Kallis (from the book by Joseph Wambaugh), HBO

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1984:

* "Deadly Lady," from *Murder She Wrote*, written by Peter S. Fischer, CBS-TV

"Seven Dead Eyes," from *Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer*, written by Joe Gores, CBS-TV

"Miami Vice" (pilot), written by Anthony Yerkovich, NBC-TV

SPECIAL AWARD:

"The Silent Shame," an NBC News Report on Child Abuse Crimes, written by Mark Nykanen

Congratulations to them all!

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FICTION

The Case of the Blushing Lips

by Donald Olson

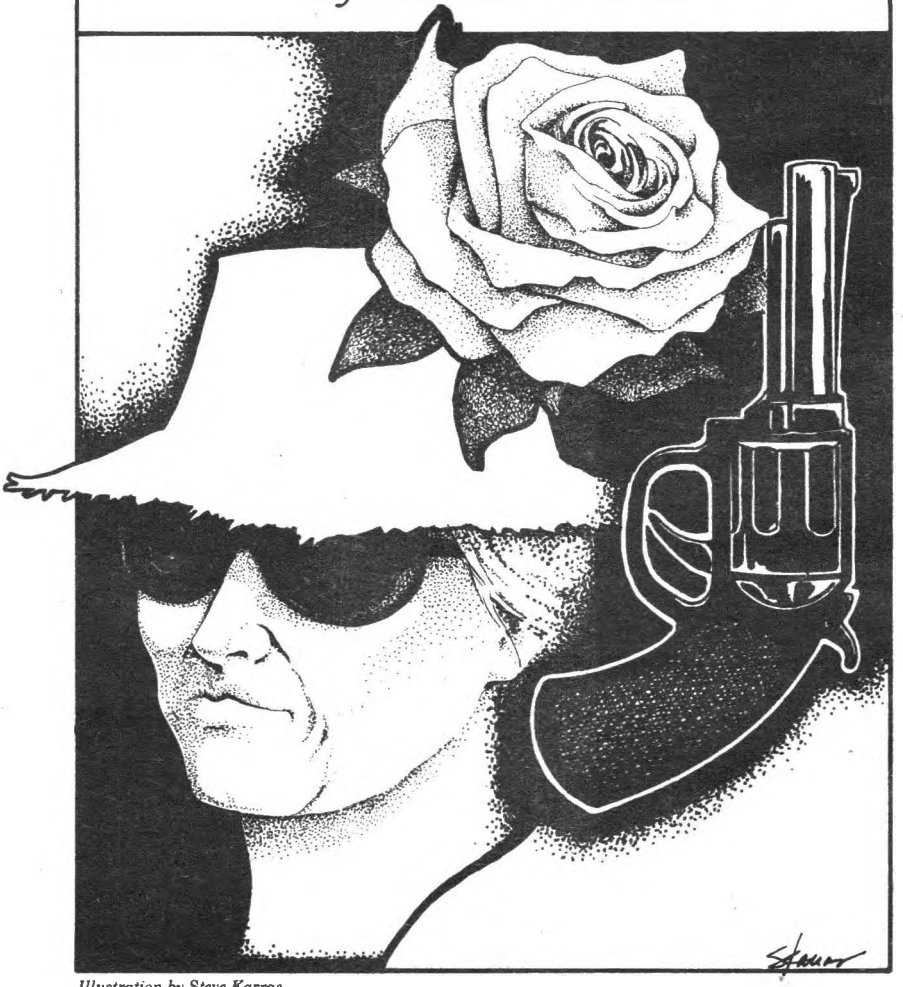

Illustration by Steve Karras

While recovering from an episode of minor surgery some years before the following events occurred, Treviss had taken himself off to the seashore for a week's vacation. South Cove was one of those summer resorts as unspoiled, rustic, and unpretentious as any you might find along the upper New England coast. Quite by chance he had found lodgings at a cottage maintained as a sort of annex to the Tamarack, a modest, four-square boardinghouse owned by a woman named Iris Kendle. Being by nature unsympathetic to the tourist mentality, Treviss had found South Cove quite to his liking, the majority of vacationers preferring the livelier distractions of neighboring North Point. Undisturbed by prattling youngsters, over-zealous "social directors," and throbbing transistors, he had been content to relax in solitude upon a scrap of sandy, rock-girdled beach and to enjoy the quietly unobtrusive hospitality of Mrs. Kendle and her spinster daughter Madeline.

Now, seven years later, he recalled this pleasant interlude as he shared with his young friend and assistant, Peters, an extraordinary letter that had arrived from Iris Kendle in the morning's mail

"So what do you think?" he asked. "Ought I to go?"

"I don't get it," replied Peters with a frown. "Why should she appeal to you? If I remember right, you scarcely more than met the woman. I thought it was the daughter—what was her name?—you were so chatty with."

Treviss rebuked him with a crusty glance from under grizzled brows. Chattiness implied the sort of aimless tittle-tattle he deplored in either sex. As a talker he could be garrulous enough when expounding upon one of his pet theories, but there were more often lengthy periods of brooding silence behind clouds of odorous tobacco smoke. Peters often teased him about his perhaps not altogether unconscious aping of his favorite literary sleuth, while the young man himself was in no respect a model of Watson; indeed, Treviss might have been hard-pressed to suffer that good doctor's blustering amiability. Even more than the keen intelligence and domestic talents of the rugged but studious ex-soldier with whom he shared the bungalow, Treviss appreciated his young friend's companionable quietness. A "spendthrift of his tongue" thank God he was not.

"Her name was Madeline, and neither of us could be accused of *chattiness,* thank you.

She was a quiet lass who knew how to mind her own business. When we talked, and we did, of course, it was about things that matter."

"Like roses?"

"Yes, like *roses*. She grew superb roses, quite equal to my own, I must admit. But you're right. The mother was ill, a semi-invalid, and all the work around the place fell upon Madeline's competent shoulders. It would appear she must have told her mother about my interest in unusual cases."

"It's also apparent from what she says here that she assumes you know all about 'Madeline's trouble,' as she puts it. Do you?"

"By no means. Hard to imagine such a young woman *being* in trouble. I do seem to recall reading something in one of the papers about this Geoffrey Lyston's murder, though I certainly didn't connect it with the Kendles. That's why I wish you'd pop over to the library and ferret out everything you can about the case. It's six years old, but you should be able to dig up the pertinent facts."

"Then you're going down there, are you?"

"One could hardly ignore so pathetic an appeal. Only this time you're coming with me. You can bring your fishing gear. Time you had a holiday." And then he added, as the young man's face brightened: "*Working* holiday, that is."

Peters grinned. "Right. Working holiday, what else?"

They departed for South Cove on a gray and foggy autumn morning when, had he owned such garments and could have worn them without provoking his friend's amusement, Treviss might have found an Inverness cape and deerstalker more practical than his quite as unfashionable and incorrigibly wrinkled gabardine raincoat and dented hat.

With Peters behind the wheel, Treviss was free to peruse at greater length the photocopies of those reports of the case his assistant had resurrected. The facts were few: a young man named Geoffrey Lyston, who had rented a beach cottage for the summer in the village of North Point, was found shot to death early one morning in his car about a mile above the town. There were no apparent witnesses to the shooting; however, the police had been seeking a young woman "seen frequently in the victim's company."

Only one of the stories mentioned Iris Kendle's daughter by name: "Police are baffled by the disappearance of Miss Madeline Kendle of nearby South Cove. Although reluctant to characterize the missing

woman as a suspect, authorities have issued an all-points bulletin in an effort to contact her." Geoffrey Lyston, it was noted, was the nephew of the late Robinson Lyston, founder and chairman of the board of Nutridermics, a prominent manufacturer of cosmetics and health care products.

Follow-up stories disclosed no further progress in the case. The murder remained unsolved, the Kendle woman never found.

Upon their arrival late in the afternoon, Treviss was happy to find South Cove unchanged, if anything even more pleasing to his eye now during the off-season when the maples were shot with gold, the quiet sea uncluttered with pleasure craft, and but a single fisherman visible on the weather-blackened wharf. The few houses scattered above the cove wore an air of desertion, and only the sassy bleating of the gulls broke the pre-twilight stillness.

The Kendle place stood somewhat removed from its neighbors on a gentle bluff ringed by spruce and junipers and overshadowed by a massive, shaggy-limbed tamarack tree. A wiry, white-haired old man in faded overalls was raking up the tiny cones of this ancient tree along the drive bordering the encircling verandah.

"Aye," muttered this old fellow in reply to Treviss's greeting. "Miz Kendle said you'd be comin'."

"How has she been, Amos?"

"Fit. Fitter'n she was when you was here back then. Good days 'n' bad. Same's the rest of us."

"Mr. Treviss!"

Only then did the two men discover the figure seated in a wicker armchair at the far end of the terrace. As they moved toward her, Treviss found it hard to judge to what extent the past seven years had changed her, for as he had told Peters he had spent only an occasional few minutes in her company on that earlier visit. She had remained in her room most of the time, and only once, when Madeline could not play the hostess, had Mrs. Kendle joined the guests in the dining room for dinner.

Moreover, it was now hard to appraise her condition, so protectively was she garbed against the brisk sea breeze blowing across the terrace, while her features were shielded from the fitful sun below a wide-brimmed straw hat held securely to her head by a chiffon scarf knotted beneath her chin. A cane propped against the chair and elastic stockings covering her swollen legs suggested a difficulty in walking. Unbecoming

dark glasses, drab gray hair, a bulky-knit shapeless sweater over a shabby housedress all conveyed an impression if not of dowdiness, at least of indifference. To Treviss she appeared older than her sixty-five years—which must be her age if he remembered correctly Madeline's telling him her mother was fifty-eight seven years ago.

Her first words, uttered in the same raspy voice he remembered, rather startled Treviss: "I expect you thought I'd be dead and buried by this time!"

Treviss chuckled. "I'm delighted to find you looking so well, Mrs. Kendle. I daresay we're both feeling fitter than we did at our last meeting."

"We're both Scots, my good man. A hardy race. When the girl told me you were a Scotsman, I was sorry I wasn't up to getting better acquainted back then. What about him?" She jabbed her cane in Peters' direction. "Is *he* one of us?"

The young man shook his curly head and grinned. "I'm just a Yankee, ma'am."

Iris Kendle shrugged. "That's all right, too. You're both welcome to South Cove. I warn you, you must take pot luck or forage for your victuals in North Point. I can manage a passable stew, but don't expect anything fancy."

Treviss looked around. "Am I to understand you run the place all by yourself now?"

"Nothing to run. No more guests. I gave that all up years ago . . . well, without the girl it was hopeless. Crazy, isn't it? We had to scramble to make ends meet when we were in business. Now, when it doesn't matter, money's no longer a problem. Or didn't you know I'm an *heiress?*"

"Are you indeed?" He wondered passingly if her long illness might have affected her mind. An heiress was the last thing she looked like.

"I am. An old flame remembered me in his will. To quite a tune, I assure you."

There followed a moment's awkward silence, saved by Peters who ventured an admiring comment about the late-blooming roses bordering the lawn behind them.

"Pretty, aren't they," she murmured in an offhand way. "They were the girl's pride and joy. Rather cultivate the roses than her guests, to be honest. Ah, but she made an exception in *your* case, Mr. Treviss."

"A charming lass."

Mrs. Kendle sniffed. "Don't know about the *lass*. She was past forty when you knew her. I had her young, you know. She was a love child. Her daddy was a passing fancy. I was a brain-

less twit at that time. My folks took her, raised her till she was in her teens. This was their place, you know. But more of that later. Amos! Quit your mucking about with that rake and help those gents with their things. . . . I've put you in the cottage, you seemed to like it so much, though I'm all alone in the house now. Amos comes around when I need him." With visible effort but waving away all assistance, she struggled to her feet. "I'm a trifle wobbly on my pins, so don't wait for me. We'll have a spot of supper in about an hour."

As both men were quick to tell her, the stew required no apologies. She had also "managed" a tasty salad and a superb cherry cobbler.

"I hope you can find your mouths," she remarked, for they dined by the light of a single candle. "I can't bear strong light, indoors or out. Hate these tinted spectacles, but I assure you it's not vanity—even if I am an heiress."

She chose this opening to reveal the first of her astonishing disclosures: her benefactor had been none other than the murder victim's uncle, Robinson Lyston. "Oh, yes. We were —well, shall we say sentimentally attached—years and years ago, when Robinson was still puttering with that pot of face cream he built an empire on. I was what you might call on the fringe of the theater. He never knew about the girl. Robinson was mighty straitlaced, you know. And I was no floozy. We were very dear to each other. Ancient history now. Neither of us ever did marry. I called myself Mrs. Kendle when I took over here. Better for the girl, you know. Robinson always promised I'd be taken care of, but I took that with a grain of salt. I hadn't seen him for donkey's years until I went down to New York to visit him when I heard he was so sick. It was then he told me about his will and the legacy. Let me tell you, I was flabbergasted. Well, he's gone now, died not many months after his nephew was killed. That boy was always a great disappointment to Robinson. Told me so himself."

Still, she avoided any mention of why she had summoned Treviss until they were taking their coffee in the adjoining lounge, which was all old wicker and turn-of-the-century antiques. From the sofa where she had placed them they could scarcely make out her features in the light of the single rose-shaded lamp.

When Treviss suggested they put off further discussion until

morning she shook her head, although he could tell she was tired. "No, no. I must tell you now. Time's important. And it won't take long. I need your help, Mr. Treviss. I know you're not a practicing detective, but the girl told me about your hobby—if I may call it that. She liked you. She was a quiet one, but canny. She trusted you, and I trust her judgment. And I can't very well go to the police. I would be expected to cooperate with *them*. I need someone who'll cooperate with *me*. Humor my caprice, if you will. Please just listen to me. Then tell me if you'll do what I ask. No questions, please, although you'll have plenty. You must get your answers from the girl."

Treviss started and leaned forward. He wished he could see the woman's eyes, read her expression. "The girl? Madeline? But she—"

"Is missing. Yes. Has been missing for over five years. But I know where she is. I've always known. And now she's coming back here. Madeline's coming home, Mr. Treviss, because I'm going to die. No, don't say a word. You know the meaning of the word remission in medical parlance. That's all it's been. Don't need a doctor to spell it out for me. Not seen a doctor in years. Seen virtually no one, except old Amos, and both of us are too near blind to really see each other. But we've managed. It's time to clear things up, Mr. Treviss. Folks around here all think Madeline killed Geoff Lyston. Even the police. Well, she did not. I can prove it. I have conclusive evidence: the very gun that shot Lyston. With the killer's prints still on it."

Could she be mad? Treviss wondered, regarding with profound uneasiness the ghostly figure facing him. As if she might have read his thoughts she uttered a low, crackling laugh. "Oh, you shall see it yourself. You'll find it on the closet shelf in your room at the cottage. You see, Mr. Treviss, I want *you* to give it to the police. But not for twenty-four hours. And when Madeline arrives you must listen to her story and go with her to the police. You must give her all the help and comfort she may need. There. That's all I ask. Will you do it?"

Treviss felt his young friend's eyes upon him but didn't dare return the glance. For moments he remained silent, and then: "I must ask you at least one question. If Madeline didn't kill Lyston, why did she run away?"

"Because I made her go. I *sent* her away. She always did what I told her to do. Oh, she didn't want to go, but when she understood how much depended on it

she did as she was told. I want her name cleared, Mr. Treviss, and I rely upon you to do that. You may name your price, but please, I beg you, don't refuse to help us."

Reason warned him to make no rash commitment, yet some impulse of deeper humanity decided otherwise:

"Yes, Mrs. Kendle. I'll do what I can. But I cannot promise to establish the girl's innocence. You must realize that."

She uttered a sigh of relief. "You won't have to. *I* shall do that."

Once, waking deep in the night, he thought he might have heard a noise somewhere down by the wharf, but he was tired and the sea air not conducive to wakefulness, thus he did not fully awaken until eight the following morning. And then only because he was rudely brought to life by the sound of his friend's voice and the pressure of his hand.

"You'd better get up," said Peters, no trace in his voice of that break-of-dawn jauntiness Treviss so often deplored. "The sheriff is up at the house."

"Sheriff?"

"Something's happened. To Mrs. Kendle."

The something, Treviss soon learned from the pot-bellied officer awaiting them in the lounge, was apparent suicide.

"You can't mean it," said Treviss, even as the words Iris Kendle had uttered leaped to his mind. *She's coming home because I'm going to die.*

"They'll be dragging the cove for her body. Chances are, it won't be found. She somehow managed to row the dinghy out to sea. It was washed up on the Killbuck sandbars early this morning. Her shoes and cane were in it." As Treviss was about to speak the sheriff raised his hand. "That's not all. She left a letter yesterday for my deputy to give me this morning. That's how I knew you were here, Mr. Treviss. It looks like we've got a lot to talk about."

Peters now appeared with three steaming cups of coffee. They all sat down. The sheriff produced the letter.

"Suicide note *and* confession. It's all here. You're welcome to read it, but I can give you the gist. Seems it all stemmed from a will written by Geoffrey Lyston's uncle. Rich old bugger who died in New York soon after Lyston was murdered. According to Iris's confession, she could expect a sizable legacy from the old man *unless* she died before he did. The old man didn't know she had a daughter. If Iris predeceased him, the money would go to the nephew,

Geoffrey Lyston. Iris Kendle's story, for what it's worth, is that the nephew came down here nosing around. Played up to Madeline Kendle when he found out she was Iris's daughter. Tried to find out all he could about the household routine, layout of the house and all that. Then one night he lured Madeline away on some pretext and came here to murder Iris. Tried to smother her, only the old girl proved feistier than he expected. She had kept a gun in a bedside stand ever since a break-in several years back. She claims she shot Lyston minutes before Madeline, realizing something must be wrong, got home. She found Lyston unconscious. Iris insists in the letter that Lyston didn't seem that badly injured, that he came around and Iris ordered Madeline to drive him home. Then she claims Madeline came back, all but hysterical, to say Lyston died on the way back to North Point. She panicked and drove the car off the road and rushed back here."

Treviss interrupted to wonder, given all that, why Madeline had then run away. "If what Iris wrote is true, that she shot Lyston, then it was clearly a case of self-defense."

"Oh, it's true, all right, from the looks of it. I should have guessed something was in the wind when Iris asked me to come out here last week. She insisted I take her fingerprints but refused to tell me for what purpose. Well, I humored her, what the hell. Figured she'd become a bit dotty living here all alone for years. In the letter she says you can produce the gun that killed Lyston and that her prints are on it."

Treviss nodded. "I was to give it to you today. Good Lord, if I'd guessed what she had in mind . . . "

"She also writes that Madeline Kendle is coming home. That she made the girl disappear to prevent her giving any evidence against her mother. So. If you give me the weapon and the prints check out, I for one will be relieved, sorry as I am about the whole damned mess. Crazy woman. If they'd only told the truth! Question is now, will the girl really show up?"

"I should hate to have to break the news about her mother."

"You may have to, sir. She'll no doubt come straight here. If she does, I'll rely on you to bring her in."

"And if she does corroborate her mother's story?"

The sheriff spread his hands. "That'll wrap it up far as I'm concerned. I don't know what the big city boys would do, but

I wouldn't choose to make trouble for the woman about concealing evidence. As I see it, everything they did was without purpose. Still, I guess I can understand why they acted like they did."

Treviss decided then and there that he liked Sheriff Mahoney.

Early that evening Treviss and Peters arrived back at the cottage from a drive to North Point for dinner to find a woman standing outside the cottage door.

"Mr. Treviss? I'm Madeline Kendle. Do you remember me?"

For a long moment Treviss could only gape. Then he glanced at Peters but saw no matching expression of astonishment or dismay. Of course Peters had never met Madeline Kendle.

And this woman was not Madeline Kendle.

From a distance he might have been mistaken, for the woman's height and figure were as he remembered Madeline's. Madeline, however, was not a blonde. Madeline would never have worn such heavy makeup. The plucked eyebrows, the long, mascaraed lashes, the high cheekbones and curve of the lips, the spike heels and glittery earrings and the somewhat too revealing dress visible beneath the short fur jacket were not Madeline Kendle.

Nor was the bold smile, which seemed to mock Treviss's consternation. With an effort he found his voice: "Oh, I remember Madeline Kendle very well."

"But you don't remember *me?*"

"No, my dear, I don't remember you."

The woman winked broadly at Peters. "And I don't remember your handsome young friend here. But give me a few minutes and then come up to the house. We'll get better acquainted." And as Treviss moved she waved a hand airily. "Don't bother. I know my way."

The two men gazed after her as she walked away with an exaggerated swing of the hips up the narrow path to the house.

Peters laughed. "Lord, but you should see the look on your face. . . . Well, you're wrong. You must be. *She* knew *you.*"

Treviss could only shake his head. "My lad, it would appear there are murkier currents in this whole affair than I dreamed possible."

"Good heavens!"

The exclamation broke from Treviss's lips the moment she opened the door to them. Gone were the blonde hair, the makeup, the earrings, and all the rest. The woman smiled shyly, touched a hand to her short-cropped dark hair. She

was now in jeans and a plaid shirt and scruffy loafers.

She thrust her hand out to Treviss. "*Now* I see you remember me. Forgive me. I simply couldn't resist doing that."

"I swear to God, my dear, you had me completely buffaloed."

"Fascinating, isn't it, what a few years in New York can teach a girl. And a mother who was a better actress—and even better teacher—than she realized. It used to amuse her to teach me a few tricks of the trade. I never forgot them, you see. It's amazing how a bit of skill with the right makeup can change the very shape of one's face. Can you wonder I was so good at eluding them when I ran away? . . . But where *is* Mother? The way she talked on the phone . . . she hasn't done anything stupid, has she? She was so mysterious, and she said something about a letter she'd written to the sheriff. They haven't come and arrest—Mr. Treviss, what is it? What's wrong?"

Treviss reached for her hand. "Sit down, Madeline. You must prepare yourself for a shock."

Although the sheriff was agreeable to postponing his interrogation of Madeline Kendle until the following morning, Treviss admired her spunk in insisting they not put it off. It was, naturally, an emotional and draining experience, all the more so when a report came in while they were with the sheriff in North Point that a body had been found drifting in the shallows below Lighthouse Reef.

He spoke softly to Madeline. "We'll know more once the coroner's arrived on the scene." Once more she declined to put off the questioning and when, having confirmed all that her mother had written, she was allowed to go home, Treviss and Peters escorted her in silence and insisted she need not apologize for wishing to go straight up to bed.

"Plucky gal," observed Peters when the two men were alone in the cottage, Treviss gazing in silence out over the darkening sea while puffing furiously away at his pipe. "It'll be tough on her."

"Yes," Treviss agreed. "Especially when the story breaks. There'll be reporters. I think that was the real reason Iris called upon us. She wanted someone around to stand by the girl. A most remarkable woman."

"I still can't see *why* they acted as they did."

"Can any of us predict how we'd react in such a situation? They each did what they thought best to protect the other."

"Still, what a price to pay."

Before they themselves retired for the night, the sheriff's deputy arrived to inform them that the body recovered earlier was not Iris Kendle's but that of a long-missing fisherman, whose remains were so badly decomposed that identification was still only tentative. They all decided it would be best not to say anything to Madeline until morning.

Peters, rising from bed later than his friend, for a change, climbed to the terrace to find Treviss admiring the rose garden alongside old Amos, who looked even more aged and bent and weatherbeaten than before. Peters felt sure Treviss had been doing what he could to console the old fellow.

"You were evidently the only real friend poor Iris had these past few years," he was saying.

Amos wiped a hand across his nose. "Friend? Don't know as you'd say that. Coulda been. But she was a queerish one, was Miz Kendle. A bit o' putterin', some fetchin' an' carryin', that's all she'd let me do for her. Wanted to be alone, that one. None o' that misery-loves-company for her, no sirree. . . . "

Treviss stooped to cup gently in his palm a full-blown pink rose trembling in the morning breeze. "Did you tend the roses for her?"

"Nay. They just growed, like as if they didn't need no tendin'. Hardy as she was, them roses."

"She never did any gardening herself?"

"Nay, I says to her once Miss Madeline would want me to tend to 'em, but she wouldn't hear of it. Wouldn't even have a single rose in the house. Said they made her too sad, remindin' her like they did of Miss Madeline. Sometimes I think she'd have bin happy to see 'em all wither away and die . . . but they didn't."

"No. Indeed they did not."

Treviss and Peters were still there when Madeline appeared. "Yes," she said in reply to Peters. "I slept. Better, in a way, than I have for months. Strange, isn't it? Or maybe the sea air."

Treviss proceeded to inform her about the body reported found the day before. She sighed. "The sheriff will call me when Mother's body is found. He'll know where to reach me."

"You're going away?"

"For a while. Till all the publicity blows over. Then I'll come back. Maybe open the place up again. So you see there's no need for you to stay longer and hold my hand. I can't thank you both enough for what you did for me, and Mother. But I'll be all right now."

Treviss turned to his friend. "In that case, my boy, you may as well pack us up and we'll be on our way. Just let me have a few moments alone with Miss Kendle."

Peters regarded him with a quizzical look, then nodded and walked down to the cottage as Treviss took Madeline by the arm and suggested they sit down in the wicker chairs at the edge of the terrace. Looking out over the water he said gently: "If you feel you must thank me for anything, my dear, there is really only one way to do that. By telling me the truth."

Her face turned to him. "The truth? What can you mean by that?"

"You might begin by telling me exactly when your mother did die." He reached for her hand. "No, don't be alarmed. I wouldn't dream of hurting you. I've already guessed the truth about most of it."

"Oh? And what have you —guessed?"

"When you arrived yesterday, I thought at first you were an imposter. I was wrong. But I'm certain the woman who claimed to be your mother was the real impostor."

Despite his assurance she could not conceal her perturbation. "Mr. Treviss—"

"I should have surmised something peculiar before this morning. Oh, your disguise was quite admirable. Ah, but the voice! The mannerisms. Quite, quite perfect. A virtuoso performance, my dear. I'm sure you must have perfected it over rather a long period. When did it first begin?"

Turning away from him, she leaned an elbow on the chair arm and buried her face in her hand.

He drew his own chair closer, patted her shoulder. "No, please. Don't be upset. I'm not judging you. I simply feel I've a right to know."

Slowly she lifted her head and turned her moist eyes full upon him, more bravely than defiantly. "You're right, I suppose. You deserve to know. Only . . . "

"It shall remain our secret, I promise you."

She began to speak in a low, reflective tone. "She worried about me, you know. Always. And she felt guilty—about our being separated when I was a child. She wanted to make it all up to me. Things weren't going well here. There were serious money problems. And then she heard about the legacy. Unless she outlived Mr. Lyston, all that money would go to his nephew. She knew she hadn't a great deal longer to live, and she couldn't bear the thought of my losing out, of my being

left alone with nothing but this place. She dreamed up this incredible scheme—she'd once been an actress, you know. We resembled each other. I was only seventeen years younger. I told her it was impossible, but she wouldn't listen. She trained me, for months. All during the winters when we were alone here she'd coach me—in makeup, everything. She made me buy wigs, all sorts of things . . . I did it to please her. In a way it gave me at the same time a peculiar sort of pleasure, all that pretending. Yet I was astonished when it actually succeeded."

"Then even when I was here before—"

"Even then. It was always me, not Mother. She'd died the winter before you arrived. Very peacefully, in her sleep. She'd made me vow to do what she wanted. It wasn't easy, especially in winter. But I did it. No one ever knew. Until Geoff Lyston came snooping around, that is. He'd tracked Mother down. He knew about the legacy. He found out about me. He insisted on seeing her. I told him she was too ill just then to have any visitors. He started sweet-talking me. Quite to no avail. He was laughably transparent. By then old Mr. Lyston had had two strokes. His mind was all but gone. Geoff could never have influenced him to change his will just because of me. I doubt if he would have changed it anyway. He was very fond of Mother. Anyway, one night he broke into the house. With every intention of murdering the woman he thought was Iris Kendle. It was as 'Mother' wrote in her confession. He tried to smother me in my bed. It was dark—he didn't realize—only I wasn't a helpless old woman. I managed to get the gun out of the drawer. The bullet went through the pillow and into his chest. I was horrified. There was only one thing to do. Somehow I managed to get him into his car. He was dead before I reached North Point. I left him there in the car and made my way back here."

Treviss exhaled a long breath. "Of course. Now the one illogical factor becomes logical. Madeline *had* to disappear."

"Yes. If I'd told the truth about everything, all that Mother had tried to do for me would have been undone. There would have been no legacy. It's not unlikely they might even have suspected me of killing her."

"There was no difficulty about the legacy?"

"None. No one had any reason to suspect I was not Iris Kendle. There were no longer any guests, of course. And we

had long since ceased to have anything to do with the locals, except old Amos. That's the truth of it all, Mr. Treviss, right up till the day I wrote you that letter. I'd intended to do what I did—to reappear—long before I did. Only I kept losing my nerve. . . . "

"And your mother?"

She stood up. "Come. I'll show you."

Presently they stood side by side looking down at the rose bed. "You know, it's odd, feeling as I do about them. Mother was never fond of roses. She always said they brought back unpleasant memories. Something to do with my father, I've always imagined."

"So you tended them—but never let Amos know."

She looked imploringly into his eyes. "You do believe all I've told you, don't you? You must. I couldn't bear it if you thought I was lying—about any of it."

"I believe you, my dear. As I told Peters, you're a very remarkable woman."

Tears gathered in her eyes as she looked down at where her mother lay buried. "If I am, it's because she made me one."

Slowly, hand in hand, they walked toward the house. "Now you must tell me something, Mr. Treviss. You said you didn't actually guess the truth until this morning. How could you possibly have known?"

He ventured a sly smile. "A pair of blushing red lips told me."

"What?"

"Pink lips, to be exact. A rose, my dear. To rose lovers like you and me, those marvelously subtle gradations of color are as identifiable in distinguishing one rose from another as are fingerprints in identifying people. There's one in my own garden, you see. I mean a Regenberg. As you may or may not know, it was not introduced into the horticultural world until 1980. You could not possibly have planted it in your garden, not unless you were here long after you were supposed to have disappeared. Your mother wouldn't have planted it. Amos told me she took no interest in the roses. As you've said yourself."

He was pleased to hear the sound of her laughter for the first time. "Dear Mr. Treviss, how clever of you. A regular Nero Wolfe!"

He regarded her with a pained expression. "No, no. Don't offend me, please. *He* was an orchid man."

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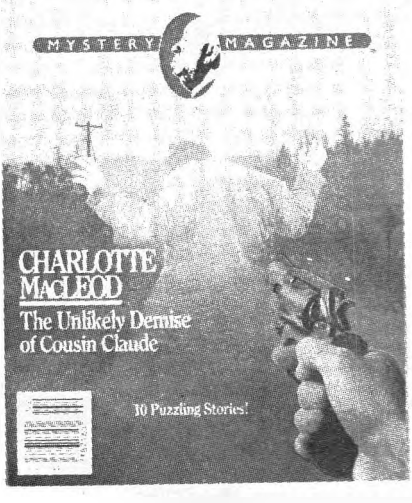

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FICTION

The Mot Juste

by Robert Loy

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

The President of the University of Virginia sighed and scratched at the remains of his once-red hair with gnarled hands. Why, he wondered, why had the Fates so arranged his destiny as to force him to confront his greatest adversary now, as a tired old man of eighty-two? His mind flitted back to ancient enemies made during his fifty-year career in politics, men like John Adams and Al Hamilton. At the time he had not realized how fortunate he was to have such rivals; they had been men of flesh and bone at least, and that sort of foe could be beaten—with a horsewhip if needs must. His current antagonist was of a realm other than the fleshly one. It was a supernatural force he now faced. And a man cannot horsewhip a shade.

Wearily he pushed his swivel chair away from his desk and, with the aid of a hand-carved cane, hobbled to the window. He gazed paternally out over the grounds of the institution he loved so dearly. Temporarily safe now in the demon-repulsing sunlight, the campus gleamed as splendidly as when he had first beheld it in a grand dream that demanded life. The school had no equal, aesthetically or academically, anywhere in the New World; even Harvard paled in comparison. All of it, from the marble columns to the maple trees, was his vision substantiated.

His rheumy gaze traveled to the dome of the rotunda, the piece of architecture from which the nightmare that had pursued his dream into reality launched its nightly assaults. Every eventide for the past fortnight the serenity of the slumbering school had been shattered by sinister sounds emanating from that dome. The first few nights it had been the unearthly screeching of the word "Negative" over and over. On succeeding nights the shade had become even more fearsome, shrieking, "Nullify! Nullify!" until almost cockcrow. And last night the president and the entire population of the school had been terrorized into wakefulness by the unearthly cawing of "Not again! Not again!" All efforts to trace the sounds to their source had failed, and already eleven students, better than ten percent of the fledgling school's enrollment, had abandoned the haunted campus and transferred to William and Mary. If the haunting happened again tonight, the president knew, there would be more transfers, and soon the dream of a university "based on the illimitable freedom of the human mind to explore and to expose every subject suscepti-

ble of its contemplation" would be a withered fantasy in a senile old man's memory—only this and nothing more.

A gentle rapping at his oaken office door jerked him out of his morbid meditations. He shuffled back to his chair and hid the cane under his desk.

"Yes. You may enter."

A small man wearing bifocals blew in, followed by a sullen youth in a rumpled school uniform.

"I, er—that is . . . Good morning, Mr. Jefferson." The little man peered respectfully up at the Sage of Monticello.

Thomas Jefferson shook his gray head. Witherspoon again. And of all times now. He probably caught that unhappy lad napping in natural philosophy class or suchlike. Why cannot Witherspoon handle these minor disciplinary matters by himself, Jefferson wondered. That was, after all, what an assistant headmaster was hired to do.

"What is it, Witherspoon?" he barked.

"I—that is—you see, sir. What I mean to say—"

"Lad," Jefferson addressed the student, "be so good as to step back outside and see if you can locate Mr. Witherspoon's tongue. He seems to have mislaid it somewhere."

"Oh, no, sir, I—I . . . " sputtered Witherspoon. "I mean to say that won't be necessary. I still have it. M-My tongue, that is." The assistant headmaster peered respectfully again, this time at the ceiling, sensing that something unseen had just flown over his head.

"Then use it," Jefferson commanded.

"Yes, sir. I—that is—" He swallowed. "I know about the noises in the rotunda, sir."

"Witherspoon," Jefferson whispered, "every man in Charlottesville, even the deaf, knows about the noises."

"But, sir, I know what is responsible for them. I've—I've seen it."

"You've seen it? You've seen the ghost?" Jefferson fought to keep his old heart from breaking rein; he dared not allow himself to hope that this foe might be corporeal. Witherspoon was probably blithering.

"Er, no, sir. You see, it is not a ghost."

"Not a ghost?" Jefferson started as though a musket had just gone off at his ear. "What is it then?"

"I will—er—allow this young man to elaborate, sir. He knows more about this than I." Witherspoon gained a measure of aplomb as he directed Jefferson's attention to the wretched youth. He leaned across the president's desk and stage-

whispered, "John Allan's stepson."

"Speak, lad," Jefferson demanded. "What haunts my school?"

The boy just stared at him morosely.

"Witherspoon!" the president thundered. "Does this youth know what is responsible for this haunting or does he not?"

"Y-Yes, sir." Witherspoon shrank six inches and peered respectfully at his boss. "He is."

"He *is?* He is what?"

"Responsible, sir."

"What!" Jefferson shot out of his chair like a man to whom lumbago was a stranger. "This boy has been making those dreadful sounds?"

"Yes—er, well, some of them, sir. Most of them were made by his bird."

"His bird?" Jefferson restrained himself from throttling his assistant headmaster only by clutching the sides of his desk. "What bird?"

"A big black bird, sir," Witherspoon explained. "He, er, captured it and is teaching it to talk."

"And why," Jefferson roared at the student, "are you teaching it to say such horrible things?"

Still the boy said nothing.

"You had better answer me, boy. You are at the threshold of expulsion."

The youth stared at Jefferson for several seconds and then said,"It's for a poetry project of mine."

Poetry? Jefferson felt suddenly dizzy. He plumped down onto his chair. Just when, he wondered, had the world and everyone in it ceased to make sense?

"A work of art that has seized my imagination and disallows me to rest," the poet went on, discarding his sullenness completely. "The poem concerns the bird, and it requires that animal to speak. But it must be the right word, the one and only right word, that it speaks or the poem will never be completed and will undoubtedly haunt me forever."

A fiery gleam from Jefferson's eyes caused the hapless Witherspoon, caught in the crossfire, to peer respectfully out the window, but fazed the budding bard not a whit.

"As yet my efforts to find that word and hear it from the bird have been fruitless. My ear for rhythm and rhyme is faultless; when I hear that one right word I will recognize it," the poet said. He added an apology almost as an afterthought: "I meant neither harm nor inconvenience to anyone. You must understand, though: with me poetry is not a purpose, but a passion. It is imperative that I

find the right word—the mot juste—to consummate this poem."

Jefferson aimed a crooked forefinger like a bent branding iron at the poet. "Here are some mots justes for you, young man: Free the bird—immediately! Consider yourself confined to your chambers after classes for a month. I do not want to see you in my office again or hear your name mentioned in connection with any disruption of school routine. And—" his voice boomed clear and strong, as it had back in the old days of the Second Continental Congress —"I especially do not want you working on any more such poetry projects while you are attending the University of Virginia. Do you understand that, Mr.—Allan, was it?"

"No. Allan is my stepfather's surname. Mine is Poe. Edgar Poe."

"Do you understand, Mr. Poe? The right word for your poetry projects is—Nevermore!"

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This story could have happened. It is based on the little-known historical fact that Edgar Allan Poe was a student at the University of Virginia while Thomas Jefferson was president of that institution. The sidelights concerning Poe, Jefferson, and the University of Virginia are accurate in all essentials.*

FICTION

THE CROSSROADS

by Jane Rice

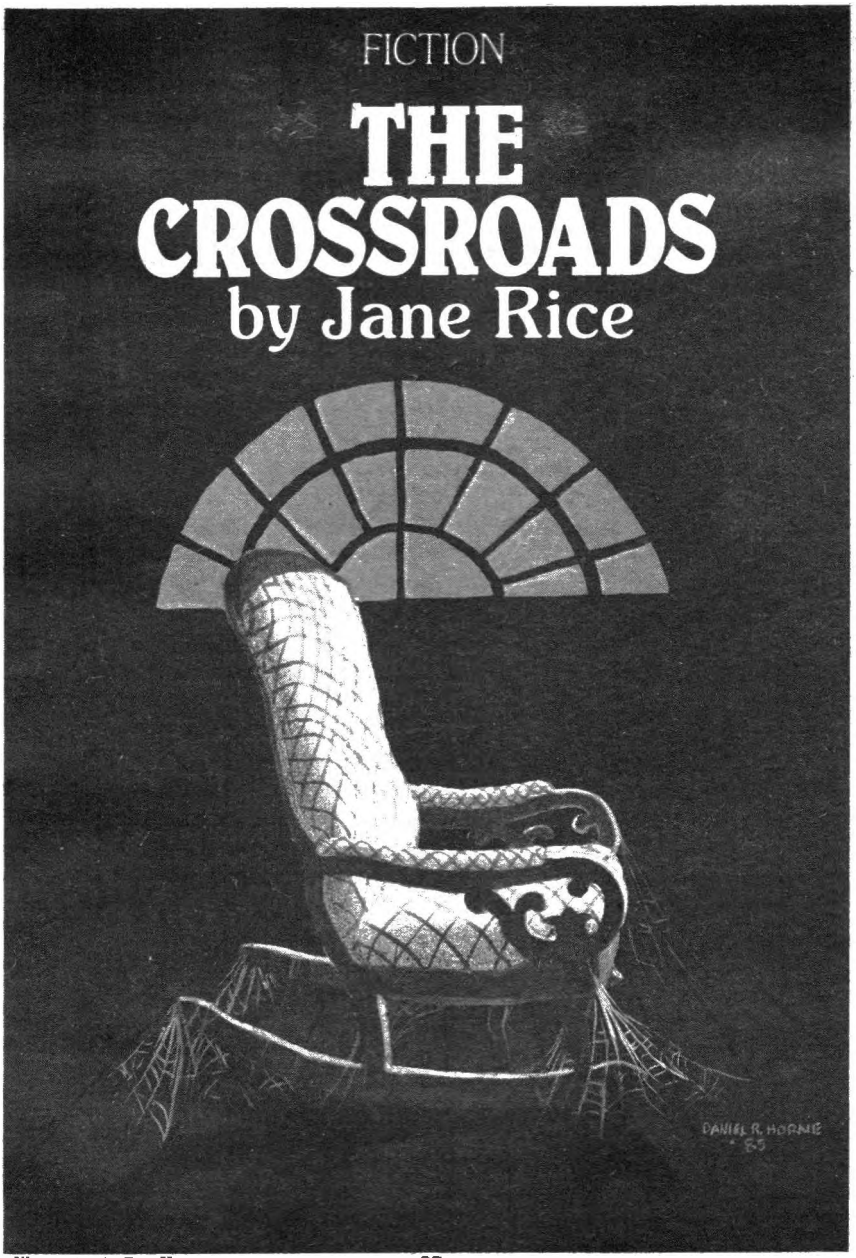


Illustration by Dan Horne

The Crittenden residence, once a colonial crossroads inn, had been built to endure. Protect. Sustain.

Pockmarks in the thick-walled, foursquare, granite-gray stone edifice on the corner of Crittenden and Main still visibly attested the structure's ability to withstand a fiercely fought Revolutionary battle. (A historical plaque affirmed the episode without providing the additional information that the embattled innkeeper, Josiah Crittenden, had been a Tory who had sided with the Crown.)

In a later and (in its own sad way) more grueling war, gaunt Confederate soldiers had smelled out the last of the high-hung, smoke-cured chimney hams, and the remaining tobacco twists stashed among the rafters, and the yams buried beneath the sand in the root cellar, but they had not found the hiding hole that was a link along the escape stations of the underground.

As successive generations of Crittendens had come and gone, the hostelry had evolved into "the homeplace." Gradually the outlying land had been sold off piecemeal, to be sliced into town lots. In the process the Crittendens, a dour and frugal people (with an occasional flamboyant offshoot), had grown prosperous, and the dwelling had finally attained the status of a landmark almost in the center of the business district. There, by its sheer presence, it shored up the hierarchical status of the remaining Crittendens, wall-eyed Harold and his tightlipped wife, Helen. A position that might have declined after the death of Harold's father, Zachary. (A bully. A tyrant. A blackguard. But, give the devil his due, a man of his word.)

By the same coin, however, the somber appearance of the property nourished the idle rumor that the house was haunted and that poor, addled "Miss Margaret" lived in the attic and had to be restrained during a full moon.

Driving up rainswept, night-lit Main Street, Rolf Crittenden noted without surprise a cut-rate drugstore in the slot that, a year ago, had been his brother's pharmacy. Who wants their medicinal needs filled by a pharmacist whose eyes have a tendency to drift apart while he is filling a prescription? Nobody.

What a day it must have been for Harold when probate had come to a close and he had stepped (pigeon-toed) into the inherited seven-league boots and there was no longer any reason for him to put up a front.

Good day for Helen, too. She was a natural for the role of backseat driver.

A humorless smile quirked his mustache. Just as he was a natural for the role of the black sheep.

Absently, he obeyed the traffic signal. Slowed to a stop, his thoughts running ahead to his destination. He still had a choice. The homeplace on Crittenden Street. Let himself in with his own key. A member of the family. Or, he could continue on out Main to the interstate to . . . where?

To cadge, or not to cadge, that was the question. Whether 'twas nobler of the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of a streak of rotten luck or, by supplication, and a tug of the forelock, end them.

Eat crow.

Look, beggars can't be choosers.

Why not?

Oh, shaddap! He slammed in the gear and squealed off through the swimmy red reflection of the stop light.

At Crittenden, he took the corner. Scraped the tires against the curbing. Saw, too late, the broken bottle lying in the gutter. Braked hard. Grimaced at the unmistakable crunch. The telltale pull on the steering wheel. Lurched to a stop beside a painted, red-coated carriage boy, one arm outstretched to take the reins of vanished horses. Kismet rides again.

He cut the motor. Switched off the headlights. Appraised the luminous blue glow that spilled from a downstairs casement. Harold was probably eating something sticky and enjoying a ride-'em-cowboy rerun.

Upstairs, the backlighted oblong of a lowered windowshade meant Helen was in her bedroom. Testing her mettle. Admiring her refinement. Sharpening her tongue.

The wan diffusion in the attic dormers? Birdie trying to locate Margaret for beddy-bye?

A web of lightning patterned the sky. A rumble of thunder gave a forewarning of more to come. The tempo of the rain increased. He flipped up the tired collar of his English raincoat. Tugged down his shapeless, but still jaunty, Irish hat. Ducked out of the diminutive car. Gave the right front tire a cursory inspection.

Flat as a keg of stale beer.

He raised the back hatch, snaffled his duffel (in lieu of the suitcase) as evidence of the transitory nature of his unheralded visit. Slammed the hatch down and sprinted to the stoop and the protection of the entry-

way. Fumbled his old latchkey into the lock. Opened the door and, closing it softly behind him, restrained an urge to cup his mouth with his hands and shout: GET SET. HERE I COME. READY OR NOT.

He stowed the duffel and his hat and coat in what had once been a "cloak" room and emerged to find his wispy, faded sister Margaret waiting for him. One eye was enormous. Froggy. Swollen to the size of a golfball by the magnifying glass she held, attached to a string around her neck.

"It's me," he said, gently. "Rolf."

"I've been *watching*," she whispered. "Did you bring me a present?"

"Let me see." He pretended to search his jacket sleeves, his lapels. Felt in his pockets. Feigned amazement. Said, "What's this?" Gave her a small package. Helped her with the wrappings. Showed her how she could convert the beam of the toy flashlight from white to red to blue to green, and back to white. (Like the magnifying glass, a wondrous thing for someone with scrambled eggs for brains.)

She tucked the magnifying glass, the gift ribbon, and the shiny paper into the neck of her blouse and, entranced, wandered off down the passageway, putting her acquisition through its changing paces.

From the study came a staccato burst of gunfire, punctuated by static and a satisfied belch.

He checked his appearance in the long, ornately framed hall mirror. Observed the reflected image of a figure on the stairs. Ah. The Red Queen. Radiating hospitality. Warmth. Cheer.

"Helen," he said, turning to address the straightbacked, autocratic woman who contemplated him.

"Rolf," Helen Crittenden responded, mimicking his tone. "How time flies."

Play it cool and don't get uppity, he cautioned himself. Then heard himself say, "I was en route to the zoo but decided to stop off here instead." The implication plain.

"We would have been devastated had you not. But what a disappointment for your friends." Trailing her fingers along the banister, she continued her descent.

Rolf inclined his head in sardonic acknowledgment. You had to admit she gave as good as she got. He walked diagonally down the hall to shake hands with his brother who, drawn by the talk, had come to the threshold of the study to investigate, wiping the

corners of his mouth with a knuckled finger.

"Harold, good to see you." No lie. I'll have a scotch, Harold. The sooner the better.

"For heaven's sake," Harold Crittenden replied, pumping Rolf's hand automatically. Taken aback. At a loss for words. "This is a surprise."

"Not on a night like this," Helen commented, stepping into the hall.

"I'll be darned," Harold exclaimed, floundering for amenities. "I'll be gosh darned. What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Oh, Harold, for pity's sake," Helen said. And, to Rolf, "You're staying with us?"

"Is that an invitation?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. Unfortunately, there's a broken bottle under my right front tire which, sorry to say, is shot to pot. In case you haven't noticed, the neighborhood is getting seedy."

"I'm sure you're an authority on pot," Helen said. She raked him with an analytical glance. "And seedy."

"Why don't you find a cure for what ails you," Rolf said, throwing caution to the winds. "Harold here must have plenty of leftover pharmaceuticals that would fill the bill. For starters, you might try an aphrodisiac. Or what about arsenic? Arsenic will cure anything. Permanently."

He halfway expected Helen, her color rising, to flathand a hard slap across his jaws. Instead, she sent Harold a look that translated: He's *your* brother. *Do* something. And no money, or there'll be no end to it.

Calling, "Margaret? Bedtime. *Mar*garet . . . " she swept off down the hall.

"Sorry, Harold," Rolf said. "But . . . " He broke off—held, for an instant, by the odd notion that his brother was standing inside an innocuous "Harold" facade, staring out at him. Druid-like.

Then one pale blue Harold eye swam off focus and Harold was Harold again, balding, going flooey around the middle, his stance lending weight to the fancy that underneath the droopy sweater vest a wind-up key was attached to his coccyx bone.

" . . . not very sorry," Rolf finished. "Where's Birdie?"

"She quit. Went back home to Tennessee. Margaret took a dislike to her."

"To Birdie! *Why?*"

Harold shrugged. "Who knows why. Margaret gets loonier by the week." He winced as a flash of lightning followed by a roll

of thunder triggered a continuous blare of static in the study. "Lord," he said, whether in protest at the weather, or the whole troublesome moment, was unclear. He retreated to attend to the noise.

Rolf sauntered after him, stiffarming the shadowy memory that lay in wait . . . Vikki's contorted face . . . the multitude of tiny pearls scattered like seeds over the carpet . . . the shouted imprecations . . . the white bust of Homer sailing through the air, missing his head by inches, to shatter against the wall. . . .

To counter the remembrance, he drifted to the bookshelves. Chose a book at random.

The yammer of the TV stilled, Harold switched his attention to a tin of caramel corn. Proffered the container.

Rolf lifted his eyes from the flyleaf of the book he was holding where the message CALL THE POLISE was scrawled in orange crayon. Declined Harold's offer. Said, "Why don't you put Margaret in a home. One with a name like Holy Angels where they specialize in Margarets." He exchanged the book for another.

"I promised Father, as he lay dying, I'd take care of her."

"Last-ditch promises are for the birds. She'd be better off learning how to make potholders." CALL THE POLISE crayoned in purple. He slid the book back into place. Tried a different shelf.

"A pledge is a pledge," Harold said, around a mouthful of caramel corn.

A self-righteous, twenty-four-karat dumbdumb. CALL THE POLISE in yellow. Did Harold and Helen know that every book in the study had CALL THE POLISE inscribed on the flyleaf? Judging from the antiquated titles on the spines, it was doubtful if they had ever taken down a single one.

As if to repudiate the unspoken disparagement, Harold strolled to an adjacent shelf and extracted a heavy tome. "While I'm thinking about it," he said. "This'll be a good night to get started on this."

"What is it?"

"The Bible."

"The *Bible?*"

"Our family Bible. I've decided to have our lineage traced. The early names in here go pretty far back."

"Margaret insists on saying goodnight to brother Rolf before Margaret will go to bed," Helen announced acidly from the threshold.

Herodias appraising the head of John the Baptist. . . .

Helen's appraisal extended

itself to include Harold. She herded Margaret into the room. "Say goodnight, Margaret."

Advancing, Margaret kissed Rolf's cheek in a gawky display of approbation. Said, confidentially, "Don't be afraid. It can't hurt you. It's just playing dead."

"All right, you've said goodnight," Helen interposed. "Come along." And, to Harold, "I'll take this up." She appropriated the Bible even as she was speaking and, snugging the volume in her arms, said, "All *right,* Margaret. Let's go."

Evading Helen, Margaret backed away. Sidled into the hall.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," she called, hurrying towards the staircase, her reedy voice seemingly directed at someone standing there, beckoning.

"Good God," Rolf said to Harold. "What's all *that* about?"

Once again he had the impression that his brother was peering out through the slits in a mask. This time, however, the Druid look centered on his departing wife's shoulder blades. The tip of his tongue made a circuit of his lips. He blinked his eyes into focus.

"What? Oh . . . Margaret. Why . . . a kid in a skeleton costume rang the doorbell last Halloween for the usual handout and scared her pink. She hasn't forgotten the incident." He extended the caramel corn. "Sure you don't want to try this stuff?"

For some reason Harold reminded Rolf of a nervous stage butler ad libbing his lines.

"I'm sure, Harold. But I could use a scotch on the rocks. Or do you have to get Helen's permission?"

Salvo!

The kitchen, formerly Birdie's undisputed territory, had acquired Helen overtones, all of them inferior to Birdie's brand of decor. Essence of Olde Town Gyft Shoppe was a poor substitute for the aroma of good cooking. Varnished gourds and pewter plates and Toby mugs couldn't hold a candle to Birdie's display of gaudy, gilt-trimmed holy cards depicting bleeding hearts and winged angels and cow-eyed saints. A pair of matching rush-bottomed chairs flanking the ashy remains of a meager grate fire were, somehow, a sad memorial to Birdie's squeaky old rocker and embroidered peacock pillow, and the warm glimmer of a long gone period when, as children, they had toasted marshmallows, popped corn, roasted chestnuts, and listened to Birdie dispensing advice . . . don't nevernever walk

under no ladder . . . a onion or a forked stick beats holly nine ways from Sunday for keeping out night hants, and don't let nobody persuade you different . . . a redheaded woman cross your path, whip right around in your tracks and high-tail yourself home to Birdie, lickety split . . . and you children STAY SHUT of that hidey hole befo' one of you winds up smothered and I loses my temper. . . .

Rolf grinned. "Remember the time Himself caught us playing Sardines with Pearl and Maisie Shipes in the hiding hole?"

"I'd forgotten the names, but not the aftermath. My backside stung for a week." Harold ambled over to the refrigerator and removed a tray of ice.

Rolf said, "I always felt what really got his goat was the fact that Pearl and Maisie were our best shot. I was determined that when I grew up I'd have my own hiding hole, with a trapdoor for anybody who barged in without knocking."

His eyes clouded at an unbidden recollection.

"So this is your hiding hole," his father said, glancing at the glossy photographs decorating the walls.

"I hadn't thought of my agency in those terms."

"I suppose not." Zachary Crittenden leaned forward in the shabby chair. Rested his mottled hands on the silver knob of his walking stick. Lowered his brows. Said, "I'll dispense with civilities and get down to brass tacks. I've come to ask a favor."

"Of me? Aren't you forgetting I'm the disinherited prodigal who never repented?"

"Nevertheless. You can give me something I want. I have come here to ask you to do that."

"Either I'm hallucinating, or you are."

"I want a namesake."

"A *name*sake?"

"A grandson. To carry on the name Zachary Crittenden."

The thrust of what his father was saying hit him. He sat bolt upright. Incredulous. "And you want *me* to *stud* one for you. Well, suborn me a jury!"

The brows became a solid line across the bridge of the craggy nose. The sallow skin flushed a dull, bruised red. "Now just a minute. Just a minute. Settle down. Hear me out." A blue vein throbbed in his temple.

Someday, old boy, you're going to get angry once too often and the final curtain is going to ring down right on top of you.

"I would expect you and your wife to share my home," the

adamant voice went on, "until the child is born, for the reason that a native son always has an edge over an outlander. After the birth you and your wife may stay, or leave. If you choose to leave, the child remains with me. If you stay, I will brook no interference in the raising of—"

"Just a minute yourself," he broke in. "I don't have a wife. I don't want a wife. I don't want a child. I don't want to share your home for even fifteen minutes. I don't want to continue this conversation." Rising, palms flat on his desk, he delivered the perfect curtain line. "Have a nice trip back to *your* hiding hole."

"For the collaboration of you and your wife in the project I have outlined," his father continued, inexorably, "I would consider the sum of one hundred thousand dollars fair exchange."

"I don't *have* a . . . " Slowly, he removed one hand from the surface of the desk. Flattened it on top of his head. Said, "Sweet Jesus." Sank into his chair.

The eyebrows smoothed. The flush began to ebb. The obdurate voice laid out the conditions.

First on the agenda was proof positive a child had been conceived. Then, and only then, the marriage simply for the paper that would make the child legitimate. There must be no stigma. A baby a few weeks early was readily explainable.

In the meantime the newlyweds would come home, ostensibly for the bride to be introduced to the family. They would decide to remain while he wrote a play, or some such believable nonsense. There would be an adequate expense account until the child was christened. Then, and only then, the big money. After which he would be on his own.

He would not be reinstated in the will. The namesake would be his father's principal heir. If either Rolf, or the wife, should attempt any shenanigans, the child would be dumped back in their laps. Penniless. There would be no legacy. And he, Zachary Crittenden, would see to it personally (tapping the desk with a forefinger, for emphasis) that "Goodbye, Broadway" would be their theme song. Had he made himself clear? Any questions?

What if the child was a girl?

A simple medical procedure could now ascertain the sex of a child months before birth. A girl could be . . . eliminated. Unless, of course, Rolf wished to assume all responsibility. Any further questions?

Harold and Helen?

"Harold and Helen make me want to puke," his father said. "They know this. If they want to inherit anything, they'll walk the chalk line. I've made provision for Margaret."

"You had two opportunities for a namesake. Why Harold and Rolf?"

The eagle eyes hooded. "Harold looked like a skinned squirrel. He was an insult to a box of cigars. You were a troublemaker from the word go. Your mother was sick as a dog for the whole nine months, at the conclusion of which you presented yourself breech first. Refused to cooperate. They had to use everything but dynamite to pry you loose. Damn near killed her."

"Why don't you beget your own child?"

"I would. If I could. Anything else? No? Do we have an agreement?"

The choice was his. He stood at another crossroads in his life. One of many. Heretofore, his chosen routes had culminated in blind alleys, and self-flagellation that he hadn't chosen the other route.

"I'll . . . be in touch."

His father surveyed the glossies on the walls. The brows lowered again. The forefinger tapped the desk. "I don't like to be left hanging. I'll give you one week. If you accept my proposition, select someone who is beginning to realize she hasn't a Chinaman's chance of making the grade on her own."

The encounter had come to a close. They did not shake hands. The peck of the walking stick diminished down the corridor.

"Who was *that?*" Vikki Villmar exclaimed, making an "entrance" with a deli bag and a Styrofoam container of coffee. She blew a fluff of red hair out of her eyes. "A stand-in for Daddy Warbucks?"

"In a sense. Or Machiavelli."

"Mack who?"

"Never mind. Sit down. And listen closely."

His ruminations were dispersed by a crack of lightning. A boom of thunder shouldered through the house. The lights dimmed. Resurged. Rain pelted the windows like flung gravel.

Harold's gaze floated ceilingwards. "Whew," he said. "We're in for a bad night." He readjusted his eyes. Padded to the sink with the icetray. Took a glass from a cupboard. Opened a cabinet. Said, "Oh, oh. Scotch. Go across the hall and see if there's a bottle in the pantry, will you?"

Rolf choked back the words,

"Anything. Whatever's available." No sense in throwing baby blue spot on that.

Taking Rolf's acquiescence for granted, Harold busied himself with the tray.

The pantry fixture did little to illuminate the confines. Searching from shelf to shelf, he trod on an object and, stooping, retrieved Margaret's flashlight. Saw the hiding hole, the false panel askew, the worn victim of attrition.

Could Margaret have been attracted by a picture of Johnny Walker or a kilted Highlander with an armful of bagpipes?

Where Margaret was concerned anything was possible.

He hunkered down and directed the white beam into a space not much larger than a piano box. The clutter was pure Margaret. A silvery ball constructed of gum wrappers. A strand of tinsel. A scatter of valentines. Orange peel. A magnet. A wad of Easter basket grass. Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle . . .

"There must be some pieces missing." Vikki jumbled the jigsaw puzzle into a heap. Picked up an abandoned crossword puzzle. Inquired, indifferently, "Do you know a three letter word for ictus, whatever that is?"

She tossed the crossword puzzle aside. Dutifully downed her glass of milk. She shuddered. Said, "The cow responsible for that should be exterminated." Crossed her arms on the card table. Said, with an enormous sigh, "Y'know what I'd give a whole big bucket of pearls for, right this second? A pizza. Sausage, anchovies, olives, double cheese, the works. And a sour pickle. And deli coffee. I think it's more the taste of the container than the actual coffee. I guess that's batty. But ever since the official thumbs-up that the baby *is* a boy, I've been feeling kind of batty. Spooky. I dunno. May seems a thousand years away. He'll be a Gemini. They're supposed to be versatile, witty, logical, and inquisitive. Did you know that?"

She fingered a piece of the puzzle. "Rolf? What if we *didn't* name the baby Zachary?"

"If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, don't."

"But we'd have the baby."

"That's what I thought you were thinking. Vikki, take the long view. In terms of diaper rash. It will be free of anything even remotely resembling diaper rash for its entire life."

"Not 'it.' *Him.*"

"*Him,* by any other name, will be lucky to get a rubber teething ring. Zachary Critten-

den, numero two-o, will cut his incisors on an array of silver spoons. That's what you really want, isn't it? Well? Isn't it?"

"Yes. Except that I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. But whatever it is, it's here in this house."

"Vikki. Everybody has bent backwards to—"

"Right this very second, *you're* not bending backwards."

"Gotcha. A trash pizza, a dill pickle, take-out coffee."

The pantry door closed, with a tiny snick.

He jarred his head against the shelf. Suppressed an oath. Pushed himself erect.

Margaret took her flashlight from him as a matter of course. She adjusted the color. Her pallid countenance became a sickly green, framed in what might have been Spanish moss instead of hair. In her derelict black satin nightgown, obviously a relic of Helen's, she could have stepped intact from a horror movie.

"Go to bed, Margaret," he said. "Go . . . to . . . bed."

"My bed's wet. Are you going to call the police?"

So that was the underlying reason for CALL THE POLISE. The threat of jail. Ye gods! What in hell had prompted the great Himself to consign Margaret to Harold and Helen with his dying breath? If he'd made provision for her, implying a trust fund, why had he changed his mind?

He held up two fingers, brought them together. "Don't worry. The police and I are like this."

Margaret nodded approval. "I'll snitch the key when I can without getting caught."

"The key? What key?"

"The key to the attic . . . shhhhhh. . . . " She went to the door. Inched it ajar. Listened. Glided away.

Did they sometimes lock her in the attic! He massaged the back of his head. Resettled his jacket. Returned to the kitchen to discover Harold had located the scotch after all, "right in front of his nose."

"Why didn't you holler?"

"Double on the rocks. Right?" Harold went on, oblivious to the query. "All poured and blowed, as the saying goes." He gave the drink he had fixed a final ceremonial stir. Offered Rolf the glass.

Had he requested a double?

There was a crash of lightning. A cannonade of thunder. Without warning the lights went out. Momentarily the darkness seemed absolute. The drumming rain a foe seeking entry. A green glow appeared

in the doorway. Discernible through the glow, apparently afloat in mid-air, was a disembodied head.

Harold made a glottal noise, as if he'd choked on his Adam's apple. The glass dropped from his grasp. Smashed at his feet. The spoon tinkled across the floor.

The disembodied head said, "Could I have some bread and jam to take up?"

With a visible effort Harold recovered a measure of composure as the lights came on. "Margaret, if you don't go upstairs, right this minute, you won't get any bread and jam for a month," he warned. He shook a menacing forefinger. "Now scoot!"

As if on cue, Helen called from the second floor, clapping her hands sharply for emphasis, *"Right this minute, Margaret!"*

Margaret backed off, and was gone.

Rolf surveyed his brother. "Was that necessary?" he asked. "What's a little bread with jam?"

"Easy for you to stand there and comment," Harold retorted, flushing. His lower lip quivered, his initial fright not fully dissipated. "You should live with what I live with day in and day out." His words stumbled over themselves, his voice rising like a woman's. "*You* wouldn't last a week." His jowls trembled. "You'd grab the cash and vamoose so fast you'd—" Abruptly, he subsided.

Cash? Vamoose?

"Forget it," Harold said. He combed a handful of fingers through his skimpy hair. Wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

"I was just blowing off," he said. He began unrolling paper towels from a holder above the counter. Essayed a laugh that didn't quite come off. "One thing's for sure, I'd better get this floor cleaned up before Helen comes down."

Several things were for sure, Rolf thought. His brother had been terrorstricken. In fact Harold had been about to pee in his pants. And Margaret deserved better treatment than she was getting.

He picked up the spoon. Had he been sent to the pantry on a wild goose chase so that Harold could concoct a medicinal "lullaby and goodnight," camouflaged by a double scotch, to keep him under wraps until morning? Why? For fear he'd latch onto something they wanted kept secret? What?

A shape developed and assumed form in the back of his mind, in the manner of a Polaroid snapshot, the figure's identity hidden by a cowl. *There*

never was a kid in a skeleton costume, the apparition murmured. It made a beckoning motion that revealed an ivory glimmer of bones. *Only me.*

Rolf's spine responded to the imagery with a sick shiver.

Don't be theatric. But let the money pitch slide until tomorrow. Put the squeeze on Harold when he has his belly full of breakfast. And stay sober. Otherwise you could pull the rug out from under yourself. Fix yourself a fresh double, and go on to bed. You're beat.

Aloud, he said, "A boy's best friend is his brother." Held out his hand for towels.

In his dream, as always, he knew there was a crisis, but he could not find out what the crisis was. The people in the street yanked their coatsleeves from his clutch, averted their eyes, and hastened on. Snow lay in piles everywhere, adding to the confusion. Seeing a signpost and thinking it might direct him to wherever he was going, he entered an arcade lined with windowed cubicles. The doctor met him. Signaled for him to follow, through corridor after corridor, while a recording repeated over and over, *No hope no hope no hope. . . .* Arriving at their destination, the doctor reached through a tangle of hoses and cylinders and tubes that fed into a bedecked bassinet and, with a swift movement, held up a skinned squirrel.

He awoke with a befuddled sense of urgency that he must act fast before it was too late. Halfway out of bed, he got his bearings and sank back, remembering the priest he had lucked onto in the hospital hallway and importuned to come with him to pronounce the magic words. I baptize thee, Zachary, in the name of the Father . . .

He threw an arm across his face in a vain attempt to blot out the uninvited memories that tumbled in like a troupe of hasbeen acrobats somersaulting from the wings onto a deserted stage in an abandoned theater.

Vikki's inconsolable weeping . . . the astonishing *smallness* of the casket . . . his father's icy silence when he had forked over the check (having been reminded that an agreement was an agreement, regardless) . . . the blue velvet jewelry case . . .

"For me?" Vikki said, accepting the blue velvet case. "Let me guess. Um . . . an old fashioned string of sweet-girl-graduate pearls with one of those clasps that catch on everything, from Himself. To say goodbye

without having to be present for the farewells. But that's okay."

Too thin, her pallor accentuated by too much eye makeup and a too bright slash of lipstick, the fire in the study grate making a red-gold nimbus of her hair, she was once again the off-off Broadway hopeful shrugging away a flop.

I'm in love with her, he told himself, almost without surprise. Like the song says . . . "When you fall in love/You'll know/You won't have to ponder/You won't have to wonder/You'll know. . . . "

Watching her open the case, listening to her gasp of amazement, he nearly laughed outright anticipating her reaction when she read his name on the enclosed card.

"Ohhhhhh," she breathed, dumbfounded, lifting up the opulent, twisted choker of seed pearls. "How utterly gorgeously *gorgeous.*" She pivoted about to face the mirror. Laid the case on the mantelpiece. Settled the necklace around her throat. Let him fasten the aquamarine clasp for her.

"Why, the old alligator," she said, softly. "He's a pussycat." A trembly smile, the first, tugged the corners of her mouth. "An alligator pussycat." Still smiling, she plucked the small cream-colored envelope from the case. Removed the enclosed card. And turned to stone.

Her eyes met his in the mirror. "You took the money."

She wheeled, her countenance distorted. *"You took the money."*

She aimed a shaking, accusatory, pink-nailed finger at him. *"YOU TOOK THE MONEY FOR MY DEAD BABY!"* she shrieked, the veins in her neck standing out like cords.

She grabbed the choker with both hands. Yanked the coiled strands apart. Tore the jewelry from her neck and hurled it at him, screaming maledictions, the tiny pearls cascading in all directions. The white bust of Homer missed him by inches. Smashed against the wall. Hysterical and sobbing, she collided with Birdie as she fled the room, and Birdie, collecting herself and doing the best she could under the circumstances, had quietly closed the door.

When he'd returned, after a monumental lost weekend, Vikki was gone. There was no forwarding address.

"I been waiting for you," Birdie said, her expression grim, giving him the blue velvet case containing the demolished choker. "I got something you ought to—"

"I don't want to discuss it," he cut in. "What's done is done." Shoving the case into his coat pocket, he had stalked off.

Harold and Helen gladly sped him on his way. His father remained incommunicado.

Driving through a rural, one-store community, in a spurt of bitterness he had thrown the blue velvet case and its contents out of the car window. Finders keepers. Maybe, down the years, the aquamarine would become a part of local folklore.

At approximately the same moment, his father evidently had had a seizure at the top of the stairs and was dead of a broken neck when he caromed to a stop in the entrance hall.

By the time Harold had been able to locate him, the funeral had taken place and the will had been read, and there was no reason to return. No reason to begin with.

How do you get rid of a mini-fortune in nothing flat? Simple. You stretch for the brass ring by buying a piece of a musical production that is in the works and which, subsequently, never gets off the ground after bad reviews in Boston and New Haven.

Had he hoped that Vikki would show for tryouts? Decide to claim her share after all? Possibly. On different occasions, thinking he had glimpsed her ahead of him—entering a building, crossing a street, boarding a bus—he had run to intercept her, only to find himself confronting a stranger. Eventually he decided she had gone back to Utah, and he had crossed her off. Like the song said . . . You'll know.

He arose and went to the window. Pushed the curtains aside. Although there was still a tattoo of rain, the storm was beginning to wane. The thunder and lightning had moved on to the west. And so would he. As soon as he could "grab the cash and vamoose."

Odd phrase, coming from stick-in-the-mud Harold. Cash, in that connotation, implied unbanked greenbacks in large denominations. Stash. "Vamoose" was a make-for-the-border word. Harold was into too many Western reruns.

He grew aware of a tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap. . . . Measured. Precise. As if someone in hiding was attempting to attract his attention without being overheard. He fixed the sound by ear. Walked to the spot and stood, staring up at the ceiling, recalling the dim incandescence he'd observed in the dormers, which he had attributed to Birdie.

But Birdie was in Tennessee. And Margaret's appearance in the entrance hall, as a welcome committee of one, didn't jibe timewise. Harold had been glued to the TV. That left Helen. A lighted upstairs window didn't necessarily mean Helen was ensconced therein, sticking pins in a wax doll with Margaret's name on it.

But what would she be doing in the attic at night? Counterfeiting Toby mugs?

The bedroom door creaked slightly. He spun around, startled as much by his instinctive gut reaction as he was by his sister's intrusion. He was getting as goosy as Harold.

The thin green ray from Margaret's flashlight lent a dramatic glint to the key she handed him. She resurrected her magnifying glass. Whispered, "I'll watch for the police." Before he could collect his wits, she was gone.

His brows knotted. CALL THE POLISE was for real, and not a club held over her to prevent a wet bed. He and Margaret had gotten their wires crossed in the pantry.

He considered the key he was holding. *What in hell was going on?*

With a final glance at the ceiling, he quitted the bedroom and slipped down the hall towards the attic door at the far end, his bare feet soundless on the carpeting.

Judging from a faint snore emanating from Helen's boudoir, Helen was in dreamlessland. Unless he missed his guess by a country mile, Helen and Valium were the best of friends.

As for Harold, he had had the tar scared out of him in the kitchen. Even if he did awaken, he wouldn't budge. He probably had a forked stick propped against the door and was curled in a fetal position with an onion in each hand and the covers pulled over his head.

The key turned smoothly in the lock. He pulled the door open and listened before he stepped inside and drew it shut. He felt along the wall. Located the remembered switch.

The feeble illumination from above seemed to paint, rather than dispel, the gloom. The fusty attic air came down to meet him, like a presence. The steep stairs felt gritty beneath his feet as he ascended, step by cautious step.

What was he hearing? An arcane musical instrument played by an idiot? It was true that your mouth got dry and the hair on the back of your neck rose like the hackles of a dog.

By degrees, the attic came into view with its relics of yes-

teryear. A golden oak table . . . a treadle sewing machine . . . a black dress form (God!). . . . There was the croquet set . . . a blotchy mirror . . . Birdie's rocker . . . his mother's vanity dresser . . . a stack of hatboxes . . . a pail, a dishpan, a lidless tin breadbox. . . .

He fought down a welling bubble of laughter. Took the remaining steps into the attic with no qualms. *The damn roof leaked.* The *plink, plunk, plonk, dup, thlop* were the drops falling into the receptacles, which explained what Helen had been doing in the attic. The tapping he'd heard on the ceiling was merely a new drip. Margaret hadn't said she'd wet her bed. She'd said, "My bed's wet." Why the devil didn't they have the roof repaired?

So what? Who cared? Grab the cash and vamoose.

He moseyed over to Birdie's chair. Rocked it, tentatively, empathizing with the old familiar squeak. Goodhearted, everloving Birdie. She must've been a sad soul when she'd packed up her holy cards to go home to Tennessee.

He stationed a crock to catch the new leak. Lifted a corner of a patchwork quilt to see what made the strange bulge underneath (an antlered hatrack) and, moving on, came to a standstill and did a slow doubletake over his shoulder.

The quilt was Birdie's quilt. Hand sewn. Made of odds and ends of Crittenden clothing. She could put a name, a time, a place, an occasion on every single scrap.

His eyes darted to the rocking chair. The *peacock* pillow.

Birdie would've taken her quilt and her pillow with her. Wild horses couldn't have prevented her. And, wait a minute . . . those valentines he'd glimpsed in the hiding hole weren't valentines (who would be sending valentines to Margaret?), they were Birdie's gilt-edged holy cards. Come to think of it, Tennessee wasn't "back home" to Birdie. Birdie came from Kentucky.

Harold was lying in his teeth!

Think. All right. The last he'd seen of Birdie, she'd gimleted him with her I-got-something- to- say- to- you- that'll-blister-your-hide look. She'd given him the blue velvet case. Folded her hands in her apron. Begun. "I got something you ought to—"

"I don't want to hear it," he'd cut in. "What's done is done." He had swiveled on his heel and departed, his goodbyes unspoken.

What if she hadn't been about

to give him a tongue lashing? What if she'd "got" something to tell him?

Had she gone to his father about—whatever? As a consequence, had his father blown a gasket and nosedived down the staircase? No. It didn't wash. His father, in the throes of a seizure, battered from the precipitate fall and with his neck broken, doing a last ditch, hearts and flowers third act death scene on behalf of Margaret-the-Nut, with Harold-the-Despised? No way.

But, the neck coup de grâce could've been administered, manually, at the foot of the stairs, if need be.

That would be why they couldn't put Margaret in a home. She'd seen what had occurred. She'd tell. Which explained CALL THE POLISE. No. Had Margaret been a witness, she'd have streaked straight to Birdie, and Birdie would've blown the whistle, loud and clear. And Birdie hadn't. From the look of things, Birdie had decided discretion was the better part of valor and had taken a fast powder, leaving her belongings behind.

As Harold and Helen intended to do, if Margaret got loose and spilled the beans. And where did they keep the quick getaway money? In the Bible. Margaret, due to Birdie's training, wouldn't have desecrated the Good Book with crayons so, in all likelihood, they were in the dark about the POLISE.

Helen had relieved Harold of the Bible, lest he be led into temptation and depart alone in the Bentley, his flight covered by the storm, leaving her holding the bag. And he might've. Harold was fed to the gills.

But who would believe some babble of Margaret's without concrete proof?

Only me, his apparition repeated.

Oh, hell's fire, if any of this were true, why hadn't they given Margaret a well-aimed shove, or a drink concocted from Harold's leftovers?

A kaleidoscopic rush of conjecture raced through his mind . . . Birdie sniffing at a glass, finding a suspicious packet, a vial, overhearing a conversation . . . his father, apoplectic with rage, storming upstairs to find Harold, only to be met by Harold at the top of the staircase (unaware that Birdie—wherever—had a full view of the proceedings) . . . John Boyer at the bank simply trusting Harold to handle Margaret's "provision. . . . "

All at once everything connected to form a complete whole.

As Harold had been unaware

of Birdie's presence so, too, had Birdie been unaware that somewhere close by Helen also had a full view of the proceedings . . . including Birdie.

Margaret hadn't said anything about "playing" dead. She'd said *plain* dead.

For one mad moment he saw himself sitting in a front row seat watching Vikki put down her emptied milk glass with a shudder. In the wings Birdie held up a cue card. The card read, ABORTIFACIENT.

He knew, now, why the kitchen smelled of Essence of Olde Towne Gyft Shoppe. And why a niggardly fire smoldered in the kitchen grate when there wasn't another fireplace in use in the whole house. And why the roof hadn't been fixed. ("Hey, Mac, you smell something smells peculiar?" Followed by, "Leaping Lena! Come look down this here chimney!")

Birdie was still here.

A hasty decision, born of desperation, had become a nemesis. They hadn't been able to get rid of her in the middle of town, in a crowded, many-windowed neighborhood. The chance of discovery was too great.

He walked to the kitchen chimney. Grasped the handle of the small square iron door set into the bricks, still as secure as in the days when the gaunt Confederate soldiers had confiscated Josiah Crittenden's high-hung chimney hams.

He tugged open the door. Peered into the aperture.

Hot tears blurred his vision. No wonder Margaret had "taken a dislike" to this Birdie. Harold hadn't lied about that.

He closed the door to. Gently. Scrubbed his eyes with his fists. Leaned back against the warm chimney bricks. Shaken. His thoughts in disarray.

Once again, he stood at a crossroads.

He could notify the police.

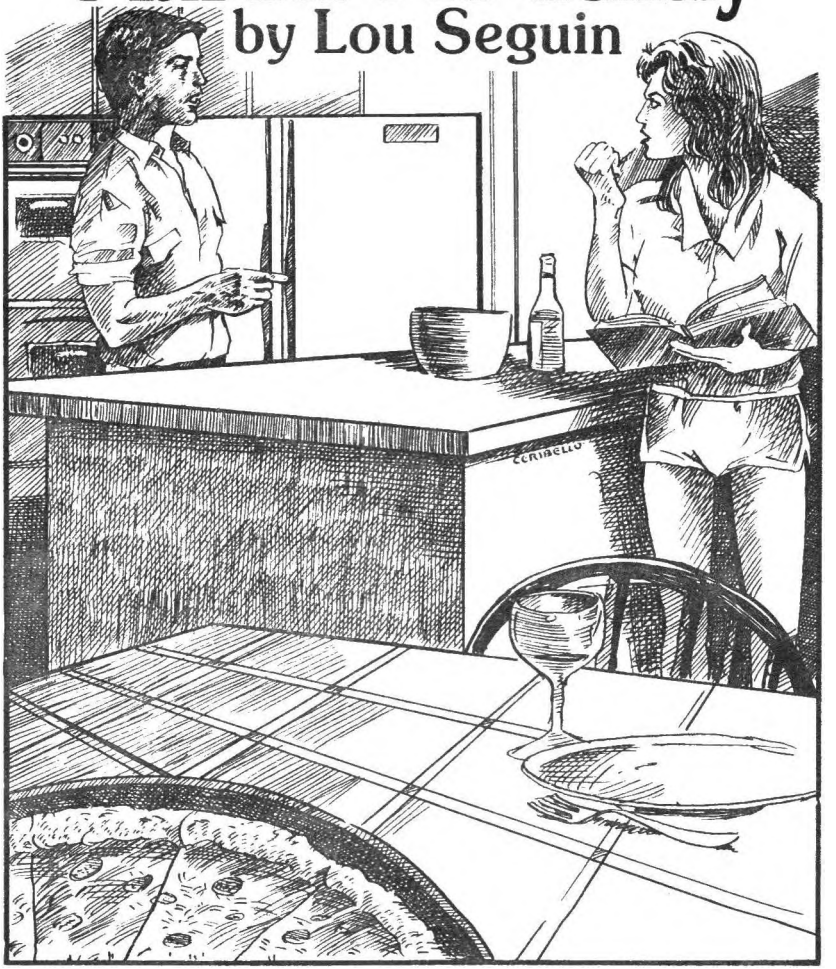
Or, he could put the bite on Harold, over and over.

Forever.

FICTION

Murder Me Gently

by Lou Seguin



Nila Turner was preparing dinner when her husband Clem came home from the office.

"Hi, darling!" he called, tossing his briefcase on the sofa. "What's for supper?"

"Pizza and strawberry shortcake," she told him, running from

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

the kitchen to the living room to give him a kiss, her hands covered with dough, the kind used for making bread and stuff.

"Oh, hell!" he growled. "This is only Wednesday and that makes three nights running since Sunday we've had pizza and strawberry shortcake." He made a gesture like he wanted to wring her neck. "Don't you know how to fix anything else?"

"Sure, dear," Nila said, brushing her hands on her skimpy jogging shorts, "but that's all I have in the house. The supermarket had a sale on pizza makings last week . . . and I know how crazy you are about strawberry shortcake." She turned and went back to the kitchen.

"I suppose," Clem sighed, removing his jacket and loosening his tie before slumping into his easy chair. He picked up the evening paper from the coffee table, scanning the headlines. After a minute or so, he got up from the chair and went to the kitchen where he sat down at the table, placing the paper in front of him.

Nila gave him a smile. "Come out to watch me work, hey?"

Clem shook his head. "I just thought that now would be a good time to give you the news."

Nila's eyes brightened. "News? What news? You're getting a promotion. That's it, isn't it?" Her fingers were giving the pizza dough a vigorous workout. "By the way, do you want pepperoni or mushrooms on your pizza?"

"It doesn't matter," Clem told her. "Green peppers and olives will be fine." He was staring down at the newspaper, avoiding his wife's eyes. "Anyway," he continued, "I've got good news and I've got bad news." He was smiling as he glanced up. "What do you want first?"

Nila turned away from the counter. "The good news." She shook her head. "I don't have any olives."

"Forget the olives," he said. "Make it anchovies. Anyway, this is going to hurt you more than it does me, but I have to tell you."

"What?"

"I'm in love."

Nila giggled. "Of course . . . with me. I'm your wife, remember? You married me almost seven years ago."

Clem grinned. "No, Nila. With someone else."

Nila's face clouded. "Well, that is news." She gave the pizza dough a whack. "And I don't have anchovies, either."

"I'm sorry, dear," Clem said, tapping the table with the fingers of one hand while the other picked at the newspaper.

"That's all right," Nila told him, recapturing her smile. "We'll settle for the mushrooms." Her small fists pounded away at the pizza dough. "By the way, hon, who are you in love with? Your secretary? Your bank teller? Your Sunday School teacher? Who? You've got me curious."

Clem cleared his throat. "You don't know her."

Nila kept punching at the roll of pizza dough. She didn't know why, but it was taking her forever to get it into the shape she wanted.

"That's all right," she told him. "I'd like to know anyway."

"Her name's Crystal Beech."

"Crystal Beech?"

"Crystal Beech," Clem repeated.

Nila's face brightened into a broad smile. "I know her. We met at the supermarket some time ago when she rammed her cart into mine at the frozen food section." She dropped the pizza dough back into the bowl. "We've been friends for weeks."

Clem gulped. "Oh, no!"

Nila laughed. "Oh, yes. I must say, though, you have excellent taste." Her eyes were teasing him. "Crystal Beech is a lovely, lovely person. Not as pretty as me but lovely anyway. She was married before, you know."

"I know. I know," Clem said nervously. "She's divorced." The newspaper slipped from his fingers.

"She has two children, too."

"I know. I know!" Clem was fidgeting around in his chair, unable to sit still. "What else did she tell you?"

Nila grinned devilishly. She was leaning up against the counter, almost enjoying her husband's uneasiness. "She told me just the other day that the man she was terribly in love with wanted to marry her."

"That's true," Clem admitted.

"But you're married to me, dear," Nila reminded her husband, turning her back to him. She picked up the pizza dough and slapped it down on the counter, ready to roll it out. "How about dill pickles as topping, sweetie?"

"Yuck!" her husband commented. "Will you give me a divorce, Nila honey?"

Nila spun around, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "A divorce, dear?" She shook her head. "No divorce, dear. Pizza, yes; divorce, no." She opened the cupboard door, looking for her pizza pan.

"That's what I was afraid of,so now I can give you the bad news."

Nila straightened up, pizza pan in hand. She looked at her husband curiously, a smirk on her lips. "The bad news? I thought you already gave me the bad news. What happened to the good news?"

Clem shook his head. "It would have been good news, darling," he told her, "if you had agreed to a divorce, but since you refuse, I'll have to kill you." He got to his feet. His face was grim as he looked at her. "You're not going to stand in the way of my happiness."

Nila laughed as she placed the rolled-out pizza dough in the large round baking tin. "You scare me, Clem Turner, the way you talk sometimes. Maybe you should go see a psychiatrist or somebody." She picked up a jar of pizza sauce and tried to open it. The lid was on too tight for her to manage it. "Would you open this for me, please, dear?" She handed the jar to her husband. A quick twist of his wrist was all it took. He gave it back to her. "Thanks much, dear," she said, turning back to the pizza. "You're going to like this pizza tonight. I think it's the best I've ever made."

"I mean it, Nila," Clem said, raising his voice and pounding his fist on the countertop. It made the empty pizza sauce jar tip over, fall off, and hit his foot.

Nila continued to put the finishing touches on the pizza. "Tell me, Clem, why do you want to marry a woman who's older than I, not as pretty, has two children, and doesn't know how to drive a shopping cart?"

Clem stared at her. "I love her . . . that's why!" He slapped his hands together for emphasis. "You have a choice, Nila. Make up your mind. Either give me a divorce or prepare to kiss this world goodbye."

Nila shook her head. "You are determined to have your way, aren't you, dear?"

She went to the refrigerator and brought out cucumbers, pepperoni, mushrooms, olives, green peppers, and mozzarella cheese.

"You told me you didn't have topping for the pizza."

"I was just teasing you, sweetie." Nila smiled at him. "Doesn't that make you want to change your mind about killing me?"

"No!"

Nila nodded her head as she began cutting up the ingredients for the pizza topping. "Well, all I can say, dear, is that you'd better wait until after dinner. Killing me now could spoil both our appetites."

Clem laughed harshly. "Oh, I'm not thinking about killing you right this minute. What kind of husband do you take me for? I'll do it when you least expect it and in such a gentle way that you won't even notice it."

"That's real considerate of you, Clem," Nila told him with a smile. "Now, would you please go down to the basement and bring up a bottle of red wine to go with our pizza?"

Clem gave his wife a curious stare. "It doesn't bother you at all, does it?" He started down the basement steps. "Doesn't the thought of dying scare you?"

"Why should it?" Nila answered. "We all have to go sometime." She looked toward the stairwell a moment and then finished putting all the ingredients on the pizza. She looked at the finished masterpiece lovingly and with pride and then placed it in the oven she had preset to the proper temperature.

It was a good forty-five minutes before dinner was finally ready. Clem had fallen asleep in his recliner while watching the TV news and Nila didn't awaken him until the pizza was on the table and the wine poured.

She shook Clem's leg at the knee. "Dinner's ready, dear," she told him.

Clem rubbed his eyes as he returned to sitting position. "I just don't understand you, Nila," he said, coming to the dining table. "Any other woman would run screaming to the police if her husband threatened to kill her."

Nila smiled. "The police would just laugh me out of the station. There's nothing they'll do until a crime is actually committed."

"You're too smart, Nila," he said, smiling. His eyes caught sight of the large pizza taking up the center of the table. "Wow . . . does that look good! You really outdid yourself tonight, kid." He looked up at her, his eyes reflecting his pleasure. "I'm really going to miss your pizzas after . . . " He hesitated, then, "How come one half has all the goodies and the other half just has pepperoni?"

Nila sat down and reached for her napkin. "You know very well, Clem, that I don't like all that gook. Tonight I thought I'd let you enjoy the full treatment by yourself while I gorge myself on what I like—pepperoni only." She smiled.

Clem nodded. "That's right. I forgot. Usually you don't have all that stuff piled on anyway." He selected a slice from his half and placed it on his plate. Napkin in hand, he picked up the pizza only to let it drop back quickly to the plate. "Hot!" he commented. Sec-

onds later, he tried again, got it to his mouth, and cautiously took a bite. His eyes rolled. "Good!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Nila told him as she reached for a slice of pizza from her pepperoni half, placing it on her plate. She picked up her fork. She wasn't like Clem. She ate her pizza with a fork.

Except for the occasional sound of Clem's smacking lips, the two ate in silence. He was already on his second slice, going for his third. Nila was enjoying the way her husband was devouring her specialty.

"You know, dear," she said, breaking the silence, "it was no big surprise to me when you told me you were in love with Crystal Beech. I've known for some time that you and she were playing house." She smiled when she saw Clem gulp . . . almost choke.

"She told you?" Clem asked, running his napkin across his face.

Nila nodded. "She talked about you from day one, but I never let on that her lover boy was my own dear husband."

Clem had a puzzled look on his face. "But she had to know. You said you were friends. She had to know your name."

Nila laughed, poking her fork into the pizza. She shook her head. "The very first thing she said after apologizing for bumping into me with her shopping cart was that she had to get something for her Clem. She said that was her boyfriend. 'You never saw a fussier eater than Clem Turner,' she told me. When she said that, I realized there was some horsing around going on, so when she asked for my name I gave her a fake one. I even dreamed up a new name for you—Regis."

Perspiration was beginning to show on Clem's forehead. He put his hand to his throat. "I don't feel so good," he said, his breathing becoming unsteady. "I feel hot all over." He was pulling at his collar and tie. "What did you put in that pizza?" He shoved his plate off the table.

Nila smiled. "Don't worry about it, sweetie. It will all be over in seconds. You won't feel a thing. I wanted to treat you gently, too."

Clem began to moan. "The least you could have done, dear, was to time it so I could have eaten dessert." With that, his head fell forward, dropping with a thud to the table.

"You wouldn't have been happy with her, anyway, Clem darling," Nila said, knowing full well her husband now was beyond hearing. "Crystal Beech buys frozen pizza, and she's allergic to strawberries."

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

Arthur Tress

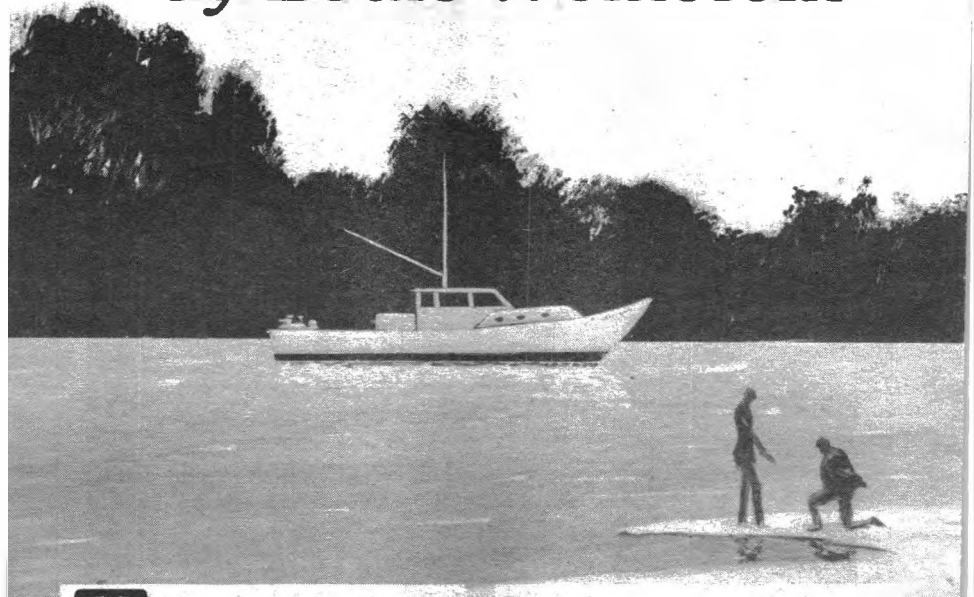
Just taking things one step at a time . . . We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

TONY'S SON

by Louis Weinstein



Timing was on my side that day. If Pat O'Hara hadn't happened to drop into my Manhattan apartment just as I was polishing off my interrupted lunch, I'd never have bothered asking him to help on the job I'd reluctantly agreed to take, just minutes before. Trying to find Freddy Matte, a missing lobsterman, seemed like a fool's errand. I'd tried to talk Matte's wife Dolores out of it, arguing that it appeared to be an open and shut case of a waterman's suffering some kind of mishap and getting lost at sea. But she'd been so insistent I'd shelved my squeamishness about taking advantage of an overwrought woman. After all, I wasn't putting a half-nelson on her, and clients are seldom lined up ten deep seeking to engage the matchless services of Phil Mandel, private investigator.

I was at the kitchen table,

Illustration by Randy Lagana

sipping coffee and getting my thoughts together, when the doorbell rang. The caller had turned out to be Pat, tall, lean, ramrod straight, all spruced up in dark blue suit and tie. His tanned face was as smooth and unlined as ever, his thick black hair neatly parted. He looked more like a prosperous stockbroker of middling years than the seventy-five-year-old retired New York City dockmaster he actually is. After I fixed him up with a cup of coffee, he asked, "What's up, Phil?"

"Nothing special. A missing person case. Just got it on the phone. Hardly worth mentioning."

"Oh." Pat's jaw dropped with disappointment, part put on and part genuine. He has helped me crack a few waterfront cases, and I didn't doubt he was itching for more action. Being a widower and living alone on his houseboat at Lacey's Marina in

Brooklyn, he naturally welcomes any break in the daily routine. He has two sons, one a police captain and the other a lawyer, and four fine grandchildren, but he prefers not to lean on them too heavily for company.

"Not a hoot in hell's chance of finding the poor bugger," I said. "I'll just be going through the motions."

"Too bad, but long as I'm here, you might as well tell me about it, if you have time. You look as if you're about to get on your horse."

"A couple of minutes more and you'd have found an empty barn. This fellow went out to tend his lobster pots yesterday morning and never showed up back home. Simple as that. This morning his wife reported him missing. The police came around, did their routine, and left. She called me a little while ago. She wants some outside help."

"Put her mind at rest she's doing all she can, is that it? But why you, Phil?" He smiled.

"She heard I was good," I smiled back.

Both of us know my reputation is built on Pat's brainwork. But I'm smart, too—smart enough to get Pat in immediately on any real waterfront case that drops into my lap. All I have to do is stay out of his way and let his all-around smarts and his incredible knowledge of the New York waterfront, past and present, go to work. He comes up with the answers and I take the bows and collect the fees. An unfair arrangement, but the way it is.

"Any details?" Pat asked.

"Sketchy," I said. "This Matte works out of Laurel Cove on Staten Island, keeps his pots down Jersey way, his wife tells me. The Coast Guard's searching. So far, no sign of him or the boat. Tell me, how am I supposed to look? Where?"

"Don't waste time chasing around out on the water. Leave that to the authorities. They may never find him or the skiff. Start with the Matte woman. Matter of fact, I cruised by Laurel Cove just a couple of weeks ago. Mind if I tag along? My laundry can wait."

That Pat had been out Laurel Cove way recently didn't surprise me. Though long retired, he keeps his hand in on his old stomping grounds, New York's five hundred and seventy-eight miles of waterfront. Sometimes he walks, sometimes he uses his boat.

"Drive over to Lacey's," Pat said as we went out the door. "We'll have a look at the water side before we go ashore, give you the feel of the place."

On the drive to Lacey's, Pat

told me what to expect at Laurel Cove, then out of the blue said, "The lobstermen use skiffs, small but high-powered. Fast and sturdy."

"So?"

"They don't have many accidents at sea. Their boats are darned rugged, and they don't go that far offshore. In bad weather they stay at the dock. If a storm brews up while they're out, they run straight for home."

"You trying to tell me something, Pat?"

"What's the weather been like the past few days?"

"Rain two or three days ago. Nice since then. Indian summer. Sunny, mild, no wind to speak of. What are you getting at?"

"Freddy Matte didn't die in an accident at sea. She hired you because there had to be foul play. She hired you because she's betting on a long shot. There has to be insurance, on the boat and on Freddy. The sooner the body's found, the sooner she collects. If he's just missing, lost at sea, collecting could be a long, drawn-out affair. If he was killed somewhere ashore, and you locate the body, she's ahead of the game."

My car parked in Lacey's lot, we shoved off in the *Barbara Ann*, a trim twenty-four footer named after Pat's oldest granddaughter. Pat had changed into what I call his old-salt gear. Although the early October day was mild, he wore a heavy wool jacket and a sailor's blue stocking cap. The getup made him look as if he'd stepped out of the pages of a Jack London sea saga. Under his expert handling the boat wove through the busy harbor traffic, steering clear of the Staten Island ferry on its five mile wallow across the bay. He exchanged whistle signals from time to time with tugs escorting barges, small oil tankers, pleasure boats, and even a container ship easing toward the open sea. We hit the Staten Island side in the vicinity of the Stapleton piers, then swung eastward, keeping a few hundred feet offshore.

"I've got a confession to make," Pat said. "I know Freddy Matte."

"I was wondering about that," I replied. "I didn't recall mentioning his first name, but you seemed to know it."

"I remember him as a kid hanging around his father's yard. Tony's dead now, and the boy, his only child, took over the operation when he died. Last time I saw Freddy was about fifteen years ago, when he was thirteen or fourteen. Old Tony was breaking the kid in from the time he had to stand

on tiptoe to look over the side of the boat. He was a goodlooking boy, average height, well put together. Not much of a smiler. Just like his father that way. Tony, there was a strange man. Quiet, taciturn. Very honorable, never did anything sneaky or underhanded. But grim, as if it were against the law to crack a smile. And with a violent temper if he thought someone was trying to pull a fast one on him. As I say, I only knew the kid casually. The Staten Island piers were much busier then, and I didn't get out to Laurel Cove more often than every couple of weeks. And somehow I didn't draw the Staten Island assignment very often. The chief used to keep me mostly in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

"Anyhow, the old man taught the boy the business from the bottom up. He'd drum it into the boy's head: The boat is your life. When you're out on the water, the boat's all you've got between you and the bottom of the ocean. So you take care of it, check it every day, everything about it."

"Sound advice," I said.

"The old man really hammered on it. You check to see if the boat's taking water. You check the engines before the trip and after, soon as you've unloaded and stowed the lobsters. And when you're out on the water, it's not a joyride but a living. A tough one but a good one if you work at it. You watch out for boat traffic, follow the rules of the road. You pay attention to what you're doing and don't try to guess what the other fellow is going to do. You make sure your radio is in good working order. The same with all your equipment. You do things right. No lazy work. Nothing sloppy. Any time I catch you doing anything sloppy, I kick your tail."

"A regular martinet," I said. "I'll bet Tony kicked a lot of tail."

"Wrong," Pat said. "The boy worshipped his father. You could tell from the way he listened, how hard he tried to please, do things exactly the way his father showed him."

"Why are you telling me all this? About Tony? We're looking for Freddy Matte, not Tony. Tony's in heaven and Freddy's asleep in the deep, probably with an anchor wrapped around him."

"Background," Pat said. "Something for you to think about. You never know where it might lead."

"I'll keep it in mind. How much farther to go?"

We were cutting past what looked like the harbor equivalent of the elephant burial

grounds—scores of dilapidated old hulks scattered along a wide, sandy beach. Barges, tugs, dredges, launches, all kinds of forlorn, once-floating equipment.

"Not far," Pat said.

We passed a boatyard, a coal dock, odds and ends of piers and wharves, separated by stretches of beach.

"Here we are, Laurel Cove," Pat said, reducing speed and angling the *Barbara Ann* into a V-shaped inlet biting into the shoreline. We eased past a fenced-in marina at the point. Beyond that, at the end of a short walkway from the shore, a small vessel rocked with the wave motion against a float. Back on the shore stood two tumbledown wooden buildings side by side.

"A lobsterman," Pat said. "That's his skiff. Notice the lobster pots on the shore."

"What a mess," I remarked. The pots were flung all over the place and mixed in with other gear—big tubs, engine parts, life preservers, boxes, barrels. Another relic of a skiff, half hidden in the tall grass, was pulled up on the land.

"Dutch Uhler," he said. "An oldtimer. Was here to greet the Indians. Lost his wife a few years back and been going downhill since."

The *Barbara Ann* was barely moving, down the center of the waterway. Pat directed my attention to our left.

"Another lobster operation. Odd, isn't it, three lobstermen in this one little corner? I don't know this fellow at all. He can't have been here more than a few months. I understand he bought out Grandpa Lucetti when he retired."

The newcomer's lobster pots were strewn about in careless, angular mounds, but the rest of the place looked shipshape. A clean-looking boat nestled broadside to a respectable bulkhead of sheet steel piling. A good-sized gray cinderbrick building flanked an older wooden structure. What little gear lay about was neatly stacked.

"We'll have to find out about this Johnny-come-lately," Pat said. "And pay our respects to Uhler. They all put their pots out in the same general area."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because that's where the lobsters happen to hang out," Pat said, waving as we neared the head of the cove. "There's the Matte layout. His house is back up the slope, beyond that fence."

My eyes shifted from the small, unoccupied dock jutting into the water to take in the long, low wooden shed, well weathered, parallel to the shore.

Nearby, miscellaneous items of gear were stored in neat piles. The grass between the piles was cut short. A little distance behind the shed a chain link fence running across the yard separated the business and living ends of the property. Just inside the gate stood a big shade tree, and on either side of the tree lobster pots were stacked in an inartistic arrangement. Up near the house stood a small, flat-topped red utility shed with shovels, a hoe, rakes, and other garden implements leaning against it, handy to the garden plots.

"This place puts Uhler's to shame," I remarked.

"Freddy's pretty much a chip off the old block," Pat said.

The public dock lay at the end of a narrow street that emptied into a wider city street after maybe a hundred and fifty feet. When we turned left on the latter, I could see it joined a main artery a little farther on.

A waist-high white picket fence fronted the Matte property. A flagstone walk leading to the front door bisected the well-kept lawn inside the fence and branched off to run around both sides of the house. Between house and walk grew assorted flowers, among them asters and zinnias. The garden plots began toward the back of the house. I recognized the big-leaved zucchini plants showing several dark green zucchini ready for picking.

"Someone around here has a green thumb," I remarked.

"Shades of old Tony. Peppers, yellow squash, thyme. He was quite a gardener, especially zucchini. They go well with the lobster, he'd say to me. The way he offered his prizes it would have been an insult to refuse them. He was the one who talked me into eating them raw, sliced like cucumber, only better. Try it sometime, Phil, with vinegar and olive oil and a pinch of oregano, instead of french fries."

I ignored the sly allusion to my substantial waistline and leaned on the bell. It sounded inside. A curtain moved at the window to our left, and seconds later the door swung open.

I must have gaped. I was unprepared for the woman facing us in the doorway. She was tall, broad-shouldered, thin-waisted, athletic looking without seeming mannish. On the contrary, she was all woman. Everything about her exuded an exotic but aloof sexuality, accentuated by black slacks of soft, clinging, shiny material topped by a shortsleeved white blouse, spectacularly filled, the square-cut bottom hanging loosely about her well-rounded hips. Flawless olive skin, in-

nocent of makeup, highlighted smoky hazel eyes. High cheekbones hinted at Indian in her ancestry. So did the sleek, straight black hair tumbling well below her shoulders. Later I came to realize she wasn't a perfect beauty: her face was too square, she carried a little too much chin, her straight nose was a trifle too long, her eyes a hair too close together.

She raised a hand to pluck the gold-filtered cigarette from her full red lips. "You're Phil Mandel?" she said in a deep, throaty voice, looking uncertainly from me to Pat and back to me.

"I'm Phil Mandel," I set her straight. "At your service."

"I'm so glad you're here." Her eyes traveled to Pat again.

"This is Pat O'Hara, a trusted associate."

"You didn't tell me you had a partner. I thought you worked alone."

"He's not exactly a partner," I said. "More like a friend."

"If it will make you feel better, ma'am," Pat said quietly, "I can step outside. If you're uncomfortable—"

She hesitated. "That won't be necessary."

A few steps down the entrance foyer she turned into the living room, where I'd seen the curtain fluttering. The good-sized living room came furnished with a brightly patterned sofa and matching chair. A recliner faced a big TV set. Along one wall a rectangular, marble-topped table displayed a vase of withering flowers and framed photos lined up near the wall. End tables complete with ashtrays were everywhere. Newspapers and magazines lay randomly on chairs, tables, even on the floor. A pair of stockings and a Gimbel's shopping bag decorated the sofa. Odd bits of fluff and debris atop the deep green carpeting awaited the touch of the vacuum cleaner.

Pat and I shoved newspapers aside to make room for ourselves on the sofa. Dolores, facing us in an easy chair, stubbed out the stump of her cigarette and reached for the cigarette pack beside the overflowing ashtray on the end table. Pure Golds, in the distinctive dusty gold pack. She blew smoke and waited expectantly. I jumped in feet first.

"Tell me, Mrs. Matte, did your husband have any enemies?"

"Who doesn't?" she came back. "He has them by the barrel."

"Start somewhere."

"Well, there's Lon Burton. He and Freddy got into a dandy of a fistfight a couple of months back. Lon got the worst of it. Freddy is good with his fists. And quick."

"Who's Lon Burton?"

"Someone who comes into the Lion Pub up on Dixon Boulevard."

"Where would that be?"

"Up the street a little way." She tossed her head vaguely.

"No problem," Pat said, getting to his feet. "I know where it is."

She looked at him sharply.

"I'm well acquainted with this neighborhood," Pat said. "Covered it many times as a dockmaster. Had lunch there many times. Good food. I'm retired now."

"Oh," she said. "A dockmaster."

"What was the fight about?" I asked.

"A lot of stupidity." She showed perfect white teeth in a faint smile. "Freddy didn't like the way Lon behaved toward me when we stopped in for a drink, thought he was putting the move on me."

"Freddy must do a lot of fighting," I suggested.

"Lon got a little out of line," she said. "Freddy was only doing the right thing, protecting me. He was that way."

"Did you go to the Lion often?"

"Occasionally. For a drink, dinner, a night out . . . "

Pat had strolled to the marble table. Hands behind his back, he was casually looking at the photos. She glanced his way, puzzlement and annoyance on her face.

"After the fight, did Burton threaten Freddy in any way?" I asked.

"Not that I know of," she said, still watching Pat. "Freddy never mentioned that to me. You looking for anything in particular?" she addressed Pat. "Maybe I can help you."

"Just looking," Pat said. "But it occurs to me a picture of Freddy would be a help."

"Of course," she said, her eyes sort of scolding me for overlooking the obvious. "The police wanted one."

"There's Freddy as a kid, with his father and mother." Pat reached out for an eight by ten color shot. "All spiffed up. Probably on the way to a wedding." He handed it to me. "Cute little fellow, wasn't he?" He turned his attention to a photo of Dolores, standing between two men and holding a string of fish and smiling. Freddy, I noted, was about the same height as Dolores, close to six feet. Both were dwarfed by the grinning giant on her other side.

"Mind if I take this one?" I asked.

"I've a better one, of Freddy alone," she said, reaching into a drawer, riffling through a stack of photos, and handing me a head and shoulders shot.

"I'll return it," I said, and pocketed it.

"Now, what about Freddy's competitors?" I concluded. "I understand a couple of other lobstermen work out of Laurel Cove. Was there bad blood between them and Freddy?"

She shrugged. "Naturally, there's bound to be competition, pretty heavy at times. And I can't say Freddy and Ray Minor—he's the other man in that picture—were bosom buddies."

"Ray Minor?" Pat said. "So he's the new boy on the block. I know old man Uhler. Dutch Uhler."

She made a face.

"That disgusting pig. Drunk all the time. Freddy had a run in with him recently, something to do with the pots on the lobster grounds. He's a troublemaker. The worst kind."

"Did Uhler take his boat out yesterday?" I asked.

She hesitated before answering.

"I can't say yes and I can't say no. I was gone most of the day, out shopping, didn't get home till about two. But I seem to recall his boat was not at the dock when I got home."

"Try to remember for sure. It could be important."

She made a gesture of helplessness.

"I don't keep tabs on him, and I had more important things on my mind when Freddy wasn't back at the regular time."

"You think the worst, that something bad happened to him?"

"I'm not kidding myself." She wrung her hands. "Freddy's been handling boats all his life. He's careful, safety conscious, a strong swimmer."

"Perhaps a freak wave capsized the boat." Pat got into it. "It can happen suddenly. No wind, the sun shining, hardly a ripple in sight. Then bam, without warning, a sneaky wave capsizes the boat. He gets washed overboard, the boat sinks. Or maybe he is swept away by the wave, or the current. There are some tricky offshore currents down that way."

"No, no," she said emphatically, looking at him as if he were soft in the brain. "It was a beautiful warm day. It had to be something else."

"He fell overboard. It can happen to anyone, it's happened to me. Before he could get back aboard, a shark got him. Or he banged his head against the boat when he fell."

"No, no, no," she snapped at Pat impatiently. "Maybe you're in the habit of falling overboard and hitting your head, but not Freddy. Something happened to Freddy, something not right, and I want you to find out what, Mr. Mandel." She glared at Pat.

"Don't peddle your sad stories to me. I can do without that."

"Did he have any money troubles?" I asked. "Debts? Did he gamble, play the horses?"

She shook her head. "He made a good living, and there's income from investments. His father left him some money. And he didn't go overboard at the track, or bet with bookies."

"Could it be something was bothering him? Was he drinking? A lot? More than usual?"

"Not Freddy. A social drink, wine with meals. But Freddy a boozer? No sir."

She wagged her head again. "And there was nothing preying on his mind. He didn't take a one-way dive to the bottom, if that's what you're driving at. Whatever happened to him, he didn't take his own life."

"Those things happen," Pat said.

"Ridiculous," she said. "Freddy was no coward. The idea of suicide is idiotic. If he had problems, he faced up to them. You can't convince me Freddy wasn't killed."

Pat's half-hearted nod of agreement looked more like scepticism to her.

"What do you know about Freddy?" she challenged. She seemed to be working to control her exasperation and anger. "What could you know about him?"

"I'm sure you know him better than I do," Pat said mildly. "But if he's anything like his father—"

"What has his father got to do with this?"

"Freddy worshipped his father. I saw that when I was covering the district. My guess is Freddy did things just the way his father taught him. And his father was a tough taskmaster, insisted on the boy's doing everything the right way, which was his way. No sloppiness, no laziness, no waiting till tomorrow. Any time I went by the yard, everything was just so, in apple pie order. And it was the boat he harped on most of all. You can bet your boots, Mrs. Matte, that whatever happened to Freddy has nothing to do with the boat's not being in tiptop shape or being handled carelessly."

"I don't understand you," she said angrily. "A minute ago you were talking out of the other side of your mouth, harping on all the horrible things that could have happened. Do you suppose his father taught him to fall overboard and get eaten by sharks? That's what you were carrying on about. Just what is the point of all this?"

"No point," Pat said, "only that it seems to me Freddy took after his father in many ways."

"And how does that account

for Freddy's disappearance?"

It looked as if they could have kept at one another all day so I said hastily, "Please, Mrs. Matte, let's not get sidetracked. Is there anything else we ought to know? Anyone else? I hate to bring this up, but is it possible Freddy was involved with another woman?"

Her nostrils flared scornfully. I thought for a second she would break out laughing. Instead, she ran her fingers through her hair. Broken pink nails shone vividly against the silky jet of her hair.

"If Freddy had another woman," she said, "I'd have known about it just like that." She snapped her fingers. "He couldn't keep that kind of secret from me. And I'd have scratched her eyes out."

Pat looked as if he were about to say something.

"Yes?" She looked at him.

"I was going to ask—but never mind, it's not important. Where's the kitchen?"

"You've apparently been here before," she said, looking puzzled again. "In old Tony's day. You know where the kitchen is. Is there something you want?"

"A glass of water, if you don't mind."

"Of course." She brightened. Her swings of mood amazed me. "How rude of me. I'll get it for you—unless you prefer coffee. How about you, Mr. Mandel?"

"Coffee'll be fine, if you have it already made. Otherwise, don't bother."

"Made a fresh pot just before you got here. I've been going on coffee." She got up. "No trouble at all."

"Water will do me fine," Pat said.

She left the room.

"What's she got against you, Pat?" I kept my voice down.

"Search me," Pat said. "Maybe she thinks I'm old and foolish."

"Whatever it is, the chemistry doesn't work."

"I can understand the state she's in," Pat said. "I'll try not to upset her. But I sure would like to see some more of the house."

She returned, carrying a tray.

I sipped at my coffee. Pat gulped most of his glassful of ice water.

"What was it you were about to say before?" she asked Pat.

"I was wondering if you have a gun—if Freddy took a gun along with him when he went out."

"He has a rifle—he likes to hunt. And a revolver he keeps in a night table beside his bed. No, he doesn't tote a gun when he works. Would you like to see his arsenal?"

"No real need to," Pat said. "Any guns missing?"

"Nothing missing. You keep

coming back to the idea that Freddy took his own life. That's what you're thinking, isn't it? Let me tell you this: That wasn't the way. And he had absolutely no reason to."

Pat drank down the last of his water. "Pardon me for bringing up these wild ideas. I didn't mean to upset you this way." He started for the kitchen with his glass.

"Where are you going?" She bounced to her feet.

"Refill." Pat waved the glass.

"Here, let me take that. I'll get it for you."

She tore after him. But it was too late. Pat's long legs churn up distance with deceptive ease. "Nice place you have here," I heard him saying. I decided I might as well join the party.

It was a big, modern kitchen, painted a bright blue. Built-in wall oven. Microwave, in a corner, sitting not quite squarely in the center of the stand. Big beige refrigerator, shiny new, standing in a corner, a white enamel breadbox atop it. Five or six assorted knives, an expensive looking set, poked out of a holder fastened above the counter to the left of the sink. Other utensils dangled from hooks. A long, narrow wall clock, having the look of real walnut, hung slightly askew behind the round dinette table. Matching chairs were set around the table. The tiled floor, predominantly blue, had a freshly scrubbed look and, in fact, smelled faintly of some kind of strong detergent.

"A real nice kitchen," Pat repeated, looking all around. "A big change since last time I was here, when old Tony was still alive." He nodded approvingly.

"I'm so glad you like it," she said. "It's all new. I had it redone to my taste. It was time anyhow." She sounded at once defensive and sarcastic.

"I'm sure Tony would have approved," Pat said. "I know he would have hated to part with things that had been around so long. But he would have approved."

"As it happened, I didn't have to get his approval," she said. "I never knew him.... Don't forget what you came for, Mr. O'Mara—your water."

"Oh yes," Pat said, filling his glass from the tap and drinking it slowly. "The name's O'Hara. Thanks."

"Did you get a good look at that fishing picture?" Pat asked later, on the way to visit Uhler.

"I think so," I said. "Minor's a pretty big guy, and they were friendly with him, for a while."

"Very friendly. Not just around the neighborhood, either. They took trips together, like one big family."

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"The fish in that picture. They weren't fishing local waters —the ocean, the bay. Those fish were big-mouthed bass. Fresh water fish. Lake fish. That means the three of them took trips together."

"Easy to figure what happened," I said. "She and Minor were getting too cosy, and Freddy put a stop to it."

"Score one for you," Pat said. "Something else strikes me as a little bit odd, too. I'd like to know a whole lot more about this Minor."

A roadway off a little street on the opposite side of the cove led to Uhler's yard. Flanking the roadway was a tangle of rank grass and weeds bestrewn with debris—wooden boxes and crates, lengths of pipe, rusted metal of all kinds. A faded, square, handpainted wooden sign reading FRESH LOBSTERS nailed atop a post announced the wares he sold, and a battered old pickup truck was parked at the side of the roadway outside the shack.

Pat knocked at the door. No answer.

"He's got to be in there," Pat said. "His boat's here, and his truck." He hammered again. "Visitors, Dutch. Open up."

No response.

"Let's go in," Pat said, pushing the door open.

An indescribable mess greeted us. A yellowed refrigerator stood in a corner next to a chipped enamel sink. The sink and the counter alongside it were buried under dishes amid which healthy flies were having a picnic. The bare plank floor was unswept and dirty. A solid wooden table, a naked electric bulb hanging down from a fixture over it, displayed a collection of empty wine bottles and beer cans and more dirty dishes. A galvanized trash can overflowed with empty food cans and food wrappings and a revolting smell of decay.

"Where are you, Dutch?" Pat sang out.

A gruff, alcohol-fuzzy voice came from a room opening off the kitchen. "Who's there?"

Dutch Uhler was lying on his back on a narrow bed that came with a bookcase headboard, all chipped and scarred. Beside the bed was a long table flush against the wall. A bottle of wine rested atop it within easy reach of the bed. Beside the bottle was a big glass ashtray holding three or four cigar butts.

Uhler picked his head off the scurfy pillow and peered toward us.

"It's me, Pat O'Hara," Pat said, edging up to the bed and

taking up a position near the long table. "I've got to talk to you. It's important."

Uhler sat up. "What the hell you want? What you coming around here for?"

"We're looking for Freddy Matte," Pat said. "Trying to find out what happened to him. You see him yesterday?"

"Go away," Uhler said. "Don't bother me."

His words were slurred, and his head wobbled unsteadily on his neck as if the connection between the two had come loose. The touch of razor to his face had to be at least a week-old memory. He smelled of sweat and alcohol and stale creatures of the sea. Suddenly I noticed the gun at the far end of the table—a black revolver, a little hard to see in the dim light.

"Freddy Matte is missing," Pat told him. "You know anything about it?"

"Good." Uhler showed some animation. "Serves him right. But I didn't do it. I didn't see him. If someone killed him, he got what was coming to him."

"Who said he was killed?" Pat said.

"If he's missing, must be dead."

"You go out lobstering yesterday?"

"No," Uhler said. "I didn't go out yesterday. Didn't see him. Don't know what happened to him. Is he really dead?"

"Missing. Just missing, unaccounted for. We're trying to find out what happened to him."

I casually picked up the gun and sort of turned my back. I sniffed at the weapon, then broke it. It smelled of gunpowder. Three chambers were empty. I dropped the bullets into my jacket pocket.

"Who's that with you?" Uhler peered foggily in my direction. "What are you doing there?"

"A friend," Pat said. "I'm helping him. My friend Phil Mandel. He's a private detective, looking for Freddy Matte, hired by his wife."

"Detective?" Hate contorted his face. "Send him away. I don't want any detectives. No police nosing around. Get him out of here. And put down that gun, you. It's none of your business."

"It's been fired recently," I said. "Three bullets short in it. When'd you fire it?"

"Rats," he said belligerently. "A few nights ago. Rumbling around outside."

"Not yesterday?" Pat asked. "Try to remember."

"No," Uhler reached for the wine bottle. "All day yesterday I was here."

"Maybe you don't remember," Pat said. "You sure you fired at rats, not at Freddy Matte?"

"You accusing me?" He was indignant.

"Just asking, Dutch, like a friend. Trying to find out."

"Find out someplace else," Uhler said, taking a long drink. "Besides, I don't have any friends. Everyone's against me. Don't you try to sweettalk me."

"I'm not against you," Pat said. "Who's against you? Freddy against you?"

"Freddy ran through my lines," Uhler said. "Freddy and that other rotten bastard, that Ray Minor."

"Come on, Dutch, you know better than that. Freddy wouldn't do anything like that. No waterman would."

"Someone did it. Freddy and Ray, two of a kind. They ganged up on me. I'll get even yet. They'll pay for what they did."

"When was the last time you saw Freddy?" Pat asked.

"A few days ago, last week sometime, maybe."

He seemed to rediscover me.

"Get him *out* of here. I don't want to talk to any stinking cop. I've had enough of cops, a belly full. You're all alike. Why don't you arrest those criminals who busted up my lines, throw them in jail where they belong?"

He was getting surlier, more obnoxious by the minute.

"Beat it," he screamed at me. "You got no right coming in here. I didn't do anything. Who wants you?" He tried to get to his feet.

"Go on back to sleep, Dutch," Pat said quietly. "Let's go, Phil." And to Dutch, "Do yourself a favor. Empty the rest of that wine out. I'll be back to see you someday when you've shaped up. We'll talk about old times."

We left Uhler reaching for the heavy ashtray, and as we were passing through the kitchen, we heard the loud crash of glass breaking on the wall behind us.

Laurel Cove's main drag came as a revelation to me. It was the center of a sort of country town hidden away in a remote part of the big city. Shops, a bank, a grocery store, a meat market, a service station, a cleaners, a stationery store, all the businesses you'd expect to find along the main street of any rural town.

The Lion Pub turned out to be a solidly built, brick-faced, three story building standing well off the street on a grassy, tree-lined lot, the trees big and of great age. We plopped onto a couple of stools. The grizzled, white-haired terrier type behind the mahogany trotted over and greeted Pat like a long lost kinsman.

"Pat O'Hara. It's been a long

time. What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Out for an airing, Brian, with my friend, Phil Mandel. He's working, private, on the Freddy Matte disappearance."

"A bad thing, that," Brian shook his head. "Doesn't look good." He stuck out his hand. "Gallagher's the name, Brian Gallagher."

We shook hands. When he returned with our beers, he said again, "A bad business. It doesn't figure. Not with Freddy."

"The same thought occurred to me," Pat said. "Was something bothering him? Was the marriage okay?"

"Stormy," Brian said. "Freddy has a short fuse, just like the old man. Speaks his mind, holds nothing back."

"How long's he been married?"

"Close to two years. Went to Florida on vacation and returned with a bride on his arm. Took us all by surprise, especially the Larsen girl he was engaged to."

"That wouldn't be Ferde's daughter—Ferde the dockbuilder?"

"The same. She was as hot as a four-alarm fire. So was old Ferde. He didn't take too kindly to seeing his daughter jilted, carried on something awful, said Freddy would get his comeuppance. But he got over it, after a while figured Freddy was no prize."

"And the girl?"

"Bounced back fast, was married herself inside a year. A goodlooking girl like that never has any trouble grabbing off a man. She married a fireman." He laughed. "A fireman came along and put out her fire. But I'm not so sure it's completely out. The word's around that Freddy and the Larsen girl might have picked up where they left off. They were seen together in Tompkinsville, getting off the ferry."

"What's Lon Burton like? What's he do for a living?"

"Insurance, real estate. Has a place down the street, a storefront office. He's around forty, goodlooking, unmarried, has an eye for the ladies, thinks he's a charmer."

"And Freddy roughed him up pretty good? We heard about their fight."

"Quite a scrap while it lasted. Freddy got the best of it, blacked Burton's eye, gave him a bloody nose. But Lon got in a few good licks himself. Freddy told him to stay the hell away from his wife or he'd find himself serenading mermaids. Now, any time he walks in and finds her decorating the premises, he about-faces and walks out. He's not looking for trouble."

"An eminently sensible thing

to do," Pat said. "What about Uhler? Has the Dutchman been behaving?"

"Crazier than ever. Sadder than ever. On the outs with Freddy and Ray Minor. Accused them of running through his lines deliberately."

"Pretty strong stuff. But losing a string of pots is not designed to improve a lobsterman's disposition."

"Dutch had it out with both of them, from what I hear. Threatened to take their pots to replace the ones he lost. He was drunk as a skunk. Freddy told him if he tried anything like that he'd be making a bad mistake, pots wouldn't do him any good, he'd need a box."

"And Minor?"

"That was a good one. He just laughed at Uhler, which only made Uhler all the madder. Uhler attacked him, right in Minor's yard. Minor picked him up like a leg of lamb, walked off with him, and pitched him in the bay, lecturing him the while on bad manners and running off at the mouth and telling Uhler it was a lucky thing for him he caught him in a good mood."

"Must be a big fellow," Pat said.

Brian glanced at me. "Phil, you've got some size on you, but you could stand behind Ray and never be noticed. Uhler calmed down mighty quick. Nothing like a nice dunk in the bay to cool off a hot-headed drunk. Uhler may be crazy, but he's not that crazy."

"Dutch is dangerous, and he has a gun. If I were Minor, I'd watch my step," Pat said.

"Minor's no fool. He has a gun of his own, keeps it handy when he's around the yard."

"I noticed his boat is tied up and a car is parked in his drive. He lives there, doesn't he?"

"Ever since he arrived. He showed up seven or eight months ago, came from Florida, somewhere around Jacksonville. Come to think of it, though, he hasn't stopped in in the last couple of days."

"Then he usually does?"

"Like clockwork, late afternoon. A beer or two only, no hard stuff. Very quiet sort. Doesn't mix much, minds his own business."

"How about him and Freddy? Any friction? How do they get along?"

"So-so. After all, they are competitors. They were thick as thieves for a while, socializing, going places, but that cooled off. Lately they've been going their separate ways, civil, not showing animosity but cool, like a couple of stiff-backed cats each waiting for the other to make the first move."

"Any reason their friend-

ship cooled off all of a sudden?"

"Like I say, Freddy's a jealous man. Maybe he figured it best not to be too chummy. . . . " Brian hesitated, as if he had more to say but wasn't sure it would be in good order to say it.

"Ray is a pretty goodlooking fellow, isn't he? And only human," Pat said.

"A lot of women would go for him—and she draws men like a free burlesque show."

"Does the name Minor ring a bell with you from the past?" Pat asked. "Wasn't there a family named Minor up near Stone Harbor some years back? Had a rowboat rental place? Moved down south?"

"You telling me or asking me, Pat?"

Pat grinned, drained his beer, and said, "Thanks much. You've been very helpful."

We drew a blank at Burton's office. No one was visible inside, and the door was locked when Pat tried it.

"Tomorrow's another day," he said. "You game to sneaking a look at Minor's place?— of course, he may be at home after all."

"Uh-uh," I objected. "That'd be trespassing."

"Protecting your license?" Pat said. "You don't have to come. I'll go it alone."

"What if he objects?"

"I doubt he'll be there. But if he is, I'll flash my dockmaster's badge. I never travel without it." Pat smiled. "He's probably never seen the dockmaster, and if he has, I'll make up some story, tell him the regular man is on vacation and I'm filling in."

"It's your neck," I said.

The eternal cigarette dangled from Dolores Matte's hand as she answered the bell. Her first words were, "Where's your friend? Come on in."

"He's looking for Ray Minor," I told her. "Wants to talk to him."

"Ray?" She laughed without humor. "It's just as well he's not with you. Why in the world did you bring that drag along?"

"He has some good ideas," I said. "You haven't seen anything of Minor, have you? Or heard anything about him?"

"I haven't left the house. Don't tell me he's missing, too? My God! Do you suppose Uhler, or someone . . . ?"

"Ray's not missing—officially, that is. It's just that he doesn't seem to be around."

"I wonder," she said, looking thoughtful and horrified at the same time.

"Not meaning to alarm you, I've had the same thought myself. If Minor killed Freddy, he

wouldn't hang around. Of course it's possible the same person killed Minor and your husband. Maybe they surprised pirates raiding their traps and the pirates got rid of them to save themselves a lot of trouble."

She wrung her hands. "I hadn't thought of that. But it makes sense."

"About Ray Minor, who'd report him missing? Does he have any relatives in New York?"

"None that I know of. He has family in Florida."

"Any special friends here, people he was close to who would miss him?"

"He's only been here a few months, just since he bought up the business. He has no real friends here."

"I thought you and Freddy were friendly with him."

"Used to be friendly," she said. "Don't ask me what happened. It was between him and Freddy."

"Pretty bad?"

"Bad enough," she said wearily. "But there's no sense in talking about it. Freddy gets some strange notions sometimes."

That was her oblique way of letting me know she was the cause of the breakup; that Freddy was simply trying to keep the matches away from the gasoline.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you better news." I started to leave. "Keep hoping for the best."

"Where's your friend?" she said from the doorway. "Did he get lost? Maybe he needs a Boy Scout or a seeing eye dog to help him get around."

She stepped outside and glanced up and down the street just as Pat sauntered toward us from around the side of the house.

"Where in the world are you coming from?" She looked as angry as a lobster climbing out of a pot of boiling water.

"I came back along the shoreline. Change of scenery. Your garden is doing beautifully. Some very fine zucchini down there. I couldn't help stopping to admire it. Freddy does all the gardening, I take it. A great job. He's a chip off the old block. Tony would be proud of him."

"Zucchini?" She looked utterly baffled. "How can you babble about zucchini at a time like this?"

"Tony used to save a few for me. A good-will offering. For some reason, he liked me."

"There's no accounting for tastes," she said, and threw up her hands in a what's-the-use gesture.

"It's getting late, Pat," I said. "We'd better be shoving off. I'll keep in touch, Mrs. Matte. See you tomorrow."

"One thing," Pat said. "Could

you spare the picture of you and Freddy and Ray, the fishing picture? The police will want to know what Ray looks like if we report him missing."

"Of course," she said. "I'll get it for you."

I felt kind of foolish for having walked out of the house without it.

On the way back to the boat landing, Pat said, "Minor wasn't there. Neither was his gun."

"Holy smoke," I said. "That means the last time he left his place he had the gun with him. It's looking worse and worse for him by the minute."

"For the two of them," Pat said. "I thought I'd have to crawl in through a window, but the door was wide open. I gave the place a pretty good going over. I'd say all his belongings are there. If he took off, it was with just the clothes on his back, impromptu-like."

"Any interesting photos?"

"Family only. None of Dolores Matte. If there was anything between them, he didn't advertise it."

In the boat and under way, Pat was silent. He steered past Uhler's, the marina, and then around the point. The harsh gray twilight settling over the bay turned the water the color of lead. The jumble of abandoned craft we'd passed earlier loomed ahead.

"How do they get away with dumping their rotten old boats there?" I asked, pointing.

"Very simple," Pat explained. "Just notify the Coast Guard in writing that the vessel is being abandoned and then it's no longer your responsibility."

"Sounds crazy to me," I said.

"Me, too," Pat said. "When the boats start to break up, they spill a lot of driftwood into harbor waters that does a lot of damage to propellers and hulls. We tried to get the graveyards cleaned up but didn't get very far." He suddenly swung the *Barbara Ann* shoreward.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Thought we might have a look around. We won't be home until after dark anyhow."

"Look around for what?"

"Nothing in particular," Pat said. "Some sightseeing."

"A hell of a time and place for sightseeing," I said.

Pat headed for the gap between two old tugs, rusting and leaning on one side, that formed the entryway to a narrow, low pier structure that poked a couple of hundred feet out into the water. The *Barbara Ann* skated up alongside the pier, and Pat had me lean out and hook a mooring line over a tilted piling and a second line around a cleat hanging on at the weathered

pier edge. The pier measured no more than three or four feet in width. We clambered up. I stood gingerly beside Pat, half afraid my weight would collapse the rotting planking underfoot.

"Don't look so worried," Pat said. "The water's not deep, and wood is tougher than you think."

I picked my way cautiously down the planking, keeping behind him. Finally the wooden deck blended into a dark-soiled beach that sloped gradually upward. Just above the high-tide mark a heavy growth of crab grass, sea oats, and weeds began. The waist-high grass tangled around miscellaneous trash. From ahead of us came the muted purr of motor traffic.

"What are you after? Pirate gold? Freddy Matte?"

"Whatever," Pat said.

Faint traces of a narrow, curving dirt roadway in which grass was growing began at the shore end of the pier. Pat followed this ghost trail toward the street. The sounds of traffic speeding past became quite loud.

"Who'd want to come here anyhow?" I said. "The road looks as if it hasn't been used in a dog's age."

"So it seems." Pat halted abruptly and turned around. "This used to be a lover's lane until the murder, about twenty-five years ago. A gangland killing. Toots Petrillo." He smiled. "The story goes that when the moon is full you can see the ghost of Toots Petrillo flitting around."

"Long as it's not the ghost of Freddy Matte, I'm not worried," I said.

It was full night when we tied up at Lacey's Marina. Pat talked me into staying overnight so we could get an early start in the morning. Once aboard the houseboat, I phoned my wife to break the sad news she'd have to do without my charming company that evening. While we ate a fast meal Pat hardly said a word. I volunteered for the clean-up chores, and Pat excused himself and went straight to bed. He didn't fool me. He wasn't worn out. He wanted to be alone to think things out quietly. I relaxed before the TV set, doing more thinking than watching. My thinking got me nowhere. The handle to the Freddy Matte mystery eluded me. Sure, he'd been killed. But how, by whom, why?

Coming awake in the morning, I was drawn to the kitchen by the smells of fresh-brewed coffee and fried eggs.

"Eat hearty," Pat said. "We've got a busy day on tap."

Within fifteen minutes, Pat was poking the *Barbara Ann* through the light fog veiling

the early morning harbor traffic. Half an hour later, the fog burned off by the sun, he swung around the marina into Laurel Cove.

"At least he's alive and cooking," Pat commented on the smoke curling from Uhler's bunkhouse chimney.

"I hope he had the sense to clean a fry pan," I said. "How can he live like that?"

"Years of practice at not giving a damn. If ptomaine hasn't gotten him yet, one more dirty fry pan won't."

Minor's place was as dead as a falling October leaf. The boat and car were still where we'd seen them last. Pat gave the yard his full attention as we eased past it. Eyes still intent on the shoreline, he mumbled something to himself as we headed on to the public dock. But to my surprise, Pat ran the *Barbara Ann* around in a half circle and gunned her out toward open water.

"Where you going?" I asked. "Don't you want to put Lon Burton on the grill? And how about the fireman?"

"We'll catch them later. There's something to do first. Something we need to look at."

A little beyond an old ferry building stood a concrete batching plant, the overhead boom idle, no sand or gravel barges tucked in against the bulkhead. Past that, scrub pines and grass stitched close to the water's edge gave way to an oil refinery—squat silvery tanks; a spaghetti of piping, puffing steam; a long narrow pier bending from the shoreline at an angle. Past another stretch of pines and grass the outskirts of another huge boat graveyard materialized. Here the boats were predominantly barges, huddled together at odd angles. Pat headed the *Barbara Ann* shoreward. As we approached land the hulks were so close together I could almost reach out and touch them as we squeezed through.

"What a hideout this would make," I said. Screened as we were, we couldn't be seen from either the water or land sides.

"Wouldn't it ever," Pat said.

Three or four covered barges, end to end like dominoes, loomed ahead, parallel to the shore. Pat made an end run around them, moving toward a little curving basin biting into the shoreline. At the end of the basin stood a rickety, pile-supported platform. The water shoaled and the churning prop kicked up a soup of mud and sand from the bottom.

"Don't dare get any closer," Pat said. He allowed the boat to hover for a moment alongside, keeping two or three feet out from the landing. The jag-

ged, slender piles thrusting up rakishly at the sides of the platform caught Pat's attention. My eyes followed his.

"Someone's been here lately," Pat said. The touch of excitement in his voice was unusual for him. "See up ahead, where the wood's been splintered? Took a boat banging alongside to do that."

I saw what he meant. Dangling splinters exposed virgin yellow wood underneath the dark, gray-brown exterior of the piles.

"A boat no bigger than the *Barbara Ann,* probably smaller, did that," he said.

"About the size of a lobsterman's skiff? You think you're onto something?"

"Perhaps a piece of what we're after," Pat said. "Depending on what we find."

Very carefully he worked in close enough for me to hang a line over the nearest of the bobtailed pilings. We stepped ashore. Rust-coated steel drums were half buried in the mud, and litter lay all up and down the beach. Blackened, decaying timbers, all sizes and shapes, stuff broken off the ragtag fleet by wave, storm, or wind and washed up onto the shore. Wheels, tires, spindles that once held wire, bits of pipe, tattered canvas, stripped and rusty auto bodies, many of them resting on boxes jammed under their axles. Above the high water mark was a jungle of trees, bushes, grass, weeds.

Without hesitation Pat made for an opening, clearly some kind of path, through the vegetation. His eyes were busy scanning every inch of the way.

"I don't think Indians left these footprints," he said, squatting to examine depressions in the ground, still soggy from the recent rain. "Do you have any idea who came this way, and why?" There was a twinkle in his eyes. "Anything come to mind?"

"Someone who knows his way around. Not exactly for legitimate reasons. I can't think of any sensible reason why anyone would come poking around here."

"A good try. A good start. Go on."

"The Matte business. You wouldn't have brought me here otherwise."

"Now you're cooking."

"If Freddy was murdered out on the lobster grounds," I thought out loud, "it was not a spur of the moment thing. A killing like that would take a lot of planning."

"I should think so," Pat said. "Quite a lot of planning. But how would this place fit in?"

"Just the place to take on a passenger who couldn't afford

to be seen getting on a boat someplace else. Simple as that."

"Not bad thinking, Phil," Pat said. "There are a lot of possibilities."

I didn't answer. Sounds were coming from a little distance away—rustling, the trampling of feet, faint voices, the words muffled by distance.

Pat put a finger to his lips to signal silence. He was listening, too.

"Who the hell is that?" I whispered. The sudden knot of anxiety in my gut sent me automatically reaching for my gun. But it wasn't there. Not expecting trouble when I left my apartment yesterday, I hadn't taken it with me.

The voices faded, then stopped altogether.

"Think we ought to find out what that's all about?" I said.

"We've got to give it a try," Pat said, moving gingerly through the grass in the direction from which the sounds had last come. "But quietly. They could be dangerous."

As we inched forward we picked up voices, distinct now. Pat poked me and pointed. From behind a thick bush we had a good view of a clearing to our front. Gathered at a tall tree were three boys, ten or twelve years old. Two held a wooden box that looked as if it had been newly nailed together from scrap lumber. The third, taller than the others and owning a shock of yellow hair, leaned on a shovel and clutched a big sheet of thick paper in his hand.

"What a great spot for buried treasure," he said. "No one will ever find it."

He consulted the paper.

"Okay," he said. "Ten paces from the tree. That way." He waved in the general direction of the water.

The others, hefting the box, counted as they shuffled shoreward. They were very serious about it.

"Right there," the leader commanded. He relinquished the shovel to the nearer of the two. "You first. Start digging. We'll take turns."

The boys hadn't spotted us. Pat backed away carefully, smiling. I suppose I smiled, too. I wondered how many generations of boys had gathered here for their games of buried treasure.

Back at the grass-bordered path, Pat resumed his hunt, eyes fixed on the ground. Suddenly he bent and came up with a cigarette butt in his hand.

"Recognize the brand?" he said matter-of-factly.

"Pure Gold. Dolores Matte's brand. So she could have been meeting someone here. Can you think of a more private place?"

"Hardly," Pat said. "But a lot

of people smoke Pure Golds, so we can't jump to conclusions. What interest me are the footprints. Careful, don't step in them. Two kinds, two sizes. A man, and a woman. A big man. A big shoe size, anyhow."

Freddy Matte had big feet. So did Ray Minor. The fishing photo showed that clearly. But a heap of other men had man-size feet, and Freddy Matte had no need to sneak off to meet his wife in such a secluded spot.

The path swept into a grassy semi-clearing overhung along its periphery by tree branches. A road of sorts led into the clearing at its far side. The grass within the clearing was beaten down in a horseshoe shape, obviously by a car's repeatedly entering the clearing from the road and turning around. Scores of cigarette butts, all Pure Golds, littered the area, along with beer and soft drink cans, discarded fast food wrappings, plastic coffee containers.

"A trysting place," Pat said. "It's fairly safe to assume for Dolores Matte and friend."

"That doesn't mean she and her playmate, one or both of them, knocked off Freddy Matte."

"But it pretty much proves Freddy's suspicions were justified."

"Do you suppose it was Ray Minor?"

"Minor's a possibility, but not the only one. Our lady is no candidate for sainthood."

We scouted down the road. It hit a wider road, leading toward the shore in a different direction, that was free of tire marks. But muddy ruts up toward civilization and along the branch we'd been following left no doubt both had been much-traveled recently.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Back to Laurel Cove, to see what Lon Burton has to say for himself."

Burton was sitting at a large, flat-topped, file-covered desk that faced the street. He was on the phone when we walked in.

"Be with you in a minute," he sang out, hand over the mouthpiece momentarily. He cut his conversation short and, as he put down the phone, arranged his face in the professionally friendly smile of an insurance hawker scenting fresh business.

"What is your pleasure, gentlemen?" he asked. He had a long thin face and alert blue eyes.

"Not pleasure exactly," I said. "My name is Mandel. I've been retained by Dolores Matte in the matter of her husband's disappearance."

The smile dissolved.

"So Freddy's disappeared? The first I've heard of it. When did this happen?"

I could see the wariness settling around him like dust.

"I won't beat around the bush," I said. "We have information you were chummy with Dolores Matte and Freddy didn't like that one little bit."

He rubbed his jaw and smiled.

"I got his message loud and clear. I suppose you've found out about that."

"About your fight with him and a whole lot more."

"Excuse me, Mr. Burton." Pat shut me off unexpectedly. "Do you have a boat?"

"No," Burton was perplexed. "I do my navigating on dry land."

"Can you run a boat?"

"A little," Burton said. "Enough to get by on a fair day. What has that got to do with Freddy's disappearance?"

"Freddy never came back from his last trip to the lobster grounds. There's a possibility he might have been murdered out there. That would have taken a boat. . . . What size shoes do you wear?"

"What size shoes?" Burton repeated, looking at me as if to say who turned the lunatic loose in my office. "See for yourself." He loped around the desk and parked himself in front of Pat. He was tall and had good shoulders. "Go ahead. Have yourself a good look. You a salesman for shoes? You want to know where I buy my socks?"

Pat glanced down.

"About eight," he said. "Small for a man your size."

"Eight and a half D, you might as well get it exact. But I still would like to know what all this has to do with Freddy Matte."

"I'm not sure myself," Pat said. "I thought you might be able to tell me the connection."

Without further ado Pat spun around and headed for the door. I followed, wondering why he'd upstaged me.

I asked Pat about it outside. His answer: "No need for prying out of him what we already knew. They were lovers. . . . I've got a call to make."

Pat was quite a long time in the drugstore phone booth. When he rejoined me, I asked, "Why so long, Pat?"

"I was ordering a pizza. They'll deliver it later."

"Now what?"

"A call to Dolores, to catch her up to date. You go in, talk to her. I'll hang around outside. No sense getting the poor woman all riled up."

"What'll I tell her?"

"That you're still working on the case. Find out if she's heard anything from Missing Persons. Ask her if she's seen any-

thing of Ray Minor, or if Uhler has been bothering her, or if she knows Freddy had been seen with the fireman's bride. Just keep talking to her. Be a little rough on her. Hint that she hasn't been frank with you, is hiding something."

Pat was up to something, but I knew better than to ask him what. I rang the doorbell. She answered the ring immediately, looked at me quizzically when she spied Pat loitering on the sidewalk.

"Pat's decided to go easy on your blood pressure and wait outside," I answered her unspoken question, then launched into the script Pat had outlined. "This shouldn't take too long. I've got a lot of bases to touch today. You haven't heard anything?"

"Not a word. God, this waiting has me tied up in knots. What am I going to do, Phil?"

"It's rough," I commiserated. "You've certainly got my sympathy. They'll let you know right away if there's any break."

"I keep calling, every couple of hours. I hate to make a pest of myself, but I've got to do something."

"Sure," I said. "Has Uhler stopped around?"

"Uhler?" Her mouth crinkled with distaste. "Why'd he want to do that?"

"A neighborly thing—offer his help, sympathy, whatever. Pat tells me there's really a kind heart under that rough exterior, if you dig deep enough." Pat had said no such thing, but it sounded good.

"Pat has his opinion and I have mine." She made it plain what she thought of Pat's opinion. "And I can do without hypocritical help or phony sympathy from that slob Uhler."

The strain was written all over her. Her hands could not stay still. She drywashed them; plucked at stray wisps of hair; twisted the ring on her finger; touched and moved ashtrays, pictures, magazines. All as she paced the floor. Deep circles framing bloodshot eyes bespoke sleeplessness.

"Did you know Uhler has a gun?" I asked.

"Everyone here has a gun. It's like a wild west town."

"Dangerous then. Guns go off. People kill people with guns. Did Lon Burton have a gun?"

"Lon?" She halted in her pacing. "I don't know. How would I know? Why don't you ask him?"

"I suppose you *wouldn't* know," I said sarcastically, "seeing as you don't know him very well."

Anger flared in her eyes, but all she said was, "Why this interest in guns? I don't understand."

"If your husband were murdered while out on the boat, a gun would be the handiest, likeliest way of doing it. No one around to hear the shot, certainly no one close enough to see the shooting. Find out what gun was used, and you've got the answer. Pat seems to think the murderer weighted the body and threw it overboard, then sank the boat."

"Pat," she snorted. For a second she was silent, then she said, "You know, he could be right. He just could be right. It's as good a guess as any I've heard."

"Pat is generally right," I said. "Of course, there's one big hitch. He doesn't know who did it. Not yet."

"Does he have any experience in this kind of thing? A dockmaster? A retired dockmaster? I don't know beans about dockmasters, but what do they have to do with solving crimes?"

"Pat's not just any old dockmaster. He's helped me many times. He's a whiz at putting things together. He'll find out who killed Freddy."

"Then I have him all wrong," she said. "I owe him an apology."

"Ray Minor had a gun," I said. "And it's missing."

"Missing?" Her eyes widened and a frown chased across her face. "Then Ray must have—?"

"Ray's not around. His gun can't be found. Add it up for yourself."

"So that's the way it was," she said slowly. "I hate to believe it, but it looks like Minor has a lot of explaining to do. Why aren't you and Pat out hunting for him?"

"We intend to, in our own way," I said, "but the police are a better bet. They have the manpower and organization."

She had migrated to the window.

"Where's Pat now?" She looked up and down the sidewalk. "I don't see him. What's he up to?"

"He's somewhere around," I said. "There's nothing more for now." I headed for the front door. "I'll check with you later."

"I'd like a word with Pat." She trailed along behind me. "I want to square things with him."

Pat was nowhere in sight. I went down the flagstone path, looked along the side of the house. No sign of him. She was still close behind me.

"Where in the world can that man be?" she said. "Always wandering off."

"Maybe he's around the other side," I said, moving down the walk toward the back of the house, where I turned left. She tagged along behind me but got

no further than the bend in the walk. She stopped abruptly.

"There he is," she called out. Pat was in the lobster yard, beyond the open gate in the chain link fence. Back bent, he was digging, with a long-handled spade, near the big shade tree.

She didn't wait for me. Instead, muttering to herself, she trotted toward the open gate. She halted at his side. Pat kicked dirt back into a shallow hole and leaned easily on the spade, one of the assortment we'd seen leaning against the tool shed behind the house.

"Just what is it you're doing?" she demanded, without pretense of politeness or patience.

"A little digging," Pat said pleasantly. "For worms. Phil and I are going fishing. I thought I'd roust out a few worms to keep myself busy while Phil touched base with you."

An old tin can lay on the ground beside him. Small uneven circles of dirt were scattered about where he'd explored and filled in.

"Worms?" she snapped. "You don't have to dig for worms. The bait locker is full of them. I'll give you all you want."

"No harm meant," Pat said. "I've got some beauties in here." He reached for the can and shook it in front of her. "Don't bother with the locker. A few more's all we need."

"You've got all you're going to get." Her voice rose with fury. "Get out of here, off my property, this minute. You, too." She spun around to face me. "You're fired. I don't need an incompetent like you," she fumbled for words, "or this clown. I never saw anything so ridiculous in my life. A comedy team, Pat and Pumpkin."

"If that's the way you feel—" I started to say.

"There should be some nice ones over there." Pat waved toward the piled lobster pots. He had the shovel handle by the middle, holding it horizontally. His back was to her.

"Watch out, Pat," I yelled as she wrenched the shovel out of his hand. She went after him with it, jabbing and then swinging the shovel, cursing him. Pat winged off in full flight, down toward the water, making an end run around the lobster pots. Quick as a panther she pursued, brandishing the shovel with earnest, murderous intent. I lumbered after her. She stopped short, whirled around, and aimed the shovel in my direction. I ducked under the vicious swipe, heard the nasty swish as it cleaved the air over my head. At the same time, driven more by desperation than courage, I tackled her, my head whamming into her stomach linebacker style and my arms

circling her waist. I heard the breath whoosh out of her as she went down heavily on her back, and the kerplunk of the flying shovel landing. The instant she hit the ground she went to digging at my face. I grabbed her hands and held them. She started biting as a distraction. I managed to keep her from sinking her teeth into me. She spouted curses at me as I slowly forced her hands together in front of her face. She was strong, and keeping that tigress under control and my skin intact took all my strength.

Pat trotted over.

"It's no good, Mrs. Matte," he said quietly. "It won't do you any good. So you might as well calm down."

I saw why as the troops arrived, from up near the house, on the double. It came to me, belatedly, why Pat had been on the phone so long after we left Burton. A couple of the new arrivals were in plainclothes. Two others, in uniform, relieved me of my heavy duty, wrestling her to her feet, none too gently, ignoring her cries to get their hands off her. Another detail, bearing shovels, were right behind them.

She was still carrying on, only her curses were directed at Pat now. Why, oh why, she moaned, had he stuck his nose in where it didn't belong, the nasty, sneaky, rotten old buzzard. Only buzzard wasn't the word she used.

A bulky, grayhaired man in street clothes said, "Where do we dig?"

"Right over there, Elmer," Pat pointed. "Under those lobster pots, somewhere near the tree. The pots put me on to her. Move them aside. Dig where you find fresh dirt. You can't miss it."

"Okay, fellows, you heard the man," Elmer said, and the men moved out.

"Now, lady," Elmer said, "you can stick around and watch the unveiling if you want to, or you can go back to the house and wait. What'll it be?"

"The house," she said, with sudden weary resignation, no longer fighting to get free, and going off quietly with the police.

Pat moved slowly to where the men were tossing lobster pots aside.

"What was that about the lobster pots?" I asked him.

"Yesterday, when we were eyeballing this place from the boat, the way the lobster pots were piled hit me wrong. At both ends they were piled evenly, but in the vicinity of the tree they weren't quite so tidy, the way the rest of the yard was. I asked myself: Why just that one little spot? That's why

I tested her, bringing up the fact that the old man taught Freddy to keep everything up to snuff. An alarm sounded in her mind. Well, today you notice they are all piled as evenly as bricks in a wall. That told me she'd done some midnight yard work last night. Today, while you kept her occupied, I checked the shovels and found fresh dirt on a couple of them. Only she could have used them, and it wasn't in the garden —there was no sign of digging there."

"Why didn't you go after her as soon as you noticed the lobster pots this morning?"

"I wanted to be sure who was in on it with her. While both Minor and Burton were possibilities, killing Freddy could have been a solo job. She could have been forced to kill Minor out on the water because he accidentally stumbled on her killing Freddy. No problem to tow his boat back. Or Minor could have seen her and her accomplice together on the boat, making it necessary to eliminate the witness. Did you notice anything about her housekeeping?"

"She wasn't much of a housekeeper. Dust all around. Pretty slobby. She gave it a lick and a promise."

"Except in the kitchen," Pat said. "Why was the floor so clean, freshly scrubbed? I asked myself that. Why all that attention to the kitchen in an otherwise neglected house? And other small, puzzling things about the kitchen. A knife missing from the set hanging on the wall. And the clock hanging a little off center, the microwave not quite in position. Why?"

"I don't follow you," I said.

"She had to clean the kitchen thoroughly and fast. Something nasty happened there, an argument with Ray Minor that ended in violence. They wrestled around, knocked the furniture around. She was big and strong enough to give even a bruiser like Minor a tussle. But he was too much for her and she reached for a weapon. The kitchen knives were handy. She grabbed one, stabbed him, killed him. Not intentionally. It was self-defense with her. But suddenly she found herself faced with the problem of disposing of the body. She did some fast thinking and speedy work. She cleaned up the blood, then under cover of dark dragged the body out back. A breeze for her, that part of it."

"I'll vouch for how strong she is. She could arm wrestle a gorilla to a draw. What about Freddy? Were she and Ray in on that together?"

"All the way. Almost all the way."

"What did they quarrel about?"

"My educated guess is Ray was elected to do the killing and he chickened out at the last minute, couldn't bring himself to pull the trigger. That left her no choice. She had to do the dirty work herself. Maybe that soured her on him. What did she need a weakling, a jellyfish, for? That night he sneaked over to the Matte house, by prearrangement. They had a falling out. My guess is that she told him what she thought of him, that she wanted no part of him. Most likely they were lovers in Florida before she met Freddy. Or he was one of her lovers. She was not a one-man woman, not even a one-man-at-a-time woman. She played the field. I don't doubt she married Freddy with the intention of taking him for all he had, one way or another. Probably it was set up in advance for Minor to come north and join her a few months after she arrived with her new husband. I'm sure she and Ray kept in touch by phone. On the other hand, maybe the idea of setting up Ray to kill Freddy didn't occur to her until after she'd been married to Freddy for a while. Maybe Lucetti's lobster station's coming up for sale was what touched off the idea in her mind. What better way for him to get on the scene unobtrusively than to buy out a business in Laurel Cove. We'll never know for sure just where and when the idea took shape unless she spills her guts."

"So you think she got on him about his losing his nerve, and that led to the fight?"

"Can you think of a likelier explanation? Once they were out on the lobster grounds together, their boat alongside Freddy's, and they showed the gun, they had to go through with it. Freddy would have gone gunning for them both if they ever let him get back to Laurel Cove. Freddy was Tony's son, and I know what Tony would have done. A matter of pride, honor, revenge for humiliation."

"How did they work it out?"

"Right after Freddy went out in his boat, she drove to the rendezvous spot, where they'd been meeting regularly. Ray knew about the graveyard because as a boy he lived close by. You saw for yourself how it's a magnet for boys and their games. Its remoteness fitted right in with their plan, may even have suggested it. She joined him there on the boat. There was no other way to do it. She couldn't risk being seen getting into his boat at Laurel Cove, even in the middle of the night. As for Ray, there'd be no way of anyone's knowing he didn't head directly

to sea. Once in the boat, all she had to do was crouch down out of sight until they hit open water.

"From the murder scene they returned to the graveyard. He dropped her off and went on to his dock. She drove back to town, showed her face. She probably stopped for gas or early coffee. She made it seem she'd gone on a shopping expedition that day."

"What a woman," I said. "So much going for her, yet she couldn't play it straight."

"That wasn't her style," Pat said. "She was always thinking ahead. After she killed Minor, she put him out of her mind like yesterday's breakfast. Having him out of the way wasn't so bad after all, even had its advantages: no one to split the insurance money with, no witnesses to the shooting, no one to implicate her, and most of all, perhaps, a ready-made logical suspect once it became apparent he as well as Freddy was missing. Everyone, including the police, would jump to the conclusion that Ray killed Freddy and beat it for the back woods. Make no mistake about it, she was thinking all the time, figuring all the angles. She was an odd combination of passion and cunning. You noticed how quickly she allowed herself to be persuaded that Uhler, the crazy, could have been the killer, or Ray. She was clever. Yet she knew she'd outsmarted herself in hiring you, that it could backfire on her."

"That was when you showed up with me. That made her nervous."

"She was also shrewd enough, knowing she'd made a mistake, to realize she couldn't unhire you without arousing some suspicion. Don't think for a minute she underestimated us."

"Underestimated you," I said. "I think she was about to start buttering you up. She said she owed you an apology."

"I'm afraid she doesn't," Pat said. "Some other things puzzled me yesterday. Her fingernails, for instance—a couple of them were broken. She's not the type to mangle her nails cleaning house or gardening."

"And what about the blisters on her hands?" I said. "What kind of work would she do to raise blisters on her hands? With her vanity? That didn't seem right to me. But at the time I didn't dream she was the killer."

"Blisters, did you say?" Pat looked chagrined. "You're one up on me, Phil. I didn't catch that at all. If I had we could have saved a lot of chasing around. That and the fresh dirt on the shovel. I missed them both yesterday."

"I catch something once in a while." I underplayed it, but it did a world of good for my ego to know I'd spotted something Pat had missed. He wasn't infallible after all.

"At the beginning," Pat went on, "I couldn't be absolutely certain of her involvement in Freddy's disappearance. All I had to go on, really, was the crookedly piled lobster pots, and the overclean kitchen. That's why I had to check out Uhler. Then when we discovered his gun had been fired recently, we had to consider him a suspect. His hinges are rusty enough to swing a little crooked. Same way, we had to check out Lon Burton. Until his small feet ruled him out, it could have been he she met at the boat graveyard. He could have rounded up a boat and run it out to the lobster grounds with her."

We were interrupted by a cry from one of the shovelmen.

"We found it. There's an arm sticking out of a blanket."

"Just the way you had it figured, Pat." The detective in charge of the digging came over. "I'd better go tell Elmer. Now he can read her her rights—fat lot of good it'll do her."

He hurried toward the house.

"Let's go." Pat plucked at my sleeve.

"Don't you want to see it?" I said.

"I've seen enough for one day," Pat said. "The whole business turns my stomach, so you'd better have a good appetite for the pizza I'm having delivered to the houseboat." He glanced at his watch. "We'll have about a ten minute wait after we get back to Lacey's."

He was wrong about that. We ran into a stiff wind on the return trip and the deliveryman waiting for us was a little miffed. Pat managed to get a slice or two down. None was wasted.

He was right about Freddy and Ray. Dolores Matte confessed, and the details were just about as Pat had figured them, which didn't surprise me at all.

UNSOLVED

by Hubert Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

In the hamlet of Uppandowne, in Doomshire, everyone belongs to one of two families. These are the Upwrights and the Downwrights. There is nothing especially distinctive about the members of either family, except that, if questioned, Upwrights always tell the truth and Downwrights always lie.

When I last visited Uppandowne I dropped in for a pint at the local hostelry. There were six villagers in the bar. Having ordered a round of drinks, I asked them, one after the other, how many of them were Upwrights. The first five answers I received were:

"Two of us are Upwrights."

"No; one of us."

"None of us is an Upwright."

"There are three of us."

"Yes; that's right, three."

Thus far, clearly it was impossible for me to tell how many Upwrights were present. The sixth villager's answer, however, solved the problem "beyond a peradventure."

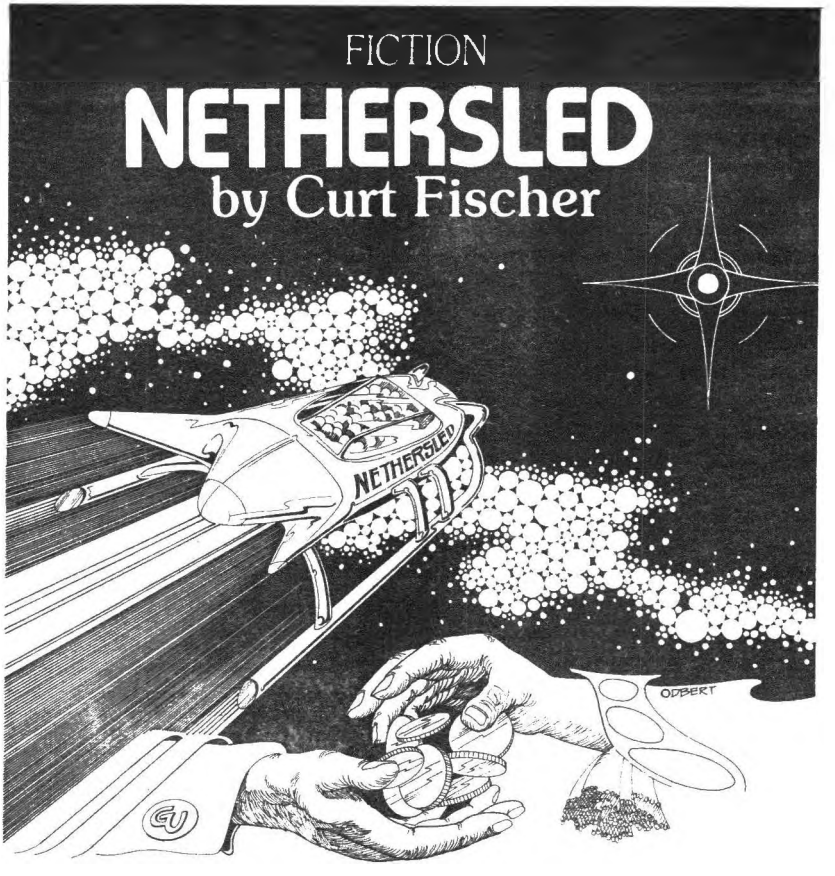
How many Upwrights were there?

See page 147 for the solution to the July puzzle.

FICTION

NETHERSLED

by Curt Fischer



The three judges hearing the case sat in resolute silence as Slaughter was brought into the courtroom by the bailiff-at-arms. As he was seated next to his law-knower, Slaughter considered the judge in the red robe who would shortly pass judgment on his guilt or innocence. The color of the jurist's gown matched his eyes; obviously he had been up most of the night considering the sayings given up to this point, or perhaps he had sipped himself dizzy on Palwa juice. Slaughter did not see either as indications that things were going well for himself. The red judge was sitting in the first chair in the twelve-chair box. The other eleven chairs were empty, symbols of his omnipotence; they had, legend told, once contained a full complement of people.

Illustration by James Odbert

Slaughter remembered reading somewhere that they had all been called "peers." Now there was only one Peer in a justice chamber, and he wore the red robe.

Slaughter surveyed the rest of the justice chamber. The green-gowned judge, Hisonor, was perched high on the six-step stool at the front of the chamber, conferring with the Prover, the law-knower pledged to present sayings against him. Hisonor had the power only to conduct the Finding and therefore did not frighten Slaughter. Suddenly he motioned Slaughter's law-knower forward to join in the conference. Slaughter began to ask Rippon, his law-knower, what was happening, but Rippon merely shook his head to silence him and proceeded to the stool.

Slaughter forced himself to gaze upon the black-robed and -hooded judge who sat in the soundproof booth in the corner, his back to everyone. He was the one called the "Sentencer." Slaughter could see the video screen upon which the Sentencer would watch a slightly distorted picture of the trial while reading a running account of all the sayings except, of course, for injections disallowed by Hisonor. "Absolute fairness," thought Slaughter, "that's what it's all about. The Sentencer does his job based on facts alone, with no personal impressions from a facial expression, or a tone of voice, or the justice-chamber antics of a law-knower. But he doesn't do anything at all unless the Peer finds me guilty."

There were no others in the room. There had been others earlier in the Finding, but once they had given their sayings, sayers were allowed to leave. There would be only one more say, Slaughter himself.

Rippon had returned to the defended's chair. "All set, lad. The Prover has confirmed that he has completed his part of the Finding. As soon as the bailiff-at-arms brings the Finding to attention, I'll call you before the stool." Rippon lowered his head and looked away at the Peer. "I've got to tell you, Slaughter, you had better be convincing. I had a . . . well, let's say a social engagement . . . with the Peer's junior wife last night, and she's certain he's leaning toward 'guilt.' " He reached over and gripped Slaughter's wrist. "And though I could end up being the Prover's next finding, I've also learned who's beneath the black hood." Pausing, he gripped Slaughter's wrist harder. "He's not one to pass light sentence on a negligent Thriller! Understand?"

Slaughter nodded.

The bailiff-at-arms had taken position next to Hisonor. "Hear

this! Hear this! The Finding is now at attention. The Finding in question rests Saxby Slaughter, accused of negligence in the operation of a thrill. The Peer, Sentencer, and Hisonor are properly heralded. Preside!"

Having done his duty for the moment, the bailiff-at-arms took his position at the gavel table which he would pound with a wooden mallet, if and when Hisonor motioned to him.

It was Hisonor's turn now. "Law-knower Rippon, are you prepared to present?"

"I am, Hisonor. I wish the defended, Saxby Slaughter, to say."

The bailiff-at-arms rose from the gavel table and solemnly intoned, "Saxby Slaughter to the saying stool."

Slaughter stood. Immediately he saw that the Peer had tipped back his head and widened his eyes, taking in Slaughter's tall seven foot frame. Slaughter tried to slouch as he approached the stool. He remembered Rippon's exhortation that many justice chamber trios held secret misgivings about the tall generation.

"Saxby Slaughter?" asked the bailiff-at-arms, who had approached the stool with him.

"Yes."

"Stand and be true."

Rippon suddenly appeared at his right as the bailiff-at-arms returned to the gavel table.

"Saxby Slaughter, you are a Thriller at the Great Universe Amusement and Thrill Center located on Alpha 46?" began Rippon.

"I am . . . uh . . . was."

"Yes . . . yes . . . 'was,' indeed. You have been dismissed from this position?"

"Yes."

"Hisonor, I request a record of injection." Rippon addressed the green-robed judge seated immediately above them.

"What is the nature of the injection?"

"That Saxby Slaughter's dismissal does not denote guilt, Hisonor."

Hisonor nodded to the Peer; the Peer nodded back. Hisonor nodded to the Prover; the Prover made a face, began to speak in disfavor, and then acquiesced.

"So injected," Hisonor proclaimed and pointed to the bailiff-at-arms, who punched the Injector at the gavel table, thus placing it in the files.

Rippon resumed his questioning. "Tell us, Saxby Slaughter, the

nature of the thrill over which you had control."

"It's a ride called the Nethersled." Slaughter looked toward the Peer, who failed to acknowledge any understanding, in spite of the fact that at least three sayers had already explained the workings of the thrill. "The Nethersled is a thrill ride, the speed of which approaches that of light and then suddenly lurches from its platform bed and sails for some distance . . . "

"Be exact, please," Hisonor interrupted.

"The distance varies depending on the local gravitation."

"What distance was it on *this* occasion?" Hisonor persisted.

"Nine hundred thousand kilometers laterally with a height of two thousand and fifty at the apex of the lurch."

"Continue," Hisonor said, having received a comprehending nod from the Peer.

Slaughter hesitated. "That's about all. Except that on landing on its pad-bed, on this occasion on another planet in Alpha 46's system, the Nethersled is redirected and returned. People normally buy the round trip ticket."

"And," asked Rippon, "what exactly do you, personally, do in connection with the Nethersled?"

"I am . . . was . . . the Thriller. I timed and executed the lurch."

"Explain, please, the importance of that role," Rippon prompted.

"Well, the lurch is one of the big attractions. The G force of acceleration is exciting, and the sensation of approaching the speed of light—every cell of the body seems to . . . It's hard to explain. You have to experience it. I've been on my own ride several times. Einstein's Factor is involved. It's tingling . . . rejuvenating . . . being born and dying several times within a moment. . . . You see everything, yet nothing." Slaughter paused. He saw that everyone in the justice chamber was hanging on his every word. "But the lurch is the best. It combines the two—the G force and the nearing of light speed. It's like leaving your body behind. You drift in a weightless splendor of light and motion. You are aware of pain but feel nothing. You . . . "

"Yes, yes," interrupted Rippon. "We understand, but is there any other importance to the lurch, besides making the ride more entertaining?"

"You mean, slowdown?"

"Yes."

Slaughter took a deep breath. "Without the lurch, the sled would continue acceleration."

No one spoke for a time. Finally, Rippon asked what everyone wanted to know. "What happens then?"

Slaughter turned slightly so that he could see both the Peer and the Prover with his peripheral vision. "Nobody knows."

There was another moment of silence.

"On the date in question, were you negligent in failing to execute the lurch?"

"I was not negligent."

"Yet the sled never landed; no one saw it leave the sled-bed."

Slaughter shrugged. "From my station in thrill control, I had the lurch timed perfectly."

Rippon pondered, stalling. It was obvious that he had something to bring out, but he was debating whether he should or not. Finally he said simply, "Do you have anything else to add to your say?"

Slaughter tensed. To say, "No," meant that the Prover would begin his cross-find. His large blond head dropped thoughtfully. His blue eyes were clear when his head came back up. "No," he said with finality.

Rippon turned to Hisonor. "I am finished with the defended."

Hisonor narrowed his eyes disapprovingly, as if Rippon had been incomplete and unsatisfactory. "Very well. Prover, you may begin to cross-find the sayer."

The Prover rose slowly from his chair and approached the stool deliberately. It seemed to Slaughter that he had given the Peer a sly smile as he sauntered past the box. As tradition dictated, Slaughter's law-knower remained at his side, and the Prover now took a position with Rippon between himself and Slaughter. He bobbed his head a few times, a phony smile wide across his face. Finally, he brought his fingertips together beneath his chin. "Fascinating. Simply fascinating, Saxby Slaughter." He turned and took a couple of paces, and then turned again. "You have heard the other sayers?"

"Yes."

"You have heard Admiral LeMare say that his special safety and rescue squadron could find no wreckage, no bodies, no evidence of the Nethersled within ten million kilometers of the Great Universe Amusement and Thrill Center?"

"Yes."

"And you still maintain that the lurch was timed correctly? That you were not negligent in your execution of the lurch?"

"Yes."

The Prover walked back to his original position, pushed up against Rippon, causing the latter to frown perceptibly. The Prover leaned forward until his face was only inches from Slaughter's. "The speed of light," he said simply. "Three hundred thousand kilometers per second."

"Nearly."

"Nearly. Yet you perform this . . . this thrill on a course only nine hundred thousand kilometers long."

"Is that a question?"

"It is."

"Then the answer is yes."

"How?"

Slaughter grinned. "The acceleration to that speed is not immediate. It takes seven seconds to lurch. The whole ride takes over three minutes. The time near light speed is only a flicker of a second."

The Prover returned the grin, only his was more malevolent. "How do the occupants of the sled survive such a violent, explosive trip?"

"The Nethersled is designed to take most of the G force. The people take some, but only a fraction of the pressure that really exists."

"Seven seconds," the Prover said; then he just stared at Slaughter. "Seven seconds. With a flicker near the speed of light." He paused again. "How do you slow down from such a tremendous speed?"

"With the lurch."

"Ah, yes, you mentioned that. How does that work?"

"The lurch propels the Nethersled upward. Well, we say upward, but it really is simply a change of direction. Gravity can then slow it . . . plus the properties of the sled are such that separation from the bed causes it to slow considerably . . . abruptly."

"I see," he said, though it was obvious that he did not. The Prover swiveled on his heels and, it seemed to Slaughter, spoke louder than was necessary. "And what if you execute the lurch too late or too soon?"

"The sled would come down in the wrong place. It would crash. Only the proper landing bed will do."

"Exactly." The Prover seemed pleased with himself. "Forty-seven people, Slaughter! That's how many were aboard that day, correct?"

"Yes."

"Forty-seven—trusting the Thriller to be precise, trusting that the Thriller would not be too occupied to lurch them safely, trusting that the Thriller was an expert—forty-seven people are gone, vanished. And you are an expert, are you not, Saxby Slaughter?"

Slaughter stood up straight, heedless of the disadvantage his height might cause him. "I am!" he said firmly.

The Prover smiled. "Yes, you are. You're an expert! Tell us, expert, where's the Nethersled?"

"I don't know," Slaughter exclaimed, and though he had noticed a smug expression cross Rippon's face during the Prover's questioning, he himself was becoming exasperated. "Look, the thrill business is unpredictable. Like a few years ago when Newton's Spin went berserk over at Galactic Fairs, or when the Quantum Hole over at the Canis Carnival imploded." Realizing that his voice had risen, Slaughter took time to calm himself a bit. "There was no negligence in those places, either. The unpredictability is part of the thrill. Without it there would be no more thrill centers or rides. It's a dangerous business, and those forty-seven people knew it. They were like friends to me; they had ridden the Nethersled over fifty times each; I recognized every one of them when they boarded below the control center that day. I've been a Thriller for nine centons, and I've administered the Nethersled to tens of thousands; what happened that day was not due to negligence."

"Injection!" shouted the Prover.

"What is the purpose of your injection?" Hisonor said flatly.

"Sufficient time was provided for a statement of confession or position, and Saxby Slaughter chose not to do so."

"This Rest Finding could result in the death penalty," replied the judge in green. "Therefore, there is no time limit for giving a statement. The bailiff-at-arms will allow the say to stand without injection." Hisonor gestured to Slaughter. "You may proceed."

Rippon glanced quickly at his defended, then at the Prover, and then spoke before Slaughter had an opportunity to continue. "Hisonor, may I provide say?"

"Injection! A law-knower may not provide say for his defended," screamed the Prover.

"Confirmed," said Hisonor firmly.

"Even when find has been withheld?" asked Rippon.

Hisonor sat more erectly on his stool. "Withheld?" He looked at the Prover. The Prover was carefully avoiding eye contact. "What is the nature of this withheld find?"

Rippon smiled. This was the chance he had been seeking, and the Prover had fallen into the snare.

"When my defended was first taken by Security to the detainment center, my defended was administered Veracimide in order that he might answer any one question which our law permits Security to ask every detainee." Rippon glanced at the Prover, who continued to stare at the floor. "The question they chose to ask was, and I quote, 'Did your negligence cause the loss of the Nethersled?' My defended's reply was in the negative."

"Injection," the Prover's voice trembled. This turn of events was not to his liking. "The defended's denial only proves that he was unaware of any such negligence, not that he was not guilty of it."

"Exactly my point, Hisonor!" said Rippon excitedly. "My defended could only tell the truth as he saw it, and since the Prover has himself insisted that my defended is an expert in the operation of the Nethersled, and therefore would know if any negligence had occurred . . . "

"Injection rejected." Hisonor looked at the Peer. The Peer pursed his lips, closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, and nodded slowly. Hisonor looked to the Sentencer, forgotten in his soundproofed booth. As if he knew that eyes were on him, his black hood bobbed in assent to the decision that he knew Hisonor was about to announce. "This Find is at an end. The accusation is quashed. Prover, you should have realized that once expertise is determined, such a response to Veracimide establishes innocence."

"Yes, Hisonor. I apologize."

"Saxby Slaughter, you are free to go."

"Thank you, Hisonor," said Rippon, who turned and greeted Slaughter with a matching smile and a firm handclasp.

The justice chamber was empty save for Rippon and Slaughter. Rippon was relishing his victory, Slaughter his narrow escape.

"You know, Slaughter, I had discovered the business with the Veracimide, but I was helpless to use it. Any information gained by Security belongs solely to the Prover. Fortunately, we had a young Prover who foolishly attacked you as an expert, probably hoping for the stiffest sentence possible, thereby making a name for himself." He paused to give Slaughter a big grin. "And it didn't hurt that Hisonor is himself a thrill devotee and was willing to listen to my . . . 'illegal' . . . say."

Slaughter slouched forward and sighed. "So it's over."

"Yes," responded Rippon. They both sat quietly for an inordinate period of time. Rippon could see that Slaughter was very pensive. "What are you thinking about?" he finally asked.

"Oh, those people . . . those forty-seven people. They really were friends, you know. I had thrilled them what seemed like every other day for centons. They even tipped me for breathtakers."

"Breathtakers? Tipped you?"

"Sure. You see these rides, even as spectacular as they are, can get humdrum, so sometimes special clients or groups of clients—like the forty-seven that day—will tip the Thriller for something special . . . like an extra high lurch, or a faster acceleration, or really cutting it fine on when the lurch occurs."

Rippon hesitated. He wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer to his question. "Is that what happened that day? Did they tip you to cut it fine on the lurch?"

Slaughter smiled. He knew what Rippon was thinking. "No. No, they didn't," is all he said.

Rippon relaxed a bit. "Still, one has to wonder what happened to the Nethersled. You have to wonder what those people experienced."

"Hard to say," Slaughter said wistfully, taking a deep breath. "Nobody's come back from beyond light to tell us what it's like."

Rippon pivoted his head sharply in Slaughter's direction. He could feel the blood draining from his face and the sensation of extreme cold. "Beyon . . . " he stammered, "then you were negligent in ex . . . "

"No!" Slaughter shouted. His head had turned, and his eyes looked deep into Rippon's. "No, I was *not* negligent. But I *was* tipped—quite handsomely—for a special ride."

Slaughter stood and began walking very slowly. A dumbfounded Rippon, beginning to grasp the truth, sat and watched him leave. Then Slaughter spun around. "That's all you, Security, the Prover, or anyone ever asked me. 'Did you have it timed? Were you negligent?' And I never lied. I had it timed, and I wasn't negligent." He turned and took a few more steps. He stopped, and gave a little meaningless laugh. "Nobody ever asked me if I failed to execute the lurch on purpose!"

When he turned once more to face the shocked Rippon, Slaughter's eyes were glowing. "I'll bet it was a glorious thrill!"

FICTION

THE PARTNERSHIP

by Bruce Obee

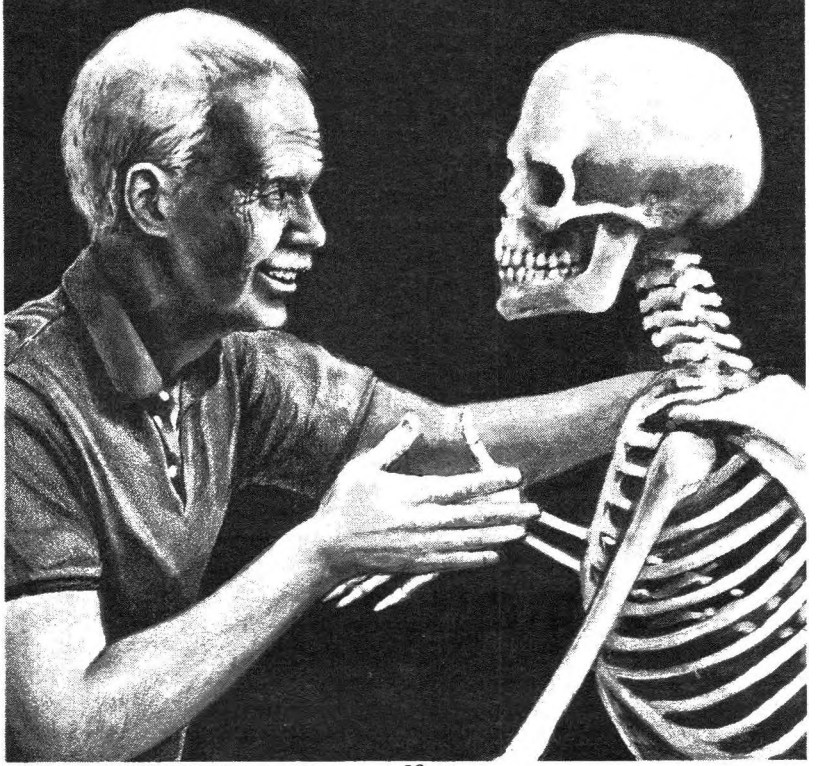


Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

Saturday afternoon in July, Albert McAllister looks up from his lawnmower to watch a flock of starlings peck at crane flies in the grass across the street. A young mother wheels a baby past the boulevard, part of the growing stream of newcomers that flows between the subdivisions at the bottom of the hill and the shopping center at the top. She stops to look behind her, and Albert notices a little boy pulling an empty wagon up the hill. Muggsy, Gladys McAllister's miniature pug, presses its pushed-in face against the gate and snorts at the boy. Albert hates that ugly pug, always yapping and offending people who walk past the house. Useless mutt. The sooner it dies, the sooner Albert can hang up the shovel and pail he uses for his weekly scoops around the yard.

He sets a sprinkler out in the vegetable garden and takes a watering can to the flower boxes at the front of the house. Albert is proud of his house. It was built by a bachelor farmer in the late thirties, and the McAllisters bought it when the enterprising farmer chopped his fields into city lots and moved to Arizona. It's just a cottage but large enough for a childless couple like the McAllisters, and over the years they've fixed it up, renovating, repairing, modernizing, adding personal touches like knotty pine cupboards and arborite counters. Now it's neatly fenced, newly roofed, and freshly painted, comfortable amid the maples and fruit trees the farmer planted half a century ago. When he and Gladys return from their evening walks with Muggsy, Albert thinks of himself as a wiser investor than the newcomers who live in the subdivisions at the bottom of the hill, in the cream-colored plaster boxes with aluminum-framed windows and asphalt roofs that ripple under the heat of the summer sun. Already the outside walls on those characterless homes are stained a rusty brown where winter rains have dripped from leaky downspouts.

The screen door slams, and Gladys's buxom body appears on the sundeck. "Muggsy," she calls in a sing-song voice like a farm woman luring her hens to the coop. "Here, Muggsy." She sets down a bowl, and the pudgy pug waddles up the stairs, snorting and wheezing and wagging its curly tail like a grinning pig oozing through a mud patch. Albert can't decide if Gladys is beginning to show her age or if it's just that he sees her more now that he is retired from the Motor Vehicles Branch.

Her excess weight has gathered up an old-lady look that reminds him of his spinster piano teacher who always spilled her tea on the keys. He often tries to imagine how he and Gladys look to other people when they walk through the corridors of the mall, Gladys, big and busty, towering over Albert's balding head, clinging to his bony elbow as though herding him through the hordes to the safety of the next store.

"Albert," she sings in the same tone she uses to attract the dog, "we should see your mother today. It's been over a week." His mother. The old biddy seems to be lingering longer than that arthritic dog; it's a race Albert hopes will end in a tie, both of them kicking off in one grief-stricken sigh of relief.

"Can you go without me this time?" Albert pleads. "I need a book from the library that'll show me how to fix the lawnmower."

"She's your mother, not mine," Gladys reminds him. In his mind Albert acknowledges his indebtedness to Gladys for the times she's covered for him over the years, keeping his mother's complaints about the infrequency of Albert's visits to a tolerable limit.

"Gladys, please," Albert replies irritably. "The library is closed on Sundays, and I want to get the lawnmower fixed tomorrow."

"It's not that important, Albert. You've just mowed the lawn."

"C'mon, Gladys. Apologize for me, tell her I've got the flu, anything."

Gladys opens her mouth as if to speak, then realizing Albert's mind is made up, returns to the house. Moments later Albert hears the front door close and through the maples sees the red roof of the Toyota backing out of the driveway onto the street. Alone in his yard, Albert wonders how different his life would be if he and Gladys had raised a family. Would there be grandchildren here today, coloring pictures and running through the sprinkler on this sunny July afternoon? None of that could change now.

But there will soon be changes for Albert McAllister because he has a plan: he is going to propose a partnership, a clandestine alliance between himself and one other person, who is about to learn that he and Albert share the same secret. Albert, you see, has acquired a new asset, something he is willing to sell, for a fair price, to his unwilling partner.

"Do you keep copies of newspaper articles?" Albert asks the librarian. He fidgets with the

brim of his old grey hat, his favorite hat, turning it in his hands.

"Yes," she smiles, "they're filed by subject and by name. What are you looking for?"

"Murders," Albert replies.

"Which murders?"

Albert restlessly glances toward a teenaged girl seated at a table, taking notes from an encyclopedia. There appears to be no one else in the library. He thinks. "Local murders," he offers, "say over the past ten years or so."

"We file only local crimes," the librarian explains. "If you're not looking for a specific crime, there's a general file on murders, divided into individual years. It's in that top drawer." She points at a metal filing cabinet behind the teenaged girl.

"Thank you," says Albert, turning toward the files.

"Are you writing a mystery, Mr. McAllister?" the woman inquires with a grin.

"Uh, no," he hesitates, "no, I'm just curious." The woman is not familiar to Albert, and he's slightly taken aback when she says his name. It's a small community library: maybe she remembers his signature from books he's signed out in the past.

Albert opens the drawer and flips his fingers over the file folders until they land at "Murders—General." He tries to recall the year he and Gladys bought the house. It must have been a year later that the police ordered the builders to dig up the new foundations they'd poured for the duplex behind Albert's yard and for the houses on either side. He sees in his memory the red and furious face of the contractor when two plainclothed policemen arrived unannounced at the duplex site with an order to dig up the foundation. When they failed to locate the body they were so sure was lying beneath the cement, they returned the following day with court orders to rip up the foundations for the other two houses, both of which were framed and ready for siding. Still no corpse was found.

Albert selects a folder containing articles nine and ten years old and carefully thumbs through the clippings, stories of the city's most gruesome events, stabbings, beatings, shootings. Most of them he remembers: the seventeen-year-old boy who ambushed his mother as she opened the front door, shot her six times; the two winos who were unceremoniously dumped from the roof of a parkade by a pack of hoodlums looking for entertainment; and the military sergeant who went berserk and stabbed his wife and two kids to death before slashing

his own wrists. But the crime Albert is searching for is more sophisticated, a carefully executed plan involving the victim's business partner and some considerable insurance settlements. The names though, the names have vanished from Albert's memory. And the circumstances, Albert vaguely remembers, were somewhat bizarre, something about the police acting hastily, laying a murder charge on the basis of circumstantial evidence—they couldn't produce a body.

Albert is nearing the end of the file when his eyes stop at a headline: NO BODY. NO CHARGE—OWEN RELEASED. Below the headline is the story Albert recalls reading nine years ago as the builders replaced the smashed foundations in the houses that now surround Albert's yard.

"A charge of first-degree murder against realtor Douglas Owen, 43, was dismissed by a provincial court judge today when police admitted they were unable to find the body of the victim.

"Owen, half owner of Sangster Owen Realty, was charged May 17 after his partner, Bryan Sangster, disappeared May 4 while preparing for a business trip.

"In dismissing the charge Judge David Lloyd ordered the immediate release of Owen, who had been held without bail since Monday. Owen was to appear for bail hearing today when Prosecutor Robert McIntyre applied to withdraw the charge, saying police had been unsuccessful in their efforts to locate Sangster's body.

"Outside court McIntyre told reporters an internal inquiry would be conducted to determine why a charge of first-degree murder was laid in the absence of sufficient evidence. He said it was unfortunate that Owen had been detained in custody for three days but refused further comment until the inquiry was completed.

"Police said earlier that Sangster was last seen leaving his office with Owen, who apparently offered to drive Sangster to the airport for a Canadian Pacific Airlines flight to Calgary. A CP Air spokesman confirmed Sangster was booked on the flight but failed to board the aircraft.

"Sangster Owen Realty is currently involved in the development of several recently-subdivided lots in south Fairview. After arresting Owen on May 17, police conducted a search for Sangster's body, which was believed to be buried under a new cement foundation. The foundations for three

homes under construction were broken up with jack hammers, but Sangster's body was not found.

"Asked if the investigation into Sangster's disappearance would continue, Police Chief John Porter replied: 'Our books remain open until the case is solved.' "

Albert photocopies the article, then takes the *Reader's Digest Fix-It-Yourself Manual* from the reference section, signs it out, and puts the murder file on the librarian's desk.

"Good luck with your mystery, Mr. McAllister," the woman chuckles as Albert turns to leave.

Albert can see the red Toyota parked in the driveway as he walks down the street toward the house. He's greeted at the gate by the bulging eyes of his unwanted watchdog, who utters a pathetic guttural growl when Albert undoes the latch.

"How was my mom?" he asks Gladys, hanging his hat on the bentwood coat stand in the hall.

"A bit lonely, I think. Your sister's family is on holiday and she hasn't had any visitors. You really should go in for an hour," Gladys suggests, then adds sarcastically, "after you've recovered from the flu."

"Yes," Albert concedes. "I'll go into town next week. I can't fix the lawnmower until Monday because I need a part from the hardware store."

Monday's breakfast over, Albert wheels the lawnmower into his garage-turned-workshop and closes the door. He removes the cover from the oil filter and spreads the *Fix-It-Yourself Manual* open to the section on lawnmower maintenance. For the first time since Albert devised his scheme he feels apprehensive. There's nothing wrong with his lawnmower, and there's no reason to walk to the hardware store. In thirty-four years of marriage Albert has never lied to Gladys, never misled her in any way. He could drop the plan, call the police, and settle it now. But for what reason?

He thinks of the opportunities he's overlooked through the years, of three decades in that understaffed office, filling out forms and watching the faceless public line up endlessly at his wicket. He listens with envy when his golfing partners boast about the accomplishments of their children and grandchildren. No, Albert tells himself, not this time, I'm not going to die with nothing more than a faithful wife and a pension.

Albert picks up the telephone on the workbench and dials a

number. "Superintendent of Insurance," a voice answers.

"Jack Waterton, please," says Albert.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Albert McAllister." While Albert waits, he reaches into a drawer and pulls out a notebook and pencil.

"Hello, stranger," a cheery voice comes on the phone. "How's the lazy life?"

"Fine, thank you, Jack," Albert replies. "I keep myself amused, putter around." Jack Waterton and Albert became friends during their years together at the Motor Vehicles Branch. When Jack was promoted to Superintendent of Insurance, he and Albert continued their noon-hour strolls to the harbor, where they'd open their lunch bags and see what surprises their wives had packed. "I'm calling to ask a favor."

"Go ahead," says Jack, "ask."

He hesitates, not quite sure what to ask first. "How long does a missing person have to be gone before he can be declared dead, as far as insurance goes?" Albert begins.

"You mean to collect insurance?"

"Yes," Albert continues, "say a widow wants to collect the life insurance but the guy's not officially dead, just missing."

"Seven years in this province," Jack replies. "Why, you planning on disappearing?"

"No," Albert laughs nervously. "There was a guy named Bryan Sangster who disappeared nine years ago. If someone wanted him declared dead, they would have filed the application for a court order two years ago, right?"

"Right."

"Can you see if anybody collected life insurance on him?"

"Somebody did," Jack recalls. "I remember the file because there was something unusual about it. He was that realtor."

"Can you find out who filed the court papers and how much the insurance settlement was?" Albert asks.

"Sure. I'll call you back in about half an hour."

Albert hangs up and looks around the workshop, already impatient for Jack's information. He walks down the path to the kitchen and pours himself a cup of coffee.

"I thought you were going to the hardware store?" Gladys asks.

"I might be able to get away without that part," says Albert, having forgotten entirely about the lawnmower.

The telephone rings and Gladys answers it. "It's for you," she says, holding the receiver out to Albert.

"I'll take it in my workshop."

"Albert," Jack's voice says, "I've got the stuff here."

"You must have an efficient staff," says Albert.

"Computers, old buddy. Everything's on computers nowadays."

"What did you find out?"

"The application for a declaration of death was filed by Ruth Sangster. There were two policies on Sangster, one naming his wife Ruth as beneficiary, the other naming Douglas Owen, his business partner. Both were for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"You mean that Ruth Sangster and Douglas Owen collected two fifty each?"

"That's right, but they waited seven years to get it. What probably happened was that Sangster left his half of the assets he held in Sangster Owen Realty to his wife. She collected the money from her policy on her husband, then sold the assets she inherited to Owen. I assume Owen used the money he got from his insurance settlement to buy out the widow. That's usually how these partnership policies work."

"Interesting," Albert says. "Thanks, Jack. We'll get together for lunch next time I'm in town."

"Good idea," he replies. "What are you doing with all of this anyhow?"

"Writing a mystery."

The garage door opens and Gladys's adequate form fills the doorway, Muggsy's roly body waggling in her shadow. "I'm going shopping. Is there anything you want?"

"No, thanks," Albert replies, "but you could return this book to the library for me."

"All right," says Gladys. "Who was on the phone?"

"Oh, just an old friend I used to work with. Wanted me to drop in for lunch."

"Don't forget I have bridge tonight," Gladys reminds him. "It's at Phyllis Palmer's out in Eastwood, so I'll probably be late."

After dinner Albert offers to tidy up, giving Gladys time to put on her face for her evening with "the girls." She emerges from the bedroom, a fresh cologne fragrance wafting in her wake. Albert kisses her on the cheek and feels the pasty texture of powder and rouge brushing against the hairs of his mustache. He sees her to the door and watches as the Toyota backs onto the street and creeps past the maples, out of sight.

Albert marches out to the garage and takes a hammer and crowbar from the tool rack. He rummages through a closet, retrieves a dusty vinyl suitcase, then slips a pair of coveralls over his clothing. He reaches

for the gardening gloves on the shelf, opens the door, and surveys the back yard, thankful for the privacy the elegant old fruit trees bring each spring. The six foot fence that encloses his yard conspicuously marks the perimeters of Albert's domain. Protection from trespassers, refuge from the curious eyes of officious neighbors.

There's an uncharacteristic sense of purpose in Albert's gait as he strides across the lawn to the abandoned well in the far corner by the rhubarb. The well was boarded shut by the farmer when the municipality brought a water line into the neighborhood. Albert had ignored it all the years he'd lived in the house until three weeks ago when he got the idea of reopening it as a source of free water for a fish pond. It was then, when he opened the hatch expecting to find a rusting electric pump, that he found, instead, the skeletal remains of Sangster.

There was no question the moment he saw the body. All these years that the police books had "remained open," their prime exhibit was slowly decomposing in Albert's back yard. His natural reaction, after the shock, was to call the police and have the matter dealt with as quickly as possible, get the hideous thing out of his yard before it upset Gladys.

But instead, almost without thought, Albert simply nailed the hatch shut, put on his old grey hat, and went for a walk. Through the shopping center at the top of the hill, past the post office and liquor store and down the hill to the subdivisions. The hundreds of times he'd worked around that well, all the rhubarb he'd harvested from that corner, the fence he'd built along the edge of the well. That body had been there the whole time, as if listening to Albert's mutterings overhead.

Albert kneels at the edge of the well and pries open the hatch. Though he's spent three weeks preparing himself for this moment, he's unable to fend off the queasiness. But there's an urgency to the situation, and Albert sets about his task with a certain efficiency, ignoring the thumping in his chest and the sweat beading on his brow. He mustn't linger.

The fleshless body is slumped in a sitting position, its lower half partially submerged in mud and water, kneecaps protruding above the surface. Clumps of dirt are caked against the shoulder blades, and the bones have turned the color of chimney bricks. Albert leans forward to reach for the left wrist, and an enormous black spider scrambles through a gaping eye socket and glides down the rib

cage. Albert shudders and pulls his hand away from the body. Spider, he tells himself, just a spider.

Again he leans into the chamber and reaches for the wrist. Ever so slowly he lifts the hand from the murky water and sees what he'd hoped to find—a wedding band, tarnished and scratched, but perfectly intact. Careful not to let it slip from the finger, Albert removes the ring and slides it into the pocket of his coveralls. "A gift for Mr. Owen," he says aloud.

The unexpected sound of his own voice instills new confidence in him, and Albert pushes from his mind any thoughts of abandoning the plan. "I'm in now," he hears himself say. "We're both in, Mr. Owen." He opens the suitcase, glances around the yard, and drags the back of his arm across his forehead. He is reaching with both hands into the well when suddenly Muggsy dashes out to the front gate, yelping and snarling his usual warning to intruders who venture too close to his territory.

Albert draws the wooden hatch across the open well and hurries along the side of the house toward the gate. Muggsy has retreated to his spot under the maples, and Albert looks over the fence to see the backs of an elderly couple walking a dog down the hill.

"Shut up, Muggsy," he whispers. Albert glances around the yard and goes back to reopen the hatch. He quickly reaches into the hole, grips the skeleton by the two top ribs, and gently tugs upward. A spider scurries along a femur and up the side of the well. Albert pulls again: the knees straighten and sink beneath the water. The rest of the body moves up, and a ray of evening sun reflects off the top of the skull. Albert nearly stumbles off balance, expecting this collection of bones to be much heavier. He leans farther into the well and reaches with both arms behind the shoulder blades and around the front of the ribs to the breastbone. Both hands firmly on the sternum, Albert straightens his body and cautiously rises from bent knees to his full height. As he moves away from the dankness of the well, Albert detects a faint, sickly scent, not putrid, but mildly unpleasant. There's an unfamiliar sweetness to it, though, which surprises Albert in the same way as the unanticipated weightlessness.

He steps back two paces and lays what's left of Bryan Sangster across the open suitcase. The sun is fading behind Albert's back, and as he stoops toward the body, sunlight streaks

over his shoulder and glistens from three gold crowns inside the dead man's mouth. "The kind of dental work I could never afford," Albert mumbles. "Must have been pretty tall," he observes, "probably six two or three." He sizes up the outstretched human remains and determines that they will fit, doubled over, in the suitcase. There's a deftness to Albert's movements, an assembly-line smoothness that gives the impression he's done this many times before. In three capable maneuvers the body is folded like a three-piece suit and, once again, denied the light of day. Bryan Sangster's relief from his decade of incarceration in the gloomy grotto beneath Albert's rhubarb is short-lived, a mere glimpse of a summer sun setting behind an ancient apple tree. With a zip and a click Bryan Sangster is baggage.

Albert knows the worst is over, that he'll never again confront that horrid, empty-eyed face. But the frozen skeletal smile, Albert knows, will haunt his imagination until he too is as dead as the man in the suitcase. It will return, Albert knows, like the recurring nightmare of a childhood trauma. It can't change now, he will have to live with it, like his childless marriage. And he will have to die with it.

Albert returns the suitcase to the closet, takes the morning newspaper to the incinerator, and lights a match to it. He removes the tarnished wedding band from his pocket, takes off his gloves and coveralls, and drops them on the burning paper. In his workshop he finds a clean paint rag, pours silver polish on a small section, and carefully buffs the inside of the ring. There's an inscription on the ring, and Albert repeatedly soaks the rag with polish and rubs it back and forth over the tarnished gold. As the brassy yellow begins to gleam, Albert can see the letters coming clear, and he smiles in the realization that his luck is taking a turn for the better. Beside the figures "18K" the words are engraved in simple script: "Bryan and Ruth May 4, 1962." "That should be clear enough to Mr. Owen," Albert whispers smugly. He looks again at the engraving and his eyes are caught by the date, reminding him of something he has read recently. He stares at the inscription, trying to recall. May 4. "The murder!" he exclaims. "Bryan Sangster was murdered on his wedding anniversary."

The clock next to the bed says Albert's loved one will return in about two hours. He settles into the wooden swivel chair, slides Gladys's portable type-

writer across the desk, and cranks a piece of paper through the carriage. The note reads like a telegram:

> DOUGLAS OWEN,
> THE RING IS A GIFT. THE FINGER IT CAME FROM IS FOR SALE. $250,000. THE INSURANCE SETTLEMENT. LARGE BILLS. OLD MAN WITH WELL DOESN'T KNOW. FORMER PARTNER HAS MOVED. ONE WEEK FROM TODAY. BE READY.
> A NEW PARTNER

"I'm going to visit my mother," Albert announces, rising from the dinner table the next day.

"Would you like me to come?" Gladys offers.

"No, that's okay, dear. You went last time."

"Fine," says Gladys, a tinge of dejection in her voice. "Muggsy and I will go for our walk."

"I won't be late," says Albert, grabbing his hat on the way out the door.

It's after six, and the downtown shops are closed. A few diners shuffle about the streets, but it's too early for the theater crowds. Albert parks the Toyota a half block from the corner where the sign—now "Owen and Associates"—hangs over the sidewalk. The envelope, marked "Personal and Confidential," is tightly clasped in Albert's hand as he walks toward the corner, rubbing his thumb across the bulge of the wedding ring inside. He casts his eyes around the streets, but no one appears especially interested as he bends over and pushes the envelope through the letter slot in the door. After a dutiful visit with his mother, Albert goes home to begin the longest week of his entire sixty-two years.

"Gladys," Albert says as he helps her clear away the breakfast dishes, "what would you do if we were rich?"

"Buy you a new hat." They laugh and Albert confesses his old grey hat might be getting a bit tattered.

"I mean really rich," he continues. "Say we won a couple hundred thousand in a lottery."

"Oh, I don't know, Albert. A holiday would be nice. Phyllis and Bob Palmer had a wonderful time in England."

"Would you want to move, to a bigger house, maybe, or to somewhere tropical?"

"No, dear, I'm happy where I am. What does it matter, we'll never be rich and I'm quite comfortable with what we have."

"Do you think we're getting old, Gladys?"

"There's a better chance of our getting old than getting rich," Gladys laughs.

It's Saturday again, and Al-

bert, armed with shovel and pail, plods around the yard collecting the disgusting little mounds that Muggsy deposits wherever he pleases. "Man's best friend," Albert grumbles, flipping another pile in the pail. It's the fourth day, and Albert's ability to conceal his growing tension is waning. Twice now Gladys has wakened in the middle of the night to find Albert lying wide-eyed on his back, gazing into space. "Just thinking," he tells her.

When he reopened the supposedly empty well, he unwittingly opened an exciting new chapter in the boring book that was Albert McAllister's life. A life without change, without goals, without fortune. Without children. His faithfulness to his spouse is admirable, but he can no longer distinguish between loyalty and love. Albert's life was a habit, a simple, steady routine whose purpose was mere existence.

Now he is frightened by his own actions, and he wishes he could skip the exciting new chapter and ask somebody else how the book ends. But Albert is alone in his mission. It is a subject that will never be discussed.

In the earliest hours of Sunday Albert and his wife are shaken from their sleep by Muggsy, furiously barking and clawing at the back door.

"What's going on?" Gladys starts, sitting up in bed.

"Just a raccoon prowling round the compost," Albert suggests, feigning sleepiness. "He'll shut up in a minute."

"Go and see, will you, Albert. Throw something at it."

"All right, dear." He hoists himself out of bed, yanks on his robe, and tucks his feet into his slippers. A half moon faintly illuminates the yard, and through the fruit trees Albert can see movement in the far corner by the well. Watching from the darkened kitchen, his eyes gradually become accustomed to the moonlight, and the figure of a man is silhouetted against the fence. Though Albert is afraid, he is not surprised: he's been expecting this visitor, every sleepless night. The man crouches over the well and quietly lifts the hatch. Albert can see a flashlight beam make a quick search and the hatch drop back into place. The man stands upright and takes in the entire yard with one sweeping scan. Albert squints, straining to see clearly his unwelcome nocturnal guest. The man walks three steps to the fence, and Albert recognizes the limp. He trembles and draws back from the window as the man, in one agile move, vaults over the fence.

The farmer, Albert shivers, the farmer who built this place. Albert can't control his shaking hands, and he sits alone in the dark for a few moments before climbing into bed beside Gladys. Oh, Christ, Albert thinks, he's got to know it's me.

"I need a few things from the grocery," says Gladys, looking across the breakfast table at the newspaper hiding Albert's face. "Do you want to come?"

"No," Albert replies. "Do you need the car?"

"I could walk. Why?"

"There's an ad here for a utility trailer in Eastwood. I'd like to drive out and see it."

"If you want," says Gladys, obviously bored by the idea. "Do you really think we need one?"

"It'd be handy."

Albert watches the beamy body of his beloved wife saunter up the street. He returns to the bedroom and sits in front of the typewriter. Again the instructions read like a telegram:

DOUGLAS OWEN,
USE THIS KEY. 10 A.M. MONDAY. LEAVE $250,000. THE INSURANCE SETTLEMENT. RETURN TO YOUR OFFICE. COME BACK AT NOON. YOUR FORMER PARTNER WILL AWAIT YOU. DO NOT BE LATE OR POLICE WILL COLLECT.
A NEW PARTNER

With Bryan Sangster neatly stashed in the trunk of the Toyota Albert pulls into the parking lot of the Princess Hotel.

"Do you have two adjoining rooms?" he inquires at the desk.

"For how many nights?"

"Just tonight," Albert replies.

"Yes, I can give you two on the second floor," says the clerk, pushing a pen and registration form toward Albert. "Do you have any baggage?"

"We can take care of it, thanks," says Albert, adding, "When is checkout time?"

"Noon, sir."

"We may be a bit late. Would twelve thirty be all right?"

"That'll be fine. I'll leave a note for the chambermaids."

Two keys in his pocket, Albert gets off the elevator and walks along the corridor to Rooms 211 and 212. He inspects both and finds that the door between the rooms can be locked by a deadbolt in 211 but that there is no lock in 212. Albert sits on the couch and rereads his final instructions to Douglas Owen. Satisfied, he drops the key to Room 212 in the envelope and seals it. Outside, he walks two blocks to the office of Owen and Associates and delivers the message.

"What was the trailer like?" Gladys asks as Albert hangs up his hat.

"Oh, not what I'm looking for," Albert lies.

"Well, I think it's a waste of money."

"Maybe," Albert says quietly. "Do you have any plans for tomorrow?"

"Nothing important. Why?"

"I wanted the car to go into town for something," Albert says.

"For what?" Gladys says curiously.

"Now, dear," Albert snickers nervously, "don't ask questions so close to your birthday."

"My birthday isn't till next month."

"That's close enough," Albert responds. "And I might have lunch with my friend, if there's time."

The guilt is beginning to wear on Albert's conscience, and with each lie he feels the weakening of another link in that eternal chain of emotions that has held him close to Gladys all these thirty-four years. He is a trustworthy man, yet he has become embroiled in a devious, criminal scheme that becomes more frightening with each step toward its wicked conclusion. As he becomes more fearful of his own doings, he sees with increasing clarity the distinction between loyalty and love. Albert loves the old bag, and he is ashamed of the dishonesty with which he has selfishly tainted his marriage.

Nine o'clock Monday morning. The bones of Bryan Sangster, bundled in vinyl, lie silently on the bed in Room 211 of the Princess Hotel. Albert wonders what he's doing here. The money is now irrelevant, and the game is dangerous. It's too late to rationalize and too risky to falter. The anxiety intensifies with the wait, and each time Albert checks his watch it appears the minute hand is stuck. He looks at the suitcase on the bed, half expecting it to open suddenly and the ghostly figure of Bryan Sangster to step out.

Footsteps in the hallway stop near Room 211, and Albert, rising from the couch, hears the unmistakable sound of a key being inserted in the door to the next room. The voices of two men startle Albert, who realizes that Douglas Owen did not, as Albert had anticipated, come alone. He presses his ear against the adjoining door and hears the curtains being opened. A deep, rasping voice, like that of a man whose lungs are poisoned by the residue of two packs a day, orders his companion to watch the hotel room from a parkade across the street. The door closes and the voices move away from the adjoining rooms toward the elevator.

Albert waits, listening for

further signs of activity in the corridor, and, satisfied all is clear, pokes his head out the door and checks up and down the hallway. The deadbolt feels slippery in his sweaty hands as Albert opens it and peers into the emptiness of Room 212. A plain white envelope sits on the bedside table, and Albert nervously picks it up and sees through the light from the window that it contains money, a lot of money. A troubled grin crosses his face, and Albert grabs the vinyl suitcase from his room, drops it on the bed in Room 212, and returns to 211. The ephemeral partnership can now be dissolved.

Through a tiny slit in the drapes Albert fixes his eyes on the parkade across the street, hoping to confirm his suspicions. Don't stay long, he warns himself. For Christ's sake, hurry up. The seconds drag while Albert's dampened hands worriedly finger the brim of his old grey hat. Within minutes, the familiar figure of the farmer who boarded up Albert's well, ten years older yet strong and stocky, limps along the edge of the parkade and stops across from Room 212. Albert pulls back from the curtains and leaves.

Shortly after noon Douglas Owen, his bulging belly straining against the buttons of his checkered shirt, is reunited with his deceased business partner. A simple glance into a partially opened suitcase is all he needs to recognize those three gold crowns smiling through the deathly jaws of Bryan Sangster. He'd seen them, day after day, jabbering at him across his desk, dictating what they should do, what they shouldn't do, complaining about his personal affairs, giving unsolicited advice about his partner's health. Owen lights a third cigarette, answers a knock at the door, and ushers in the farmer.

"Who came?" he inquires anxiously.

"Nobody."

"What do you mean,nobody?" he cries irritably. "The body's here, in this bag."

"I'm telling you there was no one in the room," the farmer replies. "I was up there the whole time. Nobody came in."

"You gotta be blind, you idiot," Owen shouts out. He picks up the suitcase and angrily stomps out of the room. He hammers on a bell at the front desk, and a serious looking young man answers the call. Before he can speak Owen throws the key on the counter and demands: "Who rented this room?"

"I'll check, sir," he says. "Is something wrong?"

"Just tell me who," Owen orders rudely. The young man runs through his registration cards and lays one on the counter.

"Here it is, sir," he replies. "He took the adjoining rooms, 211 and 212. Bryan Sangster. Sangster Owen Realty."

Owen's face flushes a frustrated red, and he glares around the lobby at the attentive faces he's attracted. He storms out the door, his resurrected partner in tow.

Albert McAllister has never possessed a great deal of foresight. His working life was governed by the rules of an employer and though he handled his job capably, he was not gifted with an innovative nature. His retirement life is secured by his go-by-the-book disposition, and as long as he doesn't stray from its course, he remains comfortable in his conformity. His single-event career as a professional extortionist has been an attempt to escape the inevitability of his destiny, to attain an independence that was not in the cards he was dealt at the start of the game. Now he is losing in spite of his dubious success in the world of crime. The lack of foresight that has plagued his past is recurrent, and Albert realizes his evil plan was incomplete. Yesterday he was a common pensioner: today he is rich, but his new-found wealth is virtually useless, for any visible changes in his way of living would be conspicuous; inexplicably conspicuous to Gladys, dangerously conspicuous to Douglas Owen. Albert's repeated self-assurances that his trail is carefully covered somehow fail to quell his fears of retaliation from Douglas Owen.

A note on the kitchen table says Gladys has gone to her ceramics class at the Golden Age Center and will return to make dinner. Albert takes a plastic garbage bag from below the sink and places his extorted earnings inside it. There are too many decisions to be made before this money can be spent, and the reasonable thing to do, for the moment, is to bury it under the rhubarb, next to the abandoned well where the scenario began.

The July sun is becoming uncomfortably hot as Albert ponders the possibilities for his illgotten fortune. Gladys is too busy with preparations for their annual pilgrimage to the Prairies to notice the sullenness that has overcome her husband. Albert avoids the rhubarb corner of the yard as though it's contaminated by some incurable disease: there's a quarter of a million dollars under that earth, a new future for

the aging McAllisters, and it's untouchable. He even contemplates telling his tale to the police, admitting the error of his ways, but for once in his life he shows some foresight. He is no longer Albert McAllister, pensioner: he is Albert McAllister, extortionist, and the consequence of expressing his remorse before judge and jury would unquestionably be a hefty prison term. He's wiser to leave that money buried the rest of his days than to risk sharing a penitentiary cell with Douglas Owen.

"Everything's arranged," Gladys announces when she completes the details for their upcoming journey. "My brother will meet us at the station, as usual, and we can have Donny's room, now that he's married."

"What day are we leaving?" Albert inquires lethargically.

"I haven't booked tickets yet," Gladys answers. "I thought we could go to the train depot today and decide."

"Y'know, Gladys, I'm tempted to buy one of those big campers, with running water and a kitchen, and drive out there in style."

"Don't be silly, Albert."

"I'm not silly," he retorts. "We could stop in campsites through the Rockies. Just take our time and get there when it suits us."

"You know we can't afford it," says Gladys, always the pragmatic housewife.

"Yes, we can, dear. We could cash in those retirement certificates or maybe . . ."

"Maybe what, Albert?" Gladys stops him. "How do you think we'd live without them?"

"We'd live like everyone else," Albert replies coldly. "Once, Gladys, just once." He leaves her perplexed, snatches his old grey hat and swaggers down the hill. "Stupid bitch," he mutters.

Halfway down the hill he swings around in alarm at the sound of Muggsy barking excitedly as if defending his territory from a pack of vicious Dobermans snarling outside the fence. He hurries up the hill, and Gladys, apron billowing in the breeze, runs onto the street and hysterically waves a dirt-caked green garbage bag over her head.

"Albert," she hollers, "Albert, come quick!"

"What, dear," he pants, breathless from his jog up the hill, "what is it?"

"Money, in here, this bag," she cries in a fluster. Albert turns in astonishment to the object his wife has clenched in her outstretched hand. He shuts his eyes and lifts his face to the sky: My God, she knows, the thought races through his mind.

"How did you get it?" he quickly asks, thinking it might be the wrong question.

"Muggsy dug it up in the back yard."

"Did you count it?"

"No, I just looked inside and there's an envelope full of money. Thousand-dollar bills, Albert, all new."

"Let's go inside and make a cup of tea," Albert says soothingly. He takes her by the arm and leads her into the kitchen. Gladys puts the dirty bag on the table and lifts the kettle from the shelf.

"I'll make it," Albert offers. "You sit down and count the money."

"Where did it come from, Albert? Who's been in our yard?"

"How should I know," he replies defensively. He tries to stay calm. Gladys is naturally asking questions: she's not accusing Albert of anything.

"Pull it out and count it," he says firmly, taking control.

The silence is intimidating as Gladys separates the crisp new bills into piles of fifty. Albert watches, leaning against the counter, struggling to hide his emotions. Eyes glued to the neatly-placed mounds of money, Albert's feelings are a curious mixture of failure and relief. He stands by helplessly while the reward for his criminal accomplishments is stolen from his hand, yet an unwieldy burden is suddenly lifted, the nagging indecision is settled.

"One, two, three, four, five," Gladys counts, pointing at each pile as she speaks. She does it again. "One, two, three, four, five." She looks up from the table to see Albert's moistened eyes, sadly calm, staring into hers. He swallows, and the veins in his neck tighten. "Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars," she says meekly.

"Hmph," is the reply.

After what seems a long time Albert asks: "Would you like a drink?"

"Yes, I would please, dear," says Gladys, tossing her head in an odd sort of twitch. There's another lengthy pause, and Gladys finally says: "We'd better call the police, Albert."

Albert, sherry glass in one hand, bottle in the other, stops pouring and looks out the window at a young mother wheeling a baby past the house. "Yes, Gladys," he agrees. "I guess we should."

"Well, it's not our money, is it, Albert?" She feels strangely distant from her spouse of thirty-four years.

"No," he admits, "it's not."

"I wonder how it got there, or how long it's been in our yard," Gladys muses. Albert is silent. He can't even fake a response. Gladys gets up from the table

and dials the emergency number on the card pinned above the phone. She hangs up and informs Albert the police will arrive shortly and that they are not to touch the money.

"I'm going for a walk," Albert says, picking up his old grey hat.

"Oh, can't you wait until the police have been here?" Gladys pleads. "They won't be long."

"No, dear," he replies somberly, "you can take care of it."

When Albert returns an hour later, the police have collected the money, inspected the back yard, and gone.

"We couldn't have spent the money anyway, darling," Gladys says, appearing relieved that the matter is concluded.

"Why not?" Albert asks, moderately surprised.

"One of the officers had a list of some kind that he compared with the bills. They were counterfeit, Albert. Completely worthless."

"Oh," Albert replies and heads toward the back door.

Gladys stops him and asks: "We did the right thing, didn't we, Albert?"

"Yes, dear. We did what's best."

"You do love me, don't you, Albert?"

"Yes, Gladys. I love you," Albert admits, forcing a smile, "I'll always love you."

FICTION

Captain Joe Miron's Peace & Quiet Bar

by Thomas Gibbs Gee

I was anchored out by Morgan's Reef last April Fool's Day, shooting fish with a rented Hawaiian sling, when a good-sized hammerhead came drifting in from seaside, you know the way they do. That was the end of the shoot—they all went back in the reef—and I hauled out on the patch of brain coral where I had the boat, peeled the flippers off, and packed it in.

Illustration by George Thompson

It was middle afternoon, bright sun and mighty hot. I fired up the outboard and ran in fast through the silver and turquoise water; the more I thought about a cold beer the better it sounded. I paid off the boatman at the dock and gave him the fish for a tip. I couldn't take them back to the hotel anyway, and I had to catch a flight home that night.

Right across Bishop Street from the boat slip there was a cool, dark tavern called Dirty Martin's, and I went in and sat down at a corner table. The boy brought me a beer in a cold mug sweating little beads of water all over it. It was better than you could believe, and I sat there in the cool dark and drank it and listened to a player banging around on some steel drums up on the little lighted stage.

There was hardly anybody in the place, just a couple of limey sailors sitting at the bar and some tourists in khaki shorts, but voices were coming in through an archway in the tavern wall and after a while I got up and went to see what was going on outside. Sure enough, there was a middle-sized drinking party going on in a little walled garden, under a big Royal Poinciana tree in full bloom that shaded the whole thing. The guests were some cuts above the tavern patrons, all cocktail dresses and white linen suits, and I leaned up against the inside wall of the archway in my guayabera and sandals and cool, damp swimsuit and looked them over.

Just outside the archway there was a little rolling bar, with a brown man sitting behind it who was acting the host, picking around at a guitar, looking down at it,and talking to the others. He had on sailing whites and a Greek fisherman's cap. After a while, he raised up and saw me.

"Well now," he said in English with a light Spanish accent, "come on out and have a drink with us."

"Fine," said I, "but I'm not exactly dressed for the occasion."

"Mierda," he said, "we don't stand on ceremony here. How about a gin and tonic?"

That sounded all right, and I went out and stood there by the little bar in the shade of the big tree while he mixed it. He was a little heavy on the gin, but it tasted crisp and good all the same.

There was a sign on a driftwood board hanging on the outside, over the crest of the archway: "Captain Joe Miron's Peace & Quiet Bar." I pointed at it and asked if he was the captain, and he said he was.

"I give this party the same day every year, for the same crowd. Five years ago today they were all on a cruise with me. We were running for port when Erma caught us up about thirty miles out in the Stream. Lots of excitement. Since then I like to get us together every year and celebrate the occasion."

Another guest came up about then, and while he mixed him a drink I looked the crowd over. They were a right nice looking bunch, mostly British on holiday. Over by the tree there was a woman with a shaggy little dog like a pocket lion on her shoulder, in a dress that sort of hit the high spots. I asked her about the dog and she told me it was a Brussels griffon, a thing I'd never heard of before. I looked it up, though, when I got to wondering about the whole thing: there is a breed like that and the picture looks just like her dog did.

Right next to her was a genuine smasher, five feet two or three, brown eyes and a shape, and about three feet of loose, wavy black hair. She wasn't with anyone, so I introduced myself. "I'm Elizabeth Chapman," she said, and I got her a drink from the bar and talked to her for an hour, until I had to leave to pack and catch my plane. She had it all down—all the way from William Blake to Zane Grey (on the fishing side)—a little bit better than I did. Everything that I knew and liked, she knew and liked better and more besides. I remember her standing there like it was yesterday, rocking back and forth on her spike heels in her little black frock and laughing at me, ahead of me all the way. By the time I had to go pack, I had her memorized and was plenty interested.

I looked her in the eye and told her, so when am I going to see you again and all. She laughed. "Not so fast, new friend. There are a lot of things you don't know about me, and one rather big one." Well, with that I guessed that she was married; but she said that she wasn't. "Not at the present time," as she put it. My time was running out, and I had to see her again, so I asked her for her address. At first I thought she wasn't going to give it to me, but I kept after her and finally she did, one in the West End of London. I pecked her on the cheek, said my goodbyes, thanked the captain, and headed for the door and Denver.

I wrote to her the next morning and three more times in the next month. No answer. At last there came a stiff but proper little note in the hand of a person who styled himself George Chapman, returning my letters unopened (all but the last) and begging to advise me that "although an Elizabeth Chapman did indeed once reside

at this address, she does so no longer, nor has she done so for over five years." In the end he wrought himself to "make bold to inquire how you came about her former address at this time." I should have answered him, but his letter left me with a funny feeling and I never did. Maybe I will, now.

Anyhow, I couldn't get her out of my mind, rocking on her heels and quoting, " 'Truly my Satan, Thou art but a dunce,' " but I was at a dead end and didn't know what to do next. Sometimes I could close my eyes and see her on the back of my eyelids, black frock and all, laughing about the big thing I didn't know about her. Finally, Christmas week of that year, I couldn't stand it any longer and I bought a ticket back to the island.

A cab dropped me off at Dirty Martin's the next afternoon, and I went in and sat down at the bar. It was big and dark and cool just like before, and I ordered a gin and tonic and looked around the place. There wasn't any light coming in at the archway, and I guessed there must be a door to it that I hadn't seen before that was closed. But when I went over to look, there wasn't anything but smooth, even brickwork where the arch had been. I felt it up and down with my fingers; no arch, not a crack, not a seam, no trace of where the door I stood in nine months ago had been. I went back to the bar and ordered a double martini.

When the bartender brought it and went back to polishing glasses, I asked him what had happened to the door that used to be in the wall. "No door I ever know about anywhere near that place, mon," he said. I asked him if the manager was around, and he pointed to a big white man with a beard, sitting over at a table with another man and woman. But he said he'd never seen the archway either, not in the twenty years he had run the place. He went outside with me, and where the garden with the big, old flowering tree had been there was nothing but a stone-paved parking lot—old, grassy stones that looked like they had been there forever—full of cars. I asked him about Captain Joe Miron.

"Miron," he said, "Miron. Sure, I remember Miron. He was the one who went down on the charter yacht with all hands and a big party when Erma hit the island five or six years ago. No survivors and they never found the boat, just some cushions and a life raft." I thanked him and went back to the hotel. I caught a flight home the next day.

But I'll be going back next April Fool's Day. I've already got my ticket.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Curious Circumstances of the Two Left Shoes

by Ernest Bramah

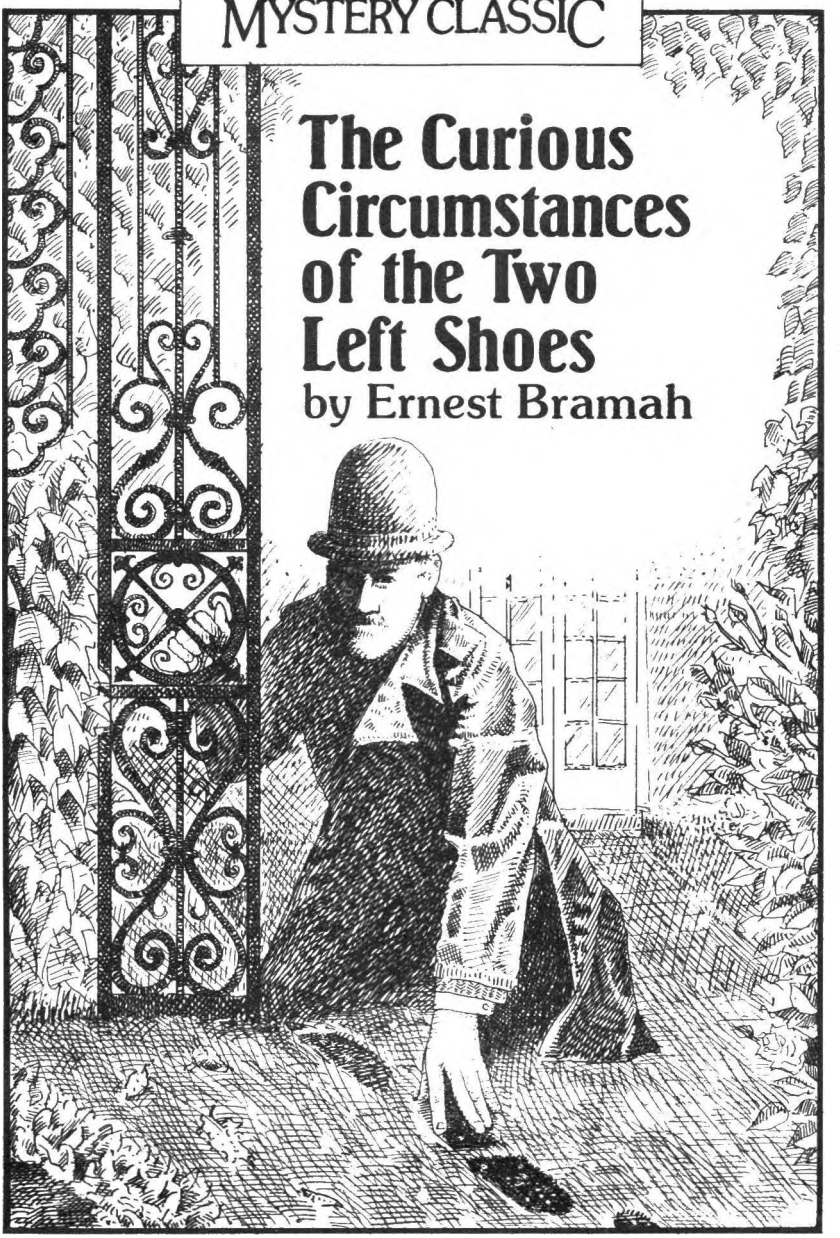


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

At the time when the Enderleighs lost their silver the Monkey Burglar was at the height of his fame. The Monkey Burglar, should you by this date have forgotten, was the one who invariably gained access by leaping from a tree onto an upper story windowsill. So strong was habit that there were said to be cases of the Monkey Burglar going through this performance at houses where the front door stood open, or where a builder's ladder, left in position overnight, was reared against the very point he gained by the more sensational flight. During the thick of the burglary season that year each number of *Punch* regularly contained one or more jokes about the Monkey; no pantomime was complete without a few references to him; and the burgled invariably tried to claim distinction as authentic victims. In this, the press, to do it justice, worthily seconded their endeavors.

The Enderleighs lived near Silver Park at that time, in one of the old fashioned cottages that have long, delightful gardens running down to the river edge. They were a young couple, setting themselves a very moderate standard until the day when Enderleigh's wonderful qualities should be suitably recognized by a partnership. In the meanwhile he was something exceptionally responsible but not so exceptionally rewarded in connection with a firm of estate agents and surveyors. Max Carrados had heard of him favorably from one or two friends and was not unwilling to put business in the young man's way. An opportunity came when the blind criminologist had, as trustee, to deal with an estate down in Warwickshire. He ascertained that Enderleigh was not debarred from doing work on his own account, and gave him a commission to inspect the property and make a general report. Business being slack, there was no difficulty in arranging a few days' leave of absence from the office, and the proposal was gratefully accepted.

On his return—he had conscientiously managed to cover the ground within two days—Enderleigh looked in at The Turrets before proceeding home and found Mr. Carrados at leisure.

"I thought that I would leave the report with you now," he explained, "in case you cared to glance over it and ask me about any details while it's all fresh in my mind. I wrote up my notes in the train on the way back."

"Good man," smiled Carrados, accepting the docket. "I should have liked you to stay while we discussed the matter, but I am afraid that someone else has a prior lien on your time."

"In what way?"

"A few hours ago Mrs. Enderleigh rang me up on the phone, and there is what I might describe as a standing order for you to communicate with her from here at the earliest moment."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Enderleigh in some trepidation. "What's up, I wonder? Nothing wrong that you know of?"

"Nothing at all," replied Carrados with reassuring unconcern. "Your wife was in exceptional spirits, I gathered, but somewhat cryptical. However, there is the means of setting your mind at rest," and he indicated the instrument. "I'll leave you to it."

"Please don't go." Enderleigh seemed to be toying with the moment as if rather unwilling to set his mind at rest. "I was startled for a second, but if my wife herself spoke to you there can't be anything much the matter. The fact is," he confided with a certain shy complacency, "she has been getting rather fanciful of late—not an unusual phase of the situation, I understand."

Mr. Carrados murmured his discreet congratulations, and his visitor summoned up enough indifference to make the call.

"Holy Moses!" the blind man heard him mutter, and there followed a rapid fusillade of "How?" and "When?" and "What?" and "You don't mean it!," all indicating consternation and surprise, as long as the colloquy lasted.

"Here's a pretty go," announced Mr. Enderleigh, hanging up the receiver. "We've been burgled!"

"The deuce!" exclaimed Carrados sympathetically. "I hope your wife isn't much upset?"

"No, I don't think so. In fact, she seems rather set up because some of our neighbors were robbed in a very commonplace way lately, and she's determined that this must have been the authentic Monkey."

"Much taken?"

"Apparently the silver chest and nothing else. Myra rather fancied that I would call here on my way from something I had said—that's why she rang you up—and she wants me to go straight on. I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course not. I had hoped that you would keep me company for an hour or two, but that's out of the question now. . . . I'll tell you what, though: I will make a bargain with you. Stay another fifteen minutes, in which we can have a snack of some kind in place of dinner. In the meanwhile I will have a car got out that will land

you at your place quicker than any other way you could go; and in return you shall invite me to inspect the depredation."

"That's certainly a bargain from my side of the transaction," replied Enderleigh. "If it isn't putting you out, I'll accept like a shot."

"Not a bit," declared his host with more than polite formality. He moved across to the house telephone and quickly distributed the necessary orders. "I love anything that comes suddenly along. It may be the beginning of—what adventure?"

"Well, as to that, of course there are two sides," said the domesticated Enderleigh. "This is quite sudden enough for me, but I certainly don't love it."

Carrados was as good as his literal word, and fifteen minutes after he had spoken, the lean form of his speedy Redshank car glided down the drive into the high road and then stretched out for Silver Park.

"Now that it's come to this, I may as well tell you about our silver," explained Mr. Enderleigh to his companion, on a confidential impulse. "We happen to have rather a lot—more than people in our modest way generally sport, I mean. Myra's father was a fruit grower and won a lot of cups and plates in his time. I used to be something of a runner and I amassed a few more, and when we got married our friends showered cruets and cake baskets down on us galore. The consequence is that there was a solid half-hundredweight of the metal reposing in a specially made case in the dining room at Homecroft. Of course it ought to have been kept at the bank, and at first it was, but Myra liked to see an assortment out on the sideboard, so that it got to be a nuisance sending it backwards and forwards. Then I said that if we had it in the house it ought to be kept up in the bedroom for safety, and Myra found that she couldn't even lift the chest and decided that it would be too inconvenient to have it there. What with one thing and another, the confounded silver got to become a bit of a sore point between us—it brought on the first unpleasantness we had. Then, as bad luck would have it, just when I was leaving the other morning to go on this job, we must needs get arguing about it again. I suggested that as there would be only two women alone in the house—herself and the servant—it would be safer if I carried the box up and hid it under the bed. Myra—God knows why—retorted that if the silver was the danger-point it wasn't very kind to want to put it just

under where she would be. One silly word led to another until I finally went off saying that I wished the damned stuff was at the bottom of the river."

"You seem to have got the next thing to what you asked for, then," remarked Carrados. "The silver apparently won't trouble you again"; but Enderleigh demurred at this cheerful summary and shook his head.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "but when you wish a thing like that you don't really mean that you want it to happen."

"You are insured, I suppose?"

"Only partly, I'm afraid, because the value of the silver now exceeds the percentage allowed. And of course a lot of the things have associations, although there is nothing of antique value. I'm really wondering how Myra will take it when the excitement wears off."

But so far the excitement was on, and she welcomed them radiantly, albeit a shade mystified that Mr. Carrados should have chosen that moment to pay his call. It does not say much for the criminal expert's sense of publicity that neither his host nor hostess had the faintest idea of his uncanny reputation. To them he was simply the rich blind man who seemed as though he might be useful to Guy.

"But isn't it a shame, Mr. Carrados?" she cooed, when the first round of wonder and exclamation had been gone through. "Sergeant Lapworth declares that it can't possibly be the Monkey Burglar. And I was so relying on that to squelch the Higgses with."

Carrados divined an exchange of private glances, expostulatory from the husband, playfully defiant on her part.

"I have met Sergeant Lapworth once or twice and he seemed to know his work," said the visitor. "Did he say why it couldn't be?"

"Well, the only way they could have got in was by the side door. No fastenings have been forced or windows opened. And the Monkey wouldn't ever dream of using a side door."

"But how on earth could they do that?" demanded Enderleigh. "I mean, without using force. Chloe fastens the door at night, doesn't she?"

"I'll show you if you don't mind accompanying me to the nether regions," said the light-hearted girl. "Chloe only locks the door, it seems—the bolts are too stiff to work—and Sergeant Lapworth says that these people—he's almost sure he knows the gang—have

all manner of ingenious tools. There's a sort of pincers that you catch hold of a key with from the other side and turn it quite easily. You can see that the lock has been oiled to make it go."

"You found the door unlocked this morning?"

"No—I don't know. I never thought of that. But I suppose they could just as easily lock it again to cover their tracks, and as it happened it was not until this afternoon that I missed the silver chest. Then there are footprints on the bed from the gate to the side door. He found those as well. It's most wildly exciting discovering clues; I've been looking for some all the afternoon, but so far without success."

"Come on then," suggested Enderleigh. "You have a lamp or candle, I suppose?"

"Yes. Do you care to see our private morgue, Mr. Carrados—oh, I am sorry: I forgot!"

"That's very nice of you—to forget," smiled the blind man. "It shows that I'm not so helpless after all. Certainly I should like to come; I'm as keen on clues as you are."

The side door was the chief point of interest. It opened onto the garden from the scullery. The scullery—a dank and forbidding chamber that almost justified its epithet—in turn led into the kitchen, and the kitchen into the hall. But there were other ways of getting about, for it was an old house with many passages and on various levels. Most of the rooms appeared to have at least two doors. "I think that the man who built it must have been fond of French farces," remarked Mr. Enderleigh, pointing out this feature.

But even at the side door there was very little to see, the Enderleigh burglary being chiefly remarkable for its negative features. There was the oiled lock, and the key bore certain recent scratches, and that was all.

"If the bolts had been shot this would never have happened," said the master of the house. "Perhaps in future—"

"But the bolts can't be stirred, dear," protested Myra. "I've tried myself until my poor thumbs are nearly dislocated. And everyone says that if burglars want to get in they will, even if they have to come down the chimney."

"I think the bolts might move if they were simply oiled," suggested Carrados. "The level is all right, you see."

"Chloe," called out Mr. Enderleigh—the kitchen door stood open—"is there any oil about?"

A young girl in cap and apron—a girl of quite unusual prettiness—appeared at the door.

"Oil, sir?" she repeated faintly, and she continued to look from one to another of them as though something was amiss.

"Yes, oil—ordinary oil—the sort you oil with, you know. There must be some about somewhere."

"Oh, yes—for the sewing machine," she replied, and disappeared to return with it in a moment.

"Now a feather."

The girl's eyes shot to a bucket holding kitchen refuse that stood beneath the sink; then rose to the level again as she continued to stand there.

"Feathers: in the middle dresser drawer, Chloe," prompted her mistress tartly. "Bless me," she confided to the others, "the girl's going dotty, I believe. Overexcitement isn't good for our poor sex."

"Now we want a chair or something for the top bolt," said Enderleigh.

"I think I can do it without, if you will allow me," put in Carrados. "I fancy that I am just a few inches to the good in that respect."

"But really, Mr. Carrados," protested the lady, "won't you get it on your clothes—or something?"

"That is only a matter of carelessness, not vision," replied Carrados. He gave the feather a dexterous turn in the neck of the bottle to remove the excess of oil before he withdrew it. "Children have the keenest sight, Mrs. Enderleigh, and yet look how they drop the jam about!"

"It's quite marvelous," she murmured, watching him apply the oil and then work the action until the bolt slid easily.

"Not so much as you might think," he assured her. "Frequently you are indebted to other senses when you think you are using your eyes, and they get all the credit. Several men have told me that they always close their eyes when they are doing certain delicate adjustments."

"I once knew a lady who always shut her eyes before she fired a gun off," contributed Enderleigh. "Yet she was fond of shooting, and often hit things."

"Dogs or keepers?" inquired Myra politely.

Certainly the burglary did not seem to have damped anyone's spirits. Presently they went out to look at the incriminating footprints—"viewing the body," Myra called it—by candlelight until

they were tired of striking matches and the friendly darkness put Carrados at liberty to go down on hands and knees and touch the well-marked impressions with his eerily perceptive fingers in his own peculiar way.

"What's this—snowing?" Enderleigh had exclaimed as he opened the door to lead the way into the garden. A sprinkling of white showed on the bare earth before them.

"Goose!" retorted Myra fondly, "it's lime, of course. Old Benjamin—he's a sort of local unhandyman, Mr. Carrados, whom Guy employs one day a week to sit in the garden and smoke shag—put it on only yesterday. He said the soil was too 'thodden' for bulbs: it's always too something for Ben."

"It came in useful, all the same," said her husband. "You see, the lime being crushed down in the footprints shows that they were made after it was put there. That's important."

"Lapworth the Sleuth had already diagnosed that, O Fountain of Wisdom," mocked his wife. She leaned forward and struck him lightly on the arm. "You're it! Race you to the river, Guy!"

"Ssh!" warned Enderleigh with a nod towards their guest.

"Go, children—run," urged Carrados benignly. "I will follow at a pace more suited to my years."

"Hold up!" cried Myra, limping into a walk before they were fairly off. "I forgot; my feet are as soft as mush today. Besides, I oughtn't to now."

"No, of course you oughtn't to," said Guy severely. "And we oughtn't to leave Mr. Carrados like that. God knows what sort of lunatic asylum he'll think he's dropped on."

"Never mind: I got you away. Just one, Guy. And don't worry about him. He said his ears, but he meant his eyes, of course: his ears are sharp enough. That old man wouldn't take any harm if you put him down in the middle of a sawmill."

"Old!" exclaimed Mr. Enderleigh indignantly. "Great Scott! What next?"

They walked back to meet the advancing Carrados, and then they all strolled soberly down to the extremity of the garden and stood contemplating the slow, muddy river before they turned back again.

"You take Mr. Carrados into the dining room, Guy," said Myra, hastening on ahead as they neared the house. "I'm going up to change my shoes—these are soaked."

"Yes, my lady, you are pretty high up already, I'm afraid," apostrophized her husband as they followed. "That's the way of it, Mr. Carrados. I shall think myself lucky if she isn't down below zero before the night is out."

"I've taken hot water up to the spare room, sir," said Chloe as they passed her in the hall.

They washed their hands leisurely and went down to the dining room. The maid had lit the lamp and was replenishing the fire. Still Mrs. Enderleigh did not appear. A few minutes passed rather flatly. Enderleigh made a half-hearted show of asking his guest if he was fond of this and that, but Carrados divined his vague uneasiness and soon they both frankly waited.

"Guy," said a queer little voice just outside the door—it had been left somewhat ajar—"do you mind coming here a minute?"

Enderleigh threw a quick, inquiring look across, and the blind man—informed by what sense, who shall say?—nodded mute assent. Then the door closed and Carrados slowly turned his face to the four points of the room.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Enderleigh returned. He came thoughtfully across the room and stood close to his guest's chair.

"It's just as I was afraid," he said, pitching his voice cautiously. "Myra is now at a very minus stage indeed. And a curious thing—curious and trivial, and yet, I must admit, extraordinary—has happened to upset her. It's mixed up with one or two other matters, and I suppose that this burglary also—although that has nothing to do with it—has helped to put the emotional screw on. If you care to hear I will tell you with pleasure, especially as you have seen how bright she was a few minutes ago, but I don't want to bore you."

"Go on," said Carrados. "Curious and trivial things that are extraordinary have never bored me yet."

"Well, you shall judge. I indicated, over at your place, that we are expecting our little household to be increased in the course of a few months. Not unnaturally, Myra has to pass through a variety of new emotions on the subject, and she also has an unfortunate misgiving. It happened that her father was born clubfooted and *his* father was disfigured in the same way. Of course, we tell her that it's all nonsense, but there is undeniably an element of heredity in that sort of thing, and she knows it well enough. Just now she

is doubly prone to take notice of any kind of suggestion or premonition that may come along, especially on that one unlucky possibility. You heard her say that she was going up to change her shoes? Well, this is what has happened: she went upstairs, kicked off her wet shoes, and proceeded to pull on another pair. They are shoes that she has worn quite comfortably at intervals for the past few weeks, but now one—the right foot—would not go on. Thinking nothing of it, she picked up a shoe-lift and tried again. Still it refused to accommodate, and then she went to the light and looked more closely. . . . It wasn't likely to fit, Carrados, for the extraordinary thing is that those shoes, which she has worn quite easily and naturally a dozen times in the last few weeks, are both for the left foot!"

There was a rattle of cups and glasses as the attractive maid nearly dropped the tray she was bringing in. Enderleigh looked sharply round, but the girl kept her face averted and quickly went out again.

"There's another who's certainly got the jumps," said her master. "But about those shoes. Of course it's ridiculous, but you see the inference? In each forerunning case it was the right foot that was wrong, and so poor Myra is miraculously endowed with two left shoes at this moment as a sort of admonition that an ordinary right will not be needed. . . . But you don't see anything in it, I expect?"

"On the contrary," replied Carrados slowly, "I see so much in it—so many thousand possibilities, all wrong but one—that I should like to go up into a very large, perfectly bare attic, lit by several twenty thousand candle power arc lamps, and there meditate."

"And the nearest thing I can offer you," said Enderleigh, "is the coal cellar. It's roomy as such places go and certainly practically empty now. For the rest—" He found the pleasantry difficult to sustain.

"So," continued the blind man seriously, "we must still proceed on directly material lines. I should very much like to handle the pair of shoes that has caused the trouble. Do you think Mrs. Enderleigh would allow me?"

"Why not?" assented the lady's husband. "I'll go and get them."

He went, and returned almost immediately—but empty-handed.

"She's coming down now. Much better," he whispered in the voice of a conspirator. "Bringing them." And almost at his heels a sobered

Myra reappeared.

"I'm a hopeless little rabbit, Mr. Carrados," she apologized. "Please don't say anything nice about it, because I am."

"Rabbit!" ejaculated her natural protector loyally; "rabbit! Why, Mr. Carrados, that—that sylph has the heart of a—a—well, I'm not strong on the faunas, but of whatever is the antithesis of rabbit."

"That would be a ferret, wouldn't it?" asked Myra in her funny way. "What a sad flatterer you are, Guy!"

"Go on," said Guy happily. "So long as you can laugh—"

She waved a reassuring hand to him across the room as she addressed their guest again.

"Of course, I know that he has told you all about it, Mr. Carrados," she said. "Because when I taxed him he began by saying, 'I only just—' Here is the mystery."

It was a pair of pretty bronze shoes, neat yet not fragile, that she put into the blind man's hands. He held them one by one, and as his long, delicately-formed fingers brushed across their surface the two watchers received a curious impression of seeing something read.

"I shouldn't mind—I shouldn't mind the shoes a particle," declared Myra—she felt compelled to speak to break the almost hypnotic quest of those understanding hands—"though, of course, they're no earthly use. But for weeks I've been wearing them all right, and now I know perfectly well that I couldn't. There's something wrong with me somewhere, don't you see?"

"But, dearest," pleaded Guy soothingly, "there's some perfectly simple explanation if only we could see it. Why, only just now you said that your feet were tender. That's probably it. You've got them sore, and so you can't put on the shoe. If they were all right you'd jump into them and not notice that anything was the matter, just as you have been doing up to now."

"Don't talk tommy, Guy!" she exclaimed half wrathfully. "As if I could possibly put on two left shoes without knowing it, even if I could get them on. And yet," she wailed, "I *have* been putting them on—that's the horrible thing about it."

Carrados had apparently finished his scrutiny, for he was listening to this exchange in his usual benign complacency, and as he listened he absently rubbed his nose gently with the polished toe of a shoe.

"Set your mind at rest, Mrs. Enderleigh," he remarked quietly, as he offered her the other one. "There is nothing wrong. You have never worn that shoe."

"I have never worn it?"

"Neither you nor anybody else. The shoe has not been worn."

"But look at the wear," she persisted, displaying the scarified sole. "Look at this worn lace."

"The lace, yes," he admitted, with unshaken confidence. "But not the shoe."

"But how can you possibly know that?"

"In exactly the same way that I could oil the bolt—by using other powers than that of sight."

"Do you mean—" began Enderleigh, but Carrados interrupted him with uplifted hand.

"If I may suggest, please don't say anything more about the shoes just yet. At this moment Sergeant Lapworth has come to the door and your servant is admitting him. Let us hear what he has to say."

Myra and Guy exchanged looks of bewilderment—almost of alarm—and then the girl's face cleared.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "I had forgotten to tell you. He did say that he would look in again after you got back, Guy."

"If you please, m'm," said Chloe at the door, "there's the detective here again, and he would like to see the master if it's convenient."

"Quite right," replied Myra. "Show him in here."

Sergeant Lapworth was a plainclothesman of the local staff. If he had a fault it was that of giving the impression of knowing more than he would tell, a suggestion that resulted in people sometimes finding him less omniscient in the end than they had expected. The Enderleighs were rather surprised at the sudden respect that came over him when he recognized their blind visitor.

"One or two small matters I thought I'd like to see you about, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Enderleigh. "Those footprints by the side gate. I understand that no one came along that way between the time your gardener put the lime there yesterday and my seeing them this afternoon?"

"That is quite right," agreed Myra. "We allow the milkman to come in at the front gate and go to the side door, to save him carrying his can right round the other way. No one else came; I asked Chloe particularly."

"You see the point, sir?" continued the sergeant, directing his voice at Mr. Carrados this time. "Whoever left those footprints is the man we want to put our hands on. We should like him to account for his movements last night at all events. Old Ben certainly never made those prints, sir. Now, I wonder," the sergeant's voice became softly speculative as he leisurely felt in one or two pockets and finally produced a neat paper template of a boot, "I wonder if this suggests anything to either of you?"

Myra shook her head and passed the paper on to Enderleigh.

"It's a man's boot, I suppose," she said. "It is broader than a woman's and the heel is twice as large. It's much smaller than any of yours, Guy."

"Lord, yes," he agreed. "I'm miles beyond that."

"Perhaps," continued Sergeant Lapworth, becoming almost dreamy in his quiet detachment, "perhaps this might help you more if you should ever have seen the original." It was a small fancy button that he mysteriously produced this time from the Aladdin's cave among his garments. Myra's spirits went up.

"What a splendid clue, Mr. Lapworth!" she exclaimed. "Where did you find it?"

"I don't want anything said about it just yet," he stipulated. "As a matter of fact I picked it up in your scullery this afternoon."

"It is a boot button, I suppose?" questioned Enderleigh. "It strikes me as rather dressy."

"It is the top of a pearl boot button undoubtedly, I should say," pronounced the sergeant. "One of those metal-shanked things that they wire into the boot nowadays. First question is, does it belong to anyone of the house? I daresay you have plenty of pairs of fancy boots and shoes in use or put by, but it isn't a button that you would readily forget."

Myra breathlessly agreed that if she had had boot buttons like that she would never have forgotten it, and added that if Guy had appeared with them she could never have forgiven it—a *sotto-voce* effort that elicited nothing more than an anxious look from her husband.

"And how about the young person in the kitchen?" suggested Lapworth.

"I know Chloe's boots, and it certainly doesn't come from there," replied Chloe's mistress. "However, you had better ask her, to make sure. Shall I ring now?"

"Don't trouble," he replied, as he returned the precious relic to its hiding place. "I can have a word with her as I go out. Now as regards the silver. Your good lady said that you would be able to make me out a list, sir."

"Of course," assented Enderleigh; "that's got to be done, hasn't it? And then there'll be the insurance people. And then a young man introducing himself as 'the press.' I'll tell you what, sergeant, this being burgled isn't such a soft thing after all."

"I don't know, sir. It strikes me that you have come off uncommonly easy, seeing as how things were. No mess, no breakages, no odds and ends from every room that you can't remember until it's too late to claim. Just one big lot taken clean."

"It would be about as much as he could take, anyway," said the owner. "I shouldn't like to heft that case far."

"Yes, it would be a tidy load. I don't know that I ever remember the case being taken before. Reckon they had a car somewhere near."

"Anyway, nothing was overlooked," said Myra. "There were some tankards out on the sideboard here, and three dozen spoons of various sizes in the drawer, and they went too. I put them—"

"You put them what?" prompted her husband, for Myra had stopped as though she had said her say.

"I haven't the faintest notion, dear," she replied frankly. "To tell the truth I think I was half asleep. Put what what?"

"Well, I think I'll be getting on along, sir," said Lapworth, reading in this a pretty obvious hint. "As soon as we hear from you—"

There was a hesitating knock at the door and Chloe entered with a card.

"Please, m'm," said the girl—Mrs. Enderleigh happened to be seated nearest to her—"there's a gentleman would like to see the master for a minute."

" 'Wich'—'Mr. William Wich,' " read Myra. "Isn't there a Lady Wich a few houses away?"

"Trefusis—Lady Wich, madam," volunteered Lapworth. "There is a Mr. William, the son."

"I'd better go out and see what it is," said Enderleigh. "Probably only a minute—excuse me, won't you?"

For so short a gap it did not seem worthwhile discovering a topic of conversation, and so no one broke the minute's silence. If they had spoken their thoughts the exchange would have been some-

thing after this fashion:

"I wonder if Lady Wich ever intends to call—city knight's widow, I suppose. Now will Mr. Carrados go when the fat sergeant leaves, or does he expect that we have proper supper?"

"Bit of a card this Mr. Willie Wich from what I hear. Old party keeps him in pretty tight by all accounts. Larky; girls."

"She must stand five feet five—possibly six. At that, with the tread she has, she will take a four and a half to five. Yes, under any vigorous exercise she might reasonably split a pliant three and a half. There were certainly two definable personal exudations about the other shoe, and associable with them syringa—that's the girl—and cheiranthus—this one."

The door opened and Enderleigh entered, then standing aside he waited for someone else.

"Rather curious," he announced. "Mr. Wich has come to give us some information about our friend last night; so as we are all here— My wife, Mr. Wich; Mr. Carrados; Sergeant Lapworth."

"It's really from my mother, you know," said the dapper youth who followed the host in. "She's a frightful invalid—heart and all that—so she sent me to tell you. We only just heard of what had happened: beastly shame—"

"We didn't know that you'd be interested," ventured Myra graciously.

"Eh? Oh, I mean rotten luck being burgled like that. Well, it seems that last night the mater was having a bad turn and she had to get up and sit at the open window to have air. That's how it takes her. It seems that from her bedroom window one can see most of your garden—we live a couple of houses along: Trefusis, you know—and as she sat there she distinctly saw someone go down your garden towards the river and disappear among the trees. She says she wasn't taking much notice of it at the time, because there was no reason why there should be anything wrong in that, and it being dark she didn't see a lot, and she was feeling pretty washed out as well. But she did notice that it seemed to be a man carrying something large and heavy, and when she heard of this she thought you'd better know."

"It's most awfully good of Lady Wich to send," gushed Myra; "and of you to come. We are just celebrating the event with frugal hospitality. Will you drink the toast 'Our Absent Friend,' Mr. Wich?"

"Eh? Oh, I don't mind, thank you."

"The river," mused Lapworth. "That's certainly an idea now: we couldn't find any likely motor wheel-tracks down the side road here. A boat waiting, you see. What time about would this be, sir?"

"Oh, about half past twelve, she said."

"Ah!" The sergeant continued to regard Mr. Wich with an air of distant speculation while at the same time his hand went mechanically to his mysterious pocket. "I suppose you didn't by any chance happen to be in the neighborhood yourself at about that hour, sir?"

The perfect respect of the tone could not wholly disguise a certain significance in the question, and Willie Wich looked up to meet the sergeant's eyes on level terms. Enderleigh also found something arresting in the sudden tension that seemed to have involved two of his guests, while Carrados continued to gaze into unseen space with the faint smile of placid contemplation. Myra alone appeared to have no interest in the passage, and her face was turned away, but her lips were tight pressed to hold back a cry of generous warning and her heart was thudding like an engine beat, for in a flash her eyes had followed Lapworth's and in a flash had seen on her spruce guest's extended foot a boot with identical pearl buttons, of which the upper one was missing.

The gap between the question and the answer was almost as long as it takes to tell of it, for with their eyes meeting Wich paused to consider his reply as though a thought urged caution.

"What do you quite mean by that?" he asked guardedly. "You know, of course, that I live in the neighborhood. Do you mean, was I at home?"

"Not exactly, sir," replied the sergeant. "You might have been passing this very house on your way home and thought you saw or heard something suspicious here and come nearer to investigate. Or you might have had a dog stray into this garden and come in to call it back, or a dozen things. What I should like to know is, did you come into this house or garden last night for any purpose?"

"I did not," said Wich, his face relaxing into something like an amused grin. "What is more, sergeant, I have never before been in this house or garden in the course of my long and industrious life."

"That's quite definite, sir," Lapworth admitted. "In the circumstances would you mind stating where you were between the hours of eleven last night and two o'clock this morning?"

To those who knew him pretty well young Mr. Wich was something of a puzzle, and they complained that you never knew how he would take it and whether the fellow was quite the fool he sometimes seemed.

" 'In the circumstances,' sergeant, seems to imply the existence of certain conditions of which I have no knowledge," he now replied. "Should I ever find myself in the dock of the Old Bailey, charged with the murder of a constable, or before the Surrey Petty Sessions accused of appropriating Mr. Enderleigh's ancestral plate, either of those eventualities would constitute an aggregation of circumstances that would enforce my acquiescence. At present I fail to see any reason why I should render an account of my trivial life and movements."

Sergeant Lapworth took out an irreproachably white pocket handkerchief and wiped his face profusely.

"Very good, sir," he remarked with dark significance. "Should you have any objection to my comparing this form"—here the sergeant dramatically produced his first exhibit—"with the boots you are now wearing?"

"Not the least," replied the buoyant young man, raising his right foot to facilitate the operation; "though I must protest against the attention thus gratuitously directed to my very unprepossessing footwear. Anything to assist the legitimate ends of justice. But not," he added severely, "of mere vulgar curiosity."

Without deigning to reply, Sergeant Lapworth went down on one knee and from that position fitted the paper impression against the proffered boot. It was at once plain to everyone that the two outlines coincided perfectly. But an even more significant piece of evidence was to emerge, for as the sergeant performed this office he slyly inserted a nail in the angle of the instep and an appreciable sprinkling of white-peppered soil fell down into his hand.

"I must call your attention, sir, to the fact that this earth from your boot appears to correspond with the soil of the garden here."

"I say!" exclaimed Mr. Wich, aghast, "I am sorry, Mrs. Enderleigh—bringing stuff like that into your pretty room!" Then with a bright look of toleration, "But I expect you know what servants are!"

"Lastly," said Sergeant Lapworth with admirable composure in spite of a rather flushed complexion, "I shall be glad if you will look at this button which corresponds exactly with those on your

boot, where one is missing."

"Thank you," replied young Mr. Wich, passing it back again; "it's very good of you to have kept it for me, but it's really no use. It isn't a button you sew on, but one of those metal-shanked affairs, and the shank is broken."

"Then I understand, sir, that you decline to assist us with any information?"

"Oh, no, you don't, sergeant—not if you understand the common or vernacular tongue, that is," retorted his antagonist. "So far, what I have declined is to give an account of my movements on the strength of an old button hypothetically lost at some time from my boot and a little piece of paper traced to measure. It may be the law that I have to if anyone shows me those: I must look that up. But you may remember that the only reason for my being here was to bring you information."

"Oh, yes," exclaimed Myra, completely won over by the suspect's ready nonchalance, "we are all sure that Mr. Wich is quite all right, Sergeant Lapworth. Aren't we, Guy?"

"Mrs. Enderleigh," put in Wich, gazing at her with melancholy admiration, "before I go I must unburden my mind, and I'm afraid you may think very poorly of me in consequence. I did *not* purloin your silver and I have not the faintest idea who did. Goodbye."

"Must you really go?" she asked. "Please be sure and thank Lady Wich from me, won't you? And any Thursday."

"If you would be so kind as to help a blind man to his car, Mr. Wich," interposed Carrados, and Enderleigh found his own proffered services quietly brushed aside.

"You don't say you are!" exclaimed Wich. "I never tumbled to it. And that's your little jigger waiting then? I'm looking forward to something on four wheels myself, but so far I have to be content with two."

"It's hardly worthwhile offering you a lift," said Carrados, when they were in the road, "but if you don't mind I should like to walk with you as far as your gate."

"Right-o," said Mr. Wich, wondering who this queer customer who had made up to him might be. "Lovely night, isn't it? What about your car?"

"It will follow presently; my driver understands. I have been trying to think where we have met before. Are you by any chance the Wich who made forty-nine for The Rest against Lord's Schools

five years ago?"

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed his companion, becoming quite boyishly shy at the reference to this exploit. "You don't mean to say that you remember that? Were you at Lord's?"

"Yes. I am fond of the minor fixtures; I can hear more play in them than often comes out in first-class matches. We did not speak, but you passed, and I thought I recognized your step again. A Winchester fellow was commenting on the game for me. You were given run out."

"You must simply be a walking Wisden, sir," said Wich, brimming with admiration. And then with a curious intonation in his voice he added, "But why 'given'?"

"I remember some reference to it. . . . Were you out?"

"As a matter of fact I was not," he admitted.

"I don't think you made any fuss about it—quarreled with the umpire or groused about the pavilion?"

"Well, should I be likely? . . . It was cricket."

"Yes. . . . And now about this business?"

They had reached the gate of Trefusis, but the young man made no movement towards it, and presently they fell to walking slowly on again.

"That isn't so easy. Not by a long, long way. I was taken by surprise, I must admit; I hadn't a notion that there'd be any trace. Of course it would have been simple enough to tell the sergeant how it came about, if that was all."

"You mean the lady in the case; or shall we say the girl in the shoes?"

"Partly; and then there is my mother. She would certainly have a heart attack if she found that William had been taking her neighbor's handmaiden out to midnight carnivals and other forms of penance."

"Is that quite—cricket?"

"Not absolutely M.C.C., perhaps, but it isn't to be inferred that I had the inklingest of who she was at first. And Chloe really is an awfully pretty girl, you know. What has she let out?"

"Nothing at all, so far as I am aware."

"Then how on earth do you come to know of her—and the shoes?"

"Very much, I suppose, in the same way that Sergeant Lapworth has come to know of you and the boot—because the traces are so obvious."

"I must say I think Chloe was a bit of a mutt to walk on the bed and then leave a button somewhere about. She might have learned better than that from the pictures surely."

"Chloe naturally had not foreseen that the escapade would coincide with a burglary. But I would not be too ready to blame her, my young friend," advised Carrados dryly. "The most disastrous blunder of all was made by someone else."

"That's a straight one," said Mr. Wich. "What did I do?"

"Suppose you tell me about it?" suggested Mr. Carrados. "Under the seal of confidence."

"I don't mind. I was going to see a lawyer first thing tomorrow to find out what I'd better do to circumvent the forces of law and order. Perhaps you could advise me?"

"Perhaps I could," admitted Carrados. "At all events I will."

"There really isn't very much to tell," said young Mr. Wich pensively. "I happened to be on the river alone a few months ago when I noticed a dazzling creature watching my feeble efforts from the bank. To have a nearer look I landed and asked her if she was not, excuse me, Miss Prendergast? She said no, but, how curious, she had been almost sure that I was a certain Mr. Johnson. This constituting a deputy introduction on established lines I prevailed upon the bright vision to go for a short cruise and even to accept some slight refreshment of a light and portable nature.

"Under the auspices of the gods the idyll proceeded with exemplary propriety to run its normal course. So far as I was concerned the chief attraction was the extreme likelihood of detection and the certainty that everyone concerned would impute the very worst motives to my conduct when they did find out.

"On our usual 'evening' last week I was indulging the delightful being's passion for a harmless beverage known as Tango Teaser when she espied a handbill announcing a cheap fancy dance at one of the public halls a few miles away and artlessly exclaimed:

" 'I should love to go to one of those.'

"Of course there was only one humanly possible reply to a heart-cry like that, and I gallantly made it.

" 'And I should love to take you. Why not?'

"To this she said that it was absolutely impossible and we fell to making the arrangements. She was to creep out quietly by a side door after the others had gone to bed, lock the door after her and bring the key, and meet me at our usual trysting place—a spot

a few hundred yards from our respective abodes. I would be there with my iron steed, and on the pillion thereof would whirl her into fairyland.

"Everything went off as per schedule. The only contretemps was that Chloe—have I mentioned that the heroine was Chloe, by the way?—ripped one of her shoes across and thus passed automatically into the retired list. I confess that I was surprised at the consternation the mishap occasioned the sweet chit, and then she told me. Ashamed at the deficiency of her own pedal outfit she had surreptitiously 'borrowed' a pair belonging to her mistress. Detection would now inevitably follow, disgrace, possibly dismissal. Sighs, tears—heavens!—reproaches. Again I did the insane chivalrous thing and swore to replace the shoe within twelve hours or perish.

"The rest is obvious. Chloe knew where they had been bought—a shop in Oxford Street—and I was to hie me off at dawn and duplicate them. As there would be the business of giving the shoes the necessary 'wear,' it would be simpler to keep only one, and this I was to put into a clump of ivy on the garden side wall. But when it came to parting a difficulty arose: it was essential for me to have the split shoe as a pattern; I could not allow the fair penitent to walk stocking-footed along the stony road; and it wasn't wise to risk being seen together any nearer our houses. The simple way out was for me to lend her one of mine, and this I recovered from the ivy bush when I put the other one in. And there, Mr. Carrados, you have the whole egg in a nutshell."

"Everything went off all right, then?" inquired Carrados maliciously.

"Like a clock. I obtained the exact thing in the exact size, scrubbed it down to the exact appearance of the other, and put in the old lace. The superfluous shoe was flung over into an orchard somewhere Isleworth way. There was nothing much in all that. But now you see why it was impossible to satisfy Sergeant Lapworth's inopportune curiosity."

"You may perhaps find it difficult to satisfy one or two other people as well. Did Chloe say anything when she let you in just now?"

"Why, yes; it struck me as ungracious at the time. The angel looked at me very weirdly and just said, 'Idiot!' I thought she must be overwrought."

"I think it very likely. I told you that there had been other

blunders besides Chloe's. What she wished to indicate by a single appropriate word, my budding Lothario, was that you had thrown away the wrong shoe, with the consequence that Mrs. Enderleigh is now on the verge of hysterics at an apparent miracle."

"No!" exclaimed Wich incredulously, "I could not. And yet, surely . . . Oh, good Lord, I did! I kept them to make a pair—the new one and the other, instead of . . . Well, I am a prize fathead! What will happen now?"

"What? Why the extreme probability that you have had your trouble for nothing and that Chloe will be sacked after all."

"Oh, I don't think that—not after seeing Mrs. Enderleigh. You and Chloe both misjudge her strangely. She seems the jolliest sort of girl to me. I bet she'll understand."

"I'll bet she will," assented Carrados grimly. "And when she understands that her pretty servant has been wearing her things, sneaking out at nights (to say nothing about giving burglars the chance of sneaking in) to foot it at dance halls with the young spark from next-door-but-one, you may not find her quite so sympathetic as she was half an hour ago. If she doesn't take the opportunity of calling upon Lady Wich about it I'm badly out."

"It's a mug's business," said Mr. Wich with a qualmish note in his voice. "What had I better do?"

"What you had better do is to leave it in my hands and agree to my condition."

"What condition?"

"That you never go gallivanting with Chloe again. You both 'don't mean anything,' but suppose you did happen to get the girl discharged with a very dubious character? Should you see any alternative to behaving either as a fool or a knave to put it right?"

"Whew!" exclaimed Mr. Wich, easing the collar against his neck, "that's heart-to-heart stuff. Well, if you can bring it off I'm good for my part. Chloe certainly is a dazzling thing, but, strictly between ourselves, her mind is little more than an assortment of obsolete film captions."

When Mr. Enderleigh returned from business the next day, Myra greeted him with a subdued note. It was plain that the excitement had quite worn off.

"If Mr. Carrados is really going to be useful to you, Guy, of course I shall do my best to amuse him. But I wonder all the same if he

is going to make a practice of dropping in every evening."

"How so?" demanded Guy.

"He rang me up this afternoon and hoped that we should both be in later, as he would like to call. I had to say we should be charmed."

"Just as well you did, my lady," remarked Guy. "Do you know that quite important people have a most extraordinary opinion of that man, and I am told that Scotland Yard will do anything to oblige him. That's what I've come across today."

"My gracious!" said Myra, deeply impressed; "it's just as well I fawned. Talking about police, I met Sergeant Lapworth in the road this morning and he seemed very odd. He said they had received instructions to go slow in taking any steps."

"That ought to suit them down to the ground," suggested Guy pessimistically. "We don't look like seeing any of our plate again, old girl."

"I don't know, Guy. It struck me that Sergeant Lapworth knew more than he would tell. He said that they expected developments."

"It used to be 'were investigating a clue,' " said the unimpressed gentleman.

Mrs. Enderleigh had named nine o'clock as a convenient hour, and with the busy man's punctuality nine o'clock found Mr. Carrados walking up the Homecroft garden path. Looking out, the lady of the house felt a pleasant access of importance, arising from the notable proportions of the car waiting at her gate.

"How nice of you to come again!" she exclaimed playfully. "After the alarms and excursions of yesterday I hardly dared to hope it."

"Oh, yes," he replied prosaically, "your husband and I have some small business details to discuss."

"Of course," she assented quickly. "I am going to leave you at it."

"But first," he continued, "I have a bargain to offer you."

"Offer me? How exciting! Whatever can it be?"

"You really want to get your silver back again?"

"Why, naturally. Guy tells me that we shall only receive about half the value the way our policy goes—isn't it, Guy?"

"I'm afraid it is," admitted her husband.

"And that's only money. To both of us many of the things are priceless."

"While you have no particular affection for that odd pair of

shoes?"

"Shoes? Oh, *those!* How ridiculous, Mr. Carrados! You are not coming like an up-to-date genie to offer silver plates for old shoes, are you?"

"You have guessed. But there's always a catch about these attractive bargains, you remember. If you agree to let the shoes go, everything connected with them goes also. You have no curiosity, make no inquiries, entertain no suspicions: it is to be as though they and all that appertains to them had never been."

"I wonder if I understand?" mused Myra with a sharp little look in his direction.

"I think you do," replied Carrados. "You are—forgive the homely phrase—no fool, Mrs. Enderleigh. If you do not quite understand yet, it's only because you have not had time to think about it. You soon would."

"All right; I'll take it," said Myra, with a very sporting air.

"But do you mean that you actually know now where the silver is?" demanded Enderleigh.

"I know where the silver is," Carrados admitted.

"Where?" exclaimed two simultaneous voices.

"When you went off a few days ago, you expressed a wish as to where it might be, Mr. Enderleigh, didn't you?"

"What was that?" asked Myra, from whose mind the malediction had apparently faded. Her husband, on the contrary, remembered very well and he colored at the recollection.

"I am sorry to be reminded of that," he said moodily. "Something happened to put me out, Myra, and in a moment of irritation, without meaning it, I said that I wished the stuff at the bottom of the river. That's all."

"Yes; that's the way with you impulsive people, as we genii are always finding. You want a thing and then discover that you don't. Well, my friend, you have got your wish, willy-nilly. The stuff *is* at the bottom of the river."

"What a lark!" exclaimed the lady.

"The burglars dropped it or hid it there?" said her husband, keenly intrigued. "How on earth did you find that out?"

"The burglars had nothing to do with it, because there was no burglar—no burglary," was the reply.

"Oh, but I say! Besides, it's gone. No, Mr. Carrados! And then the side door key, you know."

"Hush!" said Carrados mysteriously. "That doesn't count. The side door key went, according to our bargain, with the shoes."

"Very well," acquiesced Myra, with something very like a giggle, "but if there was no burglar how did the silver get into the river?"

"How?" Carrados raised an accusing finger and slowly brought it dead level on his hostess. "How? Behold the culprit! You, my dear lady, threw it there!"

Moved by a common impulse Guy and Myra came slowly to their feet. Looking at Max Carrados's quietly smiling face it seemed impossible to believe that he—to doubt that he—to know what to think.

"I—threw—it—there?" articulated Myra queerly.

"You deliberately cast the 'damned stuff' in. Rising at the dead of night, without staying to put on slippers or to cover those inadequate garments that are no longer the prerogative of my sex, you crept down, carefully replaced the silver lying about, took up the burden, let yourself out by the french window in the drawing room, crossed the lawn, reached the silent river, and with a sigh of relief at accomplishing so meritorious a task, tipped the whole bag of tricks into the water. All in a profound sleep, of course. By the way, I hope your feet are better today?"

Myra sat down again with a strange look in her eyes.

"But I could not—I could not even move the box," she whispered.

"Not when you are wide awake," he replied, becoming grave again. "And do you know why that is? It is because you know that you cannot, and so, your slavish body assenting, you really cannot. But in your sleep you do not know it; your unbound mind admits no limits, and so—"

"Do you know," interposed Enderleigh sagely, "I've heard something like that several times lately. I suppose there may be something in it after all."

"Anyway," said Mr. Carrados, "there is one thing you can congratulate yourself on. A wife who carries out her husband's slightest wish even in her sleep is a woman in a thousand."

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

Clayton was the policeman, Forbes was the murderer, Graham the witness, Holgate the victim, McFee the judge, and Warren the hangman.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

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ROSS MACDONALD

Homage was paid in this space last month to Arthur Conan Doyle, who is credited with having popularized the detective story. This month we pay our respects to a writer who, together with a small band of others, is acknowledged as having raised the detective story from the level of popular entertainment to that of serious fiction. From the publication of *The Moving Target* in 1949 to the appearance of *The Blue Hammer* in 1976, Ross Macdonald consistently received praise and plaudits from critics and colleagues (he was a recipient of the Mystery Writers of America Grand Master Award). And the sales figures of his books testify to their entertainment value.

His hero is Lew Archer, private eye. His turf is Los Angeles, and its sister cities in southern California. His clients comprise distraught parents, concerned wives, lawyers on fat retainers—it doesn't matter to Lew. They all get the best of him (in more ways than one) when they hire him. And if you want to get at the truth, regardless of the consequences, then hiring Lew Archer is hiring the best there is.

In *The Drowning Pool* (1950), Lew describes his reflection in a warped mirror: "The man in the mirror was big and flat-bodied and lean-faced. One of his gray eyes was larger than the other, and it swelled and wavered like the eye of conscience: the other was little, hard and

shrewd. I stood still for an instant, caught by my own distorted face, and the room reversed itself like a trick drawing in a psychological test. For an instant I was the man in the mirror, the shadow-figure without a life of his own who peered with one large eye and one small eye through dirty glass at the dirty lives of people in a very dirty world." Archer recovers from this attack of self-doubt, what Macdonald probably meant when he referred to "schizophrenic pain," and discovers who's been blackmailing his client. When he confronts the young perpetrator with her crime, "she laughed: paper tearing in an echo chamber."

Archer's descriptions are no small part of the power of these novels. Macdonald has delved deeply into human psychology to bring to light some of crime fiction's most memorable characters, and the plotlines of the novels reflect their twisted, secretive natures. Or, more accurately, the plots evolve from these characters. When Archer is called in to handle a case with a troubled teenager at its center (which he often is), chances are good that his investigation will turn up much more: old murders and thefts, for instance. Or double identities. Or any number of other devices employed to camouflage, or cover up, old secrets, old passions, old crimes.

Even so, it is Archer's steady persona and his sharp narrative style that raise these books above the genre. To Archer, a woman "swayed gently like a curtain at a window" *(The Blue Hammer).* Another character in *The Way Some People Die* (1951) "was such a perfect artistic example of his type that I began to like him, almost as if he were a creature of my own imagination." In *The Moving Target,* ". . . the gun in his pocket was a small, intense refrigerating unit cooling off the hallway. His eyes had already turned to ice." *The Goodbye Look* (1969) is on the faces of two men, a "funny look . . . as if they were both going to die. As if they really *wanted* to kill each other and be killed." It's a look that Archer knows, one he has "seen in the war, and too many times since the war." *The Doomsters* (1958) are the ghosts of a dead woman's crazed imagination, but the title applies equally to the woman's heirs and intimates, to all who fall spell to the "greed and hate and snobbery" of the family mansion.

There is greed and hate and snobbery galore in Ross Macdonald's novels. And although there are passionate and illicit relationships, and possessive paternal love, it is usually greed

or hate or snobbery—or some combination of them—that is at the core of the crimes, both the ones in the present investigation and the ones that Archer so often turns up from the past. If Macdonald's is a cynical view of the world, it is probably all the more accurate and believable for it.

(Many of Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer novels are available in Bantam paperback editions.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Detective Chief Inspector Jack Rudd is back in June Thomson's **Sound Evidence** (Doubleday Crime Club, $11.95, 179 pp.). This is a quietly competent, slightly contrived tale of a murder investigation that runs counterpoint to Rudd's personal perplexities: his attraction to the female M.E. who's temporarily in charge, and his handling of the faithful Sergeant Boyce's jealousy of his younger colleague. Facing one of his private problems head-on actually leads to the solution to the murders he's been investigating, which may or may not come as a surprise to readers.

Caroline Minuscule won Andrew Taylor the Crime Writers' Association's award for the best first crime novel of 1982. Taylor's second book is out now, and **Waiting for the End of the World** should please his new fans. Good guy Dougal and his nemesis Hanbury are back again, and this time there's also a spunky American black woman named Zelda. The finer points of ethical behavior won't ever drag Dougal down, but it's just as well: he has an exhausting escapade ahead of him in *Waiting,* including escape from a castle's dungeon. This is adult entertainment for broad-minded adults with a good sense of humor and a taste for the madcap. (Dodd, Mead and Company, $14.95, 247 pp.)

Another second novel in a series is William G. Tapply's **The Dutch Blue Error,** sequel to last year's *Death at Charity's Point.* Brady Coyne, the honest and hardworking lawyer to millionaires, again stars as the city of Boston's best detective. A rare stamp is at the heart of a recent crime wave that has touched Coyne's stamp-collecting client and now threatens to affect him, too. Coyne is likable, his Boston Brahmin clientele is a fresh twist, and the plot is masterfully paced. (Charles Scribner's Sons, $12.95, 216 pp.)

Mr. Yesterday is the nickname young reporters have given to Briscoe Risk, the sixty-two-year-old ex-foreign correspondent whose career was diluted by his fondness for booze. He's a crucial element in Elliott Chaze's mystery, along with other members of a small-

town paper's staff in southern Alabama. This novel has adult language and a snappy pace, and is peopled with some well-drawn characters—all of which compensate for the sloppy ending. (Charles Scribner's Sons, $12.95, 183 pp.)

There's fun for mystery fans in Max Allan Collins's **Kill Your Darlings** (Walker and Company, $13.95, 212 pp.). The narrator is Mallory, a mystery writer himself, and the setting is a Bouchercon in Chicago. That means that murder—as defined by writers, fans, and publishers of the genre, at least—is the fare of the weekend. It also means that when real murder does inevitably occur, there are a number of "experts" on hand to serve as suspects and amateur sleuths. The disappearance of a "newly discovered" Dashiell Hammett manuscript adds extra piquancy to the case.

The Rainy City is Seattle, as well as the title of Earl W. Emerson's "first Thomas Black Mystery" (Avon Books, $2.95, 229 pp.). That certainly indicates additional appearances of detective Thomas Black, and I'm pleased to hear it. Here's a private eye with a thirteen-year-old truck, a much-used bike, a small pension from his ten years as a cop, and a modest frame house in the university district. His narrative style is punchy and unsentimental, and this case—centered around a troubled young woman—is reminiscent of Ross Macdonald's books in its family relationships

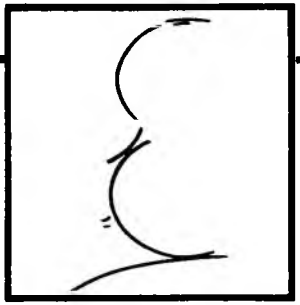
Another new slant on the amateur P.I. front is a veterinarian-sleuth, and that's what Barbara Moore gives us in **The Doberman Wore Black.** Gordon Christy, a young new vet in Vail, Colorado, is a likable hero, and the animal background is woven into a neat little plot. (Dell, "A Murder Ink Mystery," $2.95, 232 pp.)

John Denson is another Seattle sleuth, who narrates **Fish Story** by Richard Hoyt (Viking, $13.95, 187 pp.). The title refers to an outrageous tale, an exaggerated story, the proverbial anecdote about "the one that got away"; and it's a good title for Denson's latest case. Like its narrator, this story has larger-than-life elements, characters like the manic innkeeper of Denson's favorite haunt and the Indian clients for whom he's working. Then there's the puzzling appearance of frozen parts of a corpse in the middle of a small city park, and the electronic gimmickry the city is using to try to catch the murderer (much to the disgust of one of Seattle's senior detectives). There's lots of humor, fresh characters, and some action in this *Fish Story*.

Fletch and Mrs. Stanwyk pursued by Mr. Stanwyk.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The movie **Fletch** is based on the Edgar award-winning and bestselling first novel in Gregory Mcdonald's series of adventure mysteries featuring the newsman-sleuth, I. M. Fletcher. Mcdonald's hero is a streetwise investigative reporter, here posing as a drifter in order to get a story about narcotics peddling on the beach at the edge of an unnamed California city. When a local millionaire takes Fletch for a genuine beach bum and offers him first twenty and then fifty thousand dollars to commit a murder, Fletch is presented with a second, equally juicy, story to investigate.

The beach story is relatively straightforward, though it involves Fletch in a rather unsavory affair with a fifteen-year-old runaway girl who eventually dies from a drug overdose. Millionaire Alan Stanwyk, on the other hand, presents an intellectual puzzle. Without arousing suspicion, Fletch has to get the most intimate kinds of information on him: his medical health, his business and personal honesty, whether or not he truly loves his wife. For the apparently healthy Stanwyk has told Fletch that he is dying of cancer, cannot commit suicide because he wants his wife to collect on his insurance policy, and so he has worked out a plan for Fletch to kill him.

Unlike the dour, straightforward reporter of *The Mean Season* (reviewed here in June), Fletch is eccentrically but brilliantly creative in his methods. In person and over the phone

he poses as an insurance company clerk, a real estate investor, a furniture salesman. On the same day that he appears in the morning as a beach bum he can turn up at the country club in tennis whites and talk his way in as a guest. He has a talent for drawing people out to get information—from his newspaper's savvy and witty society columnist, from Stanwyk's tennis-playing wife, from Stanwyk's parents in Pennsylvania.

Fletch's own life is screwed up in classic private investigator fashion. He owes alimony to two former wives; he is in trouble with his boss because of his unorthodox methods; his life is in danger from the police chief, who increasingly looks like the kingpin of the beach narcotics trade.

But Fletch combines this familiar down-and-out syndrome with the wit of a Nick Charles and a resourcefulness all his own. Furthermore, he is goodlooking and successful with women. In the book, he adds up to a character of some depth—a man capable of human sympathy at times, and of cynical selfishness at other times.

For example, Mcdonald's Fletch is something of a misogynist; he plays more than one mean trick on his former wives, and he truly despises his woman editor. But in the movie his incompetent editor is a man, and instead of fooling his wife's lawyer with a fake alimony check, Fletch is made to come across as a good guy who cheerfully forks over the cash he has received in advance from Alan Stanwyk.

As played by the former *Saturday Night Live* comedian, Chevy Chase, Fletch is strictly a wisecracking poseur. Instead of drawing others out, Chevy Chase conducts his investigation to the accompaniment of gag lines that follow one another like a standup comic's routine. Chase walks through *Fletch* as though he were playing a skit; he is as self-possessed with a gun pointed at his head as he is visiting Stanwyk's mansion. When the movie throws in an unnecessary imitation of a scene in Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*—the one in which a fleeing Robert Donat has to improvise a speech in front of a political rally—Chase rattles off his lines without the slightest hint of tension. The purely comic Fletch of the movie gets some laughs, but he loses the flavor of Mcdonald's books. These tightly and originally plotted works stand out not only for Fletch's wit, but also for his darker side.

THE STORY THAT WON

Arthur Tress

The March Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Tina Floyd of Cochran, Georgia. Honorable mentions go to Thomas A. McCaffrey of Laurel, Maryland; James Whittle of Cochran, Georgia; Lee Ann Kerr of Chillicothe, Illinois; Jean Paiva of Bayonne, New Jersey; Carol Ottolenghi-Barga of Worthington, Ohio; Becky Panovich of Topeka, Kansas; Gil Anderson of Barstow, California; Beth Wylie of Palo Alto, California; Irene Hayse of Rapid City, South Dakota; Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa; Trip Neisler of Kings Mountain, North Carolina; Syd Clayton of Tucson, Arizona; Nikki Rogers of Kissimmee, Florida; and Alice R. McDonald of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

A HAIR-RAISING DILEMMA by Tina Floyd

"This is just too much," he thought to himself. After braving dragon-filled thickets and lugging all that heavy armor through the muck and mire of the swamp, to be confounded by such an elementary nuisance as this was enough to make his royal head spin.

He had tried everything within his means to scale the tower. After spending several hours examining the stones for secret passageways, he finally noticed the rungs that ascended the east side of the tower. He eagerly clambered up, only to find himself face down in the dirt as the rungs proved too rusty to support his princely person. Numerous other tries produced the same dusty fate.

How did they expect him to get married and inherit the king's vast domain when his bride-to-be was stuck in some forsaken tower?

Lady Luck seemed to be in a foul and beastly mood that day. The perplexed prince had found his ropes threadbare, his horse escaped, his ordeal long and his temper short.

Finally, in desperation, he cupped his hands to his mouth. "Milady!" he called until a familiar form appeared at the dungeon window. He yelled, "I'm stumped down here. I can find no mortal means of reaching yon window. Do you have any ideas, Rapunzel?"

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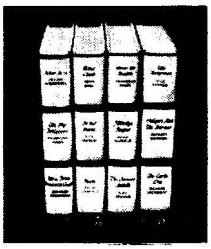

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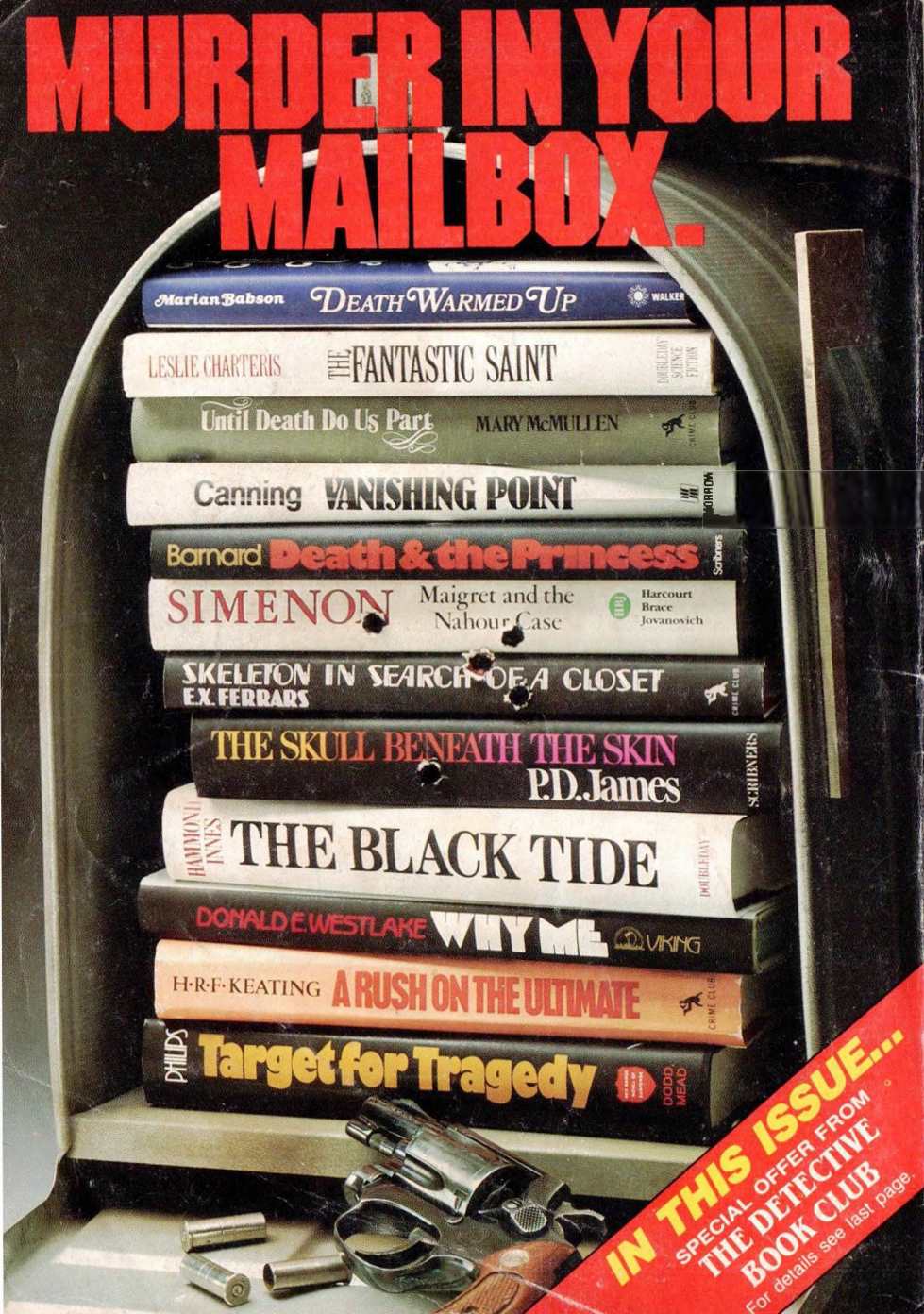

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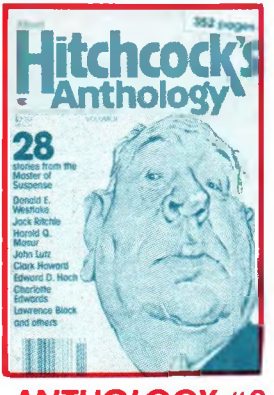

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