

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

February, 1989

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# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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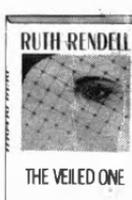
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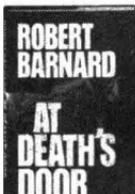
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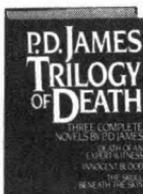
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 34, No. 2, February, 1989. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc. \$2.00 per copy in the U.S.A. \$2.50 in Canada. Annual subscription \$25.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions; \$29.50 elsewhere payable in advance in U.S. funds. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. Call (614)383-3141 with questions regarding your subscription. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Canadian 3rd class postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. © 1989 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Printed in U.S.A. All submissions must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 1932, Marion, Ohio 43305. In Canada return to 871 Janette Ave., Windsor, Ontario, N9C3Z1. ISSN: 0002-5224.

# EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

**N**ow that Bouchercon XIX is over, we can bring you the winners of the Shamus Awards, given annually by the Private Eye Writers of America at an awards ceremony during the convention, as well as the complete list of nominees. The nominees in all categories follow, with the winners in bold face type.

BEST PRIVATE EYE NOVEL OF  
1987:

***A Tax in Blood by Ben  
Schutz (Tor)***

*A Trouble of Fools* by Linda  
Barnes (St. Martin's)

*Lady Yesterday* by Loren D.  
Estleman (Houghton  
Mifflin)

*The Autumn Dead* by Ed  
Gorman (St. Martin's)

*Ride the Lightning* by John  
Lutz (St. Martin's)

BEST FIRST PRIVATE EYE NOVEL  
OF 1987:

***Death on the Rocks by  
Michael Allegretto  
(Scribners)***

*The House of Blue Lights* by  
Robert J. Bowman (St.  
Martin's)

*Shawnee Alley Fire* by John  
Douglas (St. Martin's)

*Detective* by Parnell Hall  
(Donald I. Fine)

*An Infinite Number of  
Monkeys* by Les Roberts  
(St. Martin's)

BEST PAPERBACK PRIVATE EYE  
NOVEL OF 1987:

***Wild Night by L. J.  
Washburn (Tor)***

(continued on page 151)

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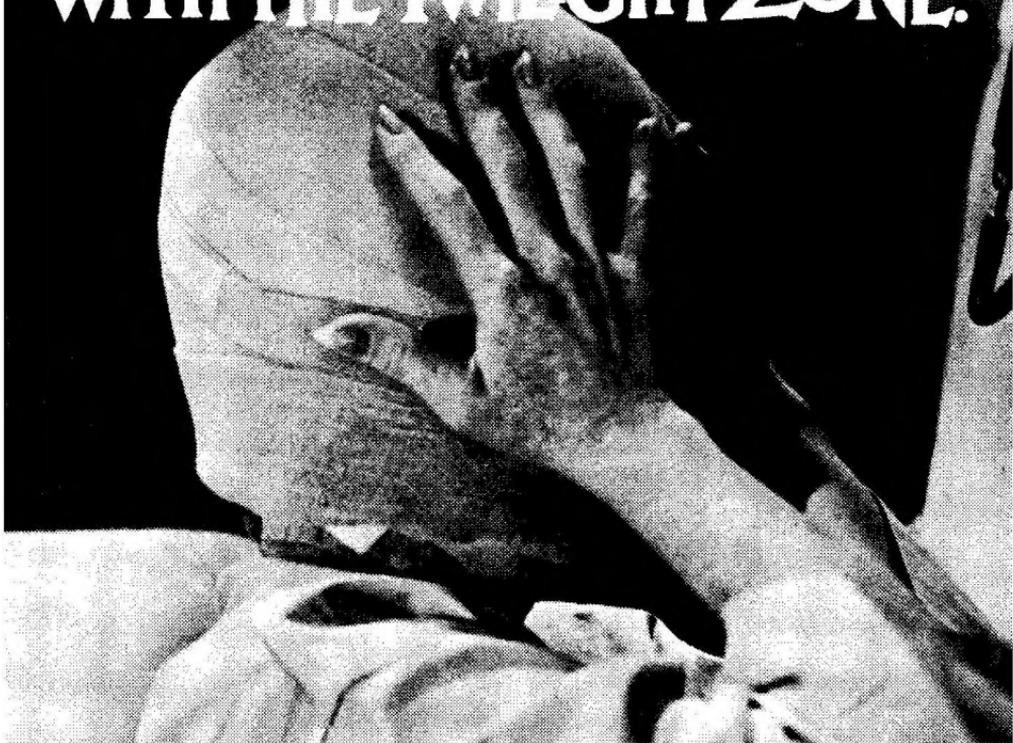
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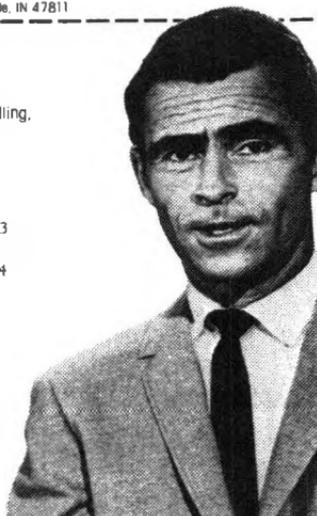
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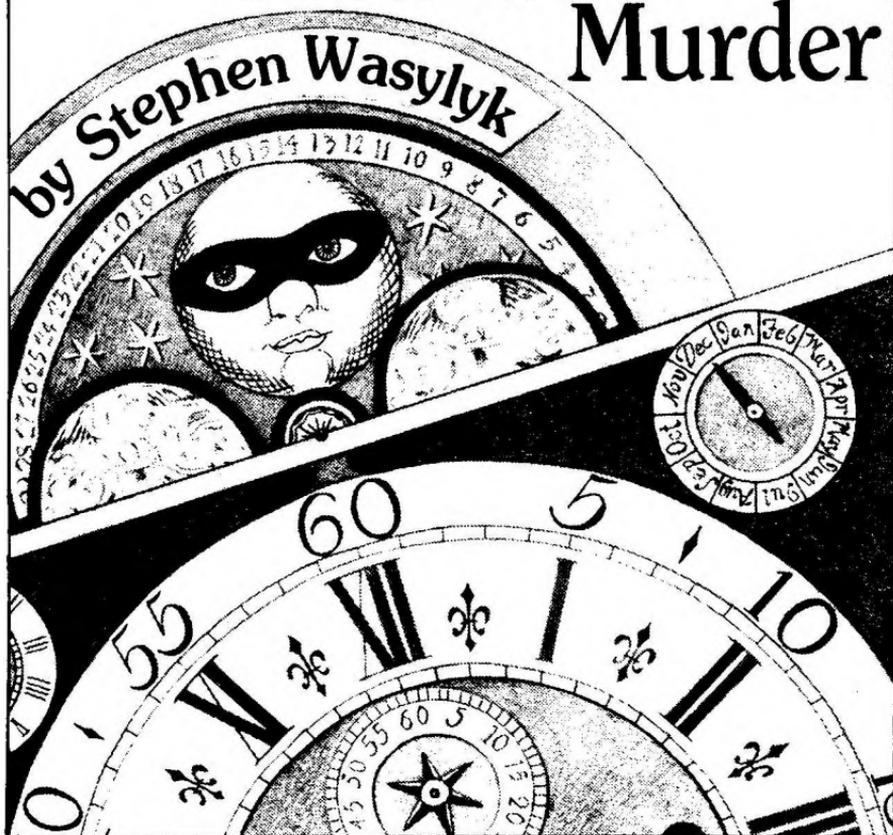
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# Common Ground for Murder

by Stephen Wasylyk



**T**he burled walnut would make a beautiful clock for the Soames girl, but with only three pieces to work with, Barney had no margin for error. He'd have to sketch and measure down to a thirty-second of an inch, and if it didn't work, try again.

To even consider using it meant he was either crazy, unreasonably stubborn, or both. A chip, a splinter, an accidental gouge in the wrong place, no matter how small, and he'd have wasted both the wood and his time. He should use the mahogany he had squirreled

away on his shelf. If he ruined a piece of that, it wouldn't matter at all.

Yet—

He glanced at the big black dog lying precisely and perversely in the center of the pool of fine dust beneath his band saw.

"Let it never be said, John Henry, that we turned away from a creative challenge."

Head flat between his paws, John Henry acknowledged his name with a flick of his tail in the dust, one pointed ear upraised. The ear told Barney that someone was coming. With the girl's wedding only a week away, any visitor was as welcome as a letter from the IRS.

John Henry heaved himself to his feet, his now furiously wagging tail creating a miniature dust storm as Corcoran stepped through the doorway; six feet and more of wide-shouldered tan uniform with a star on the chest and three stripes on the sleeve.

"Just turn around and go away," said Barney. "Edna's horoscope in the morning paper says her loved one may be in danger. Seeing you will make her more convinced than ever that astrology is an exact science."

"When have I ever placed you in danger?"

"By her standards, every time

you show up. Which is neither here nor there. Whatever you want, I pass. I'm too busy."

Corcoran grinned. "Doing what? Staring at these pieces of wood?"

"Remarkably enough, that's exactly it. Somehow that walnut is going to come together in a mantel clock that will be her grandmother's wedding gift for the Soames girl, and if I don't deliver, the old girl threatened to beat me up."

"That old girl is at least eighty-five. In your shoes, I wouldn't exactly tremble with fear. Now, in hers I might worry a little because she lives alone and, as I understand it, is well heeled. I'm sure you've heard about the three women."

"You told the paper you're making progress. Were you lying again?"

Corcoran spread his hands. "I couldn't very well say anything else without sending every woman in the area who lives alone into a panic."

"Let the county detectives earn that pay raise they just got."

"They tried. The forensic team fingerprinted, photographed, and measured everything in sight. The detectives canvassed the neighborhood and came up with one woman who heard a car in the middle of the night which she thought was a boy-

friend leaving late. You could pay them all a hundred grand a year and they wouldn't have come up with anything more. If they had, I wouldn't need you."

"What can I do that they can't?"

"For want of a better word—think."

"Very flattering, but I'm just an overweight grayhaired old guy who designs and makes custom clocks for anyone crazy enough to pay my price. I'm no detect—"

"Stop singing that song, Barney. I don't know what it takes to make a good detective, but you've got it. Now, three women have been murdered and I sure as hell don't want to see a fourth. Neither do you."

"I can't argue with that, but—"

Corcoran cupped a hand under John Henry's jaw and looked into his eyes. "You tell him. If he thinks fooling around building some sort of clock for the Soames kid—"

"Watch it, Corcoran."

"—is more important than saving a woman's life, you and I are walking out on him."

John Henry's woof could have meant agreement.

Barney sighed. "It isn't necessary to subvert my dog for your evil purposes, Corcoran. I'll listen to your problem."

Corcoran slid off the stool. "Why don't I save time by explaining on the way to the home of the last victim? One hour, that's all I ask."

Barney threw up his hands, removed his shop apron, and dusted himself off. John Henry's ears went up at the prospect of going somewhere.

"I'm a cold, unforgiving man, John Henry," said Barney. "Since you saw fit to take sides against your beloved master, you can damned well stay home with Edna."

John Henry's ears went down.

The disembodied voice of an unseen Edna curled around them as they passed the kitchen door.

"Remember, Barney, you have to run to the supermarket for me."

"As soon as I get back," promised Barney.

Ever the watchful policeman on patrol, Corcoran drove through the treelined streets slowly, head and eyes moving.

"To begin with, these weren't sex crimes, Barney. The victims were killed during burglaries that we didn't even know were burglaries when it all began because it wasn't obvious that anything was missing. The first victim was a middle-aged widow named Matteo who lived alone, both of her daughters married. We actually had no

motive at all for two days until one of the daughters shook off enough shock to realize that some of her mother's jewelry was gone. The guy took only the best. Platinum ring with several diamonds, husband's ruby ring she wore on a chain around her neck, a matched gold necklace and earring set. It explained why she was killed. She woke up, saw him, and he strangled her."

"Any chance of tracking down the jewelry?"

"Little or none. The value was in the gems and the metal, not the design. Those pieces are probably long gone. When the second victim turned up, an elderly widow named Panossis, again strangled in her bed, we immediately had her son check the jewelry. Same story. The third victim, Mrs. Brant, was in her thirties. He really made a haul there. Before her well-to-do husband left her for his secretary, he'd evidently eased his conscience during his illicit romance with an assortment of diamonds."

"You said you had nothing. Sounds like you have a great deal."

Corcoran turned into a wide street. "Not really. The jewelry is easily disposed of, we haven't turned up a single witness because the houses are all single, isolated homes surrounded by

trees and shrubbery, the women lived alone, and the killer left nothing behind, not even a footprint. Okay, fine. It isn't the first time we've started with nothing, but the biggest problem is this. How did he select his victims? They lived miles apart, were three different personalities living entirely different life styles, and there is at least twenty years difference between their ages. So how were they chosen? You know how it usually works. Cruise the streets until you spot a house where the occupants appear to be away and hit it in the middle of the night. Who actually lives there doesn't matter, and if you're wrong and someone is home, you take off. Yet, out of hundreds of women living alone, this guy found three who had what he wanted—enough jewelry to make the profit worth the risk."

"Door to door salesman?"

"He'd have to ring other doorbells and we've had none of that."

Corcoran pulled into the driveway of a magnificent stone colonial on a quiet street shaded by tall oaks, the homes surrounded by window-high shrubbery. After dark, the deep shadows would make it almost impossible to see anyone moving around.

At the back door, the screen

had been cut and a neat circle removed from one of the glass panes, the hole now blocked by a small square of plywood nailed to the inside.

Corcoran unlocked the door. "All he had to do was reach through and turn the latch. Don't ask me why everyone doesn't install key operated deadbolts."

"And dusk to dawn floodlights," said Barney.

He followed Corcoran through the kitchen, a den, and a dining room to a center hall and up the stairs.

"You'll notice we're making no noise at all on these thick rugs," said Corcoran.

"I also notice he passed up plenty of other loot."

"Most of which could be traced. We're not talking stupidity here."

The frilliness and laciness of the lilac and white bedroom was restrained just enough to mark it as belonging to a woman with good taste. Alongside the bed, an angular outline of tape marked where the body had been found.

Corcoran pointed at the dresser. "Jewelry case was there. M.E. says she died between one and two in the morning. She must have heard him—"

"And didn't scream? Or reach for the phone?"

"If she did, no one heard her.

As for the phone, we think she put up a good fight trying to reach it, which was why she was found on the floor. There were some blue nylon threads under her fingernails which must have come from his jacket, possibly one of those warm-up types. No skin tissue. And nothing under the fingernails of the others. They appeared to have no chance to fight at all, so he may have killed them before he went after the jewels. This is one mean sucker, Barney."

"Since no one heard a scream, could he have been in the bedroom by invitation?"

"If it was just her, I'd consider it, but the others were killed the same way and there's so much difference between them, all three would never have been interested in the same man. Anything else?"

Barney studied a painting over the bed, lilacs in a vase in keeping with the decor. It was well done, the woman's signature at the bottom. In her thirties and talented, most of her life had been ahead of her; a gentle life, if the painting meant anything. Now she was dead. And violently, instead of passing away peacefully in her old age, a hundred beautiful paintings behind her to say she had passed this way and seen what others had not.

*Read or hear about it and the*

*victim is remote, but catch a glimpse of who they were and what they were and an anger becomes part of you.*

"No, but I agree the first step is to link the women."

"Their ages, incomes, social circles, even their church affiliations are so far apart, I'm stymied, Barn. C'mon. I'll take you home before Edna scalps me. Didn't she say something about you doing her marketing for her? I thought she preferred to do it herself."

As they retraced their route through the house, Barney said, "She does, but she was stepping over John Henry when he decided to move his tail to the exact spot her foot was headed for. First time I've ever seen a sixty-five-year-old woman suspended in mid-air. When she fell, she twisted her knee enough to make walking painful. The doctor told her to sit for a week. She won't do that, but she's sensible enough not to walk around a supermarket."

Corcoran locked the door behind him and held up the keys. "One reason why I brought you here now. I have to turn these over to her ex-husband this afternoon. Incidentally, he was at home in bed with his new wife when it happened."

Barney motioned toward the detached garage. "Anyone check that?"

"Probably, even though the guy would have no reason to go in."

"As long as we're here, let's look."

Corcoran lifted the overhead door. The usual quota of outdoor furniture and garden tools was hung neatly from the walls, the floor swept clean, a large power mower sitting just inside the door.

A scrap of bright yellow near one of the wheels caught Barney's eye. He picked it up. Triangular and stiff, it had been torn from a corner of a card. Not wanting to throw it on that clean floor, he placed it on the mower.

"This thing isn't easily handled by a woman."

"She didn't handle it at all. A couple of kids did the outside work and, before you ask, they had no connection with the other women. I suppose the ex-husband used to mow the lawn. He lives in an apartment now. Satisfied?"

Barney nodded. "Close it up and let's go. Your hour's up and I'd better get to that market before Edna decides not to speak to me for three days."

Edna's list was arranged by aisle so that all he had to do was push the clattering cart up one and down the other, tossing in items as he went. Since her

brand preferences allowed for no substitutions, it wasn't necessary to study selections. When she wrote coffee or beans or paper towels, he could almost tumble them into the cart as he passed—like John Henry's dog food, which, as far as he knew, she'd selected because she thought the dog pictured on the label had nice eyes and the price was right. Whatever her reasons, John Henry wolfed the stuff down as though it were filet mignon.

He came out of the last aisle under full steam and pulled up short.

*"I'll be home in twenty-seven minutes."*

*Edna gave a ladylike snort. "At this time of day, it will take that long to get through the checkout counter. I told you to go early this morning."*

He sighed and settled in behind a harried, T-shirted young mother with a loose blonde pony tail trying to control two equally blond small children and an overflowing cart. He gave her points for trying. Too many simply allowed the kids to run loose.

In front of her, a middle-aged woman waited patiently as an elderly man slowly emptied his cart one item at a time with trembling hands.

A nudge made Barney turn. A business-suited woman smiled

an apology as she squeezed past toward a line she hoped would move faster.

The six-year-old boy was giving his mother a hard time, trying to sneak one box of gum after another into the cart, while his sister, not much more than a year younger, watched hopelessly.

"Hey," said Barney. "Want to earn a quarter?"

The mother looked at him suspiciously.

Barney smiled. "Let him watch my cart while I make a phone call. It will get him out of your hair and he can buy his own gum. Unless you want to frame the quarter as the first money he ever earned."

The mother laughed. "Go ahead."

He dialed Corcoran. "You were looking for common ground for the three women. How about a supermarket? Right now, every age, income bracket, social position, and religious persuasion is lined up with me waiting to pay for their daily bread. Come over and see for yourself. I'll be here for quite a while."

Corcoran sounded as though he was smiling. "Be right there."

The boy was clinging to one side of the cart protectively, his sister hanging on to the other.

Barney handed him the quarter. "Thanks, son."

The boy studied the coin. "How about my sister? She helped."

"How much did she help?"

The boy hesitated. "A dime's worth."

Barney handed her a dime. "Any objections, take them up with your brother. He obviously doesn't believe in equal pay for equal work."

"He will when I get through with him," said the mother firmly.

Corcoran walked in just as the packer stowed the last of Barney's bags in the cart. He studied the lines for a moment before following Barney out.

"You might have something. Won't take long to find out where they shopped, but to be honest, I can't see how a casual conversation over frozen pizza could give him the information he'd need."

Barney lifted a sack from the cart, thrust it into his arms, and followed it with another.

"You follow a path until you run into a wall, Corcoran. Help me carry these to the car."

Corcoran glanced into one of the bags with raised eyebrows.

"Pistachio banana swirl?"

Barney picked up the other two bags. "John Henry prefers the more exotic flavors in his ice cream. Follow me."

He was back in his workshop

after lunch, measuring and sketching. The size of the clock had been determined by the dial and movement Mrs. Soames had selected, and no matter how he calculated, the wood always came up three or four inches short. He'd anticipated that when he began. What he hadn't anticipated was being unable to come up with a solution.

"We seem to have overestimated our ingenuity, John Henry."

John Henry's tail moved sleepily.

The phone rang.

This interruption he didn't mind. When his mind set out along the wrong road and refused to change direction, thinking about something else forced it to make a fresh start.

"I found the market," said Corcoran. "Over on Eagle Road. All three were regular customers but no one ever saw any with a man, and even if one turned up, I still don't see how he could have found out about the jewelry during a casual conversation."

"Look at it this way, Corcoran. You're further along than you were this morning, which is more than I can say about Mrs. Soames's clock."

"No argument there, but a nut like that isn't going to stop. Right now he has to be lining

up the next one and I'm running out of time. Do me a favor. Stop over. You might see something I don't."

Barney glanced at his sketches. "Meet me outside," he said.

The supermarket anchored one end of a row of shops in a long, low building with a large parking area before it. As he and Corcoran entered, he stopped so abruptly Corcoran bumped into him.

The exit vestibule had a community bulletin board on one wall displaying a variety of announcements, free literature, send-in-for-free-information postcards, and several rows of hand written three by five cards offering various items for sale by individuals in the neighborhood—a sort of call-if-you're-interested flea market.

The cards were bright yellow.

He hustled Corcoran out and around the corner of the store where he clasped his hands behind his back and paced up and down while a puzzled Corcoran watched for a few minutes before asking, "What are you up to, Barn?"

"Did you notice those yellow cards? And remember the piece of bright yellow card on the garage floor this morning? The one I left on the mower? Maybe she tried to sell the mower by leaving a card with her

phone number on the wall."

"Hey," said Corcoran softly.

"It might explain how he selects his victims. He could call the number. If a man answers, he hangs up. If it's a woman, he asks a few questions. If the answers are right, he stops over to look at the item and sizes up the situation. If it doesn't look right, he backs off by saying he doesn't want it, but if it looks promising, he initiates a little friendly conversation which he steers around to jewelry by saying he's in business or something like that. No risk for him and nothing for the woman to worry about. It's broad daylight, they're out in the open. Maybe the woman knows him or where he works. He's a neighbor—" Barney hit his forehead gently with the heel of his hand. "Isn't there a small jewelry shop about three doors from the market?"

"Pop Ingersoll's, but he's older than you—" Corcoran's lips pursed in a silent whistle. "But he does have clerks who come and go. It may tie together, Barney."

"Who works for him now?"

"Young fellow named Rousseau." Corcoran took a step. "Maybe I'd better talk to him."

Barney caught his arm. "Keep away from the store. You don't want Rousseau to see a uniform right now. It might be him or

someone who once worked there, but let's check the cards out first. The first step is to get that scrap from the garage before it somehow disappears. While you're gone, I'll copy off those phone numbers. If he keeps an eye on that board, he won't pay any attention to an old man. When you get back, you can track them down while the county lab compares the scrap to one of those cards. You can eliminate apartments, condos, twins, and townhouses and maybe end up with a house that belongs to a single lady living alone who could be your next victim."

Corcoran tore a page from his notebook and handed it to him. "Go to it."

*Tires (slightly used), a color TV (good for second set), a stereo (I've upgraded, you benefit), a ten-speed bicycle (take it for the cost of my leg cast), a mahogany dresser (only slightly scratched), an encyclopedia (no book ever opened), a six-year-old Toyota (low mileage), a set of Arnold Palmer golf clubs (extra putter thrown in).*

The golf clubs look good, thought Barney. A widow might have them up for sale.

When Corcoran returned, he handed him the list along with a blank card. "You don't need me any longer. It might not work exactly the way I figured,

but there's something there, Corcoran."

Corcoran grinned. "I think so, too. Good luck with the clock. I'll call you with the end of the story."

By mid-afternoon, the clock still hadn't fallen into place. Those cards made it impossible to concentrate. All he could think of was that painting of the lilacs on the wall and feel anger because she should have lived to paint many more. He hoped the creep resisted arrest when Corcoran found him. The sergeant didn't have a reputation for being gentle.

*Where are you, Corcoran?*

He was considering substituting another type of wood for the base when the phone rang.

He'd never heard Corcoran's voice so disappointed. "It all blew up, Barney. One, the lab says the torn piece doesn't match the card. It's thinner and seems to be from some sort of tag. Two, Mrs. Matteo's daughters say she had nothing to sell, and if she did, she'd never do it that way. Ditto for Mrs. Panossis' son. As for the mower, if Mrs. Brant wanted to sell it, the neighbor who borrowed it every week would have bought it. Three, Rousseau is married and as straight as they come. The previous clerk moved to California and the one before him

has a job in New Orleans. And finally, none of the people who left those cards fits the profile of a possible victim. The only thing that held up was shopping in the same market. I guess it was one of those weird things where everything looks great until you try to fit it together."

The loud *splat* as Barney slammed his hand down on the workbench in frustration disturbed John Henry's nap enough for him to open his eyes briefly.

*Dammit to hell and back again. Everything was turning up a couple of inches short. He must be getting senile.*

The last sketch had fluttered from the workbench when he'd slammed his hand down and lay at his feet. To be sure of his measurements, he'd traced off the outline of the dial with a red pen and it now looked up at him like an accusing, bloodshot eye.

He chuckled.

"This is no laughing matter, Barney. I still think he has another victim lined up."

"I'm laughing at my stupidity, Corcoran, because I'm looking for complicated solutions to simple problems. You ought to ask—" He hesitated. "Look, just in case I'm wrong again, I'll meet you at the center in ten minutes."

As he led Corcoran into the

long, narrow, glistening jewelry shop, Corcoran whispered, "I thought you told me to stay out of here."

"I did, but that was when I was suffering from egomania."

Smooth-shaven, black hair neatly combed, collar and tie precise, Rousseau came toward them with a welcoming smile. "Something I can do?"

"Mr. Ingersoll in?" asked Barney.

"Gone for the day." Rousseau frowned at Corcoran's badge. "Something wrong?"

"The sergeant is looking for information. About three women. He'd like to know if they had a watch repaired here, anything like that."

Corcoran stared at him.

"I can easily check our records," said Rousseau. "How long ago was it and what are the names?"

Corcoran came to life. "No more than a month or so. The names are Matteo, Panossis, and Brant."

"Sound familiar." Rousseau flipped through a small ledger until he found the page he wanted.

"Ah, Mrs. Matteo. Watch repaired about three weeks ago." He frowned. "Funny. I didn't take it in, so where did I hear the name?"

His finger traced down a page. "Mrs. Panossis. Two weeks ago. Broken prong on a setting for

a diamond ring. New piece had to be soldered on." He frowned again. "Didn't handle that either."

Corcoran's eyes questioned Barney.

Barney smiled.

So did Rousseau when he looked up. "And Mr. Ingersoll handled the enlargement of a diamond ring for Mrs. Brant that had become too small. I guess she'd put on a little weight. That happens, you know."

Barney carefully leaned on the glass top of a jewelry case. "Maybe I'm wrong, but don't small shops like yours send work like that out?"

"We have to, obviously. We don't generate enough to carry a watch repairman or jewelry craftsman on the payroll, but we do provide the service by sending the work to a concern which handles many small shops like ours."

"You must use some sort of tag to identify the pieces."

"Of course. One of these." Rousseau placed a stringed tag about three inches wide and five inches long on the counter. It was bright yellow and perforated so it could be torn apart into three sections, all carrying the same number. "The bottom portion becomes the customer claim check. We enter the customer's name and address on the center portion and keep it

for our records. The top is attached to the item with instructions as to what's to be done. Our name and address on the tag tells our supplier from which store the item came. So does the small envelope it goes into to keep it separated from the other items we're sending out."

"And the customer's name and address also go into the ledger."

"Right." Rousseau frowned and turned to Corcoran. "Why all the questions, sergeant?"

"Who has access to those names and addresses?"

"I do. Mr. Ingersoll, of course."

Corcoran looked at Barney, eyebrows raised.

"Mr. Rousseau, for your own sake, think hard," said Barney softly. "Does anyone else see those names and addresses?"

"No one does. No one is supposed to." Rousseau suddenly appeared worried. "Except—"

"Except who?"

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention it to Mr. Ingersoll. He doesn't come in that often, you know. Just so I can go to lunch and times like that, so I'm alone most of the time, and if I'm busy when the messenger comes, sometimes he helps me out—"

"The messenger from the concern that does the work," said Barney.

Rousseau nodded. "All the envelopes go out in a sealed

bag, but the bag is kept open until the last minute in case something more comes in. If I'm tied up with a customer I can't leave, he'll check off the numbers for me in the ledger, seal the bag, and leave a receipt. I've never seen any harm in that. After all, he's bonded and everything is insured."

"Where can I find him?" asked Corcoran.

Rousseau rummaged through a drawer, found a card, and handed it to him. "His name is Maxwell. But I still don't understand why—" The color ebbed from his face. "Oh—my—God. I just remembered why those names sounded familiar."

"Then you know why you're closing the shop and going to the station with the man I call and giving him a statement. How you settle this with Ingersoll is your problem."

Barney felt sorry for Rousseau. The last man he had seen that particular shade of green had been under the delusion he could spend the evening drinking beer and brandy with no ill effects.

The red brick building was long, low, and windowless, an L-shaped parking lot across the front and down one side separated from the building by a thirty foot strip of sloping lawn.

Corcoran pulled up before a

steel grated entrance manned by a uniformed guard.

"I know you want to be in on the end, Barney, but I have to do this alone. He may not be there, but if he is, he may cause a fuss and not only Edna but the Chief would have my scalp if I placed you at risk."

"You ought to have some backup."

Corcoran smiled. "A man who strangles women in their beds isn't likely to give me trouble, but if he does, I wouldn't want you caught in the middle."

He spoke to the guard and disappeared inside.

Almost immediately, a stocky, black-haired man wearing a blue jacket came out of the entrance, moving fast, half running along the lawn in front of the building and not noticing Barney in the cruiser because he kept glancing back over his shoulder as if to see whether he was being followed. He disappeared around the building to the parking lot at the side.

*Uh, oh. Where are you, Corcoran?*

His eyes on the entrance, Barney slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

With a roar, another came to life in the parking lot.

Barney hesitated, still hoping Corcoran would appear.

Tires squealed at the side of the building.

*Dammit, Corcoran, do I have to do everything?*

He threw the cruiser into reverse and floored the accelerator. Tires smoking, the cruiser shot backward to close off the exit from the L. He caught a glimpse of a wide-eyed face through the windshield of a silver Cadillac, coming out of the L too fast to stop, just before it smashed into his right rear, spun him around, and bounced off into a parked car, the deafening crunch of metal and tinkle of glass bringing people charging out of the building, Corcoran in the lead.

He opened the door slowly and tenderly fingered a numb left knee before limping to the wrecked car just as Corcoran arrived.

Corcoran reached in and felt for a pulse. "Seems to be just knocked out. Are you all right, Barney?"

"Whacked my knee. I hope that's Maxwell."

"None other. He was talking to the receptionist when I walked in. I guess he knew why I was there because he took off. When I asked for him, the receptionist had just pointed at the door when we heard the crash. Actually, she didn't have a chance to say a word."

The uniformed guard said, "I called for an ambulance, sergeant."

His face concerned, Corcoran watched Barney gently kneading his now throbbing knee. "Dammit, Barney, you're going to the hospital. What in the hell made you play demolition derby with my car? He wouldn't have gotten very far."

The man slumped over the wheel stirred and groaned.

*She'd seen beauty and tried to capture it, not only for herself but for others. Those who create give a little piece of themselves, while those who kill take something from us all.*

"You sure he isn't badly hurt?" asked Barney.

"How fast could he have been going in a parking lot?"

Barney's disappointment showed in the one word. "Damn."

He was on his stool in his workshop that evening, wielding a narrow chisel with a delicate touch to clean out a mortise in a piece of mahogany destined for the side of the Soames clock, his left leg extended before him because of the bandage layered around his throbbing knee, when Corcoran tapped at the door and entered.

"How's the knee?"

"Hurts only when I walk," he lied. "Maxwell safely put away?"

"For a long time. Ingersoll's wasn't the only store where he picked up names and addresses

and culled out the women living alone. We have him not only for the three murders, but for more than a dozen other jewel burglaries where the women were lucky enough to be out. All we need is the guy who handled the disposition of the loot." Corcoran shook his head. "Would you believe he wanted the money to play high roller at the casinos in Atlantic City? What put you on to the store?"

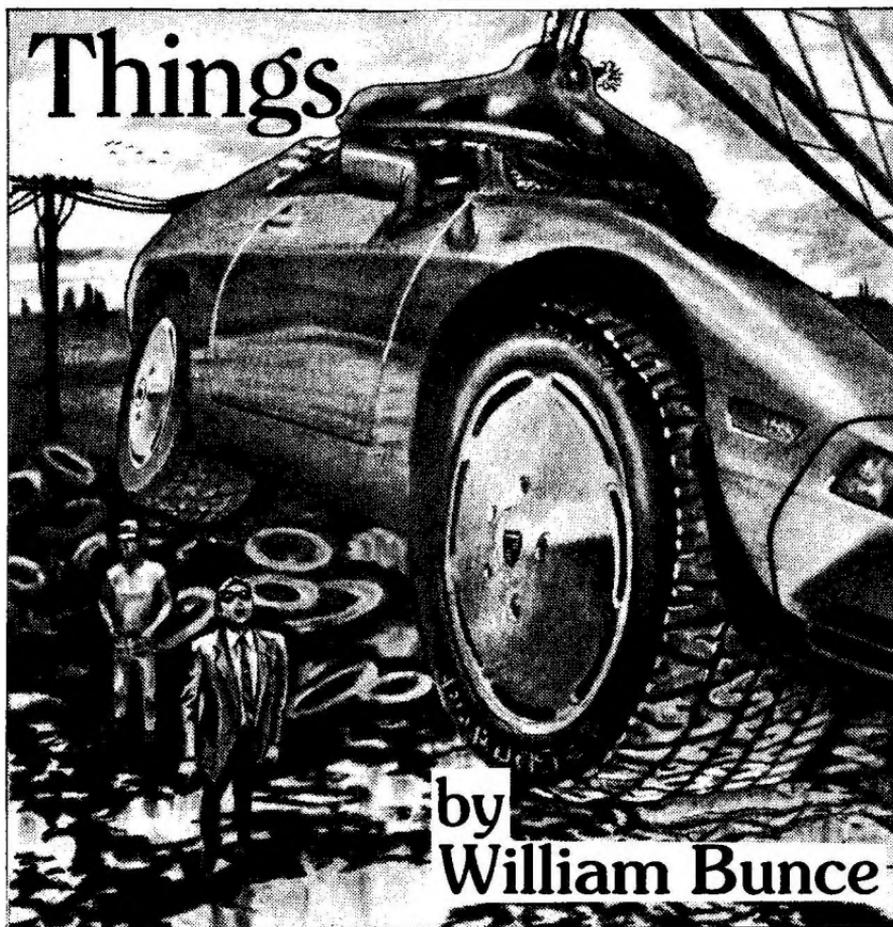
"Your first answer to a problem, Corcoran, is sometimes from ego, not common sense. Take the clock. No matter how smart I was, I couldn't make seven inches of wood fit where eight was necessary. By thinking it through, I wouldn't have had a problem at all. If I'd done the same at the supermarket when I saw those cards, I'd have realized I was reaching for a complicated solution when a simple one was three doors away. Shopping centers exist so that people can do most of their shopping in one place. The women all patronized the supermarket, so it was logical

that they also patronized the other stores, including the jewelry shop. Since we were concerned with jewelry, *that* had to be the common ground. Shopping at the supermarket had simply brought them together there. Did the chief chew you out about the smashed car?"

"Hey, the man appreciates what you did. He called the hospital to have your bills sent to him so he could put them through under civilian injured while assisting officer. More important than that, how mad is Edna? After that horoscope this morning, she probably blames me for that knee. Maybe I can get out from under by doing your shopping—"

Barney shrugged. "Maybe, but you'd better look up Scorpio in the morning paper before you go near her. If the conjunction of the planets with the stars or whatever calls for something like loving forgiveness, you have it made."

He tapped the shavings out of the mortise. "But if it doesn't, you'd better get out of town."



**L**oomer stepped out of his robe and into the shower. The water warmed his skin, turned it baby-pink. Gingerly he shampooed his sparse hair, the only thing that had worried him lately. The expensive conditioner he had been using for weeks hadn't stimulated much growth. He thought of an implant and how attractive he'd look to the broads. He was smart enough to know that money wasn't everything where women were concerned, but

there were always choices when you had the cash. If he were still out on the streets selling nickel bags of dope, he would be miserable, lonely—and bald. Luckily he had found another line of work.

The soothing spray suddenly turned to a thousand searing needles driven into his flesh. Scalding steam poured from the shower head. "Damn!" He fumbled for the temperature control and gave it a hard twist. It came off in his hand. He bounded out of the tub cursing. Still naked, he headed for the kitchen phone, dialed for the manager, and waited while a puddle collected at his feet.

"Jake Loomer here. You know, the sucker who just moved into your fancy Corinthian Towers? Listen, you creep, I'm paying a fortune for this penthouse." He glanced in disgust over his shoulder at the clouds of steam billowing out of the bathroom. "Well, the plumbing is crap. I almost scalded myself to death in your brand new john. If you don't get it fixed by the time I get back, you can start hunting for some other patsy to rent this dump." He slammed the phone down. Unaccountably, it broke into two pieces and fell onto the linoleum, tinkling cheerfully like a child's toy xylophone. He regarded it in disbelief. "Dammit, even the telephone company is going to hell."

An hour later, on the other side of town, he stepped out of his new steel-gray Porsche, paused for a moment to feed the meter a quarter then wiped away some dust from the hood. Best not to get attached, he warned himself, knowing he'd have to get another soon.

He walked into the La Boheme restaurant, past the clusters of empty tables, to the entrance of a dimly-lit room. Before he was allowed inside, a man the size of a football linebacker unbuttoned Loomer's sports jacket and ran his hands expertly around his body. Failing to find anything, the bodyguard motioned him into the back room.

There in a booth a very fat man sat facing the remnants of a spaghetti dinner. He pushed up the corners of his mouth when he saw Loomer. "Never a minute late."

"It's a business," said Loomer, sitting down. "Reputation's everything."

"Can't argue there. You're the only one we pay in advance." He slid a business card across the table. Loomer glanced at it. On one side was an ad for the Acme Pest Control Company and the slogan printed in big bold letters: *Guaranteed to kill 'em dead.*

Loomer looked up.

The fat man shrugged. "A private joke."

He flipped it over. On the other side was a sloppily handwritten name and address. His eyebrows rose ever so slightly. "A minister?"

"Bothering our people on the streets, wants them to see the light. A man so close to heaven maybe he belongs there." The fat man dabbed his lips with a napkin, but didn't get everything. "You have reservations?"

Loomer smiled and put the card in his top pocket. "It rains on churches like everywhere else."

"Glad you see it that way." He handed him a thick envelope. "Your car will be waiting, as usual."

Now that business was over, the man undid the top button of his silk shirt and began to butter a slice of garlic bread. "How many is this now?"

Loomer helped himself to some mints in a glass dish. "Thirty-two? Thirty-five? I've lost count."

"The cops never touch you?"

"Hard to prove anything without a body."

The fat man scraped the plate with the edge of his fork to get any stray strands that might have escaped. "That's what I never understood. What do you do with 'em, anyway? Acid? Cement?"

But Loomer hated small talk. He was already gone, counting the thick sheaf of bills on the way out.

Awaiting him was a parking ticket plastered under the wipers of the Porsche. He swore and glared at the meter. It registered zero, and he'd been inside less than fifteen minutes. "Is this what we pay taxes for?" he said aloud, although no one was there to listen. Then he gave it a kick, tore up the ticket, and stuffed the scraps into the coin slot.

That night Loomer was on his way to Carl's Scrap Metal Works with a smile on his lips and the good reverend in the trunk. He thought he should specialize in ministers. No whining for mercy to throw him off schedule. No parade of wallet-sized family pictures to arouse his sympathy. He didn't even wait until the old man had finished his prayers before pulling the trigger. Why waste time?

As usual, Carl was waiting on the platform in his Mets baseball cap and torn T-shirt. A rusting assortment of discarded automobiles rose above him, a Mount Fuji of junk. "Hi," he said. "Been waitin' for you."

Loomer got out of the car and walked over to the platform. After taking a good look around, he climbed up beside the junkman and said, "Got another one for you."

"Who-eee," squealed Carl, rising on the toes of his sneakers. "That's a beauty of a Porsche." Loomer winced because it sounded like *porch* when he said it. "Beats me why you want to trash these good cars all the time. I almost cried when the Mercedes went in."

"I get tired of 'em after a few weeks," Loomer said. "Anything against that?" He handed Carl a crisp hundred dollar bill.

"Well, I think . . ."

"Shouldn't do that," said Loomer, tapping Carl's cheek lightly. "You're no good at it." He gave him another hundred.

Carl grinned. His teeth were crooked and rotten. "The feeling just passed."

After Carl disappeared, Loomer walked up and down the platform whistling. In a minute the overhead crane slid along its tracks until it hovered over the Porsche like a monstrous bird of prey. The magnet thudded onto the roof, and the tires of the car sagged up to their rims. Loomer could almost close his eyes. This was the part he hated most: a beautiful thing gone to waste.

Loomer loved things. As a kid, he had nothing—not a lunch box for school, not a bike, not a cap gun. At Christmas he didn't even have a tree, never mind presents. His father skipped out when he was in diapers, and his mother shot every dime she could hustle into her arm. From the beginning he had to fend for himself. Now he was determined not only to have everything, but the very best of everything.

In a moment the car was dangling thirty feet in the air. Carl maneuvered it over what looked like a black rectangular hole in the ground, then cut the switch. It dropped in with a crash.

Loomer strolled over to watch the compactor at work. The giant pistons took turns slamming the Porsche against the sides of the rectangle. In the moonlight glass shattered, metal buckled like Play-doh. The car groaned like a dying man, and Loomer had to turn away.

When Carl hoisted it up again, it was roughly the size of a large freezer. He let it fall unceremoniously onto a stack of other rusting metal cubes. Sad, thought Loomer. The price you have to pay for killing someone. He thought about the minister inside: a man devoted to the rejection of worldly things had just become part of one. He might even have called it ironic if he had known what the word meant.

And Loomer was safe.

Outside there was a red Ferrari waiting, as arranged. Leather interior. Custom stereo system. As he glided through the empty

city streets, back towards Corinthian Towers, his fondness for the Porsche gradually faded. That's what he liked about things. They could always be replaced.

**T**he next morning started out worse than the previous one. The superintendent had replaced the shower control, but no matter which way he turned it, only ice cold water came out. Vowing to vacate at the end of the week, Loomer forced himself to stand under the freezing spray until his body turned numb.

Later, the toaster smoked for five minutes, then hurled the bread out with such velocity it hit Loomer square in the face. He walked into the vestibule with a angry red mark under his left eye.

Halfway down, the elevator started acting up. It went into a shaking fit that ricocheted Loomer from wall to wall like a snooker ball. Finally it settled down, but the doors opened up between floors, and he was forced to climb up to the lobby. As a parting insult, the elevator doors slammed shut like a guillotine, almost catching hold of his ankle.

He walked out into the sunshine and dabbed the sweat from his face with a handkerchief. A kid on a bicycle lost control, ran across both his feet, and Loomer backed up against the side of the building.

What was going on? Warily, he scanned the neighborhood for trouble. The world had turned into a dangerous place.

Glancing suspiciously in all directions, he walked down the street. This was his haircut day. In his thinning state, he really didn't need one, but it was a ritual he hated to abandon.

He waited at the curb until the light turned green, looked both ways just in case, then proceeded to the other side of the street. About midway across he saw the light change abruptly from green to red, bypassing amber entirely. Traffic surged around him. Horns blared. He shook his fist at a woman who made a rude gesture out of her window.

"This is crazy," he said to himself, once safely on the other side. "Crazy things are happening."

He hoped for peace in the barbershop. Mr. Olivetti always had a chair waiting for Loomer, no matter how many other customers were ahead of him. He knew who was important and who wasn't. Of course, the fifty dollar tips didn't hurt any.

Like a child when things aren't going his way, Loomer sulked with a blue apron tucked under his chin.

"Bad day?" said Olivetti.

"You wouldn't believe," said Loomer. "The worst."

The barber started talking about taxes' never going down, and Loomer closed his eyes.

He fell into a dream. He was a little kid on a picnic, about to bite into the biggest peanut butter and jelly sandwich he had ever seen. From out of nowhere a huge wasp with sinister orange eyes and antennae as big as a Buick's appeared. It chased him up and down the countryside until he was trapped in a kind of dead end canyon whose walls hemmed him in on all sides. No escape seemed possible, and he screamed as the infernal buzzing got closer and closer . . .

Loomer opened his eyes. Wide. Olivetti was shouting. The men in the seats put their magazines down and gaped in astonishment.

"I can't hold it!" shrieked Olivetti. The electric clippers writhed in his hands like a serpent. "It's gone berserk!"

Loomer tore the bib away and leaped from the chair. The top of his head felt icy cold; and when he saw himself in the mirror, he almost fainted. It looked as if he were wearing a white skullcap. "You'll pay for this, Olivetti. You'll pay for every damn hair!"

The barber had by this time tugged the electric cord from the wall and was gazing at the clippers in disbelief. "I can't understand it. The thing is brand new. It was as if it had a life of its own."

Loomer ran out onto the street with both hands on top of his head like a prisoner of war—not just because of embarrassment. An idea had come to him, an idea so bizarre his head felt about to explode.

He found a pay phone on the corner. The number he dialed rang three times before Carl picked up the receiver.

"What happens to the cars after you squish them?" Loomer yelled.

The junkman seemed as dull over the phone as he was in person.

"What do you mean?"

"Where do those big metal cubes go?"

"They truck 'em out."

"I know that, you dummy. Where do they go to?"

There was a pause and Carl's voice came back with a slight edge.

"They melt them down at the foundries."

"Then what happens to the stuff they melt?"

"Hell, I don't know. They sell it to use for everything made out of metal. It gets all mixed in."

"Like elevators? Could they use it for elevators?" Loomer's voice was now high and frantic.

"Why not?"

"Street lights?"

"I guess."

He slid a hand over the top of his head. It sent shivers down his spine. "Hair clippers?"

"I suppose so. Say, if you're going to call me names, you can just drive your cars over a cliff, buddy."

It only took Loomer a few minutes to get to his Ferarri. When he emerged from the underground parking lot, the wooden gate descended in front of the car, but he splintered through it anyway. He realized his only chance was to get out of town, escape to the country, away from anything made of metal. In his panicky state, he pictured creatures of molten metal, suffused with the flesh, blood, even the souls of his victims—all arrayed against him like a vast, unconquerable army.

He waited impatiently at the turnpike entrance, behind a tractor trailer. A problem with the automatic ticket dispenser seemed to have halted the progress of the line. Two or three blue-uniformed cops huddled around it trading ideas. He thought about switching lanes, but the cars on both sides hemmed him in.

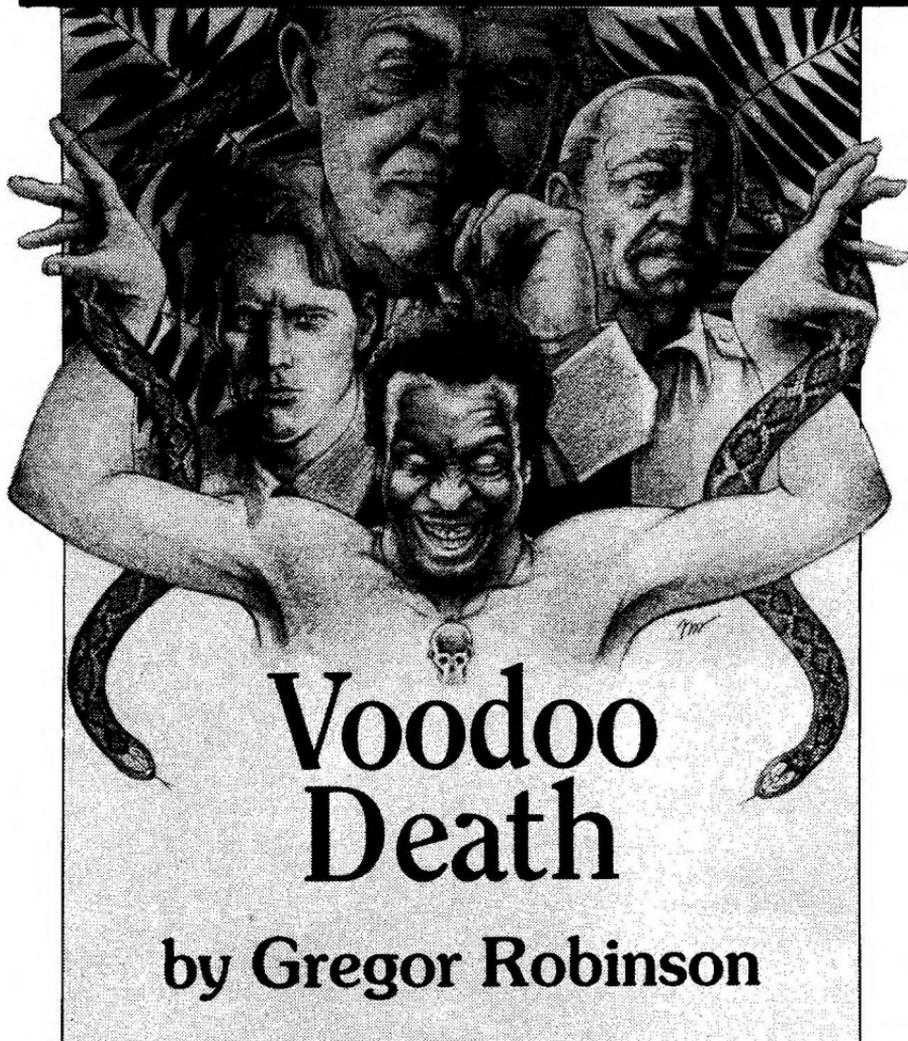
Loomer turned on the radio, and settled back for a long wait. There was no rush. He had plenty of money laid away to take a much needed rest, and as for the hair—he stroked his hand over his shining scalp—he was sure Telly Savalas had no trouble getting dates. Once he got on that turnpike south, his ordeal would be over.

A couple of annoyed drivers started blowing their horns, and Loomer added his to the chorus. Dumb cops, he thought, couldn't fix a ticket machine to save their lives.

Glancing casually into his rear view mirror, he noticed a diesel truck looming up behind him. There was something about its orange fog lights glinting in the afternoon sun that made him sit bolt upright in his seat.

It didn't slow down. To his horror he saw the huge eighteen-wheeler begin to accelerate as it headed straight for him. For a split second, he could see the driver struggle frantically with the brakes, then at the last possible moment yank helplessly on the horn. The unearthly wail easily drowned out Loomer's last scream.

The new Ferarri was slammed between the two massive trucks. Glass shattered, metal buckled like Play-doh. The Ferrari's delicate chassis was bludgeoned into a compact mass of steaming metal, roughly the size of a large freezer.



**I**t was past midnight and we had finished our business, but Irish whisky and a steady rain, both rare in the islands, kept us late. Mrs. Hamish had cleared the dinner dishes and gone to bed. Now the whisky

bottle stood almost empty on the table between us and we sat silent, listening to the gurgle of the water running down the roof and into the concrete cistern beneath the floor. The rain seemed to be letting up — it

was difficult to tell with that sibilant rush, the drumming on the window panes; I was half hypnotized — but still it drowned the sound of the surf below. I was planning to walk home along the path which wound through the scrub growth above the beach; it was the shortest route from Burnett's house back to the village. I waited for the rain to stop.

"Not so much the rain as the night you have to be careful of," said Burnett. "Voodoo," he added, with exaggerated dark meaning. "Feeding the *loa*."

I told him I wasn't afraid of the dark. I wasn't superstitious.

"All the same, easy to get lost out there." He gestured towards the black window. "The paths crisscross and twist back on one another. Before you know it, you wind up in the bush at the other end of the island. Completely lost. Zombie country." He grinned. I didn't. He said, "Tell you what: when the rain lets up, I'll get Tommas to drive you home."

Tommas was one of the Haitian refugees. He lived in a wood hut on a corner of Burnett's property, in return for which he did a little work around the plantation. Tommas would resent being roused in the middle of the night to drive me home — he was sullen at the sunniest of times — and I pre-

ferred to walk. But there was little choice, for Burnett had begun the laborious business of cleaning his pipe; soon he was filling it with fresh tobacco. He said:

"I ever tell you about Taff?"

There was no need to answer; Burnett was on his way. Sitting there with a day's growth of beard and his foul pipe, he looked like an old sailor, the kind who, if you saw him at a bar, you'd give a wide berth. The bright gleam of his blue eyes made him look a little off. But he was a director of the bank, and Healey had advised me to humor him. Several times a year Burnett flew to Montreal for board meetings, a different person there, I supposed, in his grey suit and tightly-knotted tie, than he was here. If he had a story to tell, I was the one to listen: an employee's obligation. He was a widower and he liked to talk. In Montreal he had this reputation — rather fierce. But living alone in the islands had made him garrulous and a terrible gossip. I poured myself more whisky, just a drop, the one I had declined a moment before. In fact I had heard snatches of the Taff story; it was almost island myth.

"Taffy, everyone called him," Burnett said. "He was an Englishman. Came out to see about starting up some kind of school

here. Actually, I had met him in London several years earlier, through my squash club — he still had the damn tie, used to wear it to the Yacht Club on Saturday nights. In England he had been a schoolteacher for a time, then some kind of businessman. Direct sales and patent medicines, that kind of thing; you didn't want to go into it too closely. He seemed to think I could be of some help in this school project of his. He was here maybe six or seven months altogether, but it never came to anything. He was like you, not afraid of the dark, said you could never get lost.

"'Whatever happens, you come to the sea,' he used to say; 'all you do is follow the coast. One way or another, you come to a pier, somebody's house. Then you're home free.'"

"Something in that," I said.

Burnett continued, ignoring my comment.

"Said he didn't believe in voodoo either, of course, made a great point of it. Called it mumbo-jumbo, the going into trances and so forth, a religion for the ignorant. After all, he was English. 'The Brits are down to earth. Unhysterical,' he said. 'Sensible people. You saw it in the Blitz, old boy.' Who was going to argue with that?"

"Did he actually call you 'old boy?'" I said.

"All the time," said Burnett. "Hexing, spells, the pointing of the bone, whatever you call it — he didn't believe in that either."

"Do you?" I asked. I knew it was all nonsense.

"No," said Burnett, "or rather, I don't like to say. It's like the Holy Ghost, the Trinity. What's all that supposed to mean? You tell me. But here it's in the air. Even the villagers more than half believe, and they're not Haitian. Mrs. Hamish, the housekeeper, you saw her, she's a sensible woman. But talk to her on Christmas Eve, or New Year's. She won't leave the village those nights, and I know what she means. On those nights you can hear the drums from the center of the island wherever you go. If you interrupt the ceremony, the *hougan* will throw a curse." He looked at me, pausing for effect. Then he said, "Have you ever seen a zombie?"

"Only on the *Late Show*," I said.

"You know the fellow Touissant who sweeps the sidewalk in front of the hotel, cleans up the garbage bins?"

I laughed. "Slow," I said, "not a zombie. Mentally backward. He's lucky he lives in the islands. In a big city, he'd be out on the streets."

"Touissant used to work on

a forest plantation on Great Abaco," Burnett said. "After the place closed he wandered around in the scrub behind Marsh Harbour. People gave him food. Then one of the refugees saw him, fellow from the north, near Cap Haitien. Said he knew Touissant, that he had died several years before. No one would have much to do with him after that; that's when Madame Grumbacher at the hotel brought him over here."

"What do you think?" I asked.

"It's not what I think," said Burnett. "It's what happens. The *hougan* throws a curse and the victim gets sick and dies."

"Do people actually get sick and die?" I asked.

"Of course people get sick and die. All the time. Always will. Nothing to do with voodoo. Plain illness or maybe poison, that's what Taffy used to say. He'd researched it."

Taffy sounded sensible to me.

"Sensible," said Burnett, "but he had a weakness."

"Who doesn't?" I said.

"He liked to gamble. People on the island didn't notice it at first. I certainly didn't. Gamblers are like alcoholics, you know; they hide their addiction. When Taffy was first here he used to travel a great deal, almost every week. He said it was to talk to people about the school, financial people and so

on, government officials. But it was always to places like Grand Cayman and Free Town, places where they have the casinos. Easy money.

"The school plan of his should have given us a clue: he kept changing the notion of what the thing was for. At first it was supposed to be art and drama, something Taffy was interested in — he had even joined the Strawboaters, who perform in the Methodist Chapel; did a very nice Boris Karloff in *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Then he started talking about the project as some kind of science school, a center for human studies, like that place they have over on Andros. Learn all about plants, he said. Finally it was anthropology, which was logical because Taffy was something of an anthropologist himself. There would be field trips to remote places, to see how the backward people live, examine the connections with Africa and so on.

"But the real purpose was money. Whatever else the school was for, it was going to make pots of money. 'Snob appeal, old boy,' he told me. 'A place for rich people to send the brats. Broken homes. We'll get them from all over — the States, Britain, Latin America.' He wanted me to invest, so I heard all about it; of course he knew I

was connected with the bank. The pitch was get rich quick. I believe he collected quite a lot of money.

"Anyway, it turned out he had visited every casino in the West Indies. Then he started gambling here on the island — perhaps they didn't want him elsewhere, I don't know. There's a game at the Majestic Hotel on Saturday nights when the dart league plays; he got into that, but it was hardly enough action for a real gambler like he was. He asked around — at the pool room at the Riverside, at the marina, down at the government pier. Word got out. One day Ti-Paul approached, the fellow who works on the ferry, asked Taffy if he would like to play down at Annie's place."

Burnett had my interest. Annie's was at the far end of the island, at the mouth of a broad, shallow lagoon known as Fish Mangrove. It was where the drug shippers gathered; at least, that is what everyone in the village believed. If the wind was low, you could sometimes hear the throaty roar of speedboats leaving the lagoon in the middle of the night. I had never been to Annie's place. But it was what I wanted to hear about: a hint of corrupt romance.

"There's often a big game at

Annie's," Burnett said, "people from Miami, the other islands. The first few nights Taffy did well, seemed to know what he was doing. But of course one night he began to lose, which always happens to gamblers, and he kept playing and playing. He ended up losing badly. Everything he had, and he had markers down for fifteen thousand dollars. That pilot was there, Wade, and he had brought some fellows from Colombia. You lose to them, you pay. I suppose Taffy suddenly seemed like only an Englishman schoolteacher, a shabby con-man. Scared. Small time.

"Ti-Paul took Taffy into the back room, to try and work something out. There was some difficulty. Ti-Paul and some of the other Haitians run a little loan operation out of the Riverside, but they couldn't do the whole amount. It may not seem like a lot to us, but fifteen thousand was too much for them to raise, and they were nervous. Annie herself came up with about a thousand dollars; she didn't want trouble at her place. Ti-Paul could raise almost eleven thousand, but, as I say, he was wary about making the loan. That's when they called me on the radiophone."

"You?"

"Tommas was out at Annie's that night, drinking at the bar;

he had introduced Taffy to the game after all. He backed up Taffy's claim that he knew me. They called me at around midnight. I agreed to put up the other three thousand; it sounded serious for Taffy — what could I say? Naturally they wanted cash. I had the money in the house; that was before we had a branch of the bank here on the island. Tommas and Ti-Paul came over immediately.

"That was the most I would do. I told them that I knew Taffy, that he had been a businessman in London — stretching a point — that he was starting a school on the island. But I wouldn't take responsibility for his loans. I suppose it was enough that I even knew him because in the end they agreed to lend him the rest.

"Looking back on it now, I don't think Taffy ever had any intention of repaying Ti-Paul. He paid Annie back almost right away — he had his reputation as a gambler and his potential investors to think of, after all. Annie knew people who came by airplane, and that kind of news travels fast — and he managed to pay me a little within a few weeks. But the big debt to Ti-Paul kept dragging on and on. Tommas came to see me about it. Said he had heard if Taffy didn't pay there was going to be a ceremony in the

forest; Ti-Paul would throw a curse. Turn Taffy into a slave."

"A slave?" I had to smile.

"A zombie — just what we were talking about. That's the drill, you know. They kill the fellow with magic, then bring him back — the undead — to be a slave. Like Touissant."

"Right." The rain had stopped. I made a move to leave, but Burnett ignored it. He said:

"I asked him if Ti-Paul thought that kind of threat would induce Taffy to pay up. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"But, you see, the threat of sorcery was the way Ti-Paul's operation worked. Everybody knew about it. It was the best means of enforcement they knew; no goons necessary: they only lent to believers. Taffy started receiving messages — a skull and cross drawn with chalk on the sidewalk in front of his house, a couple of bloodied white feathers and a rock thrown through the window, ugly printed notes. He showed a couple of the notes to me. Then a peculiar thing started to happen: people began to ignore Taffy. It began with the Haitians, of course; it's part of the process. They walked past him in the street as though he wasn't there. All the Haitians did it: Madame Dell who does the laundry, Pierre down at the wharf, the fellows at the ma-

rina. Ti-Paul no longer harangued Taffy about the loan. The debt was no longer an issue. And it spread to the villagers. They hardly spoke with Taffy, and they spoke about him even less, as though his fate were a foregone conclusion. As for the tourists and expatriates, those of us who were here watched with amazement.

"One morning Taffy opened the door of the little cottage he had rented to find a dead chicken nailed to the frame. The throat had been slit and blood streaked down the wood onto his floor. There was a cross and a circle of white powder on the steps.

"The next day or two Taffy visited all the merchants with whom he had done business. He was settling up his bills — the little ones at least. He paid Drover down at the grocery store. He paid Mrs. Rainy. He paid Madame Dell, who had complained to everyone that he was always weeks behind. He made a great show of it; the whole village saw. I was in town for lunch and I met Taffy at the bar of the Majestic; it was before the tourists and charter yachts had arrived, the time of year when the locals use the place. I had heard about the chicken nailed to the doorway. Mrs. Hamish had told me over breakfast; news like that travels like wildfire. But I was sur-

prised at Taffy's flurry of activity. I asked him what he was up to.

"'Voodoo, old boy,' he said in a flat voice. 'Afraid I've become a believer.' I thought he looked a little wan. Then he winked. He never offered to pay me.

"One night, less than a week later, I heard a drumbeat from the woods. Mrs. Hamish had just brought in the coffee tray when it began, and she looked up with a frown. As far as either of us knew it was not a religious day nor a special occasion. I strolled over to the garage to speak with Tommas. He was not a believer but he respected those who were, and he usually knew what was going on. Not this time. The drumming was closer than usual; it seemed to be coming from the trees out beyond my tennis court, above the beach path. I suggested we go and have a look.

"We followed the drumbeat into the woods — it was in fact much farther back than it sounded — until we saw light wavering through the trees. The light became brighter. We saw storm lanterns hanging from branches around a little clearing. There was a fire in the middle of the clearing, and a figure dancing around the fire, beating the drum and shaking a bone rattle. In the woods

nearby there was movement, people approaching quietly through the flickering darkness, attracted like us, by the drums and fire.

"When we had crept to within about twenty-five feet of the fire, Tommas held out his arm and whispered, no farther. We were part of a silent circle among the trees, watching. I could see the figure by the light of the fire, dancing in a kind of trance, humming a low drone. A woman advanced from the shadows into the circle of light, dancing to the rhythm of the drum. She moved rigidly, like a person of wood. Her face was frozen, her eyes wide, and she howled. Another woman came into the circle, then a third. Ti-Paul put the drum down. He kept up the guttural humming.

"Near the fire was an old oil barrel cut in half, the kind they use to make steel drums, and a neat pile of broad green leaves and tiny bones. Ti-Paul put the leaves and bones into the oil drum, then began beating them with a stick. One of the possessed women picked up another stick and began beating along with him. When the contents of the drum had been pounded into powder, the *hougan* bent down and picked something from the ground. He held it high above his head. It was a doll-shaped bundle of

sticks, around which was knotted Taffy's Racquets Club necktie. A *paquet*. There was a howl from the silent circle in the woods. Ti-Paul hurled the *paquet* into the oil drum. The women continued beating with their sticks; they pulverized that little bundle. Ti-Paul threw the whole works into the fire with a burst of flame and a wild shout.

"Taffy was in the clinic two days later. He had been off the island and was in the air over the Berry Islands when the first symptoms appeared. He began to feel faint and nauseated. His skin was cold and moist, his pulse became very rapid."

"The symptoms of severe shock," I said, "continual adrenal overload. Fear. I have heard of such things after a car crash."

"Why did it hit him at that particular moment?" Burnett said. "He did not know when the magic was being done, or if it had been done."

I had no answer for that.

"By the time he went into the clinic here that evening, he was coughing. His blood pressure was very low, his red blood count high, he had lost weight. He asked for me. Naturally I went to see him. By that time he was having great difficulty breathing. Said something about the box, something about its

working right. Delirious, I'd say. Then he passed out.

"By morning Taffy was dead. A mysterious ailment, but it was no mystery to the Haitians. Ti-Paul was a *hougan*. Taffy was buried the next day. It was late summer, and they don't keep bodies long around here. There was a little service at the Methodist Chapel where Taffy had done his acting. I heard that there was another ceremony in the woods that night, a kind of mourning ritual, meant to guide Taffy safely into the land of the dead. Too bad about Mr. Taff, people in the village said. You could be sure that they would not fall behind on *their* payments to Ti-Paul."

Burnett paused to relight his pipe.

"You're telling me they killed him with voodoo?" I said.

"You have nothing to worry about. You're not a believer."

"Is the body still in the graveyard?"

"They say not, of course," said Burnett. "Lives in the bush somewhere, hidden away. I haven't the slightest idea. You walk home through the scrub tonight, you might see him."

It had started to rain again. Burnett rose from his chair and went over to the walkie-talkie that connected him with the out buildings. A few minutes later I said good night and climbed

into the back of the Jeep.

Bouncing along the gravel road, I thought about the story of Taffy. There was something wrong. The delirious comments? Perhaps. He had known something was up — Burnett said he had looked wan, yet he winked. Why the wink? Taffy was a con man; he had come to the islands to make money. In the rear view mirror I saw the flash of Tommas' bright eyes.

"You know anything about a fellow called Mr. Taff?" I said.

"What do you want to know?" said Tommas.

"Is he a zombie?"

"No such thing." I had felt like a fool asking the question, and his answer made me feel it more. Tommas had had a couple of books of poetry published in St. Lucia — a refugee who wrote. He was used to fending off the idle curiosity of people like me. I was a banker. I rephrased the question.

"Is his body still in the graveyard?"

Tommas did not answer right away. Then he said,

"You still writing, Mr. Ren-nison?" Tommas had come to see me when I had first come to the islands.

"Stories only, Tommas. And reports for the bank. No poetry." I supposed I was still a disappointment. Tommas shrugged his shoulders and looked away,

now considering. Then he said:

"You want to see Mr. Taff?"

I nodded. Tommas slowed the car to a stop, then threw it into reverse.

"We're going to see him now?"

Tommas didn't answer; by then we were turned around and headed south. We drove past the gates to Burnett's long gravel driveway, past the narrows where the Atlantic almost touched the sea, past the fork in the road that led off towards the cove and Annie's place. We turned off several times and soon were driving over rough and rocky tracks between the trees. We drove away from the ocean, away from the cover of the sea grapes and the warm rustle of the palm trees. The weather had quickly changed as it does in the tropics; from behind fast-moving clouds came the night sky. At the side of the road, the white ironwood and quicksilver bushes looked deathly pale in the light of the half-moon. This was a part of the island to which I had never been, and the trees were ragged and taller than any I had seen. The moon was soon lost behind a tangled skein of scraggly branches. We lurched to a sudden stop.

For almost half an hour we scrambled on twisting paths. The going was hard. The islands are made of coral rock

— the detritus of tiny sea creatures not so different from those that still lived at the edge of the growing reef — and everywhere that wind and rain had worn the stone away, rough growth had gained a foothold. We walked between that growth, over pitted, jagged rock. I could feel the thin rubber of my moccasins being sliced at every step. It was impossible then to know that we were on an island in the tropics. Burnett had been right: it was easy to become lost. I stopped to catch my breath. The luminous dial on my watch showed the time to be quarter to two.

"Not much farther," said Tommas. He pointed. Through the trees I saw light.

I had heard about the Haitian refugees whom no one knew, those who lived in the interior of these out islands, but I had never seen them. I saw now that the places where they lived were not even huts but leanto's of gum wood and spindly pine. There were a couple of fires and several lanterns around the edge of the camp. Silent figures watched us.

Tommas said a few words in French. We were led through the ragged village to a large hut, at the opposite end of the clearing from where we had entered. Taffy sat on a wooden bench outside the hut. He was

round-faced, pink, short, and balding; his steel-rimmed glasses glistened in the light of the crackling fire. He wore what must have once been a fine linen suit, now tattered, grey, and stained. His mouth was slightly open, and there was a raised streak of fleshy skin along his right temple, the badly healed scar of a wound. I had heard about this kind of mark: the wound of a coffin nail. Yet he didn't look alarming. There was nothing strange about him until we tried to speak.

"Mr. Taff?" I said.

Nothing.

"Taffy? I am a friend of Burnett's." He stared straight ahead, the same empty look about him. He was like an autistic child. Around us a group of Haitians watched. Someone spoke in Creole.

"They say he sleeps most of the day," Tommas said, translating.

"I am a friend of Burnett's," I said to Taffy, keeping it up — trying to engage him. "I am with the bank."

I thought I detected a flicker, but there was nothing. No change in the blank look. I turned to Tommas.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"He was called back from the dead the night after he was buried. Ti-Paul brought him here."

"Where is Ti-Paul?"

"Back in Haiti," said Tommas. "Came into some trouble with the believers."

There was a stirring behind us. Taffy was looking up. His lips moved.

"The box . . ." His voice was a raspy whisper. Filled with sudden energy, he rose and ran towards me; with his hands outstretched he lunged for my throat. There was sweat on his chin, a feral look of madness about the eyes. They grabbed him and he was immediately still; the frenzy vanished, and Taffy turned his stare once more to the ground. He said nothing more.

Driving home, Tommas said:

"He knew about the magic, how they do it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"He was trying to fool the spirits."

As a part of my job I traveled to Nassau every other week to visit with the regional head office, to give my paltry reports on Caribbean country analysis: who had oil; who had sugar; how the refineries were doing; estimates of political stability — that kind of thing. (We never mentioned drugs, which was where most of the money came from.) I also occasionally flew to Miami. Coming home from those trips, I generally stopped

off at the branch across the channel to chat with Healey. He supervised all the out island branches.

I told him about Taffy. I had at last met a zombie.

"No way," said Healey. "He knew the whole rigmarole. They do it all with plants and the blood of sea creatures, mashed up bones, you know, stuff like that. Taff told me."

"Plants?"

"Right on. Like an anesthetic. It puts you out for a few days, makes you look dead. They put you in the cold, cold ground. Then the brothers come and dig you up. 'Course, you wake up down there, you go sort of mental. A lot of them never recover, especially if they really think they've been brought back from the dead. Walk around slack-jawed, know what I mean? But Taffy was no Haitian. He knew all about it."

"How did you know Taff?"

"Came in here trying to get money. Said he was onto a pharmaceutical breakthrough. Then it was some school, money for a nature camp or something. Pipedreams. He had a safety deposit box downstairs."

The box. "Is it still there?" I asked.

"Suppose so," said Healey. "You know, another fellow was in here a few months ago asking about Taff's money. Skinny

black guy. Didn't tell him a thing, of course. Bahamian bank law."

It was strictly against the rules, but Healey opened the box. We found about fifty-five thousand dollars. Also notes on various types of plants, meticulous notes, in Taff's handwriting. He must have done them in London before he came out. There was a description of the symptoms: respiratory difficulties, weight loss, hypothermia, and hypotension. The poison was topical; it was placed in a white powder which was laid across the victim's doorway and, like drugs for seasickness, was absorbed into the bloodstream through the skin.

"They were in cahoots," I said. "It was a way for Ti-Paul to get the money he was owed. Taffy probably planned it that way from the beginning — even the losing at gambling. And they held the ceremony close to the village — where people like you and the others would hear it and investigate. After that I think it became a question of who was cheating who."

This was several days later, Saturday lunch. Burnett and I were eating conch fritters and drinking Beck's beer at the Poolside Bar of the Majestic.

"You're saying it was a scam — they were in it together?"

"They must have been. Taff had to be certain he would be dug up. Only Ti-Paul could know it was a fake. Taff would be dead, killed for gambling debts, even buried — and those from whom he had wheedled capital for his school scheme would be out the money for good. Like you *are* out the money for good. When he was brought back from the dead, he would make his way to Marsh Harbour, get the money — which had all been converted to cash and put into the safety deposit box — pay off Ti-Paul, and vanish. But something went wrong. He was given too much of the drug. He suffered from lack of oxygen down there — I don't know exactly."

"The trouble with you," said Burnett, "is that you're too removed." He was annoyed. I had forgotten how much he loved the islands and his fantastic stories. "Too analytical."

"How's that?" I asked.

"You've been in banking too long. You have an explanation

for everything. All this business of topical poisons and comas. I tell you, there are two worlds: the scientific and the spiritual, religious — call it what you like. At some point, those worlds cross over. It's like the Catholic Mass. When does the wine become the Blood of Christ? It all depends on what you believe. You're quite right, I said he winked. But that was bravado. He looked terrible — and this was well before any illness. I think he half believed even then. Faith is everything — like fear. What Taff doubted was not voodoo but science. Perhaps he believed he could cheat death. You never can. Forget about overdoses of poison or lack of oxygen. He is what you saw."

"What's that?" I said.

"The living dead."

Burnett had been in the islands too long. He believed in voodoo death. I knew that what I had seen in the woods was the wretched victim of a botched murder.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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One plus one = one? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), 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.

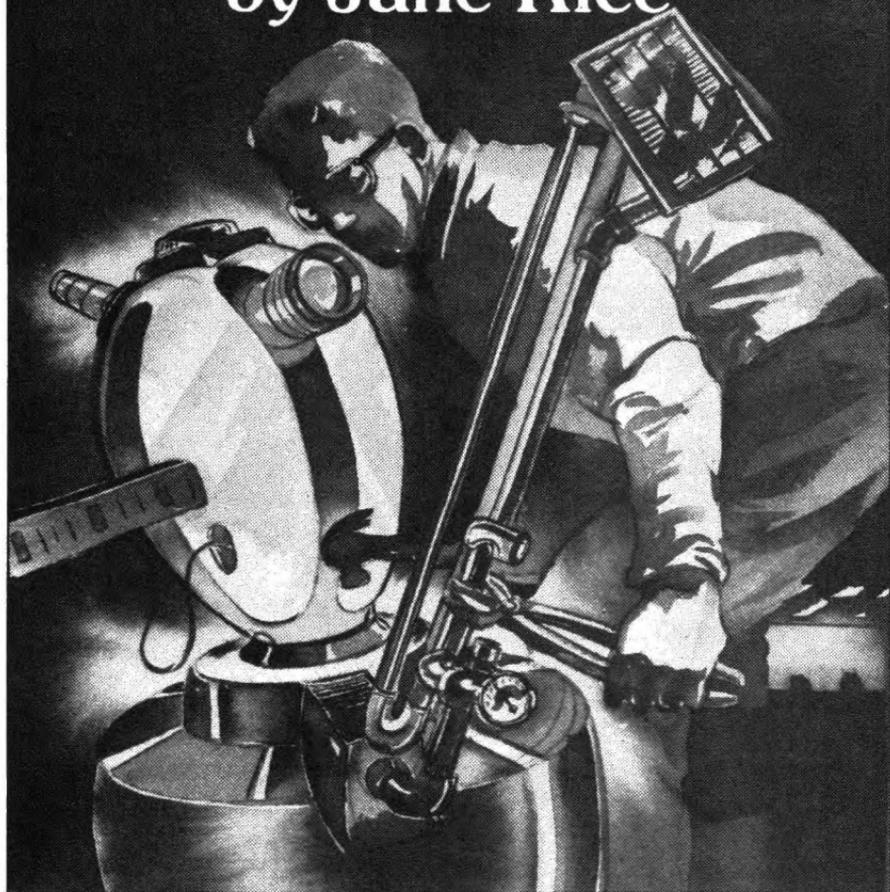
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The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# The Misfits

by Jane Rice



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**T**he Pritchetts' side street environs of timeworn porch houses were all alike, except for a personal touch here and there—a flamingo yard ornament, a yucca plant, a border of conch shells, a horseshoe nailed above the door of a weary garage. The residents, too, had a certain sameness, but in every neighborhood there are a few eccentrics. Misfits. The Pritchetts themselves could have been termed prime examples.

Reticent, thick-spectacled Elmo Pritchett, though seldom seen, had acquired an image of always being slightly singed around the edges for the reason that his inventive endeavors had earned a reputation for self-destructing in a flurry of pyrotechnics. Nothing to get alarmed about, repetition having borne out the trickle-down across back yard fences that Elmo's ventures, like Elmo, weren't going to set anything on fire. The neighborhood consensus was that he was nuts and that his unassuming, sparrowy little wife, Lottie, had her work cut out for her.

Not that Lottie Pritchett minded. She was convinced that someday Elmo's preoccupation with interstitial space, whatever that was, would cool and he would begin to invent novelty gadgets, and then the shoe would be on the other foot.

Meanwhile, she considered her part-time job as a clerk in a shopping center hardware store a godsend that enabled her to augment the shrinking royalties Elmo derived from earlier patents for machine tools that were fast becoming obsolete.

Lottie Pritchett might not be much to look at, or listen to, but she knew how to make ends meet.

However, neighborhood-wise, the consensus was that Lottie was likewise nuts, for the reason that she never threw anything away and, as a consequence—

“—couldn't begin to count the odds and ends of chinaware, the knickknacks, the boxes of gewgaws. Balls of yarn. Goldfish,” Annie Biggs told her new neighbor Roxine (call me Roxie) Moore, across their mutual back yard fence, to alert her quick-in-a-hurry as to what to expect of the Pritchetts, who lived on the other side of the Moores, across the opposite fence.

“Boxes of *goldfish*?” The penciled Moore eyebrows arched as far as they would go.

Annie, noting that one of call-me-Roxie's earrings had a pearl missing, set the record straight about the goldfish, which were alive and thriving in their numerous bowls along with a sprinkling of snails and wee turtles.

"I suppose it's her way of compensating for not having had a family," Annie said, thinking that call-me-Roxie's scoop-neck sundress didn't leave much to the imagination, for someone with such a generous upper story. "Not that that's anything against her," she amended hurriedly, some deepdown instinct notifying her that it was highly unlikely call-me-Roxie, despite her endowments, had produced any offspring either.

"I know many's the time, if I'd had my druthers, I'd have stopped at five." Annie gave a light conspiratorial laugh to indicate that her Matt had been some boy-o in his heyday.

She hesitated. Took the plunge. "Just you and the mister?"

"And Jewel," Roxine Moore added absently, her attention having wandered to Annie's hollyhocks.

Annie, who had named her three daughters Opal, Pearl, and Ruby, felt her heart beginning to thaw towards this showy replacement for Mary Murphy, her previous next door sidekick, who, having become increasingly forgetful and prone to "sinking spells," had been packed up willynilly by an officious daughter and whisked off before you could say whipperstitch.

"Jewel," Annie repeated.

"What a lovely name. And somewhat of a coincidence, you might say. I named my first three girls Opal, Pearl, and—"

"Clint calls her Jocko," Roxine Moore went on, her tone revealing this was becoming a bone of contention.

Annie, who had been a slow learner and had suffered the nickname "Ninny" until she'd blossomed out in junior high, elevated her own eyebrows in silent commentary on "Clint's" lack of sensitivity. One eyebrow lowered a notch. By the same token, maybe Jewel was the kind who, these days, "monkeyed around" and, in between, came home to roost. Sophie Carrico's son Jack, who was on the rebound, would be a sitting duck if Jewel was in his age bracket.

"Nicknames come and go," Annie said. And, innocently, "How old is she?"

"She'll be a year in September." Roxine reached across the fence, pulled a blossom from one of the hollyhocks, and regarded it curiously.

"A year," Annie echoed, thinking *that must've come as an almighty surprise*.

"I'd like to have another one," Roxine Moore said, using the hollyhock flower to flick a ladybug from her upper arm, "but Clint says nix to that. He says as far as he's concerned one is

one too many. He'd sell Jewel in a minute, if I'd let him."

Annie, thinking possibly she hadn't heard correctly, bleated, "Sell her?"

"Ummmm. But I'm not about to give in. Not yet. And if he does, without my say-so, it's going to be goodbye Charley and I don't mean maybe." She tucked the flower behind an ear. The penciled brows lifted in query. "Do you have a kitty?"

Back in her kitchen, Annie Biggs put the kettle on for a mid-morning break. "Name's Moore," she said to her husband, who was up on a stepladder giving the ceiling a coat of paint. "Roxine and Clint, which don't sound like names you'd be baptized with. Just the both of them, which might could be why they moved in without much to speak of in the way of furniture, even if they do have a brass bed. Though, if you ask me, in my opinion they get repossessed a lot."

She got down the sugar bowl, two mugs, and a box of tea bags. "Unless I miss my guess from here to Okeechobee, they aren't hitting it off too good. She has this cat she dotes on and he uses it for an excuse to get her goat. He sounds like he might could have a mean streak in him."

She placed a tea bag in each mug. Observed, "I wish they'd

quit using plastic strings and go back to string strings. I'm gong to try a different brand next time." She held the box at arm's length to read the brand name, as if the tea had been foisted off on her by an unscrupulous grocer. "There was this purple-green bruise on the inside of her arm and how're you going to knock up against something with the inside of your arm?"

Annie pursed her lips, reflecting on call-me-Roxie's complete lack of interest in Opal and Pearl, much less Ruby, and the decorative use of the hollyhock flower that had been appropriated without so much as a by-your-leave. "She's short on manners and long on splash."

She sniffed, sampling the air. "If you ask me, Elmo Pritchett is trying to invent a substitute for brimstone."

She switched on the radio, flipped the dial to a quartet of gospel singers. "Water's on the boil. You want plain or jelly doughnut? *Matt*, I'm *talking* to you."

Elmo Pritchett emerged, coughing and slapping at himself, from the outside entrance to his basement workshop.

Forewarned by Annie Biggs as to Elmo's occupational hazards, Roxine pretended to be oblivious. Heading for her back

steps, her cat cradled in her arms, she glimpsed a movement at her kitchen window. The shadow of a smile twitched a corner of her mouth. Every once in a while she had to make Clint sit up and take notice and, after their last go-round, now was a golden opportunity. With Jewel for conversational openers, this Pritchett individual would be a pushover.

She changed her course and approached their front fence. "Are you all right?"

Elmo, his coughing beginning to subside, nodded that he was all right.

"Are you sure?" She let a note of concern seep into her voice.

Elmo nodded that he was sure. Mulling over the possibility that he had miscalculated the force of gravity on light, thereby negating prismatic inversion as a primary factor in the fusion of dimension, he administered a final slap here and there.

Roxine gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. "Well, you certainly gave *me* a scare. Oh, I'm your new neighbor. Me and my hubby, that is. We're the Moores. Clint and Roxine . . . Roxie for short." She tightened her grip on Jewel, who was becoming restive. "And this is a third Moore. Jewel's her name."

She hoisted Jewel a trifle higher and waited for Elmo Pritchett to say, "Hi there,

Jewel," and ask what kind of a cat Jewel was. Everybody always did, usually. When she replied, "Siamese," more often than not those of the masculine gender who weren't in any hurry to terminate the encounter generally kidded, "Where's the other one?" Jewel was practically a foolproof ice breaker.

Elmo Pritchett contemplated the middle distance, as if hardening to a distant drummer.

"A third more joules?" he murmured. The myopic eyes behind the thick glasses became mere squints. His speculative "Hah" acknowledged a fresh hypothesis. The proportionate mass, if *extensive*, would necessitate greater force to counteract inertia. . . . Therefore, induction would *require* more energy per unit volume. At the terminus of gravitational acceleration it might work. Worth the try!

He focused in on Roxine Moore, and before she could collect her wits or discern his intent, he advanced to the fence and grasped her shoulders. "Yes! Yes!" He emphasized each exuberant "Yes!" with an equally exuberant shake.

Jewel, having taken advantage of the opportunity to abandon ship the instant Elmo took over, padded up the Moores' kitchen steps, jumped on the screen door, and, in seeming emulation of what was tran-

spiring down by the fence, shook the screen back and forth, undeterred by a spate of expletives from the interior.

"What was all that about?" Clint Moore inquired in a tone of bored indifference.

Roxine suppressed a smile, finished wiping her shoulders with a damp tea towel, tossed the towel on the counter. "Don't ask me. I'll say this, he's not the usual."

"You can say that again." Clint Moore retrieved the towel, pulled it taut, aimed it at Jewel's flank.

"I'll say *this* again, if you ever pop her one it's goodbye Charley and I don't mean maybe," Roxine told him, dealing out each word as if it were a face card and she was daring him to up the ante. She shooed Jewel out of the kitchen, saying, "Go find a sunny windowsill, honeybun, before you're obliged to give somebody cat scratch fever." And, to Clint, "Don't *you* go getting *your* back up, hear?"

She settled her sundress. Gave her hair a push. Remembered the flower. Discovered she'd lost it.

"Me? Get my back up? Over a four-eyes in Charlie Chaplin pants? Don't make me laugh."

"He may not be a dude—" she paused just long enough to convey the idea that in her opinion Clint was one and that this was

the extent of his accomplishments—"but he's no dumb bunny."

"What's that supposed to mean? I am?"

"You said it. I didn't. If the shoe fits, wear it."

"Now you listen here—"

"Don't you now-you-listen-here me, Clinton *Lewellyn* Moore."

Annie Biggs tuned down the gospel singers and listened to the escalating Moores. "See, I told you," she said. "Unless I miss my guess from here to St. Patrick's Day, they spell trouble with a capital T."

"Could be," Matt replied around a mouthful of dunked doughnut. He gave an appreciative chuckle. "With a big rig like her, no telling what." Realizing his mistake, he choked down his mouthful with a too quick swallow of hot tea.

"Don't be biting off more than you can chew," Annie admonished. Except for the innuendo, she might have been chiding him for his table manners.

"She may turn out to be a nice addition to the neighborhood," Matt said defensively.

"I wouldn't bet the rent." Annie's retort was amiable but her eyes were gimlets.

Elmo Pritchett, delving now and then into his rag box, proceeded to make a careful inspection of the elliptical

contraption that was bolted to the basement floor and resembled a pipefitter's nightmare. When he was satisfied no real damage had been done—making slight readjustments here and there as he went along—both his bladder and his stomach refused to be denied longer. One needed emptying, the other filling . . . the latter supplying the additional input that if this was Friday—and it felt like a Friday—Lottie would've left him what she called "a duke's mixture" for lunch. Friday was sweep-the-icebox day. When his ship came in, one of the first things they would dispense with was "a duke's mixture."

He patted his invention as if to assure it that the latest setback had been of minor importance. That success was but a hairsbreadth away. That, due to a fluke of circumstance, they were about to snatch victory from the jaws of another defeat. One hundred fourteen other defeats to be exact. No matter. One hundred fifteen was the turning point. He could feel it in his bones. His goal was in sight. This was it!

An unbidden memory surfaced of a bright fall afternoon and a football field. Jim McCready, the squad captain, who was built along the lines of a Mack truck, gave him a man-to-man whack on the butt and

said, "This is it, buddy." And, with the score tied and seconds to go in the final quarter of the Big Game, he—Elmo Pritchett—braced himself to kick for a last-ditch try at a field goal. The whistle blew and—with the stadium going wild and Maybeth Lorrimer, in her cheerleader outfit, shrieking his name—he swept forward. The toe of his boot connected squarely with the pigskin and, as the sweet elixir of triumph permeated his whole being, the dream exploded and he found himself on the floor, beside his desk in physics class, rubbing his head and going "wha . . . wha . . . wha . . ." to the unrestrained hilarity of everybody in the classroom with the exception of Miss Jenkins, the teacher, who dismissed Maybeth Lorrimer and Jim McCready from the room until they could pull themselves together—an unfortunate choice of words that increased rather than diminished the mirth. And, right there, he had decided that one day he'd make each and every one of them say, *We knew him when.*

Not that that obtained any more. Not after all these years.

A wistful expression shadowed his countenance.

Still, it would be nice to show up at a class reunion. Just once. Be pointed out. Overhear—

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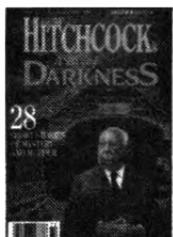
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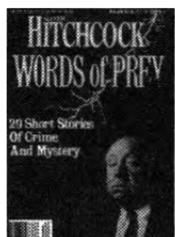
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*There he is! That's him!*

His eyes dimmed with an unexpected film of tears. He blinked them away. Put his soiled rags to soak. About to go upstairs, he hesitated. Squared his shoulders. Walked to his machine and bestowed a flat-handed whap.

"Team," he said.

He about-faced and, ignoring his tingling fingers, mounted the stairs singing "The Strife Is O'er" in a reedy falsetto.

In the basement, not far from the spot where Elmo's whap had landed, a gauge quivered. Activated. Began a quickening metronomic movement. In swift succession a variety of devices triggered into play. There was a *thrum*, and a tremorous hum began to emanate from what had become a working machine.

A thrust of iridescent light as thin as a needle shot into existence and steadily increased in brilliance. Where its tip bored into empty space, an amorphous swirl appeared, grew rapidly in size, and, like a magician's trick conjured out of nowhere by a blinding wand of light, became an aperture. Murky. Cavelike.

The hum altered in pitch. The wand wavered. A chromatic phosphorescence danced among the machine's maze of fittings. The dark opening

whirlpooled and silently imploded. The light vanished. A burst of incandescence disintegrated into a shower of sparks that cascaded harmlessly to the cement floor. The hum ceased.

Somewhere upstairs a toilet flushed, and ran until the handle was jiggled. A tap was turned on and off. Elmo, his voice again lifted in song, wended his way kitchenwards.

At Pleet-Holder Hardware, as the afternoon wore on towards closing time, Lottie Pritchett stationed herself advantageously in order to be prepared for the surge of last minute customers trying to get a jump on Saturday, a predictable influx that left the other clerks unenthusiastic despite the WE AIM TO PLEASE machine-stitched in pea green on the breast pocket of their tan jackets.

Not so, Lottie. She knew which side her bread was buttered on, and who kept it buttered, and she had developed a nose for those she perceived as the butterers. She moved in now on a definite Positive — double chin, voile dress patterned with teeny-tiny rosebuds, sensible shoes, "invisible" hairnet, bakery box from Heinemann's next door, roundhead door key already in hand to speed the process of having a

duplicate made, wherever the means to this end was located in among everything else.

Lottie's solicitous "May I help you, ma'am?" startled her prospective customer, who had been completely unaware of Lottie's presence.

Lottie took pains to make sure the duplicate was perfect, laying aside the first attempt as not quite smooth enough. "We aim to please, even if it costs us," she said. The implication being that the new key was virtually a giveaway. She fostered this concept of Pleet-Holder as a purveyor of freebies, if you took advantage of an opportunity, by providing her customer with a ready pencil and a slip to fill out for the prize that was given each month to the lucky entrant whose name was drawn.

"I have a hunch it could be a pretty china teapot like that one over there with the gilt trim."

Mission accomplished, she reclaimed the pencil from Mrs. Rufus B. Hobbs of 342 Maple Street, wished her a nice weekend, directed her towards the drawing box, and awaited the approach of a Possible whom she assessed as one of the growing number of "swinging singles" who subsisted on frozen pot pies, never defrosted their refrigerators or tidied their bu-

reau drawers. No loose change in the customary places, but plenty of cheese and a variety of crackers, that Perrier water Elmo called H-two-O-and-then-some, tube socks galore, maybe a hotel ashtray from somewhere far off to add to her collection . . . it was amazing how many people stole ashtrays from hotels.

Her "I have a hunch this month it could be beer glasses, like those packaged ones there" produced the desired result. And her "Have a nice weekend" evoked the gratuitous information that he was going to the beach and, on second thought, maybe she'd better make him a couple more keys.

Lordy, Lottie thought, young people these days! She'd surely had a liberal education, in many ways, since the day several years ago when it had dawned on her that if she could somehow acquire a small, nondescript car she could solve her increasingly worrisome budgetary problems, slick as a whistle, without disturbing Elmo's peace of mind one iota.

Occasionally, but not very often, she wondered if the original owner had been taught a lesson about leaving his car keys in the ignition.

Long before the store closed she had garnered, and unobtrusively tagged and pocketed,

three more "imperfects." Ample. She knew from experience that these, plus those she had accumulated on her other half days, would fill the gaps her weekly wages wouldn't cover. She had learned how to pick and choose and the persons she selected weren't Pleet-Holder regulars, so she wasn't being disloyal. Furthermore, she made it a point of honor not to take undue advantage, nor throw away a nickel's worth . . . as Elmo said, Waste-Not-Want-Not was her middle name.

Dear, innocent, guileless, unsuspecting Elmo.

Her brown eyes grew limpid. Instead of waiting until tomorrow to investigate Mrs. Rufus B. Hobbs' bakery box, she'd go ahead and splurge on two lemon tarts for a grand finale to the sweep-the-icebox casserole. Elmo loved lemon tarts. Savoring the aftertaste of the last squashy bite, he'd say, "When my ship comes in, we'll have these every day for breakfast."

And she would say, lightly thumping the table for emphasis, "On a silver platter."

And he would reach over and give her fingers a tender squeeze.

Elmo emitted a replete sigh. "When my ship comes in, we'll have these every day for breakfast."

"On a silver platter," Lottie

responded, giving the table an affirmative thump.

Instead of tenderly squeezing her fingers, Elmo, too, gave the table an affirmative thump. "I wasn't going to say anything until I was absolutely sure," he said, impulsively. "But I am absolutely sure. It came to me out of the blue. Lottie—" He broke off to fumble through his pockets for notations.

"You've an idea for a novelty item," Lottie hazarded hopefully.

Elmo stared blankly at the dilapidated whatever it was he had dredged up from a pocket. Remembered he had left his calculations in the bathroom when he'd gone up to wash before supper.

"What is it?" Lottie inquired, and answered her own question as she took it from him. "It's a hollyhock flower. Or what's left of one." She returned her puzzled regard to Elmo. "I don't understand."

"Hollyhock flower," Elmo echoed, peering at what she held. His face brightened. "Oh. Yes. That's what she had behind an ear. It fell off while I was giving her a shake. I must have picked it up without thinking, while I was thinking about what I was thinking about."

"She?"

"A woman."

"What woman?"

"I don't know. She was just there, across the fence, in Mary Murphy's back yard."

"The new neighbors," Lottie said, enlightened. And, in mild reproof, "Elmo, you don't shake hands like you're trying to get water from a pump."

"I didn't shake hands with her. She was holding a cat."

"But you said—" She contemplated Elmo in disbelief. "Elmo—?"

"I got carried away," Elmo said, sheepishly.

"You . . . shook her? You mean . . . you *shook* her?"

"She was talking a blue streak and suddenly I—"

"Elmo!" Lottie drew a deep breath, said, as if she were speaking to a small boy, "You'll have to make amends, Elmo."

"All right. Listen, Lottie—"

"I hope she'll be nice about it. How did she act?"

Elmo thought. Again his face brightened. "On the order of Mae West," he said. "Remember Mae West?" He made a descriptive, fulsome gesture with both hands. "She was sort of a cross between Mae West and Dorothy Lamour. Remember Dorothy Lamour? Always had a blossom behind an ear. Wore a sarong."

"This woman was wearing a *sarong*?"

"No. But there wasn't much to it." He probed his memory to drum up a clearer image for

Lottie's benefit. "She had orange hair and pale green eyelids."

"She sounds . . . different."

Mentally comparing the newcomer to Mary Murphy, Elmo said, "She is." Perplexed at how far he had strayed from his initial subject, he began anew. "Lottie, guess what!"

"What?" Lottie brushed a stray crumb to and fro with the flimsy remains of the flower.

Elmo's excitement ebbed. What if he were wrong? He wasn't . . . but what if he were? Better that he wait. One day soon, very soon, he would simply call up the basement stairs for her to come down, that he had something to show her. And, while she stood stockstill in open-mouthed astonishment at his *fait accompli*, he'd say . . . he'd say . . .

"I fixed the bulb in the toilet tank," he said.

Ella Zimmer inched back a curtain as Roxine Moore appeared in response to a summoning toot from a yellow compact driven by her husband.

"There they are," Ella informed Jake Zimmer. "Going gallivanting already from the looks of her. Our car beats theirs, even if theirs *is* yellow."

Jake Zimmer cast an obliging glance over the top of his newspaper.

Ella said, "From what I can see of him, he's a dead ringer for a store dummy."

"Well, *her* assets are sure above the national average," Jake Zimmer said. He lowered his paper to gawk openly. Said, "Hoo boy."

"Fly-by-nights," Annie Biggs declared under her breath to the African violet, on her parlor windowsill, that she had been inspecting for mites. "Here today and gone tomorrow." Her gaze veered to her front steps and her husband's broad back, which she also seemed to be inspecting for mites as—watching Roxine Moore ease herself into the small car, one leg at a time—he let the match he'd struck to light his pipe burn down to his fingers.

For the same reason Jack Carrico, hosing his van, inadvertently drenched brass-lunged little Amelia Grubb, who was playing hopscotch on the sidewalk.

Faces were everywhere in evidence as the Moores drove off, leaving a visible wake of blue exhaust.

**B**y the time Saturday was in full sway the news had traveled, almost by osmosis, that the Moores were misfits. Especially her.

As a rule, Lottie's Saturday morning excursions gave her a

perky, mischievous uplift. Once she had ascertained that the coast was clear, as it usually was (what with housewives engaged in a mass invasion of supermarkets, and husbands assembling on golf courses, and singles fleeing their habitats like lemmings to engage in the latest "in" pursuits), a sort of while-the-cat-is-away-the-mice-will-play feeling took hold and made her forays seem more of a frolic than an economic necessity.

Today, however, her heart wasn't in it. Even the discovery that Mrs. Rufus B. Hobbs had an aquarium—from which she extracted a mottled goldfish, with the aid of Mrs. Rufus B. Hobbs' wire strainer and a Mason jar—failed to enliven her spirits.

Ordinarily, after she had made her modest acquisitions from the kitchen shelves of those she had chosen as benefactors, and had generated a reasonable amount of change from a sugar bowl, or a coffee can, or whatever, and had acquired an extra or two . . . socks, toothpaste, scouring powder, rags . . . and selected a souvenir, she would breathe a departing "thank you" in the direction of the ceiling. Now, as she lifted her eyes, the underlying cause of her lackluster attitude welled to the surface.

"He's been smitten and doesn't

know it," she blazed. And, fiercely, "We mustn't allow it!"

Her eyes snapping, her color rising, a determined jut to the delicate line of her chin, she resembled an undersized Valkyrie about to yank a spear from her shopping bag. The resemblance dwindled and died.

"But how?" she beseeched. "How?"

The answer came to hand, literally, at her last stop when, inspecting the contents of a dresser drawer, she came upon a strategically padded girdle, a pair of falsies, and a strapless bra. The phrase *All's fair in love and war* zipped through her mind with the speed of light. An adjacent dressing table provided the rest of the paraphernalia.

Her posture behind the wheel of her car was triumphant as she rattled homewards.

Careful not to disturb Elmo, who, judging from the profound silence in the basement, was deep in concentration, she stowed away the perishables. Set two frozen pot pies on a cookie sheet and put them to bake. Transferred the goldfish to an isolated bowl in the parlor with only an artificial seahorse for company, until she could be sure it was a perfectly healthy specimen and fit for a suitable berth with some of its peers.

Only then did she succumb to the temptation for a sneak pre-

view of her "new look."

When, presently, she stood back to contemplate her handiwork, pivoting to appraise the shapely, mirrored stranger whose powdered countenance was lined with mascara, eyeliner and shadow, blusher and lip rouge, she was astounded at the transformation she had wrought. She fluffed out her hair. Yielding to the larky feel of the moment, she improvised a sarong from a half slip she redeemed from the basket of mending beside her sewing rocker. Struck a pose.

Below, the basement door leading to the kitchen relayed its familiar creak. Elmo's voice, calling her name, had an urgent ring.

Forgetful of her appearance, knowing only that Elmo was in distress, Lottie dropped her stance and raced downstairs, her heart pounding.

Elmo's aspect had also undergone a drastic change. He was bedraggled, dirty, malodorous, and in pain. "My back's gone out again," he said as if that explained everything, including the red smear of lipstick on his mouth.

Bit by bit, while she maneuvered him into a chair, and loosened his belt, and wiped his face, and removed a watermelon seed from his hair, and fetched him a glass of water, Lottie extracted the gist of

what had happened to him.

He had found himself unable to fix his mind on rechecking some recent calculations, due to the fact that having to make amends was like an uninvited guest standing at his side interfering with his computations, until, totally distracted, he decided to go ahead and make amends and get them over with. Whereupon he had acted accordingly, taking the quickest route via the alley. About to open Mary Murphy's former back gate he had stepped on a wad of something sticky and while he was scraping the sole of his shoe with a plastic fork that had been lying nearby, the rubbish men drove up and began heaving away and, in the process, dumped a cat out of a garbage can into their vehicle.

Because of his proximity they assumed the cat was his cat and had waxed vociferous. They didn't take dead critters, they informed him in no uncertain terms, and when he responded that their assumption was incorrect, that the creature wasn't his and wasn't defunct or it wouldn't have taken possession of a fish head, they took umbrage at his use of the words assumption, creature, and defunct, and the big fellow said, "Awright, egghead. Let's *you* get it the hell outta there, an' I be glad to assist you."

Before he knew what was happening, Elmo said, he found himself in close juxtaposition to the cat, who evidently feared the fish head was in jeopardy and became aggressive.

An involuntary shudder accompanied the recollection.

"Oh, *no*," Lottie protested, horrified at the scene he had evoked.

"Fortunately, there was a splayed broom within grasp and I managed to fetch the creature a swipe with it, at which juncture my back went out and I could do no more."

"Oh, you poor dear. Those dreadful men! That awful cat!"

"Yes. If its owner hadn't arrived when she did, no telling what the outcome might have been."

"Whose cat was it?"

"Hers."

"Hers? Oh. *Hers*."

As if responding to a cue, a questing "Helloo-oo?" floated up from the basement.

Elmo said, "That's—" A spasm of pain rendered him speechless.

"Her," Lottie finished. She patted his cheek, said, "I'll attend to it," the angle of her chin belying her level tone.

The purpose of Roxine Moore's unexpected visit was self-evident. "They got creamed in the hassle," she said, handing over the wreckage of Elmo's specta-

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cles. Introducing herself, she continued non-stop. "You must be his wife. I guess he's told you what happened and how he went to the rescue. That was the sweetest thing! After how he, you know, like leaped at the breach to save Jewel, he's ace high in my book. Tell him if he ever wants a favor all he has to do is ask, hear?"

She gave Lottie's attire a quick once-over. "Well, I won't keep you. I wouldn't have barged in like I did, even if the door *is* wide open, if I'd known you were in dishabille."

Her gaze drifted to Elmo's ellipsoid creation. "I heard your hubby invented," she said, as if her concept of an inventor had been dashed. "Is that thingamajig one?" She arched an analytical eyebrow. "It *has* to be. What's it for?"

Lottie tried to find her voice and failed. Her benefactors had a tendency to meld in retrospect, but she possessed total recall when it came to Mrs. Clinton L. Moore.

Mrs. Clinton L. Moore had had a door key duplicated in January and had bought a fake rock to hide it under, volunteering the explanation that she had accidentally locked herself out the day before, when she'd stepped outside in her kimono to see if there was any mail.

"If it hadn't been for the super coming along when he did, I'd have been in a real pinch," she said, with a reflective half smile at the word "pinch."

In response to Lottie's "I have a hunch" stratagem, she quipped, "I've got a hunch I'm spinning my wheels, but what the hell when you got nothing to lose."

Lottie had classified her as a Possible. Elmo doted on the type of deli fare that leaned heavily on mandarin oranges, marshmallow whip, coconut, and maraschino cherries and went by such interchangeable euphemisms as Tahiti Delight and Hawaiian Surprise . . . and Mrs. Clinton L. Moore looked as if she lived on treats of this ilk.

Reconnoitering the former Moore place of residence, in a past-its-prime pseudo-Spanish complex in need of restuccoing, Lottie had very nearly changed her mind. However, since she was there she had gone ahead with her original plan, secure in the knowledge that her disguise—a drab headscarf, sunglasses, and a paper shopping bag with a display of carrot tops for window dressing—rendered her invisible. She was a nobody-anybody returning from an anywhere supermarket. Not worth a second glance.

She had forgotten whether Tahiti Delight or an equivalent had been available, but she recalled her decision, based on the skimpy furnishings and an untidy pile of bills, not to pick out a souvenir. Fair was fair.

The thing she *really* remembered, though—and wouldn't forget in a thousand years—was the incident at the storage closet.

She had gone down a short, dark hall to investigate the closet, thinking it might be a source of supply for some rags for Elmo. She had opened the door, and congealed.

Standing amid the clutter was a scantily clad and barely recognizable Mrs. Clinton L. Moore, in a provocative pose.

Momentarily, she had been too paralyzed to move and then, in a wild surge of panic, had tried to escape and stumbled over a half grown cat. The cat, seeking a haven, had skittered between her feet and into the closet before it bounded off, while Mrs. Clinton L. Moore slid sideways and, stiff as a board, came to rest at an impossible tilt with her head against a dead possum suspended from a hook.

The possum turned into an old muff and she perceived that Mrs. Clinton L. Moore was a replica of a younger self. A cut-out of the sort used by questionable theaters to entice male

passersby. A memento of a time when she'd been "a drawing card"?

Concealed under the torn lining of the muff was a cache of greenbacks. Replacing the money intact, Lottie hoped the Moores wouldn't ever be burgled. To a practiced eye, the muff might as well be transparent.

The recollection dissolved as Roxine Moore, misinterpreting Lottie's silence, said, "Excuse me for being nosy. Can't say I blame you for keeping mum, what with all the sharpies ready to knock off anything and everything at the drop of a hat. Anyhoo, I hope he sells whatever it is for big bucks. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Tell him that Clint, my hubby, is a used car salesman off and on, and he does this."

Before Lottie realized her intention Roxine Moore went to the machine and gave it a kick.

"Then," Roxine went on, "he'll say, 'This baby is put together. What I mean is p-u-t to-gether,' like that. Clint says you don't have to work yourself blue in the gills on an iffy deal if you have a punch line for a clincher. And speaking of blue in the gills, honey, I don't want to step on your toes but I used to be in show biz and, take it from me, that shade of face powder doesn't do a lick for sallow skin tones

like yours. Same goes for that blueblueblue eye shadow and the frost lipstick. You could improve your touch with mascara, too. Spiky is tacky. Black in particular. You don't want to look like a poop, if you'll pardon the expression, you want to look like, you know, you're center stage. Just say the word and I'll be glad to give you some pointers, but right now I'd better get a move on. I left Clint trying to get a handle on tonight's dog races and Jewel is liable to meow and get blamed for throwing him off the track. Ha ha. I, personally, go for hunches myself. Clint thinks hunches are for the birds. From where I sit, that's why he's in a slump, and why I've socked away close to what it takes to get a neck lift. But that's for me to know and him to find out."

She gave Lottie a wink. "Men. What they don't know won't hurt 'em. Right?"

She waggled a handful of fingers, said, "Well, bye-bye. Enjoyed our chat," and took her departure, leaving a shaken Lottie and the lifeless vestiges of the scintillating personality she had donned so briefly with such a high heart.

Unwittingly, Mrs. Clinton L. Moore had done her a favor. She rubbed off her ersatz complexion with a rag from Elmo's box. Not that it made any difference.

Without his spectacles Elmo couldn't see boo. In the fluster, she hadn't noticed they weren't in their accustomed position. Lucky for her they'd been smashed.

She picked up Elmo's shattered glasses, held them by their mangled ear pieces. . . . She was manning Elmo's machine, zinging blueblueblue darts at a bulls-eye painted on a far wall, when Mrs. Clinton L. Moore sauntered in through the outside door and inquired, "Where's Elllmo?"

"None of your beeswax," she replied and, swiveling the machine, she accelerated the power. There was a flash . . . falling sprinkle of charred—

The *pies*. She scurried up the basement steps to salvage what hadn't bubbled over, without observing that a gauge had begun to oscillate on Elmo's "thingamajig."

In rapid order the various devices triggered over. Synchronized. A *thrum*, more sensed than heard, focalized into a hum no louder than the drone of a bee. An attenuated stab of prismatic light materialized. Elongated. Began to glow with increasing intensity. Where it seemingly drilled into thin air a nebulous whirl appeared. The whirl deepened. Gained quickly in size and dimension. Steadied. Suddenly coalesced into a

definite cavelike entrance. Beyond the periphery of the opening lay an impalpable darkness as thick as fur. There was no hint of what might be within.

For a full minute the materialization held its position, solidly, in space before the hum fluctuated. The needle of light vacillated. The aperture yawned. The light vanished. A flickering luminescence glimmered here and there. The hum ceased. A lone, spiraling spark winked out and, once again, the machine was inoperative.

**L**ottie left The Optical Place with a sinking heart. Prices had skyrocketed since the last time. She had barely been able to cover the minimum payment now required, and she was going to have to come up with the balance, cash on the barrelhead, by Saturday when Elmo's glasses would be ready. And she was going to be eighty-seven dollars short. The rainy day savings she had stashed in a ball of yarn had recently been depleted by what the garage mechanic had called a ring job and unless she resorted to outright *stealing* when she did her Saturday shopping. . . .

Unthinkable! Stealing implied victims, and she had never victimized anyone in her entire life. The items she acquired on her Saturday sorties, and the

dibbles and dabbles she withdrew from sugar bowls and jelly jars and so forth, certainly hadn't *victimized* anybody. As for her souvenirs, they were merely trinkets and trifles that had caught her fancy, collected as a kind of memorabilia, in a spirit of fun.

What to do?

A yard sale was too risky. Someone might turn up out of nowhere, as had Mrs. Clinton L. Moore, and recognize an inconsequential fiddle-faddle, and the fat would be in the fire. By the same reasoning, a pawnbroker was out of the question. Her one involvement with a loan company had cost her more in the long run than the amount of the original loan. Mr. Osgood, the manager of Pleet-Holder, had an inflexible rule against borrowing on wages. Although she was friendly with her neighbors, neither she nor Elmo was gregarious by nature and had kept to themselves. To approach, say, Annie Biggs or Ella Zimmer with a request for a loan of eighty-seven dollars would be an embarrassment of gargantuan proportions. Besides, a sum of this magnitude would be a subject for discussion with whoever's respective husband, and if the final decision was no, her mortification would be doubled and trebled and forevermore.

What to do?

As the week wore on and the sight of Elmo, forlorn and at a loss, tugged more and more at her heartstrings, she cast her eyes ceilingwards so often that one of her cohorts at the hardware store ventured the conjecture that she might need glasses. A suggestion she had very nearly answered with a wail.

And then, on Friday, as she was about to despair, Annie Biggs unknowingly pointed out the means by which she could acquire the necessary where-withal.

"Get a load of that," she said to Lottie, flapping a hand at an empty cat food tin and a banana skin lying beside the Moore's garbage can. "And unless I miss my guess from here to Tarpon Springs, that's only the beginning. After the tonguelashing she gave the rubbish men over that cat of hers, they'll have it in for the alley . . . bashed in trash cans . . . litter blowing around. . . . She had a nerve, laying them out to cool like she did. Her cat wasn't their look-out."

Annie knuckled her hands on her hips, gave vent to the underlying cause of her considerable ire. "I don't want to sound begrudging but you know what she did? She came over to borrow some sugar while I was in the bathtub, and Matt got down the box of superfine I had earmarked for an angel food and

she took the whole box. I didn't find out until I'd gone ahead and separated the whites from the yolks. Twelve eggs! Who wouldn't raise the roof! But from how Himself stomped out, you'd think I'd denied aid to the starving."

She warmed to her subject. "She's a troublemaker is what she is. Remember when Jack Carrico doused little Amelia with the hose? I saw how it happened and none of it *would've* happened if Guess Who hadn't been all legs getting into that yellow excuse they have for a car. And you know Jack. Anyhow, the Grubbs and Jack got *that* falling out patched up, thanks to Sophie who hates hard feelings like the devil hates holy water. So, yesterday, if little Amelia didn't go and throw a rock at Jack's van and put a dent in that hula scene he had painted on it in enamel. Ike Grubb says a dent in the Kohinoor diamond wouldn't cost what Jack wants to have his dent ironed out and re-enamelled. And Jack says if Ike won't pay off he'll take him to small-claims court. Sophie is a wreck.

"And they're not the only ones on the outs. Jake Zimmer put his foot in his mouth with some comment—" Annie jerked her thumb at the Moores' house, to indicate who had caused the comment "—and Ella is fit to be tied. Come to think of it, if it

hadn't been for that cat, your husband wouldn't have hurt his back. How's he coming along?"

Conquering a momentary urge to blurt out her own dilemma, Lottie explained Elmo's predicament.

"There you are!" Annie Biggs said, vindicated. "The neighborhood was normal as corned beef and cabbage until she showed up. She's the key to the whole kaboodle. If you ask me, little Amelia threw her rock at the wrong target."

**T**he fake rock stood out like a gray ghost among the half-sunken, weathered ones in Mary Murphy's rock garden, which was beginning to have a neglected aspect. Lottie ceased pretending she was scraping out a flowerpot and returned to her kitchen to find that Elmo had blundered into a door and given himself a bloody nose.

That settled it. Cracking ice to staunch the flow of Elmo's blood, she dismissed any lingering qualms. Tonight, after Elmo had retired early—as he'd been doing to bring a merciful close to another do-nothing day—and while the Moores were at the dog track, she would don her black coat. Go out through the basement. Keep close to the fence. Slip through the alley into the Moores' back yard. Re-

move the key from beneath the rock. Use it. Extract the eighty-seven dollars—Elmo's just recompense—from Mrs. Clinton L. Moore's neck-lift funds hidden in the muff.

It was simple as pie. Her spirits rose. The worry lines between her brows smoothed. . . only to reappear as the question surfaced phoenix-like from the ashes of her anxiety . . . *what if the key wasn't there?*

The key was there.

*What if it was some other key?  
What if it didn't fit?*

It fit.

As she pocketed the key and stepped over the threshold, a vague feline shape crossed her path. Even as she thought *cat*, her knees threatened to betray her. With a stubborn exercise of will she proceeded on to the storage closet, located, as was hers, in a recess under the stairs.

*Please, let the muff be there.*

She turned the doorknob, switched on her pencil flashlight, directed its dim beam into the cubicle.

The muff was there, dangling by its wrist cord from a nail. In the uncertain glow its dead possum quality was eerie. A frazzled feather duster looked as though it might come alive and cock-a-doodle-do. The come-hither smile on the cardboard countenance of the cutout

seemed to hint at a secret.

*What if the money had been hidden elsewhere?*

The money was there . . . in fives, tens, and twenties.

She counted out eighty-five dollars, decided it was better to have two dollars less than Elmo was entitled to, rather than three dollars more, and retain a clear conscience. Tomorrow, when she did her Saturday shopping, she would make up the difference, and forego a keepsake to pay back.

She stowed her windfall in her coat pocket, replaced the remainder in the muff, restored the muff to its nail, extinguished the flashlight. And froze.

The warbly, Danny-boy tenor of Matt Biggs, seeking his doorstep, broke in mid-note and he swore happily and with bleary eloquence as he stumbled, charting a course up the front steps of the lookalike house she was standing in.

She had a mental picture of what would ensue. Curtains edged aside. Observation posts established. Annie emerging like a sloop in a high wind. The picture altered. Somehow, she, Lottie Pritchett, had been detected . . . apprehended . . . was being led, handcuffed, to a summoned police car . . . neighbors lined the walk . . . sotto voce comments expressed shocked

amazement . . . no one paid any attention to her perfectly logical explanation . . . little Amelia hefted a rock . . . Elmo tried to intervene and was pummeled. . . .

Lottie fled.

Safe in her own house, thankful she had had the foresight to leave the basement door cracked for a fast re-entry, and reassured by the peaceful snore drifting to her ears that Elmo had not roused, she hurriedly divested herself of her coat and put it away.

The money was safe where it was. Get to bed. Skip the preliminaries and just get to bed before she keeled over from emotional exhaustion.

She awakened to find the room pale with day-break. Still muzzy with sleep, she automatically stretched out an arm to defeat the alarm, remembered it was Saturday. The events of the previous night swarmed in. She was out of the woods! Her worries were over! She sat bolt upright and hugged her knees, relishing a moment of pure joy. Beside her, Elmo shifted position, murmured an unintelligible equation, subsided.

Ordinarily on Saturdays she allowed herself an extra half hour to hover between sleep and waking but, now, she

slipped out of bed and stole down the stairs in her nightgown and bare feet to resurrect her bonanza for the sheer pleasure of verifying her achievement. Halfway down she slowed to a snail's pace.

A partially unraveled ball of pink yarn lay on the hall runner. Had it been there last night? Had she overlooked it in her hurry, in the dark? How had it gotten there?

Quickening her descent, she nabbed the ball and wound up the raveling as she went to the doorway of the parlor, a room which long since had acquired an atmosphere normally associated with flea markets. Even as her eyes took in the scattered balls of yarn spilled from an overturned basket, and located the inconspicuous gray one that served as her savings bank, she came to the conclusion Elmo had walked in his sleep, as he sometimes did after a sweep-the-icebox casserole. Had he accidentally strayed into the parlor, or had his subconscious led him there to check their cash reserve . . . a reserve that, awake, he had trustingly believed was plenty for the simple reason that she had told him so. What if, sound asleep, he had put the remaining bills somewhere else? Her eyes flew about the jam-packed room. *It might take her weeks. . . .*

She scooped up the ball of gray wool.

The bills were there.

She cleared a place next to a fishbowl and counted to be sure. Gave a sigh of relief. Zeroed in on the fishbowl and its sole occupant, the artificial seahorse.

The mottled goldfish was gone.

The thought that maybe *she* had walked in her sleep slithered into her mind. Had last night's escapade been a dream? What if there was a goldfish in her coat pocket instead of the muff money! Within seconds she had jabbed a shaking hand into the coat pocket.

*The muff money was there.*

She was home free. The goldfish was inconsequential. Inevitably, after three days, it would make its whereabouts known. She riffled the bills happily, dislodging a small object which hit the floor with a clink.

Mystified, she stooped and with a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach picked up the key. In her precipitate flight she had failed to replace the key.

If its loss was discovered, the Moore woman would make a beeline for the muff. After that there'd be the police . . . and, after that, it wouldn't be long before the connection between herself, Pleet-Holder, the key machine, and the fake rock was

established beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Once more, little Amelia drew back her throwing arm. . . .

The hounds rounded the far turn in a pack in close pursuit of the mechanical rabbit, and began to gain ground. The distance between the dogs and the lure shortened dramatically. The gap closed. The lead dog lunged. There was a scrap. A pileup. Aghast, she saw the thing they were tearing to pieces was her muff. Her money was flying in all directions.

Roxine Moore came awake with an indrawn gasp, to find the bedroom pearly with early morning light. Clint stirred, mumbled an incoherent series of syllables, and burrowed into his pillow.

Roxine Moore edged out of bed, slid her feet into scuffs, shrugged on her kimono, went quietly into the bathroom, and exhumed her last night's winnings from inside her shower cap.

With what she had salted away in the muff she could get going on a neck lift, pronto. Thanks to Elmo Pritchett. Funny how her comment about him being ace high in her book had sprung to mind, like he was standing at her elbow pointing a broom at a surefire winner. Ace High. Ace High had been

a skinny, undersized scroot with the trembles. Nevertheless, she'd plunged, without letting on to Clint. And she'd *kept* her mouth shut.

Three twenty-two was shaping up to be a lady-luck address, right off the reel, even if it was a low-end street. Like she'd told Clint when she saw the advertisement in the FOR RENTS, three-two-two added up to seven, which was lucky in anybody's language, except for crapshooters, and Clint was more of a pool player . . . her birthday was March twenty-second . . . they'd be married going on two years come February third . . . plus they could swing the rent.

As Lottie had done, Roxine betook herself downstairs for the sheer pleasure of verifying her achievement.

She gave the cutout a cursory glance, noting that in posture and costume it was showing its age. The flirty pose was almost quaint, and the skimpy garb no longer daring. Worse, it revealed an era and it wouldn't take a CPA to figure out how old she was.

Relieving the muff of its contents she went on to the kitchen, where, calling softly *kittykitty-kitty*, she poured canned milk into a saucer and sat down at the table with a glass of tomato juice to prolong the flush of the moment by separating the

money according to denomination.

Meanwhile, Lottie, dressed and ready—the key in her apron pocket, a measuring cup in her hand—left by her kitchen door. A housewife short on sugar going to borrow some for breakfast from a next door neighbor. She would tarry at the rock garden ostensibly to tie a loose shoelace and, her real purpose fulfilled, would go on to the back door. All open and above-board, if she were noticed. Should either of the Moores be up and about, which was doubtful, could they spare half a cup of sugar? If her knock went unanswered she would go on to Annie's for the sake of verisimilitude. In less than five minutes she would be out from under and back in her own kitchen.

She selected a clear space between two puffy clouds that were in the process of turning from pink to white and firmed her resolve. There was nothing worse than a scared prayer.

*Thank You for coming to my assistance.*

Her rehearsed plan went smoothly. Mary Murphy's back gate yielded without complaint. So far as she could tell she was unobserved. There was no mistaking the fake rock. She almost bestowed a preliminary pat when she leaned over to go

through the motions of tying her shoelace.

In that instant, however, the prevailing hush was sundered by a cry of fury issuing full force from the larynx of Roxine Moore.

"YOU THIEVING SONOF-ABITCH!"

Lottie fled.

The accelerating furor brought the sleep-frowzed neighborhood to its collective feet and kept the onlookers at their stations until Clint Moore, who obviously had dressed in haste under adverse conditions, made an ignominious getaway in the yellow compact.

Those whose curiosity had led them outside withdrew. And Lottie, at her kitchen window, steeled herself. It was now or never.

"I'm going over there," she said to Elmo, who had appeared carrying a flashlight, under the impression an emergency had developed and that a flashlight might be useful.

"She could've been hurt," Lottie said, trying to sound perturbed.

"I'll go with you."

"That cat will have it in for you. Why don't you make some coffee—" she crossed her fingers under the cover of her apron—"in case I bring her here." With that she left, before she caved in and confessed just to rid herself of the increasingly

heavy feeling that a great cold stone lay between her shoulder blades. Whoever had penned the lines *A fearful soul, alas, alack/Bears a bully on his back* had known what he was talking about. She wondered, fleetingly, what had bullied him and if he'd have swapped with her.

She opened Mary Murphy's back gate with outward aplomb. This time, if she were seen, she was a neighborhood version of Mother Teresa going to the aid of a leper. When she bent, to tie the shoelace, she had the key in readiness . . . and dropped it as Annie Biggs rose up from behind the fence.

Lottie, undone, followed suit.

"Didn't mean to scare you," Annie apologized, leaning her forearms companionably on the top board. "I figured since I was out here anyway I might as well pull a few weeds. What's that you've got?"

Numbly, Lottie handed over the rock she found she was holding, as if she were Alice in Wonderland complying to a request from her counterpart on the other side of the Looking Glass.

"It was out of kilter," she said.

Annie said, "It won't be the only one." She inspected the rock. "I'll declare. I'd forgot all about this. It's a phony," she

explained. "There's a place underneath to hide an extra key in. See? Key's gone, but there's where it fits. I got it out of a catalogue for Mary Murphy's birthday. She was always misplacing her door key."

Annie gave a sad little laugh. "She was getting pretty absent-minded. Bless her heart. I expect she forgot what this was for. Or that it was there. Or, more'n likely, got hustled off before she had any say-so. That daughter of hers was a pistol."

She twitched a nod in the direction of the Moores' back door. "And unless I miss my guess from here to the moon, we've got us a whole shooting gallery rolled into one. That was a humdinger, wasn't it? If we're going to have that for a steady diet, the neighborhood is in a fix. I knew they were misfits from the min—" Her countenance registered belated bafflement . . . what was Lottie doing on the wrong side of the fence?

"I thought she might be hurt," Lottie said, fielding the question before Annie asked.

"If she is, I'm a monkey's uncle," Annie retorted. "He was running like the devil was after him." She cocked her head, listening. "Isn't that her I hear calling her cat." It was a statement, not an inquiry. Roxine Moore wasn't hurt a whit.

Annie considered the rock.

"No reason on earth why I shouldn't have this," she said, "on account of I'm the one who paid for it. Right?" The query was purely rhetorical and, remarking that she'd better go tend to Matt, who had a head as big as the inside of Jonah's whale, she ambled off with the rock and a vague impression of Lottie Pritchett as being a mouth breather.

Jewel was missing.

Roxine Moore, disheveled and spent, discovered she really didn't give a hoot. If Jewel was out in the alley chewing on something awful, let her. If Clint had grabbed her, like for a hostage if the car didn't start, so what? Lately, Jewel had been acting slinky and hateful. Only yesterday she'd showed her claws and gone *yowrrrr* when she'd been routed out from behind the fridge.

She had more on her mind to think about than where Jewel was. Like how, as of right this minute, she'd had it with Clint. If he'd taken the whole wad it wouldn't have been as lowdown as his sneaking two tens, three twenties, and a five. The two-bit, sticky-fingered bastard! The weasel! If he thought she'd be here when he slunk in, beer-sorry and thinking to make up the way he knew how to do best. . . .

Roxine Moore's eyes began to shine. Welllll, why not add some incentive. The cardboard cutie pie in the storage closet wasn't all that antique, in a dim light, if you were half plotzed. With an artful arrangement of pillows and the sheet pulled up, he'd go for it. And for the rest of his pea-picking life a brass bed would set his clock back, but good. Serve him right! Why she'd picked him for number three, over George Smedley, she'd never know. Even if George was short. Short didn't amount to a nickel's worth of sawdust, if the fellow could saw wood.

And she wasn't dead yet.

She hoisted the glass of tomato juice as though in response to a toast from an imaginary tablemate.

"It's good to *be* back," she said.

By the time Lottie returned from her Saturday shopping, it was common knowledge that Roxine Moore had departed in a taxi, with two suitcases, a garment bag, several pocket-books slung from a shoulder, a couple of coats flung over an arm, and no cat.

Annie Biggs imparted this information across the fences to Lottie, tailoring the circumstances to fit her conclusions.

"He sold the cat," she de-

clared, gesturing authoritatively with her trimming clippers. "That's what the fracas was about. She wasn't calling her cat, she was bemoaning its loss. She told me, her own self, he wanted to sell it and that she'd give him the pitch if he did, and he did, and she's done it."

"Over a cat," Lottie said, thinking she'd seldom heard such welcome news. It was true that all burdens were lifted from you if you but *believed*.

"I expect the cat was only the tip of the iceberg," Annie said. "Unless I miss my guess from here to the First National Bank, he'll bow out when the rent comes due." She wiped her forehead with a wrist, leaving an earthy smear. "I might make him an offer for that brass bed, if he's willing, and doesn't want an arm and a leg for it. And if it's paid for," she amended, as an afterthought. "My, you two sure do eat a lot of carrots."

"They're supposed to benefit the eyes," Lottie said.

"When does he get his specs?"

"We're going in to get them after lunch."

"Well, don't let me keep you. Run along." And, in a burst of camaraderie, "The neighborhood isn't the same without a smell or two, no offense intended."

"None taken," Lottie said,

happily. "None taken whatsoever."

Lottie Pritchett had her peculiarities, Annie thought, watching her tote her shopping bags up her kitchen steps, but she was a nice little person. Trustworthy. Not a devious bone in her body.

Elmo Pritchett, his sight restored, his inactivity at an end, descended the basement stairs and would have enfolded his machine in loving arms had his arms been of sufficient length. Relatively speaking, a week was a lifetime when, with nothing else to do but think, your cogitations had taken an unexpected direction that had led to some sobering conclusions.

*One.* By opening the field of interstitial space, he might be raising the lid of a Pandora's box . . . unknown viruses could be freed, germs, bacteria, dreadful plagues, hideous diseases. . . . Perhaps there were inhabitants worse than rats, more prolific than roaches . . . evil. . . .

*Two.* The extent of interstitial space could very well be beyond the realm of imagination. The dimensions might be completely different from those that governed the present concept of area as three-dimensional. Ultimately, strobic dependency would be elimi-

nated, leading to rapid exploration. Dissensions would arise over territorial claims. The result would be wars and more wars and, with the advance of ever more deadly weaponry, the annihilation of mankind.

*Three.* Should none of these assumptions be valid and interstitial space prove to be a benign environment, the exploitation thereof was an unqualified certainty. Inevitably, this marvel he had wrought, this brainchild that had been aborning for so many fruitless years, would be prostituted by greed merchants, despoilers, outright crooks. Eventually, interstitial space would be exactly the same as here.

And he wasn't going to permit any of this to happen. He had wrestled with his scruples, in a vain attempt to justify his masterwork, and had lost each and every bout. Truth was absolute. And the truth was . . . face it . . . he'd been obsessed. At Lottie's expense. No more. There was plenty of room for prosaic inventions that filled a need. As Lottie kept hinting.

Lottie.

Lottie had been a brick. She deserved the biggest silver platter he could find, and anything else she fancied. As soon as he dismantled this . . . face it . . . Frankenstein creation, he would begin work on a flexible

flashlight, magnetic glue, a spray-on-peel-off bandage. . . .

He went to his tool bench, selected a wrench, returned to the machine, and, walking beside it, ran a gentle hand along its length.

"It is best that I not know," he said softly, as if clarifying a moot point to a colleague. He swallowed the lump that swelled in his throat, and applied the wrench to a joining.

The rings resisted his efforts. After several hard raps with the wrench in futile attempt to loosen the coupling, he cast about for his oil can. Scanning the laden shelves lining the walls, he told himself that from here on in he was going to have a place for everything and keep everything in its proper place, even though such methodical practices more or less eliminated the fortuitous happenstance. At least for him. His *modus operandi* had been a far cry from the ordered world of microchips and processors, and how those people did what they did was a mystery to him. One he had no desire to solve. As of today, simplicity was the watchword . . . easy-free nuts and bolts—BUY PRITCHETT'S E-Z FREES—a permanent faucet washer, a sonic ear plug to circumvent tinnitus, although, as of the moment, he found a faint persistent hum a pleasant im-

provement over the crickety clicking that customarily beset him.

In the act of taking down the oil can, he grew still, his gaze riveted on an apothecary jar whose glassy surface reflected a hairline streak of prismatic light.

He wheeled about. Sucking in his breath. The oil can fell from his nerveless clasp.

Wide-eyed and incredulous, he approached the dark opening a careful step at a time, lest any untoward motion have an adverse effect on the unwavering needle of light, and, bending slowly, he strained to see within. Was there a pulsing, frondlike movement? Or was this a variance in the consistency of the woolly blackness that blocked depth perception?

A stifled sneeze from the vicinity of the stairs told him that Lottie was there. Too late, he made a backward motion for her to stay where she was.

"You've done it," Lottie whispered, at his elbow.

From the corner of his eye she seemed a stranger. A trespasser, bringing him the flashlight he had left in the kitchen. A meddler, with her apron bunched in one thin birdbone hand, giving her nose a wipe. An intruder, who was an unwelcome reminder of the noble resolutions he had entertained.

When she smothered a second sneeze, he would have throttled her to prevent a third. . . . However, the brilliant prismatic needle remained as stable as if embedded in stone.

He began to relax. There was no need for alarm. The machine was producing its own energy density. Evidently the rap with the wrench had been the catalyst, which indicated a slight malfunction in the time-varying magnetic field, a simple problem of small import. He couldn't have cared less. His theory, that interstitial space existed, had become a proven actuality. Lottie had recognized the salient thing. *He had done it.*

His animosity waned. She would neither want him to jet-tison a breakthrough of this intensity nor allow him to. He took the flashlight from her and, switching it on, played the beam over the cavelike opening. Like fur, he thought. Thick, black fur.

Lottie gulped, audibly. "Elmo, you're not going in there, are you?" she asked in a parched voice.

He straightened. Eased his back. "No," he said. "No. I'm satisfied. I've done what I set out to do. Once the news hits—" with a thumb and forefinger he depicted the sweep of the ban-

ner headlines "—there will be an endless stream of eager volunteers."

He turned towards her with a jubilant smile. Spread his arms. Said, "I could do with a hug."

These were Elmo Pritchett's last words.

Before he could perceive her intention, Lottie snatched the flashlight from him and clobbered him with it.

He staggered, off balance, stupefied, instinctively trying to protect his spectacles, and Lottie, exerting all her strength, gave him a shove that sent him reeling and floundering into the dark aperture.

For a split second she had an impression that something sluggish stirred at the bottom edge. Otherwise there was no indication of any break in the enveloping blackness as Elmo passed through.

He did not reappear.

Lottie angled away, attempting to marshall the thoughts that had been leaping like squirrels ever since she had come to a halt on the basement stairs, dumbstruck at the sight of this terrible hole in the air. She had known from the way Elmo was calmly perusing the shelves that the hole had evolved while his back was turned. If a black, hairy spider the size of a bucket had crawled out and crept towards him, she

couldn't have screamed if she'd wanted to . . . and, standing there, unobserved, the realization came to her—as if from a distance—that she wouldn't have screamed anyway.

In the process of making do, from week to week, she had fashioned a secret life for herself . . . a life she had come to enjoy and, as the wife of a celebrity, would have to forego. She would be expected to dress up, pour tea at social functions, be on committees with people who didn't know a Phillips screwdriver from a roofing nail, attend luncheons and dinners, listen to speeches, stand in reception lines until the bunion plaguing her left big toe howled like a banshee for the merciful comfort of her old flats with the slit in the proper spot, and smile until her head ached beneath its tortured beauty salon hairdo. . . .

She would be a misfit, no matter what. And Elmo? Judging from his recent performance, he would be putty in the hands of flashy women, who were out there by the dozens.

She backed into Elmo's rag box, nearly fell, and before she could regain her footing a supple, black, hairy appendage emerged and brushed her cheek. Beating at it with the flashlight, she heard shrieking.

Jewel, galvanized by the assault on her tail, scrambled

from the box and—desperate for some peace and quiet in which to undergo her rapidly approaching motherhood—sought refuge in the cavelike recess, and was gone.

Lottie discovered that it was she who was shrieking.

She regained her composure. Gathered her wits.

So a cat, undoubtedly the one she had encountered last night, the same one that had caused all the trouble to begin with, was the explanation for the lost goldfish and the strewn balls of yarn. Good riddance. It had gotten its comeuppance.

As for Elmo . . . well, thanks to her, he was in a position to satisfy his curiosity about interstitial space to his heart's content. He had become a veritable Robinson Crusoe. Only better off. Robinson Crusoe hadn't had a cat.

Keeping a wary eye on the yawning cavity into which Elmo and the cat had disappeared, she availed herself of a hammer and went to work. The results were immediate and gratifying. She waited out the accompanying rain of sparks in the protective lee of the furnace, slapping at fiery vagrants with her apron but keeping the hammer at the ready—though any further action was hardly probable.

As for Elmo's absence, nobody would miss him if his pres-

ence was projected from time to time. A string of firecrackers now and then. Once in a while a noxious odor—burning chicken feathers would do nicely. On a dreary day a brief appearance in a pair of Elmo's baggy pants, his draggled raincoat, and old slouch hat. An "Elmo says" dropped on occasion in casual chitchat over the fence . . . and she might as well begin her program without delay, dropping an "Elmo says" in the ear of Annie Biggs, who sounded in a dither and was at the door.

"Coming," she answered. "*Coming.*" She eliminated a last twirling spark, went to greet Annie, and called over her shoulder as she opened the door, "It's Annie Biggs, Elmo. Is it all right to let her in?" And, to Annie, "You'd better not. His mice escaped and they're all over everywhere."

"*Mice,*" Annie bleated, retreating. "Good Lord! I thought I heard you screaming! No wonder!"

"One of them jumped off a shelf and almost went down my neck." Lottie joined Annie outside. Eased the door to.

"They're white mice. Elmo says they're not the least bit germy."

"Mice are mice," Annie asserted, continuing her retreat. "All you need is one mama mouse loose in the walls. I once spent ten dollars on traps and

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cheese and made two novenas to get rid of the things. Tell Elmo I don't want to be ugly but I'll hold him responsible if what I hope doesn't happen happens."

"I'll tell him," Lottie said, with an understanding nod. "And thanks for coming, even if it was a false alarm."

"You're entirely welcome," Annie said, her tone conveying the message that, henceforth, Lottie was on her own. She marched off to settle her nerves with a mug of tea and to alert Sophie Carrico and Ella Zimmer as to Elmo Pritchett's latest fiasco. The man was a born klutz, and Lottie was a saint on earth who deserved to go to heaven in a basket without any stopovers.

Lottie, preparing to settle her

own nerves with a cup of tea, wondered what a novena was. Decided it was a pious method of presenting a request by beating around the bush instead of going directly to the Top. To each his own. If you didn't ask for the impossible, you generally got what was coming to you.

Without thinking, she took down two cups. Stood there, bereft. She was going to miss Elmo. For the time being, she would have to keep a stiff upper lip. Sooner or later other matters would take precedence, would supplant her feeling of loss. Hopefully sooner. *Please. Oh, please!*

The shrilling whistle of the tea kettle masked the creak of the basement door as it was slowly pushed open behind her.

*Important Notice to Subscribers: All subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 1932, Marion, O. 43305. For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving. Send us your current mailing label with new address.*

# UNSOLVED

by  
Guy Savant

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the March issue.*

Bonnie and three other amateur safecrackers were set to prove themselves: the "Big Guy" had given each of them a job. And to make it simple for them, he included in each packet of instructions the nature of the valuables the burglar was after, the time the safe was accessible, and—what could be easier! —the safe's combination. What the "Big Guy" didn't count on was the four would-be safecrackers' getting together for a couple of drinks before heading out to their jobs—and accidentally (drunkenly) juggling the slips of paper with the combinations. Now not one has the proper combination he or she needs to do the job.

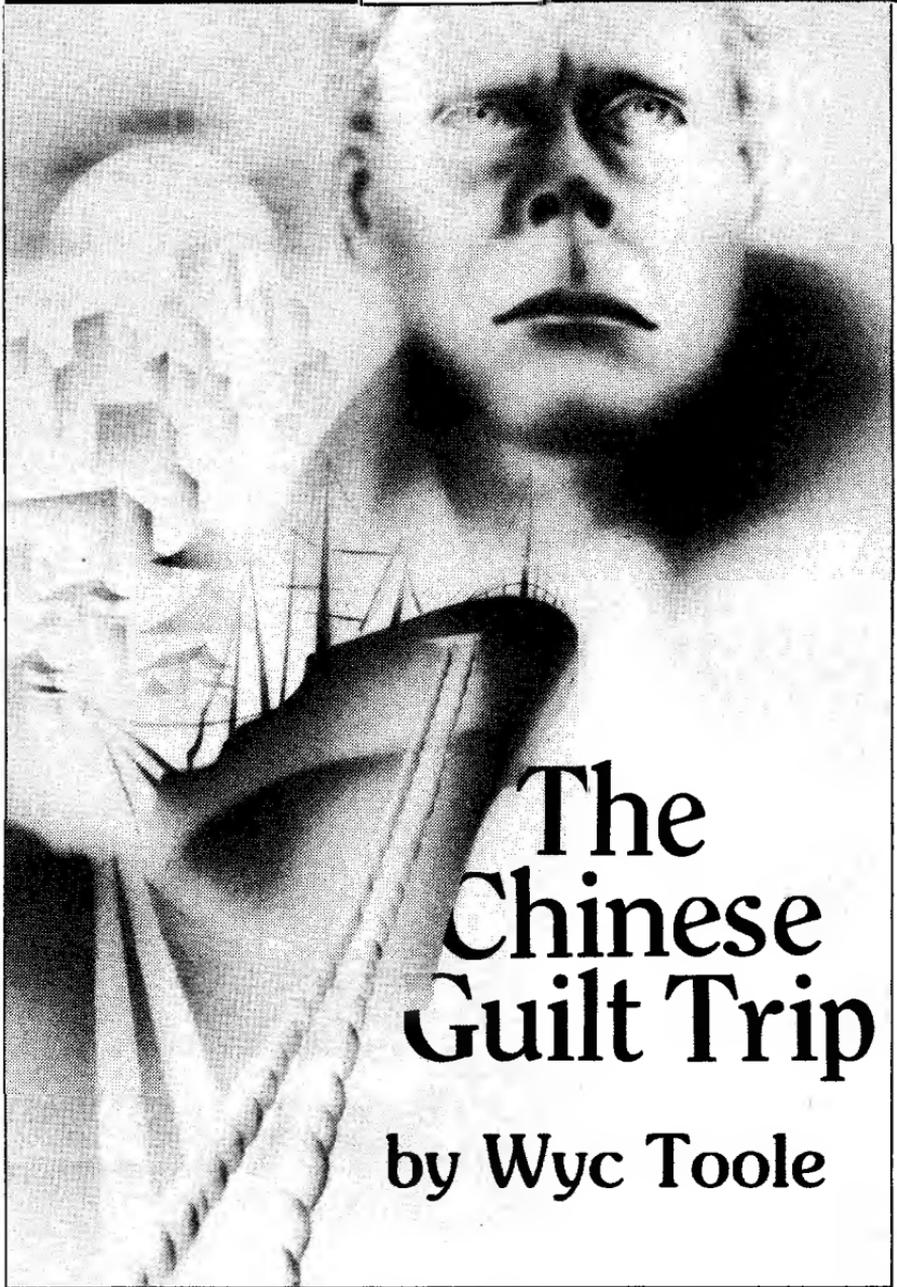
Can you help keep them out of cement shoes by figuring out from the following clues who has whose combination, what each safe holds, and the time each safe is accessible?

1. Clyde found himself with combination 7036, when what he needed was the combination to the safe holding rare coins.
2. The safe that was timed to be opened at 2:25 contained stamps, but the thief holding that safe's combination was after precious gems.
3. Alec wound up drinking four martinis and with combination 1470, the combination to the safe timed to be opened at 1:15; he wanted the combination held by the thief who wanted combination 3692. The burglar who ended up with combination 3692 was not after stock certificates or precious gems.
4. Lucy held the combination to the safe that opened at 1:55. The safe timed to be opened at 2:45 was the latest of the four.
5. The thief after stock certificates was supposed to do the job less than forty minutes after the thief who was to crack the safe with the combination 5814.

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See page 97 for the solution to the January puzzle.

FICTION



# The Chinese Guilt Trip

by Wyc Toole

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The man sitting across from me looked as if he had stepped directly out of a British Airways ad for a two week tour of England . . . tall, lean, bowler hat, furred umbrella, dark suit, snow white shirt with high collar, and a thin, striped regimental tie. His accent was crisp, precise Londonese, and his face long and ruddy, split into two unmatching parts by a sharp, hooked nose. His mouth was tight and austere with no signs of smile lines, and the small attempts at humor I had attempted to inject into our conversation had been totally ignored.

He had introduced himself as Andrew Thornton, a British solicitor, and we had been talking for the better part of an hour about a man I had known in Hong Kong a very long time ago. A man and a place I had managed not to think of for many years. But as soon as Thornton asked me if I knew a Mr. Harpe, good old Robert bounded out of my subconscious along with the vivid memory of anger, copper red hair, and sky blue eyes.

Since I was not sure what Thornton was after, I had cautiously answered his questions as well as I could, considering what had happened and the passage of forty-odd years; yet I still had no better understand-

ing of the reason for his visit than I did when he first marched into my office and inquired if I was indeed Mathew Bolton.

Mr. Thornton had called me "on a matter of the *utmost* urgency" earlier that morning and I had squeezed twenty minutes out of a full schedule for his visit. However, I had gotten lost in the memories of the days he was asking about, and now my secretary had begun peeking nervously into my office as a reminder of the time. I was just starting to tell him I was enjoying our conversation but would have to leave, when I saw his pale grey eyes register a decision.

Before I could speak, he sat back, nodded in agreement with his own thoughts, picked up his briefcase, set the combination lock, snapped it open, and said, "Well now, Mr. Bolton, your credentials and our conversation are more than adequate for my purposes. If you will be good enough to sign this acknowledgment of receipt, I will give you Mr. Harpe's letter."

I read the document he handed me, and it was precisely what he had said it was: an acknowledgment that he had delivered into my hands a sealed letter from Mr. Robert T. Harpe to Mr. Mathew R. Bolton.

As I was signing the paper, he commented, "I'm terribly afraid you may find the date on

the letter somewhat disturbing. A year is a long time in transit. However, you were not all that easy to locate, you know. All Mr. Harpe was able to give us was your name and a hotel in Hong Kong that is now an office building. Rather difficult, that."

"He is still alive?" I questioned.

"No. Very sad. Robert died about six months ago. We are handling the estate and your letter is one of the loose ends we need to tie up."

"Do you know what's in the letter?" I asked.

"Not really. Mr. Harpe could be most secretive about his private affairs. I suspect you know that already, uh? I am privy to the knowledge that there is to be some sort of accounting for something that happened between you two in those days, and my firm is prepared to honor whatever instructions the letter contains for us. You can reach me here at any time," he offered, handing me a card. He tried to smile, but didn't quite make it. I had never thought about it before, but I guess you have to do anything—even smile—more than once a year to make it seem natural.

My curiosity level was well over the 98.2 mark and the afternoon was shot anyway, so I told my disapproving secretary to cancel the rest of my appointments, hold all calls,

not to peek into my office to see if I was alive or anything like that, closed the door firmly, returned to my desk, and sat looking at the unopened envelope and thinking of Hong Kong in 1946. My God! Nineteen forty-six . . . forty-two years ago . . . not possible . . . but when you subtracted the numbers that's how it came out.

So much time and so much change. I see what they say is Hong Kong on television today and all I recognize is a bit of the harbor. Which doesn't bother me, because the Hong Kong I knew was more exciting and I had the world right by the tail then. I was twenty in 1946 . . . big, strong, healthy, and bullet proof. Absolutely nothing could happen to me I couldn't handle . . . nothing. I was in the Merchant Marines and the whole world was a big beautiful park just made for me to play in and I was enjoying every minute of it. And confident . . . it's almost unbelievable to me now what a clear sense I had then of being very lucky and very special, which is sort of how I came to be in Hong Kong in the first place.

My mother died when I was ten and my father didn't take it well. I ended up living with an uncle, who I know now was a pretty fine man to accept the responsibility for an eleven-year-old boy when he was di-

forced and trying to live like a carefree bachelor. I have no complaints, however. He did well by me and I think of him now more as a brother than a surrogate father. Anyway, I was a big kid and when I was just sixteen he signed papers that hedged on my age a bit and I went off to sea in 1942 on a freighter to see the world and the war.

I didn't enjoy the war as much as the world, but it was a good time for me. I liked the excitement and learned a lot and by the end of the fighting in '45 I was second mate on a tanker. In June of '46, the ship was en route from Singapore to Tsingtao when we hit a leftover mine floating around loose south of Formosa . . . that's Taiwan now. We lost the ship and four of the crew, but I never got a scratch. The lifeboat was dry, the weather good, and I rather enjoyed the two days of fishing before we were picked up by a passing destroyer and taken to Hong Kong.

As I said, Hong Kong was a much different place in '46. Not rich and sleek like it is today, but crowded, dirty, and hungry . . . busy digging its way out from under the destruction and poverty of a long brutal war . . . a little paint slapped here and there . . . a few buildings starting to go up on the hillsides and around the har-

bor . . . more being torn down . . . a million refugees jamming the streets and squabbling over what little housing there was. It was all noise and confusion, ugliness and beauty, wild smells and excitement, and you could buy anything you could imagine. Quite a place that Hong Kong.

I wanted to stay a while and the company I worked for gave me recuperation leave. Living space was damn hard to come by, but luckily, the company agent located an empty bed for me in a room at the Gloucester Hotel. From what Mr. Thorton said, it's an office building now, but it was a first-rate hotel then. You notice I said a *bed* in a room at the hotel, because only the very rich and very powerful could get a whole room to themselves and I didn't come close to being either one. However, after the ship, what I had seemed luxurious.

It was a big room on the fourth floor that smelled musty. You entered it from a high, wide, dark corridor through a door into a short hallway. Off the hallway, on the left, was a huge, old fashioned, tiled bathroom with ancient plumbing that worked surprisingly well. The hallway then led into the main room, which was enclosed on three sides by high, cracked, dull yellow plaster walls. The fourth side of the room was an

ornately carved Chinese separating screen that stood in front of two vast french doors leading onto a wide, deep balcony. In the main room were two beds, a sofa, a coffee table, three chairs, and a floor lamp. Two large wooden clothes closets stood against the left wall, and a faded, threadbare Chinese carpet covered the tile floor. There was another bed on the balcony.

I had one of the beds in the main room. The other was occupied by Robert Harpe, the man I had been discussing with Andrew Thornton. He told me he owned a rubber plantation in Malaya.

At that time I guess Harpe was in his early to middle thirties. We swapped reasons for being in Hong Kong and his was to arrange for the purchase of some machinery needed to get his operation going again. He laughed and told me that both he and his plantation had had a hard war. His pallor, emaciation, and a deep, livid scar running the length of his left arm supported his contention. What saved him from looking like an escapee from a hospital bed was his thick, bushy, copper red hair and clear blue eyes. His handshake was firm and he smiled easily and often. His heavy bone structure, erect posture, and graceful movements were additional

evidence that a lot of sun and good food would take care of any remaining physical problems he might have. I liked Harpe immediately, and he seemed to feel the same about me.

The balcony formed the living quarters of the third member of our group. His room was almost private in that the french doors could be closed and the screen provided additional concealment. However, because of the sticky, humid summer heat, the doors were kept open to allow the big, slow fan turning noisily on the high ceiling of the main room to move the heavy air a little. In addition to a bed, a squat wooden bureau, and two chairs on the balcony, he had a battered old steamer trunk plastered with ancient ship labels pushed into one corner.

The man living on the balcony was an old Irishman named Patrick Francis O'Halloran. The day I moved in he came into the main room and introduced himself with a brogue so thick it flowed off his tongue and so heavy it sounded fake. I never did find out how old Patrick was and it was impossible to tell by looking at him. He claimed to have spent forty-five years in China—five of them in Japanese prison camps—and that will age anyone a lot faster than mere years. If I had to guess, I would say he was in his

middle seventies when I met him.

Patrick was a bit taller than I am. Even slightly stooped with age and the weight of prison camps, he was about six feet two inches and weighed over two hundred pounds—none of it fat. He had two tufts of white hair that stuck straight out from the sides of his shiny bald head and the scraggiest white mustache I had ever seen on a man anywhere. He had a big red nose and amber eyes and I remember that the heat didn't seem to bother him. I never saw him dressed in anything other than a heavy dark blue serge suit, a white shirt with a high collar, dark tie, and black hightop shoes. As soon as he dressed in the morning he put on a black derby hat and wore it all day as he sat on the balcony and talked aloud to himself. Patrick didn't seem to belong in Hong Kong. He was an anachronism, knocked out of his world by the war and unable to find his way back.

While I was there, I never knew of a time when Patrick left the room. The room boy brought in all his meals and any other things he needed. Occasionally, when he was lucid, he talked to us about going back to Ireland where he claimed to have a sister living in Dublin. However, he never got any mail and he was very

seldom lucid. Perhaps it was age or the pressures of war or the things he had seen and endured; but whatever the reasons, his mind was muddled and he was often confused about where he was and the time he was in and he spent most of his days reliving the past. When he was happy, he sang old Irish ballads.

I know it sounds bizarre, but that was Hong Kong in 1946, and a crazy old Irishman could live in a hotel room with two strangers and no one thought much about it or really even cared. Perhaps it was the conditioning from the lack of privacy that comes with war; but in those days, if you had the slightest choice, you accepted people as they were, lived with them, ignored their eccentricities, and didn't worry about it. Although O'Halloran did scare hell out of me the first night I spent in the room.

I had gone to bed about two in the morning, exhausted from trying to see all of the city in one night, and was deeply asleep when the sound of a heated conversation on the balcony dragged me to the surface of wakefulness. It was sometime between three and four o'clock, that weird, grey time of night that is always confusing when you wake suddenly, and I distinctly remember a moment of pure panic as I tried to make

sense out of my strange surroundings and the odd noises that jumbled reality.

The street lights reflecting off the glass of the french doors cast a pale, sinister luminescence over the room, filling it with distorted black shapes that made no sense in my bewildered mind. I was completely disoriented and the loud voice coming from the balcony added to my confusion. I could only hear one side of the angry conversation . . . one audible voice demanding and accusing and waiting for answers I couldn't hear.

I had been sleeping face down on the pillow and I pushed myself cautiously up on my elbows and looked around. On the bed to my right I could make out the sleeping shape of Robert Harpe. To my left the balcony was hazy, as if filled with a fine mist. Randomly, as I lay listening and trying to bring the scene into focus, I could see what appeared to be the large form of O'Halloran pacing back and forth on the balcony, pausing often to point a distorted hand at someone or something I could not see. His words were harsh and intense and then I made out the shape of a pistol in his black hand. My skin tightened and I could feel the hair on my arms rise and rub against the stiff sheets.

"Harpe!" I whispered as loud

as I dared. "Harpe. Wake up!"

The dark shape on the bed next to mine moaned, stirred, and a black head rose out of the dark mound on the bed. "Yeah? Whatayawant?" it mumbled.

"Not so damn loud," I cautioned. "O'Halloran's out there arguing with somebody and he's got a gun."

The shapeless head fell wearily back into the black mass of the bed and a detached, sleepy voice said casually, "It's awright . . . he does it all the time . . . doan worry about it . . . le's go back asleep, okay?"

"Harpe! You're not listening to me!" I hissed. "He's bloody angry and he's waving that gun around like he means it. We've got to do something!"

"I got all the bullets to his gun . . . please, Matt . . . lemme go back to sleep, okay?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Are you crazy?" I said, forgetting to lower my voice. "That damned old man is going to shoot somebody and you keep telling me to go back to sleep! Who's out there with him, for God's sake?"

The head came out of the dark bed again. "Nobody's out there. O'Halloran is nuts. He's buggy. He isn't playing with a full deck. He's talking to somebody who isn't there. I've heard this same fight at least four times since I been here. He's yelling at his wife. She ran off

with some bloke in Shanghai years ago and he caught 'em. I think he killed 'em, but maybe he didn't. It was a long time ago and I bloody well don't care. I took all the bullets to that damn gun after the first night I went through one of his spells. If Patrick wants to talk to himself, it is perfectly fine with me. At least *he* doesn't wake me up." Harpe dropped back onto his bed with a finality I was unable to ignore. Within seconds I heard the soft sounds of heavy sleep.

I eased back down on my bed and listened. Harpe was right. Patrick was accusing his wife of sleeping with another man. The words made sense once you understood that one side of the conversation existed only in his mind.

For a full hour I listened to O'Halloran and his ethereal wife fighting on the misty balcony. Then, except for the muffled street sounds, the room became quiet.

That night set the pattern. At least twice a week I would be awakened by O'Halloran's conversations or arguments with apparitions from his past. Also, during the day or late in the evening, I would often return to the room to find him having tea with several empty chairs grouped around the table. After two weeks he began to introduce me to his ghostly guests. By then I was so accustomed to

his odd ways that I would acknowledge the eerie introductions and even join the weird scene for a few minutes. On other occasions Patrick would be perfectly normal, laughing and talking with Harpe and me, telling fascinating stories of the old China. Once he even tried to sell me a silver mine he claimed to own in Korea. But on the whole he stayed pretty much to himself on the balcony with his memories of the past.

Harpe and I, on the other hand, had to adjust to each other in the matters of practical living. If one of us brought a girl back for the evening or had a party, the other either kept the lights off, joined in, or left as appropriate. It is hard now to remember just how adaptable I was then. It took Robert and me only a few days to establish a friendship that would have taken years before the war. We shared food, drink, fun, and games with equal enthusiasm, and I found him to be a very exuberant person, totally incapable of abiding inactivity. He was full of plans and ambitions and sure of his future fortunes. He drank well, talked intelligently, and smiled a lot as if he knew things no one else did about how life was going to turn out.

Our lives flowed along like this for about three more weeks. Then, early one evening I left

Harpe at the Press Club and returned to the hotel to change clothes for a dinner date. As I entered the lobby the manager intercepted me and asked if either Harpe or I had been having any unusual problems with Mr. O'Halloran. He knew Mr. O'Halloran was "a bit addled," as he put it, but since he paid his bills promptly and we had not complained, the hotel had seen no reason to make an issue of his "condition." However, he was now "concerned," since Mr. O'Halloran had attacked the Chinese laundryman returning my wash that afternoon.

It seemed the room boy had let the laundryman enter our room unaccompanied—which the manager admitted never should have been allowed—where he had been confronted by O'Halloran. The laundryman claimed that without any provocation or warning O'Halloran had gone wild, striking him with a heavy cane and throwing him bodily from the room. The hotel was now worried about our safety.

I told the manager that Mr. O'Halloran was a gentleman and had caused us no trouble whatsoever. Further, that I doubted the entire story and trusted there would be no repetition of people being allowed in our room alone. That it appeared to me the hotel was responsible for the misunder-

standing and I certainly hoped it would not happen again. I said all of this in a very loud and indignant tone of voice. My adamant defense of Patrick was not expected, and it so flustered the manager he decided it was best to forget the whole matter and I continued up to my room.

When I shut the door behind me, Patrick came off the balcony and proceeded to tell me with great animation that a thief had broken into the room that afternoon. "Beggar was after my jewelry," he shouted. "Rushed in here bold as a brass monkey. But I gave him a good slash with my cane and threw him out. Nothing safe since the bloody war!" he complained.

I don't remember how the conversation went after his initial outburst because I was busy changing clothes and I had no idea the jewelry existed anywhere other than in his mind. However, I eventually asked him—more as conversation than with any real interest—what kind of jewelry he had and where he kept it. Patrick looked at me with half-closed eyes for a few moments before leading me onto the balcony and over to the old steamer trunk. I was still expecting to make the proper noises over his imaginary stones when he pushed open the trunk, pulled out two drawers and pointed to the contents. To say I was

shocked and surprised doesn't come close, for on that open balcony in an unlocked steamer trunk O'Halloran had two deep drawers filled with jewelry. I saw unset stones, rings, necklaces, bracelets, and brooches all tossed together in an untidy jumble. I was no expert, but like most people who traveled the world during the war, I had learned a lot about gems because of the bargains in precious stones available from refugees desperate for dollars. There was no doubt in my mind the stones were real and that there was more than a million dollars' worth in O'Halloran's trunk, unprotected and readily available for the taking. They may have been worth even more, but a million in 1946 dollars was all my mind could handle at that age.

"Where did you get these, Patrick?"

"Here and there . . . round and about," he smiled slyly. "I used to have more. Lots more, but they got lost. I hid these in Shanghai. Had a devil of a time getting them out. Real pretty, ain't they?"

"You should put these in a bank vault."

"Don't trust banks. I only keep money in banks and no more of that than I have to."

"How many people know you've got these up here?" I asked nervously.

"Just you. And I can trust you. All my friends like you, you know."

"Patrick," I warned, "don't trust anyone else. You understand what I'm saying?"

He drew himself up and said proudly, "Of course. What do you take me for? Don't worry so. Now come over here and meet my good friends Toby Rake and John Morse. On their way to India. Beastly place, that damned India. Should go to Ceylon. But they won't listen to me. Everybody has to learn for themselves these days."

I followed him to the table, nodded to the two empty chairs, gave my apologies for a previous date, and left the room in a daze.

I can't explain what happened next. I keep blaming things on the war and that may just be an easy way out. I do know, however, that when you take on a man's job and a man's life when you're sixteen, and you live with death and destruction on almost a daily basis, those fine lines between right and wrong can get very wavy and indistinct. In this case they virtually disappeared and from the moment I saw the jewels I began to think of them as mine. The rationalization was not difficult, either. I was young and O'Halloran was old. If he died, as he probably would

in the next year or two, the jewels would be taken by the first person who stumbled across them. More likely, however, someone besides me would learn they were in the room and come after them, killing all three of us if they had to. But uppermost in my mind was the fact that a chance like this would never again come along in my lifetime and I could make much better use of all that money than a crazy old man lost in Hong Kong. Once I convinced myself of those things, it seemed only logical to begin planning how to steal them.

I like to think now that I would never have done any more than plan if I hadn't been pushed so hard so soon after seeing the jewels. But fate leaped up and bit me again two days later.

It was Tuesday morning when the shipping line called and said they needed a second mate on a tanker departing Hong Kong for Basra Friday evening. I had already turned down two ships and I didn't want to go, but the offer was made in a way I couldn't refuse. It was either go or quit and I was almost broke.

By Tuesday evening I had decided whatever I was going to do had to be done by Thursday night and my options were limited. I couldn't just take the jewels and walk away.

O'Halloran could convince someone I had taken them, and a ship is easy for the authorities to track. So, as much as I disliked the idea, the safest thing all around was for O'Halloran to commit suicide. With him out of the way I could take the jewels and be gone by Friday night. No one would keep me from sailing to attend an inquest, if I did it right. Harpe might wonder where Patrick got the bullets for his gun, but that wouldn't be enough to stop me from leaving.

I also considered the possibility that Harpe might know about the jewels and have his own plans. If that turned out to be true, I'd just have to split with him. Half was better than nothing and it was a problem I would face if and when it occurred.

The plan I came up with was simple. I would drug O'Halloran Thursday afternoon when he was having tea. While the drug was working I would go down to the bar and drink for an hour or two, giving me a chance to tell the bartender how depressed Patrick seemed. After that, I'd go back to the room, take the jewels and hide them in my luggage, stage the suicide, call the hotel manager, and tell him O'Halloran had just killed himself.

I wasn't worried about anyone's finding out O'Halloran

had been drugged. There was too much real trouble in Hong Kong for the authorities to perform a complete autopsy on a demented old man who had obviously shot himself. Also, the hotel would want to keep things as quiet as possible, and his attack on the laundryman would provide ample evidence of his unstable mental condition. Harpe posed no problems, either. According to O'Halloran, he knew nothing about the jewels, and he had a new girl. For the past week he had been coming in at two and three in the morning.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized there just wasn't much that could go wrong. So Wednesday morning I bought a strong sleeping potion from a Chinese herb shop and bullets for O'Halloran's gun from a street vendor. I hid them in my clothes closet. After that there was nothing more I could do until Thursday afternoon.

I tried to pass the rest of the day getting ready to leave, but every now and then a stray doubt that I could actually kill O'Halloran would slip into my mind and fight hard to stay there. I had a miserable day and a worse night. I got very little sleep and that punctuated with terrible nightmares.

The next morning when we were having breakfast Harpe asked me why I was so jumpy.

I told him I wasn't happy about leaving and he seemed to buy that as a logical explanation. It was too bad I couldn't convince myself also, because the emptiness in my stomach got worse and the rest of the day seemed to last forever. I was into something I had no experience with, and what I would actually do when the time came to put the gun in O'Halloran's hand and pull the trigger seemed to be the only flaw in my plan.

I left the hotel immediately after breakfast and submerged myself in all the sights and smells of the emerging city, fighting my conscience, the rising excitement of potential wealth, and the fear of what could go wrong. By three thirty, the July heat pressed on me like a heavy blanket, and I was physically drained and mentally exhausted. However, it was time to begin. O'Halloran always had afternoon tea at four, and I started pushing my way through the hot, crowded streets towards the hotel.

I let myself into the room about five minutes after four. The high ceilings and dim light made it seem almost cool, but the palms of my hands were slippery with sweat and my breathing slightly faster than normal. Patrick was sitting at the table drinking tea. There was a cup and saucer in front of the empty chair opposite him.

He smiled, stood, and greeted me.

"Mathew, my boy. Do come in and join us. Just started." He turned to the side tray, picked up a cup, and began filling it with the hot, strong tea. While he was busy doing this I moved in behind him, took the packet of sleeping powder from my pocket, and emptied it into his cup. He drank his tea strong, heavily sweetened with brown sugar and thick condensed milk. I was not afraid he would detect any difference in taste.

Patrick turned, handed me the cup, and continued loudly, "Let me introduce you to my friend Colonel Gordon Giles." He pointed at the empty chair. "The colonel lives in Canton. Just in for Christmas holidays. Wonderful time of year, Christmas. Sit down. Might even sing a carol or two."

I nodded to the chair, sipped my tea, and said, "Thought you were going home to Ireland for Christmas this year, Patrick."

O'Halloran frowned, thought a minute, then laughed, "Was, you know. But couldn't leave my friends during the holidays." He looked at a spot above the empty chair where a head would have been if someone were sitting there and asked, "Couldn't do that, could I, Gordy? What's that you say?" Patrick listened, nodded and turned to me. "Gordy says you

look disturbed, Mathew. Is there anything wrong?"

The question startled me enough to speak to the fictional Gordy. "Nothing other than I'm leaving tomorrow. I'm not too happy about that."

Patrick listened carefully to the imaginary reply and then, as if translating, said to me, "Interesting. Gordy thinks it's more than that. Thinks you've got the 'not enough time' disease, he does. He says the way your face looks makes him believe you're trying to push the future around some. Bad move, that. Young men always worry needlessly about changing the future. When you get older, you'll understand there's really not much you can do. It rolls over you like a big wave, it does, and I never found a way to stop it or change it one little bit.

"Oh, we all believe we can when we fiddle around and get something we think we want. Pretty sure we changed everything, we are, but that's just fate having a little joke, it is, to teach us a lesson.

"Hard to believe at your age, Mathew, but your needs and ideas *will* change . . . quite often, too. What you want now is totally different from what you'll want in another year or two. That's why I believe when fate gets to feeling frisky and lets you have you that very im-

portant thing of the moment, more often than not you'll soon find yourself stuck with something that's nothing but a damn burden you'll carry till you're bloody sick to death of it and not one way in hell to put it down. No, Mathew, we don't change anything. Fate just has fun with us sometimes. And if you doubt what I'm saying, take a good look at me."

Patrick paused, smiled wanly, looked at the empty chair, shrugged, and said quietly, "Although you could be right. I'll admit leaving any place or anyone is sad. A bit like dying, it is. After tomorrow, I'll be dead to you and you'll be dead to me. We'll be no more than little fragments of memories to each other, which is what death usually leaves behind." He turned to the empty chair. "Did I get it right, Gordy?"

The conversation was bothering me. It was either my imagination and guilt or Patrick was using his phantom friend to tell me he knew what I was doing. I suddenly had the eerie feeling that Gordon Giles had seen me put the drug in Patrick's tea and had warned him. I knew right then I had to get out of the room while I still had some rationality and a little nerve left.

I stood up. "Thank you for the tea, Patrick, but I really have to go. I've a girl waiting."

O'Halloran looked at me and then the empty chair. "Young people get nervous when the conversation turns serious, uh, Gordy. Well, you run along, Mathew. When you get to be our ages the young ladies have all come and gone. So kiss as many as you can before the years take them away from you." He took a deep swallow of his tea and looked directly into my eyes, "God bless, Mathew, and don't worry. Things sort themselves out eventually."

I left hurriedly and went to the bar. I drank and talked with the bartender just as planned, but an hour and three gins later I finally admitted to myself there was *no* way I could kill Patrick. It might have been the things he had said to me or perhaps I never did have it in me; but, whatever the reason, I couldn't do it. If fate wanted me rich it would have to show me a better way than murder. The best thing to do, I decided, was go back and make sure he was comfortable while he slept.

I was more relaxed when I entered the room this time. I had been carrying a very large load of fear and guilt that I had put down in the bar and walked away from, and it felt good to be rid of it. I closed the door quietly and walked softly towards the balcony. About halfway there I realized the room

was too still. When I reached the french doors I saw why. It was O'Halloran. He was lying curled up on his left side, his right hand clutching the material of his shirt over the area of his heart. His derby hat had rolled under his chair, and his cane lay about two feet from his body. The color of his face and his open, sightless eyes completed the picture of death. I muttered a short prayer, which was more for me than him. Apparently his heart had been unable to cope with the strong sleeping potion I had put in his tea and despite all my good intentions of the past hour, I had murdered him.

I stood looking down at O'Halloran's body for a full two minutes before I finally shook my head hard enough to bring back reality. I had very little time and I had wasted too much already. I turned and ran to my clothes closet, took the handbag I had ready, went to the trunk and began to cram the jewels into it. I was so nervous I dropped some and had to crawl frantically around the floor to find them. When I was satisfied I had them all, I moved quickly back to my clothes closet and put the bag on the top shelf. Then I went back to the trunk, took some clothes from the other drawers and put them in the ones I had just emptied. When that was done, I stood back and

surveyed the scene to make certain everything was in order before I went for help. It looked fine at first, but just as I was turning away, out of the corner of my eye, I picked up a bright reflection over by O'Halloran's derby. I went back and saw a large diamond I had missed resting against the brim. I picked it up, started back to my closet, and then the door to the room opened.

I spun sharply and saw Harpe standing in the entrance to the hallway. He looked at me strangely and said, "Dear God, man, you're white as death! What's wrong?"

"I just found Patrick lying on the balcony. It looks like he's had a heart attack. I think he's dead." My voice sounded hollow and far away to me.

"Go get help," he told me. "I'll see what I can do here."

The rest of the day was about what you would expect. The doctor came and said O'Halloran had died of a heart attack and they carried his body away. The police took our statements, and the manager rushed around worrying about what to do with Patrick's possessions and trying to keep everything quiet so as not to disturb the other guests.

It was about eight o'clock when everyone finally left Harpe and me alone. We were both depressed and went out to eat and drink. We ended up just

drinking and I awoke the next morning with a horrible hang-over. Robert was already in the shower, singing happily, when I dragged myself out of bed and sat trying to make sense of the preceding day. It was too much to handle right then, so I settled for cursing at Harpe when he came out of the bathroom laughing at me.

"You young lads just can't handle it, can you?" He grinned.

I tried to throw a pillow at him, but it didn't make it. "No matter," he roared. "I'll take care of you. Your last day and breakfast is on me. A good lot of eggs, bacon, toast, and gin and you'll be in proper form to impress your new captain. But no dawdling, now. It's already past ten and we have to move you out by noon, you know. So perk up, laddie. Forget about O'Halloran. Terrible thing I know, but we all get old. Even me, I'm afraid," he concluded thoughtfully.

I groaned and headed for the bath. In the shower, I got my mind working enough to decide that Harpe had not known about the jewelry. Otherwise, we would have been having totally different conversations last night and this morning. The water eased the pain in my head, and I began to relax. I was rich and there was little that could beat that for a promising future.

After breakfast, Harpe said goodbye to me on the street in front of the hotel. Nothing elaborate; like most partings of those days it was just a quick handshake and good wishes for the future. It was something you did so often you really couldn't afford much emotion, and I was truly surprised at the very strong sense of loss and sadness that gripped me as the rickshaw bounced along the waterfront to my new ship.

It was two hours after I got on board before I had a moment to myself and went to my cabin to unpack. It occurred to me as I locked the door behind me that I had not been alone since I found Patrick's body. Harpe had been in the room when I packed and I only had a chance to check the weight of the bag and glance inside to see that the jewelry was still there. This was the first time I could see and feel my new wealth in comfort. Naturally, I got the handbag first and dumped its contents on the bunk. At first the jewels appeared to be exactly what I had taken from O'Halloran's trunk. Then, as I touched them, the difference became apparent to me. What lay on the white top sheet of the bunk was cheap costume jewelry.

I remember very little about the trip back to the Gloucester. I was too angry with Harpe and

myself to pay attention to much around me. Of course, when I got there, I found that Harpe had checked out immediately after I had. He left no forwarding address and there wasn't enough time to do anything other than return to the ship.

One of the most vivid memories I have of Hong Kong is that final sad evening when the tugs cut us loose and we sailed down the channel, the harbor crowded with bum boats and junks, the white broad wake of the ferry crossing to Hong Kong from Kowloon, the evening light fading the day's bright colors to deep blues and greys, lights beginning to show in the hills and around the harbor, the lingering smell of garlic and the sure knowledge that an important part of my life was coming to an end.

As we rounded the point and headed for the open sea, the rolling waters were a smooth slate grey and the skies were just showing the first faint tinges of the brilliant reds and yellows and blues that would soon create a magnificent sunset. I stood quietly on the starboard wing of the bridge, my hand in the right pocket of my khaki pants clutching the diamond I had found by O'Halloran's derby, and took one long last look at a place I would never return to. I didn't understand it all right then,

but I did know there were some storms that neither a man nor a ship could survive completely intact and I had just experienced one. It was time to go home.

We never got to Basra on that run. I forget now the exact reason, but there was one of the local wars of political squabbles going on in the Persian Gulf—like there always have been for the past five thousand years or so—and we were diverted to Bahrain. Bahrain is a free port, and I sold O'Halloran's diamond there to an Indian gold dealer working out of a small office on Jufair road. It was a very fine diamond and I got enough money from it to get home and go through four years of college. I owe Patrick O'Halloran a lot.

It was a long mental journey from those strange days in Hong Kong and the deck of that tanker back to the chair in my office, and the residual sadness of the sailing still clung to me like black oil as I picked up Robert Harpe's letter and opened it.

"Dear Matt," it began. "As I write, I do not even know if you are alive. If you are and are reading this, good! If not, I need to get these thoughts on paper for my own peace of mind. So the letter is not an exercise in futility whatever your situation may be.

"The purpose of this letter is

to tell you I have always regretted what happened in China. I didn't realize that Patrick had shown you the jewels. He said I was the only one who knew, but he was so flaky and forgetful I felt all along someone else had seen them. I just didn't think it was you. I suppose he told you the same thing and we both got greedy. I have no idea what your reasons may have been for trying to take them, but I needed the money desperately. I was there frantically trying to raise money to reopen my plantation and not having much luck. Investors couldn't see the quick returns from a war ravaged rubber plantation that were so readily available to them in other areas. I had one more month to come up with something or I was going to lose everything left to me. That's the kind of pressure that forces you to do things you ordinarily would abhor. I had already lost my wife and two children to the war and I was damned if I would lose the last thing I had in the world. It was that simple. The jewels were the answer to all my problems, so I took them.

"I am sure you have relived that day hundreds of times in your mind, seeking answers to what really took place. You even may have guessed the truth. But to resolve any questions that may remain, what

happened was that as soon as I heard you were leaving I decided it was best to steal the jewels the night before you were to sail, because I did not want to take a chance on who might replace you in the room. You were very young and very naive. You believed what you were told and accepted whatever went on at face value. You appeared to be the perfect witness for Patrick's death, you would be leaving immediately and seemed to be no threat at all to my intentions. I felt I couldn't count on being that lucky again. Obviously, I was mistaken.

"I didn't have an elaborate plan. I merely intended to kill Patrick in a way that would enable you to swear along with me that his death was natural, take the jewels to a place I had ready for them, and get out of Hong Kong as soon as possible. The only clever part—or what I thought was clever—was covering the possibility that someone else had seen the jewels. If Patrick had shown them to anyone else, I was confident they had never been able to examine them carefully. He had stayed too close to them for that. So I purchased a good quantity of excellent paste and costume jewelry to replace them with after I removed the real ones from his trunk. In that way, even if someone else did know about them, the paste jewels

would be there and there was very little chance anyone could prove they were not the ones that had been there originally. As it turned out I used them a bit differently to fool you, but the effect was the same.

"The death part wasn't difficult, either. As you remember, you could buy anything in Hong Kong then, and I got my hands on a drug that would simulate a heart attack. I went up to the room at teatime that day and found Patrick visiting with one of his invisible friends. He said you had been there earlier and had left to see a girl, which fitted my program beautifully.

"I know it will be hard for you to believe, but I honestly had strong feelings for Patrick. I could easily picture myself in the same lonely situation someday in the future, and I couldn't stand the thought of watching him die. It just seemed to me that I needed the money more than he did and I had no other choice; or if there was one I couldn't see it. So as soon as I had put the drug in his tea I left the hotel and walked the streets for an hour, waiting for it to kill him.

"Needless to say, I was surprised to find you in the room when I returned and even more surprised to find the jewels gone. It was not hard to locate them after I sent you for help. There were only so many places they

could be in the room, and I found them almost immediately. Perhaps I should have shared them with you, but at the time I was terribly angry. I had done all the work and you were trying to take everything. It seemed quite fair at the time to leave you with nothing.

"Although I did not get as much for the jewels as I had hoped, there was plenty to save the plantation and buy more land. I expanded from there into shipping, mining, and newspapers. I am now very rich and very old. I never remarried and probably would remind you a great deal of Patrick. I even have those moments when the past is more clear to me than the present and I find conversations with old friends more real than the ones I have with the living. I rather enjoy the odd expressions on the faces of those I introduce to my absent friends. I like to sing those Irish ballads of his, too.

"I know this sounds weird, but even Colonel Giles has turned up in my memories. Patrick may have introduced you to him. We have tea together almost every day and long conversations about the old China. This causes great consternation to those around me. However, I never go far enough for them to have me declared incompetent. I think I learned to walk that thin line from Patrick.

"It is also interesting to me that I keep wishing Patrick would come one day. There is a lot I would like to explain to him, but I guess I am still carrying too much guilt from China to face him yet. I do need to talk with him, though, because I am now sure he did kill his wife and whoever the man was that took her. I think when you murder someone something happens to you that later lets you spot that same potential intensity in others. This is why I felt so strongly at the end that Patrick knew exactly what I was planning to do.

"I am even more convinced now, for I have two nephews who are looking at me in the same way I looked at Patrick's jewels. They stand to gain a great deal from my death and can barely disguise their impatience for it to happen. I am just afraid they don't have the nerve to take a chance on hurrying it along, but I am sure they are trying to work it out. I can see it in their faces just as I am sure Patrick could see it in mine."

I put down the letter for a moment, rubbed my eyes and said aloud, "And he could see it in mine, too, Robert."

I picked up the letter and began reading again. "If I am dead when you get this, you will know they finally decided it was worth the risk. But I do not

want you to do anything about it. If they were smart enough to get what they think they want, let them alone. I am tired and more than ready to pass my guilt on to someone else. I'm not certain they can handle it. However, that will be their problem just as it was mine.

"Another reason for this letter is that I wish you to have something of what I took from you. I have authorized my solicitor, Mr. Thorton, to give you a check for five hundred thousand dollars. It comes late, but it is the least you are due and my nephews should not have what is yours." The letter ended abruptly and was signed simply, "Robert."

I put the letter on my desk and called the number that Thorton had left. He was waiting for my call and returned to my office immediately. Everyone else had left for the day, and we were alone.

"The letter says you are to give me five hundred thousand dollars," I told him when he was seated, "but if I have to return the letter to get the money, let's forget it."

He looked at me with interest. "I realize you are wealthy, Mr. Bolton, but no one is that wealthy. It must be an unusual letter."

"It is, Mr. Thorton. Do I get the money or not?"

He reached into his briefcase

and handed me a check. "I have no instructions to get the letter from you, and I believe that completes our business. Good evening, Mr. Bolton," he said, rising from the chair. To my surprise a genuine smile grew on his face. "I had hoped you would satisfy my curiosity. However, I can see you and Robert are from the same tree."

"Not exactly, but close enough." I stood up, walked with him to the door. "How did Robert die?" I asked.

He stopped short, turned and said, "A bad fall. He fell down a steep flight of stairs leading from the second floor hallway to the servants' pantry. Broke his neck."

"Anything unusual about it?"

Thorton started to speak, paused, and then said, "Only that he had never been known to use those stairs before. However, he was becoming more and more erratic . . . talking with people who weren't there . . . doing odd things . . . times and places were getting mixed up in his mind. Who knows what Robert was thinking or doing when he tried to go down those stairs. Is there anything in the letter that would lead you to believe differently? Frankly, I have never been satisfied with the report of the inquest."

"No," I lied. "Thank you, and

have a pleasant journey home." Thorton nodded and left.

I went back to my deck, picked up the telephone, and called home. My wife answered and asked, "Where in the world are you, darling?"

"I'm in a bar drinking with a beautiful blonde."

"Don't lie to me, Matt Bolton. You are in that dreary office working late again. You come home right now! We have three of *your* grandchildren spending the night and I need all the moral and physical support I can get."

"*Mine?* Being that bad are they?"

"If they were not so handsome, like my side of the family, I would have called Animal Control an hour ago." She lowered her voice and did her sexy imitation, "And furthermore, I am all the beautiful blonde *you* can handle."

"Indeed you are, pretty girl. Put a scotch on ice and wear a sexy dress. I'm leaving in ten minutes."

"The eternal optimist," she laughed and hung up the phone.

I began gathering papers and stuffing them in my briefcase. Harpe's letter I put carefully in an inside pocket. Tomorrow it would go in my safety deposit box. I slipped the check into my inside coat pocket to show my wife. I had once told her part of the story of my life in Hong

Kong and I knew she would be fascinated to hear the ending. Also, I would have to talk with her about whether we should keep the money. Like Harpe, I had always been troubled over what had happened in Hong Kong. I had been so sure I had killed Patrick I never even considered that Harpe might have done it. Time makes it easier, but murder is a pretty heavy thing to carry around most of your life. Harpe's letter had relieved me of that load, and I wasn't certain it would be worthwhile to pick up even a little of it by accepting the money. In any case, there would be some happy charities over the next few years.

I put my desk lamp on low, picked up my briefcase, and started for the door. The room was coated with long deep shadows that varied in colors from inky black to misty grey. Patches of faint yellow light spilled over the edges of the

desk, softly illuminating my leather chair. And suddenly, half hidden in the hazy darkness, I was sure I could see Patrick Francis O'Halloran sitting there with his two big hands resting on his cane, his black derby sitting square on his big head with tufts of white hair spilling wildly from under it, and a big smile stretching his big mouth and raising both ends of his thick bushy mustache. I couldn't see his eyes, but I could sense they were smiling, too.

"Thanks for coming, Patrick," I said to the shadows. "It was kind of you to come all that way so I'd know our Chinese guilt trip is finally over."

I closed the door and started walking down the dimly lighted corridor towards the elevators. I know there are always strange echoes in empty buildings at night; but, behind me, in my office, I would swear I could hear two men singing happily.

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**SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":**

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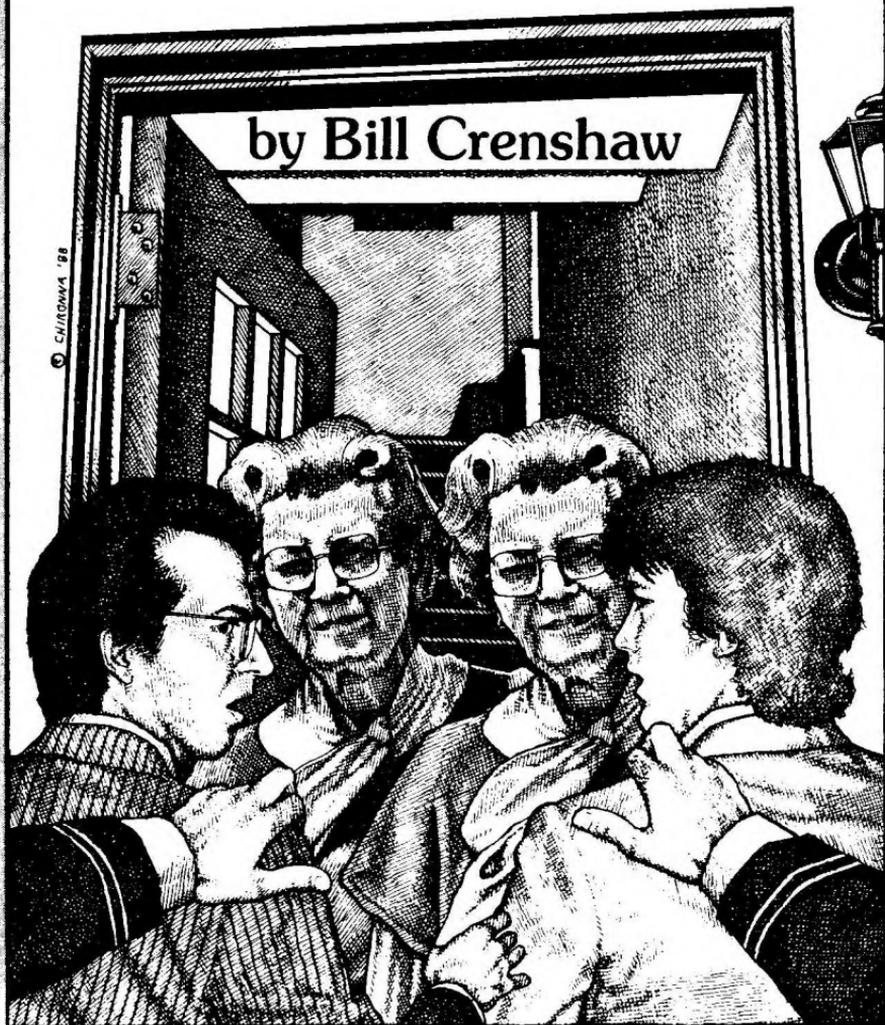
R P U V T S Q

FICTION

# Snowman Meets the Ice Queen

by Bill Crenshaw

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**I**n the year 1978 I took my degree of Bachelor of Arts from Cranefield College and proceeded to Florida to go through the course prescribed for golfers to make the tour.

To make a long story short, I didn't get my card, so I found a job as a golf pro at a weatherbeaten course so I could eat while I sharpened the old game up.

"Took" is a pretty good word to describe what I did to my college degree. "Earned" would probably be stretching things a little thin. On paper my major was English, but they say what you learn outside of class is as important as what you learn inside, and since my roommate Perkins spent his days on the inside part, I thought I should give the outside equal time. Average us together, we came out with a well-rounded college education.

My dad said that only two things stood between me and professional golfhood—skill and practice. But Dad is never so happy as when he says he told me so. I still think I might have made it if I hadn't taken that shot to the shoulder.

Now I know it was partly my fault—we shouldn't have been on the course that time of night, and Pete just flat didn't see me out there when he teed off. It was a solid stroke for someone

in his condition, and would have been a good couple hundred yards, but it went about thirty feet before it made contact with my left shoulder just where the collar bone joins whatever it joins to make the joint. Dad said it wouldn't have hurt so much if it had hit me in the head. Ha, ha.

I healed up okay, except that the joint is stiff and kind of freezes up just at the top of my swing. So I said goodbye to the golf pro job and the green jacket in my future and went back to my hometown and got an apartment and bummed around the city feeling sorry for myself until I ran through most of what little money I had. Then I decided that I'd better decide what I wanted to do, since I wasn't going to be able to play games for money after all.

On the very day that I came to this conclusion, leaning over my beer in the Standard Bar, someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around and saw, of all people, Perkins.

Now, Perkins and I had never been what you'd call close, but it was good to see him then, and not just because he ordered us a pizza and picked up the tab, either. It was good to see a familiar face, any familiar face. I asked him how he'd been doing in the two years since graduation. He'd been doing

well, of course. He was a rapid riser at Baker Street Development. He told me all the details. I smiled and nodded and made the right noises, my way of paying for the pizza.

"So, Snow," he said, when he'd finished his recap, "what about you?"

He listened to my sad tale with great interest because I was obviously headed for that bad end he always said I would get to. Even in college he had sounded a lot like Dad. Perkins, you should understand, is the son my daddy never had. He majored in business instead of English, he joined the young Republicans instead of a fraternity, and he went to work for Baker Street Development instead of going out to play. Baker Street Development is Dad's company.

Well, Perkins, being Perkins, felt obliged to give me the benefit of his advice, and he told me something I would never have thought of myself. He told me to go to Dad.

I laughed. He laughed. We had a good laugh together.

The next morning I called Dad and made an appointment to see him about working for Baker Street Development.

I could see certain advantages, not the least of which was that Dad would be so happy about getting to say he told me

so about so many different things that he'd probably be in a good enough mood to give me a decent start. I thought I might get an office of my own and maybe be like his assistant while I learned the administrative ropes, or whatever you learned in real estate and development and all. After that I could lean back in my chair like Dad and let all the people I hired make all the money for me. And I'd probably be playing a lot of golf for the company, which would be great, even if I did have to let the clients win. I saw myself on sunny greens in polo shirts with no ties. "Great shot, Mr. Wentworth," I could hear myself say, holding the pin for the double bogie putt. "Now, about that multimillion dollar development deal . . ."

I have this unfortunate habit of imagining my bright future in some detail, so I already had a reasonably specific picture in mind as I waited across the desk for Dad to get through his speeches so he could show me to my new office as his administrative assistant.

What he did was make me gopher for the Ice Queen.

Dad got the idea while we were sitting there in his office. He was still beaming from his thirty minute non-stop series of told me so's. "Now," he said, leaning back in the big chair

behind his big desk, "where do we put you?"

I figured he'd already decided, and that this "considering" was really a show for my benefit, but I smiled hopefully anyway, with a touch of grateful thrown in in anticipation of something good, and just a hint of sheepishness to show the right amount of humility and embarrassment that I was putting him in this position when if I'd only listened to him in the first place, things would have been different. If they'd given grades for smiles, I'd have made the Dean's List every term.

But he really hadn't decided, and the idea came to him right then like an inspiration. I know that because Dad made the Dean's List for looking serious, and the look on his face then was A+. Suddenly he smiled. It was an involuntary smile. Involuntary smiles are dangerous. "I know," he said. "We'll make you assistant to the Ice Queen."

I had no idea what that meant. It didn't sound like what I'd thought of as businesslike, but then I had stayed away from all things businesslike. I kept my smile on.

He wrote a memo to her. He could have picked up his phone and called her office, but he didn't. He wrote the memo, called in Mrs. Hobbs, his sec-

retary, and told her take the memo straight down.

"She's out," Mrs. Hobbs told him. He told her to leave it with reception so that she would get it as soon as she came in. "Oh, thank you, sir," Mrs. Hobbs said with what I thought was some relief. I didn't take that as a good sign.

I made my face blank and raised my eyebrows in an innocently curious sort of way so that it wouldn't look like I was asking.

"Our best agent," said Dad, grinning now. "Best in sales, best in listings, best residential, best commercial. The best." He was rubbing his hands together. He was nodding. I smiled and sort of nodded back.

He asked me if I wanted a cup of coffee. I said, yes, thanks, I would. He told me there was a pot in the employee lounge. He said he thought there were cups there, too.

Well, I didn't really think he'd fall on my neck and kill the fatted calf. I found the lounge and filled a clean cup and opened a copy of *Realty World* and stared at the pages. So much, I thought, for nepotism.

So far, I have to say, I wasn't working up much enthusiasm for the idea of going into real estate. Sitting in the lounge didn't help. I guessed that the people who came in while I sat

there were mostly agents. They gave me big hellos and found out who I was and asked me where I went to school and I told them I had graduated two years ago, and they asked me where I was going to college. Maybe it was the way I was dressed, but it was my best teal sports coat, khaki chinos, Bean madras buttondown, and white Top-Siders. They all had on darkish suits with pinstripes. They all looked like bankers or politicians. The fact that I was Dad's son made them hearty but not friendly. Their names fell out of my head as soon as I heard them. I wondered if one of them was the Ice Queen, and why Mrs. Hobbs had looked relieved, and why Dad had called her the Ice Queen anyway, and why I was here.

Perkins drifted into the lounge when I was on my third cup of coffee. He was surprised I'd taken his advice, but I could tell it was doing his ego good. "So, Snow," he said, "how does it feel, first day on a real job?"

He smiled the same after-the-test smile I saw all the way through college. He was a C-smiler.

"Really interesting," I said, nodding. "I mean really."

He nodded back, smiling. "You working for the old man, I guess?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure," I said. Then I leaned to-

ward him. "Perks," I said in a low voice, "who is the Ice Queen?"

His face froze. The smile was there, but it was stuck.

"What do you mean?" he managed to get out through his teeth.

"What do you mean, what do you mean?" I asked.

He swayed over to the coffee pot and poured a cup and tried to take a sip before answering. "I mean," he said, "that nobody works with the Ice Queen. Especially not you."

I think that last part kind of slipped out before he knew he had said it, maybe because he'd burned his tongue on the coffee.

"No offense," he said quickly, "but look at you. Professionally, not physically. I mean, Snow, you don't know anything. You've never known anything. You never *will* . . ." He stopped and looked at me hard. Then he sat back down. "She's the best. She always ices the sale. Never misses. It's like a point of pride with her. You get the feeling sometimes that it's not the money at all. It's just doing it."

"I get the feeling," I said, "that people are afraid of her."

"Not afraid, exactly. . . . It would be like playing golf with one of the greats. Who's the best?"

I named a name.

"How would you like to play

in a tournament with him as your partner?"

"It would be super," I said. "It would be fantastic. We couldn't lose."

"Unless . . ." said Perkins, leaving the sentence unfinished like he always did when he was helping me study for a test.

"Unless . . ." I said in exactly the same way, and frowned to show I was really concentrating and waited until he told me the answer.

"Unless *you* screwed up," he said. "You couldn't lose unless *you* screwed up."

I nodded. That made sense. "Yeah, but people seem, well, afraid or something."

"You haven't even met her, have you?"

"Well, no."

Then the receptionist stuck her head into the lounge and asked me who I was. I told her. She gave me a long look that combined amusement and pity, and told me that the Ice Queen would see me now. Perkins spilled coffee on himself.

I knocked lightly and went in. She was on the phone. She looked at me. She looked at the couch across from her desk. I sat.

Her hair wasn't white, exactly, but it was so blonde that it might as well have been. Even across the room I could

see that her eyes were as blue as blue ever gets. Her desk was mostly glass. What wasn't glass was silver. Her suit was white. Her chair was blue. The rug was white. The couch was blue. The walls were white. I shivered.

She was talking to Dad. She wasn't happy. She was talking in a voice like a day in November. Not only did she not need a gopher, she didn't want one.

Apparently neither of us had much choice.

She hung up the phone. The phone was blue.

She looked me over for a little while.

"Golfer," she said.

I nodded. "I'm surprised Dad mentioned it," I said, trying to put a little but not too much distance between me and Dad, especially if she wasn't happy with him.

"He didn't," she said. "Can you drive?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know the city?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about real estate?"

She knew I didn't. She just wanted to make sure that I knew where things stood.

"'Eraid not," I said, and gave her my boyish smile, good-humored and naive, with just a glint of something interesting going on behind the eyes. It was my best smile, bar none. It was

the smile that got me the name of Snowman back in college. It always worked. I waited for her reaction.

Her eyes crystallized.

I kept the smile on as long as I could, but what with her eyes and her office all blue and white like the inside of an igloo, whatever warmth the smile had just kind of drained right out.

"Where will you be," she said, "when you're needed?"

I glanced around the office with hopeful eyebrows raised. "In the lounge?" I said.

She held out a stack of folders. "Study these. New listings. We'll start in Greenwood Hills."

I took the folders. They felt cold.

In the lounge I warmed my hands around another cup of coffee. Nobody tried to strike up a conversation, which was good because I thought I'd better try to study the folders. It was like I was back in school, which I thought I'd left forever. Each folder had a big card with a picture of a house and a chart of features and a lot of abbreviations which looked too much like Latin had looked back in the ninth grade. I didn't even know what I was supposed to be looking for.

I was beginning to think the idea of doing real estate was as dumb as I used to think it was, but finally Perkins came in.

He had changed pants.

"Well," he began, and then he went pale. I turned around. The Ice Queen was in the door.

"Bring the folders," she said to me.

She was going to let me drive because she didn't know what else to do with me, but she wasn't going to let me drive if I had to ask directions. "What we do in this job," she said, "is based on timing and time."

Her car was white on white. She held the keys over my open palm, then hesitated. I smiled my earnest but humbly self-confident smile. She let the keys drop into my hand anyway. She sat in the back seat. "Greenwood Hills," she said. I felt like Jeeves.

I knew the back ways and shortcuts and cross streets. I wove through traffic and slid under yellow lights and still made the ride so smooth that she didn't even look up from the folders in her lap. "Twelve minutes," she said when I turned into the driveway of the Greenwood Hills listing.

"Not bad, huh?" I said.

She stared for a half second longer than necessary. "Pay attention to what you see," she said. "You can't sell what you don't know. And see what work it needs before it hits the market."

It was a big house on its own two acres, as all the houses were in the Hills, with plantation columns and Tudor windows, a sort of Tara-on-Avon. A little grove of trees sat between the house and the road so that once you turned up the driveway you could have been out in the country somewhere and lord of all you surveyed. The lawn ran from the trees all the way to the house, long as a fairway, smooth as a green. I liked it. I looked around, thinking it was all kind of nice. The Ice Queen was looking, too, but with eyes like twin cameras snapping Viewmaster pictures, cataloguing it all, the long green lawn, the paint flecking on the columns, the flower bed all dug up and the new rose bushes and azaleas ready to go in. I started looking closer. I had a feeling there'd be a test.

The owner met us at the door, a Mr. Fergusson, a strange little man in a flowery red Hawaiian shirt and electric blue shorts and running shoes with no socks, and seventy if he was a day. He took the Ice Queen by the elbow and steered her into the house. He kept calling her "honey." It made me nervous.

We sat in the living room. I tried to concentrate on developing my powers of observation so I could get to know what we were going to sell if I was really

going to be in real estate, which still didn't seem quite real if you know what I mean. I looked around carefully. It was nice, except for this really old carpet on the floor. Needed wall-to-wall, I thought. But nice furniture if a little clunky, nice curtains, really nice clock on the mantel, an iron lion kind of thing. The Ice Queen was telling Fergusson that it was a beautiful house and that she was sure that he was sorry to be selling.

Mr. Fergusson snorted. "Got to get to Florida," he said. "Too damn cold up here. I'm ready for fun in the sun."

We took the quick tour, me trying to figure out what to look at, the Ice Queen's eyes flicking around, taking it all in. I thought it was a nice house.

When we were through, the Ice Queen got all the right papers signed and got a key for the lockbox to go on the front door and went through her list with Fergusson about where paint was needed and what faucets needed washers and why the kitchen sink should be replaced and what furniture should be put in storage somewhere. She said she'd call the people we had on contract and have the rugs and drapes cleaned professionally. She said she'd have the cleaners come right over. Fergusson patted

her hand and told her not to trouble her pretty head about all that. I expected icicles to pin the old man right to the wall, but all he got was a warm smile and a little laugh, indulgent with an edge of limited tolerance. She said that it was no trouble, that it was her job. She was glad he'd gotten Davis Landscaping to redo the flower bed. "The right touches always help the sale value," she said.

"What sale value?" said a pair of voices behind us, and I turned and saw a set of twins standing in the door, looking like Fergusson but a couple of years younger maybe.

Fergusson talked to them like there was only one. "I told you, sis, I'm selling. We're headed south."

"We don't want to leave, do we?" one said to the other.

"No, indeed. We're perfectly happy here. We have our friends and"

"our club and"

"the museum and"

"everything. Florida is for"

"tourists."

They were big women, sort of ice queens themselves, I thought. I glanced at the Ice Queen, but she was looking at drapes as if nobody else was in the room. I could hear the twins breathing. The Ice Queen wasn't making any noise at all. It would have been an interesting

match-up if the twins had stayed, but they just faded away after giving their brother a long dirty stare.

Outside I said I guessed that was that. "Too bad, too," I said. She looked at me until I went on. "I mean, they don't want to sell."

"Who?"

"The sisters."

Two plumes of icy breath escaped her nostrils. "They're not the owners. What did you think of the house?"

"Nice house," I said.

Her eyes frosted up again.

She drove back. We just oozed through traffic somehow. Wherever she was, lines weren't. We didn't hit a single light. She didn't weave, she didn't speed, she didn't take shortcuts. She just drove, and we were there. Seven minutes.

Back at Baker Street I found I was getting an office. The Ice Queen took me past her office, around the corner, and down the hall to a supply closet. It was about eight by ten feet. The workers were ripping out shelves and removing supplies, grumbling about where they had to put all the stuff until they noticed us in the doorway.

The Ice Queen looked it all over and nodded. "Desk here," she said, pointing. "Phone here. Terminal here. And door," she said, pointing at the opposite

wall and tracing a rectangle with her index finger pointed like a laser blaster, "here."

The head worker started shifting his feet and took the pencil he was sucking out of his mouth. "We can't cut a door here," he said.

She turned slowly as if she was looking for something. When her head and eyes got to him, they stopped. "When?" she said.

"Uh," he said, "this morning. We can't cut a door here this morning. We can start tomorrow maybe. Maybe this evening. Maybe this afternoon."

She smiled at him. He smiled and ducked his head in a kind of nod, as if telling himself he'd gotten the answer right.

I told her that I didn't think I needed another door. She said it wasn't for me. "If I want to see you for some reason," she said, as if trying to imagine what such a reason could possibly be, "I want to see you. I don't want to wait while you wander the halls."

An office, I thought. Wow. Then I quit flattering myself with the idea that I had something to do with it. This was office politics, which is to national politics as chess is to checkers, as golf is to putt-putt. I wondered what Dad would think of it all, but I didn't think he'd have much choice.

That afternoon I had a desk and a phone and a terminal and a couple of guys making measurements and grumbling, and we got a nibble on the house. A couple named Parker-Murphy were relocating and were interested in something big. They were in a hurry and wanted to see it the next day. We had just the thing.

The Ice Queen told me to call Fergusson and set up an eleven A.M. showing. That meant she wanted them out of the house before we got there. "Never show a house with the owner floating around the corners of the rooms like a ghost," she said. She also wanted to speed up the Right Touches department. She called Stan's Steam Cleaning and told them to do what they could to the drapes and carpets that afternoon. She called Page Brothers Painting and told them to do the eaves and columns. She called Davis Landscaping to get them to finish up the flower bed fast.

"Gonna be hard," said Davis. "Not today. Maybe by Friday."

She was silent.

"How about Wednesday?"

Silence.

A sigh from the speaker-phone. "When do you need it?"

"Tomorrow. Eleven."

"I'll have a crew out at nine."

She told me to make sure that Fergusson knew that work was

going to be done and that it could make a difference of ten or fifteen thousand dollars on a house like his. Even more if she had more time.

I was impressed. This real estate stuff was seeming like a sure thing about then. Big cars and seeing neat houses and a little phone work, people hopping, carpets getting cleaned and doors getting cut, and a nice commission when you finished the round. I thought I might like it after all.

But the next morning with the Parker-Murphys checking out the lawn, the Ice Queen took my elbow and asked me what I thought of the flower bed. All the roses were planted. Fast work. I nodded. "Nice," I said.

"Never send amateurs to do professional work," she said. I wasn't sure if she meant me or Davis, but I had a good guess.

We went inside. It looked good. Floors were cleaner, drapes brighter. The Parker-Murphys were drooling. The Ice Queen was smiling.

In the living room, while the Parker-Murphys oohed and ahhed and felt the curtains, she asked me what I thought. I looked around frantically for something to say besides "nice."

"Glad they got rid of that ugly rug," I said.

She smiled at me, teeth like

little icebergs, and said in a low voice, "Chinese. Priceless."

I nodded and smiled back. "Well," I said, seeking redemption, "too bad they took the clock."

She didn't even bother to comment on that one. I wasn't doing too well.

Then as we started into the dining room the sisters popped in and asked us what we were doing in the house.

"We scheduled this showing with Mr. Fergusson," said the Ice Queen.

"He's out," they said, "and we don't know when he'll be back."

"We'll just look around, if you don't mind," she said, winter in her voice.

"Oh, but we do mind. You're trespassing. Our brother is not here. How do we know he gave you permission?"

"Yes," said the other, "you must go now, or we will"

"call the police."

The Ice Queen turned to me.

"But I talked to Mr. Fergusson," I said.

The sisters raised their chins together.

We left.

I thought I knew cold. I spent one winter in Denver. That was Miami in July compared to the office when we got back.

"I thought you'd set it up with Fergusson," she said.

"I did. I called. I talked to him. Eleven o'clock. He was excited."

"Did you make sure he understood the time? the date? that he was to get his sisters out as well as himself?"

"I . . ."

"Did you do a confirm callback?"

"Callback?"

The moisture in the air went solid and settled over everything like a fine white dust. It was a really great sale, and I had blown it. I'd mixed up the date or the time or something. I had told Fergusson wrong.

She pointed to her couch. "Pay attention," she said.

She used the speakerphone so I could hear. She called Davis Landscaping first. She spoke to Davis himself. She told him what she'd seen. She told him that Baker Street couldn't have that. She told him that if they couldn't do better work, Baker Street would get someone else. Ice cubes were just falling out of her mouth and piling up on her desk.

Davis said he'd get back to her.

She called the Parker-Murphys to apologize again. She promised to work it out. She had them apologizing to her before she hung up.

Then she called Fergusson. The sisters answered. Ice on ice.

Winter on the tundra. No, their brother still wasn't home. No, they didn't know when he'd be back. No, they didn't know where he'd gone. Maybe Florida. Yes, they'd leave a message. And they'd thank her not to call back again.

She didn't. She made me. I called all afternoon. I called that evening. Still no Fergusson. I didn't sleep real well.

"I think they're screening the calls," I told the Ice Queen the next morning. There were no workers measuring the wall in my office. "The phone rings once, a sister answers and says he's not there. He's probably out jogging somewhere." I tried to imagine the Ice Queen jogging, spreading killer frost in her wake. "Or maybe," I continued into the silence, "maybe he took off for Florida already. Maybe his sisters drove him nuts and he just left." Maybe, I thought, he just flapped his arms and flew away.

"Anything else?" she said.

I hung around the coffee pot just to stay warm, and I figured I'd better drink all the free coffee I could because my real estate career had just about run its course.

Perkins came down, and when we were alone in the lounge, I told him what had happened. He was not encouraging.

"God, Snow," he said, "it was

a sure thing. Sales don't get any easier." Perkins has never been good with his eyes. I could see that he was not entirely sympathetic to my problems.

"What are my chances of making it up?"

He looked at me as if my name were Scott and I'd just asked what my chances were for the South Pole.

I nodded glumly. "That's what I thought."

Perkins' mouth went tight. "You blew it, Snow," he said. "It was handed to you on a silver plate, and you blew it."

Good old Perks. Always trying to cheer me up. "Don't rub it in. Tell me what to do."

"I mean, Snow, you were working with *her*."

"If you work with her," I said, "dress warm."

He didn't hear me. He was staring through the wall somewhere just above my head. His eyes were getting strange. The Ice Queen had done more than intimidate my old roomie.

I didn't know what to think. I mean, Perkins wasn't what you'd call a romantic, and the Ice Queen had ten years on us easy, and, well, she was the Ice Queen. If Perkins was carrying a torch for her, it was a safety match in Siberia.

"Perkins?" I said. "Perks?"

His eyes stayed locked on the heart of the galaxy. "Doesn't

she remind you of some great heroine?" he said in a far off voice.

"Lady MacBeth?" I suggested.

He swung his eyes back down. "Joan of Arc," he snapped. "Cleopatra."

I laughed. I shouldn't have, not with Perks feeling like that, but I couldn't help it and it made Perks mad, so I tried to explain that I'd seen this image of the Ice Queen, the Empress of the Frozen Nile, rolled up in a rug and delivered to Marc Antony (with Perks as a skinny Marc Antony, but I didn't tell him that part). "Can't you just see it?" I asked.

Apparently he could. He had gone snow white. I turned around. She was behind me, a strange glint in her glacier blue eyes. The Ice Queen cometh.

The arctic winds were building to sweep down from the north and freeze me solid to the ground. I braced myself for the blast, but when I opened my eyes, she was gone.

Perkins sank into a chair. His hands were shaking. "Oh, God, what have I done?"

"Blown it big time," I said. Mean, but I couldn't resist. It was Perkins, after all.

He grabbed my lapel. "Snow, you've got to help me."

"How?" I said.

"We've got to save that sale."

"The Fergusson sale?"

"It's the only chance we've got. You said you thought the sisters were screening the calls. Let's go out to the house and find him."

I was long past having anything to lose. What else could possibly happen?

We got arrested. We banged on the front door and rang the bell and got no answer. I figured we'd try the back and see if Fergusson was out for a jog or having a swim in the backyard pool or just in the back of the house. Nothing there either. We tried the front again. Nothing.

I shrugged. "That's it, I guess."

Perkins got a little wild. "Maybe he's upstairs," he said. "Maybe they're keeping him a prisoner in a bedroom. You said they were younger, and there are two of them." He had a point. I knew what it was to work with an ice queen. I rang the bell and called. We backed to the edge of the porch and cupped our hands at the upstairs window and yelled for Mr. Fergusson.

And then we heard the front door being unlocked. *It worked*, I thought, and just as it swung open to reveal the twins, a hand came down on my shoulder. It was attached to a policeman. Perkins had one, too.

"That's him," said the twins, pointing at me. "We told him that if he came back"

"we'd call the police. We" "warned him."

I got read my rights, just like on TV.

The cops were nice about things, but they had their job to do, which meant running us through the system since the sisters insisted on swearing out a warrant.

Sometimes things stick with you even when you don't know it. Some of my English major took after all, because as we're getting fingerprinted and photographed and Perkins is moaning about how he was sorry he ever saw me in the bar, sorry he'd been my roommate, sorry I was ever born, and that this was the worst thing that had ever happened to him in his whole entire life, a line floated back from a play about things not being the worst as long as we can say, "This is the worst."

I didn't have any cash. Perkins had seventeen dollars. Bond was minimal, but not that minimal. And they didn't take checks.

I called Dad.

He called the Ice Queen. Office politics again.

The Ice Queen picked us up. Perkins about died.

I drove and Perkins sat in front. It was either that or Per-

kins and me in the back with the Ice Queen looking like a chauffeur or chauffeurette. Perkins just held his head and looked green. I started to drive back to Baker Street, but she said to go to Fergusson's.

*Showdown*, I thought, not particularly wanting to risk the crossfire.

"I called the cleaners and painters," she said. "They both said that Fergusson was at home while they were there, making a nuisance of himself, apparently. Telling them how to do their jobs."

I didn't know what to say. I nodded.

"The landscapers called this morning," she said. "Davis demanded an apology."

Not smart, I thought.

"He said his crew hadn't finished the flower bed. It had been planted when they got there. What do you think?"

I shrugged. "Fergusson did it himself, thinking he was doing us a favor?"

In the mirror she stared at me for a while as if sizing me up. "You are positive that you set up that appointment with Fergusson?"

Absolutely, I told her. He had been jumping up and down. He said we must be the world's greatest agents. She gave a little ghost smile at that.

"You had better be more than

positive. You had better be right. Davis is under contract to Baker Street. I told them to rip up the flower bed and start again. I called them before I knew you two had managed to get yourselves arrested."

Perkins moaned.

"I'm taking a chance that you are right and that we had an appointment with Fergusson. If we didn't, we're going to be in trouble."

Perkins moaned again.

"What you said about Cleopatra and the rug," she said.

Perkins sank in the seat and buried his face in his hands. I was dead. I tried to say I was sorry, but my jaws were locked tight.

"Turn in," she said.

I had almost overshot the house. I turned into the drive and pulled up behind the two Davis vans. Perkins and I got out. Six or seven workers were leaning on shovels, and dozens of rose bushes and azaleas stood around waiting to go into the ground where they belonged. Nobody was working, everybody was staring at the freshly turned flower bed, because in the ground, where it did not belong, was the Chinese rug from the living room and in the rug, where they didn't belong, were Fergusson and the lion clock.

Davis walked over to the Ice

Queen's car. "They've locked themselves in the house," he said. "Somebody should call the police."

"I already have," said the Ice Queen.

After the police coaxed the sisters out of the house, they got a confession of sorts. After the cleaners and the painters had left, the sisters had argued with Fergusson about selling. The more they argued, the more determined he was to move and move fast, and while one of them was berating him to his face, the other lifted the iron clock from the mantel and gave him a whack from behind. Maybe they didn't mean to kill him, but he'd dropped to the rug like a topped drive, and they rolled him up and planted him with the roses and azaleas. It was hard to say whether it was premeditated; it wasn't planned exactly, but both seemed to have gotten the idea at exactly the same time. Each said the other had given the actual whack.

The police took us back to the station, but this time to take our statements about Fergusson and his sisters instead of fingerprints. Before she left, the Ice Queen said to see her as soon as I got back. When they were done, the police gave us a lift back to Baker Street. Perkins made them drop us at a

corner several blocks away. "Need the exercise," he said when the patrolman said he didn't mind. "Feeling queasy."

At the office Perkins said I could do him a big favor and go play golf and never talk to him again. I told him I understood. He shuddered and disappeared into the men's room.

Might as well get it over with, I thought. She'd said in her office when I got back. I wished I was dressed for the Yukon.

She going through folders when I went in, and she pointed to the couch. I looked at where the door to my office should have been by now. Nothing. Oh, well. Would have been interesting, in a way, working for the Ice Queen, but my mouth had done me in again.

She stacked the folders and put them aside and turned to me.

Please, I thought, don't mention Cleopatra and the rug.

"When you made your little joke about Cleopatra and the rug," she said, "I connected some details that had been bothering me. The flower bed already planted. The missing clock, which at the time had seemed a move of good taste. The fact that only the one rug had been removed for cleaning. And Fergusson's leaving his sisters in the house if we had

the appointment, or not being there himself if we didn't. It all came together with the image of Cleopatra in the rug."

"Uh," I said. "Uh . . . uh . . ."

She reached for her folders and looked up. "Now . . ." She paused. "What is your first name, by the way?"

"Snowma . . . Ah, Bartholomew. Bart."

"Selena," she said, meaning, I guessed, herself. She held out a stack of folders. "Study these. Know these. Then come back."

I couldn't believe it. Reprieve. Second chance. I reached for the folders.

She didn't let them go. She fixed me with her crystal eyes again. Her voice was dry ice.

"Never," she said, "never, ever discuss me with Perkins or with anyone else again."

I tried my best smile of self-abasement and mortification but could only manage something that was a plea for my life. And yet she'd said "again." "Again" implied a certain continuity. I managed a nod and she let the folders go. I turned to the door.

"Bartholomew," she said.

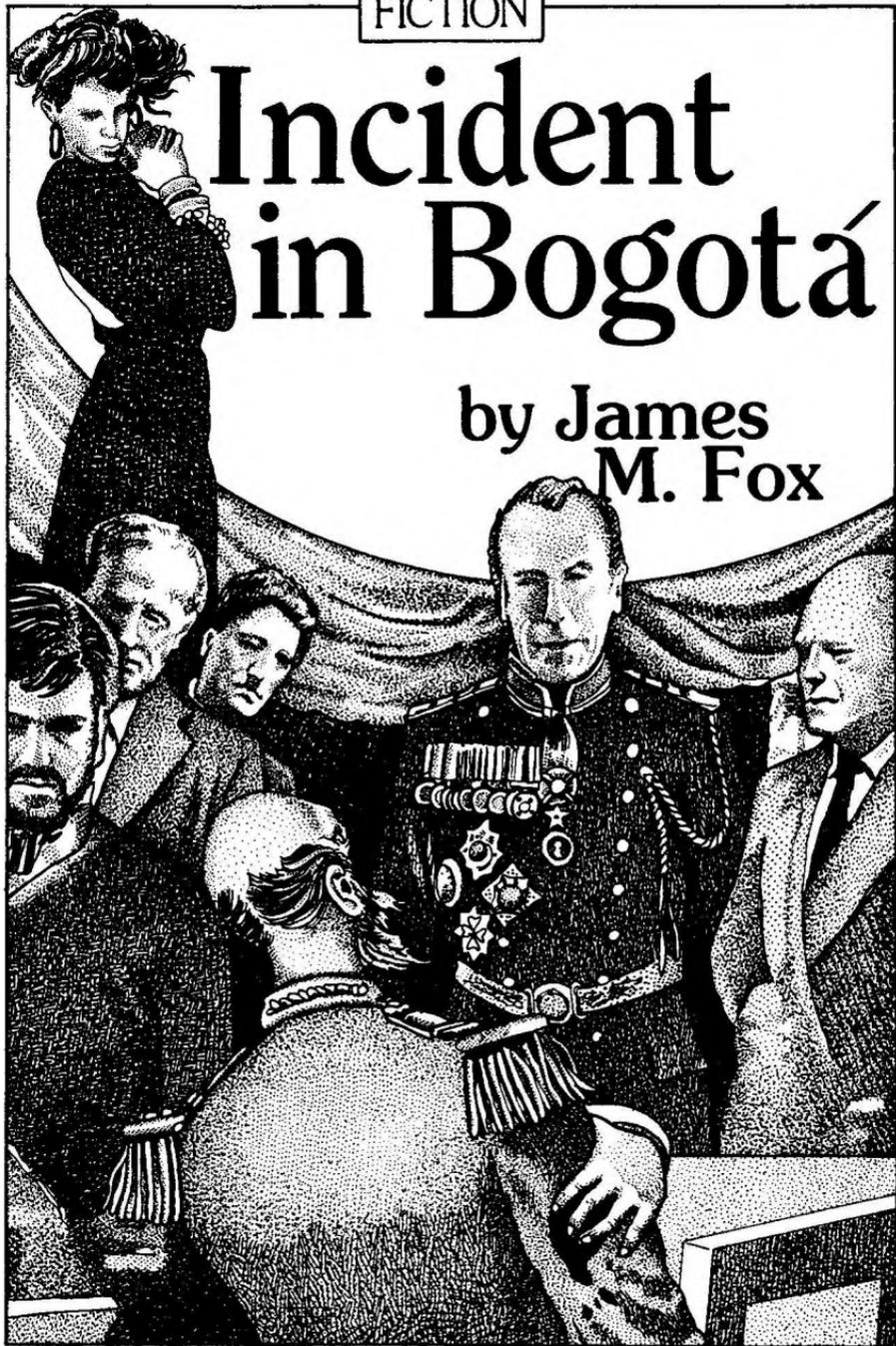
I turned back.

"Your office is that way." She pointed to her wall. And sure enough, they had cut a door through. But, of course, you couldn't see the door from her side unless you knew where to look.

FICTION

# Incident in Bogotá

by James  
M. Fox



I met General Francisco Vargas Urticaria only once, several years ago, and under circumstances of substantial embarrassment to both of us. These had originated on my side one late November evening, with a call from Washington. I caught a flight from London, where I was stationed at the time, to Miami that same night, and walked into Wayne Latimer's hospital room at breakfast time.

He was a former FBI agent, in his late forties, sharper than a stainless steel tack but not in good physical condition. Gelusil and tranquilizers couldn't always keep him going, and his temper would fall off accordingly. "Why you?" he greeted me. "You don't know South America. You've never even been there." When I told him everybody else was busy and that he'd deprived me of a holiday, he managed to control his sympathy. "You do speak Spanish?"

"Let's not worry about me so much," I said. "What's wrong with you?"

He said the medical profession had been trying to make up its mind if he should be cut open to find out. "They wanted to get on with it in Bogotá. I passed, and grabbed a plane. Our customer is on the hospital board down there."

"He's a doctor?"

"So was Che Guevara."

Latimer looked pretty bad. I put a leash on my impatience and said pleasantly enough: "I know that, Wayne, but Jimmy Dexter mentioned that you were supposed to brief me. You can skip the generalities. Colombia has twenty million people. It's about the size of California and Texas put together. It's politically fairly stable, with a president elected for four years, a senate, and a house of representatives. Exports are coffee, emeralds, and cocaine. Havana has been trying for a long time but can't seem to get anything going there. Now tell me why."

"You see?" he scoffed, exasperated with me. "You don't have a clue. Take you three months to line this up, and you won't get three days." He had a spasm, bit it back, and bared his teeth at me. "Okay, I'll give it to you in one hunk. Castro *is* making progress. There's no reason why he should. The country's fairly prosperous. The Indios are a small minority, well-integrated. There's the usual agrarian-reform problem, and politics are elitist, of course. But you can't get away from those in South America. They need agrarian reforms in Cuba, in reverse, and *their* political elite is even more objectionable since it has no manners. In Colombia, they've organized a half dozen guerrilla outfits.

Doesn't mean a thing, the army can take care of them. The only question is, who takes care of the army."

"Don't the politicians?"

"Sure they do, if you mean pay and rations. But there are too many first lieutenants crowding forty, and too many majors who'll never get a regiment."

The straw to make the bricks. Even in ancient Rome, if you were discontented with the government, you talked with four or five centurions and promised each of them a legion. "Who's your doctor friend?" I asked.

"Juan Ruiz-Martinez. Home and office in the Bolivar Hotel. A Castro agent, but he's not responsible for the guerrilla picture. That's supposed to be controlled direct, by Cubans in the field. Ruiz-Martinez is a practicing Colombian physician. Almost all his patients are notorious radicals or student activists."

"His nurse sold you the list," I said.

"His janitor, for fifty pesos. Like three bucks. What should be worth a little more than that is which one of them will assassinate General Vargas. Also when and how."

"Who's he?"

"He's not the president," said Latimer, bitterly patient with me. "Or the chief of staff. He has been both, but he retired

about ten years ago. To some extent he's the Colombian De Gaulle. You'll never meet him, and you wouldn't like him if you did."

"If he's all that important, they'll have tried before to take him out," I said.

"At least three times, but his protection's pretty good. This time they'll make it, our informant claims."

"The janitor?"

"No, no. The general's wife."

**N**ovember is a rainy month in Bogotá, the Avianca hostess told me. My arrival late that afternoon, however, featured sunshine, a mild spring breeze, and the longest landing run I could remember suffering through. The city and its airport are at eighty-seven hundred feet.

The desk clerk at the Tequendama came up with a guest card to their country club.

I caught up on my sleep that night. At nine A.M. the golf pro found me waiting at his door. He had a fairly decent bag of clubs, a cart, and a small item of advice for me. "The party just ahead of you, señor. Do not disturb them, please." I said I wouldn't think of it, which was untrue, and parked near the first tee where, from a courteous distance, I watched Isa-

bella Luz de Vargas hit a very creditable drive. She had a caddie but no partner, and no transportation. As she walked off down the fairway, two men in a pickup truck rolled from the service area along a trail that turned into the rough.

I did my warming up and waited until she'd moved almost out of sight, then fired an easy drive to follow her. The cart was a big help to me, of course. She was a walker, but I stayed behind at a respectful distance for six holes, closed in a little on the seventh, moved up on the eighth, and dropped a nice approach shot about ten yards short of where she was already lining up the green, her caddie at the flag. It made a more or less acceptable excuse for overtaking her on wheels.

"Good morning. I've replaced Wayne Latimer. My name is Stephen Harvester."

The pickup truck was coming fast; its driver plowed up quite a strip of turf when he slammed on his brakes. His partner had an automatic rifle on me. "*No se mueva, por favor, señor!*" I kept my hands in view, on the cart's steering wheel, and didn't move, as ordered. They were competent enough, but they'd forgotten that most laborers in overalls will shave, or trim their mustaches, only on weekends. When the driver started to jump out, Lita de Vargas stopped him

with a hand wave. "*Está bien, Jacinto. Señor Harvester es un amigo.*"

She bestowed her queenly smile on me where he could see it. Both men stared at me, impassively, filing a mental picture of me; then the driver bowed to her and slipped behind the wheel again, and ruined some more turf going into reverse. "I'm glad you managed to convince him," I said cheerfully.

"Why shouldn't he believe me? He has known me since I was a child."

She sounded cool and distant, and the smile had vanished. Latimer had warned me that I would dislike her, too, and he was right. I said: "Let's agree now on where we've met. Before Jacinto thinks of asking us."

"If he presumes to do that, I shall tell him you were at the same Columbus Day reception at your embassy, last month, where Mr. Latimer was introduced to me."

"No good."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He can check my passport. It'll show I was in England and in France last month."

"... Very well, you were presented to me at a charity affair in August. In Monaco. By Princess Grace herself. We danced."

I thought about that and said: "Better. Were you unescorted?"

"Always when I am in Europe, yes."

"All right, that'll be it. Finish your round and meet me for a cup of coffee on the clubhouse terrace, please."

She merely nodded, and I backed the cart away. She gave her ball a careless swipe that nearly missed the green and strode on after it.

Later, when she came to my table on the terrace, she looked very elegant indeed, as well as freshly showered, in a simple little cotton print that only an Italian couturier could have whipped up for her at say, a thousand dollars. "What has become of Mr. Latimer, please?"

"He has stomach trouble."

"Yes, of course." She put the matter from her mind. "Have you made progress?"

"I came in last night."

"Why did you wish to talk with me?"

I didn't. I detested her, and it was fairly obvious that she reciprocated. "Wayne suggested *you* might have made progress," I said coolly.

She released her breath in a long sigh. "But how? He knows the situation. He must have explained it to you. There is a young student of good family who has been socially acceptable to both my husband and myself, and who became—in-fatuated with me. It was he who blurted out to me in privacy,

last week, that an attempt on us is being planned. If this succeeds, the army and the government are to be taken over by a group of radicals to which the boy himself belongs. He certainly would not have warned me if my life were not in danger, and he has refused to give me any further information."

"But he wants you to get out of Bogotá right now, and show your appreciation to him later. Is that it?"

Her eyes were green, and scornful of me. Latimer had told me all of this, and that she'd come to him with it because she'd sensed he was in a position to take action. She had made him promise that the boy would not be hurt, a promise she could never have extracted from her husband. Latimer, who knew about Dr. Ruiz-Martinez, had agreed to handle it. He had installed two spike mikes in the Bolivar Hotel that broadcast to a tape recorder in his office in the Esso Building, and he'd paid the janitor to keep a name-and-time log of all visitors. He had been getting interesting but not yet conclusive stuff until two days ago, when he'd thrown up a glass of milk that had turned red.

The answer might be waiting for me there. But it was clearly necessary to come to terms with our informant. "Are you sure that this young man . . ."

She cut me short, imperiously. "Quite sure, thank you. Or we should not be sitting here, discussing it. May I know what you plan to do?"

"Did Wayne explain his plans to you?"

He'd told me he had not. She said, too eagerly: "Of course he did." I shook my head and said I'd be in touch, got up and pulled her chair, and walked her to her car. Jacinto and his partner, who'd been loitering at the nearest corner of the clubhouse, were already in the front seat, wearing livery. The car was a Rolls Silver Cloud. I bowed over her hand, disliking her, and strolled away, aware of the green lilac eyes behind me, resting on my back.

Latimer's key opened a door describing him as the *concessionario* of an obscure brand of American refrigerators. His executive suite did not even bother with a secretarial desk. Its front room held two dusty display models and a box of literature several years old; the back room was much like my own on Oxford Street. I found the tape recorder, which was 15/16th, low fidelity, speech-activated, with a timer circuit. There were still a few feet on the current reel. I put a new one on, set up a separate playback deck, and went to work.

By eight o'clock that night I'd run through everything, in-

cluding Latimer's old tapes and his interpretative notes.

That a conspiracy existed was beyond the slightest doubt. I counted forty-six participants in the available material. They were so fat and happy with their system of communication that it didn't seem to have occurred to them a doctor's office can be bugged as easily as any other place. Ruiz-Martinez sounded curiously indiscreet himself; he even made me wonder if he might be a police provocateur, and if perhaps another tape recorder might be picking up these fascinating conversations at the *jefatura*, seven blocks away. It certainly would be of interest there to find out the name of the new chief, and of his boss, the minister of the interior, and *his* boss, the new president. The army, too, might like to hear about who would be in command of it, and of its more important units. All of this as of November twenty-third. The day after tomorrow.

There were various discussions of the ways and means to bring these things about, of course. Company X would occupy the television station, Squadrons Y and Z the presidential palace. Regiments in Barranquilla, Medellin, and Cali were to deal with this and that. Soldiers will follow orders, even if they don't completely understand why certain

officers have suddenly replaced their seniors.

Unless a voice speaks up, a voice of great authority, commanding very much respect.

The name of General Francisco Vargas was not mentioned on the tapes. Almost inevitably the conspirators had started by deciding how he'd be disposed of, and by whom. Wayne Latimer must have plugged into them too late, probably much too late—perhaps a month or more. At this stage there was little need for any more discussion of the matter. All I could dig up was a few cryptic references that might very easily apply to some entirely different and minor aspect of the plot. *We can depend on Major Robles* (nothing in the context specified for what), and, *if Ortega does his job . . .* (Unspecified again. The speaker was the future minister of justice. His remark was interrupted by a mutter of consensus.) There were many more, but I liked these two best. One reason was that neither of these names appeared on the good doctor's list of patients. Or on the log of visitors kept by the janitor.

I locked up the material, and for a while stood by the only window, looking out. I had missed lunch and hardly noticed it. The city, glistening under the night rain of late spring,

loomed even larger than I had anticipated. Bogotá has more than two million people, and the notion that so many could be taken over by so few seemed utterly absurd. Yet it was feasible, I knew that very well. It might even prove easy. Just two bullets might turn out to do the trick, and one of these would very nicely keep Señora Isabella Luz de Vargas from perhaps reaching a radio station, or a barracks, or some other place where she'd be talking out of turn. Too many wives of retired generals have caused too many problems all through history.

Tomorrow night would be the night, I thought, and wondered about Julio Guzmán.

He was the one who'd urged her to leave town. I had him on the tape, several times; he sounded very young, and terribly sincere. Apparently he led a delegation of the student activists involved. Jacinto and his partner would have needed about twenty minutes, wringing him out dry.

But there were other methods. This must have occurred to Latimer as well, because he'd made a casual surveillance of the boy. I checked his notes, went back to my hotel room, changed to a dark suit but did not shave. A steak and salad at La Pampa served to fuel me. It was still early for Colombia,

around eleven, when my taxi found what I was looking for, the little coffee bar, one of a dozen in the district bordering the university.

He wasn't difficult to spot, although the others at his table were much like him: early twenties, medium-long hair, cheap slacks, expensive sweaters. But they were deferring to him, not unreasonably—the charisma of the budding politician draped him like a flag and strongly underscored his dark good looks. The group was eating *empanadas*, pancakes filled with spiced ground meat, and still the volume of their conversation shook the walls. I leaned my back against the bar, had coffee, and deliberately put the evil eye right on the kid.

It took a little while. He wasn't stupid or insensitive, but he was busy. When he did become aware of me, he stiffened visibly. I jerked my chin in the direction of the back door and walked out that way. The alley was a mud bath hissing with the rain, but there were garbage cans in a small service court under a strip of roof. The ambiance was exactly right.

I'd never been in South America before, as Latimer had pointed out, but I knew Mexico, and knew it well enough to pass, under the circumstances, for a certain type of Mexican.

When Julio Guzmán appeared, he found me sitting on a crate, legs crossed, the collar of my trenchcoat up over my ears. "They told me you were faster on your feet than this, señor," I said.

The phrase, in Mexican, sounds fairly crude. He closed the door, reluctantly. "*Qué quiere?*"

"Major Robles sent for me."

*We can depend on Major Robles.* Therefore, if he sent for somebody like me, he had his reasons. Julio Guzmán accepted that, of course. "I see. But to what purpose?"

"It is now considered necessary to provide a jockstrap for tomorrow night, señor," I said, and spat into the alley past his feet.

He understood me very well. What I was telling him was that there had been a decision to employ a Mexican professional to back up the assassin. It was dark, but I could almost taste and smell his consternation. "At Casa Rosaleda?" I ignored that, struck a match, and lit a cigarette, allowing him to see my sneer. "But what . . . why do you come to me with this?"

"You are familiar with the house, señor. You have a car."

That was more like it. He could breathe again, almost too audibly. "*Muy bien.* Where shall I meet you? At what time?"

"The bottom station of the

cable car, señor. You name the time. It is your city, and your car."

"I shall be there at three o'clock tomorrow night."

It was pathetically obvious what he had in mind. I grunted at him, tramped off through the alley, reached the street, and found my taxi where I'd left it down the block. By then I'd pretty well decided how to put a handle on the situation. Latimer had given me the number of her private phone. I rang it with the sun over my early breakfast table. "You'll be at the club this morning?"

"Yes, as usual."

"I wanted to make sure. I'll join you, if I may."

"Of course, with pleasure, Mr. Harvester," she told me distantly. "Thank you for asking me. Goodbye." The phone clicked in my ear and offered me a dial tone. I caught myself just short of slamming it. No woman had come close to irritating me as much as this in many years. I passed up what was left of breakfast, underdressed deliberately, then concluded that Bermuda shorts might give her the idea that I was trying to look younger than my age.

She was ten minutes late, which almost brought me into conflict with the female four-some booked for a nine thirty start. When she arrived, a fashion plate straight out of *Vogue*,

they knew her, fawned on her, and held us up some more while I was being introduced and scrutinized. Then she banged out a two hundred yard drive, not even troubling to warm up, and I produced a slice that screamed about three hundred, right over the clubhouse roof. Nobody laughed, not even when my second ball popped up.

We walked to it along the fairway, in dead silence, and she stood by hipshot, like a model, watching me compose myself and fire my normal brassie distance, halfway to the green. She made no comment as we strolled behind our caddies. I said: "Is your house named Casa Rosaleda?"

"Yes, it is. Didn't you know?"

"My dear lady, I just got here, and Wayne's records don't happen to mention it. The name came up last night and seemed to fit. I have exciting news for you. Your husband's murder has been scheduled for tomorrow morning early, probably at two A.M. You were supposed to be included. But when you pretended to ignore your Mr. Guzmán's warning, he apparently decided to work out something for you. My guess would be that he has made a private deal with the assassin. I imagine that between them they'll just lock you up somewhere for a few days. Until their revolution's running in the groove."

She didn't even glance at me. We'd found her ball, and she reached for a three-wood, hacked away, and landed smartly on the green, about six inches from the cup. We walked, and she asked coolly, "Are you certain?"

"No. There's no such thing. I want to check out two more names with you. Ortega?"

"I've met Señora Carmen Torres de Ortega. She's a widow in her eighties, socially important. And I know two tradesmen by that name."

"We've missed on that score. Major Robles?"

"Which one? There must be as many as a dozen in the army. Surely you're aware that Spanish surnames cannot be identified that way. You need the first name and the mother's name as well, and..."

"Do you know any Major Robles?"

"Personally? No. There is one in the Ministry of War. He's the assistant bureau chief of personnel assignment, I believe."

That was more like it, but I made no comment. My ball had an easy lay, and I got on the green with it right next to hers. She was two up on me, but not for long. I shot the nine in thirty-seven, beating her by three, enjoying it. Along the service road, Jacinto's pickup truck kept pace, although I never caught him or his partner watching us.

As we approached the locker room she asked me quietly, "May I know what you propose to do?"

"Arrange for an abortion."

"I beg your pardon."

"My dear lady, you don't *want* a revolution in this country, do you? Even a suppressed one? Neither do my people, so let's just not have one."

"Can you stop it?"

"Yes, I think so. Maybe even without inconveniencing your husband."

"I'd appreciate that very much," she carefully assured me. "But I don't quite understand."

I smiled at her, disliking her. There really wasn't much to smile about. I wasn't going to perform card tricks or do anything particularly clever. Latimer had done his job and made it easy for me. "Just in case," I said, "what are your husband's plans tonight? And yours?"

"We expect friends for bridge and a light supper. They'll have left by two." Routine security was fairly good, as she explained when I inquired about it. The estate was walled, and wired against intruders. Visitors and tradesmen at the gate faced a closed-circuit television camera. She had no children, and at night only Jacinto and an adjutant stayed in the house itself; the servants' quarters

were some fifty yards away.

I told her that if there were any problems I'd get back in touch, bowed to her, and left her there. With any luck at all I'd make the early morning Pan Am flight back to Miami. I was certainly not interested in her understanding, or her appreciation, or in ever seeing her again. I caught a taxi back to the hotel and changed, walked to the Esso Building, spent about two hours checking out the current tape, and found what I'd expected—nothing much. There had been no more conferences because none was needed. They were set to go.

Dr. Juan Ruiz-Martinez had been seeing a few real patients. He appeared to specialize in what are tactfully defined as male disorders. I got through to him by phone when he returned from lunch, declared myself a tourist at the Tequendama, and in my best broken Spanish started to explain that I'd been with a woman a few days ago, and now there was something I'd like to talk to him about. He interrupted me in passably good English. "Who referred you to me, sir?"

I said that I was very happy he could speak my language. Didn't he know that his name was listed in a confidential travel guide for members of the Lions Club? It seemed he didn't and that he was much amused

by it. He gave me an appointment at five thirty. For a while I listened to the tape recorder monitor, but he made no suspicious phone calls; he just rang the desk at the hotel to ask if I was registered. By five o'clock I'd finished at the Esso Building, packaged the material, and typed a resume of it. Then I called Latimer's crunch contact at the embassy and told him where to find it if he didn't hear from me again by seven on the dot.

Political conspiracies, except for some of the wild-eyed Middle East variety, always provide themselves with a fail-safe routine. They can be simple, and they usually work out pretty well when somebody discovers the red light on the control board. Dr. Juan Ruiz-Martinez saw it right away. He had admitted me himself into his empty waiting room, and looked me over, and had been unable to conceal his agitation. I was rather obviously not a member of the Lions Club.

"Excuse me, please. I have another patient."

He retired into his office, tried to close the door, and found me on his heels. He was a bantam weight in a white jacket, pale and intellectual, with the obligatory little black mustache, but in my thirty years of pottering around the edges I'd come up against a few more

like him. It was very necessary to bring up a knee under his spine. He bounced off his examination table, tripped over the chair I kicked into his way, and scuttled for his desk. By then I was behind it with the drawer open and his deadly little German Mauser pistol in my pocket.

"Take it easy, doctor. There's no hurry."

"Who are you, sir?"

"You've got my name right here in your appointment book. It's as I told you on the phone, doctor, we have something to talk about." He had recovered his composure. He picked up the toppled chair and used it, gingerly. His stare at me where I was sitting on his desk relayed the obvious message of distrust and disaffection. "Money," I said cheerfully. "A lot of money. Such as twenty thousand pesos every three months. We'll call it a retainer for professional services."

The peso in Colombia is worth about six cents, but he was not a wealthy doctor. He was interested, and confused, and trying to pretend. "Even a life insurance company pays more than that," he slowly pointed out.

"Not ours, doctor. We throw in free life insurance. You're going to need some, by tonight."

That got us down to basics.

"What is it you wish to buy?"

"You, doctor. It's that simple."

There's an elementary technique in counterespionage, known as the turnaround. It wouldn't have worked out with Che Guevara, but this man looked right for it, which was why Latimer had gone for him even before Señora Isabella Luz de Vargas showed up on the screen. Dr. Ruiz-Martinez knew exactly what I had in mind by then. He didn't have to like it, but it was a reasonable proposition. I was offering protection and a fee, of sorts, if he'd agree to work for us.

A double agent has his problems staying healthy. Still, it must have seemed to him he didn't have much choice. He said: "You take a lot for granted, Mr. Harvester."

"You don't believe that, doctor."

"Are you telling me that you are of the CIA, and the police have been informed about tomorrow's—schedule of events?"

"Oh, that," I said. "We've known about that for six weeks. You're going to turn that off, of course. The warning code is *calderón*."

It shouldn't have surprised him, but he winced and cursed me anyway. His English ripened into weary pathos. "Have you no eyes, no shame? My country suffers. It needs surgery."

"I wouldn't know, doctor. It doesn't need the Russians, or

Fidel. It doesn't need a bunch of discontented officers and politicians who haven't made the grade. Shall we get on the phone and save the firing squad a lot of work?"

He asked me slyly whom I wanted him to call. When I produced the list he glanced at it and shuddered. Then he pulled the phone across the desk. I told him not to get involved in explanations, warned him that my Spanish was as good as his, and prodded him along. But it takes time to complete forty-six connections, many of them on long distance, even if you're only trying to identify your party and communicate a single pregnant word to him. You get a lot of busy signals and wrong numbers, and a lot of wives who can't be sure just when their husbands will be home. We were still at it by eleven, long after I'd called the embassy and taken Latimer's man off the hook.

Then it occurred to me, belatedly, that there were two more names. They were, of course, the first two I should have attended to. But all of us are capable of folly, or stupidity, or mental block, as the case may be. "Catch Robles and Ortega while you're at it, doctor, will you please?"

He stared at me, a complicated stare, part stricken, part defiant. He, too, had forgotten,

so to speak. He dialed rapidly and listened to the ringing signal, disconnected, tried again, and shook his head. "It is too late."

"What do you mean, too late? Where are they?"

"I don't know, sir. Major Robles carries the responsibility for the elimination of General Vargas *y su señora*. Captain Rafael Ortega is to execute it and report to me. But none of us was made acquainted with their plans."

*We can depend on Major Robles.* "Wrong," I said. "Call Julio Guzmán. He knows." The student activists had been the last ones on my list because they were the least important. My reluctant helper was already dialing and listening, biting his lips. I noticed with considerable irritation that I was perspiring, which was most unusual for me without exercise.

"There is no answer. I am sorry."

"Call the Bar Café Mercedes," I said harshly, throwing him the phone book. He complied, got through, was told that Julio Guzmán had not come in. I took the phone away from him and rang the private number of her ladyship at Casa Rosaleda, let it ring twice, changed my mind, and banged down the receiver. "There's still time, I'll go myself. Complete the list, please,

doctor. Then you'll have to get out of the country like the others, until this blows over. Tell 'em you discovered that your office had been bugged, which happens to be true. Report to me by mail at Postbox 400, London West One."

He had that enigmatic stare for me again. "What if my memory should fail me, sir?"

"I'd move to Cuba or to China in that case, if I were you."

He nodded, sadly, as if he could see my point, and started dialing. I walked out of his office, sprinted down two flights of stairs into the lobby of the Bolivar Hotel, and lost ten minutes like so many hours hunting for a taxi in the rain. It was already close to midnight when the driver pulled up at the gate and eyed me in his rear view mirror. "Here it will be necessary for you to descend, señor, and push the button."

This was set in a white metal box under a spotlight mounted on the gate itself. Both wall and gate looked duly formidable; it would take heavy equipment to contend with them. I got out in the rain and pushed the button, activating a whole bank of floodlights and a slide in the white box that bared the lens of the closed-circuit camera. A grille-protected speaker cleared its throat and asked my name. When I supplied it there was a brief silence, then: "*Lo siento*

*mucho, señor*, you are not expected."

That would be the adjutant on duty. "This is urgent business, and highly confidential," I said. "Please check with Doña Isabella. She will authorize you to admit me."

"She is entertaining guests, señor, and cannot be disturbed. You will be good enough to telephone for an appointment in the morning."

With a click the bank of floods dimmed out. I turned back to my driver, paid him off, and sent him on his way. A witness to my further conversation with the adjutant I didn't need.

The situation was a little delicate. A German or a Frenchman, even an Italian, would have listened to me with the possibility in mind of changing his decision. But the Spanish temperament, admirable otherwise, doesn't accommodate itself to flexibility. The adjutant would be inclined not to believe a word I said.

I was still wasting an allotted sixty seconds' mental concentration on the problem when a silver blue Ferrari growled out of the traffic on the avenue and screamed down to a stop beside me with its headlights glaring at the gate. The driver did not even see me. He burst from the car, stabbed at the button, stood under the lights, and showed himself as Julio Guzmán wear-

ing a dinner jacket, getting wet. But he was recognized: the floods clicked off, the electronic gate hummed open. He flung himself back behind the wheel, and had the car in gear and rolling before he became aware of me sitting beside him with the little Mauser pistol in my lap.

He hit the brakes so hard he would have pitched me through the windshield if I hadn't braced myself for that contingency. He even tried to take the gun away from me. I had to force him back against the headrest with a forearm crushing in his Adam's apple. "*Un momento, niño!* I have news for you." But he continued clawing at me, gasping for breath until the code got through to him. "It's *calderón*, Guzmán! You understand me? *Calderón!* Where is Captain Ortega? We must stop him!"

"You are not Mexican." He actually sounded like a child.

"*Where is Ortega?*"

I'd released him, and he slumped over the wheel, groaning, debilitated by frustration and bewilderment. "He . . . is here. He will not act until I join him. Who has authorized the cancellation code?"

"Ruiz-Martinez, *niño*. Let us find Ortega."

Shakily, he managed to restart his engine and to put the big Ferrari back in gear. The driveway wandered through severely landscaped grounds, then

passed the formal rose bower that gave the place its name. Only two other vehicles were in the parking plaza, one of them a Daimler limousine, the other a plain khaki Ford with military markings. Lights blazed on the ground floor through eight huge french windows curtained in damask. The double row of coach lamps on the porch steps lent an almost festive air. I'd slipped the Mauser back into the pocket of my dripping raincoat, following the kid up to the massive wrought-iron and plate glass front door, which he opened with an easy familiarity, leaning his weight on it. A vestibule paved in Carrara marble, decorated with Italian antiques, confronted us. The anteroom immediately to our left must have been large, but it looked inconsiderable by comparison. It had been furnished with austerity and in a regimental manner with crossed swords and standards on the wall, and battle paintings, and with a big table covered in green baize that bore a television monitor and a control panel. Behind this, from a swivel chair, rose a tall man in his late thirties who wore a ceremonial uniform flashing with silver fourragères.

His rank insignia were unfamiliar to me, and there was no time to study them. He recognized me from the monitor,

of course; I had anticipated that, and I was ready with my little speech. But it was not the right one. I was tired, and slow, and I had failed to grasp the obvious. Major Robles, she had told me, was a war ministry officer in charge of personnel assignment. He could place disgruntled juniors by the score in staff positions with the power tap conveniently near at hand. He also could replace the trusted ADC to an ex-president, for one night, on some plausible excuse, and keep himself out of the way.

Captain Rafael Ortega took one look at me and at the cheerless and bedraggled youth accompanying me. His reflexes were too fast for his own good; I found out later that he was on the Olympic team, both as a horseman and a fencer. He attempted the impossible, which was to get his hands on the machine pistol racked up under the table out of sight and cover me with it before my own reflexes pulled the trigger in my pocket. "*Calderón*, you idiot," I said, about a second and a half too late. The insult was intended to apply to both of us.

He stared at me in utter disbelief, and at his own right arm in which my bullet had smashed through the artery and probably through half the motor nerves. He looked like a good man, accustomed to the

best in life, and certainly accustomed to his body functioning efficiently, responsive to his bidding. I felt sorry as all hell for him, and for myself. There wasn't one damn thing that I could do for him at this point. If he kept his mouth shut I could save the boy, but that was all.

"Put on a tourniquet," I said.

The kid yanked out a handkerchief, snatched up a ruler from the table. He'd been briefly paralyzed, then jolted into action. Evidently he'd had training in first aid; he got Ortega's pulsing spout of blood under control immediately. His patient leaned against the wall, below the crossed Colombian and presidential flags, and watched him at his work. By then both of them were expressionless, almost detached.

Behind me, in the doorway to the vestibule, someone demanded irritably: "What has happened here, señores?"

I swung around, keeping both hands in view. This proved to be a sound idea, because Jacinto had another machine pistol on me with the trigger slack already taken up, his finger knuckles gleaming white. The man beside him actually looked a little like De Gaulle. But the resemblance was just facial—he was not particularly tall, and was rather stocky. He wore dinner clothes as if he lived in

them. His tan had that distinctive healthy glow; he might be seventy, but he was evidently durable.

Behind him in the vestibule Señora Doña Isabella Luz de Vargas, pale as milk, stood with her guests. They were, as far as I could make out at a glance, just two more people: elderly, aristocratic, troubled but composed. "It would be pleasant to assure your excellency that this was an accident," I said.

"No doubt it would, señor. For you." He wasn't the least little bit amused with me. I was a dangerous intruder who'd shot up one of his officers, in gangster style, my coat stinking of scorched wet gabardine. The only thing that had to puzzle him would be the presence of the kid. "What is the purpose of your visit, Julio?" he carelessly inquired.

I said: "Señor Guzmán was kind enough to drive me here, and to secure admission for me at the gate."

That didn't bowl him over, but it sounded true if inexplicable. It meant that there was something more to this. Jacinto's trigger finger had relaxed, I noticed, and his eyes came slightly out of focus in a sidelong glance at his employer's wife. She noticed it, but she was forced to speak up anyway, of course. "This is the gentleman I've mentioned

meeting at the club, Francisco," she said formally. "His name, you may recall, is Stephen Harvester. General Vargas, Señor and Señora Escobar."

Her guests murmured polite acknowledgments. Her husband's stare at me changed character, although not necessarily increasing its benevolence, so far as I could tell. "Why did you shoot?" he asked me bluntly.

"General, if I had not, both you and Doña Isabella would have died. Most probably within ten seconds."

"Please explain."

"Captain Ortega has a private grievance," I said carefully. "He planned to have himself assigned here for one night. This afternoon he boasted to a woman of these plans. She happens to be one of our informants."

Silence clogged the room. None of us moved an inch except the boy, and he only to readjust the tourniquet. At last, Vargas inquired: "You are of the United States intelligence, señor?" I just stared back at him, not answering him. "Can you prove this accusation?"

"Yes, your excellency. If I have to."

Vargas took his eyes off me, glanced at the automatic weapon on the floor. "Captain Ortega?"

The big man in bloodstained

ceremonials said coldly: "He is right, the Yanqui."

Vargas sighed and held his hand out to me. "Let me have your gun, please, Señor Harvester," he said. He took the little Mauser I'd removed from Dr. Juan Ruiz-Martinez's desk drawer and gave it to Jacinto. Then he nodded at the self-confessed assassin. "Take him out," he ordered wearily.

At the hotel I walked my room for a long time. It was a good-sized room; it gave me eighteen paces straight across. There was a bottle of Black Label on the dresser, with a siphon and an ice bucket from room service to keep it company. As we all know, whisky is a depressant and should be avoided under stress, but somehow you don't think of that. You think of other things, such as the distant crack of a small pistol, and the whimper of distress beside you from the long-haired man-child fumbling with his starter key and suddenly collapsing on the wheel. No, Julio, there is no Santa Claus. The Rafael Ortegas of this world are not allowed to try again. They commit suicide.

If you must be a revolutionary, copy Major Robles. Then you won't need anyone like me to save your skin for you.

That had got through to him. He'd covered the ten miles or so

back to the Tequendama in about six minutes. The Ferrari 365GT goes supersonic on you, if you let it. In Colombia, it'll cost your parents about ninety thousand dollars, duty paid.

The phone started to ring when I unlocked the door.

"I must speak with you."

"Sorry. My plane's at nine A.M.

"I mean right now. I'm coming over."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Expect me, please." She had hung up on me again.

It turned out that her version of right now was something like an hour and a half. I walked my eighteen paces, wearing furrows in the rug, and used up half a bottle of depressant without notable effect. When she came in without so much as bothering to knock I happened to be in the bathroom. She could see and hear me, but she made no comment or excuse; she fixed herself a drink and sat down on the bed with it. She'd changed from dinner dress into gray jersey slacks with matching tunic and rebozo. Her umbrella dangled from the chair back, dripping on my furrowed wall-to-wall.

I watched her from the bathroom doorway for a while. At last I said: "Three guesses. One, he was your lover, and you're here to settle my account."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, of course. Two, you've grown tired of living. Since we hate each other, it occurred to you to take me with you where you're going. Three, you do this all the time. Your husband doesn't care."

She glanced at me over her shoulder. "Do you have a cigarette? I came away without my purse." I found her one and struck a match for her. She took it from my slightly shaky fingers, used it, blew it out, and tossed it in a corner. "My husband knows I'm here. He often has suggested this. He has been impotent for many years."

"He has suggested it? You mean like whisky, for medicinal purposes?"

"That is his thought."

I made a sound that may have been identifiable as laughter. "Considerate of him. Has it been beneficial to you, this medicine?"

"Do you believe I should have taken it?"

By then I had my back to her, making myself another drink. I needed to do something with my hands to keep from hitting her. "Well, haven't you?"

"Of course not."

In the dresser mirror she looked ice-cream cool. "About a week ago," I said, "you heard from Julio Guzmán about this little fracas that was in the

works. You came to us instead of to your husband. You demanded our protection of the boy."

"I had more confidence in you than in our own security organization. I was right."

"You told Wayne Latimer a different story."

"Did I?"

"Oh, come on. The Guzmán kid has no experience, but he's a radical, no question about that. Why should you worry about him? They would've packed him off to jail for a few months, or put him in a sanatorium. His family . . ."

"My husband would have had him killed."

"Why?"

"He'd have been convinced, as you are, that there was something between us. That would have been unacceptable to him. Please, let me show you." She extended her left hand; I turned back from the mirror to inspect it. It was small, and beautifully kept, but there were four small scars a fraction of an inch apart, about an inch above the wrist. "Three years ago a young French diplomat paid me a great deal of attention. I was—interested, but of course I knew that nothing could be done about it. I did not encourage him. But he was stubborn, and perhaps a little obvious, and when my husband spoke to him one evening at a

small dinner party there was trouble. I'd had one glass of champagne too many and tried foolishly to intervene. I wound up with a fork driven into my hand, as a reminder of whose property I was. *He* had a hunting accident. Within two weeks."

"Fatal?"

"Oh yes. What you don't understand is that I'm not supposed to get *involved*."

She rose and put her empty glass down on the dresser, facing me. I said contemptuously, "And you've never taken medicine before."

"No, and I never shall."

Green lilac eyes reached up to mine, grew wider, deeper, drawing me into them, drowning me. I came up shuddering for air and realized that we'd been kissing for a long time, clinging to each other, mouths locked hard together and already thoroughly explored, but drinking from each other thirstily. Emotional inversion can be gradual, but when it is explosive it'll blow your mind. I was so much in love with her and wanted her so badly, I felt stupid, clumsy, nauseated, ill, and she herself seemed not much better off. She choked for breath, tearing herself away from me. "Tell me you love me! Please!"

"I love you. I don't know what's happened to us, but I . . ."

"Say 'I love you, Lita.'"

Call me by my name."

"Lita. I love you, Lita."

"Prove it to me!" She was trying to undress, and sobbing with frustration at a faulty zipper. When it broke she ripped it out and burst out into laughter. "I can't go back like this. You're stuck with me."

I slapped her, spinning her around. She fell across the bed, abandoning herself to me, as I stood over her, biting my tongue in vain—the words forced themselves through somehow. "You *didn't* sleep with Julio Guzmán?"

"No! Please *believe* in me!"

We were so good together it was frightening. She gave me back my youth, and I released in her the tensions that had built up through twelve years of unsuccessful marriage. But there was more, of course: a genuine ardor for each other that exceeded greatly the emotional involvement she had undertaken to deny herself. "Doesn't your husband realize . . . ?"

"No, no, my darling. Can't you see you're perfect, from his point of view? A Yanqui working for a living. Obviously you are unaccomplished and uncultured, and you have no money."

"Sure I do. I'm worth over a hundred thousand dollars. I've got tax problems."

"Please don't be silly. You're in the same category as Colom-

bian peasants and Italian gigolos. I've been encouraged to experiment with both, at one time and another. Which reminds me, I'm supposed to pay you."

"Beautiful! How much?"

"Whatever we negotiate . . . no, not like that. I'm serious, you'll have to take a check and cash it, you can give the money to a home for wayward girls or something but it's terribly important that Francisco never suspects . . . oh! Oh marvelous! Oh utterly supremely marvelous. Tell me again now! Say my name!"

I said her name; she had not yet called me by mine. She left at five A.M., with a rebozo as a belt to hide the broken zipper. From my window I could watch the general's Silver Cloud drive off with her along Carrera Diez.

Her thousand dollar check I cashed that afternoon, at the Miami branch of the Chase National, and put my own check in the mail to the Red Cross. I visited Wayne Latimer, who wasn't very interested; they had

done a good deal more repair work on him than he had been looking for. Then I reported to New York by phone and reconfirmed my two weeks' leave.

She called me at the Fountainbleau that evening, as arranged. The next day I flew to Jamaica, found a cottage at the Tower Isle, and met her plane at four. She'd carried off her end of it. Permission for a further course of treatment had been granted. But she'd been assigned a retinue: Jacinto Gomez and his wife. For her protection and for our convenience.

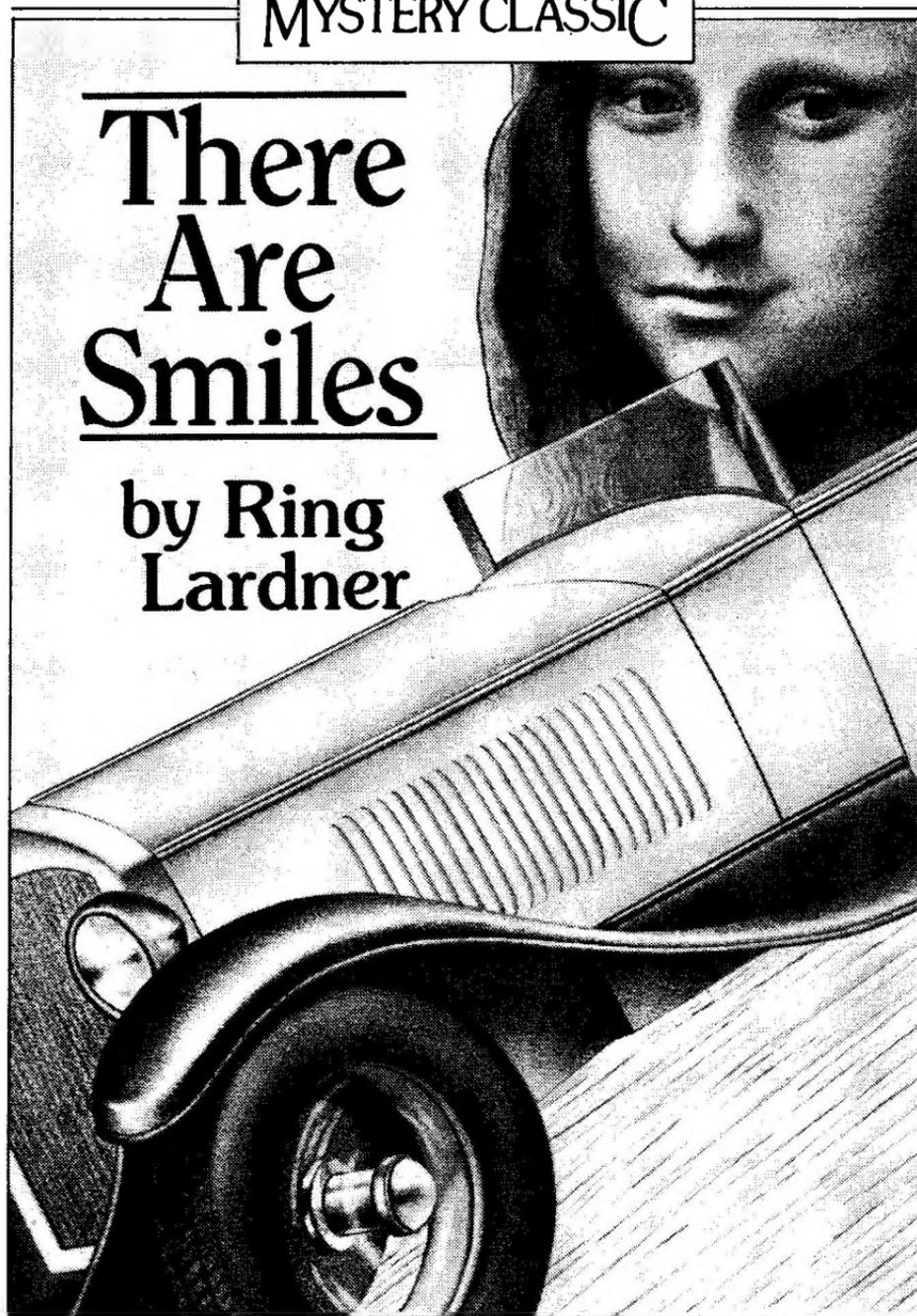
It meant we had to set a constant watch over ourselves. There is a quite considerable difference between the public conversation and behavior of lovers and those of a lady with her chartered fancy man.

Wayne Latimer recovered and was transferred to Manila. Dr. Juan Ruiz-Martinez disappeared from sight. No mail from him came to my London post-box. I was not especially surprised. You play the averages in this game.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# There Are Smiles

by Ring  
Lardner



**A**t the busy corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-sixth Street there was, last summer, a traffic policeman who made you feel that he didn't have such a terrible job after all. Lots of traffic policemen seem to enjoy abusing you, a sadistic complex induced by exposure to bad weather and worse drivers, and, possibly, brutal wives. But Ben Collins just naturally appeared to be having a good time whether he was scolding you or not; his large freckled face fairly beamed with joviality and refused to cloud up even under the most trying conditions.

It heartened you to look at him. It amused you to hear him talk. If what he said wasn't always so bright, the way he said it was.

Ben was around thirty years old. He was six feet four inches tall and weighed two hundred and eighteen pounds. This describes about eighty percent of all the traffic officers between Thirty-second Street and the Park. But Ben was distinguished from the rest by his habitual good humor and—well, I guess you'd have to call it his subtlety.

For example, where Noonan or Wurtz or Carmody was content with the stock "Hey! Get over where you belong!" or "Where the hell do you think you're going?" Ben was wont to finesse.

"How are you, Barney?" he would say to a victim halted at the curb.

"My name isn't Barney."

"I beg your pardon. The way you was stepping along, I figured you must be Barney Oldfield."

Or, "I suppose you didn't see that red light."

"No."

"Well, what did you think the other cars was stopped for? Did you think they'd all ran out of gas at once?"

Or, "What business are you in?"

"I'm a contractor."

"Well, that's a good, honorable business and, if I was you, I wouldn't be ashamed of it. I'd quit trying to make people believe I was in the fire department."

Or, "How do you like London?"

"Me? I've never been there."

"I thought that's where you got the habit of driving on the wrong side of the street."

Trangressions at Ben's corner, unless they resulted seriously, were seldom punished beyond these sly rebukes, which were delivered in such a nice way that you were kind of glad you had done wrong.

Off duty he was "a big good-natured boy," willing to take Grace to a picture, or go over to the Arnolds' and play cards, or just stay at home and do nothing.

And then one morning in September, a dazzlingly new Cadillac roadster, blue with yellow trimmings, flashed down from the north, violating all the laws of common sense and of the State and City of New York. Shouts and whistles from Carmody and Noonan, at Forty-eighth and Forty-seventh, failed to check its crazy career, but Ben, first planting his huge bulk directly in its path, giving the driver the choice of slackening speed or running into him, and then, with an alertness surprising in one so massive, sidestepping and jumping onto the running board, succeeded in forcing a surrender at the curb half way between his post and Forty-fifth Street.

He was almost mad and about to speak his mind in words beginning with capitals when he got his first look at the miscreant's face. It was the prettiest face he had ever seen and it wore a most impudent, ill-timed, irresistible smile, a smile that spoiled other smiles for you once for all.

"Well—" Ben began falteringly; then recovering something of his stage presence: "Where's your helmet?"

She made no reply, but continued to smile.

"If you're in the fire department," said Ben, "you ought to wear a helmet and a badge. Or paint your car red and get a siren."

Still no reply.

"Maybe I look like a bobby. Maybe you thought you was in London where they drive on the left side of the street."

"You're cute," she said, and her voice was as thrilling as her smile. "I could stay here all morning and listen to you. That is I could, but I can't. I've got a date down on Eighth Street and I'm late for it now. And I know you're busy, too. So we mustn't keep each other any longer now. But I'd like to hear your whole line some day."

"Oh, you would!"

"Where do you live?"

"At home."

"That isn't very polite, is it? I was thinking you might live in the Bronx—"

"I do."

"—and that's on the way to Rye, where I live, so I might drive you."

"Thanks. When I die, I want to die of old age."

"Oh, I'm not a bad driver, really. I do like to go fast, but I'm careful. In Buffalo, where we lived before, the policemen all knew I was careful and they generally let me go as fast as I wanted to."

"This ain't Buffalo. And this ain't no speedway. If you want to go fast, stay off Fifth Avenue."

The girl looked him right in the eye. "Would you like that?"

"No," said Ben.

She smiled at him again. "What time are you through?"

"Four o'clock," said Ben.

"Well," said the girl, "some afternoon I may be going home about then—"

"I told you I wasn't ready to die."

"I'd be extra careful."

Ben suddenly realized that they were playing to a large, staring audience and that, for once, he was not the star.

"Drive on!" he said in his gruffest tone. "I'm letting you go because you're a stranger, but you won't get off so easy next time."

"I'm very, very grateful," said the girl. "Just the same I don't like being a stranger and I hope you won't excuse me on that ground again."

Which remark, accompanied by her radiant smile, caused Mr. Collins, hitherto only a bathroom singer, to hum quite loudly all the rest of his working day snatches of a gay Ohman and Arden record that his wife had played over and over the night before.

His relief, Tim Martin, appeared promptly at four, but Ben seemed in no hurry to go home. He pretended to listen to two new ones Tim had heard on the way in from Flushing, one about a Scotchman and some hotel towels and one about two Heeb's in a night club. He managed to laugh in the right place, but his attention was on the northbound traffic, which was now none of his business.

At twenty minutes past four he said goodbye to Martin and walked slowly south on the east side of the street. He walked as far as Thirty-sixth, in vain. Usually he caught a ride home with some Bronx or north suburban motorist, but now he was late and had to pay for his folly by hurrying to Grand Central and standing up in a subway express.

"I was a sucker!" he thought. "She probably drove up some other street on purpose to miss me. Or she might have come in on one of them cross streets after I'd walked past it. I ought to stuck at Forty-fourth a while longer. Or maybe some other fella done his

duty and had her locked up. Not if she smiled at him, though."

But she wouldn't smile like that at everybody. She had smiled at him because she liked him, because she really thought he was cute. Yes, she did! That was her regular line. That was how she had worked on them Buffalo fellas. "Cute!" A fine word to use on a human Woolworth Building. She was kidding. No, she wasn't; not entirely. She'd liked his looks as plenty other gals had, and maybe that stuff about the fire department and London had tickled her.

Anyway, he had seen the most wonderful smile in the world and he still felt warm from it when he got home, so warm that he kissed his wife with a fervor that surprised her.

When Ben was on the day shift, he sometimes entertained Grace at supper with an amusing incident or two of his work. Sometimes his stories were pure fiction and she suspected as much, but what difference did it make? They were things that ought to have happened even if they hadn't.

On this occasion he was wild to talk about the girl from Rye, but he had learned that his wife did not care much for anecdotes concerning pretty women. So he recounted one-sided arguments with bungling drivers of his own sex which had very little foundation in fact.

"There was a fella coming south in a 1922 Buick and the light changed and when it was time to go again, he thought he was starting in second, and it was reverse instead, and he backed into a big Pierce from Greenwich. He didn't do no damage to the Pierce and only bent himself a little. But they'd have held up the parade ten minutes talking it over if I hadn't bore down.

"I got the Buick fella over to the curb and I said to him, 'What's the matter? Are you homesick?' So he said what did I mean, homesick, and I said, 'Well, you was so anxious to get back to wherever you come from that you couldn't even wait to turn around.'

"Then he tried to explain what was the matter, just like I didn't know. He said this was his first trip in a Buick and he was used to a regular gear shift.

"I said, 'That's fine, but this ain't no training camp. The place to practice driving is four blocks farther down, at Forty-second. You'll find more automobiles there and twice as many pedestrians and policemen, and besides, they've got street cars and a tower to back into. You won't never learn nothing in a desert like this.' You ought to heard the people laugh."

"I can imagine!" said Grace.

"Then there was a Jordan, an old guy with a gray beard. He was going to park right in front of Kaskel's. He said he wouldn't be more than half an hour. I said, 'Oh, that's too bad! I wished you could spend the weekend.' I said, 'If you'd let us know you was coming, we'd have arranged some parties for you.' So he said, 'I've got a notion to report you for being too fresh.'

"So I said, 'If you do that, I'll have you arrested for driving without your parents' consent.' You ought to have heard them laugh. I said, 'Roll, Jordan, roll!' You ought to have heard them."

"I'll bet!" said Grace.

Ben fell into a long, unaccustomed silence.

"What are you thinking about?"

It came out against his better judgment. "There was a gal in a blue Cadillac."

"Oh! There was! What about her?"

"Nothing. Only she acted like it was her avenue and I give her hell."

"What did you say to her?"

"I forget."

"Was she pretty?"

"I didn't notice. I was sore."

"You!"

"She all but knocked me for a corpse."

"And you probably just smiled at her."

"No. She done the smiling. She smiled—" He broke off and rose from the table. "Come on, babe. Let's go to the Franklin. Joe Frisco's there. And a Chaplin picture."

Ben saw nothing of the blue Cadillac or its mistress the rest of that week, but in all his polemics he was rehearsing lines aimed to strengthen her belief in his "cuteness." When she suddenly appeared, however, late on the following Tuesday afternoon, he was too excited to do anything but stare, and he would have lost an opportunity of hearing her enchanting voice if she hadn't taken the initiative. She stopped at the curb a few feet above his corner and beckoned to him, "It's after four. Can't I drive you home?"

What a break! It was his week on the late shift.

"I just come to work. I won't be off till midnight."

"You're mean! You didn't tell me you were going to change."

"I change every week. Last week, eight to four; this week, four to twelve."

"And next week eight to four?"

"Yes'm."

"Well, I'll just have to wait."

He couldn't say a word.

"Next Monday?"

He made an effort. "If you live."

She smiled that smile. "I'll live," she said. "There's an incentive."

She was on her way and Ben returned to his station, dizzy.

"Incentive, incentive, incentive," he repeated to himself, memorizing it, but when he got home at half past one, he couldn't find it in Grace's abridged Webster; he thought it was spelled with an s.

The longest week in history ended. A little before noon on Monday the Cadillac whizzed past him going south and he caught the word "later." At quitting time, while Tim Martin was still in the midst of his first new one about two or more Heebs, Ben was all at once aware that she had stopped right beside him, was blocking the traffic, waiting for him.

Then he was in her car, constricting his huge bulk to fit it and laughing like a child at Tim's indelicate ejaculation of surprise.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Nothing. I just feel good."

"Are you glad to be through?"

"Yes. Today."

"Not always?"

"I don't generally care much."

"I don't believe you do. I believe you enjoy your job. And I don't see how you can because it seems to me such a hard job. I'm going to make you tell me all about it as soon as we get out of this jam."

A red light stopped them at Fifty-first Street and she turned and looked at him amusedly.

"It's a good thing the top is down," she said. "You'd have been hideously uncomfortable in one more fold."

"When I get a car of my own," said Ben, "it'll have to be a Mack, and even then I'll have to hire a man to drive it."

"Why a man?"

"Men ain't all crazy."

"Honestly, I'm not crazy. Have I come near hitting anything?"

"You've just missed everything. You drive too fast and you take too many chances. But I knew it before I got in, so I can't kick."

"There isn't room for you to, anyway. Do you want to get out?"

"No."

"I doubt if you could. Where do you live?"

"Hundred and sixty-fourth, near the Concourse," said Ben.

"How do you usually go home?"

"Like this."

"And I thought I was saving you from a tiresome subway ride or something. I ought to have known you'd never lack invitations. Do you?"

"Hardly ever."

"Do the people ask you all kinds of questions?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. Because I wanted to and now I can't."

"Why not?"

"You must be tired of answering."

"I don't always answer the same."

"Do you mean you lie to people, to amuse yourself?"

"Sometimes."

"Oh, that's grand! Come on, lie to me! I'll ask you questions, probably the same questions they all ask, and you answer them as if I were a fool. Will you?"

"I'll try."

"Well, let's see. What shall I ask first? Oh, yes. Don't you get terribly cold in winter?"

He repeated a reply he had first made to an elderly lady, obviously a visitor in the city, whose curiosity had prompted her to cross-examine him for over twenty minutes on one of the busiest days he had ever known.

"No. When I feel chilly, I stop a car and lean against the radiator."

His present interviewer rewarded him with more laughter than was deserved.

"That's wonderful!" she said. "And I suppose when your ears are cold, you stop another car and borrow its hood."

"I'll remember that one."

"Now what next? Do you ever get hit?"

"Right along, but only glancing blows. I very seldom get knocked down and run over."

"Doesn't it almost kill you, standing on your feet all day?"

"It ain't near as bad as if it was my hands. Seriously, madam, I get so used to it that I sleep that way nights."

"Don't the gasoline fumes make you sick?"

"They did at first, but now I can't live without them. I have an apartment near a public garage so I can run over there any time and re-fume myself."

"How tall are you?"

"Six feet ten."

"Not really!"

"You know better, don't you? I'm six feet four, but when women ask me, I tell them anything from six feet eight to seven feet two. And they always says, "Heavens!"

"Which do you have the most trouble with, men drivers or women drivers?"

"Men drivers."

"Honestly?"

"Sure. There's fifty times as many of them."

"Do lots of people ask you questions?"

"No. You're the first one."

"Were you mad at me for calling you cute the other day?"

"I couldn't be mad at you."

A silence of many blocks followed. The girl certainly did drive fast and Ben might have been more nervous if he had looked ahead, but mostly his eyes were on her profile, which was only a little less alluring than her smile.

"Look where we are!" she exclaimed as they approached Fordham Road. "And you live at a Hundred and sixty-fourth! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't notice."

"Don't get out. I'll drive you back."

"No, you won't. I'll catch a ride. There's a fella up this way I want to see."

"You were nice to take a chance with me and not to act scared. Will you do it again?"

"Whenever you say."

"I drive in once a week. I go down to Greenwich Village to visit my sister. Generally on Mondays."

"Next Monday I'll be on the late shift."

"Let's make it the Monday after."

"That's a long ways off."

"The time will pass. It always does."

It did, but so haltingly! And the day arrived with such a threat of rain that Ben was afraid she wouldn't come in. Later on, when the threat was fulfilled and the perils of motoring trebled by a

steady drizzle and slippery pavements, he was afraid she would. Prudence, he knew, was not in her makeup and if she had an engagement with her sister, nothing short of a flood would prevent her keeping it.

Just before his luncheon time, the Cadillac passed, going south. Its top was up and its squeegee flying back and forth across the front glass.

Through the rain he saw the girl smile and wave at him briefly. Traffic was thick and treacherous and both must keep their minds on it.

It was still drizzling when she reappeared and stopped for him at four.

"Isn't this a terrible day?" she said.

"Not now!"

She smiled, and in an instant he forgot all the annoyance and discomfort of the preceding hours.

"If we leave the top up, you'll get stoop-shouldered, and if we take it down, we'll be drowned."

"Leave it up. I'm all right."

"Do you mind if we don't talk much? I feel quiet."

He didn't answer and nothing more was said until they turned east at Mount Morris Park. Then:

"I could find out your name," she said, "by remembering your number and having somebody look it up. But you can save me the trouble by telling me."

"My name is Ben Collins. And I could learn yours by demanding to see your driver's license."

"Heavens! Don't do that! I haven't any. But my name is Edith Dole."

"Edith Dole. Edith Dole," said Ben.

"Do you like it?"

"It's pretty."

"It's a funny combination. Edith means happiness and Dole means grief."

"Well," said Ben, "you'll have plenty of grief if you drive without a license. You'll have it anyway if you drive fast on these kind of streets. There's nothing skiddier than car tracks when it's raining."

They were on upper Madison and the going was dangerous. But that was not the only reason he wanted her to slow down.

Silence again until they were on the Concourse.

"Are you married?" she asked him suddenly.

"No," he lied. "Are you?"

"I will be soon."

"Who to?"

"A man in Buffalo."

"Are you stuck on him?"

"I don't know. But he wants me and my father wants him to have me."

"Will you live in Buffalo?"

"No. He's coming here to be my father's partner."

"And yours."

"Yes. Oh, dear! Here's a Hundred and sixty-fourth and I mustn't take you past it today, not in this weather. Do you think you can extricate yourself?"

He managed it with some difficulty.

"I don't suppose I'll see you again for two weeks."

"I'm afraid not," she said.

He choked down the words that wanted to come out. "Miss Dole," he said, "take my advice and don't try for no records getting home. Just loaf along and you'll be there an hour before your supper's ready. Will you? For that guy's sake in Buffalo?"

"Yes."

"And my sake, too."

Gosh! What a smile to remember!

He must walk slow and give himself a chance to calm down before he saw Grace. Why had he told the girl he wasn't married? What did she care?

Grace's greeting was a sharp command. "Take a hot bath right away! And wear your bathrobe afterwards. We won't be going anywhere tonight."

She and Mary Arnold had been in Mount Vernon at a card party. They had got soaked coming home. She talked about it all through supper, thank the Lord!

After supper he tried to read, but couldn't. He listened a while to the Ohman and Arden record which his wife couldn't get enough of. He went to bed, wishing he could sleep and dream, wishing he could sleep two weeks.

He was up early, early enough to look at the paper before breakfast. "Woman Motorist Killed By Street-Car in Bronx." His eyes felt funny as he read: "Miss Edith Dole, twenty-two, of Rye, was instantly killed when the automobile she was driving skidded and struck a street-car at the corner of Fordham Road and Webster Avenue, the Bronx, shortly after four thirty yesterday afternoon."

"Grace," he said in a voice that was not his own, "I forgot. I'm supposed to be on the job at seven this morning. There's some kind of a parade."

Out of the house, alone, he talked aloud to himself for the first time since he was a kid.

"I can't feel as bad as I think I do. I only seen her four or five times. I can't really feel this bad."

Well, on an afternoon two or three weeks later, a man named Hughes from White Plains, driving a Studebaker, started across Forty-sixth Street out of turn and obeyed a stern order to pull over to the curb.

"What's your hurry?" demanded the grim-faced traffic policeman. "Where the hell do you think you're going? What's the matter with you, you so-and-so!"

"I forgot myself for a minute. I'm sorry," said Mr. Hughes. "If you'll overlook it, I'll pick you up on my way home and take you to the Bronx. Remember, I give you a ride home last month? Remember? That is, it was a fella that looked like you. That is, he looked something like you. I can see now it wasn't you. It was a different fella."

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685) 1. Title of Publication: Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine. Publication No. 00025224. 2. Date of Filing: October 1, 1988. 3. Frequency of issue: Every 28 Days; (A) No. of Issues Published Annually: 13; (B) Annual Subscription Price: \$25.97. 4. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. 5. Complete Mailing Address of the Headquarters or General Business Offices of the Publishers (not Printers): 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. 6. Names and Addresses of Publisher, Editor and Managing Editor: Publisher: William F. Battista, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Editor: Cathleen Jordan, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Managing Editor: Holly Garrison, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. 7. Owner: Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Davis Communications, Inc., 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017; Joel Davis, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. 8. Known Bondholders, Mortgages and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages or Other Securities: NONE. 10. Extent and Nature of Circulation: Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months: (A) Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run): 335,302; (B) Paid Circulation: (1) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, and Counter Sales: 22,799; (2) Mail Subscriptions: 228,404; (C) Total Paid Circulation: 251,203; (D) Free Distribution by Mail, Carrier or Other Means Samples, Complimentary and Other Free Copies: 634; (E) Total Distribution (Sum of C and D): 251,837; (F) Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Left Over, Unaccounted, Spoiled After Printing: 4,364; (2) Returns from News Agents: 79,101; (G) Total (Sum of E and F—should equal net press run shown in A): 335,302. Actual Number Copies of Single Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date: (A) Total No. Copies Printed (Net Press Run): 346,340; (B) Paid Circulation: (1) Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors and Counter Sales: 23,200; (2) Mail Subscriptions: 238,343; (C) Total Paid Circulation: 261,543; (D) Free Distribution by Mail Carriers or Other Means Samples, Complimentary, and Other Free Copies: 691; (E) Total Distribution (Sum of C and D): 262,234; (F) Copies Not Distributed: (1) Office Use, Left Over, Unaccounted, Spoiled After Printing: 7,986; (2) Returns from News Agents: 76,120; (G) Total (Sum of E and F—should equal net press run shown in A): 346,340. I certify that the statements made by me are correct and complete.

LAURA GUTH

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



NANCY PICKARD

Photo: Judith Kirk

**J**enny Cain fans are swelling in numbers, and author Nancy Pickard continues to please them. I number myself in that crowd.

If you haven't had the pleasure, let me introduce you to Jenny. She's bright and attractive, and she's also blessed with a keen sense of humor. That, added to a strongly developed social conscience and a temperament that can flash with temper or wit, makes her very good company indeed.

There are many pleasures in the Jenny Cain series: *Generous Death*, *Say No to Murder*, *No Body*, *Marriage Is Murder* (all in paperback editions with handsome jackets by Pocket Books), and the latest, *Dead*

*Crazy* (Scribners, \$16.95). There's the setting, the handsome old coastal town of Port Frederick. This is the hometown of Jenny and her sister (another kettle of fish entirely!). Jenny's handsome but profligate father once owned the local factory that provided the town's major source of employment. Then he carelessly went bankrupt, throwing his wife and two daughters into disrepute. Jenny's mother reacted to the change by buckling; Jenny visits her regularly in the home where she has lived for many years. Jenny's sister became a defensive, self-centered socialite and first-class snob. Jenny's father remarried. Jenny herself became director

of the Port Frederick Civic Foundation, a community philanthropic organization set up to evaluate grant requests, administer funds to worthy projects, etc. For Jenny it means a high-tension job with rewards that are primarily ego-satisfying rather than pocketbook-gratifying. Jenny doesn't need the money, although she takes her job as caretaker of the funds seriously. Sometimes, one might even say, in deadly earnest. She rarely, however, loses her sense of humor.

"So we get a constant flow of inappropriate applications from individuals and causes we can't help. And that means that as director of the Foundation, I spend a lot of my time saying 'no' to some perfectly nice and deserving people.

"And to some perfect jerks.

"One of whom appeared at our office that second stifling week of June, screaming holy bloody murder. It was a sadly

appropriate and prophetic thing to do." (From *Say No to Murder*.)

Nancy Pickard's characters — and many of them pop up from book to book—grow and change and mature and fail. I found myself revising my opinion of several of them over the course of the five books, as Jenny does also. Jenny, too, develops, not in entirely predictable ways. But that is no small part of her charm. She is a full-drawn character, vulnerable to snappish bouts of fatigue, occasionally giddy with joy, too often weary with the burden of caring for the weaker. It would be doing these books an injustice to say they are "problem" novels, even though each does explore one or more social causes, the kinds of issues people in Jenny's work face every day. But readers all heartily agree that the only "problem" with Nancy Pickard's Jenny Cain books is that their author doesn't write fast enough.

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## MYSTERY REVIEWS

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Mary McMullen's suspense novels are being reprinted—hurrah! I picked up **Strangle Hold** (Jove, \$2.95, 188 pp.), originally published in 1951, and thoroughly enjoyed its wit and originality. The setting helped: a New York ad agency in wintertime. Protagonist Eve is a young but seasoned copywriter, and a new employee of Wade and Wallingford. It isn't enough that she has gotten off to a bad start with the company's brilliant but prickly art director. She's also one of the unlucky few who open the door to a conference room only to discover the body of a nude woman, dead by stran-

gulation. It's an inauspicious beginning to a new job, but as things progress there's more at stake than Eve's livelihood. The anachronisms (women wearing hats, what's considered scandalous regarding a single career woman, people smoking like chimneys) add to the charm.

**Obedience** (Mysterious Press, \$16.95, 208 pp.) is Joseph Hansen's latest Dave Brandstetter, and it's excellent. Dave's announced retirement from insurance investigation is postponed when he agrees to look into the murder of a wealthy Vietnamese businessman. The accused is an angry veteran, a spokesman for a group of people who had been living on their boats at the businessman's shabby marina. But the dead man had announced eviction plans, and many of the group literally had no place to move. Hansen explores the ties of family and loyalty and tensions in ethnic groups.

Steven J. Kirsch's **Oath of Office** (Fawcett, \$3.95, 355 pp.) is a political thriller that explores a constitutional loophole. Jonathan Starr has just been elected America's first Jewish president—then he's kidnapped. As he struggles to maintain his sanity and courage and dignity in captivity, both parties try to plot a course of action. But who is to occupy the Oval Office if Starr is not found before Inauguration Day? Kirsch has written a tense and human "what if?" novel based on an actual legal premise.

Rick Boyer's Doc Adams series continues with **The Whale's Footprints** (Houghton Mifflin, \$17.95, 276 pp.). This one strikes closer to home than the last two, and perhaps for that reason I found it more enjoyable. Doc's son Jack brings home a college friend for the weekend. Tragedy strikes: the lad, who suffered from epilepsy, dies in his sleep. But there's more. Doc suspects foul play, and urges the coroner to check. The case is homicide . . . and Jack is arrested as the prime suspect. Doc, his wife, and friends work furiously to uncover the truth before young Jack finds himself in the dock for murder.

Patrick McGinley may already be known to mystery fans as the author of *Bogmail*. His latest is **The Devil's Diary** (St. Martin's, \$16.95, 249 pp.), and once again we get a story with the sights, smells, and characters of Ireland. This time it's a small coastal town where Father Jerry lives in humble surroundings and apparently at peace. It's true that he's not happy with the commercialism and tourism and ugly industrial development brought in by a boyhood friend, the supremely self-confident Arty Breenan. But it's not until the sudden and unexpected return of Jerry's

prodigal brother — another strong and outspoken man who immediately places himself in direct opposition to Arty's next development project—that Jerry's unease becomes palpable. There's also the new neighbor, the attractive and apparently free-spirited Olga. The men in the village are all attracted to her, yet she seems to pop in often to see Father Jerry. Then there are near-fatal "pranks" played on Jerry and his brother, soon followed by the disappearance of Arty. This is quietly menacing and very evocative. Most readers should find it haunting and irresistibly compelling.

Keith Peterson's *The Rain* (Bantam, \$3.50, 170 pp.) is third in the recent series featuring John Wells, crime reporter for the *New York Star*. It opens when a "weasel"—one of Wells's tipsters—sets up a meeting to show him photos of a state senator with a young woman. They are scandalous, and Wells turns them down. The next day the punk is dead—and Wells is held up to ridicule as the reporter who let the big one get away. This novel, like the earlier two, is intelligent, peopled with interesting characters narrated by a protagonist who's different and wears very well. A thinking man's and woman's series.

(continued from page 3)

*The Monkey's Raincoat* by  
Robert Crais (Bantam)  
*Snake Eyes* by Gaylord Dold  
(Ballantine)  
*Recount* by David Everson  
(Ballantine)  
*Madelaine* by Joseph Louis  
(Bantam)

"Bodyguards Shoot Second" by  
Loren D. Estleman (*A  
Matter of Crime*)  
"The Kermin Kill" by William  
Campbell Gault (*Murder  
in L.A.*)  
"My Brother's Life" by Rob  
Kantner (*AHMM*)  
"Merely Players" by Joseph  
Hansen (*AHMM*)

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STORY OF 1987:

"*Turn Away*" by Ed  
Gorman (*The Black  
Lizard Anthology*)

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Achievement Awards to Robert  
Wade and Dennis Lynds.  
Congratulations to all!



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Ben Kingsley and Michael Caine as Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes in *Without a Clue*.

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Imagine a tale in which Dr. Watson is the brains behind a doltish detective Sherlock Holmes. This Holmes looks like the real thing, complete with hat, cape, and pipe. But he'd rather find the bottom of a whisky bottle or pick up a pretty woman than pick up a clue or get to the bottom of a case.

This is the situation in **Without a Clue**, an amusing spoof of the gang at 221-B Baker Street, starring Academy Award winners Michael Caine as Holmes and Ben Kingsley as Watson. It is Dr. Watson, Holmes's longtime friend and assistant, who has actually been the great sleuth all along, according to this story. He did not wish to reveal this when applying to lecture at a stodgy medical college. So he invented the Sherlock Holmes character and hired a deservedly out-of-work

actor, Reginald Kincaid, to play the part in public. In addition, Watson popularized the adventures of his fictional sleuth with stories of Holmes's detective work in the *Strand* magazine.

As an actor Holmes naturally adores the publicity and plays up to the press. Watson, although he created Holmes, just as naturally resents the kudos Holmes receives for this brilliant detective work. One day he lambastes the actor, pointing out his many shortcomings. He reminds Holmes of the time he managed to deduce a murder victim had been bludgeoned with a "blunt excrement." In a fit of pique Watson tosses Holmes out onto the street.

He doesn't need Sherlock Holmes any more. After all, he's John Watson, the Crime Doctor. But nobody seems to need a crime doctor. The pub-

lisher at the *Strand* refuses to listen to Watson. "Sherlock Holmes is worth a fortune to this magazine," he tells him. And when Watson goes to investigate a suspicious fire at a local paper mill, the London bobby won't even let him poke around. Send Mr. Holmes over, he suggests.

When Lord Smithwick, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, visits the house on Baker Street on a matter of national security, he insists on dealing only with Holmes. The plates for the five-pound note have been stolen from the Royal Mint. The threat of a flood of counterfeit currency could mean the economic ruin of the British empire.

It's on to a local pub where Holmes is having a few. After much cajoling by Watson, and the presence of a pair of friendly loan shark types, Holmes returns to the fold. After all, there's a mystery to be solved.

Lord Smithwick meets with Holmes, who accepts the case for a five hundred pound fee, "payable in ten-pound notes." The investigation leads to the home of Peter Giles, an employee at the mint, who has disappeared. While Watson feeds Holmes his lines, Scotland Yard's Inspector Lestrade attempts to out-investigate him. A comical competition between Lestrade and Holmes through-

out the film is a humorous side-show to the main plot.

Holmes bumbles his way through, telling Giles's lovely daughter Leslie that her father's been abducted "by abductors." In another instance, while the local constabulary in a lake village wait for Holmes to reveal what he thinks when a body is found in the lake, he says, with confidence, "It is my opinion he is dead."

The bumbling continues until Dr. Watson, one misty night, falls victim to the evil Professor Moriarty, who is, of course, behind the crime.

A downcast Holmes attempts suicide, accepting the blame for Dr. Watson's apparent demise. But he only ends up sprawled on the floor, his hanging rope too long. Lovely Leslie Giles convinces Holmes that only he can find her father and solve the case. After a false start he begins to figure out the mysteries.

At this point the film's pace picks up and a couple of unexpected surprises may keep the interest of mystery fans.

Caine and Kingsley are top-notch actors, and they help pull the movie along during some dull stretches. Caine especially shows flair as a comic actor. True devotees of Sherlock Holmes, however, might be better off searching for Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce.

# THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious won by Wes Dawson of orable mentions go to D. J. New Jersey; Orlo Strunk, Carolina; J. F. Pierce of Bryan, Texas; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; J. Webster Davis of Berkeley, California; Maria Lynn of Chaffee, Missouri; Robert M. Nolan of Plainsboro, New Jersey; Tara Yakus of Lakewood, California; Shari Black of Abilene, Texas; and Caroline Bessey of Medford, Oregon.



Photograph contest was Summerville, Georgia. Hon-Pettigrew of Westwood, Jr. of Calabash, North Carolina; J. F. Pierce of Bryan, Texas; Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California; J. Webster Davis of Berkeley, California; Maria Lynn of Chaffee, Missouri; Robert M. Nolan of Plainsboro, New Jersey; Tara Yakus of Lakewood, California; Shari Black of Abilene, Texas; and Caroline Bessey of Medford, Oregon.

W. N. J. J. J. J.

## THE CASE OF THE EXPLODING BOX OFFICE by Wes Dawson

Joe Heart was a movie detective from way back. He had probably solved more theater crimes than anyone else alive. Therefore, it was only natural for George, as manager of the Hill View Drive-in, to bring his problem to the master sleuth.

Heart leaned back in his chair, propped his feet on the desk, and listened intently.

"Each time a new movie is delivered," George said, "I lock it in the box office and go tidy up the grounds. Within minutes the film explodes and makes a mess of the box office. We can straighten things up because the blast is never very big, but you can't run a drive-in without a movie."

The detective wrinkled his brow and looked thoughtful.

"The police suspected a bomb in one of the film cans," George continued. "But a check turned up nothing, and the film exploded as soon as the box office was empty."

Heart grinned and sat up straight.

"The solution is simple," he said. "Have the film delivered to the projection booth."

George was horrified.

"If it exploded in there, we'd lose thousands of dollars in equipment!"

"It won't," Heart assured him. "Movies only bomb at the box office, never in the projection booth."

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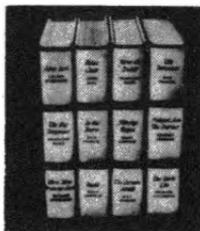
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