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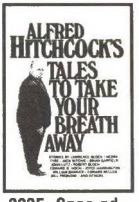

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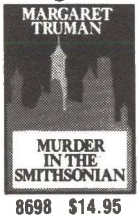

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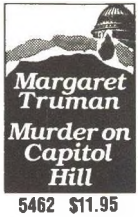

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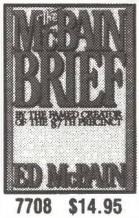

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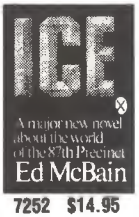

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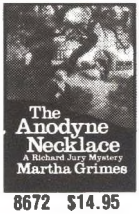

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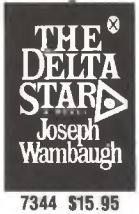

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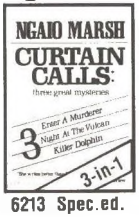

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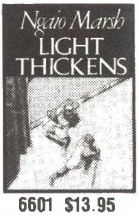

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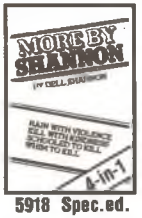

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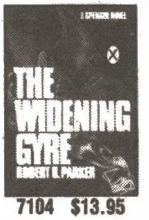

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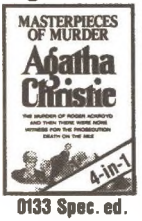

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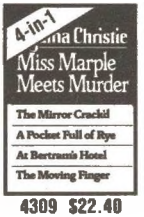

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Last month we listed several upcoming mystery vacations being planned for locations as diverse as England, Nevada, and a cruise ship going to or from Mexico. This month there is yet another such offering on the horizon, "the first island mystery ever." The setting is Bermuda; the sponsors, the Princess Hotel in Hamilton, Bermuda, and Murder to Go in New York. Dates: March 1-3 or March 8-10; cost (not including air fare): $199 for two nights (double occupancy); number to call: 800-223-1818 (in New York State: 800-442-8418; in New York City: 212-582-8100). Since the plot involves a collection of photos, Mysterious Photograph contest entrants might be especially good at unraveling it.

In the meantime, in this issue, we are pleased to present a new adventure starring Adameus Clay, hero of Bill Crenshaw's "Good Fences." Adameus (his mother got mixed up) made his first appearance in the May, 1984, issue in "Poor Dumb Mouths." And we defy you not to be surprised (and delighted) at every turn in James A. Noble's story, "A Short Pocket Mystery," which introduces the Thatchers, already scheduled for a future appearance as well. Jane Rice, author of October's "The Mystery of the Lion Window," has a new story in this issue, the very funny "The Last Straw," as does Jessica Callow with "The Doll." Finally, we are glad to welcome L. A. Taylor, author of the engaging "Murder Most Musical," our cover story, and of a novel just out from Walker, *Deadly Objectives*.

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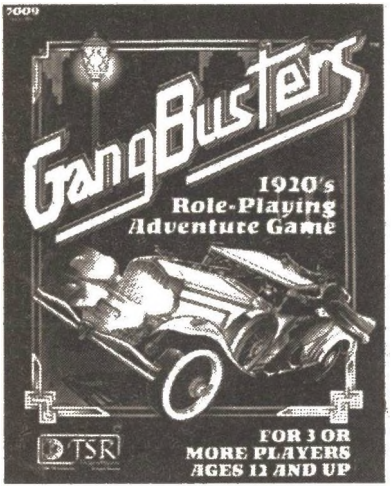

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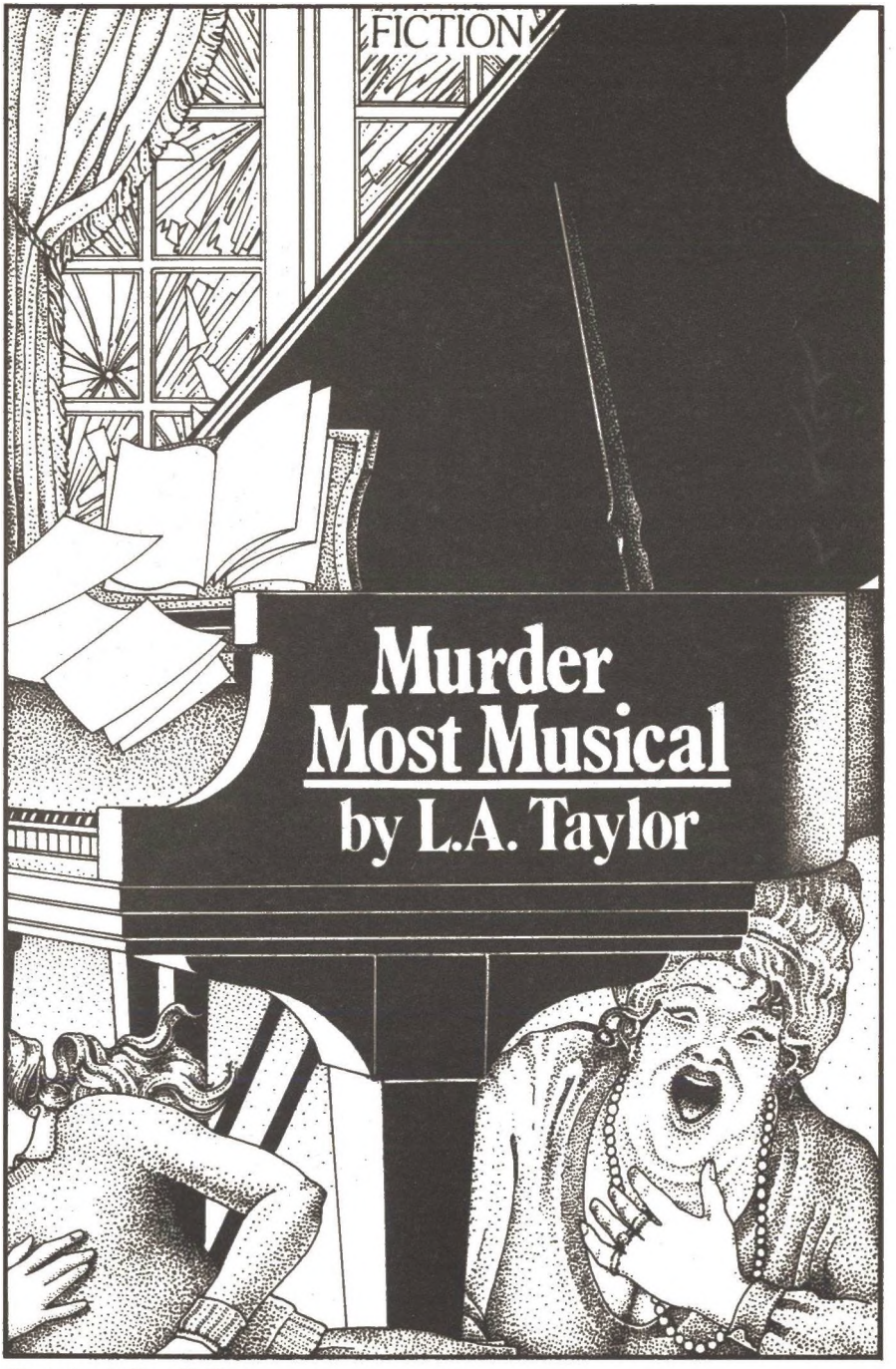


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

The doorbell chimed in B-flat major; as Enrico braced his legs against the carpet, yapping in G, Madame Spezzacristolo let the refrigerator door slam and wiped her hands on her hip-filled red dress. The doorbell bonged again.

"Coming, I'm coming," Madame muttered, swallowing the last of her snack on the way through the dining room. She stooped to adjust the bow that kept Enrico's silky hair out of his eyes, pulled her aging bulk upright, and answered the door with a bright stage smile.

Shadowed against the dripping afternoon, the new student clutched her music to her chest. "Come in, come in," Madame Spezzacristolo intoned. "What you have brought? Schubert? Ah, a few little *canzoni, si,* a good start, good."

"What a cute dog," the student said, of Enrico snuffing at her ankles.

"*Si,* my Enrico. Out to the kitchen, *caro,* and lie on your rug, that's my good boy." The retired soprano, despite her rotundity, strode to the grand piano on spike-heeled sandals to slide gracefully onto the bench with hands held out for the girl's music. Behind her, french doors onto a lilac-bordered garden admitted plenty of light. No need to bother with the music lamp. "A few warm-ups first, hey?" Madame played an E-major arpeggio. "And we find out what your voice is all about."

The girl licked her lips. "Okay."

"Who you have studied with, again?" Madame asked, hands on the keys. The girl mentioned a name. Madame nodded. "Could be worse," she allowed, although she believed she herself did certain—many—things better than anyone else, among them vocal coaching.

"Now. Eee—ooh—aah, please, on the triad." She demonstrated. The girl began.

Too bad. A pretty voice, but thin; a slip of a voice from a slip of a girl. Still . . .

"Nice, okay," Madame said, her smile turned up for the second balcony. "Now again, you remember to aim the breath here, so"—yanking on her own large nose—"and from here comes the support, *capisc'?*" She pulled in her abdomen and corsetted it with fingers from which a dozen rings sparkled.

The student tried again, facing an alarming spectacle: an enormous pouf of dyed red hair, a triple chin under a large-featured face accented with violet eyelids on which one false eyelash waved

askew; an enormous freckled bosom rising within a red paisley tent. All her training deserted her.

A shame, a shame, Madame thought. Me, reduced to taking on whatever walks through the door, after all the *brava, brava!*

"*Brava,*" she said aloud. "Now, we really rattle the teeth, yes?" She played a chord in G, thinking of the garden behind her, where she had hoped to eat supper on the brick patio nestled in the ell of the house. Alas, it was raining, the lilacs would be rusty and scentless by morning, the bricks exhaling a dampness that at her age irritated her throat.

The student really rattled her teeth.

Along with the scream came a shot, glass breaking, and Madame Spezzacristolo, her reflexes honed by thousands of performances, found herself crouched under the piano. She opened her eyes to note the student collapsed in a heap beside her and the wound in the girl's chest, then squeezed them shut, tensed for the second shot.

No shot came. Madame held her breath, eyes tight, and heard first a thrashing among the lilacs, then the afternoon silence of the neighborhood punctuated by the drip-drip-drip of the rain. As a car started in the alley beyond the garden, something cold and wet touched her cheek.

Her scream, even cramped as she was on her knees under the piano, rattled the glass of the french doors.

Enrico Caruso yelped and backed off.

"Didum hurtum's ears?" his owner asked absently. "Momma's sorry."

She gathered up her skirt and crawled past the overturned piano bench to bend over the student. The poor girl was clearly dead; the wound had already stopped bleeding and the blue eyes stared in soft dilation at the ceiling. "Outta here, 'Rico," Madame ordered. "We gotta leave her alone. No good licking her hand now, poor kid." She picked up the wriggling Pomeranian and hustled into the kitchen.

"Nine-one-one?" she asked herself, perplexed. With the girl dead, was it an emergency? Or should she call the precinct house direct, as she'd been told to do when the dirty old coot next door hadn't answered his door for four days and the assembled neighbors had decided to break into his house? As she dithered over the white pages hoping for instructions, her telephone rang.

"Madame Spezzacristolo?" asked a pleasant male voice—breathy,

but a decent baritone. "It's Bettina Smith's lesson time, isn't it? Could I speak to her, please?"

"Ah—no." Madame sucked in her upper lip. "She, er, left."

"Oh," said the voice. "Already? Isn't she supposed to be there until four?"

"Right," Madame confirmed. "Something more important came up."

"Oh. Sorry to bother you." The line clicked. Madame Spezzacristolo, the call she had to make becoming more urgent by the instant, dialed 911.

The police proved unexpectedly sympathetic and expectedly efficient; little more than an hour passed before the student was removed from her spot beside the piano. Photographs had been taken from every conceivable angle, including several of Madame herself, posed on her brocade couch with her hands uncharacteristically still in her lap—not as part of the investigation, but for the two men who were opera buffs. One of them had gone all the way to New York to hear her as Norma! Madame felt a special warmth of heart for this man, who now prepared to question her.

"This seems ridiculous, me being such a big fan of yours, Madame Spezzacristolo," the man said, opening a notebook onto his knee with an embarrassed chuckle, "but, you know rules. I got to ask you your name."

"Lena Goldfarb," Madame Spezzacristolo said crisply.

"Uh, what?"

"Goldfarb, comma, Lena. That's my name."

The cop, a big blond with the look of an aging lumberjack, stopped to consider. "I don't have to spell Spezzacristolo?" he asked.

"*Diretto*, sweetheart." Madame Spezzacristolo-Goldfarb flashed a humorless smile. "Just a stage name—in my day Goldfarbs didn't take to the stage. Not opera, anyway."

"But—weren't you born in Italy?"

"New York City, *caro*. Little Italy, *capisc'?* Family across the hall, Graziano. Downstairs, Romano. On the stoop I played jacks with my good friends, the Lampone twins." Madame reflected for a moment, her full upper lip sucked in so that the little lines of lipstick that had run into the wrinkles above her mouth splayed out like the rays of the sun. " 'Course, I don't know how much Yiddish they knew."

"Goldfarb," the cop said, writing. "Address, I've got. Age?"

"Seventy."

"Is that so?" he remarked, lifting his brows. "I can't believe I went to New York that long ago!"

"Not so long," Madame said. "Maybe twenty years." What she knew about the afternoon's incident was quickly told: the new student, the shot, finding herself under the piano, the thrashing in the lilacs, the car in the alley.

"Must have thought he got you," the cop commented, still writing. "You tumbling under the piano so quick."

"Me!" Lena exclaimed, a thrill of fear at her throat. "I didn't think of that."

An interminable series of questions about her enemies followed. As Maria Spezzacristolo, she had upstaged most of the major singers of the past fifty years: the list was long. And then, rejected students, outraged accompanists, incensed conductors, even (given that she was home all day and found much to criticize in the way the city was run) her alderman. None of them, Lena thought, likely to do murder, not after all this time. A strangling onstage, sure, splinter the piano bench over her head, an unconsidered stab to the heart with the baton—quite possible. But a shot years later from among her rusting lilacs? Missing so large a red paisley target, and hitting a pale slim girl smack in the heart?

No. Yet, "Look, do I sing high C's?" the large cop chuckled. Ridiculous question for a bass.

Nevertheless, he closed his notebook and stood up. At the door, Lena twinkled her many rings at him. "*Ciao,*" she said, with a first-balcony smile. The other cops had already left; an earlier attack of temperament had taken care of the press. Alone, she leaned her head against the closed door and took a deep breath.

"Come, 'Rico," she said. "We'll shut ourselves up in the kitchen this evening. And go to bed early."

By morning, the sky had cleared to an almost painful blue. Madame Spezzacristolo sat on the brick patio next to lilacs still spangled with rainwater, sipping a cup of strong black coffee.

"Never saw anything like it," the young man repairing the french doors remarked. "Only one pane shot out, but every last one of the others is cracked."

"Two trained sopranos screamed," Madame Spezzacristolo ex-

plained. "One"—she inclined her head graciously—"with an international reputation."

"Oh, like that ad where Ella Fitzgerald breaks the wine glass?"

"Right." Madame went into the kitchen for more coffee. Poor kid, he'd never make a singer. That whiny tenor. Whooppee-whoppa-whooppee with an electric guitar, maybe, but nothing *real*. Not even little lyric *lieder*. Nothing like that baritone on the telephone yesterday, even.

She went back out with her steaming mug and sat down. That morning, as a bow to propriety, she had donned her soberest dress, a well-cut tent in royal blue shot with purple and forest green. She'd even removed most of her rings, leaving only her sapphire birthstone and her father's black onyx oval. With the index finger wearing the onyx she traced the pattern of her funereal—relatively funereal—dress, half-listening to the tenor complain.

Now, wait.

S'pose you fired a shot—through the pane whose shards the whiny tenor was just removing—into a room where the light wasn't so good. You *thought* you'd hit Bettina Smith (no sense shooting somebody you didn't know, right?), but that fat lady in the red dress dropped *as if shot* and rolled under the piano! You'd leave in a hurry, and in some uncertainty, wouldn't you?

Lena Goldfarb got up and carried her mug to the trampled spot where the police had investigated most intensively. She broke off a bent but unwilted peony and turned to look into her house. Allow for this being morning and the sun shining into the room.

Even so, she couldn't see much past the piano—in fact, all she really saw clearly was the white uniform of the man cleaning the carpet. And yesterday it had been afternoon, and raining. Mmmm. What simpler than to stop at a pay phone to make sure you'd hit the right woman? Wasn't there a pay phone in the 31 Flavors place, two blocks away? Sure.

She sipped coffee, running the remembered nuances of that voice past her inner ear. Nervous: something she hadn't spotted in her own agitation. Relief in that "Sorry to bother you." Mmmm.

The *nerve!* Shooting the kid before she'd had a chance to open her mouth, and using *my* telephone to check up! "He'll sing a different tune when *I* get done with him," Lena snarled, *sotto voce.*

Mmm. To shoot—or call—you'd have to know where Bettina Smith planned to be. Didn't that imply somebody who knew her well? Someone who would be expected, say, to go to her funeral?

"Hey, kid," she called to the whiny tenor.

"Yeah?"

"If you shot your girlfriend, only you thought maybe you shot somebody else, would you call up the somebody else to see if she'd been shot?"

"What?"

Patiently, Lena repeated.

"I guess maybe," the tenor replied, with a sideways glance at the eight remaining cracked panes of the door.

"C'mere," Lena ordered.

The tenor glanced at the glass cutter in his right hand and set it down carefully.

"C'mon, c'mon," Lena urged. "Yeah, right here in the bushes."

"In the bushes?" the tenor repeated, sounding alarmed.

"Yeah, right here. No, no, no, I mean turn around and look at the house. See?"

"See what?" the tenor asked nervously.

"That guy cleaning the carpet."

"Yeah, I see him."

"What else?"

"Uh, the piano, and the window on the street end."

"That's it!" madame crowed. "You couldn't see which one you'd hit if they both fell down, could you?"

"Both what?"

"Women, *balordo,* women!"

"I don't see any women."

"Of course you don't. There aren't any."

"Wait'll I tell the guys about this," the tenor muttered, starting for the house with his right index finger wiggling at his temple.

How degrading! "Don't tell the guys about this," Madame Spezzacristolo implored. "Swear to me, *caro,* you'll keep this as secret as the grave."

"What grave?" whined the tenor, white showing at the tops of his eyes.

"Any damn grave you please," Madame snapped. "Just keep your trap shut, *capisc'?"*

She clacked back to the table and sat drumming her fingers on its surface for several minutes.

"I'll go to the funeral," Lena Goldfarb said aloud.

The glazier turned his head, decided the crazy old lady was talking to herself, and snapped the glass he'd just scored.

"First, though," Lena said, gathering Madame Spezzacristolo around her once again, "I'd better talk to a few people."

"Good idea," the tenor muttered.

The telephone rang as Madame set her cup on the kitchen counter.

"Hi, Lena?"

"Oh, hi, Ed." Madame Spezzacristolo leaned her ample behind against the counter, knocking over the fortunately empty cup without noticing.

"Hey, what happened to Bettina Smith?" asked the caller. "She's dead? The newspapers don't make much sense. I guess you threw a fit?"

"Temperament, dear," Madame said. Bizarre, to talk this way with someone she hadn't seen to speak to in at least three years. "What else could I do? The place was *seething* with reporters!"

"But she was murdered? I know she didn't have her gut under anything below an E-flat, but she wasn't that bad."

"I never got to hear," Madame Spezzacristolo said. "She'd sung maybe a dozen notes when somebody shot her. Through my back door."

"Honest? That's what the papers said. I figured they screwed it up, like they do reviews."

"*Did* reviews," corrected Madame Spezzacristolo, who'd had a good one not two months before. "No, they were right this time. Any idea who did it?"

"I thought they were after you."

"Me!" Madame hesitated. Twenty years of acquaintanceship decided her.

"Not me, Ed," she said. "I think they were after the girl."

"Oh?" Ed sounded miffed. "The police haven't talked to me."

"They will." Madame hung up after a few more exchanges, not at all sure of her prediction: if the girl had a jealous lover or had been given to injudicious upstaging, Ed hadn't known. As she strode into her living room in her high-heeled feathered mules to see what the carpet man had done to her floor, Madame remembered belatedly that Ed was a class-A, dyed-in-the-wool gossip. Well, let her suspicions spread. Maybe a guilty somebody would give himself up. Hadn't she been stabbed at least a hundred times herself—as Carmen, of course—and hadn't Don Jose confessed, every single time?

Two more days of intermittent thought led Lena to change her plans. Again in the more-or-less funereal blue, Madame Spezzacristolo minced up the steps of the mortuary home Thursday afternoon, on the dot of the beginning of "visitation hours." She dreaded seeing that pale face again, composed and painted though it would be, but watching here was the best way she could think of to use her own special talent to roust out a killer, a killer with more *chutzpah* than was good for him.

Inside, a smooth middle-aged bass invited her to sign a "memory book." *Maria Spezzacristolo,* in her huge, jagged hand, barely fit into the space allotted; she switched to printing to add her address. Then, with the deep sigh of a woman about to go onstage in a brand-new role, she entered the "small chapel."

Bettina Smith's parents huddled near the other end of the room, as bowed with sorrow as Lena had feared. Nearby a young man, obviously a sibling to Bettina, lounged uneasily, talking to another man perhaps in his middle twenties. Madame Spezzacristolo raised her chest like a spinnaker and sailed slowly across the blue carpet toward the group.

Condolences came more easily than she had anticipated; the Smith family apparently held her no ill will. "Mark Crawford," the father introduced the second young man. "Bettina's fiancé."

"Pleased to meet you," the young man said. "Bettina is—was—very excited at the thought of studying with you."

Him! Already! Shocked but gleeful, Lena gabbled her regret at the way things had turned out. "But I've had the pleasure of speaking with you before, haven't I?" she suggested, clutching her purse to keep her hands from trembling. "Tuesday—wasn't it you who called?"

"Tuesday?"

"After—I mean, during Miss Smith's lesson, someone called to speak to her. Wasn't that you?" Madame Spezzacristolo found a smile to soften the words.

"Hey, did you tell the cops?" the gangly sibling inquired. "You oughtta tell the cops!"

"Not me, no," Crawford said.

Liar! I never forget a voice! Lena thought. "I'm so sorry," she purred. "I thought it was you. I'm not often mistaken about voices."

Crawford shook his head. "I wouldn't have dreamed of interrupting a lesson with you," he declared.

Madame pulled in her chin and raised her freckled bosom to

acknowledge the compliment, tottered through the rest of the social forms, and fled the mortuary.

The Crawford fellow's air of certainty might have given another woman pause, but Madame had seen some marvelous acting in her time: more than one two-hundred-pound Mimi the audience would swear was a consumptive waif; more than one Rodolfo who made the ladies sigh over his stage tenderness toward a woman he privately despised—on occasion, herself. Her suspicion was soon confirmed: the telephone rang that evening as she devoured her third Weight Watchers' frozen dinner. "Maria Spezzacristolo," whispered the caller. "If you go to the police with your ideas about voices, you will die."

"I beg your pardon?" Lena boomed, but received only a click and a buzz in reply. "Ah," she said excitedly to 'Rico. "The chickens are flying now!"

Over her second slice of cheesecake she began to wonder whether the threat might have some teeth in it. Threats, on stage at least, had a way of being carried out. . . .

"We've talked to Mark Crawford," the blond cop assured her, sitting on her couch half an hour later. "True, he's got no alibi, but he's got no reason for killing her, either."

Madame Spezzacristolo reared back. "Where there is love, there is reason for murder," she said. "You, as an opera lover, know that."

"But as a police officer—"

"Mark my words," Lena interrupted. "That young man killed that girl. Otherwise, why call that afternoon without identifying himself? Execrable manners. Yes, that's your murderer, right there. And then, why lie about calling? You can take all those singers off your list right now."

"Mark Crawford's a singer," the cop remarked.

Shaken, Lena played the afternoon's conversation back in her ear. Undeniable: that voice had done some singing. And the voice on the telephone, so similar, hadn't seemed trained at all—yet, the girl's soprano, after years of study, had been breathy and small when faced with a new coach. Surely shooting somebody would have the same effect? "Still. Keep an eye on him. I warned him, see, I'm on to him. He's even threatened me."

"You've got a point," her visitor agreed. "We'll take care of it."

"Thank you," Madame Spezzacristolo said, with great dignity. After the cop left, at his suggestion, she went through the downstairs rooms pulling the drapes for the first time in months. Sneezing heartily as a result, she wrote herself a reminder to fire her cleaning lady.

"You'll protect me, won't you, 'Rico?" she asked the little dog mournfully. For once, she wished she had a large dog with fearsome teeth, instead of her poppet.

The ten P.M. news reported the killer uncaught. Madame looked in the yellow pages under "Dog Rentals" but found no such service, useful though it would be. Sighing, she carried her disappointment upstairs, exchanged her royal blue tent for another of apricot chiffon, and went to bed.

What woke her, Lena didn't know. She held her breath, listening. Nothing unusual; only the faint wheeze of 'Rico breathing at the foot of her bed. Stealthily she slipped out of the bed and tiptoed to the window.

There. In the shadow under that linden. Wasn't that a man? Just standing, across from her house? Yes!

The room went cold. How dumb, to have only the one downstairs phone! With one beside the bed, next to the clock that glowed softly to tell her it was three in the morning, she could call the police. As it was, the thought of the creaky staircase, the trek through half the living room, the dining room, and part of the kitchen, everywhere surrounded by her lovely, heavy, turn-of-the-century furniture, exposed to whoever—or was it whomever?—might be lurking behind it, was suddenly daunting. Lena sat on the edge of the bed, fumbling half-heartedly with her toes for the satin mules, and couldn't find them.

Was that a knock? A single knock, *downstairs?*

She tiptoed back to the window. The man was gone.

At the moment she turned away from the glass, 'Rico yipped once and barrelled for the open bedroom door.

" 'Rico, no!" Lena shouted. "Come back here!"

The man must be in the house! Frozen until 'Rico's scurry vanished down the stairs, Lena burst into action. She slammed the door, leaned against it, and looked wildly around.

The dresser! Perfect! Shove that against the door—

She gave the heavy chest of drawers a mighty heave. But her calf muscles, so used to her high-heeled shoes, rebelled. She felt

a searing pain in her right calf, and stopped with a yelp and a whimper. The dresser stayed canted a scant foot out from the wall.

The door! she told herself through her pain. Lean against the door!

No! A bullet would go right through that thin walnut panel. Lena dived for the closet and crouched among her flowing polyesters, ears straining at the sounds from below.

'Rico yapping. Footsteps. A voice, the voice she had heard on the phone, shouting words she couldn't make out. Running steps, dog and human, on the stairs, and 'Rico, *caro* 'Rico, his heart so much bigger than his teeth, yapping, growling, yipping—then a hoarse human cry and thunder on the staircase as someone fell.

"Got him," Lena crowed. "*Bravo*, Enrico!"

Too soon! To her horror, human steps pounded up the stairs and the bedroom door burst open. In the three seconds it took the man to cross the room, she stood and filled her lungs. A flash memory of the last act of *Lulu* passed through her mind, the lady of the evening about to be slaughtered by Jack the Ripper, only this time a Jack with his arm so incredibly lengthened by a gun—as the closet door ripped open, she let her Lulu scream rip loose.

Ten minutes later, the uniformed cop sat on her couch still shaking his head to make his ears stop ringing. The big blond one she had begun to think of as a friend thumbed off his walkie-talkie and grinned at her.

"I don't understand," Madame Spezzacristolo said. "He looked so much like the kid I saw this afternoon, and he sounded almost *exactly* the same—"

"Twin brothers."

"Oh." Madame felt herself somewhat mollified. "But *why?*"

"That I can't tell you," her fan said. "Yet. I'll let you know, though, when I find out."

The policeman returned the next morning. Lena saw him get out of his car and stop to watch the whiny tenor replacing the glass in her bedroom window from a ladder, and hurried to the door. "Come in, come in," she said. "Have you found out some more?"

"Yes, indeed." With an oddly nervous grin, the big man followed her into the house. "The guy you saw yesterday was Mark Crawford. The one who broke in was his twin brother, Mike."

"That you told me."

"Seems Bettina was engaged to Mike, but when she met Mark—they were both in some operetta, Gilbert and Sullivan, I think—"

"It would be," Lena muttered.

"—Bettina broke her engagement to Mike and started dating Mark. Mike wasn't too pleased, and when Bettina promised to marry Mark, all he could see ahead of him was a lifetime of hating his brother and, er, lusting after his sister-in-law."

Lena rolled her eyes upward. "Kids! They think everything lasts forever, like on stage!"

"I guess. Anyway, Mike couldn't bring himself to get rid of his own twin—so he took the only other way out he could see. He hoped people would think he'd been aiming at you, that's why he did it here. And then, when Mark told him you'd said that he'd called you, Mike saw the danger. That brought him here."

"Oi!" Lena shook her head. "Sounds like he had his life planned by some nineteenth century librettist!"

"Ah, speaking of librettists."

A little thrill of—not quite fear, but something close—touched Madame Spezzacristolo's throat. "Yes?"

"I was thinking—you lost a student, and I used to do some singing. . . . I thought maybe you could help me get my voice together . . . unless you think it's too late?"

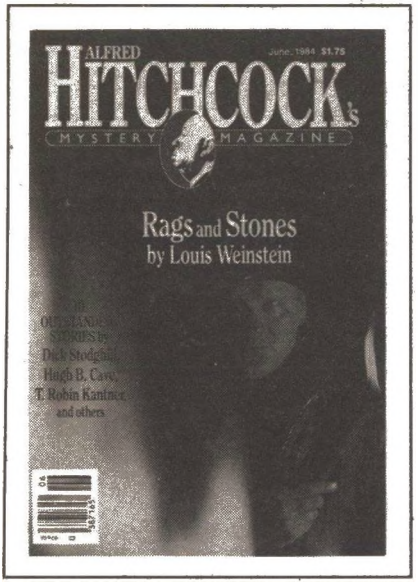
"Probably no," Madame said briskly. "What did you have in mind?"

"Uh, the *Winterreise,* for starters?"

"Absolutely not." Madame put her foot down. "Not Schubert. I have just developed an allergy to Schubert. How about, mmm, Mozart? Yes, some nice, light Mozart."

Outside, the whiny tenor started to sing, off-key country and western, an all-too-appropriate ditty about rejected love. I suppose I'll be next, Madame Spezzacristolo groused to herself, as she wrote the big cop's name in her appointment book.

WATCH OUT!



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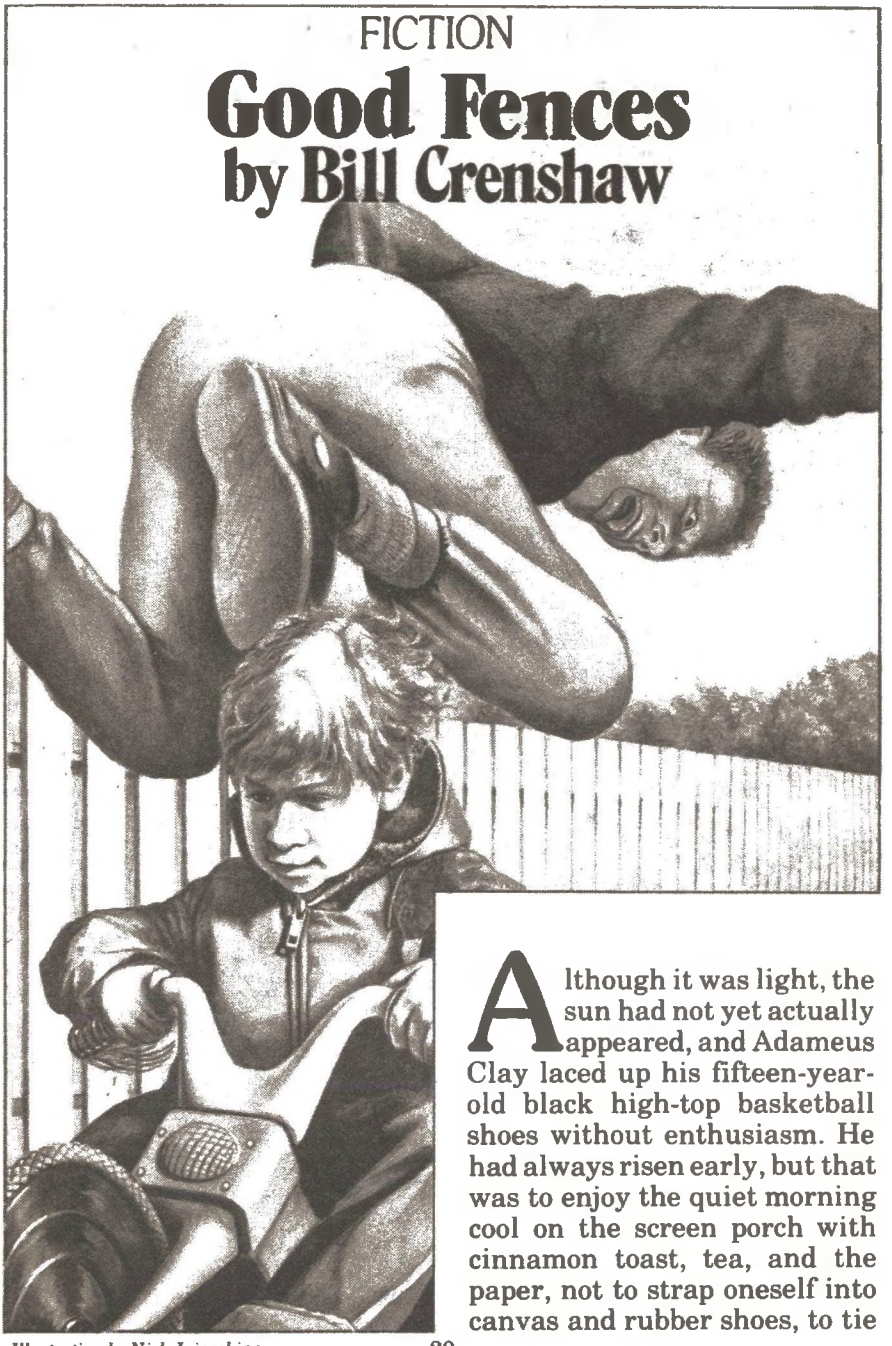
FICTION

Good Fences

by Bill Crenshaw



Although it was light, the sun had not yet actually appeared, and Adameus Clay laced up his fifteen-year-old black high-top basketball shoes without enthusiasm. He had always risen early, but that was to enjoy the quiet morning cool on the screen porch with cinnamon toast, tea, and the paper, not to strap oneself into canvas and rubber shoes, to tie

Illustration by Nick Jainschigg

one's glasses on with an elastic band, to expend energy by moving rapidly through the neighborhood, and to end up some minutes later precisely where one started, only now sweating and gasping for air.

Jogging, it was called. Supposed to be good for you. Adam felt obligated. The twins were only two, and he was sixty . . .

Ah, well, at least early in the morning most people were still in bed and couldn't see him leave by himself. Even Ginger didn't know he was jogging, and as long as the twins let her sleep, he could keep it a secret until he could show some results.

He pulled the laces tight against his ankles and tied them in double knots.

The air was gray and cool, the street quiet except for distant birdcalls and a muffled banging from a neighboring house or garage. A good morning, he thought, but then the sight of Brunhilde made him wince. Less than a month since Ginger had secretly had the Studebaker repaired and repainted after a run-in with a jeep, and then yesterday evening a late spring storm had hurled some chunks of hail, chipping the paint, denting the body, and cracking the windshield in white, web-like patterns the size of sausage patties. Ginger's VW had escaped almost unscathed under the pines, but water pooled in the dimples on Brunhilde's roof. Not a propitious beginning for the first day of the holidays.

Adam tried not to look as he jogged by, resenting once again not having a garage, as if it were the fault of the builder or the previous owner, and now resenting the distant banging and the changes that were turning the quiet, staid neighborhood, whose residents had had jobs and yards and roots, into a transient rental district.

The banging, he decided, was probably coming from the house catty-cornered to his in the back, where the Simpsons used to live. They had kept such a lovely yard, but in the last two years, four different families had let the yard go seedy. The latest group, the Ricketts, seemed the worst of the lot, as far as he could tell from furtive glances across the fence as he bent over his broccoli plants. He didn't know quite what to make of them, with their battered pickups and their cars up on cinder blocks and their apparently unsupervised children. Thank goodness the yards were fenced.

Not that the fence had kept one child off Eva Lamb's woodpile. Ginger hadn't seen the boy fall but was outside and got to him first. He hadn't been able

to move, and although several days of X-rays and testing and observation found no permanent injury to his back or neck, he still wore a white foam cervical collar around his neck as he played in his back yard with his brother. The collar didn't seem to bother him. The accident might never have happened as far as the boys were concerned.

Adam rounded the corner at Eva's house, stiff-kneed, amazed at the resilience of children.

Adults he found not so resilient—he and Ginger still jumping at every noise, the Ricketts bringing an attractive nuisance suit against Eva Lamb, Eva resisting the insurance company's efforts to negotiate. Eva had taken the accident hard, was still taking it hard, and she came over every day to talk and talk about how horrible the whole thing was, as if she had hurt the boy on purpose. Adam didn't want to seem uncharitable, but he was desperately tired of hearing about it and of telling her that she was blaming herself unfairly. Accidents could happen to anyone, even to the best protected, even to his own little girls.

It was for them that he jogged. He had to lose his flab, get the old ticker ticking hard again, wanted to hear people say that he couldn't be sixty, that he looked fifty. He wanted to live for a long time for his daughters, to provide for their needs and the occasional luxury.

Luxury. Money. It was depressing how fast money disappeared, would keep disappearing. Braces. College. Weddings, lord, weddings, and him the father of the brides, and the money just sprouted wings and flew. Even the bonus from Fat Chance and Acme Insurance. No, that wasn't true. Most of that was in savings for the twins' college, and what he had spent on the word processor was deductible and would help him finish the novel, if he'd ever get back to it.

Unconsciously he increased his speed, feeling a need to hurry. He rounded the second corner and moved up the street past his back door neighbors, heading into the rising sun.

Ah, but the twins made it all worth it, even the jogging. They were amazing. All children were amazing, incarnations of innocence and hope and joy, wonderful in the most basic sense of the word, even children he didn't know, like the little boy barreling down the sidewalk on his, what-do-you-call-it, a three-wheeled plastic pedal toy, not a tricycle like he used to have, but more fun maybe, looked like the Ricketts' younger child out in the morning cool, owning

the empty sidewalk, his own racetrack, riding right at him, moving left when he moved left, right when he moved right, bearing down on him relentlessly, and when Adameus finally realized that he should maybe step off the sidewalk completely, it was too late, and the kid on his low-slung Thunderbolt Road Racer cut Adam's feet out from under him and began howling as if he had fallen among all of life's thorns at once.

"Ow!"

"Oh, Adam, hold still," said Ginger, moving in again on Adam's knee with the washcloth and rubbing alcohol. "You're setting a bad example."

From the hall the twins stared wide-eyed at their father sitting on the closed toilet lid. Adam tried to smile at them, chin high, maintaining what dignity and composure he could. They just stared.

He found his composure difficult to maintain. His knees and palms burned, his discreet jog had turned into a neighborhood sideshow, and worst of all, as she knelt on the floor to clean his scrapes, Ginger was mad at him.

"Just what," she said through her teeth, "did you think you were doing?"

"I was exercising."

She snorted. "You might need X-rays."

"I didn't break anything."

"Eva Lamb broke her hip last year just by falling in her yard. You hit the pavement."

"Eva Lamb is an old lady."

"Adam, she is only three years older than you."

"So?"

A silence lengthened uncomfortably.

"Hold still," she said, attacking with fresh alcohol. "There's some dirt in here."

"Dirt?" He bent to look, horrified.

"Hold *still,* Adam." She wiped at his knee with more vigor than he thought necessary. "You're lucky you didn't crack your skull."

Adam felt his forehead. There *was* a scrape there. He must have hit pretty hard, but he didn't remember the actual fall. Suddenly he had been face down on the sidewalk and an awful lot of things were happening at once—the kid howling somewhere and different parts of his body starting to hurt and the garage door flying up with a lean man with longish hair and eyes set narrow in his flattened face storming out, howling himself and swinging a black tube like a sock full of rocks with which Adam thought he was going to get clubbed, and then the man, whom Adam now

recognized as Floyd Rickett, picking up the kid and yelling at Adam for hurting him and threatening Adam with retribution both physical and legal and Adam trying to get up and being worried about the kid and mad at him, too, and making it to his knees when he felt a woman's hands helping him and heard Floyd's wife yelling at Floyd that this was Dr. Clay, their neighbor, and that he should give her a hand. Floyd did, and they got Adam over to the front steps, asking if he were okay and what they could do.

Adam had sat until his head cleared and then said he just wanted to walk home before he got too stiff, but they wouldn't hear of it, Floyd insisting that he give Adam a ride and apologizing for the accident. Adam apologized, too, and Floyd's wife apologized, and they dragged the child over and made him apologize, though clearly he didn't want to, then sent him crying toward the house with a quick swat on the fanny.

Adam didn't really want to walk home, but he didn't want to ride in Floyd's car either, the one that he could see Floyd working on almost every afternoon, deep metallic blue, rear end high in the air, the word "Chevy" in big mother-of-pearl script across the back window, changing color with a change of angle. But Floyd, like Adam, was proud of his car, which Adam could understand, so as he climbed in Adam said that it was a nice car and too bad about the hail damage, which seemed worse on Chevy than on Brunhilde, but he couldn't make out the answer because at that point Floyd gunned the engine and whipped the car back out of the garage and shot up the street with a little squeal of the tires, grinning and talking about fuel injecting and turbo-charging and other things that Adam knew only as incantatory syllables used by mystic adepts who worked spells on internal combustion engines. Floyd smiled and chattered, trying very hard to be friendly.

Ginger had been wakened by a knock on the door and the sight, as she entered the living room tying her robe, of Adam limping into the house, looking as if he had been mugged in a locker room. "Your dad collided with my kid," Floyd said, and Adam didn't have the energy to correct him about the relationship. Ginger checked Adam over quickly, and when she was sure he was okay, she was mad.

She gave the knees a final look. "Okay, let's see your hands."

Adam offered his palms.

"Not as bad as it could be,"

she muttered. "How bad did you hurt the little boy?"

Adam drew himself up. "I didn't hurt him at all. He ran me down. On purpose."

She raised her eyes to his, staring from just beneath her eyebrows.

"Well, he did," Adam said.

"Was it Donnie or Floyd Junior?"

"I don't know which is which."

"Floyd Junior fell off the woodpile."

"This was Donnie, then. The younger one. He wasn't hurt at all."

"What did Charlena say?"

"Who?"

Ginger stopped cleaning his palms.

"Honestly, Adam, these people are our neighbors, like it or not. Charlena is the mother, Floyd is the father, Floyd Junior and Donnie are the boys."

"Well, I've never actually met them, you know, until today."

Ginger was silent.

"She was very nice," said Adam. "I thought the father was going to attack me first. I can understand him getting so angry, because of the other accident. He calmed down."

Ginger started cleaning his forehead, but she was still silent.

"By the way," Adam continued, "he recommended that I take Brunhilde to a Buzz's Auto Body Barn. He says that they are quick and quality."

Ginger stopped dabbing at his eyebrow and stared at him.

"Those are his words, not mine," said Adam.

"What about Earl?" said Ginger.

Adam stirred uncomfortably. "Well," he said, "Earl isn't fast, exactly."

"Adam, nobody but Earl has touched that car in years. He'll be crushed."

"He cries every time he sees Brunhilde. What if he sees her like this?"

"He loves old cars, that's all. Especially Brunhilde."

"It makes me uncomfortable. And he charges too much. The size of his bill is directly proportional to the number of his tears."

"We have insurance," said Ginger.

Adam said nothing.

"Don't we?"

Adam sighed. "Yes. But I took a five hundred dollar deductible on comprehensive to save money on premiums."

Ginger shrugged. "Well," she said, "I'd go to Earl anyway, but you do what you want." She raised his arm. "Got your elbow, too. Maybe we should take *you* to Earl." She poured alcohol across the scrape.

"Oowww," Adam wailed.

"Oh, Adam, stop it. You are

such a baby. You've skinned your elbow before."

"Not since I was twelve. Not in forty-eight years."

"Welcome to your second childhood."

Adam knew she wasn't mad any more. "Thank you, Mommy," he said.

Ginger finished bandaging his elbow. "All better?"

Adam smiled.

"All better?" asked the twins from the doorway.

"All better," Adam answered, and they disappeared, their watch apparently completed. "And he did run me down on purpose," he added, but Ginger ignored him.

By eight o'clock Adam was out on the screen porch with cinnamon toast, tea, and the Sunday paper, thinking how preferable this was to exercise, looking forward to a long and leisurely day. Things were looking up. Even the various aches and pains seemed muffled. Then Ginger reminded him that her brother Marvyn was coming at noon to eat dinner with them.

"Don't look at me," she said when Adam gave her a blank-eyed stare. "You invited him."

"I was just being polite," Adam protested. "I said, 'Why don't you come to dinner some time?' "

"Now you know," she said, and smiled.

Fat Chance as dinner guest. He'd almost rather be run down by a manic six-year-old. At least, he thought, the morning is mine.

It was at almost that instant that Eva Lamb called, "Yoo hoo," fluttering her hand across the hedge at Adam as she opened the gate below the porch, her hair blue in the morning sun.

Adam tried to comfort himself by noting that he had brought joy into another's life, that he had brightened someone's day. It didn't work.

Fat Chance started giggling again.

"Marvyn," said Ginger.

"Sorry, sis," Fat Chance said, "but it just cracks me up every time I think about it. I can just see the headlines—'English Professor Victim of Hit and Run. Vicious Six-Year-Old Still at Large.' " The laughter returned, a damp burble.

For almost a whole month Fat Chance had not made Adam the butt of a single joke, the object of even a teeny wisecrack, and it had been a strain; it showed in the way the skin at his jowls quivered when he clenched his teeth. But whatever respect Adam had gained with Fat Chance by solving the Cannon murder had been lost the minute he explained the reason for the bandages and the

limp. Fat Chance was overwhelmingly relieved. Adam was no longer a hero. Adam was just Adam again, and fair game.

Adam sighed. All fame is fleeting.

"You'd never catch *me* jogging," Fat Chance said, stirring the empty air with his fork. "Say it does make you live longer. Say it gives you an extra minute for every minute you jog. The amount of time you gain exactly equals the amount of time you jog. Heh, heh. Why bother?"

"You should exercise, Marvyn," said Ginger.

"I'm in great shape," he answered, looming over his food, the great curve of his back arching over the plate that was gathered close to his chest, hoarded there. "Say, Adam, you gonna eat that bread?"

Adam gave his head the slightest of shakes and Fat Chance's hand struck quick as a frog's tongue and the bread was across the table being buttered again.

"And anyway," Fat Chance continued around the bread, "when your number's up, it's up."

Adam didn't like talk like that because it always made him think of his own number, and with what had happened to Eva and all, he wanted to make sure that Ginger and the twins were provided for when any number was up.

"Marvyn," he said, "could I ask you a question about insurance?"

"Yeah, I saw Brownhildy. I'd get it in right away if I were you. Bring her by the office tomorrow early, and I'll get a check authorized. But early, understand. Everybody and his brother is gonna be there with beat-up cars and open palms."

"Don't I have to submit a bill or estimate or something?"

"Nah. Too many claims. Case like this, we'll just confirm the damage with a quick look and then check the car in the book. Cheaper in the long run just to settle based on the book than to see who's got five thousand miles and who's got fifty thousand and which garage'll do it fifty bucks cheaper. If you get it repaired for less than the difference, keep the difference."

"No danger of that," said Ginger.

Fat Chance looked at Adam.

Adam smiled thinly. "Five hundred dollar deductible," he said. "To save on premiums."

Fat Chance shook his head.

"Actually," said Adam, eager to change the subject, "I was wondering about liability insurance."

"Especially since you're crashing into six-year-olds, huh?"

Adam maintained his special Fat Chance smile. "How much is enough? I was thinking about Eva Lamb. Did you have enough?"

Marvyn seemed to sag a little.

"What's with that woman, anyway? Here we got both our client and the people suing her arguing for more money. Can you beat that? Lamb's a good name for her. Patsy would be better."

"Now, Marvyn, that's not fair," said Adam. Eva could be tiresome, but he could not sit by and hear her insulted.

"Oh, yes it is. The kid's all right, isn't he? Okay, so he was lucky there, Lamb was lucky there. But those Ricketts are luckier. They've got somebody here who wants to just *give* them the money, like it's hers or something. She wants to give *our* money away. They want fifty thousand in actual and five hundred thou in punitive. She wants them to have every last cent."

"Why, that's ridiculous," said Adam. "Surely her policy couldn't cover that?"

Fat Chance looked up as if Adam were springing a trap. "I didn't overinsure her, Adam, if that's what it looks like. I admit that the coverage is generous, but . . . "

"What do you mean 'generous,' Marvyn?" asked Ginger.

"Generous. You know. Substantial. Not chintzy."

"Why does she need such a generous policy?" Ginger said.

"Everybody needs total coverage," said Fat Chance. "You never know when something'll happen. Like a kid falling off your woodpile."

"Marvyn," said Ginger in a big sister tone, "if you've taken advantage . . . "

"What advantage?" said Fat Chance. "She knew you and Adam, and that . . . "

Adam cut him off. "You used your relationship—" he struggled with the word—"your relationship to me to sell insurance?"

"I did no such thing. She took my advice. She trusts you, she trusts your brother-in-law. Anything wrong with that? And she's lucky she did, isn't she, or they'd be trying to take her house now instead of negotiating with Acme."

Adam had to grant that point, but he still felt used. He wiped his hands on his napkin. "How much insurance did you advise her to take out?"

"Can't tell you that. A big policy might attract a big claim. Never discuss your coverage with anybody except your agent. Nobody else should know that."

"Oops," said Adam to himself.

"Oops?" said Fat Chance. "What oops?"

"There was a survey . . . " He trailed off, staring into the middle distance.

"Hey, sis," said Fat Chance. "Wake him up, huh? He's down the looking glass again or whatever."

"A survey," Adam continued, "by somebody or another, the other day. They were doing a survey. They wanted to know what my coverage was."

"What coverage?" Fat Chance's eyes had narrowed.

"Well . . . all of them, really. Automobile, home, health. They said they were compiling guidelines for minimum coverage."

"And you believed that."

Adam drew himself up a little. "Certainly. Why should I not have believed it?"

"Because, Adam old boy, the world is filled with greedy little men who know that there's a sucker born every minute. You think everybody is peaches and cream. You think these guys were doing you a favor."

"Well . . . "

"They want something. You wait. You're gonna get a knock *on* your door and a foot *in* your door and somebody's gonna try to show you how what you've got just isn't enough. You want hard sell? That is hard sell. This Acme does not do."

Adam smiled as best he could and nodded. "Anyway," he said, trying to get back to his original question, "do we have enough?"

"Enough what?"

"Coverage."

"Adam," said Fat Chance, rearing back in his chair and giving the film of gravy on his plate a final swipe with a crust of bread, "is not Marvyn P. McMorton your agent? Would he sell you short?" He popped the bread into his mouth. "You're insured up the old wazzoo."

It was some time after Fat Chance had gone before Adam had a chance to speak to Eva Lamb. He felt that he owed her an apology or something, embarrassed that he was somehow a participant in getting a fat commission for Fat Chance from her generous insurance policy. He made an attempt in a roundabout way to apologize to her across the fence when she came out to tend her peonies. He hoped, he said, that she had not felt pressured into taking out the policy.

"Oh, no," she said. "Mr. McMorton was very nice, very thoughtful, you know? He didn't try to pressure me at all. And it was really lucky, too, don't you think? With what happened to little Floyd Rickett, I mean. It's like providence or

something that I was fully insured." And she smiled at him and blinked her eyes.

Adam said that it *was* lucky that she had enough insurance to help the Ricketts, and she answered that luck had nothing to do with it. "It's careful financial planning in an uncertain world," she said. "Only one out of ten people is adequately insured like I am. That's what they told me on the survey when I told them my coverage, that I was someone who looked to the future and planned for it. The payments looked high at first, but since Mr. McMorton is your brother-in-law, I knew I was being treated right."

Which was just about the worst thing Adam could hear, and he didn't have the heart to tell her that she shouldn't have revealed the details of her policy over the phone, so he just smiled and nodded. She turned back to her flowers; he limped down to the vegetable garden at the back of his lot, hoping to find lots of cabbage worms to kill.

He could see the Rickett boys across the fence, playing in the yard, the older, Floyd, spinning in stomach-churning circles on the tire swing, hanging upside down, not bothered, apparently, by the cervical collar. The younger brother was whipping around the patio on the pedal toy he had run Adam down with that morning, making engine sounds and driving madly. Adam stopped and leaned on his hoe, smiling again at Children. How could he even think that Donnie had hit him on purpose? There was innocence in the world, and Adam felt the need to apologize for doubting it. He went back into the house and found two foil-wrapped mints, chocolate covered, and went back out to watch the children.

Donnie stopped his driving, parked his little machine, and lugged several bricks to the patio. He jacked his three wheeler up on the bricks and crawled under it. Adam moved over and leaned on the fence to watch as Donnie wiggled out from under the racer and disappeared into the garage, then returned with a double handful of tools and began applying them to various parts of his vehicle.

Child imitating father. Adam found himself moved. Would his girls want to be like him?

Floyd Junior had stopped swinging and was eyeing him fixedly. Adam waved. Floyd didn't move. Adam waved again, then turned his head toward a sudden whacking noise and saw Donnie beating away at his racer with something, smacking furiously for a few seconds, standing back and looking, then

smacking again. Adam chuckled. Kids.

The mints were growing warm in his palm. "Donnie," he called.

The boy jumped as if he'd been caught at something and looked around for the voice.

"Over here," called Adam, waving.

Donnie saw him and sauntered over, carrying himself with an air of curiosity and suspicion, the thing with which he'd been hitting his racer dangling casually from his hand. He stopped about ten feet from the fence. "Yeah?" he said.

"I just wanted to see if you'd like some candy." He offered the mint.

"My dad says never take candy from strangers. My dad says you don't know what kind of creeps and weirdos are out there."

Adam laughed gently. "And that is good advice, Donnie, but you know me. We ran into each other this morning. I just wanted to see how you were and say I was sorry." He held out the mints again.

"Sorry don't pay the bills," said Donnie and he took the candy, careful that his fingers didn't touch Adam's palm. Then he just stared, holding the mints in one hand, swinging in the other a sock with something in it.

"What are you doing?" asked Adam finally, nodding at the sock.

Donnie glanced down at the sock and spun it like a propeller. "Fixing my car," he said, "but it's none of your beeswax."

"Won't that hurt it?" asked Adam, finding it more and more difficult to smile honestly. Over Donnie's shoulder he could see Floyd Junior approaching.

"I'm fixing it, I told you, and I'm gonna get a new one soon."

Floyd Junior drew even with his brother.

"Hello," said Adam pleasantly.

"Whatcha got?" said Floyd to his brother.

"Nothing," said Donnie, closing his fingers over the mints.

"Gimme," said Floyd, reaching.

"Buzz off," said Donnie, fending Floyd off with one hand, clenching the candy more tightly in the other. Chocolate began to ooze through his fingers.

"Boys," said Adam, "let's not fight."

"You gimme," yelled Floyd, "or you're gonna get it."

Donnie at that point let loose with the same howl Adam had heard that morning, and Floyd got a hand over his mouth, got it bitten, and started his own howling, and they both went down, grabbing and punching and pulling at each other, ig-

noring Adam's "Now, boys, let's stop this, please," ignoring even the howling of Floyd Senior as he charged out, but having more difficulty ignoring Floyd Senior's hands in their respective heads of hair, pulling them inevitably apart. He then dragged them both screaming toward the house, demanding to know just what the hell was going on. Adam heard something about the smiley old toad and candy, but whether Donnie or Floyd Junior had said it, he wasn't sure.

Adam stood at the fence, apparently smiling, for a few minutes more, pretending that nothing had happened at all, then he strolled casually back to his study, where he sank into his reading chair and sulked until the phone rang. "Adameus Clay," he said.

"Well, Adameus Clay, old bean," bellowed Fat Chance as if he were using a megaphone, "I think we're up against a scam here."

"Just follow me on out," Floyd hollered, leaning out of the Chevy's window. "If you get lost, you can't miss it. On the left." He revved his engine as if asking a question.

Adam raised his hand and nodded to signal okay, though he doubted that anything was.

Floyd popped his clutch and squealed up the block toward the stoplight. By the time Adam got out of the driveway there were three cars between Floyd's Chevy and Brunhilde, and Adam knew better than to trust anybody's assurance that he couldn't miss it, especially if it meant turning left off the beltline, especially with all these cracks in the windshield. The light was yellow when he got to it. He went through anyway. He hated that.

He hated being here period, but Fat Chance insisted, talking him into calling Rickett for directions to Buzz's Auto Body Barn. When Fat Chance found out that Rickett had offered to lead Adam out there himself, he had jumped for it. "Great," he'd said. "Perfecto. Talk to the guy. Get to know him."

Get to know him. Even before Fat Chance's phone call, Adam had been awkward around Floyd; now things were worse. On the phone to Floyd, his conversation was stiff and filled with inappropriate pauses; in person he seemed to lose the ability to speak altogether. What could he say to a con man? "*Alleged* con man," he reminded himself aloud. "Judge not."

"I think we're up against a scam here," Fat Chance had said, and while Adam thought

he knew what Fat Chance meant by scam, he had no idea what Fat Chance meant by "we."

Adam had asked for clarification.

Fat Chance explained that by scam he meant getting snookered. He said that a lot of things had come together since hearing Adam's story at dinner. Now he thought that Floyd Junior had taken a dive off that woodpile, if he'd been on it at all, and then faked all his agony according to detailed instructions from his parents. He also thought that Adam had in fact been run down by the six-year-old. Hadn't Adam said that the kid started howling even though he wasn't hurt? Hadn't the father seemed angry with Adam until he found out who he was, the next door neighbor of Eva Lamb, the husband of Ginger Clay, who was the witness to their son's accident? The six-year-old had been setting Adam up for another scam, but the parents had quashed it.

Here Adam objected. "That's a bit farfetched."

Fat Chance asked to be heard out. Hadn't there been a quote survey unquote not long before the accident that would tell the quote surveyor unquote exactly who had a big liability policy that could be hit for megabucks and that would settle out of court for bucks that were merely big?

Fat Chance thought that it was all adding up, and when Adam told him about the fight over the mints and the father's treatment of the boys, he was even more convinced. "If you were hurting, would you fight your brother like that? Or would you grab your kid by the hair if he was wearing a C-collar and you thought he had really been hurt? These guys are cons, Adam old boy. We've got to get them."

By "we" Fat Chance meant Adam and Fat Chance. "We're a team," he said. "We solved the Cannon murder, right?"

Adam had almost hung up.

"Okay, I admit, *you* did most of the work. But we're still a team. You couldn't have done it by yourself. How about it? Six dollars an hour and half the bonus."

"You need me for some reason, don't you, Marvyn?"

There had been silence for an extra second. "Of course I need you," he said finally. "First of all, I need you to go door to door around the neighborhood and get the pattern on this so-called survey. My guess is that it centers on the Rickett place."

Dealing with strangers was particularly painful, and going door to door was the last thing Adam wanted to do, but he had always had a hard time finding

a polite way to say no, so he decided to ask for more than Fat Chance would agree to.

"Fifteen dollars an hour."

"Done."

Adam realized too late that he should have asked for more. Now he was committed to doing something he didn't want to do, and even though fifteen was three times the old rate, it scarcely made working with Fat Chance worthwhile. But he had seen in his mind's eye his daughters and dollar bills with wings, and he had heard Fat Chance talking to him without insulting him, and all of that together had made it worth it.

Almost. He was having a hard time keeping up with Rickett, who seemed unable to stay in one lane or to travel at a relatively constant speed. Traffic was terrible. Adam had asked that they go about noon to avoid rush hour traffic, but rush hour couldn't have been much worse. Knots of cars flew from stoplight to stoplight, bunching and swerving and cutting each other off, then stopping in great clouds of heat and exhaust at the next light, waiting, edging forward, engines growling impatiently. Rickett was always up there ahead of him somewhere, half hidden in the glare and the dancing heat.

Adam dearly loved his Studebaker, loved its lines, its thick sheet metal, its solid feel, loved the little details like the air vents that opened like little hands to catch the air and closed with such a neat, precise snick. But now he would almost trade for something with air conditioning. He was peeling off his coat just as the light changed and was blasted by twenty horns for causing a three or four second delay. At the next light he reached up to loosen his tie, but he stopped with his finger on the knot and changed his mind. One could go only so far, even for comfort's sake.

Then he missed the turn, seeing Buzz's Auto Barn just as he passed it. How Rickett had crossed that solid stream of traffic he neither knew nor cared to know, and right now he didn't care much about Fat Chance's ideas either, but he was for sure as heck going to charge him for all of this time in traffic.

It took him twenty minutes to find his way back to Buzz's. He pulled Brunhilde into line behind ten or twelve other cars with cracked windshields. The exhaust fumes were giving him a headache. He had loosened his tie.

Finally he pulled even with the guy with the clipboard and the baseball hat that said "Eat More Possum." The guy said "Number 107," and he slapped

a big red sticker on the windshield that said the same thing. Then he stepped back and looked at Brunhilde for a few seconds and his shoulders started going up and down. It took Adam a few more seconds to realize that he was laughing.

"Hey, Buzz," the guy shouted when his shoulders quieted down. "Get a load of this."

Sweat was running into the corners of Adam's eyes. A short man with a big belly swaying over his belt and a cheek distended with chewing tobacco wandered over and looked Brunhilde up and down, making little comments to Eat More Possum that Adam couldn't quite hear, but it was clear that they found something amusing. Adam finally got their attention. Buzz leaned down, with his sweaty forearm on the roof just above Adam's door. "Can I get it back by four?" Adam asked.

Buzz thought that was hilarious. "I can't fit this thing from stock," he said. "You'll have to leave it."

"You oughta shoot it," said Possum, at which he and Buzz broke up again.

Adam's smile became more of a smile. "Look," he said, almost evenly, "I called this morning. I called for an appointment and to see if you had the necessary parts. You said there would be no problem. To quote you, you said, 'Hell, buddy, just bring her on in, we're fast, and we can fix anything.' "

Buzz arced a brown stream of tobacco juice to his left, toward Brunhilde's front tire. "Just what the hell *is* this thing anyway?"

"This," said Adam in a tone reserved only for the most lazy and ignorant of freshmen, "is a six passenger 1948 Studebaker Regal Deluxe Land Cruiser, and it is one hell of a car. And I'll thank you to get your greasy arm off it." And he dropped it into gear, cut the wheel to the left, and drove off rather more quickly than he expected, causing Buzz and Eat More Possum to leap back out of the way. He drove straight to Earl's, thinking to heck with Buzz, to heck with Rickett, to heck with Fat Chance.

When he saw Brunhilde, Earl wept for five and a half minutes. Adam knew it was going to cost him plenty.

Taking his survey was worse than Adam expected, and he expected it to be terrible.

He had found a pattern, as Fat Chance had predicted, realizing by the time he was through that the Ricketts must have gotten names from mailboxes or doorplates or something and then had simply called

around. They didn't have to face what Adam faced as he went door to door for five and a half hours.

"I don't want to talk about it," was all that he would say to Ginger.

Whether or not anything came of the survey, he was going to charge Acme Insurance not only for the time at fifteen dollars an hour, but also for a new hat, since he had last seen his between the teeth of a Doberman galloping around the corner of a house.

His feet burned, his lower back was throbbing, and his knees refused to bend. Still, he was pleased with himself, as if he had seen the dentist and done well in the chair, as if he had put the last grade on the last paper of the academic year. He even invited Fat Chance over for dessert so that he could present the results of the survey to him and find out what was next.

"It doesn't look good, Adam," said Fat Chance as he handed his plate to Ginger. "Any more of the pie left?"

"What do you mean, it doesn't look good?" said Adam. He wasn't interested in "doesn't look good." He had suffered too much for the survey results to have everything dismissed with so casual a phrase.

"Jeez, take it easy, will ya? What am I supposed to do? You want me to go say, 'Hey, Rickett, Acme doesn't owe you squat. Somebody called up your neighbors to check on their insurance coverage. We think it was you.' "

"But surely it was he," said Adam. "The pattern shows the calls centering on his . . . "

"Pattern, schmattern," said Fat Chance. "You want to go in a courtroom and say, 'Look at this pattern,' and then have Rickett put his kid on the stand in a neck brace and say, 'Look at this kid'? Yeah, the way to a jury's heart is through the pattern." He swept his arm before him. "This is the real world out here. This is your education into things the way they are. You know Rickett's a con, I know Rickett's a con, and there is no way we can get him on this one. I thought we could, but we can't."

"But his history of accidents . . . "

"Oh, yeah, lots of accidents. What we got is a very accident-prone group of people who are lucky to be walking around. Within the last couple of years, both Floyd and Charlena have had whiplash problems after being rear-ended, Charlena hurt her coccyx slipping on a wet floor at McDonald's, and good old Floyd had a car stolen, had a car vandalized, and had a car catch on fire. That's just the

stuff I could find, just a string of bad luck, you know, and that's how their shyster will play it. I mean, the poor schmuck's been beaten down by life and while he's lying there bleeding, you want I should kick him in the kidneys. Jury'd love that."

"But," said Adam, "but . . . " But he could think of nothing to say.

"What about the children, Marvyn?" said Ginger.

"What about them?" asked Fat Chance, running his finger around the edge of his plate to get the last of the lemon chiffon.

"Well, aren't there laws about using children in this way? Shouldn't somebody do something?"

"Sure, somebody should do something. Who? What? Give me some answers and we'll do something."

"It's just not fair," muttered Adam.

Fat Chance leaned across the table. "Bravo," he said. "Write that down. 'Rule Number One: There Ain't No Justice.' Welcome to Reality 101."

"Marvyn," said Ginger, "you can be a real pain sometimes."

Marvyn sat back and smiled and spread his hands as if it were a calling in life which he accepted.

"So that's it, then?" said Adam.

"That's it," said Fat Chance. "Unless there's any more of that pie."

There was, and more coffee all around, and more talk, mostly from Fat Chance, who finally finished the piece of pie, then rose and helped himself to another, taking even more time now that his appetite was somewhat appeased, ignoring all hints from Ginger that he should leave, including her taking a shower and reappearing in her bathrobe, her hair in a towel.

Adam didn't hint well himself, never having found a hint that he considered polite and that he could drop without blushing, so usually he didn't hint at all in such situations, sitting stiffly and apparently smiling, but tonight, as Fat Chance babbled on, he was emboldened by the lateness of the hour to yawn and stretch mightily. It didn't work. Fat Chance just sat, reared back in his chair, yakking away.

It was clear that short of throwing him out they could do nothing to hasten his departure. Adam settled back in the half dark and tried to get comfortable.

Suddenly Fat Chance was interrupted by the thundering roar of a car engine revving up, then bubbling down, backfiring, then revving up again.

"What the hell is that?"

"The Ricketts," said Ginger, pointing through the trees to the patch of light across the fence.

"This late? Inconsiderate slobs."

"That means he has his car back already," said Adam almost to himself. "Back and safe in his garage."

"*His* car got a name?" asked Fat Chance. "Hortense or Mabel or something?"

"Chevy," Adam said blankly, only half listening, and Fat Chance laughed, thinking it exceedingly clever.

"Chevy," he repeated when he caught his breath. "That's rich. Well, I hate to run, but some of us work for a living." Neither Ginger nor Adam dared say something, afraid that the wrong syllable might induce him to stay longer. But once he was in the doorway, Adam took a chance.

"Are you sure there's nothing we can do?"

"About the Ricketts? Nah. I wish. This ain't like the Cannon thing, y' know, because here you got no body. Come by tomorrow and put in your time and I'll get you a check ASAP. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out an envelope. "Here's the settlement for Brownhill."

"Brunhilde," said Ginger.

"Whatever."

Adam opened the envelope. It was a second or two before he could speak. "Sixteen dollars and eighty-seven cents?"

"Best I could do. That's even calling it a collectible, which it isn't really."

"The car," said Adam, "is a classic."

"Yeah, well, on a new car with full comprehensive, you'd be looking at sixteen hundred now instead of sixteen. Too bad you don't have a garage. 'Course Rickett had a garage, but they don't do any good unless the car is inside."

And he was gone finally, and Ginger and Adam collapsed into bed, but Adam couldn't sleep. He was stiff and sore, he was thrown off schedule by Fat Chance's late departure, and he kept hearing the Ricketts' radio blasting away in the garage as they did whatever one does to cars like that. And he had no garage. Why should Eva, Fat Chance, Rickett have garages, and he no garage at all. *He* wouldn't leave Brunhilde in the rain. "They don't do any good unless the car is inside." He'd *always* have Brunhilde inside, he'd be careful, not like Rickett.

But Rickett was always careful.

Adam sat straight up. Rickett never left the car out. He called Fat Chance.

"I think we got 'im," he said,

not unhappy that it was two thirty A.M.

The next morning, Adam had second thoughts. They became more pronounced as Fat Chance made the left turn into Buzz's Auto Body Barn.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" he asked Fat Chance.

"It's all we got," said Fat Chance. "You want to let them off totally?"

Adam hesitated.

"Well?" said Fat Chance.

"No," said Adam.

"Well, okay then. Let's do it. You just stand around and look . . . " he waved his hand in the air, reaching for a word that wouldn't come " . . . however it is you look. Just let me do the talking, okay?"

Adam was more than happy to agree to that.

It was still early, and they found Buzz and Eat More Possum drinking cokes and smoking cigarettes in Buzz's office. The air was blue with smoke. Fat Chance introduced himself and lit a cigar. He did not mention Adam, just saying he needed their help about a claim.

"Yeah," he said, "you know how it is. Somebody's always making new paperwork for us, like we didn't have enough already."

"Yeah, well," said Buzz, "we're kinda busy ourselves, here, if you know what I mean, still got cars to get to and more coming in. And I don't know if we could help you even if we did have the time. I mean, our records are private and I don't know if we even got what you need."

"Well," said Fat Chance, puffing on the cigar and fogging the room even more, "all I need is a specific windshield. I saw a stack of them out back. I think you got what I need."

"You got a search warrant or anything?" said Buzz.

"Search warrant?" said Fat Chance as if shocked. "Search warrant? Did I say something about crime here? Am I a cop? Is there something we need a search warrant *for?*"

"Why don't you just go blow it off somewhere else, bud," said Buzz. "You don't scare me."

Fat Chance turned to Adam. "I didn't think there was any collusion here or anything, but maybe I was wrong. This *was* the place he recommended, wasn't it?"

"Quite specifically," said Adam.

"And you know what," Fat Chance continued, looking through the glass walls of Buzz's office out into the work bays, "an operation like this, they do mostly insurance work, wouldn't you think? And I bet just a whole bunch of it is Acme in-

surance work. I'd hate to recommend that Buzz's Auto Body Barn be struck from our approved list, wouldn't you?"

Before Adam could say anything, Fat Chance continued.

"Oh, I forgot. You didn't get such great service here, did you? Wasn't that prompt, courteous attendants stuff you see on TV, was it? So maybe you wouldn't mind dropping Buzz's."

"Oh, yeah," said Possum in recognition, pointing at Adam. You're the guy in the funny car."

"That car," said Fat Chance, "is a classic."

"How are we supposed to know which windshield?" said Buzz.

"You got those big red stickers on them," said Fat Chance. "The stickers got numbers, which I assume match numbers on work orders. The number we want will probably be in the nineties. The name is Rickett."

Buzz swiveled to a filing cabinet and opened a drawer, and thumbed through the folders. "Ninety-one," he said to Possum.

"I appreciate the cooperation," said Fat Chance, and he shook Buzz's hand.

Outside, a few minutes later, Fat Chance was squatting down beside the windshield with a magnifying glass. "Well, looky here," he said to Adam. "My, my, my."

Adam took the glass and bent over the windshield. Caught in the cracks of the safety glass he could see tiny black threads. He stood up and smiled broadly.

"Either this window got hit by fuzzy hail," said Fat Chance, "or somebody's been using the old golf-ball-in-the-sock-trick."

Rickett was working on his car when Adam and Fat Chance walked up, and he was friendly enough as Fat Chance walked around the garage, praising the car and asking questions, apparently interested in what Rickett had to say. Rickett got a bit less friendly when Fat Chance said he was from Acme and would like to talk to him about the accident.

"Talk to my lawyer," Rickett said. "I'm not supposed to discuss the case, he says."

The two boys came into the garage to look at the visitors. "Why don't we go inside," said Fat Chance, winking. "I could use a cup of something and I'd sure hate to talk about this in front of the kids and all."

"Look," said Rickett, "like I told you, I can't talk about this case."

"Well, then," said Fat Chance, "why don't we talk about your car. I'd love some coffee, wouldn't you, Adam? Got any coffee, Floyd? Mind if I call you Floyd?"

"Charlena," he called.

"Reinforcements," said Fat Chance softly to Adam.

Charlena appeared at the door, and Fat Chance repeated his request. She said that they'd hear what Fat Chance had to say before they called their lawyer or the police, she wasn't sure which yet. "You boys scat," she said to her kids as she backed out the door to let Fat Chance through.

Adam found the whole experience very disturbing. He didn't know what to say or how to say it and he didn't think Fat Chance knew what he was doing and he wasn't sure he wanted to be associated with him even if he did.

But there he was, trapped against the window at the kitchen table, Fat Chance effectively blocking one side, the Ricketts blocking the other. Behind him he could hear the children fighting in the yard while inside there was dead silence except for Fat Chance's slurping at his cup of coffee. Nobody else had touched his.

Charlena sat across from Fat Chance, leaning back in her chair, her arms folded across her chest. Floyd stood slightly behind her, crossing and uncrossing his arms, occasionally pacing. Adam sat as still and as rigid as stone, every muscle fixed, apparently smiling.

With a final gulp, Fat Chance downed the remaining half cup. "Floyd," he said finally, ignoring Charlena, "I'd like you to reconsider Acme's offer."

Charlena visibly relaxed. "We've decided to accept," she said, smiling.

"Oh, I know that," said Fat Chance. "That's what I want you to reconsider."

Charlena stiffened again. "Our lawyer says . . . "

"Oh, let's leave the legal beagles out of this. This is between us, with no lawyer skimming from either one, okay?"

Nobody said anything.

"What I'd like to see," continued Fat Chance casually, "is that we pay the kid's hospital only. Actual costs. We pay nothing else, no punitive, no mental anguish, no nothing."

Floyd's pacing sped up. Charlena smiled. "The offer was actual costs plus forty-seven and a half."

"Thousand?" said Adam, aghast. "Forty-seven and a half *thousand?*"

Fat Chance ignored him. "I'm offering actual only. Take it and we'll forget the fact that Junior out there is such a fine actor. And like I said, we'll keep the lawyers out."

"Charlena," began Floyd.

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. "You got nothing," she said to Fat Chance. "Floydy got hurt on that woodpile."

"There was nothing wrong with him."

"Lucky for you," she snapped, "or we wouldn't settle for a lousy fifty thousand."

Floyd was smiling now, moving in quick little jerks behind his wife's chair. "Why don't you boys take off, huh?" he said. "You got nothing."

"Oh, we got a lot," said Fat Chance. "It's just not what you think." He stuck up a fat thumb. "One, we got a windshield that got hit by a sock with a golf ball in it. Your windshield. That's one." He held up a finger. "Two, we got the sock and the golf ball. Three, we got witnesses putting your car in the garage before the hailstorm. You always put your car away, didn't you?"

Floyd was pacing again.

"I notice that you only fixed the windshield," said Fat Chance. "Had to. Law against broken glass. Guess you made your profit in not having the body work done after you got your settlement, huh?" He continued to tick off each point on a stubby finger. "Four, we got a witness who was there when you popped your car with your homemade hail. Five, we got a witness who saw your kid beating up on his car with the sock and claiming he was fixing it. Six, we got you trying to set up another scam by having your kid run down a pedestrian and claiming vice versa. Seven, we got your accident-prone history, especially with cars. Eight, we got a funny neighborhood insurance survey. Want me to go on?"

"You don't have the sock," said Floyd.

"Shut up, Floyd," said Charlena, "just shut up. Like I said, tubs, you got nothing."

Fat Chance shrugged. "Suit yourself. But life's going to be uncomfortable for a while. Then it'll get worse. You know, you might can get clear on the woodpile, but I bet it takes at least fifty thousand to get you out of it and what you're getting into here. It's kinda like buying a lot of hassle and getting nowhere. Kinda like jogging, right, Adam?" Adam just looked at him and tried to smile. The effect was sinister, which seemed to please Fat Chance.

"Oh, I haven't introduced my partner here," he said, sweeping his hand in apology. "You read about the Cannon murder in the paper last month? Insurance fraud where the guy bumped off his wife but made it look like an accident by hitting a bridge and almost killing himself? See that, did you?"

Charlena was quiet for a few seconds, then decided to ask. "So?"

"So, this is the guy that solved

it. He solved it by looking at accident reports. We're gonna give him your case special. And he's still a little sore where he hit the ground Sunday. You want him on your case?"

Adam sat straighter and lifted his chin.

"Well," said Fat Chance, putting his palms on the table and pushing himself up, "I can see that you two have lots to talk about, so we'd better shove off." He flipped a card onto the table. "I'll be at that number this afternoon. We can find our own way out."

They went back through the garage, Fat Chance pausing at the top of the stairs as he closed the door. "Listen," he whispered.

They could hear Charlena screaming about being greedy and not leaving well enough alone. "If they quit, tell me," Fat Chance said, and he somehow tiptoed down the stairs as if he weren't the size of a rhino and poked around while Adam, leaning forward with his hand cupped to his ear, stood on the landing fighting panic.

"Got it," said Fat Chance, waving the sock triumphantly.

"You can't take that," said Adam. "That's stealing."

"Whaddaya think, they'll call the cops? Let's go."

Just as they left the garage, a small blur of wheels tore around the corner, bearing down on them. *"WATCH IT, TWERP!"* Fat Chance thundered, and Donnie swerved into the flowerbed, rolled out of his Racer into the soft dirt, and started howling.

"Jeez," said Fat Chance, shaking his head. "Kids."

Fat Chance didn't bother to tell Adam anything about the Ricketts for a week, not until Adam overcame his reluctance and called him about the check he had not yet received. He had hoped Fat Chance would put it in the mail; Fat Chance said he'd run it by instead.

In the meantime Eva had appeared, angry that the Ricketts were dropping their claims for punitive damages, since their son was not permanently injured, and upset that the Ricketts were moving. "You've got to admire people like that," she said, "people who won't take more than they think is right. I think my insurance company ought to pay them anyway, and I think I'll call Mr. McMorton to give him a piece of my mind." Adam gave her the number of Fat Chance's private line.

Brunhilde was ready, finally, and Adam picked her up and left his handkerchief with Earl, who was either crying again or crying still, a feeling with which

Adam was in complete sympathy when he saw the bill. Still, no one could match Earl's work. Still . . .

Ginger had a surprise for him when he brought Brunhilde home. "Try them on now so I can take them back today if they don't fit." She held up a pair of running shoes. "If you're going to jog, you're going to do it right."

"But they're so expensive," Adam said, although his objections ran more to reasons other than expense.

"Well, you earned some extra money with Marvyn, and I won't have you hurting yourself in the wrong shoes. Now, try them on."

As he was putting them on, they saw Fat Chance's car turn into the driveway, and Ginger excused herself to start coffee. Fat Chance entered with his usual bluster, bringing Adam's moolah, as he called it, though Adam preferred to call it his consulting fee. It was not nearly what he expected.

"You put in for seven hours," said Fat Chance. "At fifteen dollars an hour, that's a hundred and five bucks. What do you want?"

Adam pointed out that for the Cannon case, he had received fifteen percent of a sizable claim against the company, and he had thought that the same arrangement would be working in this case, and that he therefore had anticipated something in the neighborhood of, oh, seven thousand dollars to split between them.

"Adam," said Fat Chance through a broad grin, "the Cannon case was all open and aboveboard. It was official-like. Here you got a kind-hearted couple who decided not to stick it to a poor old widow. We didn't save the company anything, official-like." He lowered his voice to a whisper, as if in conspiracy. "As a matter of fact," he said, putting his arm across Adam's shoulders, "what we did might could be called your minor extortion. Now, even you should know that we can't get paid for extortion, don't you?"

Adam was speechless. Then Fat Chance laughed and laughed and laughed.

"What's funny?" said Ginger, entering with coffee.

Fat Chance could only point at Adam.

Ginger shook her head. "Ignore him," she said. "Shoes fit?"

Unfortunately, they did.

FICTION

A Short Pocket Mystery

by James A. Noble

Mystified, old Thatcher looked around. "Winnie, dear. What are we doing here?"

Winnie looked up from her knitting and smiled brightly. "Don't you know?" she asked. "We're the two protagonists in a little story printed in this magazine."

"Really? What are we supposed to do?"

"Silly man. This is a publication for mysteries. We're supposed to solve one."

"Oh," replied Thatch as if he understood the explanation. He pondered nervously before asking his next question.

"A mystery about what?"

Winnie shook her head and clucked softly. "Thatch, you're positively exasperating. Look at the title for pity's sake."

He looked up and slowly read aloud. " 'A . . . Short . . . Pocket . . . Mystery.' " He became very excited. "Winnie. We must act quickly. This is only going to be a short mystery."

"We have plenty of time, dear."

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Thatcher snorted. "That's what you think. We probably only have a few pages. Quickly, tell me the details of the mystery."

"Very well," sighed Winnie. "The mystery centers around the murder of Frederick Upton."

"What? Good ole Freddy has been murdered?"

"Stop being so melodramatic," scolded Winnie. "He's only a character in this story, like you and me."

Thatch obviously didn't take kindly to being referred to as a character. His displeasure showed in his expression.

"Freddy was a member of the exclusive Pendleton Club," continued Winnie. "He so much enjoyed the place that he decided to leave a sizable portion of his estate to the club, plus a not too shabby sum of money to each of the club's employees. They all expected to be collecting their inheritance at any moment.

"It seems that Freddy was in poor health and had a life-threatening condition. He suffered from severe attacks for which his doctor had prescribed some pills. Whenever Freddy felt an attack coming on, he was to take one of the pills or face a terrible consequence."

"Do you mean death?"

"Yes," said Winnie. "To be certain that he always had his medicine, he made it his butler's responsibility to put a small tin of the pills in his right front trouser pocket when he laid out the clothing Freddy would be wearing that day.

"Freddy always left the tin in the same trouser pocket even if he changed clothes while at the club, say to play tennis or something. That way he was never confused by switching the tin from one set of clothing to another. If he felt an attack coming on while he was on the court and in his tennis garb, for example, he'd simply go to the locker room, retrieve the pills from his trouser pocket, and take one.

"Losing the tin of pills was a constant worry to Freddy and he was in the habit of checking to make sure he had them. Sometimes he would check as often as five or six times each hour.

"On the day of the murder, Freddy left his mansion and went to the club for a little swim. He changed into his swim trunks at the club and locked his street clothing, including the trousers with the tin of pills, in a locker in the men's changing room. Besides the key that Freddy had, only Tom, who oversees the room, was in possession of an unduplicatable master key to those lockers.

"After the swim, as he was showering, Freddy felt an attack coming on. But it didn't seem too severe so he finished the shower

before he went to his locker, retrieved the tin, took a pill, and returned the rest to the trouser pocket.

"He changed back into his street clothes and was preparing to leave when he ran into an old friend. After a short conversation, Freddy and his friend decided to play a few holes of golf. Once again he returned to the changing room, put on the golfing clothes he kept at the club, and locked his street clothes in the locker. In the meantime, Tom had turned the master key over to Dick and had left. So while Freddy was out on the golf course with his friend, Dick was the only one who had the master key that could unlock Freddy's locker.

"When the golf match was over, Freddy and his friend changed back into their street clothes. Then they decided to have a couple of drinks at the club's bar. They stayed several hours, into the early evening, before Freddy's friend had to leave. The friend was aware of Freddy's health problem, so before he left the bar, he asked Freddy if he was certain he had his tin of pills. Freddy assured him that he had just checked and he did indeed have them.

"Freddy decided to have a steam before he went home. Now, the locker room adjoining the steam room is not the changing room he had been in before. The only person who has a master key to the lockers next to the steambath is Harry. Freddy, of course, locked his street clothing in one of those lockers. He was only in the steam room about ten minutes when he felt a bad attack coming on.

"He raced out to his locker, unlocked it, and reached into the right front pocket for his tin of pills. They were gone. Desperately, he searched the other pockets of his trousers and the locker, but the tin of pills could not be found. He called for help and his doctor was summoned, but by the time he arrived, Freddy was dead.

"When the police were called, they performed a thorough search of every spot Freddy had been that day. The tin of pills could not be found. The one thing they discovered in the right front trouser pocket was a dozen salted peanuts."

When Winnie finished the story, she picked up her knitting again and waited silently for a response from Thatch.

"Humph," he said finally. "Where were his locker keys and his car keys?"

"He always carried the locker key he was using on a thin chain around his neck whenever he was out sporting at the club. The rest of the keys he put on a shelf in the locker."

"I suppose it would be silly to assume he had a hole in his pocket," suggested Thatch.

"It certainly would. Sorry, no holes."

"Maybe there was a pickpocket about."

"The Pendleton Club does not allow pickpockets as members. If you ask me, dear Thatch, you're looking for an easy way to solve this case."

"So you think it was either Tom, Dick, or Harry?"

"What do you think?" asked Winnie, ignoring his question.

Thatch took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Tom had access to the tin of pills while Freddy was swimming, Dick while he was golfing, and Harry while he was in the steam room. You're forgetting a few others, however."

"Who?"

"The butler and Freddy's friend is who."

"I didn't forget them. I just left them out because I know they couldn't have done it."

"Aha," said Thatch, looking very smug. "I've got you there. Freddy wasn't murdered at all. It was an accident. Freddy and his friend got their trousers mixed up when they got dressed after the golf match. The friend unknowingly walked off with the tin of pills."

"Really, Thatch!" said Winnie, blushing. "Freddy is ten inches bigger around the waist than his friend. Besides, I told you Freddy checked for the tin at the bar, long after the golf match."

Thatcher fell silent again so he could reorganize his thinking. When at last he spoke, he sounded fairly certain about his next solution.

"If Freddy took a pill from the tin after his swim and shower," he began, "it couldn't have been the butler or Tom."

"See," interjected Winnie, knitting with a vengeance. "I told you the butler didn't do it."

"And it couldn't have been Dick because Freddy still had the tin of pills at the bar after he had played golf. That means the tin could only have been taken while he was in the steam room, and since his locker key was around his neck, Harry had to have taken the tin by using the master key."

"Brilliant . . . " said Winnie flatly.

"Why, thank you."

"And too obvious . . . "

"Yes, it does appear so. Doesn't it."

"And wrong."

Thatch held firm. "That's not possible. You stated that Freddy was in the bar for several hours. If he was constantly checking to

make sure he had his tin of pills as you claim he was, then the only time he was separated from them after that time was when they were in the locker next to the steam room. Harry had the only other key that would open it."

"I'll prove you wrong with a little experiment," said Winnie, setting the knitting aside once more. "Are you carrying your wallet?"

"Of course."

"Are you sure?"

Thatch leaned forward in his chair and patted his hip pocket. "Yes," he affirmed.

"And do you have your car keys?"

"Yes," he said, putting his hand on the front pocket of his pants.

"How do you know?"

"Because I just checked, of course."

Winnie made an expansive gesture. "There you have it. Freddy checked for the tin just like you checked for your wallet and keys. He felt for it."

"I don't see the point. The fact was, he determined the tin was in his pocket."

"You're absolutely right, Thatch," agreed Winnie. "As a matter of fact, except for the brief time he removed the tin to take the pill after his shower, it never left his trouser pocket." Winnie reached under her knitting and put the little tin of pills in Thatcher's hand. "And that's exactly where I found it when I went over to the police station and checked his clothing this morning."

Thatch opened the tin and studied the dark little pills resting on their bed of sponge rubber. He appeared confused. "How come you found it in the pocket but Freddy and the police couldn't?"

"Because they merely reached into the pocket to get at its contents. They never realized someone had sewed the pocket shut just above the tin. When they put their hands into it, they didn't notice the pocket was slightly shorter.

"You have to remember that anyone who saw Freddy very often at the club was aware that he checked for the tin frequently and of the manner in which he did it. The murderer came up with the ingenious idea of sewing the end of the pocket shut over the tin.

"He knew that when Freddy checked for the pills, he felt for the tin, but when he desperately needed a pill to stop an attack, he reached into the pocket. He was certain Freddy wouldn't realize the tin was just a fraction of an inch below his fingertips, separated by a few stitches of thread.

"The murderer, knowing that it could be some time until Freddy's next attack and thinking the tin of pills sewn into the bottom of the pocket might go totally undetected, realized the police would simply think Freddy had lost it and there'd be no subsequent investigation.

"Even if they did find it, Freddy would have been so many places that they never would have been able to trace the stitches back to the killer."

Thatch scratched his head.

"But who sewed the tin into the bottom of the pocket? Both Dick and Harry had the opportunity."

"That's where the salted peanuts come in," said Winnie, retrieving the pillbox. "The police found them in the pocket above the stitching. I took the tin out by cutting a hole in the bottom of the pocket. There were no peanuts or traces of salt in the area where the tin was located.

"The killer might have taken the peanuts out of the pocket, if they had been there, before he sewed it, but he couldn't have removed the traces of salt.

"That means the peanuts were put into the pocket after it was stitched. And you, my dear Thatch, should know where one is likely to find salty peanuts at an exclusive club."

"The snacks at the bar, of course," replied Thatch, smiling at having contributed something.

"Precisely. And since the pocket was sewn before Freddy put the peanuts in his pocket at the bar, as indicated by their presence above the stitching, who must the murderer be?"

"Dick."

"Dick is correct," said Winnie, picking up the knitting again. "He was the only one who had access to the tin between the time when Freddy took the one pill and when he introduced the peanuts into his pocket."

Thatcher laughed and slapped his knees. "Winnie, dearest. You never cease to amaze me. When did you suspect the pocket had been sewn?"

"Almost immediately, but as soon as I saw the title of this mystery, I was certain."

"The title? You mean 'A Short Pocket Mystery'?"

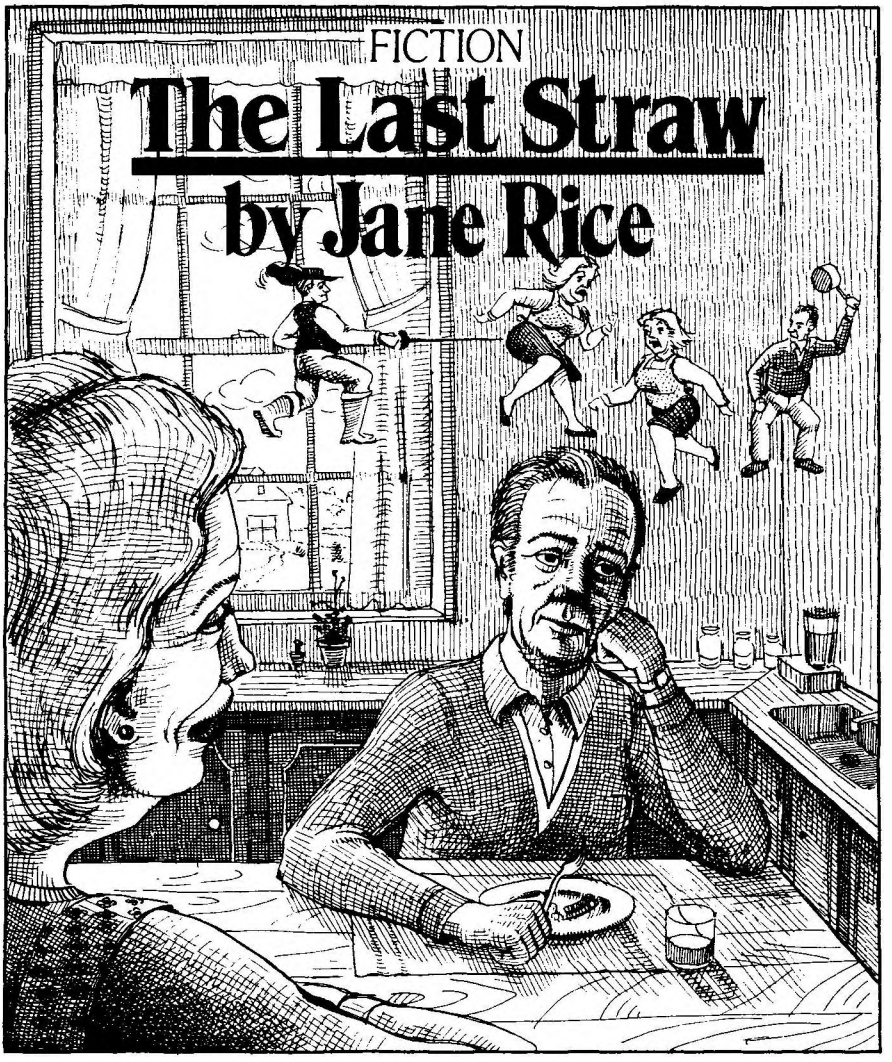
"Yes. The 'short pocket' part of it gave it away," she said.

Thatch laughed again. "And all the time I thought the reference to 'short' meant the length of the mystery. I thought we were going to run out of pages and space before we could sol . . .

FICTION

The Last Straw

by Jane Rice



The Patricks, Austin and Claudia, newcomers to Stonybrook, lived on Laurel Lane in an authentic saltbox they had named The Farmhouse because of the barn and a few old apple trees. Claudia had fallen in love with the house at first sight, and the adjacent barn had appealed (mightily) to Austin, who saw himself enclosing the hayloft as a haven and a refuge to take up the slack of early retirement. (He had quit while he was ahead, having recognized the handwriting on the wall for what it was—computerese—which might as well have been Sanskrit as far as he was concerned.)

He had tackled the loft with

Illustration by Dan Black

enthusiasm, visualizing himself esconced therein, writing a book. A swashbuckler of some sort. Thereby confounding his former confreres. He had not, however, visualized rats and wood roaches and, on rainy days, whiffy reminders of the barn's previous four-legged tenants. His waning enthusiasm ground to a halt the day his eyes met those of a blacksnake looped ropelike from a rafter directly overhead.

Nevertheless, the incomplete enclosure served admirably as a storage place for the unusable flotsam that surfaces when one moves to a different locale.

Austin (taciturn, spare of frame, a pleasant dinner partner) and Claudia (plump, pink-cheeked, sociable) were in the process of melding into Stonybrook. A fairly easy procedure if one patronized the Village Playhouse, supported the Millwheel Arts and Crafts, attended the town meetings in Town Hall, which Austin and Claudia were willing to do. Furthermore, Austin made an excellent Manhattan cocktail. (He marinated the maraschino cherries in brandy and added a dash of orange bitters to the finished product.) And Claudia's stroganoff was epicurean. (She enjoyed good food. Her culinary feats were as simply-motivated as that, and the reason why she could never stay on a diet.)

In short, the Patricks appeared to be really and truly living happily ever after.

David Abbott (glitzy third wife, four children in college, too many charge cards, a salary invariably shot full of holes while it was still warm in his hand, retirement looming on the horizon like a fog bank) experienced a sharp stab of envy as he sped past the neat gray house and red barn beyond the low stone wall margined with yellow daffodils.

Get a load of that, he thought. Not a care in the world. And here I am beating it down the road with a stale jelly doughnut and a mug of ditch water, trying to make the seven forty-seven to get to the rat race, to help pay for Austin Patrick's social security, which he needs like he needs another daffodil. And there *he* sits, in the catbird seat. Not a care in the world. Probably tucking into ham and eggs right this minute, and hash browns, and hot buttered biscuits, and a whole pot of real honest-to-God coffee.

At that point in time David Abbott would have traded places with Austin Patrick without a moment's hesitation.

And at the same instant, Austin Patrick would gladly have gone along with the switch, simply to get away from hear-

ing what he was steeling himself to hear.

It came as he was tying his shoelaces.

"Hoo hoo?" Claudia called up the stairs.

Austin winced as if he had experienced a twinge of low back pain. The first "hoo hoo" of the day had been launched. What she meant was, "Breakfast is nearly ready. How about you?"

"I'll be right down," he called back, before she could "hoo hoo" again.

At one stage in their marriage, he had attempted to circumvent the breakfast "hoo hoo" by accelerating his routine, in the manner of a Keystone Kop trapped in a revolving door. While this tactic had enabled him to appear in the kitchen before the "hoo hoo," the stratagem had backfired when Claudia began topping her double "good morning" with "early bird." ("Good morning, good morning. And how is the early bird this morning?") He had finally desisted the day he threw a rock at a robin.

He finished tying his shoelaces. Stood. Shook down a trouser leg.

Just stay the course, he cautioned himself, making a sailboat motion with one hand. Keep in mind that from here on in, Claudia's bit of extra money makes the difference between living in Stonybrook or in one of those developer's-delight areas where an auxiliary nine-hole, par three golf course is considered a boon.

He heaved a soft sigh of resignation and went downstairs to face eating breakfast (once his favorite meal) across from his wife, who was "watching her waistline." This time with a health food that resembled seaweed. Lately, he had had an odd urge to jump up, take hold of her neck, and make her bend over and actually *watch* her waistline. Which, to paraphrase several of Claudia's well-worn platitudes, would upset the applecart into the fire and fry the goose out of the cooking pan.

The kitchen (wire egg basket in the shape of a chicken, kitchen witch, red peppers dried and strung, potted herbs on windowsill) was splashed with sunshine which bounced off the hanging coppery array of pots and pans. Austin's alter ego let their burnished bottoms have it with the spatula and the bread knife, like a drummer in a circus before an announcement by the ringmaster.

"Good morning, good morning," Claudia greeted him, brightly, her slight overbite glistening in the sunlight. He braced himself for the "we."

Mentally seized two pot lids and whanged them together, right on beat, as she added, "And how are *we* this morning?"

"Staying the course," he responded equably, with a vague movement of one hand, as she offered him a cheek and a glass of orange juice. He bestowed the expected kiss on the proffered target. Accepted the orange juice. Drifted into the breakfast nook. Sat down at the table. Leafed through the newspaper, scanning the items that claimed his attention. (STRANGLER STRIKES AGAIN. FAULTY BRAKES BLAMED IN FATAL CRASH. SNIPER KILLS RIDGEWAY WOMAN.) Sipped his orange juice and awaited the inevitable and unfortunate expression that roused memories, best forgotten, of an ill-timed cruise they had taken the year before.

"Breakfast coming up!" Claudia announced.

Enter Claudia, he stage directed. *Claudia is carrying two plates. On one is a bowl of guck and what appears to be a slice of plywood. On the other plate French toast is flanked by what Claudia will refer to as "little pig sausages," thus leaving the impression that his breakfast had been partially provided by a piglet dragged, pink and squealing, straight from the farrowing to the butcher's block.*

"The little pig sausages are yours," Claudia told him, as if to forestall him from snatching her bowl away from her and gobbling down the greasy contents, warding her off with an elbow.

"The usual for me," she said, in the tone of a martyr cheerfully accepting the rack as a necessary means to obtain the celestial end. She deposited their plates at their respective places. Went back to the kitchen for the coffeepot. Returned. Filled their cups. Set the pot on the trivet. Sat down in her chair, with an audible plop.

"David Abbott went whizzing by a couple of minutes ago and almost ran over their own cat," she said. "Syrup?" She gave the pitcher a nudge in his direction.

She thought to her soul she would die, and her heart was in her mouth. He helped himself to syrup. Said, "Perhaps it was another cat. They abound."

"It was their cat," Claudia said, watching the syrup spill over the sides of his toast. "Muffin."

"Not with this, thank you."

"Their cat is named Muffin."

"Um . . . yes. Muffin. Nice cat."

"She's an awful cat. She's the one that uses our redwood tub for a litter box. But, even so, a cat is a cat is a cat. Like a rose. You know."

Austin nodded that he knew about the rose. Set the pitcher down.

Claudia said, "My heart was in my mouth. I thought to my soul I would die." She slipped her napkin from its ring and spread it in her lap. "You know, I don't believe the Abbotts are hitting it off too well. He drives like a bat out of H-E-double Q."

Austin sampled his toast. The first non sequitur of the day had landed. He chewed ruminatively, counting to ten.

"She reminds me of somebody," Claudia went on, "but I can't put my finger on who. Sugar? Cream?"

"After you."

"Um-um. I've simply *got* to watch my waistline."

Austin used the cream and sugar. Stirred his coffee. (Another way of counting.) Averted his gaze as Claudia lifted a spoonful of glop from her bowl.

"Nor," Claudia continued, holding the spoon poised, "would I be the least surprised if they weren't living beyond their means. They have wire coat hangers. And if you ask me, that's only the tip of the iceberg."

She ate what was on the spoon.

The ship shuddered to a stop. A voice began repeating through a bullhorn, "Now hear this. . . . now hear this. . . ."

Someone yelled, "Starboard bow!"

And, sure enough, there they were . . . cleaving the mist. A gigantic tangle of wire coat hangers!

A frantic crewman pressed him into service to help lower the lifeboats. At the rail he peeled off his life jacket and gave it to Rita Abbott. Tightened the straps for her.

"Your ears are as red as beets. Do you feel all right?"

Austin blinked. Cleared his throat. Cleared it again. Seized at inspiration. Gave her the little sailboat motion. Said, "Red ears at night, sailors take fright. Red ears by day, anchors aweigh." He began to eat steadily, his eyes on his plate.

"I don't believe you've been listening to a word I said," Claudia declared, in a tone of wifely tolerance. "Sometimes you make me wonder. You really do. You're about to get your sleeve in your syrup. Oh, that reminds me. St. Andrew's is planning a white elephant sale. I gather it's an event, with a capital E. I think we should participate, don't you?"

Austin stopped chewing. Contemplated Claudia. Inquired, "Out of simple curiosity, why would getting my sleeve in the syrup remind you of St. Andrew's having a white elephant sale?"

"I don't know. It just did. I was thinking, you know, about those things we stored in the barn loft. There's the hammered gong. The Mexican pottery. That bas-relief Three Muses umbrella stand. The . . . "

"Not the umbrella stand," Austin interrupted, instantly alert.

"Why forever not?"

"I keep my Japanese swords in it." In his mind's eye he peered down through the swords at the glassy gleam of his hideout bottle of bourbon at the bottom of the umbrella stand.

"Why not give the swords? They're of no earthly use, and all donations are tax deductible."

"Because I want to keep them."

"What on earth for?"

Austin rested his forearms on the edge of the table. Mastered an itch to let his knife and fork drip syrup on the pink tablecloth instead of into his plate. Said, "Do I have to have a reason?"

"Well, surely you must have a reason."

Austin's other self arose. Ran around the table in a Groucho Marx crouch, flicking cigar ashes and giving her the eyebrows. Sat down. Leaned forward. Leered.

"I have a sword fetish."

"That isn't funny, dear, and you know it. If you want to keep the things, keep them." She spooned in another mouthful.

What she meant was, he was being dog in the manger. He couldn't have cared less.

She patted her mouth with her napkin. Missed one corner. Said, "I'll find you another container. I thought I'd go over to the barn right after breakfast. Decide what's what. Bring down the umbrella stand, and the . . . "

"I'll go," Austin said, quickly. "Those loft steps are steep."

"Thank you, dear, but I want to look around myself."

His left eyelid began to twitch. "It's buggy up there. Cobwebs. Remember the snake? And the bat? I'll make a list. You can check what you want brought down." He gave her an authoritative nod that said "that's that," and resumed eating, as a means of concluding the conversation.

"We'll both go. I don't recall your ever mentioning a bat, but I'll tie a scarf around my hair and take a broom, just in case. You know, unless I miss my guess, Sarah Patterson is a natural for that umbrella stand. She puts marshmallows in her fruit salad. Oh, that reminds me. Don't let me forget to look for owl droppings. Sarah's bird club has gotten into owls. How

are the little pig sausages?"

"Stop sniveling, woman," the judge told Claudia. "It's your own yikkity-yakkity fault."

He gave Austin a look of sympathetic understanding. "Divorce granted," he intoned, terminating the proceedings with a thump of his gavel, clearly wishing he could bring this symbol of authority down forcibly on Claudia's bowed head.

A chastened Claudia murmured, "Oh, Austin. . . ." She extended a supplicating hand.

Her lawyer stepped forward and wrapped the hand around the car keys, the deed to the property, the bank book, the stock certificates, the life insurance policies.

"Wake up," Claudia said, with an indulgent smile. "Remember me? Claudia? Honestly, dear, sometimes you slay me. You really do. How are the little pig sausages?"

He held the revolver at his side. Raised it. Took careful aim. Fired. A small purple and white funeral flag popped out and hung from the end of the barrel.

"Fine," he said. "Very good. Excellent."

Deciding to have cream and sugar in her coffee after all, Claudia tasted the result, her little finger crooked in a manner that suggested high tea at an English country house. She set the cup—lightly, meticulously—on the saucer. Picked up her slice of ersatz plywood and crunched into it.

Like a gopher, he thought. And as she automatically flicked her napkin across her bosom to brush away the fallout, he wondered how he had ever imagined her overbite was cute, or her cleavage exciting.

"I know what will fill the bill," she said.

"Pardon?"

"The very thing!"

"Claudia, what are you talking about?"

"The milk can."

"The milk can?"

"Now, don't go woolgathering, dear. The painted milk can by the fireplace. Milk cans are old hat, and frankly, I always did think they were overrated. The milk can is just the ticket for those swords of yours. We'll take it with us when we go up to the barn." She selected the Food and Cooking section of the newspaper and retired behind it.

Austin found himself staring at an advertisement, on the back page of Food and Cooking, depicting a wheelbarrow filled with groceries above the streamer: "Why Get Less And Pay More When You Can Get More And Pay Less At Getty's Market!"

Once again he made a

crouching circuit of the table. Slid in beside himself. Hunkered down. Whispered, conspiratorially, into his own ear . . . I've got it! You can't carry the milk can, see? The old sacroiliac is acting up. So, you go to the barn to fetch the wheelbarrow. You remove the bottle from the umbrella stand and stash it elsewhere.

Claudia lowered Food and Cooking. "We'd better use the wheelbarrow to trundle the milk can up to the barn. You know how your back can go out."

He found his voice. "Good idea. I'll mosey on up and get it." He reached for his napkin ring.

Claudia gave him a look. Said, "Heavens to Betsy, Austin, finish your breakfast. You're jumpy as a cat. Henry didn't put the yard things away yesterday when he got through, because he didn't get through. The wheelbarrow is right outside where he left it."

You can fake some kind of seizure in the loft, Austin told himself, gripping the wheelbarrow handles and preparing to shove off. Croak for water. Paramedics. Your sister Phyllis, in Idaho. The last rites. Anything.

"Showgirls," Claudia said.

Austin gave her a slow, slantwise glance. In her bib apron with a scarf tied under her chin and a broom in her hand, she resembled an advertisement for scouring powder that could also be used as putty.

"That's who. Rita Abbott reminds me of," Claudia explained. "The ones who mince about in those elaborate . . . "

The gargly jabber of the kitchen phone cut into her discourse.

To Austin's ears, the sound was a last minute reprieve straight from the governor. A ringing telephone was, to Claudia, what the cry of *gold!* had been to the Klondikers.

"Who could that be this early?" Claudia said. "Probably somebody selling cemetery lots. I've a notion not to answer it."

Delicately, with the expertise of a skilled fly fisherman casting in a trout stream, Austin laid his reply where it was most likely to accomplish his purpose. "Or someone from St. Andrew's getting up a white elephant committee."

The suggestion hovered, gauzy-winged, for her inspection.

She took the lure. "I suppose I should . . . "

He set the hook. "Then you'd better get moving before they hang up." Gave her enough line. "I'll amble on. Take your time. We've got all day."

Ta da! he thought, guiding

the wheelbarrow towards the barn. He had a good head start. All he had to do now was transfer the contents of the umbrella stand into the milk can. Ta, da da da, ta *da!*

The wheelbarrow struck a half-buried stone and, like a tipsy acquaintance being escorted home, lurched sideways and was righted with difficulty. One eye caught a gnat. A sock began to walk itself down into the shoe. A drop formed on the end of his nose, fell, and was replaced, the procedure repeating itself with steady regularity.

He stubbed a toe, the one with the ingrown toenail. Stumbled. Fought the wheelbarrow back onto the uneven path. Quickened his pace to regain lost momentum. A slight downgrade accelerated his speed, and he yawed into the dim interior of the barn and rammed the barrow into a roll of chicken wire before he was aware of the presence of chicken wire. Not expecting chicken wire to be there. Nor anywhere else on the premises.

Jarred and shaken, he discovered he'd bitten his tongue and had what felt like a black hole in the pit of his stomach where he had been gored by a wheelbarrow handle.

The faint but unmistakable *thwack* of the kitchen screen door told him Claudia was coming.

Hurrying now, he struggled the milk can out of the wheelbarrow. Lugged his burden to the steps. Humped it up into the loft. Positioned it beside the umbrella stand.

His downward gaze sharpened. Focused. For the second time he was confronted by chicken wire. An inextricable snarl of chicken wire, which he recognized as what must have been the underpinnings for Claudia's spiky winter arrangements of dried whatever the hell the stuff was. The goddam milk can was useless. The swords weren't going to go down into the godforsaken thing. Without the swords the bottle would be a sitting duck.

His eyes, sweeping over the collection of has-beens around him, fruitlessly seeking an object suitable for his needs, leapt to the dusty window. *The duck pond.* Duckless, green and murky, and with a soft, muddy bottom that would bury his secret swiftly and efficiently.

He overturned the umbrella stand. Grabbed the bottle. Scrambled to the window.

The window was stuck.

Yanking availed nothing.

Could he lob the bottle from the edge of the loft where his ill-fated carpentry had ended, into an opposite stall below?

Too risky. He could miss. The bottle would break, with aromatic consequences.

Quelling a desire to wrench off the bottle cap and let the remaining two inches of bourbon flow down his throat, he wheeled about and dashed to the clutter of swords. Snatched one. Sprang to the window. Pried desperately around the sash, dislodging spiders and bug hulls, and a family cluster of daddy longlegs, several of whose members promptly used him as a thoroughfare, seemingly hastening to a rendezvous at a choice spot on his anatomy known to themselves alone.

The frame gave. He jettisoned the sword. Began to jig the window open.

"Hoo hoo," Claudia called, entering the barn.

A last-ditch spurt of adrenaline enabled him to send the window rattling and crashing upwards. In one smooth motion he reached down, gripped the neck of the bottle, hauled back, and hurled his nemesis away, unerringly bound for the pond.

A zigzag of lightning struck his lower vertebrae and caromed down one leg. He grimaced. Emitted an involuntary grunt. His eyelids squeezed themselves shut. He fumbled in a hip pocket for a handkerchief to mop his suddenly clammy brow.

"Hoo hoo?" Claudia repeated, questioningly, plainly baffled by the racket that had emanated from above. And, advancing, "Austin? *Austin?"*

The spasm passed. He reopened his eyes.

In the pond the bottle floated at a jaunty angle, tilting to and fro.

Handkerchief in hand, he stationed a forearm against the window frame. Rested his forehead against the arm. Let the sweat drip.

Enter Claudia, he directed. *Expecting an explanation.* He flicked off a daddy longlegs that resurfaced. Stepped on it. Wearily, he straightened. Turned. Waited, swabbing his face and neck. Somewhere along the way he had pulled a shoulder muscle. The stubbed toe was sending out distress signals, in Day-Glo. He had acquired a splinter in his thumb. His solar plexus was pleading for the *coup de grâce.*

"Didn't you hear me?" Claudia asked, winded, stepping into the loft with the help of her broom. Catching her breath, she took him in from head to foot. Said, "Whatever on earth? You're a sight!" She skirted the jumble of swords, her curiosity mounting. Her survey encompassed the open window. Veered to the sword beneath.

"There *was* an owl!" She

pressed a fan of fingers against her mouth. "Austin, you didn't . . . "

He caught the lifeline. Said, "He flew the coop when I got the window pried open. Big fellow. Raised quite a ruckus."

He hoisted himself up the line to safety. "Except for what appears to be a derelict liquor bottle in the pond, the status has returned to quo." By implication the bottle had been there for weeks. Months. He was home free.

He moved aside. Let her look.

"There *is* a bottle in the pond," Claudia said. She parked her broom. Leaned out the window, as though expecting to see the trespasser reeling off, hiccuping, with their owl in a sack thrown over a shoulder.

Her backside loomed.

"Tilt 'er up and out she goes," the man with the little brown jug paraphrased. He gave Austin an owlish wink. One friend to another.

The newspaper caption read: STONYBROOK RESIDENT SUFFERS FATAL FALL FROM BARN LOFT.

He held out his hand for the stock certificates . . . the life insurance . . . the full-color brochure of a tropical island featuring a blue lagoon and a girl with a red flower behind her ear. The girl offered him her flower. Said . . .

"I could just spit!" Claudia withdrew from her vantage point. "If there's anything we don't want to have to get, it's a dog. I'm tempted to notify the police."

"About what? Some bygone local soak giving his empty the pitch while taking a shortcut?" He pulled up his socks. Examined his splinter.

"He isn't all that bygone," Claudia said. "The bottle wasn't there yesterday when I was showing Henry where to stake the chicken wire for a compost heap. Which he didn't do. He's a Gemini. What we need is a Scorpio. Born in the year of the ox. He is also a Seventh Day Adventist. They don't drink. That lets *him* out. I *am* tempted to notify the police. I don't care if Sarah Patterson *is* known all over Stonybrook as Scary Sairy because she calls them about the least little fiddle-faddle. All anybody has to do is read the papers. We think this, that, and the other won't happen to us, but that's what the people these awful things happen to *used* to think. Oh! I've decided we should keep the umbrella stand after all. They may come full circle, like Tiffany lamps. Do you suppose Billy Carmichael could be responsible for that bottle in the pond? That would explain Polly Carmichael's telephone call just now. I'll bet dimes to

nickels Billy hasn't been home all night and Polly, poor thing, is making discreet phone calls here, there, and yon, without letting on. Billy *does* cut across through here sometimes. I'd hate to . . . I mean, well, Billy is Billy. Why compound the situation by making waves. Oh! The upstairs commode still has to be jiggled. If you're going into town later on today, why don't you pick up a new bulb."

What she meant was FIX IT. Austin discovered he was holding his handkerchief like a garrotte. Consumed with a hideous fear that he might make a gobbling noise, such as the one he'd made when he'd met the blacksnake eye to eye, he stuffed the handkerchief in his hip pocket. Buttoned the button. Smoothed the twitching of his eyelid with a fingertip. Pretended interest in a defunct cuckoo clock. The cuckoo came away in his hand, like a small atrocity.

Claudia said, "Well, we'll have Henry fish the bottle out of the pond, for future reference. And keep our eyes peeled."

Her initial concern having abated, she picked up the sword he had used for a tool. Gingerly tested the point. Said, "Goodness. We'd better think about taking these things with us. To be on the safe side. In case some nut takes it into his head to do his boozing up here."

She moved to a willow basket full of books, handing him the sword in passing, her meaning plain. (I've said all I'm going to say. But I want your swords out of here.) She chose a book. Held it at arm's length to read the title. Said, "*Bayou Cookery.* Mercy." Returned the book to the basket. Investigated a box labeled MISC. GAMES. Said, "I can't understand why we kept any of these."

She probed into a nearby carton. Exhumed a piece of stemware. Said, "You know, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that *is* Billy Carmichael's bottle in the pond. Polly no more wanted my carrot cake recipe than the man in the moon. That was a lot of horsefeathers."

She stopped speaking. Glanced about, slowly. The parfait glass slipped from her grasp. Fell back into the carton. Broke.

"How stupid of me," she said, her jollity gone. "How incredibly *stupid.*" Repeating *stupid-stupidstupid,* she crossed to the window, where she retrieved her broom as if needing support.

"There aren't any ripples on the water," she said, staring woodenly at the pond. "How do you account for the fact that, only moments ago, there were ripples galore. There aren't any owl feathers up here anywhere,

either. Not a single solitary feather. How odd. Especially after that 'ruckus.' "

She switched around to face him, her nostrils pinched, her complexion mottled. "There wasn't any owl, was there, Austin? That is *your* bottle in the pond, isn't it? Well, believe me, Austin Patrick, if you think, for one minute, that I am going to put up with any Billy Carmichael brand of nonsense, you have another think coming. For your information I haven't the remotest intention of . . . "

Austin tuned her out. They would patch up the pieces. Go on. Present a unified front to all and sundry. Stay the blasted course. But from here on in, after a party somewhere, she would say, "I'll drive." She would snoop. Become a sniffer. A taster.

He limped to the edge of the loft. Dropped the cuckoo at his feet. Positioned himself. Ignoring his aches and pains and using the sword for a golf club, he swung.

The cuckoo described an arc. Disappeared into a stall in the barn below.

Chances were he could've lobbed in the bottle safely, he thought. He'd wonder for the rest of his life. He poked a large, black, dead beetle into place. Essayed a second swing.

The lightning hit, full force.

"Austin Sydney Patrick, you turn around and LISTEN TO ME!" Claudia shrilled.

He couldn't have turned around if he'd wanted to. This is how the camel feels, just before his knees begin to buckle, he thought, gritting his teeth. Which was Austin Patrick's last coherent thought.

Claudia, putting every ounce of her strength behind a roundhouse swing, swatted him squarely across the seat of his pants with the flat of her broom and catapulted him out of the loft.

The last thing that Austin Patrick saw was a daddy longlegs, high-stepping up the blade towards the hilt of the sword, seemingly attempting escape from what was about to occur.

Claudia stood at the edge of the loft, stunned. Austin's rag doll sprawl, the tilt of the sword, and the dark, rapidly spreading stain, told the story without further investigation. Austin was dead.

Approximately ten seconds elapsed before she realized she wasn't sorry.

Twenty-seven years of Austin had been an awful lot of Austin. And, of late, his mannerisms and idiosyncrasies and habits, plus his inability to fix anything so that it *stayed* fixed,

had nearly driven her cuckoo.

His mooselike chewing, the methodical way he stirred his coffee and drummed his fingers and pulled at his nose and examined his nails, and left the soap in a puddle, and *always* finessed a queen and covered an honor, and laughed haw haw haw, and never refolded a newspaper . . .

A lot he'd cared that she could have been cast in the role of a "poor thing." A poor thing, wifewise, was an object of pity. Low on the totem pole. Polly Carmichael was a prime example. Had the circumstances been reversed, Billy would have been classified as a saint on earth with a heart of gold and, more than likely, would have capitalized on his misfortune, and been excused for his peccadilloes, while Polly would *still* have been classified as a "poor thing."

It wasn't fair. Any more than it was fair that she be blamed for what had befallen Austin. This whole fiasco was his fault. If he had only *listened*. She had merely wanted to get his attention. She had acted almost without volition. That cuckoo, like an unwitting bit of mockery, had been the last straw. She certainly hadn't planned to . . .

But, there he was. What to do?

"Chinese checkers," Claudia said, aloud.

Rita Abbott greeted her husband home with a pillowy kiss and a glass of pink champagne. Before he could inquire (stiffly, remembering the stale jelly doughnut) *why* pink champagne, she said, "Austin Patrick is dead."

"Holy cow!" he exclaimed, his astonishment overriding the doughnut. "What happened?" He sat down. Set his champagne glass on the coffee table. Pink champagne was no substitute for an icy cold, dry martini.

"According to the evening blat, under the heading STONYBROOK RESIDENT SUFFERS FATAL FALL FROM BARN LOFT, he died of an abdominal wound suffered in the fatal fall."

"Holy cow."

"That's only part of the story." Rita curled herself into a corner of the sofa. Took a sip of her champagne. "He was up in the loft this morning getting stuff together for the St. Andrew's hoopla. Evidently he was sorting through a collection of swords, though why anyone would save *swords* is beyond me. Anyhow, presumably he stepped on some marbles that had spilled out of a Chinese checkers game, lost his balance, fell over an umbrella

stand, and looped-the-loop down into the barn, with a sword in his hand. The blade went straight in. Their yard man found him when he went up to the barn looking for a wheelbarrow. He'd been dead about an hour."

"Holy cow."

"Claudia is being brave, as the saying goes." She paused. Added, enigmatically, "In more ways than one."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, at first, there was talk of possible foul play, after somebody fished a liquor bottle out of the pond. Rumor was rife that they, whoever 'they' are, were holding a suspect for questioning in Somers Point. But when word spread, Sarah Patterson reluctantly came forward. Seems she was out birding in the overgrown woodlot the Carmichaels jestingly term their 'east forty,' thinking, wrongly, that this is droll.

"Sarah observed a shape battering itself against the Patricks' closed barn loft window. For some obscure reason she believed she was seeing an owl, although definite identification was impossible because of the sun glare on the window, which was none too clean in the first place. Also, for some reason, she was thrilled to the marrow with this 'sighting' and kept her binoculars trained on the supposed owl as she began maneuvering through the underbrush, bird watcher fashion, blending in with the flora at the speed of a snail.

"To her amazement the window suddenly shot up and out sailed a bottle. She heard the splash when it plummeted into the pond. At which juncture she stepped in a hole, and went down in a heap. The next thing she saw, when she sat up and began pulling herself together, was Claudia leaning out of the window, obviously checking to see if everything was copacetic.

"Rather than embarrass them both, Sarah stayed low until Claudia drew back into the loft. Whereupon, Sarah scurried off in the opposite direction and went home and, I suspect, thought long green thoughts.

"Soooo . . . due to Sarah's revelations, and the implication that the said suspect was being interrogated by a team of karate experts, Claudia tearfully admitted 'twas she who had thrown the incriminating bottle into the pond, for fear Austin would 'find out' when he went up to the barn later on and started delving."

She held out her glass, which she had emptied during her recital.

David Abbott, performing the necessary functions, said musingly, "Why out the window

when she had a whole *barn?* It doesn't make sense." To his surprise he saw that he, too, needed a refill.

"Ask her. Don't ask me. My hunch is that while the poor thing was a wifely wife—as you no doubt have observed, wistfully—she lacks smarts. Otherwise, she'd have caught on to Noreen."

"Hmm?" He resumed his seat. Decided that pink champagne had certain merits.

"Noreen. The manicurist with the I-am-Tondelayo approach at Scott's Barber Shop. She is why Austin had the best dressed fingernails in town."

"Austin *Patrick?* Holy cow!"

"To change the subject, guess who's taking us to Le Chanticler for dinner."

"Us? Who?"

"You. I've made reservations. To clue you in, we're celebrating my birthday. That's why the pink champagne."

"Oh God," David groaned. "Here we go again."

"Not to worry," Rita said. She extended a languid arm. Jingled the bangles at her wrist. "I charged them to you."

"Hold on," David said. He sat upright. Leveled a forefinger at her. "Just a minute. Just a doggone minute. Your birthday is the seventeenth of *October."*

"The *eighteenth* of October. But, what's the difference? We're not celebrating the date. We're celebrating the *event.* And if you say holy cow once more I will crown you king of the herd. With the ice bucket."

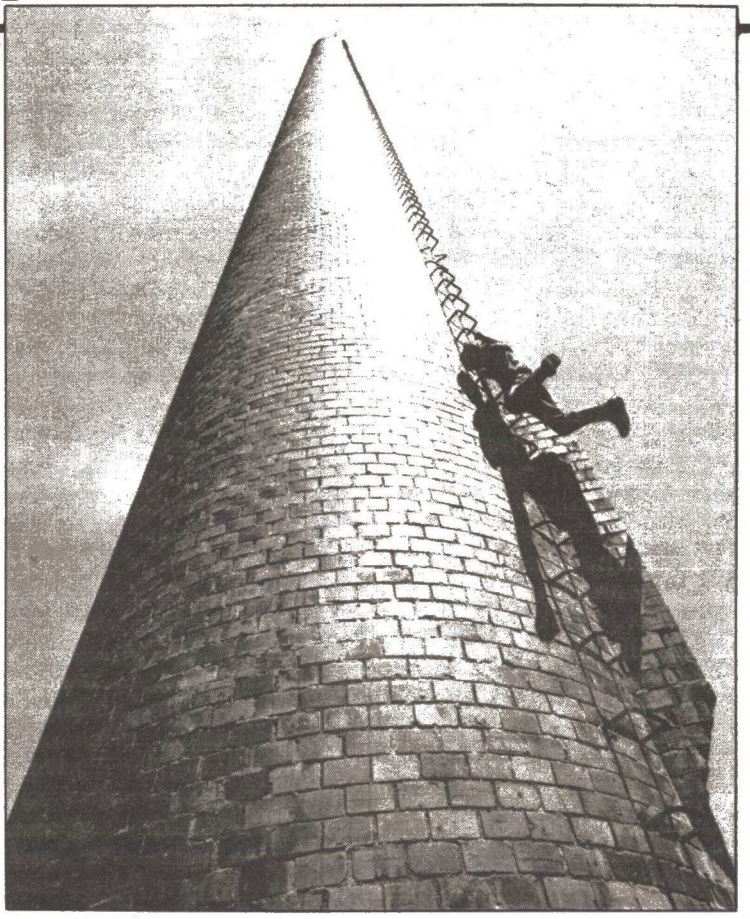
David Abbott began to laugh. "Mrs. Abbott," he said, shaking his head, "you're something else."

"You're just saying that because it's true."

"That's right." He raised his glass. "Love ya."

"Now, *there's* an idea," Rita said, lifting her own glass in response. "Why don't you call Le Chanticler . . . and cancel."

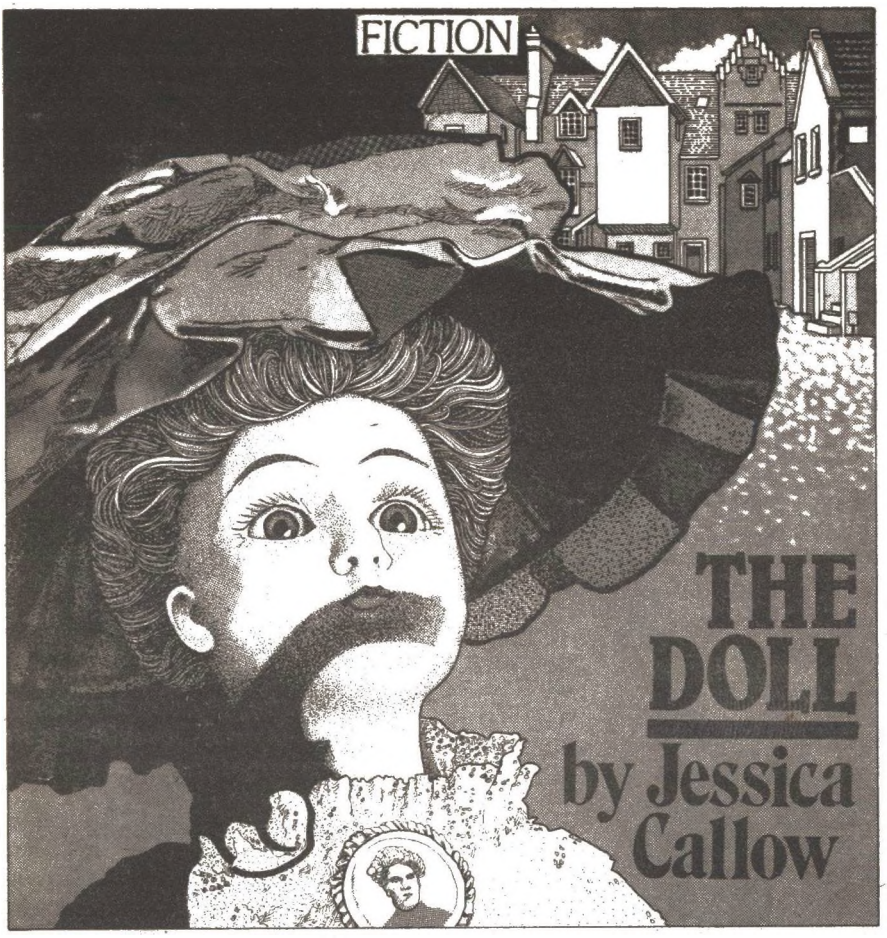
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Treas

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

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



Hard on the heels of World War II, munitions factories in England were swiftly converted to civilian use, working overtime. Others hastened to adapt to peacetime requirements the innovations designed for use in war. With those changes came many others. The northern textile-mill city of Doverly, turning from silk to the new synthetics, operated day and night, absorbing the local supply of women workers enticed by high wages and the prospect of evenings and weekends free. At the same time, job candidates for household work dwindled to a trickle, and servants' registry offices throughout England closed their doors for all time.

At the sprawling Edgerly mansion in its lush meadowlands to

Illustration by Kurt Wallace

the south of Doverly, Lord Edgerly and Lady Maude lived now in one wing with but a skeleton staff. But Edgerly's decline was aggravated more by the stiffnecked attitude of his lordship—who disdained to convert his silk mills to ones that made products of nylon—than by the lack of servants. The sale of his freeheld properties, for a while, trimmed the debts that piled up, high as the weeds that began to overtake the once well-tended grounds, and in the meantime, Lord Edgerly refused to worry. He never doubted that his handsome son Rupert would pull things together eventually, through a rich marriage. Hadn't negotiations between families always proved successful? Not unhappy that the burden rested now on someone other than himself, his lordship continued dispensing with his negotiable treasures as his bills required.

While the fortunes of Edgerly diminished, the riches of its rivals, Jonas Smith and Hiram Bell, rose to spectacular peaks. The two already prosperous Doverly mill owners not only bought the Edgerly properties that came on the market but swiftly adjusted to new methods and materials. Further, they had long ago adopted the same principle approved by his lordship—the joining of houses in marriage—and had become wealthy indeed; from the amalgamation of their families came the granddaughter known in Doverly as Veronica Bell-Smith, she some years younger than Rupert Edgerly and owner of the impressive house on the hill to the north of the city. Veronica was easily one of the richest women in England. Endowed with good business sense, and smart enough to realize that change required tripling former salaries, she assured the good management of both her mills and her capable domestic staff, even though she herself spent many months of each year abroad at the archaeological diggings that were her particular interest.

In yet another Doverly household overtaken by change, Judge Emory Thurston eyed his burnt toast with distaste. Fifty now, immaculate in a suit of light grey and as handsome still as the day he was appointed—at thirty-five—Doverly's youngest judge ever, Emory had remained unaware of shortages of any kind until the death of his wife Mildred, after a long illness. With Mildred's passing, everything in his household had fallen apart. Three housekeepers later, every meal was a disaster, a grey film of dust was settling on the carpets, his bed was haphazardly made, and perhaps worst of all, his telephone messages were either not reported or

incorrectly relayed. He poked at a leathery egg that slithered about in undrained bacon grease. Something had to be done, and at once, but remedies totally escaped him. Mildred would have handled things better; never in their twenty-five years of marriage had she permitted a whisper of domestic turmoil to disturb him.

Immediately following Mildred's demise, the old housekeeper, Maria, had retired. Her niece and her granddaughter, trained by Mildred, had departed also, to work in the mill.

"I'm that sorry to leave you, sir," Maria had said. "I never would have as long as Miss Mildred was sick. But now, sir, well, I'm seventy-five."

He'd kissed the work-worn face and said, "Maria, if anyone deserves a rest, you do." He'd assumed it was but a matter of calling the registry, that they'd send him someone just like Maria, but younger, of course. That had not been the case.

His sigh was profound, his dark blue eyes roamed restlessly over the room. "Should sell this house. Take a flat? And what then? Same thing all over again. Rooms at the White Stag? No garden to putter in of an evening. No place to sit on summer nights and smoke a pipe." He thought of the lawn at the rear of the house, the seat beneath the sycamore tree where he and Mildred had frequently lingered. But he couldn't sit there alone, not now.

He opened the morning paper and for a few minutes read the columns of real estate offers, to find the prices being asked in his area. Presently, looking among "Flats To Let," his eyes came to rest on one particular advertisement: "Will board professional gentleman. Two rooms, own private sitting room. Spacious grounds. Oak Park area. Box 203."

Stirred by sudden excitement, he re-read it. "By George!" he said to himself. "Louisa Counsel. Who else? Has to be Louisa, and that lovely house overlooking Oak Park. The times Millie and I had dinners there, that Louisa cooked!" Louisa's situation was not unlike the judge's own, now that Sheldon Counsel, her father, had died. Heading for his study, the judge reached for his telephone.

The outcome was that Judge Emory Thurston dined that night with Louisa in the house at 100 Oak Park Drive. And spring saw the judge settled snugly, far more than a boarder, occupant of "two rooms, own private sitting room." The strong aroma of his meerschaum pipe proclaimed his presence throughout the house, to Louisa's delight. Emory's work with the dilapidated rose arbor facing the treed area of Oak Park corner resulted in the restoration

of trellises which, by the time June arrived, had a glory of roses, Emory enjoying that delightful retreat at the end of each busy day. With the scent of roses, the gentle twitter of birds readying for bed, the chatter of squirrels in the oak grove on the opposite side of the street, it was certainly not a setting for murder.

Louisa's father had died a poor man, his crippling arthritic condition having incapacitated him for the last fifteen years of his life, eroding his meager fortune. The house, heavily mortgaged, was the only material asset he left his spinster daughter. To sell it, Louisa knew, would tear her apart. For forty-five years she had poured her love into it. Its handsome walnut paneling and polished furniture, enhanced by the mellow glow of fading Persian rugs, were her heritage from a comfortable past. Faced with the burden of unpaid taxes, as well as the mortgage, she had struggled with the worry of what to do until her plan of sharing with a boarder had taken shape. In her usual positive manner she had shoveled coal into the huge kitchen range and closed the top to draw the blaze under the oven for the cooking of the evening meal.

"Good thing I like to cook, Nellie." She turned to watch Nellie Ryan, her daily maid—Fridays only now—preparing to leave. "With what I've got planned, good meals will be important. Of course, if I do take a boarder, the whole town's going to know, but for now, keep it under your hat."

"Under this hat is where it's at," Nellie answered, cramming the home-knit toque on her faded red curls. "Yes, ma'am, if cooking's to do it we've got it made." Jauntily she gave a roguish pantomime of pirouetting while shaking hands with herself. Her ripple of laughter, the merry twinkle in her bright blue eyes, gave no hint of the weariness in her bones.

From the larder, Louisa brought a newspaper-wrapped parcel. "Save you cooking for the boys tonight. Now hurry, Nellie, or you'll miss your bus."

"Oh, I do thank you, Miz Counsel." Nellie picked up the parcel and stepped smartly after Louisa's tall figure towards the front door. "I've fingers crossed for both of us, since your plan means extra days for me. Fridays here and Thursdays for Marietta isn't enough for me to do as I should for my Derek and Dan. I'm lucky, of course, to have the wash from the White Stag."

Nellie's recent availability to other householders—due to Louisa's need to cut down—had demonstrated their reluctance to hire her. There was that husband, Lennie Ryan, whose application for parole

might materialize by the end of another year. And it brought one all too close to the well-remembered brutal murder of Lord Edgerly's gamekeeper, Edwin Lawson, as well as the murder of Arnie Shum, Ryan's poaching companion and relative by marriage. There were those threats Lennie had made against Judge Emory Thurston, who had sentenced him, and the similar threats against Iris Shum, Arnie's daughter, eyewitness to the shooting of her father. One didn't object to Nellie, of course; she had a refinement and loyalty above the usual char. But that dreadful man!

A newsman on the prowl for a human interest story recognized Nellie Ryan as she stepped down from the bus in front of St. Timothy's church that night.

"Mrs. Ryan." The young man raised his hat. "May I ask you a question or two? I'm John Moss. We've met, you know."

"Yes, I know. But you're wasting your time," Nellie snapped, moving on.

"I'll go away if you insist." John Moss fell into step. "But I'd like to talk, just for a minute or two."

"Suit yourself, but I've nothing to say that I haven't said already, hundreds of times."

"This talk of Lennie's being considered for parole. If he should be released, does it worry you? I mean regarding the repeated threats against Judge Thurston and Iris Shum?"

"In or out of jail, Lennie has nothing to do with me. As far as the judge is concerned, or Iris, wherever she is, neither needs worry. Lennie's talk was but to impress the fellows in jail. No threats will anyone be hearing if he's trying for parole. Besides, Lennie hasn't the waft in him to kill; bone-lazy, crafty schemer he is, but murderer, never. Those guns he had were just to show off."

"Then who did kill Ed Lawson and Arnie Shum? Lennie admitted to having both the shotgun and the revolver when he and Arnie went poaching that night at Edgerly. No mystery that the revolver was missing, the police said; they were confident that after shooting Arnie—they did have a whopping quarrel, you know—Lennie got rid of it before getting himself plastered. Certainly Arnie didn't hide it."

"I've thought all along that if the revolver that killed Arnie could have been found, Arnie's own fingerprints would have been on it. Iris, when they found her, had but her doll."

"Meaning what?"

"That Arnie shot himself, that's what."

"You're saying that Arnie's daughter Iris deliberately lied?"

"I'm not saying any such thing. I just happen to know that after my sister Aggie died—Arnie's wife she was, as you know—Arnie didn't give a hoot whether he lived or died. Had Aggie lived, Arnie never would have ended up on Canal Street. Never was Arnie a bad man. Oh, never. But if by some mistake he shot Lawson, that's one more reason he'd have finished himself off. He had come to a terrible state of mind."

"But that doesn't explain the missing revolver. Arnie dead, Iris fled with nothing but her doll. . . . Lennie, well, he might have had the wits to hide it. In that case he'll know, if and when he gets out, where to find it. Where is Iris, Mrs. Ryan? Bit of a mystery the way she disappeared, wasn't it? Wouldn't you be the one to know?"

"No call for Iris to tell me her comings and goings, grown woman as she is now." Nellie quickened her step, looking straight ahead.

"These years, Mrs. Ryan, they've been hard ones for you, raising your two boys alone. What effect has all this had on them?"

"These years with my two sons are the best I've known. As for them, they know, better than most, the importance of doing what's right. Let me tell you," Nellie stopped suddenly, confronting the young man, "I've seen to it that the family at 56 St. Timothy Street is an honorable and happy one. Now, John Moss, I've nothing more to say except good day to you." And Nellie walked swiftly away.

Before the war, when a lifetime was needed to build even meager savings, how such a one as Arnie Shum had been able to buy a cottage on St. Timothy Street—where Nellie and her boys now lived—was a mystery to his acquaintances. Arnie, gardener at Edgerly House, gave credit to his new wife, Agnes. "Saved every penny she ever made at the mill, has Aggie," he said proudly. Indeed, Agnes had augmented her full-time pay by bringing home bundles of work from the mill, the "fringing" of shawls and scarves keeping her busy through long hours of the nights. And that was all anyone knew of how Arnie and Agnes came to own the cottage on St. Timothy.

In Doverly, many such cobbled streets as St. Timothy, with identical cottages, housed mill hands. Almost every well-worn doorstep was scrubbed clean. Gleaming lace-curtained windows glowed with pink and red geraniums, among which canaries sang to the accompaniment of player pianos in the parlor. It was to 56 St. Timothy Street that Nellie, pregnant with her second son, abused by Lennie

and then abandoned, finally came. The shock of her sister Agnes's death shortly afterwards found Nellie in no shape to cope with the grieving Iris. Arnie, beside himself with grief such as he had never known, took to drinking to escape the pain of it, and presently found himself with Lennie Ryan in one of the shacks on Canal Street. And there Iris, refusing to live with her Aunt Nellie, had joined him.

Canal Street, running parallel to the canal, was not a slum as the term might be used in most big cities. Spacious weed-filled patches of property adjacent to the canal nurtured shady sycamores and colorful wildflowers. The canal itself was a busy waterway for barges vying with rail transport between seaport cities and mill warehouses, dispensing bales of goods to loading platforms, or serving the coal merchant's storage. But the railway roundhouse, failing to hide its rusty discards among nettle and burdock, added to the derelict atmosphere, and Canal Street was home to many unfortunates in the process of sinking, or struggling up.

Arnie Shum had gone the sinking route, fast. Strangely, it was his death that set Iris free of the street. Few in Doverly knew that she and Marietta Delgarde, proprietor of the dress and beauty salon on busy Canterbury street, were one and same.

Iris's attachments were profound as a child, the intensity and seriousness of her nature expressed in her solemn dark eyes. In hatreds as in loves, Iris gave her all, and she lavished her devotion on her father, Arnie, when they took to Canal Street after Agnes died. Iris, twelve at the time, was sometimes the efficient, capable woman patterning herself on Agnes, more often the frightened and lonely child.

The prized possession that Iris took with her to Canal Street was her doll, the one Agnes had bought for her the year she was seven. For Iris, the doll was a symbol of growing up, she the little mother with her child. In an out-of-the-way shop Agnes had found the doll at a surprisingly moderate price. And that night she and Iris had taken the shortcut through the graveyard at the rear of St. Timothy's church on their way home. Under the light of a Christmas full moon, they had stopped to rest beside one of the stone monuments—and to shore up a bursting parcel Agnes had brought from the mill. Taking the doll from its wrapper, Iris had experienced a fairy tale moment, a miracle made more impressive when the sound of the organ and the choir practicing Christmas carols came through a window of the church.

The doll, dressed in pink tulle, her sweet red mouth smiling, her trusting brown eyes glowing, had been an instant charmer, a fairy princess, surely.

"She looks just like you, Iris," Agnes had said. "Yes, I do declare that's what made me spend all that money on a doll, for she looks just like my little Iris." As always, Agnes had added to the joy. A magic night under the stars of a Christmas sky.

Upon the raised monument beside them was the name of a young woman, sleeping far from her native French soil. Chiseled in the stone was the record of her tragic few years, her part in the transfer of the silk industry from France to England. In the shadow of St. Timothy's church, Iris named the new doll after her: Marietta Delgarde. A name with a proud ring to it, she thought.

The doll, during the Canal Street years, became Iris's chief companion, friend, and confidante. She was a link with Agnes, too, as well as a talisman. Agnes Shum, in death as in life, had had a tremendous impact on the lives of those close to her. She had been a child worker, entering the mill at the age of eight, working from six in the morning until six o'clock at night, at home being a little mother to her younger brothers and sisters. At sixteen—when her sister Nellie was born to a worn-out, dying mother—Agnes had taken charge of the child, even taking the baby to work with her, setting it on the floor in its basket to sleep to the clatter of the weavers' looms. When Nellie was twelve, Agnes had placed her in service at the mansion of Lord and Lady Edgerly. "Warm and comfortable and well fed they are at Edgerly," Agnes had said, remembering her own discomfort and how one's days and nights could be.

And from a little maid tending the huge log fires at Edgerly, assisting in the kitchen, Nellie had graduated to the laundry, to learn the care of fine linens—which experience stood her in good stead in later years as she washed and ironed table linens for the White Stag Hotel on Canterbury Street. And when she was mistreated and deserted by Lennie, Agnes had once again come to the rescue.

Then Agnes had suddenly died, and for a time her daughter Iris had become Nellie's charge. But Nellie's pregnancy was a difficult one. With Agnes gone and Arnie out of work, with Iris weeping for her mother and Lennie contributing nothing, Nellie had been less kindly toward Iris than she normally would have been. Iris ran away to live with her father on Canal Street.

"I won't live with Aunt Nellie," Iris screamed, when her father tried his best to send her back. "Dad, I want to stay where you are. I'll not be any trouble, really I won't. You send me back and I'll run away to where you'll never find me. I'm twelve now, I'll keep house for you." The strong-willed Iris was too much for Arnie in the state that he then was, and he had let her stay, actually glad to have her become housekeeper, a surprisingly good one, as well as breadwinner. And work Iris did, fetching bundles of unfinished work from the mill, having learned the fringing of shawls and scarves from Agnes. Before she was fourteen, Iris had entered the mill. A quiet girl, reluctant to show the loving side of her nature, Iris made few friends, and she was fearful as well of acquainting anyone with her Canal Street home, suffering daily as she did from her father's deterioration.

But there was always the doll, regal as a dainty princess in the single shabby room at the top of the narrow stairs, its only window a skylight. As time went on, Iris used that skylight as a means of exit and re-entry when she chose not to go through the room below where her father and her uncle Lennie Ryan sat drinking and quarreling.

Following the shooting of her father in the house on Canal Street, and the jailing of Lennie Ryan, Iris had gone back to live with Aunt Nellie on St. Timothy Street. When she was seventeen, she had suddenly disappeared from Doverly. Ten years later she had returned, having taken the name of Marietta Delgarde. Marietta, the blonde, suave mistress of the elegant salon on Canterbury Street, was not recognizable as the former dark-haired Iris. Only two persons in Doverly knew that Marietta and Iris were the same: Nellie Ryan and Judge Emory Thurston. For Judge Emory it was who set Iris up in the salon, having sponsored her in the schooling for the venture.

It had been, perhaps, a sense of guilt or loyalty or both that had made Iris renew her association with her aunt. Discovering Nellie ill and in dire need, the new Marietta had made herself known, and had given generously. And accepting Nellie's fiery independence as something unchangeable, she worked out with her the arrangement that Nellie would care for Marietta's apartment.

Furnished luxuriously and with exquisite taste, like Marietta herself the apartment above the shop had an air of aloofness, as though it were waiting for something or someone, and were incomplete in itself. On Marietta's bed, regal among a mound of cushions,

looking like a small queen, was the doll, her dark curls shining still, her smile still trusting, her brown eyes looking confidently straight ahead. The pink tulle dress, although not the original one, was an exact replica of the original. As long as there was the doll, the dream world should not be lost.

Appearing to live only for the busy life that her various enterprises involved her in, traveling frequently to cities where the latest fashions were available, Marietta came and went almost unnoticed, a mystery woman to most of Doverly. Her dress salon carried lines for every pocketbook, and there was millinery to further flatter, some of it sold at prices that made even Lady Maude Edgerly gasp.

The success of Marietta's salon was that she catered to the worker as well as to the rich, now that workers were earning salaries undreamed of in former days. Were they not proud indeed of their appearance? All the mill and shop girls visited the hairstylist at the salon, and Marietta created their wedding ensembles.

But apart from all this, in the gentle world of the doll, was Marietta's own private domain, one she shared with Emory, willingly paying the price of loneliness for him, their association over the past ten years her sole reason for returning to Doverly. The hours they spent together were, for her, a pinnacle of delight. In a way that she barely understood, he compensated for the loss of her father—and not merely the death of Arnie; rather, he almost embodied the image that she, as a child, had created in her mind for him, and thereby for herself.

At home and abroad, Sir Rupert Edgerly had dutifully searched for the necessary rich—and perhaps beautiful—lady who should restore the family fortunes. But age forty-six saw him a not-so-gay bachelor still. When his father died, it was finally agreed that Edgerly House be either exploited in some way or disposed of to pay the taxes. Little benefit would accrue to Sir Rupert either way. His own private, and enormous, debts rendered him, the new earl, scarcely better than a pauper. In the private dining room at the White Stag, at the monthly meeting of his group of friends, Rupert, sadly acquainting them with the news, found little sympathy.

"Should have moved your backside long ago," lawyer Martin Dennison commented coolly. "You've heard, I presume, that the age of miracles is past."

"If I'd had the land you've owned all these years," Dr. Erwin Halvard gave Rupert a frosty eye over his whisky and soda, "I'd have mucked in with the farmers long ago. Three of the finest farms in England were attached to that mansion, by God. And you've let 'em go!" It was well known that Halvard's passion, and pastime, was farming, highly successful at that.

Judge Emory Thurston promptly congratulated Rupert: "Best thing ever to happen to you. Now you're free to make your life worthwhile. The best of a fellow emerges when he finds himself pushed to the wall."

But the charmed life of Sir Rupert held good. At a houseparty marking the opening of the grouse season, on home ground where he least expected to find it, romance raised its glamorous head when he met, for the first time, Veronica Bell-Smith, who was spending some time in Doverly to attend to her mill's expansion.

Heiress to two fortunes, Miss Bell-Smith was frequently newsworthy. In obscure, sometimes dangerous places of the world, Veronica and her crews set up tents and worked the diggings that currently interested her. A workaholic herself as her father had been, she measured most men by him. That she was a spinster still at the age of forty was her own choice.

Veronica's dainty five feet four brought her flashing violet eyes a good fifteen inches below Rupert's sultry brown ones. In the ballroom at Edgerly House, her dark hair shining in a neat chignon on her shapely neck pointed up the creaminess of her velvet skin. Her wanderings appeared to have led her to the fountain of youth, and outshining others far younger, she was the belle of the ball.

Captivated, Rupert found himself incapable of tearing his eyes away from her. That she was rich he was, for the moment, unaware. Only once before in his life had he known the uplifting urge to dedicate his life to the cause of love: an affair at the age of eighteen that had ended disastrously; a brief soaring to a dizzying peak, as now. And in the violet eyes looking up to his, there was a responsive glow. The crowd about them melted away; soft music played for but the two of them; and Rupert knew he wanted to keep it so forever.

Veronica herself was ready for a new adventure. She admired the tall, darkly handsome man who so ably supported and guided her in the dance. There was about him that same mystery and sadness that touched Veronica herself, and something of her own loneliness. In his dark eyes and genteel manner, she detected a

link with a long-gone Spanish ancestry, and as in her work, she sought the touch of history obscured.

A whirlwind courtship followed. But although Rupert proposed, Veronica held back for some reason that she was not able to understand. "I've discovered something about myself," she told Rupert. "I'm afraid of men, or rather, I'm afraid of myself with men, fearful of total commitment. I never knew that before. I'll decide on Christmas Day," she told him. "For me that is a good luck day. It's my birthday. Yes, on Christmas Day I shall know."

But Lady Luck, still with tricks up her sleeve, contrived on the day of Christmas Eve—the ground hard with frost, snow clouds lowering on the horizon—that Veronica, in need of quiet thought, should direct her horse to the sandy road that cut through the moor a few miles north of Doverly. That very day, also seeking solitude and an answer to pressing problems, Judge Emory Thurston rode. At the fork where the two ways came together, on the loneliest part of the moor they met, Emory and Veronica, and talked; this their first meeting, although each had known the other by reputation.

Judge Emory had been pondering a recent powerful urge to ask Louisa to marry him, yet he had an inner conviction that it would be wrong for both of them, that he could never extend to her the genuine affection she would give. That he should give less, however, was abhorrent to him. And there was another facet in his life that, of late, he had hoped to bring to an end without hurting anyone: the woman who had given him solace through the long and difficult years of Mildred's illness. He felt emptied out and in need of something, he knew not what; he realized only that he must find a new way to go.

As the two rode side by side, the world about them was empty of sound except for the sighing of the wind and the muffled padding of horses' feet in the sand. Powdery snow ran about in little swirls. Presently the wind stilled as the cold grey sky settled low, to release a steady fall of snow. A strange, unreal quality surged about them, seeming to push them together; one figure only moving through the greyness.

It was the first of many meetings. And there followed, before long, the announcement of their intention to marry in the early days of June.

For Rupert, it was disaster. From the height of heady delight,

he crashed to shattering gloom. Darkly vengeful, he sought to drown his ill luck in various ways.

For Louisa, the news was equally devastating. Making the matter all the more difficult to shrug off was the knowledge that everyone had supposed that she and the judge would marry. In a way, it was a public humiliation. But Louisa's bout with despondency was brief. Not once, after all, had Judge Emory spoken any word that might have misled her. It had been purely assumption on her own part, based on Emory's evident enjoyment of their association. She had dreamed for a while. Well, the dream was over, and she rolled up her sleeves and got on with the spring cleaning.

And then, one Friday morning, it was discovered that the judge had mislaid his favorite meerschaum pipe.

Pausing in her task of cleaning the living room grate, Nellie Ryan joined the judge and Louisa in the search for it.

"Saw it but a bit ago, I swear." Nellie foraged among cushions and under chairs. "Had it in my hand, I know. Now where in tarnation would I have put the dratted thing? I declare, lately my head's a ragbag of bits and pieces."

"Never mind," the judge called. "I'll take this one." Stoking up another of his many pipes, he left for the office.

Kneeling again in front of the living room hearth and making no effort whatsoever to think about the missing pipe, Nellie remembered its whereabouts. "Holy St. Chr—ristopher! Now I know where I saw that danged pipe!" Sitting back on her heels, Nellie put her mind in reverse and arrived at Thursday, her day for cleaning Marietta Delgarde's apartment. That was where she had seen, and had handled, the judge's favorite meerschaum pipe. "Never even fizzed on me then that it was his. In her apartment! I'll be jiggered!"

For Nellie, that Friday was a day of jolts from first to last. In the evening, as she sat by her fire in the house on St. Timothy Street, reading the newspaper after Derek and Danny had gone to bed, she came upon the brief announcement that Lennie Ryan had that day been released from prison, his sentence commuted to the fifteen years already served.

Lennie Ryan sat facing the probation officer to whom he had been assigned. "Framed I was, right enough, for those murders," Lennie said sullenly. "Plain as day that they made a mistake. Wouldn't be sitting here, would I, if they weren't

admitting to a mistake? I never killed nobody. The evidence that Iris Shum gave at the time was lies. One day I'll find her, and that Judge Thurston. I've a score to settle with both of them."

"Use that kind of talk in front of me, or anyone, and it's back behind bars you'll be before you know what happened," the officer admonished. "And stay away from Nellie and the boys. We'll steer you in the direction of a job. After that it'll be up to you."

"Any objection to me going back to my old scrap iron business?"

"Not if you work it perfectly legit. No lifting somebody's wrought iron gate off its hinges and saying you found it in the city dump."

"I never lifted nuthin' in me life," Lennie said, airily. "Fancy suggestin' I'd do a thing like that."

"Fancy someone writing a thing like that in your report." The officer tapped the folder in front of him. "Possession of guns or firearms will be assumed to be a threat. But we've already been over that. Mind you report in like I said."

In Doverly, in a shack on Canal Street, a candle stuck in a bottle on the rickety table, Lennie Ryan sat, terrified. This was the freedom he'd looked forward to for so long. The moving light from the candle sent shadows creeping about the room, Lennie's eyes following them. He could not understand why his mind had ceased to function as it always had and was now conjuring up frightful images. For so long, even in the glare of light, he had been comfortably remote. Now, outside the shack was an eerie, all-enveloping darkness. The wind, or was that Arnie Shum screaming? Arnie with his brains blown out, less than a furlong down this street.

He had managed to collect firewood from about the warehouses and in the weedy lots beside the canal. A tiny fire burned in the rusty grate, and Lennie crept close to it. To procure the bottle of whisky had been an ordeal he hadn't bargained for. He had slunk away, shaking, through back alleys and laneways, unable to bring himself to venture out again to buy food. With darkness came a silence he was unfamiliar with. Not a soul was there to talk to. The terror increased, and Lennie was at a loss to understand what had happened to him. Where was his freedom? He took a long pull at the bottle. Ah! He'd be all right, maybe, in a day or two.

For Marietta, losing Emory was a shock she could not adjust to. Overnight she became a totally different person, or was many persons, in the range of moods that swept over her. It was not unlike

the time, so long ago, when she had fled from a shocking scene that had blotted out her own rational mind. But now she could not escape into oblivion, and was confronted with the devastation of her life. The span of happy years vanished as though they had never existed, and only grim betrayal remained. On top of that there was Lennie Ryan's return to Doverly.

With deep concern, Emory tried to ease the blow by being even more attentive, treating her with studied gentleness, which, to Marietta, served only to emphasize the fact that he had never loved her at all. A convenience she had been. Her devotion counted for nothing. Hour by lonely hour the bitterness grew. Tempests of rage shook her, and she rushed about the apartment in a half-demented state.

Was there some fateful implication in all this? As Lennie had long ago departed from her life, Emory had entered it. Now, as Emory was gone, Lennie was back again. Life, like the earth, was round. You ran far and fast, only to come back to the starting point again. Nellie, she knew, would never reveal her identity to Lennie. They had talked.

"He'd not know you now, Marietta," Nellie had said. "Not if you met face to face. I swear, that day you came to me on St. Timothy, you were a total stranger. It's been fifteen years, you but a skinny, dark-haired child then."

But the return of Lennie meant more than the fear of what he might do. It exhumed the ghosts of terrors and griefs that had never been truly resolved; memories of the loss of her parents, Agnes and Arnie; of the lonely, degrading years on Canal Street where hopes, like the weeds that blossomed there, withered unfulfilled.

One spectre was the conviction of having testified by action, if not actual words, against Lennie. Then there was the shocking revelation that her father, Arnie Shum, had burdened her with the night he died. From which time she had been convinced that Lennie Ryan was her real father. Blood of that hated, evil man in her veins? For that, Marietta hated herself. She wanted to ask Nellie about it, but she had never dared. As long as Nellie never confirmed it, she herself could sometimes believe it wasn't so.

In her bedroom Marietta examined herself in the mirror. She could come upon no trace whatsoever that Ryan had fathered her. Sometimes, when she put on the black wig that she kept in the wardrobe, she saw a familiar face, one not immediately identifi-

able. Wasn't it just Iris as she once had been, the old Iris, so like the doll sitting on the bed? Was she like Agnes? But then, Agnes had not been her mother. Arnie Shum had said so moments before he died. What Arnie had not confirmed was what haunted her.

The wide eyes of the doll on the bed stared at her, as ever untroubled; the gentle smile on her delicate face declined to believe in trickery or betrayal. The fragile hand outstretched was a gesture of trust. As Marietta's mind ran back, so did everything around her recede into the distant past, ending finally at the bloodstained, shabby room on Canal Street. Total clarity had never returned, a nightmare it was still. She roused herself. Get out and walk in the cold, she told herself; chill winds should stimulate some healthier state of mind.

Carefully locking the sturdy door to her private stairway and the apartment above the salon, Marietta emerged into the crowded hall below, a throughway from Canterbury Street to the parking lot behind the salon and the bank. It was Wednesday, and the usual market day crowds thronged the sidewalks of Canterbury Street; from the parking lot they came hurrying into the wide hall, with business at the bank or taking a shortcut to the street.

Pausing at the front entrance, Marietta pulled on her gloves. Suddenly, within but feet of her, walking slowly, hands in jacket pockets, stumbling now and then as he stared about, was Lennie Ryan. As though hypnotized, unable to help herself, Marietta's eyes stayed glued to his thin, pale face, and he, as though aware of being examined, turned his gaze suddenly and stared directly at her. But there was no recognition on his part. How could there be? She was no more like the Iris he'd known than the plump farmer's wife walking in front of him.

Moving close to the wall, Marietta stood for a moment, seeking to control her trembling, her knees threatening to give way. From the doorway she watched, furtively, until Lennie's head disappeared in the crowd beneath the overhead sign of the White Stag down the street. Changing her mind about the walk she hurried, shivering, back through the crowded hall and upstairs to the welcome warmth of her apartment.

As for Lennie, through the blur that constantly misted his pale blue eyes, he saw only strangers in this city where he had been born and had lived for so long. The hands in his jacket pockets were tightly clenched fists; his teeth chattered, not so much from cold as terror. The roar of traffic stupefied him. Gasping for breath,

he dashed into the cobblestoned yard of the White Stag and hurried into the lane running parallel to Canterbury Street, turning back in the direction he had come, unsure of where to go or what to do next. In the wide parking lot behind the bank and the dress salon he came upon a relatively quiet spot. He sank onto the bricks of a planter box, staring through the blur that filmed his eyes.

In her apartment kitchen that overlooked the parking lot, Marietta prepared a pot of tea, something hot to stop the shivering. Glancing down she saw the man sitting on the planter box. Lennie Ryan! He was watching her, then, from the back as well as from the front. Yes, he'd stared directly at her. Somehow he had found out that in the salon of Marietta Delgarde he should find Iris Shum. So he *was* intent on carrying out the threats he had mouthed as frequently in the past. It was degrading to be in such fear of him. A terrible anger shook her.

Pacing the floor, Marietta cried aloud: "There's got to be a way to be free of him. I must do something, or the thought of him will dominate every day. I'll not have that. I'll not allow it. I won't. I won't."

Perhaps the solution lay somewhere in the past, as Lennie himself belonged to the past. Again she forced her thoughts back to the night her father died in the house on Canal Street, something she had avoided through the years. But now she was driven by the need to protect herself. She, not Lennie Ryan, must win this battle of wits.

There was Lennie's missing revolver with which Arnie had been slain. The fact that Lennie had got himself together sufficiently to race away from the murder scene before the police arrived had convinced them that he had thrown the weapon into the canal, or had otherwise disposed of it. Which assumption had resulted in a less intensive search of the Canal Street premises than there might have been.

That gun, if found, might have supported Lennie's assertion that Arnie shot himself, should Arnie's fingerprints have been found on it. But Lennie's persistent claim of not having taken the revolver served only to complicate matters, that is, insofar as the police believed Lennie at all. Might not Iris have taken it? That, to everyone but Lennie, had seemed highly unlikely. All this ran through Marietta's mind as she stared at Lennie sitting on the planter box below. Slowly, she decided what she must do.

The particular part of the parking lot where Lennie sat was, to

Marietta, a familiar place: Judge Emory frequently parked his car nearby. Anyone seeing him enter the building would have assumed he had business at the bank, or sought, as many did, access through the passage to Canterbury Street. But there was a second way to gain admittance to Marietta's apartment. Not plainly noticeable behind a shrub in the planter box, close to the building, was a small door to her garage at the back of the building; from there a stairway led up to the kitchen. From front or back the judge had had swift access.

Late that night, both entrances to the hall below locked for the night, the parking lot at the back and the street outside quiet at last, Marietta, tam o' shanter pulled over her blonde hair, clad in jeans and dark jacket, went softly down the back stairway and out through the small door into the lane. To the right it terminated in yet another lane running at angles to Canterbury Street, and paralleling the rear of Market Street. A slight, athletic figure Marietta was as she ran soundlessly on her Plimsols down the deserted lane.

South of the city, passing the lighted mills busy with night workers, she sought only the shadows, and came at last to the canal bridge. She could have crossed on the footbridge by way of the stairs, but feeling that would make her too conspicuous in the bright moonlight, she chose to swing the heavy wooden traffic bridge into place. In the middle of the bridge she stood for a moment, watching the barge that had just passed, hearing the gentle slap-slap as ripples of water hit against the sides of the canal. How many times in the old days had she stood watching the barges leave, heart and mind reaching after them, longing to be gone to wherever it was they went. The same nostalgia returned, the urge to be gone, and still, after this long time, she could not say to where. Not distant enough the ends of the earth.

Hurrying, she gained that part of Canal Street where some derelict houses still stood, one or two occupied at the far end. She turned to one standing apart, overshadowed by a neighboring warehouse, squat and lonely amid the rubble of other demolished shacks. There was wire fencing about it; it had become a storage place of sorts. The windows were boarded up, the doors padlocked. Inside the fencing, old doors, boards, and relics from dismantled cottages were piled against the back of the house at the foot of the steep bank.

Tying her shoes together by the laces and slipping them about

her neck, her toes in the wire netting monkey style, she scaled the fence. Then, scrambling atop the doors piled about, she clawed her way to the roof. In seconds she had prised up the skylight—the only window in the low-ceilinged attic room—and dropped to the floor inside. How well she remembered the way, via upturned oil drum then, and broken drainpipe. A beam of moonlight showed her the old iron bedstead, no more rusty now than it had been when she was a child, the old straw mattress spilling its stuffing onto the floor. The familiar furnishings were still in place; the house had been shunned, feared, after what had happened there. Window frames, kitchen sinks, bathroom fixtures, and other reclaimed items from torn-down houses stood about.

Stepping carefully through the dust and debris, Marietta slowly descended two steps of the stairs. For some time she sat, eyes riveted on the cluttered room below. The clutter vanished, and she saw again the sagging red sofa, the table beside it where she had kept weed flowers in a glass jar. And there came again the vision of that night, and the terrifying conversation between her father and Lennie Ryan as she'd crouched, shivering, at the top of these stairs.

"My God. We'll swing for this!" Arnie's voice was a hoarse moan. He paced the floor, tearing at his hair, now and then gulping from the bottle in his hand.

"We knows nuthin', Arn, understand," Lennie had said between great gulps from a bottle of his own.

"We kilt him, that gamekeeper, Ed Lawson. I can't believe it! How'd it all happen? A trout or two, a rabbit was all we were after. And, oh God. We kilt Ed Lawson." Arnie was almost screaming.

"Shut your mouth, Arn. Whaddya mean, we? You was the one with the gun, not me."

"Both of us had holt of it. Your fault that there was the gun at all. I told you before, you fool, that nuthin' but trouble would come of it. And you determined to shoot that deer, that was why I grabbed it. And right then Ed jumps up, and that gun went off 'cos you'd held onto it. It's every bit you as much as me. Don't you go trying to make it different. D'y hear me, Lennie? It's you as much as me."

"Now listen, Arn. We both got to tell the same tale. We'll bury the shotgun back o' the house along wi' my pistol. Gotta get rid of that for sure now. Wisht I'd never stole it." From one of the many inside pockets of his poacher's jacket, Lennie took a revolver and set it on the table against which the double-barreled shotgun

leaned. "They'll not find Lawson for a few hours. We got till morning. First off, I gotta get rid of the damn shakes." He took a long, gurgling swig, and came up gasping. "Arn, might be best to lam out of here at that. I gotta feeling—I gotta a feel—" The long swigs on an empty stomach knocked Lennie out suddenly, and he collapsed onto the sagging couch in a blind stupor.

Arnie, in great distress, still on his feet but staggering and crashing about, had begun to weep, calling on his dead wife Agnes. "Aggie, Aggie. Let me find you. Oh God, Aggie, come to me."

From the top of the stairs Iris rushed down. "Oh, Dad, Dad. Let me somehow help you. It can't be as bad as you say. No, Dad, you'd never. My mum and me—"

And then Arnie had screamed at her, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking her until she cried out with the hurt. "Go back to Nellie. D'you hear me, Iris, go back to her. Your real mother she is. Neither of us have Aggie any more. For God's sake, go now. Run."

"No, no, Dad. I'll never leave you. Oh, Dad, Dad!"

Arnie had hit her then, hard across the face, the shock of his action worse than the blow. And Iris knew in that moment of his telling that he spoke only the truth. "I swear, Nellie's your mother. Aggie and me, we took you, Nellie's bastard child, when she was but sixteen. Go to her. She'll take care of you. Oh God, Aggie, Aggie. Let me come to where you are!"

And before Iris's shocked and unbelieving eyes, Arnie had picked up Lennie's revolver and shot himself through the head.

There had been no time, no inclination, or even believing what Arnie had said, but it was all part and parcel of the shock. What followed had been the outcome of terror, and the inner belief that it was up to her to do something for her father, even as Agnes, her mother, would have sheilded him. Always Agnes had said it was Lennie Ryan's fault when bad things happened to them. Again now, Lennie Ryan, with his guns, was responsible. And everyone knew that to take one's own life was a terrible thing. She alone must do . . . something?

Her father's screams still resounding in her head, Iris, too shocked to utter any sound, had snatched up the revolver from the floor and raced up to her room. Through the torn and loosely patched mattress cover, she pushed the gun down into the straw stuffing. Then, clutching her doll, she sped away into the darkness and the rain, not knowing why or where she ran.

Regarding the rest of the night, or where she spent it, Iris had no real memory. Her impressions were of monuments, giant-tall in flashes of lightning, and the doomsday crash of thunder. By morning, wet, cold, and in a catatonic state, she had been discovered by the curate, sitting on the steps in front of St. Timothy's church, speechless, and still clutching her doll.

There had been a long silence in Iris's life after that, how long she never knew. She had repeatedly pointed to Lennie Ryan when questioned about what had happened. Had she been in the house when her father was killed? Iris had nodded. Was Lennie Ryan there at the time? Iris had nodded. The conviction grew around her that Lennie had killed her father that night; over her own mind there was a dark cloud of doubt. What had she imagined? What had been real? Only with years had there come clarification, and guilt. Perhaps more than wronging Lennie, she had done evil to Nellie and her two boys, rendering husband and father a murderer. And there had come the day she had had to run away from Doverly, seeking escape from that. But there had been more seething in her mind, fermenting and rising to the top those things that Arnie said before he died. If her father, that is, Arnie Shum, had told her the truth that terrible night, and Nellie Ryan was her real mother, then—then Lennie Ryan was in all probability her father. Was that why Aggie had hated Lennie Ryan so much, for what he had done to Nellie, her favorite sister and charge, even before he saw fit to marry her? Agnes had vowed that Lennie had always been to blame for any troubles they'd had.

Iris had been taken to live with Aunt Nellie on St. Timothy Street and had made no fuss about it. Nellie had been kind and loving, as was her true nature, and between them there had grown a strong bond of sympathy. In time, Iris went back to her work at the mill. The women there were kind to her, too, not seeking to talk, setting cups of tea and soup beside her, patting her shoulder as they moved away; the gesture more expressive of sympathy than words could convey. And her own fog of disbelief had obscured the nightmare.

It had been a long time before Lennie himself had remembered what had happened the night Arnie died, he having first a battle with delirium tremens in the prison hospital. About the killing of Arnie he could not be certain. "I must ha' done it," he told Nellie. "But I were drunk at the time. I don't remember. All as I recall is that when Arnie was saying that I was as much to blame as he

was for killing Lawson, I'd the strong inclination to grab the revolver and shut him up for good. Still yelling his head off, he was. But I hadn't the strength to pick a pin up off the floor. My brains is just now waking up, startin' off from where I come to full stop that night, blotto. One thing I'm sure of is that Iris was atop them stairs. One day I'll get my hands on her and pound her until she tells the truth about what really happened."

For some time Marietta sat on the stairs, agonizing thoughts like evil spirits from the past crowding in on her. She experienced a sudden revulsion for Arnie Shum, on whom she had lavished so much devotion. She felt betrayed by him for what he had allowed himself to become, her own love and the love of Agnes seeming to count for nothing. This, on top of her recent betrayal by Emory, evoked an emotion in her of immense and unreasonable proportions. Breathless and shaking, she leapt up, edging her way through the clutter to the bed. Ripping at the old mattress cover, she pushed her hand in and down, and drew out the revolver. With the sight of it, and the feel of its weight in her hand, there came an astounding elation. She was no child now to be kicked aside, abandoned, but an entity to be reckoned with. No man, not one, should steal her precious emotions and thoughtlessly betray her without paying a high price. Swiftly, purposefully, she buttoned the revolver inside her jacket.

From the top of the rickety old dresser, as she had done in the past, Marietta reached up to the skylight and swung herself upward. Carefully poised at the corner of the roof, she took a flying leap and landed on the steep slope among the weeds on the far side of the wire fence. By the way she came, Marietta returned to her apartment, carefully appraising the shrubbery at the back of the building before entering the small door into the garage.

Nellie Ryan studied the faces of her two sons as she proceeded with her ironing. Lennie's return would be difficult for them.

"There'll be some at school who'll try to get you riled up," she said. "It's not so much what is said that will matter as how you feel if you let it bother you. Remember that you're clean and wholesome, and you're not going to let some smart aleck kid destroy that." Nellie finished the ironing and fastidiously packed the hamper of carefully laundered linens. "There'll always be the type that likes to sneer. They feel big putting others down."

"We've been hearing already," Derek said.

"Who cares?" Danny shoveled apple pie into his large mouth, munching contentedly. Not much bothered Danny for long. "What's he look like, Ma?"

"I've no idea. Fifteen years will have changed him. We'd a separation, so I'm not his wife, which is why I say he's not coming here. Now, soon as you finish your supper, it's off with you to the White Stag with this lot." Nellie thrust in the wooden peg that fastened the lid of the hamper and stood up, her glance momentarily caught by a movement outside the kitchen window. She gave a gasp, for there, pressed against the glass, grimacing, was the face of Lennie Ryan. A little scream escaped her, for the white face, at first glance, had resembled a death's head. "My God!" she gasped. "He's here. It's him."

Lennie tapped on the glass, but Nellie stood staring, considering bolting the doors front and back. Then, slowly, she beckoned, indicating the back door.

"You ain't staying," was Nellie's abrupt greeting, even as Lennie had one foot poised over the threshold. "I'm realizing you'd like to look at the boys. I'll give you a supper, and that's it."

"Now, Nellie, that's hardly a greetin' for a feller that's been away for all this time, and thinking about nuthin' but you an' my two boys. My heart's been broke all these years just longing to see all of you." Lennie's voice was a whine, deliberately designed to incite sympathy. "I'm a changed man, Nellie. A man with no place to go. We was man and wife once. Surely you've some feeling for that?"

"Only a grand feeling that that's long gone. Now, the boys has to go with the wash for the White Stag. Derek, Danny. It's getting late."

With Nellie's help, the boys lifted the hamper of laundry onto the wagon in the gennel that ran behind the houses on St. Timothy. "Mind you don't tip over, settin' down from the curb," Nellie admonished, and watched for a few seconds as the wagon rattled off out of sight.

Making sure that they were out of earshot, Danny said: "D'you think Ma'll let him stay? Kinda excitin', ain't it?"

"I hope she won't. I don't like him. He used to beat her, you know." Derek's serious face showed worry.

"He looks all right to me. Ma says herself that he never kilt nobody. He's a right good lookin' chap." There was a ring of approval in Danny's tone.

"You're clean daft. Come on, you ain't pullin' your share of the load."

By the time they returned home, to Derek's relief, Lennie was gone.

"Why didn't you let him stay, Ma?" Danny asked. "I mean if he hasn't any place to go? If he didn't really kill anybody, like you said he didn't, what'd be the harm?"

"Because he's got a place, floppin' in one of those shacks on Canal Street. Tells me he's got a job at the coal warehouse. That's the sort of job with hard work attached to it, so he'll not have it for long."

Nor did he. But by whatever means, Lennie managed to raise enough cash to buy an old truck. In the days that followed, it became plain that either Danny had searched out his father or that Lennie had made it easy for them to meet, managing to pause nearby as school let out. And Danny could be seen riding in the cab of the truck while Lennie went about collecting junk. Nellie found herself with a new problem as Danny began to stay away from home and to play hooky from school.. With an admiring, impressionable teenager beside him, Lennie regained the old swaggering manner. Danny, eager to please, enjoyed riding about town and saved Lennie the effort of running up alleys and lanes to see if anything might be available.

At once Lennie began, very cautiously, to watch the movements of Judge Emory. From among the trees at the corner of Oak Park he saw that the judge took an after-dinner stroll in the garden of Miss Louisa Counsel's house, and a further turn there before bed, to smoke a last pipe. Observing that, on some nights, the judge went out in his car, Lennie took to waiting in his truck and followed. And so discovered that the judge, as well as keeping trysts with Veronica Bell-Smith, frequently visited the apartment of Marietta Delgarde.

"An' him a man of law, with a setup like that. Goin' ter marry the rich woman, and he's another on the side. An' Lennie Ryan's the only man-jack in Doverly who knows what's goin' on. Now what if I was to nudge him a bit, saying I could spill the beans about his little love nest? Nar. No go. I'd be back in the hole before I could wink. Could get an angle on this female with the salon. Looks like she's got a pile."

One night, seeing Marietta leave, Lennie entered through the small door into the garage, and with no difficulty gained entrance

to the apartment. In the bedroom a light left burning on the vanity cast a pink glow. "Who'd guess this posh place from the outside?" He whistled softly. And then his eyes caught the doll seated regally on the bed. A sudden nervous shock jolted him. Its gaze appeared to follow him, wide brown eyes staring, a tiny hand pointing.

He stood, tense and listening, eyes swiveling, and in the vanity mirror again he saw the doll. For some reason that he could not fathom, it fascinated and unnerved him. Then, his eyes falling on a framed photograph on the vanity, he gave a gasp. Agnes and Arnie Shum. Here! Hardly believing, he stared at the photograph. Between Agnes and Arnie there stood a little girl holding a doll: Iris. Iris and that damned doll that she'd carried about and talked to like it was a real person. Some crazy French name she'd given it, Marietta Del—something. Couldn't be. But yes, there they were, Agnes and Arnie, and Iris with her doll, that doll there sitting on his bed, pointing a finger at him. More times than enough, he'd seen it in that shack on Canal Street.

Iris Shum.

Marietta Delgarde.

Here in this place Iris had hidden herself.

Lennie smashed a fist into his palm. That judge and Iris! Grabbing the photograph he snarled: "You, Aggie Shum, always turning your nose up at me. Not good enough for you, I wasn't. And you, Arnie Shum, for you I done fifteen years. And little Iris. Well, hello, Marietta." He leaned over to shake his fist at the doll on the bed. "I bet you still got that gun hid here, somewhere. I know right well you lied me into that jail. I've had time to think it all out. You it must ha' bin who hid that gun that'd have shown that Arnie shot hisself, the state he was in. Nellie said so. Not a soul was there in the place but him an' me and you that night. And neither me nor you shot Arnie. Who else was there to run off with that revolver? Only you, Iris. Just you."

Lennie's further search of the room turned up a roll of five-pound notes. He chuckled. "Like I said, Iris, I'm gonna make you pay, in more ways than one. This'll do for a start." He shoved the notes into an inside pocket and went softly down the back stairway.

Returning from her errand, Marietta knew at once that Lennie Ryan had entered and searched her apartment. And that the missing money was but part of what he sought. What evil he planned she could guess. On top of that came the announcement of Judge Emory Thurston and Miss Veronica Bell-Smith's wedding date.

The announcement caused a stir throughout the city. To Lennie, in the shack on Canal Street, came the realization that a session with the judge was necessary after all, before the nuptial knot was tied. "It's only for my two good lads, to give them a start in a little business." It sounded better each time he went over it. "One of the richest women in the country he's about to hook up with. No sir, he ain't going to let that go. He'll not want Iris dragged up. He don't want to go along and starts gettin' shirty—well, we'll see about that." Dreams of sudden wealth made Lennie bold. Nor was the urge due altogether to the prospect of wealth. A sense of getting even, of having power over such a one as the judge, elated him. Surely a providential opportunity, one not to be ignored.

Two days later came the shattering news that Judge Emory Thurston had been murdered.

It was on a Wednesday evening in mid-March, with a touch of spring in the air. The judge had commented to Louisa how good the air smelled, and that he was about to take his usual late night stroll to the end of the rose arbor. For some time, Louisa pottered about the kitchen, attending to matters pertaining to next day's breakfast and waiting for Emory to come in. Eventually, when he did not, and concerned about the ice that formed on the flagstones at night, she had stepped outside. Not seeing him, nor hearing any sound, she had gone as far as the rose walk. At the far end that overlooked the treed area of the park she had found him. She had heard no sound of the shot—at close range—that had killed him. There was no weapon at the murder scene.

Shock waves rippled throughout Doverly. So Lennie Ryan had carried out his threat to kill Judge Emory. Every policeman of every division was put on alert. Scotland Yard was on the job at once. Find Lennie Ryan, *now*.

A search of the wooded area at the edge of Oak Park, only a few yards from the rose arbor in Louisa's garden, proved that Lennie had stood there for some time. Footprints; a wad of mud matching that peculiar to Canal Street; soil and oak-leaf mold from the park on a pair of shoes in Lennie's Canal Street shack; cigarette butts and an empty cigarette package—all proclaimed his presence at the spot. Moreover, it was fairly certain that the judge had been slain by the same revolver that had killed Arnie Shum. So Lennie had known where that weapon was all the time.

Watching the detectives search her house, newsmen confronting

her everywhere, Nellie, humiliated to the point of despair, prepared for her Thursday session at Marietta Delgarde's apartment.

"We'll be followed every move we make," Nellie warned Derek and Danny. "Mind you come straight home when school lets out. I've left stew that you can warm up, and there's rice pudding for lunch. I'll make dinner when I get home."

At the apartment on Canterbury Street Nellie found Marietta listless and stony-eyed, lying on her bed. Sitting beside her, Nellie took the cold hand in her own.

"Iris." The old name slipped out. "I'm that sorry. Seems like once again I cause you grief by way of him once belonging to me. All this time he'd that revolver hid someplace. I wish—I wish there were some way I could say what I feel for you. The judge, oh, poor, dear man. A grand man."

Marietta's surprised eyes searched Nellie's face. "You knew about us?"

Nellie nodded. "Found his pipe here one day. And there were other things. That pipe tobaccy he smoked. For long enough I'd thought it was those Turkish cigarettes of your own. When he went to live at Miss Louisa's, it became plain as day, once I'd connected with finding his pipe here."

Seeing Marietta's look of concern, she rushed on: "No need to worry. If I've learned anything at all in my stupid life, it's to keep my mouth shut."

Her first task always being to clean up the kitchen, Nellie soon realized that Marietta had had no recent meal. Perhaps, in fact, it had been days since Marietta had last eaten. Saying nothing, she set about preparing her something. When she went into the living room with the tray, she found Marietta at the window watching the news agent across the way. He was setting out placards announcing, "Extra! New Developments Relating to the Death of Judge Emory Thurston."

"A nice little breakfast for you, Marietta," Nellie said, setting the tray on the coffee table. "Come now, while it's hot. I'll be back in a minute or two."

Quietly Nellie went down to the entrance, and from a boy in the street bought a newspaper. Lennie's picture was on the front page. "Lennie Ryan, chief suspect in the slaying of Judge Thurston, may have succeeded in getting away from Doverly," she read. "Being closely scrutinized are others with possible motives."

Names had been carefully dropped in. There was mention of the

judge's lifelong friendship with Louisa Counsel, that being all that was needed to suggest that Louisa might have been a contender for the judge's affections, not to mention any financial considerations between them. Then there was Sir Rupert Edgerly and his recent interest in Veronica Bell-Smith. Subtle hints only, to be sure, followed by the statement that "the police were carefully evaluating any lead."

Nellie's blood boiled. "Miss Louisa! What rot. Sir Rupert? Well—" A little smile softened Nellie's anger. "I bet that one hated to miss out on all that money. But no, he'd never—but then, folks do change." She stared at Lennie's picture on the front page. "Little rotter. You'd that revolver hid all this time. Who else but you harbored hatred and revenge like that?" And suddenly, Nellie was struck by a chilling thought. Who else? Well, there was Marietta, silent and morose upstairs.

With little heart for her task, Nellie set about cleaning the apartment. Marietta, weary from lack of sleep, seeming to have aged ten years overnight, wandered about the rooms.

"Marietta, go to bed for a bit," Nellie said. "You look like you might be coming down with something. Sleep is what you need."

"Sleep, Aunt Nellie, I can't sleep. Why do I still call you 'Aunt Nellie,' when all these years I've known you were my mother. What a truly good person you are. My mother. Whatever good there is in me is a legacy from you. But I've a curse in me that you're not burdened with. I've Lennie Ryan for a father. You know he fathered me. Arnie Shum as good as told me so minutes before he shot himself. Yes, Arnie shot himself. I saw it happen. And all these years I've lived with that lie, letting you and your boys be branded. I might not have said it in words, but I let Lennie be blamed. Isn't what I did proof enough that Lennie's blood runs in my veins? Like Lennie, I'm a coward, too. I want to end my life but haven't the courage. How do you feel, Mother, having a daughter such as that? But don't hate me too much. In my own way I shall make it up to all of you."

Shocked by the talk and the wild look in Marietta's eyes, Nellie sought for words to help. "Look, it's only natural that you should be upset by what's happened. You'll come out of it after a while. And Iris, let me tell you, such pride and love I've had for you all these years as you'll never know. Let me be a comfort to you now. As for you knowing what went on that night, you'd no recollection of anything at all."

But there was about Marietta something that terrified Nellie. This was not grieving as one grieves for a loved one recently lost. With a shaking hand, Nellie grasped Marietta by the arm.

"What do you mean, what Arnie good as told you that night? Wasn't he drunk as a skunk, too, and not making any sense?"

"All these years I've known that Lennie Ryan was my father." Marietta sat wild-eyed. "He was, wasn't he? You should know about that. I told myself I didn't care. Well, I did care. It never stopped hurting. I can't—won't—live with that any more, and what I've become. My one chance left is that I tell everything before I end it all."

"Hold it right there, Iris," Nellie snapped. "You've made up my mind for me. I'm going to tell you what should have been told long ago. When you were little, you were told that Aggie, my sister, was your mother, that Arnie was your father. They, good folk that they were, adopted you. They took you when I had an illegitimate child at age sixteen. Yes, your mother I am. But Lennie Ryan is not your father."

"I don't believe you, Aunt Nellie."

"Iris, I can be as big a liar as anybody. But may I be struck dead this minute if I'm not telling the truth now. Lennie Ryan is not your father."

"Then who is? Don't tell me that you and Arnie—you did both work at Edgerly, didn't you?" Marietta's eyes burned with hostility, her face twisted into a mask of horror.

"You do have a grubby mind at that, Iris," Nellie said calmly. "By comparison, the way I was then, I was an innocent angel. Funny thing, when a body tells a pack of lies, folks tend to believe 'em. Tell the truth and you're called a liar."

Nellie took from the bookcase a Bible; then, seating herself on the sofa beside Marietta, she said: "With both hands on this book, that I believe in with all my heart, I tell you God's truth. It's my child you are, born when I was but sixteen. My sister Aggie took you. I was her pet, had been from the day I was born. Had you been her very own she couldn't have loved you more. As for Arnie, apart from his loving Aggie the way he did, you were the most important person in his life. But he was not your father."

White-faced, silent, Marietta could not drag her eyes from Nellie's face.

"Sir Rupert Edgerly is your father. As God is judge, he is your father."

The room was quiet. Outside a newsboy shouted, "Extra! Extra!" From the front hall came the sound of the grandfather clock ticking.

In a low voice, choking a little, Nellie said: "Pretty I was, dainty and sweet as a newborn rose. And singing like a bird the day long. Rupert, oh, a beautiful young man he was then, a dreamer, but kept like a prisoner by his selfish father. Two carefree young ones we were, curious about life, and love, and quite infatuated, one as much as the other. Trouble we never gave one thought to. My fault it was, as much as his, for what happened.

"Aggie and Arnie, just married—Arnie had been at Edgerly for years—well, the adoption was arranged, and they'd be paid. That's how Arnie and Aggie came by the deed to the house on St. Timothy. You, Iris, provided for us all those years. But let me tell you, if there's one man with a grand nature hid deep inside him, it's Rupert Edgerly. He's just like his mother, Lady Maude. It's his blood that's in your veins."

The storm broke then. The terrible laughter sent Nellie running to make sure that windows were closed, that none of the hideous sound could reach the street. Exhausted, finally, Marietta lay still on the couch. Nellie, holding her hand, wept. "Oh, God. I must've been mad to tell you. But I thought only to do some good. I do believe I'm driven half mad myself with all that's been happening. Iris, please believe that."

For answer, Marietta raised Nellie's hand and laid it gently against her cheek. There was a long, peaceful silence.

Well past her usual time, Nellie arrived home, explaining to Derek and Danny that Miss Marietta had taken sick and had had to be put to bed, as well as coaxed into eating some dinner.

Derek, always considerate, said: "I got taters in the oven, Ma. Danny's set the table. There's rice pudding left over." Looking at her critically, he went on: "Ma, have you been crying? You don't look right."

"Me, crying! Don't be daft. Got a bit of cold is all." Nellie blew her nose vigorously.

In the dead of night, from among the shrubbery behind the salon, Lennie Ryan moved swiftly, letting himself into Marietta's garage by the small door behind the boxed shrub. At the same time, the sleepless occupant of another apartment caught a glimpse of him as he darted among the shadows and called the police, reporting a prowler in the parking lot behind the bank.

At the foot of the stairs in the garage, Lennie stood listening, almost convinced of having heard stealthy steps in the lane. But all was quiet outside. "Must've been the cats." Lennie let his breath go in a shivering sigh, and went quickly up the stairs. He was cold, hungry, and shaking with fright; the warmth of the room was a sudden luxury. The past hours had been a nightmare.

Returning to Canal Street from a favorite haunt at two A.M. Thursday, on foot as the truck had developed tire trouble, Lennie had been alerted by some movement in the shadows behind the shack, and had fled. Through Thursday and Friday, news vendors had screamed out the details of the judge's death. Lennie, sleeping from time to time in abandoned sheds, had made his way through gennels and lanes on Friday night, when hunger pushed him, to hide behind Marietta's salon.

In the kitchen Lennie rubbed his shaking hands together. "I can hole up here for a bit. I got little Iris right where I want her. Glad she'll be to give me enough to get away, after a bit. A miracle me reckernizin' that doll." He tensed at a sound from the garage below. But how could there be anyone? There hadn't been a soul in sight. He listened, hardly breathing. Nothing. Must have been the wind, or the cats.

Stealthily he moved towards the bedroom. Drawn-back drapes let in some light from outside. A table lamp, still burning, but from a rakish angle on the floor, lit a fantastic scene. Some wild orgy had replaced the room's former neatness with total disorder. Chairs, pictures, ornaments lay splintered about. The figure lying on top of the bed was still, but suddenly gave a moan. Lennie stood frozen at the desperate sound. Lurching in sudden panic, his foot crunched into broken glass. There was a sharp crack as it splintered.

The figure on the bed gave a terrible shriek and leapt up, arms thrashing wildly. The doll toppled from her throne of cushions, and from beneath her pink dress, something clattered to the floor. Lennie recognized the revolver instantly, and the old terror engulfed him. In some sort of nightmarish act he snatched it up as Iris, crying and moaning, lunged at him. A sudden banging at the kitchen door added to the commotion. As Lennie put up his hands to ward Iris off, there was an ear-numbing crack, and whimpering softly, she crumpled to the floor at his feet.

Petrified, Lennie stood, revolver in hand. On the floor, from her bloodied face, Iris's eyes rolled at him, and from her parted lips

came what sounded like a little chuckle. The kitchen door crashed open with a splintering noise. Lights went on, and as the room swam about him, Lennie, through misting eyes, saw the policemen. In a daze, hardly knowing he moved, he was led away.

The two policemen who were left behind expressed surprise at so much havoc in so short a time. To an arriving reporter one said: "We'd followed him, after we'd got onto his trail. Lost him for a bit, but felt certain he was in the bushes back there. The chief thought he'd be having a go at breaking in somewhere for ready cash. And then a call came that a prowler was behind the bank. We thought he'd got into the passage through to Canterbury, not realizing he'd disappeared through that small door at the back of this place. Her screaming, of course, told us for sure. Seconds earlier and we could have saved her. Quite a fight she put up, didn't she? Think, five people dead, all because of that little punk."

"Five?" The newsman stood, pencil poised.

"Ed Lawson, Arnie Shum, Judge Emory, Iris Shum, and himself. Yes, I'd say he'll get the long drop now."

"Iris? But wasn't that Marietta Delgarde who—"

"One and the same. The police have known it for some time. Ryan vowed he'd kill both the judge and Iris. He'd followed both for quite a while."

Nellie duly acquainted the police with what Iris had told her. The Yard men listened politely. "Mrs. Ryan has two boys," it was remarked. "It's only natural that she should seek to whitewash their father. Ryan was caught red-handed with the gun in his hand, Iris dead at his feet. And he was at the spot in Oak Park we're sure, the night the judge died. Both he'd sworn to kill."

Visiting Lennie in jail, Nellie heard his side of the story.

"So, you've come to gloat," Lennie sneered. "Well, I didn't kill Iris nor the judge. That little bitch had the gun all the time. When I picked it up, it went off. She'd come at me like she was crazy. I 'ad it in me 'and when them coppers come crashing in. You don't believe me, either.

"Nellie, I tell you it's a frame. Iris it was who shot the judge, for she'd the gun right there. That doll was sittin' on it, inches away from me, when I went into her place that first time. Iris has put the noose about my neck just like before. Nellie, ain't you got a kind word for a condemned man?"

"Crackpot talk, like always. Still blaming Iris. Never could she have known what went on the night Arnie died, her mind blotted

out. All she clung to was that doll, as everybody knows. Your guns they both were. You blaming Arnie for killing Lawson because Arnie's in no shape to say different after you've shot him. Didn't come roaring at you like you said; like always when he was drunk, he'd be no physical threat. Sobered up, he could have told how you killed Lawson. Like now, you're saying Iris shot the judge, when you've made sure she's long past talking."

Wound up, Nellie rushed on. "Did you give one thought to Iris, she watching you drag Arnie down, like you drag everybody down that comes near you? That child, grieving for Aggie, worn out and half starved, working at the mill. And you getting money off her by one sneaky means or another. A kind word from me, Lennie Ryan, will be a long time coming."

"You're a real bitch, Nellie, saying things like that, and me good as dead. I tell you, Iris had the revolver. I seen where she had it hid when that doll toppled off that bed."

Nellie, in agitation, went on. "I think about how you abused me, the boys and me with nothing had it not been for Arnie and Aggie. Never a thought did you give to what all this has done to Derek and Danny, you willing still to lead Danny astray. Not once did you ask how did I manage to raise 'em up. All you can say to me on your way out is that I'm a bitch. Well, there's a mighty big score to settle, one way or another. What's happening now puts paid to it." Gasping, weeping, Nellie mopped her face. "I'd not meant to talk like this. It wasn't my reason for coming. Reckon it had to bust out and be done with."

Warm summer sun had brought the trees to full leaf in the park and along the streets of Doverly. The scent of June roses wafted through the windows of Louisa Counsel's house on Oak Park Drive. From the park came the laughter of children playing. Sitting quietly, Louisa read a copy of the Doverly *Document*. There was an account of the quiet wedding uniting Rupert Edgerly and Veronica Bell-Smith. Among other news items was a mention that the salon of Marietta Delgarde was sold. Turning to the "Classified" section, Louisa nodded her approval at the entry there: "Expert convalescent care. Rates reasonable. 100 Oak Park Drive." Accompanying her telephone number was a date of opening. First, she and Nellie both needed a holiday.

At 56 St. Timothy Street, examining herself critically in the

mirror over the mantel, Nellie Ryan carefully pinned the smart new hat over her greying red curls. Derek and Danny, dressed in their Sunday best, rushed about, laughing. "Two weeks at the seaside." Danny danced a jig and, picking up the last of the suitcases, hurried out to the waiting taxi. Derek grabbed a traveling rug and the sack of sandwiches. "Come on, Ma. Hurry!" His voice reflected his bubbling excitement. "It'll never do to miss our train." He raced off to join Danny outside.

From the mantel, Nellie took down the photograph that was one of two items she had taken from Marietta's apartment. The faces of Aggie and Arnie looked at her, smiling. And there was Iris, pretty as the doll cradled in her arms. Nellie brushed sudden tears away. "Oh, Iris. I do miss you." She struggled to stem the sudden flood of tears. "Iris, I still can't believe it, me and Miss Louisa partners in the convalescent home. All because you left me a fortune."

Also on the mantel was the doll, miraculously escaped from the storm that had raged in Marietta's apartment. With a sob, Nellie gently laid the dainty china face against her own.

"Little Marietta Delgarde. If only you could have spoken. But, Iris, you did, didn't you, that is, if there was truth to what you told me?"

From the overpowering jumble of recent events, Nellie struggled with inexplicability. Had Lennie, by his own hand, eliminated the one person who could have—would have—told the truth about everything? So close had Truth hovered that, even now, Nellie felt the impact of it. Lives inextricably interwoven were the warp and woof whereof Truth fashioned its own garment. But Fate had had the last word. Or were they one and same, working out a particular judgment?

With a sigh, Nellie replaced the doll on the mantel, between the old photograph and a more recent one of her two handsome, smiling sons. Her hands encircled it, caressing. Then, head up, her eyes moist still but a bright smile lighting her merry face, she hurried out, carefully locking the door behind her.

UNSOLVED
by
George J. Summers

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

The answer will appear in the April issue.

When a psychiatrist was found murdered in his apartment, four of his patients were questioned about his death.

I. The police knew from the testimony of witnesses that each of the four patients had been alone with the psychiatrist in his apartment just once on the day of his death.
II. Before the four patients were questioned they met and agreed that every statement each patient made to the police would be a lie.

Each of the patients made two statements, as follows:

AVERY: 1. None of us four killed the psychiatrist.
2. The psychiatrist was alive when I left.
BLAKE: 3. I was the second to arrive.
4. The psychiatrist was dead when I arrived.
CROWN: 5. I was the third to arrive.
6. The psychiatrist was alive when I left.
DAVIS: 7. The killer did not arrive after I did.
8. The psychiatrist was dead when I arrived.

Which one of the four patients killed the psychiatrist?

See page 148 for the solution to the February puzzle.

FICTION

Mini-Scam

by Richard MacFarlane

Illustration by George Thompson

First off, I'd better begin by saying that George Gull is not some sort of comic character like you might see on TV. It's just that he had a lively imagination and, to some extent, an exaggerated idea of our job as police officers in a small town. I've been chief here for fourteen years, and George has been on the force for about half that time. During those years I've found him to be a capable and efficient officer. That's why I made him our only detective. It took some badgering to get the Village Council to authorize having a plainclothesman on the force, but I convinced them that it was a matter of promoting him on the one hand or giving him a raise on the other, so they gave in. In the end I still had to give him a raise, but not a big one. He himself decided that he should have the title "Inspector," so he had a badge made, at his own expense, that said "Anderville Police Department—Detective Inspector."

That was a little over a year ago, and since that time I'd have to say that George has been well worth the money, and the embarrassment, of having a detective inspector on a nine-man police force in a town of six thousand. George has been responsible for solving a dozen crimes around here by the use of good police methods mixed with a lot of plain logic, a little luck, and many long hours and tireless sifting of details.

But this time that I'm going to tell you about, George let that imagination of his run overtime.

"Chief," he told me, "what we need here is one of those 'sting' operations." (He always calls me "chief" even though everyone else on the force calls me "Bob.")

Now, I didn't have to ask him what a "sting" operation was because I saw the movie, and I read the papers and watch as much TV as the next guy. But I really didn't think he was serious, so I just laughed and said, "Right, and we also need a SWAT team, a counterespionage unit, and closer ties with Interpol."

"Those things can come later," he said, "but I mean for right now. If we can set up a phony fencing operation, I'll bet we could close the book on a lot of the theft that's going on in this town right now."

"You mean that we might nail the guys that broke into the coffee machine over at the wire works and get back that nine dollars and seventy-five cents?"

He looked at me a little scornfully. "Hell, chief, a sting operation isn't any use against thefts of cash. What it's used for is the iden-

tification and apprehension of suspects involved with larcenous appropriation of chattels."

"Gotcha," I said. "We can lay a trap for the international gang of garbage can thieves that ripped off my new Sears garbage can night before last."

"You're not taking this seriously, chief."

"All right, George, I'll be serious. What do you have in mind?"

"Just this. We set up a place here in town where we let it be known that we receive stolen property. Once the word gets around, the suspects will bring their loot to us, and we'll pay them for it just like we were real fences. Then, while they're doing business with us, we'll be doing our business with them, if you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean, but what are we going to buy the stuff with?"

"I've thought of that. Right now we've got that eighty-seven hundred dollars in the capital account, and—"

"Hold it right there, George. That eighty-seven hundred is money I wrung out of the Village Council to buy a new patrol car. Not only would the council take a dim view of me spending the money on anything else, but I'm the one who's going to get to drive that new car, and I've got the eagers to go 'vroom vroom' and blow the siren."

"It'll only be for a few weeks, chief, or a couple of months at the most. Besides, by then the year-end car sales will be on and you can get a better deal on the new car, don't you see?"

"I can see that you're trying to get my ass in a sling."

"Not to worry. When we pull this off and cut down the crime statistics in this area, they'll be so grateful they'll give us a whole new fleet."

"A whole new fleet of skateboards. Where will you set up this operation, the Community Center or the mayor's house?"

"There's a perfect spot for it in the back room of Eddie Vang's Pool Palace. And the back of the pool hall is just shady enough to make it seem authentic, if you catch my drift."

"I catch that you're fixing to get us drifted out of a job, inspector. But I've got more questions. Like, who's going to run your scam? Everyone in town knows everyone on the force. You thinking of using Eddie Vang himself? He's so scared of us and of everyone else in this town that he reports violations of his 'No Profanity' signs."

"There's where we're in luck, chief. My wife's brother from Cleveland is coming here to live. He's out of work and is coming here to look for a job. We can keep his relationship to me under wraps. No one will know who or what he is, and as a stranger he'll be more credible, don't you see?"

By this time I could see that he had given a lot of thought to this kooky scheme of his, so I decided not to put the crusher on him real abruptly. I merely said, "Well, give me some time to think it over."

"Right, chief, I'll keep working on the details."

I really had no intention of thinking it over, but I did. It wasn't that I had the remotest notion that the cockamamie scheme would work, it was just that I was fascinated by the lengths to which an imagination could travel under the influence of too much TV. My own imagination started running away with me, and I thought of the possibilities, purely for my own amusement.

One thing I did was to reread the minutes of the Village Council meeting where they had voted the eighty-seven hundred. Having been present at the meeting, I knew that the purpose of the appropriation was the purchase of a new automobile, but there was no mention of a vehicle in the final motion as passed. It merely said, " . . . that the police department be allotted $8700 for capital expenditures." If the Village Attorney had been there, he would have pinned down the language a little tighter than that, but he wasn't there, and they didn't pin.

Still, I knew that there would be hell to pay when they found out that I had put some of that money into George's little game. They expected me to order that car this week. A brilliant thought struck me. I could go ahead and order the car now, but I could fix it so that it couldn't be delivered for months. All I had to do was order it equipped with a Gernsbach S803 siren. The last time I ordered a Gernsbach siren, it held up delivery for seven months, and it cost only forty-three dollars more than a standard siren. I guessed I could wait that long to go vroom vroom and blow the siren.

The hell of all this was that although I couldn't take the sting operation seriously, I had begun to plan as though I did. I suppose that there is a secret conspirator in each of us, and mine was pushing itself up now.

So it was that on the next morning when George came into my

office with the inevitable question, "Well, chief, what do you think?" I still wasn't ready to burst his bubble but actually began to enter into his scheming.

"Shut the door," I said. "Trouble is, the crooks in this town aren't the kind you can catch with your trap. Bessie Avila's night bartender is knocking down fifty to a hundred a week, and we can't get the goods on him."

"Why doesn't Bessie fire him?"

"Damned if I know. Maybe she thinks he's moderate. Then there's Smitty at the Shell station. He bought a twenty-five-foot cabin cruiser just selling people rebuilt carburetors they don't need. How are you going to nail a guy like that?"

"The way I see it, chief, our scam won't be limited to Anderville. Once the word gets around, we can become the dumping ground for hot goods from Clark City, Pleasant Grove, and maybe as far away as Columbus."

"Let's talk about how it's going to work. The FBI used hidden video cameras to get the evidence. If we can't come up with lawyer-proof evidence, we shell out a lot of money for nothing, not to mention your brother-in-law's fine services. By the way, have you mentioned this to him? Will he go along with it?"

"No, and yes."

"What's that mean?"

"You asked two questions. No to the first, and yes to the second. Bernie will enjoy this sort of thing, and he'll be good at it. When he gets here this afternoon, I'll bring him in and we can go over it together.

"Now, about the video cameras. I know we can't afford anything like that, but I've got an idea for the next best thing. I've got an eight millimeter movie camera and a cassette recorder that I'd be willing to lend to the department for the duration of the operation. I've got in mind how to rig up a relay to trip a cable release on the camera whenever we've got a live one. And we can flip on the recorder at the same time."

"It would be better if we had it on videotape," I said. "That way there'd be no problem on sync for some defense lawyer to trip us up with. Let's not forget that the whole purpose of this thing is to get the kind of evidence we can go into court with."

The moment I said that, I realized that I had passed some point of no return. I was committed to George's plan. As soon as I started making contributions of my own, there was no turning back.

"You go into Columbus," I said, "and rent the video equipment, buy a bunch of video cassettes, and we'll work it out with those. I'll fit it into the budget somewhere. Bring your brother-in-law in when he gets here, but be careful."

It was after five when the two of them came into my office. My first glance at Bernie convinced me that he was exactly right for his role. He had the look of the guy who used to sell dirty postcards before all the skin magazines knocked the bottom out of the business. He looked both puzzled and apprehensive as he shook hands with me. I got the impression that police chiefs weren't his usual companions. Between us, George and I explained what we were up to and how he was to fit into it. His eyes lighted up and he said, "Just like on TV!"

To tell the truth, I didn't know whether to be reassured by that remark or not, but at least it meant that he was able to grasp the principle. George and I stepped out of the office for a moment, after I had locked my desk drawers and pocketed the key. I said, "I guess he'll do. How soon do we get started?"

"Tonight," said George. "Let's get him over to meet Eddie Vang and make arrangements for the back room. First thing in the morning I'll go to Columbus and pick up the video gear."

"Do you think it's a good idea for Bernie and Eddie to be seen talking to the police chief and the inspector?"

"Chief, you're right. You've got a real feel for undercover work. Tell you what I'll do. I'll go down to the pool hall and bust Eddie right now."

"Bust him for what?"

"Permitting gambling on the premises."

"He'll think you're just sore because you lost sixteen dollars last Friday playing nine-ball."

"I don't care what he thinks. I'll bring him in and we can lay it out for him. By the way, should we get the D.A. in on this?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe we should. We'll have to be very careful not to lay ourselves open to an entrapment defense, and he'll know how to avoid that. On the other hand he's so damn go-by-the-book that he may want to put the kibosh on the whole thing. I think we'll deal him out until we've got the whole thing in operation, then present him with a fat accomplice."

George brought Eddie Vang in, and we had some difficulty convincing him that the bust wasn't for real. I'm damned if he didn't

demand the whole Miranda bit. He wanted his lawyer there during questioning. Eventually, however, we got him calmed down enough that we were able to explain our plan. As it finally began to dawn on him what we wanted, he panicked.

"Them crooks'll get me," he wailed. "When it comes out that I was in on it, they'll put out a contract on me. Why don't you get someone else?"

"Because your establishment is the optimum site for an effective surveillance," said George.

"Because if you don't go along, we'll lean on you," I said.

Whichever answer he found more persuasive, he did agree to cooperate, and then damned if he didn't have the nerve to demand twenty-five bucks a week rent for that fly-specked hole of his.

It was Bernie who brought up the next problem, and of course it meant more money. "If I'm supposed to be making a living in the stolen goods business, it won't do for me to find a regular job, so what am I going to live on while all this is going down?"

He had a point there, so I offered him two hundred a week while he was working undercover for us. He held out for two fifty, and finally I gave in. I could see that the expenses of this thing were beginning to mount. Apparently George was beginning to add up the dollars and cents, too, for he said, "Of course we'll have to deduct from that all money you win shooting pool."

We agreed that Bernie should start hanging around the pool hall and Bessie's Green Light Lounge, dropping hints here and there that he knew how to take care of hot stuff.

"Play it cool, Bernie," George warned him. "If you're too gross about it, you'll blow the whole scenario."

That's the way it started. Bernie began slinking around town looking shady (which was natural for him) and trying to get a nibble. That went on for three weeks before he got a live one, and that wasn't in the back room where we could get a picture of it. Paul Tichenor sold him a hot watch for twenty-five bucks, and Bernie came in to report a success. I looked at the watch and got mad.

"Hell!" I said. "This watch ain't hot. These are on sale over at the Pleasant Grove Shopping Mall for thirteen ninety-eight."

"Can I keep it?" asked Bernie.

I just stared at him.

George intervened. "Have you run across a suspect named Perk Nelson yet?"

"I played pool with a Perk something-or-other one day last week. He's a hustler. Shot like somebody's grandma until we got to playing straight pool for a buck a ball. I had to quit clowning around and shoot my best to clean him of eighty-five big ones."

"You didn't report that winning," I said.

"It'll be in this week's report."

"Anyway," said George, "keep your eye on Nelson. I'm after him. Make sure that he knows you're fencing, and for God's sake get him into that back room if you're going to do any business. Have you got the routine down with that recording equipment?"

"Sure, I practiced yesterday with it for nearly an hour."

"Those cassettes are reusable, aren't they? I don't want you to use up tape if it can't be used over again."

"It can, but by the way," said Bernie, "I found a guy who can get me all the video cassettes I want for five bucks each."

"Who is he?" said George. "What's his name, and where's he getting the stuff?"

"Hell, I don't know," said Bernie. "I didn't get his name, but he's some sort of regional sales coordinator for a national distributing service. He says that he can get me an eighty percent discount on name brand video and stereo equipment, all in original cartons."

For this I was paying two fifty a week out of my car money. I figured that by now I'd have to buy the car without the Gernsbach siren, and possibly without the engine, too.

Two, maybe two and a half weeks passed, and Bernie was beginning to get a little action. He had bought three hubcaps, a CB radio, and a ten-speed bicycle. Fortunately, he'd got all these transactions on tape, but in each case the suspect's back was to the camera.

"But my picture came out real nice, didn't it?" said Bernie. "See how natural I look?"

George said, "A redeployment of the surveillance equipment is indicated—for optimum evidentiary effectiveness."

I said, "Why only three hubcaps, Bernie?"

"The guy said that some son of a bitch ripped off the fourth one from his garage before he could get them down to the pool room."

"Keep your eye open for that fourth hubcap," I said. "That might be the key piece that's going to smash the whole Mafia."

George shook his head. "There are no indications at this point in time that the Mafia is in any way implicated." He was sounding more like a TV script every day.

"What about Perk Nelson?" George asked. "Any action in that direction?"

"Nope."

George pulled at his lower lip. "Maybe I'd better muddy the waters a little."

Two days later I learned what he meant. He had arranged to be in Red's Diner having coffee at the same time as Perk Nelson, and had mentioned that the Thornquists were going to be out of town for a week or two and that they had given the servants a vacation, so the whole Thornquist place was going to be empty, and it was putting a strain on the police department to maintain surveillance of the premises in addition to their routine commitments.

Apparently the hint was enough, for when the Thornquists returned, they reported that their house had been ransacked to the tune of two TV sets, a three-thousand-dollar set of sterling silver, and Mr. Thornquist's antique gun collection, value yet to be determined.

Just the previous day, Bernie reported that he had bought two TV sets, some fine looking silverware, and eleven old-fashioned rifles and pistols for a total of twelve hundred dollars.

"Was it Perk Nelson?" I asked.

"In the flesh," said Bernie.

"Did you get the whole transaction on tape?"

"You bet your butt I did—all of it."

"All *right!*" said George. "Now we've got a case. Chief, I think you should fill the D.A. in on it now. I'll go get a warrant. We've got P.C. I'll go apprehend the suspect. Bernie, you go down to the pool hall and bring in the video equipment. Be sure to have Eddie Vang with you so that he will be able to testify to the placement of the camera and the microphone and so forth. We're going to sew this case up tight with stainless steel thread."

As far as I was concerned, that was the end of it, but the real end came when Bernie didn't return from the pool hall. After waiting two hours, I went down there and found no hubcaps, no radio, no bicycle, no TV sets, no silverware, no guns, no video equipment, and no Bernie! I never set eyes on him again, but George heard a rumor some months later that Bernie was the regional sales coordinator for a national distribution service.

When the Village Council voted five to four not to accept my resignation, it was about the most that I could hope for. And I sure don't take much pleasure in that six-year-old patrol car.

FICTION

A Case for Clara Cates

by Carolyn Jensen Watts

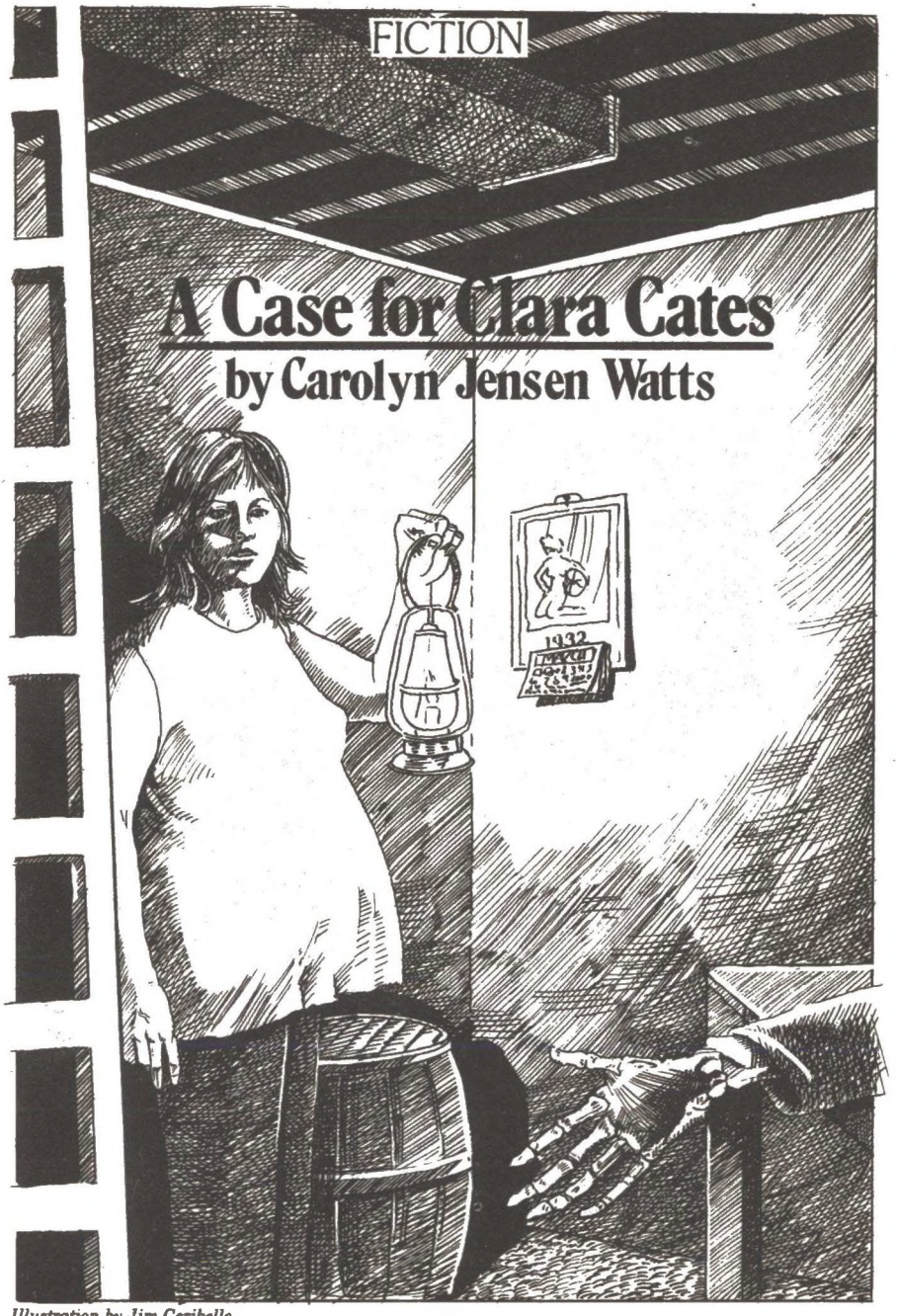


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

It ain't that I'm particular because I ain't, but when that rental agent showed us the house and the main bedroom had that dark maroon pile carpet with that orange and brown flowered wallpaper, I about gagged.

I tried to point it out to Cloyd, but he wasn't seeing nothin' except the workshop downstairs and the one-and-a-half-car heated garage. I knew it wasn't any good talkin' to him at all. I'd seen that look in his eyes twice before. Once when we bought this really classy lookin' lemon instead of the station wagon I wanted, and once at Howard's Pizza Shop and Bookstore when I was there with Jimmy Thompson and Cloyd worked there. He kept comin' over to our table to fill our glasses and givin' me that look, and when Mr. Howard would glance over, he'd busy himself near us straightening up the comic books and wiping the mozzarella off the magazines.

Mr. Lane, the agent, had left us alone in the basement to talk things over, and Cloyd was runnin' his hand over the workbench like it was Dresden china.

"This here's where the vise was," he said, showing me some ugly dents. "Looks to me like part of this house has been here since the 1800's, but I think most of it has been renovated, and look here—" he pointed up "—all oak floors, Clara!"

"And do you intend to sleep down here, Cloyd? Have you seen the bedroom?"

He looked at me like I was talking about some faraway island.

"The *bedroom,* Cloyd! You know, upstairs? You ain't just renting a basement and garage, you know."

He plodded up the steps behind me and really saw that bedroom for the first time.

"Oak door frame. That wallpaper *is* unusual."

"Unusual? It's disgusting! You think Mr. Lane would let us repaper?"

Cloyd considered. We are what some people would call thrifty. Hate to throw away stuff and hate to pay good money to replace things just because we're tired of them. So this presented a problem because there wasn't anything whatever wrong with that wallpaper except being ugly as sin and mixing with that maroon carpet like tuna fish on strawberry ice cream. It was nearly new and had that vinyl coating.

"You know what I think?" Cloyd said. "I think whoever done this just bought what he could find on sale."

I thought whoever done it ought to be hung.

But the rest of the house, I had to admit, was very nice. The kitchen was big with plenty of cupboards, and as it had almost an acre of land with some woods and as I didn't want to have Cloyd end up an embittered old man in some nursing home moaning about oak floors and heated garages, we took it.

But from the beginning it was just like what happened with Granny Cates's kitchen floor.

See, they'd bought these chairs at an auction over thirty years ago and one of them was missing a cushion piece on one leg so that every time you scooted up to the table you scratched the floor and sometimes that one leg would stick and the chair would buck. Granny worried Grampa about it from day one, but he didn't do nothin' and pretty soon the linoleum was scratched and gouged every which way. Wasn't until it bucked him one day and he broke his arm that it got fixed—and the floor replaced. Every time after that when they'd have words, she would recall that chair, and when Cloyd was growing up, she told him that story many times to teach him about fixing things right away. Maybe that's partly why he became an aircraft mechanic.

(By the time I was a member of the family, I had heard that story at least twenty times. I can't imagine how Grampa has suffered all these years.)

Yet I couldn't seem to help it when it came to that wallpaper. From the first night it bothered me and I bothered Cloyd.

"Clara, can't you be still? I have to be at work in four hours!"

I tried—really did—but even in the dark that wallpaper was *there*, and with Molly and Susie in the attic room upstairs and little Roy in the small bedroom down the hall, I had to put my desk in there and writing my children's stories came to a standstill. Seemed to me that wallpaper was more suited to Stephen King than Clara Cates.

Cloyd told me I was obsessed and I said tell me something I didn't know but if I could do anything about it it wouldn't be an obsession, would it?

Some nights I crawled in bed with Molly and Susie, but they complained my feet were cold and I took all the covers and snored. Other nights I slept on the couch and watched Perry Mason returns.

Cloyd finally got tired of my midnight wanderings, and when we got our income tax check, he promised to call Mr. Lane and ask if we could repaper. I found a nice design with tiny leaves and rosebuds that very day.

I couldn't believe it when he come home that night. Grampa and Granny Cates was there for supper and Cloyd came through that door stomping his feet like it was December instead of the middle of May.

"That stupid Lane! He won't let us repaper!"

I felt my world slipping out from underneath me and sat down. "Did you tell him we'd buy the paper?"

Cloyd nodded.

"And do the work?"

Nod, nod, nod.

"Well, why not?!"

"He says it's Farley Jessup —the banker. He owns this place and wants it left as it is."

"That one's a snake," Grampa declared. "I wouldn't trust him with nothin'. "

"I like it," said Granny.

I stared at her. She always did seem a bit crazy.

"It's just like him," Grampa continued. "Gouge the little guy till there's nothin' left."

"But, Grampa," Cloyd pointed out, "this ain't costin' him nothin'! We was gonna do the work and buy the paper!" He snorted. "See if I'm available next time his Cherokee won't start on a Sunday afternoon."

"Cloyd," I pleaded, "are you *sure* Mr. Lane understood everything you said?"

His nostrils flared and I about ducked under the table.

"No, Clara, I ain't sure!" he thundered. "Maybe I was speakin' Chinese! Maybe *you* should call him! If you wasn't so paranoid about that stupid room, wouldn't no one have to call him!" He stomped down to the basement.

Cloyd and I never fight except maybe about money once in a while and the time Molly wanted to join the Boys' Brigade at church. So I was really embarrassed and I think Grampa was, too. Little Roy giggled and clapped his hands and pounded his head on the highchair tray, and Granny just made a clucking noise and started leafing through a newspaper.

I stood up and put the teakettle on. From the basement it sounded like Cloyd was erecting the Eiffel Tower. Rivet gun. I flinched.

Grampa cleared his throat. "Yeah, that Jessup is so crooked he could hide behind a corkscrew. I remember when he was just a smart-mouth kid. Ran off with Carl Jenks's girlfriend and came back in the middle of the Depression. Had a fancy car and money to burn. Said he struck it rich in Mexico or somethin'. Anyway, he bought up all these farms and homes dirt cheap. Just turned people out. Lorded it over everybody like he was king."

"Dirty money, if you ask me," Granny declared. She brightened. "Say, wasn't his wife living here when she died? No one even knew that she'd left him, and then she turns up dead."

"That's right!" Grampa nodded. "Then he turns around and marries some thirty-year-old chippie."

"His wife barely in her grave, too." Granny clucked. "She was in a wheelchair—had that disease, what's it called? Anyway, the one where . . ." Granny went on to describe in great detail some horrible disease that would put you off your food right now. Grampa left the room.

"It still don't make any sense," I mumbled when she was through. "Why would Farley Jessup care if we repapered?"

"Looks new," said Granny. "I bet Mrs. Jessup done it before she died."

"It's probably what killed her," I said, and got up to call the girls for supper.

Cloyd ate in a glowering silence, and I was so flustered I went around the table cutting the kids' spaghetti and cut Granny's, too.

"Clarence!" Granny called to the living room. "You best eat!"

"I tole you I ain't hungry!"

Granny clucked. "Stubborn, that's what he is. Just like when we bought these chairs . . ."

Cloyd and I stared at our plates and slipped into a welcome trance.

It was eleven o'clock that night and Cloyd was still downstairs pounding away. I had tried to sit in the kitchen and work on one of my children's stories, but my heart wasn't in it and the page before me had more doodles than words.

Cloyd had been the one to suggest I write down some of the stories I told the kids and I sold two of them the first year, which was enough to make me addicted to writing like he was to machinery and wood. But when things wasn't right between us, nothin' worked.

I went to check on the kids and found they was just where they was supposed to be and decided I didn't want to fight.

So I went into our bedroom and faced the wall. I'd read all about positive thinking and negative self-talk and decided to try it out.

"You *are* pretty paper," I whispered fiercely. "You are *pretty* paper. I *will* get used to you!"

That paper just grinned in droopy, gaudy flowers of orange and brown and I tasted my spaghetti again and thought how it looked like a shirt from *Hawaii Five-O*.

I went down to the basement then and sat on a cot hugging

my knees and watching Cloyd work. We both had already said "hi," like you do in the hall at high school between classes. Cloyd had repaired Susie's wagon, and on the floor was a sheet of metal with rivets in it for no reason at all unless you count getting mad. Now he was planing a slat of wood for a rocker he was making for little Roy for his second birthday. I like to watch him work with wood the best. There's something about sawdust mixing with those little curly-Q things getting stuck in his beard that really gets to me if you understand my meaning. Before long we was both casting glances and knowing looks and half-smiles, and Ellie Hilda had her beginnings on that cot.

In October, Cloyd got a pay raise, which, if you know anything about it, is nearly unheard of in general aviation. But things was looking pretty good at the flying service and the raise was pretty good, too, so we decided to try and buy the house and went to call on Farley Jessup ourselves.

He was a tall, good-looking man with thin sandy hair and about in his mid-seventies. He shook hands a lot, but told us the house wasn't for sale.

"I tell you, Cloyd, my wife Ethel dearly loved that house, and I'm just not ready to let it go. I tell you what, though. I have a house on 314 that I'll let you have for thirty thousand."

That night we went to see that house and there discovered why Mr. Jessup was one of the richest men in town.

In December, Cloyd asked him again if he'd let us repaper, thinkin' to give me a surprise Christmas present. Mr. Jessup got a little angry that time and hinted he might have to ask us to leave as he was thinkin' of tearing the place down. (Which, of course, didn't make no sense at all if he was emotionally attached to it.)

Cloyd decided he was senile, but I thought even then that there was somethin' peculiar about it all.

It was when I was nearin' my due date in February that I made my discovery that people still talk about today.

I don't know about you, but by the beginning of February I am so tired of dull gray days and dirty hard snow I could scream. (I sincerely believe that if we'd all just hibernate in February the world would be a better place.)

The only thing worse than February is being pregnant in February. I don't care what the libbers say. There is a definite difference between a man and a woman emotionally, espe-

cially when that woman is pregnant. Maybe none of them never carried four children and every one nearly a month late, or maybe I am high-strung, but toward the end of a pregnancy I begin to get a little more than touchy. I am not always rational, and anyone who comes around best not be, either. I don't mean to say I'm not a good wife and mother and I don't go around and stick pickles in the sock drawer or think I'm Shana of the Jungle or run for Congress, but I am not always myself.

It was on one of them dull cold days when I was big as a buffalo and twice as mean that that wallpaper came down.

Little Roy's Sunday School teacher once told me she thought he was a progressive child with a lot of curiosity. Cloyd says that means he entered the "terrible twos" at one and a half and was still going strong. Little Roy has been to the emergency room three times. Twice for stitches and once for sticking a marble up his nose. (I suppose if you asked anyone who knew him what little Roy was to be when he grew up, they'd say a rock star or a demolition expert.)

That day, all I did was to leave Susie's poster paints on the bed in our room and let little Roy's nature take its course. I watched him wander in there with Boo, his Ohio State stuffed football player, under his arm, and waited fifteen minutes.

Five would have been enough. Besides the walls, he painted the bed and dresser and desk and himself. I was so proud!

I happened to have the materials to remove the wallpaper on hand, and all that day little Roy and I slopped the paper wet and scraped and giggled. I kept singing about Joshua and the walls that came tumblin' down, and hoped in my heart that Mr. Jessup wouldn't hit a pregnant woman. Roy acted like this was more fun than life could give him.

By three o'clock everything but the closet had been done. I put all the clothes out in the living room, feeling a little guilty about how messy the rest of the house looked, but just a little.

The closet was strange—it was papered just halfway up, like they'd run out or something. It seemed kinda odd to wallpaper a closet at all, but that paper in an enclosed place was truly disgusting. I got it done quick as I could and looked around, satisfied. Every bit of the paper was now garbage. Then I saw it. In the front bottom corner of the closet there was a ragged shred of orange and brown still huggin' that

wall. I took the metal scraper and attacked it.

Suddenly there was a creak and the back wall begun to move and I felt dizzy, like you do when you're in a parked car daydreaming and the car beside you starts to back up and you jump to slam on the brake and feel the fool. I grabbed little Roy and jumped back to the bed.

"Wadder?" little Roy pointed.

"Ladder," I nodded.

The whole back wall of the closet had moved over, and there was a ladder hanging in the space.

"Don't this beat all," I stared.

"Wadder, whee!" yelled little Roy and threw Boo down the hole. He looked at me and pointed. "Boo bye-bye," he declared.

I grabbed him up in my arms and made for the phone. Cloyd was out test flying the 210, and I left a message for him to call me right away. There was no answer at Granny and Grampa's and Cloyd's parents were still in Florida (they travel all the time—have a bumper sticker on their trailer that says they're traveling on their kids' inheritance. I don't think that's funny in February, do you?) I waited for about ten minutes, and when I tried the phone again, Mrs. Gaborski was on it and I knew it'd be a long time 'fore the line was open.

So I got a box of animal crackers and set Roy in his crib with them.

"Eh, Boo?" he asked.

"We'll get Boo, honey. You stay, okay?"

"Eh, BOO!" he demanded.

I knelt beside that hole and could see a table with an oilcloth top, a braided rug, and some chairs. Boo was on the table next to a kerosene lamp. I wished I wasn't so far along because I could've seen a whole lot more laying on my stomach. I checked the front corner then with the flashlight and could see a small white button flush with the wall. I pushed it and the wall closed. I pushed it again and the wall opened.

Roy was laying on his tummy in the crib with his thumb in his mouth and his little butt sticking up in the air. He was hugging Boo's backup, a stuffed frog, and his eyes had that glazed expression like he was about to go to sleep.

I tiptoed down the hall and checked the phone again and wished Mrs. Gaborski had inoperable laryngitis.

When I went back to the closet, I just happened to have a book of matches with me.

There are times I do things that, even as I'm doing them, I know I shouldn't be. This was one of those times.

The ladder was sturdy. Cloyd

had made the comment that whoever built this house liked things sturdy and, judging by the wiring and woodwork, had been a craftsman. The air was cold but dry, and as I lit the kerosene lamp, all I could think about was Jacob in the Bible except his ladder went up.

All along the wall across from me there was oak barrels, about twelve of them. There was a sink with a pump, a potbelly stove, and cupboards, and over to my right a beautiful rolltop desk made of oak. On the wall was a calendar. March, 1932, with a pretty girl and a bottle of Coke.

Then I looked over to the back corner on my left and saw Mr. Tucker. 'Course I didn't know it was Mr. Tucker then. All I saw was this skeleton lying on a cot with his head turned and grinning at me, and his hair and nails grown somethin' fierce, and dressed in a suit. I grabbed onto that ladder like it could whisk me up and out of there, and then the scratching begun and I kept tellin' my legs to move but they wasn't listenin'.

I hadn't considered rats and I closed my eyes tight, expecting to be overrun by a whole herd of them, but when the animal crackers hit me atop the head, I realized it was, oh dear Lord, little Roy.

"Un, foo, free, boom!" he howled and some wallpaper hit me atop the head, too.

I blew out the kerosene lamp and, as well as I could, started scramblin' up that ladder with Boo.

"You, Roy! Back!" I hollered, but already the wall had started closin' and my last look was little Roy waving bye-bye with the metal scraper and all I could think of was being found fifteen hundred years from now. Me and Mr. Tucker and Boo. American Tut.

I hollered some but couldn't hear nothin' from the other side of the wall. It was pitch black and gettin' colder all the time. I knew the girls would be home soon, but I knew little Roy, too, and prayed fervently for his safety, adding the suggestion that perhaps he might think to push that button again.

I lit the kerosene lamp again and determined to examine the body on the cot.

"C'mon, Boo," I said, thinkin' positive.

I had the flashlight and could see a trail of dark stains on the braided rug that led to the cot, so I knew before I got there that this man had been hurt. He had on an old suit like Elliott Ness, with a dark stain at the waist. "Gut shot," I thought, and shuddered. His wallet was in the front pocket of his jacket.

At the table I searched the wallet, and Mr. Tucker and I were properly introduced. There were about twelve cards that said:

WISE JEWELERS
Since 1896 on the Square
in Gamble's Mill
Harlan Tucker, Asst. Mgr.

There was about fifty dollars and a picture of a woman and a pretty little blonde-haired girl. The woman had the kindest eyes and on the back it said, "Hilda and Ellen, Christmas, 1931." There was also two news clippings.

Meanwhile, Cloyd had tried to call and come home to find the house a mess and little Roy enjoying himself by pulling up the bathroom tiles. He worried I'd gone off the edge over that wallpaper.

"Where's Mommy?" he asked little Roy.

Little Roy sadly shook his head and stared hard at his dad. "Gibble fish," he replied, and then started crying for Boo and Cloyd tore up the house more trying to find him. Then the girls came home and Susie started throwing a fit over her poster paints and Molly started crying for me and Granny and Grampa showed up and Granny told Cloyd I always did seem a bit peculiar.

Believe it or not, we are to this day married.

I liked Mr. Tucker. He had a nice smile and his wife had the kindest eyes. The first news clipping was dated February 16th, 1932, and told of the discovery of a jewel theft in Gamble's Mill.

According to police chief Jerry Bridger, the theft of over one hundred pieces of jewelry, estimated at close to $50,000, took place over a period of months. If it hadn't been for a fluke of fate, the theft might have gone unnoticed for yet another month. Mr. Wise, owner of the store, has been for the past few months traveling in Europe with his wife. He is en route home now and therefore could not be reached for comment. According to Miss Ethel Clowers, a clerk at the store, Mr. Wise had purchased the substantial amount of gems before he left on his long voyage. "All we do is sell the jewelry," she stated. "We had no idea they weren't genuine."

When Mrs. Lance Curliss of Sulphur Springs took an amethyst brooch to a jeweler there for repair of the clasp, she was told that the gem was a clever re-

production. She then reported it to the Gamble's Mill police, and on further investigation the substitution of the other gems was discovered. All the employees of the store are being questioned.

The second clipping was even more interesting. There was a picture of Mr. Tucker, a dark-haired man with a wide grin that didn't sit well with the caption, "Suspect Harlan Tucker sought in jewel heist."

The story said that several of the genuine pieces of jewelry had been found at the Tucker home. "Mrs. Tucker denied any knowledge of them but promised her husband would explain all when he got home that evening. To date he has not returned, and Mrs. Tucker is unavailable for comment." It was dated March 9th, 1932.

I looked over at Mr. Tucker on the cot and at the calendar on the wall.

"I don't think you stole anything," I said out loud. "But I bet you knew who did."

The air seemed to be getting even colder and I could see a pile of blankets by the stove, so I went over and grabbed the top one and that's when I found the second body.

"Cloyd!" I hollered from the bottom of the ladder, shaking it hard. "Cloyd, you Cloyd!" I stood on one chair and pounded at the ceiling with the other. "Clooyyd!"

I stood there in the middle of the room and tried not to cry. This would be a nice room, present company excepted. I knew I had to keep exploring because I knew if I didn't I'd start blubbering and hiccupping and get red blotches all over my face and look a mess. Then I realized it wouldn't matter if I looked a mess and just almost began to cry anyway.

I went over to the barrels and lifted one of the lids, and a strong smell of moonshine whisky about keeled me over. I promptly dropped Boo in, and when I fished him out, we both smelled like my Uncle Cletus on a Saturday night.

I was half afraid to open the rolltop desk. Probably find a dead midget.

It really was a beautiful piece of furniture. The drawers were locked, but the top was full of books and papers. The books were all technical journals like Cloyd likes. Plumbing, woodworking, electricity, and acoustics. They had the name "C. Jenks" written in them. Then there was a ledger full of names and numbers like "Ches—12—Skid—2/24"; "Wilt—15—Skid—2/26"; "GM—11—me—3/6." There was a desk calendar with

the date March 12th and a note in big block letters: "ETHEL—MUST CALL TODAY." Under that was another scribbled note: "GM—15—Skid." The blotter was interesting in itself. I always thought you could tell a lot about a person by his doodles. These were all sketches and numbers. Pieces of furniture and what looked like carefully drawn lines, and in one corner something real interesting. Pieces of jewelry: brooches, bracelets, necklaces, and rings. Then I found a letter in one of the cubbyholes and understood why it was so important to call Ethel. It was dated March 9th and was on lavender paper with pretty writing.

Dear Carl,

You have played me a fool for the last time. I know you went to Millie's Thursday night. Well two can play that game. I want my share now and you can forget all the rest. Or take Millie. Our pigeon knows and since we don't know where he's at, I want out now. So you best call me real soon or you're going to hear me sing.

Ethel

I sat at the desk tapping a pencil and studying the air. Well, Mr. Tucker must surely be the pigeon and Ethel must be Ethel Clowers, the clerk at Wise Jewelers. Carl, whoever he was, must have been the one to plan the robbery. If these were his books, he was Carl Jenks and this had been his house. But how Mr. Tucker got here and who killed these people and what happened to the jewels I didn't know. Unless it was Ethel? "Hell hath no fury . . ." Something didn't seem right about it.

I sighed and stood and tried to crack my back. I'd eaten all the animal crackers and now, besides being cold and tired, I was hungry as a bear.

The cupboards was full of bottles, some empty, some full. And there were some funnels and hoses. Looked like runnin' shine had been good business. In another cupboard was some canned stuff that looked hard and green and fuzzy, some coffee, and a tin of Prince Albert tobacco. There was a coffeepot, too, but I was afraid to build a fire and burn the house down. I tried the pump but it didn't work, needin' to be primed, and just served to make me thirsty, too. (Uncle Cletus woulda died happy anyway.)

"Well, Boo," I said, givin' him a soggy squeeze, "looks like we're here for the duration." I started to put the tin of tobacco

away and heard a clinking sound, so I opened it and dumped the tobacco out on the counter. Somethin' hard hit the sink and fell down around my feet. 'Course I hadn't seen my feet for almost two months now, so I went down on my knees and felt around and then caught my breath.

It was a beautiful diamond ring with pearls surrounding it. I picked it up and tried it on. It was truly gorgeous, catching the light in sparkles of color. I wondered if it was real or fake, and then I saw a note stickin' out of the tin. It read, "Ethel, Have saved the best for you. All my love, Carl."

Carl Jenks seemed paranoid to me. Locks his desk drawers and puts a rock like this in a tin of tobacco. Didn't seem to me he was throwin' Ethel Clowers over for Millie or anyone else.

I tugged at the ring and it wouldn't budge. My fingers, like everything else, was swollen. I tugged and pulled and muttered and then begun to cry, feelin' about as dainty as a beached whale.

Then a thought struck me that made me feel worse because on top of hungry and cold and thirsty and tired and fat, I felt stupid. There had to be a button on this side of the wall, too.

So I started searchin' all around the ladder and the walls. Couldn't find nothin' anywhere. I looked all through the cupboards and under the sink and table and finally pulled up the rug and found the trapdoor.

By this time I was beyond surprise. Little purple men with two heads and six arms could've climbed out of there and I'da said, "How do you do, and have a seat." No ladder—this time it was steps. I got the flashlight and stuck Boo in my blouse and blew out the lamp. It was creepy dark then, and I shivered as I started down.

There were three steps and then I was in a little cave like the hundreds we used to explore in the woods when we was kids. There were about ten cases of whisky there and a tunnel leadin' out. One thing I hate almost as much as February is bats, and I shone my light around on the ground lookin' for their droppings, bein' too scared to shine it up top. I didn't see none and started walkin' down that tunnel.

By this time it was one in the morning and Cloyd was sitting at the kitchen table with Jerry Bridger the third, who was the current chief of police. Granny Cates and Grampa had got the kids to bed and were cleaning up wallpaper and poster paints and floor tiles.

"I told Clara there was a loose corner on one of them tiles," Granny told Grampa. "That's what happens when you let the little things go."

Grampa just growled.

We'd both known Jerry Bridger about all our lives. He even put Cloyd in jail when he was twelve for throwing eggs at cars.

"We've checked all the hospitals, Cloyd. Bet you anything you hear from her tonight or in the morning at the latest."

Cloyd had a stubborn set to his jaw. "I'm tellin' you, Jerry, Clara wouldn't leave little Roy like that. Somebody's made off with her. There's all kinds of nuts out there, you know. There been any jailbreaks?"

"No, there ain't. What d'you think they're going to do with her, Cloyd? Hold her for ransom? You gonna give them a set of wrenches?"

"Ain't funny, Jerry. You know what they do to defenseless women."

Jerry stared at him a second and then started laughing.

Cloyd jumped up. "You find somethin' funny?" he hollered, and Granny and Grampa rushed in.

"Shush you, Cloyd! Took me three hours to get little Roy to sleep without Boo! Kept runnin' to the closet in what's left of your room, wailin' his heart out for Boo! You want he wakes up again?"

Cloyd sat down. "Sorry." He glared at the police chief, who was wiping his eyes and chuckling.

Jerry Bridger sighed and sat a little straighter in his chair. "I *am* sorry, Cloyd. It's just that Clara never seemed defenseless to me—and don't you see it, man? She's nine months pregnant!"

Cloyd stared at him and then he stared laughing, too, and almost crying at the same time. Then Granny and Grampa started, even though they didn't know what they was laughin' at, and it was like no one could stop.

Was then that I walked by the kitchen window and saw them all. I slammed through the back door grimy and hungry and cold with that old blanket wrapped around me and Boo peeking out from the top of my blouse.

"You havin' a good time, Cloyd?" I bellowed. "You want I should go get hit by a truck so's you can have a party?"

Well, of course then everyone was full of comfort and cheer, getting me dry clothes and food and hot tea and asking a million questions like where had I been and who kidnapped me and was I drunk.

"Just let me get dry and fed.

And, Jerry, don't you leave. I think I got an idea on a robbery happened over fifty years ago."

The tunnel I took had had cases of whisky stacked all the way through it and every once in a while a name and a date scratched in the wall, like "Ernest Hatten—1858," "Louisa Simpson—1860," and one that caught my attention; "Samuel Jenks—The Truth Doth Set Them Free—1858." Was that inscription and Granny and Grampa's memories put it all together.

The five of us sat at the table. I had checked on the kids, wanting like all the world to wake them, but Boo was in the wash and I had to find some things out.

"Granny, I got one question for you," I started as they all looked at me.

"Lord amighty!" she cried. "Where'd you get that ring?"

"I'll come to that. I just gotta know one thing. Who was it Farley Jessup ran off with?"

"Carl Jenks's girlfriend," said Granny.

"Ethel Clowers," said Grampa. "She was quite a looker, remember, Molly?"

"Hmph!"

"But wild," Grampa hurried on. "Real wild."

"And she lived here afore she died, right?"

They nodded and Granny clucked. "Poor woman in a wheelchair, y'know, had that disease . . . "

"I knew it!" I interrupted, and hit at the air with my fists. "I knew that wallpaper was ugly for a reason!"

They stared. "Clara, you sure you ain't been drinkin'?" Cloyd asked.

"This," I said holding out my hand, "is from a robbery at Wise Jewelers in 1932."

"I remember that," said Grampa. "Was that fella Tucker."

"Was not," I shook my head. "Was Ethel Clowers and Carl Jenks."

"Jenks?" Jerry Bridger stared at me. "But they found some of the jewelry at Tucker's! I remember my dad was surprised at him."

"We all was," nodded Granny. "Harlan Tucker seemed to be a good man. Made it awful hard on his wife and girl . . . "

I waved my hand. "That jewelry was planted by Ethel Clowers. Tucker was framed by her and Jenks."

"I recollect Jenks," said Grampa. "Big gruff man with never a how-de-do. He was an electrician."

"And he disappeared the same time as Tucker, right?"

"Right." Jerry nodded. "Went after his girl and Jessup, everybody thought. They were all

looking for Tucker. Why? You seen Jenks?"

"In a manner of speakin'. "

"You seen Tucker?"

"Just today."

"What's he say?"

"Nothin' much." I studied the ring on my finger.

Cloyd leaned back on the chair. "Clara, you best quit fooling around. I know that look. Just tell us."

"Better I show you."

Needless to say, they was all impressed with the wall and the room. Jerry jimmied the drawers of the desk open and found drawings of some of the jewelry and a couple of addresses of some people in Chicago, and then we all gasped when he opened the bottom drawer and found a whole case filled with jewels.

"Bet those are fake," I said. "More substitutions they couldn't use once they was found out."

"So it was Jenks. Wonder why?" Cloyd was lookin' through the technical books, ignoring the jewelry.

"Greed," I said. "And this was 1932. Prohibition was about to end. Jenks was more bootleg than electrician. You should see all the cases of shine in that tunnel."

"I seen enough already," said Grampa looking at the two skeletons. "I'll be upstairs."

Granny studied Mr. Tucker. "Seems to me if he's here, he had somethin' to do with it."

"Well, I got another question. Did Farley Jessup have a nickname?"

Granny considered. "Seems he did. He was a rouster. Flashy. Worked part time at the Mercantile but always seemed he had lotsa money. Had a car he liked to race around town, too. Asked me out once."

"He did?" I stared, a little too surprised for my own future good.

"Clarence and I had had a fallin' out. Clarence never could make up his mind about nothin'—still can't. Anyway, I give him back his ring and there was Farley Jessup. He was about eighteen, four years younger than me. I went for a ride in his car out by Clarence's. Next day Clarence brought back my ring and said we was to be married the next week."

"And what happened to Jessup?"

"Oh, of course Jessup tried what he could," she picked daintily at her blouse, "but I put him in his place, all right. Skid. That's what it was—Skid Jessup."

"I knew it! Jerry, you got to arrest Farley Jessup."

"For what?"

"Murder. Don't you see? He was never in Mexico. He killed

Carl Jenks and Harlan Tucker and run off with Ethel Clowers and the jewels."

Jerry sat down. "You know what, Clara? Nothing would suit me better than to arrest Jessup. He kicked my uncle off his farm. But we don't got any real proof."

Cloyd had been studyin' over by the desk and clapped his hands. "Clara! Right here is the plan for the wall on the paper stuck in this here book!" He came over to the table and moved the kerosene lamp. Right there, nice as you please, was a button. He pushed it and the wall closed. I looked at the scribble on the piece of paper and stared at Cloyd. "You are truly amazin', " I said.

Jerry had been looking at the newspaper clippings. "So you think Harlan Tucker suspected Ethel and followed her here?"

"Yes, and Jessup was already here. Mighta already shot Jenks. Way I see it, Jessup had turned Ethel against Jenks by telling her he was seein' another woman, and at the same time he started movin' in on her himself. Her letter talks about two of them playin' at that game."

"But how do you figure Jessup in the robbery?"

"Well, I ain't sure about this part. I think he started out just trying to steal Ethel, but then she told him about the jewels and he saw his chance to strike it big. He robbed the robber and then shot him in the back. That musta been the night Tucker followed them from the cave in the woods to this room—so Jessup shot him, too, gut shot, and left him here to die, the rat."

"If that's true, why didn't he get rid of the bodies when he came back?"

"Look here." I showed them the ledger. "See here, 'Ches' is Chesterville; '12,' I figure, is twelve cases of shine; 'Skid' is Jessup; and '2/24' is the date. And if you look at the desk calendar, Jenks was expecting Jessup that night. Jessup was a shine runner for Jenks. But I don't think he ever saw any entrance but the tunnel. He knew there was one from the house, but he didn't know where. Granny, Jessup come back in 1934, right?"

"I ain't rightly sure. It was at least two years."

"Well, that cave comes out right beside Willowbrook. Do you remember what that was?"

(Willowbrook didn't have willow or brook—just a bunch of pre-fab houses.)

Granny brightened. "The CCC! They was clearin' and cuttin' the forest and replanting some parts!"

I grinned. "When Farley Jessup came back, there was a CCC camp in the area of the

cave entrance. After that, with all the work they done, he couldn't find it because it was all changed."

"And," Cloyd added, excited, "Jessup probably never seen the cave except at night, because of runnin' shine."

"Right!"

"It still ain't enough," said Jerry. "We need proof. This letter ain't enough, and it's gonna be mighty hard to prove Jessup's movements fifty years ago."

Granny clucked. "It don't make sense. Why didn't Ethel tell Jessup where the secret wall was?"

"Well, in the first place, I don't think she expected him to kill Jenks, and in the second place, she might not have known how to open the wall, even though she knew where it was. Besides, that was the only thing she could hold over Jessup. Remember, he'd already killed two people."

"No wonder she started drinkin'." Granny clucked again.

"And if Farley looked for it," I continued, "he couldn't find it, but that's why he didn't want us to mess with anything in the house. I think Ethel chose that awful paper on purpose, hoping someone would find the place. And she did the closet herself; the paper only goes halfway up, her being in a wheelchair."

"Why didn't she go to the police?" asked Jerry.

"I don't think she could face the shame." I stretched, somewhere between a yawn and a sigh. "I really do feel sorry for her. She was runnin' most of her life, scared of the police and scared of Jessup. I think it was when he started runnin' around with that younger woman she decided to move in here and hope someone would find the room."

"How do you know," Cloyd considered, "that it was Jessup that killed them and not Ethel?"

I'd been afraid someone would ask that. "Well," I answered, feelin' a little embarrassed, "the only suspicion I got is that ugly wallpaper. You gotta agree it brings attention to the room. Either Ethel killed them and the guilt was eatin' at her, or Jessup killed them and she wanted it known. Whichever, I think she wanted this room found. You're right, Jerry. I ain't got proof. But listen. I do got a plan."

They sat quiet as I told them my idea, and when I was finished, Cloyd took my hand and kissed it.

"Clara, *you* are truly amazin'," he said.

Ellen Tucker looked a lot like her mama. She was about sixty-three, with soft blonde hair and kind

eyes. She was a history professor at the college over in Richfield, and when Cloyd and I called on her, I liked her right away. Her house looked like a small town library.

"Have you read all these?" I looked at her in amazement.

"Most of them, I'm afraid. That's why I'm single." She laughed.

"We thank you for seein' us . . . " Cloyd began.

"Well, I must admit, I was quite intrigued by your note. You have word of my father?"

Suddenly I wished we hadn't come, and handed her the photo.

She caught her breath and her eyes filled with tears. "I remember when this was taken," she whispered. "I was ten and got a pair of ice skates that Christmas. Papa used to call us his Norwegian beauties. My mother was an immigrant. . . . " She wiped her eyes. "I'm sorry. Where did you get this?"

I stopped a second, feeling all choked up.

"Well, Miss Tucker. . ." I stopped.

"Please. Call me Ellen. I know my father's dead, Mrs. Ca . . . Clara. I've known that since I was twelve. Papa would never have let us go through what we did. And I know something else. He didn't do it."

By now I was blubberin' a little and Cloyd was standin' there bitin' his lip and rubbing my shoulder.

"You know—" her eyes filled again. "A lot of people in Gamble's Mill thought this ruined my mother. But it didn't, really. She never lost faith in my father. And when the other children laughed behind my back—or came right out and said my papa was a thief—it was her faith that carried me through. And pretty soon I had that faith, too—'what was meant for evil was turned to good,' you know? It really made me a stronger and better person in the end."

Now we was all cryin' a little, and Ellen got us all a cup of tea and we talked about the weather while it brewed. Then the time came I was able to begin.

"We moved into this house and our bedroom had this awful wallpaper . . . "

February was over, but my pregnancy wasn't. It was on one of them early thaw-slushy days in March that Miss Ellen Tucker went to see Mr. Farley Jessup.

He shook her hand. "Miss Tucker? I'm pleased to meet you. My secretary says you wish to discuss a financial arrangement with me?"

"That is correct."

"Retirement fund? Bonds?"

"No."

"Well, then, a will perhaps?"

"No, Mr. Jessup. I want to know I will be financially secure for the rest of my days."

He laughed.

"Don't we all! What did you have in mind?"

"I have in my possession a letter from your wife."

(I guess ol' Farley turned white as a sheet.)

"My wife Louise?"

"No. Your wife Ethel. Guilt does strange things, Mr. Jessup. Perhaps you knew my father, Harlan Tucker? Your wife had some information about him."

Jessup stood and paced a little.

"My wife was very ill for a number of years before she died. She was not altogether rational."

"Let us understand each other, sir. I know my father's dead. I can't bring that back. I would like my last years to be secure."

"How secure?"

"To travel. See the world. I have heard it said you were in Mexico?"

"Many years ago. What did Ethel tell you?"

"She told me about a secret room in a house. Once used for hiding slaves, it was transformed into a warehouse for bootleg whisky. She told me about a man named Jenks and a young rouster named Skid."

"Where is this letter?"

"Safe. Ethel warned me of your tricks."

"You can't prove a thing!" Jessup spat it out viciously. Then, quieter, "How much?"

"Forty thousand dollars."

"Impossible."

Ellen stood, raising her voice a little. "Then I shall give this letter to the papers and you will know what it is like to live with a clouded reputation. You, sir, are a greedy, unscrupulous man!"

Jessup sucked through his teeth. "Don't you talk to me about scruples, lady! You're trading off on your father! I killed those two men when I was young and foolish and ambitious, but you! You are calculating and crass, for all your fine talk!"

Ellen sat down. "I had to hear you say that," she answered, and bowing her head began to cry.

Farley Jessup stared as the office door opened and Jerry Bridger, Cloyd, and I walked in. (You shoulda seen his face. It was a sight.)

"I was glad to hear you say that, too," said Jerry.

"You won't be needin' your Cherokee for a while," added Cloyd.

"I just had to get rid of that disgustin' wallpaper," I declared.

Ellen Hilda Cates was born on March 14th, weighing seven pounds and exactly two weeks late. Cloyd was actin' silly counting her fingers and toes.

"What do you think of this?" I asked him, waving my notebook in the air. "The Case of the Pregnant Detective."

"Huh! Ellie will probably grow up to be a coal miner."

"Archaeologist, maybe. You know, Cloyd, my worst fear was that I would go into labor right there in that tunnel."

"A week early? And ruin your record?"

"I ain't kiddin'. All I could think of was them newspapers at the grocery checkout with great big headlines—BABY BORN TO WOMAN BURIED ALIVE!"

"Well, it didn't happen. Hey, I got the room down there all fixed up for you. That guy Jenks may have been a nut, but he was somethin' when it came to woodworking and wiring."

"Is that whisky all gone?"

"Yeah. Busted open in the woods."

He bent over and snuggled at my neck. "There'll be a lot of drunk chipmunks for a very long time."

"I'm glad we met Ellen."

"Me, too. She acts like it ain't important that she's a college professor and I'm a grubby mech."

"It ain't. Sometimes I think we kinda shut out whole groups of people because we think we ain't their type. It ain't that they think they're better. It's that we think they think they're better."

Cloyd scratched his head. "You wanna go through that again?"

"Never mind." I hugged his arm. "Did Granny get the paper?"

Cloyd hesitated. "Well, Granny thought she could get somethin' almost like it at Herick's cheaper. Then she found this bargain . . . "

"Cloyd, you shut up!"

"It has big blue frogs with shiny red tongues and green flies and purple squirrels . . . "

At the hospital they have this rubber ring you can sit on after you have a baby. I grabbed it and whacked him upside the head.

That's how me and Cloyd got into the detective business, and if you know anything about it, it ain't a bad idea when you're in general aviation. (By the way, we got a reward for the diamond ring. It made a good down payment on the Jenks homestead.)

FICTION

Walking Fingers
by Linda Finn

Here sits Ol' Shermy basking in luxury. Who'd have thought I'd ever have a vacation like this? Sunshine on my face, and the blue-green Caribbean rolling up to the verandah, that's my reward. I earned it.

The way it came about amazes some folks, but it doesn't amaze me. I like to poke around and find out about other people's lives. I've been cleaning the Wheeler Bank in my little town of Heston for twenty years, and I know a lot of personal stuff about the employees and customers there, just from what they leave about or throw out.

Anyway, to get back to the reward. It all started the day Miss Francine Fornum retired. That little lady would have made a perfect grandmother on TV; you know, a "cookie-baker" with her white hair in a bun. But Miss Francine didn't always act like a sweet grandmother. She was snippy to me and never happy with the way I cleaned her desk.

The bank manager, Mr. Ross, planned a party for Francine that took place on Friday after closing. It was a bon voyage party, too, because Francine

Illustration by Eric Marcus

and her nephew were going on a cruise.

"Hope that nephew of yours got you both a whopping discount," Mr. Ross said. Francine's nephew, Bruce, managed the travel agency over on McCarthy. He was a confirmed bachelor, not bad looking, but I always thought he'd be better off without the hairpiece.

"He saved me enough to order a gorgeous new outfit from St. Louis," Francine said, pointing to one of the two suitcases next to her desk. "And I'm going to put it on in just a few minutes. It's summery, so I couldn't wear it all day long." That was good thinking. It was about eighteen degrees out and snowing.

Roberta and April, the tellers, offered to help Francine change, but she insisted we all go on with the party. She trotted around the corner, down the hall towards the back door to the ladies' room, and couldn't have been gone more than five minutes when it happened.

A man in a black sweatshirt and ski mask bounded out of the back corridor and waved a gun at us.

I put my hands in the air and sloshed champagne all over. Mr. Ross stuttered as he told everyone to stay calm. He and Roberta jammed the money in a bag and whispered something about the door alarm. It never did go off. After he took the money, the robber motioned to us to lie down on the floor. Then he held up one hand, meaning we were to stay there for five minutes.

I'd made the mistake of lying down on my tum, which is a big one, but I didn't dare turn over. Muzak played "Sentimental Journey," Roberta sobbed, and Mr. Ross cleared his throat. The ladies' room door squeaked but I hadn't heard the back door close yet. Francine would walk right into the fleeing robber. But no, the back door closed, the ladies' room door squeaked again, and Francine appeared, all dolled up in her new suit.

The police were quick, but of course they would have been quicker if our alarm had gone off. Turned out that Francine, whose job it was to lock both doors and turn on the alarm system, had slipped up.

"It's all my fault," she was crying when her nephew Bruce arrived to drive them to the airport in St. Louis. "I got so excited about my trip I forgot to lock the back door, and turn on the alarm. And now we've been robbed and the ship will sail without me."

"It's okay, Auntie Fran," Bruce said. "We've got insurance on the trip, and I can book us on another ship in a few weeks."

But Detective Johnson said

there was really no reason for Miss Fornum to cancel her vacation; she hadn't even seen the bank robber. Francine and Bruce thanked Johnson several times, and we all wished them a good trip as they left for their plane.

After I gave my statement to an officer, I was allowed to go on with my cleaning. I started in the men's room near the back door, scoured the sinks and toilets, and emptied the big wastecan. It seemed awfully heavy; usually it was just full of paper towels.

Down in the basement, I emptied the trash bag into a garbage can instead of straight into the incinerator. Strange. There were two big St. Louis phone books in that bag, the white and the yellow pages. I couldn't figure out what they were doing in the men's room trash can, so I carried them back upstairs with me.

Detective Johnson shook his head. "Can't think how it could have anything to do with the holdup, Shermy. Nobody'd come in to rob a bank and drop two phone books in the men's room first."

"I guess you're right, it doesn't make sense." But the whole thing bothered me. I bundled up (oh, it's so nice and warm here in the Caribbean) and went out into the cold wind. It was snowing and blowing a gale, but I lugged those phone books seven blocks home.

After settling down with a nice pot of tea, I thought about the robbery and went over those books, page by page.

It was midnight when I figured it all out. The police would think I was crazy, but there was a way to prove that I was right, and if I waited till morning, it would be too late.

I found Detective Johnson's number in Heston's slim little phone book and dialed. "I know who robbed the Wheeler Bank."

"Who is this?" He must have thought it was a crank call.

"I'm sorry, sir, it's Shermy, from the bank. I just worked it all out. You've got to come over right away."

"Listen, Shermy," he said with a yawn, "I've had a tough day. I'm sure you mean well, but it'll wait until morning."

"No, sir, it can't wait. You'll be mighty sorry if you let it wait, sir."

"All right, give me your address."

I had placemarks in the yellow pages when Johnson got to my house. "Now see, 'Roth's Resort Wear, Washington Street,' that's underlined, but doesn't tell us too much," I said. Officer Johnson was still yawning.

"Be patient, sir, you'll understand me in a minute. 'Calvin's Hair for Men,' that's got a check

mark next to it." Officer Johnson looked more awake now. "And see the travel agents' section and the airlines? Those pages are all marked up and frizzled at the edges."

Johnson's eyes were wide now. "Bruce?"

"They were his phone books. But he didn't put them in the men's room trash can." I paused for effect. Must admit I like a little drama. "She put them there."

"Who's *she?* Shermy, you'd better get down to the nitty here."

"*She* is Miss Fornum."

"So, Francine's the bank robber?"

It did sound ridiculous the way he said it. Then he scratched his ear and got up to leave, so I forgot the drama business and just blurted it all out.

"They both are—Francine and her nephew Bruce. And if you can get them stopped before they leave the country, you'll find a suitcase stuffed full of money with them.

"See, sir, Francine forgot to turn on the alarm system and lock the back door on purpose. She and Bruce did some careful timing, and he came in the back door after she went to the ladies' to change. She handed him the black sweatshirt and mask and took his coat in with her. After he robbed the bank, he threw the money bag and his costume into the ladies'. She passed his coat back, and he walked right down the alley and back to his office."

"Whew, Shermy." He was looking at me with admiration now. "But where do the phone books come in?"

"Ballast."

"Ballast? So, Francine was bringing her own for the ship?" He grinned at me.

"Francine needed an empty suitcase for the money, but she couldn't leave it empty all day. Someone might pick it up. Like me, to clean around her desk. So she put Bruce's old phone books in it, and before she went to change, she threw them in the men's room trash can; that way they wouldn't be connected with her. The other suitcase would be for the dress she wore to work and Bruce's robber's costume, but that was okay without books because she had her new outfit in it, and . . ."

I didn't need to say any more; Detective Johnson was on the phone to St. Louis. That was the only snowstorm I ever loved. Francine and Bruce had tickets for Argentina, but they never got off the ground. And they had the suitcase full of money with them, just like I figured.

I don't have a suitcase full, and this vacation is only for two weeks. But it's enough. It's proved the value of poking around.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Weight and See

by Cyril Hare

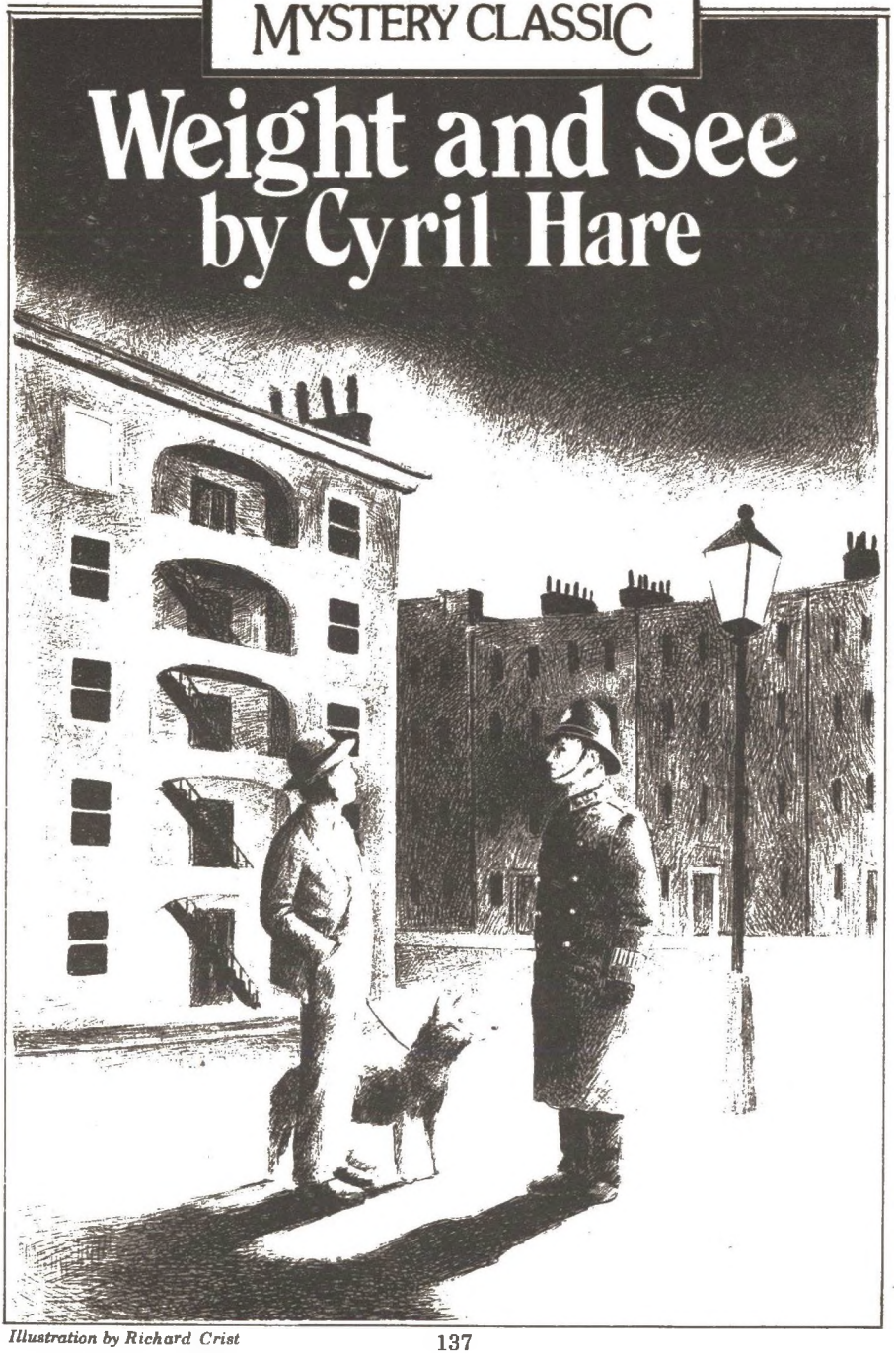


Illustration by Richard Crist

Detective-Inspector Mallett of the C.I.D. was a very large man. He was not only tall above the average, but also broad in more than just proportion to his height, while his weight was at least proportionate to his breadth. Whether, as his colleagues at New Scotland Yard used to assert, his bulk was due to the enormous meals which he habitually consumed, or whether, as the inspector maintained, the reason for his large appetite was that so big a frame needed more than a normal man's supply for its sustenance, was an open question. What was not open to doubt was Mallett's success in his calling. But if anybody was ever bold enough to suggest that his success might have been even greater but for the handicap of his size, he would merely smile sweetly and remark that there had been occasions when on the contrary he had found it a positive advantage. Pressed to further and better particulars, he might, if in an expansive mood, go so far as to say that he could recall at least one case in which he had succeeded where a twelve-stone man would have failed.

This is the story of that case. It is not, strictly speaking, a case of detection at all, since the solution depended ultimately on the chance application of avoirdupois rather than the deliberate application of intelligence. Nonetheless, it was a case which Mallett himself was fond of recollecting, if only because of the way in which that recollection served to salve his conscience whenever thereafter he fell to the temptation of a second helping of suet pudding.

The story begins, so far as the police are concerned, at about seven o'clock on a fine morning in early summer, when a milkman on his round came out of the entrance of Clarence Mansions, S.W.11, just as a police constable happened to be passing.

"Morning," said the constable.

"Morning," said the milkman.

The constable moved on. The milkman stood watching him, two powerful questions conflicting in his breast. On the one hand, it was an article of faith with him that one whose work takes him to other people's houses at a time when most of the world is only beginning to wake up should never poke his nose into other people's business; on the other, he felt just now a craving, new-born but immensely powerful, not to be left out of the adventure which some sixth sense told him was afoot. The constable was almost out of earshot before the issue was decided.

"Oy!" shouted the milkman.

The officer turned round majestically.

"What is it?" he asked.

The milkman jerked his thumb in the direction of the block of flats behind him.

"I don't know," he said, "but I think there's something queer up there."

"Where?"

"Number 32, top floor."

"How d'you mean, queer?"

"The dog up there is carrying on something awful—barking and scratching at the door."

"Well, what of it?"

"Oh, nothing, but it's a bit queer, that's all. It's a quiet dog as a rule."

"They've gone out and left him in, I suppose."

"Well, if they 'ave, they've left a light on as well."

The constable looked up at the windows of the top story.

"There *is* a light on in one of the rooms," he observed. "Seems funny, a fine morning like this." He considered the matter slowly. "Might as well go up and see, I suppose. They'll be having the neighbors complaining about that dog. I can hear it from here."

With the milkman in attendance, he tramped heavily up the stairs—Clarence Mansions boast no lift—to the top floor. Outside Number 32 stood the pint bottle of milk which had just been left there. He rang the bell. There was no reply, except a renewed outburst of barks from the dog within.

"Are they at home, d'you know?" he asked.

" 'S far as I know. I 'ad me orders to deliver, same as usual."

"Who are the people?"

"Wellman, the name is. A little fair chap with a squint. There's just the two of them and the dog."

"I know him," said the policeman. "Seen him about often. Passed the time of day with him. Didn't know he was married, though."

"She never goes out," the milkman explained. "He told me about her once. Used to be a trapeze artist in a circus. 'Ad a fall, and crippled for good. Can't even get in or out of bed by 'erself, so he says."

"Oh?" said the constable. "Well, if that's so, perhaps—" He sucked his cheeks and frowned perplexedly. "All the same, you can't go and break into a place just because the dog's howling and someone's left the light on. I think I'd best go and report this before I do anything."

The milkman was looking down the staircase.

"Someone coming up," he announced. "It's Mr. Wellman all right," he added, as a rather flushed, unshaven face appeared on the landing below.

The constable put on his official manner at once.

"Mr. Wellman, sir?" he said. "There have been complaints of your dog creating a disturbance here this morning. Also I observe that there is a light on in one of your rooms. Would you be good enough to—"

"That's all right, officer," Wellman interrupted him. "I was kept out last night. Quite unexpected. Sorry about the dog and all that."

He fished a latchkey from his pocket, opened the door, and went in, shutting it behind him. The other two, left outside with the milk bottle for company, heard him speak softly to the dog, which immediately became quiet. In the silence they could hear his footsteps down the passage which evidently led away from the front door. They looked at each other blankly. The policeman said "Well," the milkman was already preparing to go back to his round, when the steps were heard returning, there was the sound of the door of a room nearby being opened, and then Mr. Wellman was out of the flat, his face white, his eyes staring, crying, "Come here, quick! Something awful has happened!"

"But this," said Mallett, "is odd. Very odd indeed."

He sat in the office of the divisional detective-inspector, meditatively turning over a sheaf of reports.

"Odd is the word for it," the D.D.I. replied. "You see, on the one hand there seems no doubt that the lady was alive at nine o'clock—"

"Let me see if I've got the story straight," said Mallett. "Mrs. Wellman is found dead in her bed at about seven o'clock in the morning by her husband, in the presence, very nearly, of a police officer and another man. She has been killed by a blow on the back of the head from a blunt instrument. The doctor thinks that death occurred about seven to eleven hours previously—say between eight o'clock and midnight the night before. He thinks also—in fact he's pretty sure—that the blow would produce instantaneous death, or at all events instantaneous unconsciousness. There are no signs of forcible entry into the flat, and Mrs. Wellman was a cripple, so the possibility of her getting out of bed to let anybody in is out of the question. Am I right so far?"

"Quite correct."

"In these circumstances the husband quite naturally falls under suspicion. He is asked to account for his movements overnight, and

up to a point he seems quite willing to do so. He says that he put his wife to bed at about a quarter to nine, took the dog out for a short run—What sort of a dog is it, by the way?"

"An Alsatian. It seems to be a good-tempered, intelligent sort of beast."

"He takes the Alsatian out for a short run, returns it to the flat without going into his wife's room, and then goes out again. That's his story. He says most positively that he never came back to the place until next morning when the constable and the milkman saw him going in. Asked whether he has any witnesses to prove his story, he says that he spoke to the constable on night duty, whom he met just outside Clarence Mansions on his way out, and he further gives the names of two friends whom he met at the Green Dragon public house, half a mile from Clarence Mansions—"

"Seven hundred and fifty yards from Clarence Mansions."

"I'm much obliged. He met his two pals there at about a quarter past nine, and stayed there till closing time. He went from the public house with one of them to the nearest tram stop, and took a Number 31 tram going east, or away from Clarence Mansions. His friend went with him on the tram as far as the next fare stage, where he got off, leaving Wellman on the tram, still going away from home. Is that all clear so far?"

"Quite."

"Further than that Wellman wouldn't help us. He said he'd spent the rest of the night in a little hotel somewhere down Hackney way. Why he should have done so he didn't explain, and when asked for the name of the place he couldn't give it. He thought it had a red and green carpet in the hall, but that's all he could remember about it. The suggestion was, I gather, that he was too drunk to notice things properly when he got to the hotel, and was suffering from a bit of a hangover next morning."

"He certainly was when I saw him."

"Things begin to look rather bad for Master Wellman. They look even worse when we find out a few things about him. It seems that he hasn't a job, and hasn't had one for a very long time. He married his wife when she was traveling the country as a trapeze artist in a small circus, in which he was employed as electrician and odd-job man. When a rope broke and she was put out of the circus business for good, her employers paid her a lump sum in compensation. He has been living on that ever since. His accounts show that he has got through it pretty quickly, and it's odds on that she had been wanting to know where it had gone to. It's not very hard

to see a motive for getting rid of her."

"The motive's there all right," said the divisional inspector, "but—"

"But," Mallett went on. "Here's where our troubles begin.—Wellman is detained for enquiries, and the enquiries show that his story, so far as it goes, is perfectly true. He did meet his pals at the Green Dragon. They and the publican are positive on that point, and they bear out his story in every particular. Therefore, if he killed his wife it must have been before a quarter past nine or after half past ten, which was approximately the time when he was last seen on the Number 31 tram. But Mrs. Wellman was alive when he left Clarence Mansions, because—"

He pulled out one of the statements before him.

" 'Statement of Police Constable Denny,' " he read. " 'At approximately nine o'clock P.M. I was on duty in Imperial Avenue opposite Clarence Mansions when I saw Wellman. He had his dog with him. We had a short conversation. He said, "I've just been giving my dog a run." I said, "It's a nice dog." He said, "I bought it for my wife's protection, but it's too goodnatured for a watchdog." He went into Clarence Mansions and came out again almost at once. He had a small bag in his hand. I said, "Going out again, Mr. Wellman?" He said, "Yes. Have you seen my pals about anywhere?" I informed him that I did not know his pals, and he replied, "I expect they're gone on ahead." He then said, "I'm waiting to see if the wife has turned in yet." I looked up at the windows of Clarence Mansions, and there was a light in one of the windows on the top story—the window to the left of the staircase as you look at it. I have since learned that that is the window of the bedroom of Number 32. As I was looking, the light was extinguished. Wellman said to me, "That's all right, I can get along now." We had a bit of a joke about it. He then went away, and I proceeded on my beat. At approximately ten thirty P.M. I had occasion to pass Clarence Mansions again. There were then no lights visible in the top story. I did not pass the Mansions again until on my way back from duty at approximately six fifteen A.M. I then observed that the same light was on, but I gave the matter no thought at the time.' "

Mallett put down the statement with a sigh.

"What sort of a man is Denny?" he asked.

"Very intelligent and observant," was the reply. "One of the best uniformed men I have. And not too blooming educated, if you follow me."

"Very well. We have it then on his evidence that Mrs. Wellman,

or somebody else in the flat, extinguished the light at a little after nine o'clock, and that somebody turned it on again between ten thirty and six fifteen. I suppose Mrs. Wellman could turn it off and on herself, by the way?"

"Undoubtedly. It was a bedside lamp, and she had the full use of her arms."

"Therefore," Mallett went on, "we are now driven to this—that Wellman killed his wife—if he killed her—after ten thirty, when he was last seen on the tram, and before midnight, which is the latest time which the doctor thinks reasonably possible. Then comes the blow. To test Wellman's story, for what it is worth, we have made enquiries in Hackney to see if we can find a hotel of the kind that wouldn't mind taking in a gentleman the worse for liquor, with a red and green carpet in the hall, and handy to the Number 31 tram route. And the very first place we try, we not only find that they remember Mr. Wellman there but are extremely anxious to see him again. They tell us that he came to their place about half past eleven—which is the time you would expect if he left the neighborhood of the Green Dragon by tram an hour before—persuaded whoever it was who was still up at that hour to give him a room, and next morning was seen going out at six o'clock remarking that he was going to get a shave. He never came back—"

"And he never got that shave," interjected the D.D.I.

"True enough. And when the hotel people opened his bag—which Police Constable Denny has identified, incidentally—it contained precisely nothing. So—"

"So we packed him off to the Hackney police to answer a charge of obtaining credit by fraud and asked the Yard to tell us what to do next."

"In other words, you want me to fix this crime onto somebody who has to all appearances a perfect alibi for it."

"That's just it," said the divisional inspector in all seriousness. "If only the blighter had had anything on him that could have been used as a weapon!"

" 'On Wellman,' " said Mallett, reading from another sheet of the reports, " 'were found a pencil, a small piece of cork, a pocketknife, two shillings silver, and sixpence halfpenny bronze.' Why," he continued, "do we have to go on saying 'bronze' when all the rest of the world says 'copper,' by the way? But the weapon—he could have taken that away in his bag and disposed of it anywhere between here and Hackney easily enough. We shall be lucky if we ever lay our hands on that. The alibi is our trouble. From nine

o'clock onwards it seems unbeatable. Therefore he must have killed his wife before nine. But if he did, who was it that turned the light off in her room? I suppose the dog might have done it—knocked the lamp over, or something?"

"There's no trace of the dog having been in the room all night," said the other. "His footprints are quite plain on the carpet in the corridor, and I've been over the bedroom carpet carefully without any result. Also, there seems no doubt that the bedroom door was shut next morning. Wellman was heard to unlatch it. Besides, if the dog turned the light off, how did he turn it on again?"

Mallett considered.

"Have you tested the fuses?" he asked.

"Yes, and they are in perfect order. There's no chance of a temporary fault causing the light to go off and on again. And Wellman was waiting for the light to go off when he was talking to Denny."

"Then," said Mallett, "we've got to work on the assumption that someone else got into the flat that night."

"Without disturbing the dog?"

"A goodnatured dog," Mallett pointed out.

"But there are no signs of any entry whatever. I've looked myself, and some of my best men have been on the job."

"But I haven't looked yet," said Mallett.

Number 32 Clarence Mansions was exactly like all the other flats in the block, and indeed in Imperial Avenue, so far as its internal arrangements were concerned. Three very small rooms, looking onto the avenue, opened out of the corridor which ran from the front door. Three still smaller rooms opened out of another corridor at right angles to the first, and enjoyed a view of the back of the Mansions in the next block. At the junction of the two corridors the gloom of the interior was mitigated by a skylight, the one privilege possessed by the top-story flats and denied to the rest of the block. The bedroom in which Mrs. Wellman had died was the room nearest the entrance.

Mallett did not go into this room until he had first carefully examined the door and the tiny hall immediately inside it.

"There are certainly no marks on the lock," he said at last. Then, looking at the floor, he asked, "What is this powdery stuff down here?"

"Dog biscuit," was the reply. "The animal seems to have had his supper here. There's his water bowl in the corner, too, by the umbrella stand."

"But he slept over *there,*" said Mallett, nodding to the farther end of the corridor, where underneath the skylight was a large circular basket, lined with an old rug.

They went into the bedroom. The body had been removed, but otherwise nothing in it had been touched since the discovery of the tragedy. On its dingy walls hung photographs of acrobats, dancers, and clowns, and the framed program of a Command Variety performance—memorials of the trapeze artist's vanished career. The crumpled pillow bore a single shapeless stain of darkened blood. On a bedside table was a cheap electric lamp. Mallett snapped it on and off.

"That doesn't look as if it had been knocked over," he remarked. "Did you notice the scratches on the bottom panel of the door, by the way? It seems as though the dog had been trying to get in from the passage."

He went over to the sash window and subjected it to a prolonged scrutiny.

"No," he said. "Definitely, no. Now let's look at the rest of the place."

He walked down the corridor until he reached the skylight.

"I suppose somebody could have got through here," he observed.

"But he would have come down right on top of the dog," the D.D.I. objected.

"True. That would have been a bit of a strain for even the quietest animal. Still, there's no harm in looking."

He kicked aside the sleeping basket and stood immediately beneath the skylight.

"The light's in my eyes, and I can't see the underside of the frame properly," he complained, standing on tiptoe and peering upwards. "Just turn on the electric light, will you? I said, turn on the light," he repeated in a louder tone.

"It is on," was the reply, "but nothing's happened. The bulb must have gone."

"Has it?" said Mallett, stepping across to the hanging light that swung within a foot of his head. As he did so, the lamp came on.

"Curiouser and curiouser! Switch it off again. Now come and stand where I was."

They changed places, and Mallett depressed the switch. The light was turned on at once.

"Are you sure you're standing in the same place?"

"Quite sure."

"Then jump!"

"What?"

"Jump. As high as you can, and come down as hard as you can."

The inspector sprang into the air, and his heels hit the floor with a crash. At that instant, the light flickered, went out and then came on once more.

"Splendid!" said Mallett. "Now look between your feet. Do you see anything?"

"There's a little round hole in the floorboard here. That's all."

"Does the board seem at all loose to you?"

"Yes, it does. Quite a bit. But that's not surprising after what I've done to it."

"Let me see it."

Mallett went down on hands and knees and found the hole of which the other had spoken. It was quite small—hardly more than a fault in the wood, but its edges were sharp and clear. It was near to one end of the board. That end was completely unsecured, the other was lightly nailed down. He produced a knife and inserted the blade into the hole. Then, using his knife as a lever, he found that he could pull the board up on its end, as though upon a hinge.

"Look!" he said, and pointed down into the cavity beneath.

On the joist on which the loose end of the board had rested was a small, stiff, coiled spring, just large enough to keep that end a fraction above the level of the surrounding floor. But what chiefly attracted the attention of the two men was not on the joist itself but a few inches to one side. It was an ordinary electric bell-push, such as might be seen on any front door in Imperial Avenue.

"Do you recollect what Wellman's job was, when he had a job?" asked Mallett.

"He worked in the circus as odd-job man, and—good Lord, yes!—electrician."

"Just so. Now watch!"

He put his finger on the bell-push. The light above their heads went out. He released it, and the light came on again.

"Turn on another light," said Mallett. "Any light, I don't care which. In the sitting room, if you like. Now . . ." He depressed the button once more. "Does it work?"

"Yes."

"Of course it does," he cried triumphantly, rising to his feet and dusting the knees of his trousers. "The whole thing's too simple for words. The main electric lead of the flat runs under this floor. All Wellman has done is to fit a simple attachment to it, so that when the bell-push is pressed down the circuit is broken and the current

turned off. The dog's basket was on this board. That meant that when the dog lay down, out went the light in the bedroom—and any other light that happened to be on, only he took care to see that there wasn't any other light on. When the dog begins to get restless in the morning and goes down the passage to see what's the matter—you said he was an intelligent dog, didn't you?—on comes the light again. And anybody in the street outside, seeing the lamp extinguished and lighted again, would be prepared to swear that there was somebody alive in the room to manipulate the lamp. Oh, it really is ingenious!"

"But—" the divisional inspector objected.

"Yes?"

"But the light didn't go off when I was standing there."

"How much do you weigh?"

"Eleven stone seven."

"And I'm—well, quite a bit more than that. That's why. You see, there's a fraction of space between the board and the bell-push, and you couldn't quite force the board far enough down to make it work, except when you jumped. I had the advantage over you there," he concluded modestly.

"But hang it all," protested the other, "I may not be a heavyweight, but I do weigh more than a dog. If I couldn't do the trick, how on earth could he? It doesn't make sense."

"On Wellman," said Mallett reflectively, "were found a pencil, a small piece of cork, a pocketknife, two shillings silver, and sixpence halfpenny bronze. Have you observed that the little hole in the board is directly above the button of the bell-push?"

"Yes. I see now that it is."

"Very well. If the small piece of cork doesn't fit into that hole, I'll eat your station sergeant's helmet. That's all."

"So that when the cork is in the hole—"

"When the hole is plugged, the end of the cork is resting on the bell-push. It then needs only the weight of the basket, plus the weight of the dog, to depress the spring, which keeps the end of the board up, and the cork automatically works the bell-push. Now we can see what happened. Wellman rigged up this contraption in advance—an easy matter for an experienced electrician. Then, on the evening which he had chosen for the crime, he put his wife to bed, killed her, with the coal hammer most probably—if you search the flat I expect you will find it missing—and shut the door of the bedroom, leaving the bedside lamp alight. He next inserted the cork in the hole of the board and replaced the dog's basket on top.

With a couple of dog biscuits in his pocket, he then took the dog out for a run. He kept it out until he saw Police Constable Denny outside the flats. Probably he had informed himself of the times when the officer on duty could be expected to appear there, and made his arrangements accordingly. Having had a word with Denny, he slipped upstairs and let the dog into the flat. But before he came downstairs again he took care to give the dog his biscuits in the hall. It would never have done if the light had been put out before he was out of the building, and he left the dog something to keep him the other end of the passage for a moment or two. He knew that the dog, as soon as he had eaten his supper and had a drink of water, would go and lie down in his basket. I expect he had been trained to do it. Alsatians are teachable animals, they tell me. Down in the street he waited until the dog had put the light out for him, and called Denny's attention to the fact. His alibi established, off he went. But he had to get back next morning to remove that bit of cork. Otherwise the next person who trod on the board might give his secret away. So we find that when he came to the flat the first thing he did was to go down the corridor—before ever he went into the bedroom. That little bit of evidence always puzzled me. Now we know what he was doing. He was a fool not to throw the cork away, of course, but I suppose he thought that nobody would think of looking at that particular place. So far as he knew, nothing could work the lights if the cork wasn't in place. He thought he was safe.

"And," Mallett concluded, "he would have been safe, too, if there hadn't been that little extra bit of weight put on the board. He couldn't be expected to foresee *me.*"

Which explains, if it does not excuse, the slight but unmistakable touch of condescension with which Inspector Mallett thereafter used to treat his slimmer and slighter brethren.

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY "UNSOLVED":

Nat is the left fielder.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

AMANDA CROSS

A quick and casual survey of friends and family has confirmed a long-held suspicion that everyone (or so it seems) once had a teacher whom he admired without reservation. Mine was a high school history teacher, a woman of great stature, with wit and a sense of humor to match. Over the years, I have undoubtedly idealized her and all her "perfect teacher" qualities, and I could probably feature her as a prominent character in a novel (should I ever write one). Perhaps that is how Amanda Cross's sleuth, Professor Kate Fansler, first came into being. Perhaps the author based this delightful character on a favorite old teacher. Or perhaps Kate Fansler resembles the author herself, for Amanda Cross is actually Carolyn G. Heilbrun, professor of English at Columbia University in New York, an institution that closely resembles the unnamed university in which Kate Fansler teaches.

In *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers* (John M. Reilly, editor, St. Martin's Press), Amanda Cross describes herself as "that apparently rare anomaly, an individual who likes courtesy and intelligence, but would like to see the end of reaction, stereotyped sex-roles, and convention that arises from the fear of change, and the anxiety change brings. I loathe violence, and do not consider

sex a spectator sport. I like humor, but fear unkindness, and the cruelty of power." As she explains further: "One day Kate Fansler, therefore, sprang from my brain to counter these things I loathe, to talk all the time, occasionally with wit, and to offer to those who like it the company of people I consider civilized, and a plot, feeble, perhaps, but reflecting a moral universe." As a reader of the six Kate Fansler mysteries, I can vouch for the author's successful execution of her original intentions.

If you haven't met this rare academic sleuth in your reading, I suggest you seek her out. Kate Fansler, like her creator, hates violence, ignorance, prejudice, and recklessness. She is a professor of Victorian literature, the product of several elite schools *(The Theban Mysteries,* 1971, is set in her old alma mater), and highly respected by her academic colleagues. She is a feminist, but independent of that or any other "movement." When she marries, she is past her youth. Her relationship with Reed Amhearst, a New York D.A., involved a long-standing friendship that ripened into a deep and mature love. Reed's continuing presence in the later books is a pleasure, as is his conversation with his wife. In fact, the dialogue in all the novels is a joy.

Don't look for fast-paced action in these books, but don't underrate the plots either. There's a murder in each, and a problem to puzzle out. There are also oodles of quirky characters, literary quotes, and satisfying peeks into the "ivory towers" of American academia. These aren't "literary" mysteries in the sense that one has to have a degree in comparative lit to ferret out the truth about the crime. Instead, they are lively and literate, and lovely fun for anyone who appreciates the uses of the English language in the mouths of its masters.

In the Last Analysis (1964) introduced Kate Fansler, who has subsequently solved murders in *The James Joyce Murder* (1967), *Poetic Justice* (1970), *The Theban Mysteries* (1971), *The Question of Max* (1976), and *Death in a Tenured Position* (1981). I urge you to make the acquaintance of Kate Fansler and her academic cronies. But I warn you: your well-remembered favorite teacher may pale by comparison.

(Early Amanda Cross mysteries were published in hardcover by Macmillan, while the later novels are to be found under the imprints of Alfred A. Knopf and Dutton. Both Avon and Ballantine have a few of the titles available in paperback.)

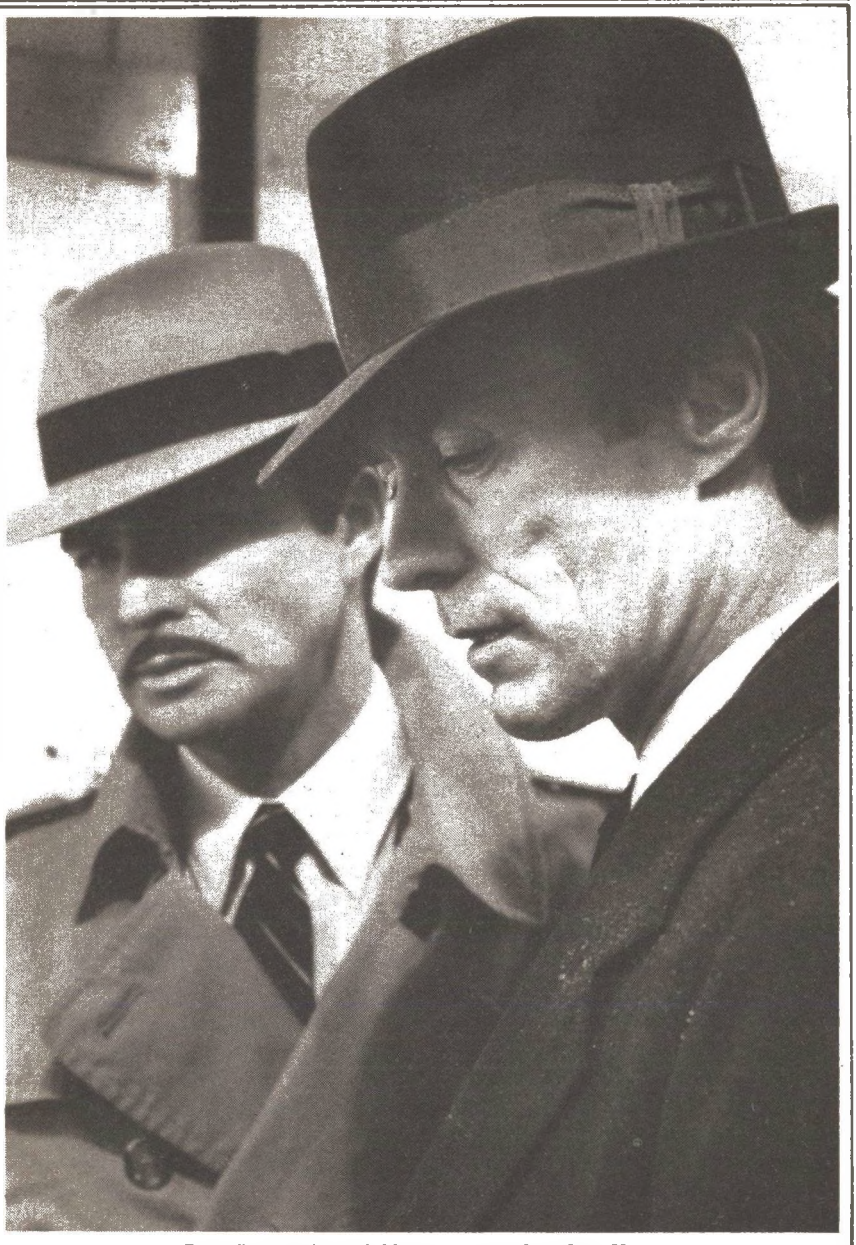
MYSTERY REVIEWS

Laurie Mantell's **Murder and Chips** (Walker British Mystery, $2.95, 157 pp.) is set in New Zealand and stars Detective Sergeant Steven Arrow and his boss, Jonas Peacock. Not only is the New Zealand stuff fascinating, but Mantell has deftly woven two apparently separate incidents into a tightly-plotted police procedural. Characters are strongly drawn, and the murders—and their solutions—intriguing.

Actor George Kennedy has written another delightful mystery starring himself and a fictional ex-N.Y.C. cop-turned-actor. **Murder on High** (Avon Books, $3.25, 208 pp.) mixes up Hollywood types (on location making *Airport: The Middle East)* with a wounded pro-American sheik. The group is sharing the sheik's private jet as it wings toward L.A., returning the movie folks home and rushing the prince to emergency surgery. Then someone starts bumping the passengers off in mid-air. Kennedy has a good sense of humor, and the behind-the-camera movie stuff is fun. Good reading for a dreary winter day.

Banquets of the Black Widowers (Doubleday, $13.95, 212 pp.) is another collection of Isaac Asimov's short stories featuring the six elderly gentlemen and their invaluable waiter, Henry—all members of the Black Widowers, a private mystery club. Here are ten tales reprinted from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* and two new ones written for the collection. The framework is always the same: the members meet at the elegant Milano Restaurant in New York City, and usually prise a puzzling tale out of their guest for that evening. Asimov refers to his plots as "gimmickry," but I'd call them just plain fun. And his brief afterword that follows each story is as delightful as the tale itself. Perfect bedtime reading, especially "The Good Samaritan" and "The Wrong House."

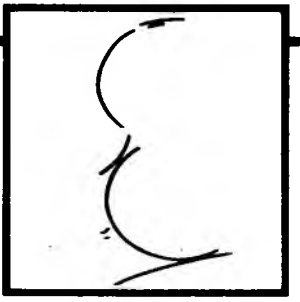
Bill Pronzini authors a series featuring the "Nameless Detective," and **Quicksilver** is the newest. The setting is San Francisco, and Nameless takes his last solo case with little enthusiasm for its proving interesting. Alas, he's dead wrong: the gifts a puzzled young woman has been receiving from an unknown admirer prove to be linked up to some pretty gruesome murders. (St. Martin's Press, $11.95, 151 pp.)



Burt Reynolds and Clint Eastwood in *City Heat*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



Strictly speaking, **City Heat** is a private eye comedy-adventure. But when Hollywood's two biggest stars, Clint Eastwood and Burt Reynolds, combine their personal production companies and set out to exploit their respective mystiques on screen, the result is more correctly termed a "sensation" or a "blockbuster" or, "box office dynamite."

Eastwood is a police lieutenant with no visible relationship to the law enforcement profession. He simply drives about town shooting and beating up on criminals—this in the course of tailing his former partner on the force, Burt Reynolds, who's now a private eye. When the two run into one another, they trade insults calculated to delight an audience that knows they will turn out to be buddies again. Reynolds is on the trail of his new partner, played by Richard Roundtree, who gets himself involved with both black and Italian gangsters and is killed off early in the movie. Luckily for Reynolds, who is kept busy flashing his million dollar smile and delivering the script's succession of laugh lines, there are no false leads or ambiguous clues to worry over. As for Eastwood, he shows up at the right times and places thanks solely to the dispensations of the same script.

Considerable writing and production skills went into the making of *City Heat*. The dialogue can be playfully literate, as when Eastwood is referred

to as "stealthy" and Reynolds as "agile," or when Eastwood talks to a gangster about others of his "ilk" and then asks him if he knows what the term means. "Yeah, a big deer" is the reply. (The dictionary reveals that the expression "of that ilk," when used to mean "of that kind," is actually based on a misusage. For it seems that "ilk" originally meant of the same *name,* not of the same *type.)*

City Heat is shot in soft nostalgic color to capture the feel of the Depression year represented by a billboard advertising James Cagney in *Public Enemy* and by a movie marquee advertising the Marx brothers in *Horsefeathers* along with *Golddiggers of 1933.* Most impressive are the vintage cars of the era, especially the gangsters' Cadillac with maroon sidepanels. The screen is full of cars throughout, and one winces more when they crash into one another or get shot up than when the movie's characters get hurt.

In fact, though, Richard Roundtree proves to be the only really vulnerable good guy on the scene. He doubles over when hit in the solar plexus and dies when he is shot. In contrast, Eastwood and Reynolds repeatedly emerge without a scratch between them even though they take numerous shots right on the snoot, and stand up to both nine-millimeter handguns and tommy guns. If *City Heat* isn't quite a cartoon, it can be described as a combination of *The Sting* movies with their lighthearted, wiseacre chatter and *Pennies from Heaven* with its slick but merely decorative reproductions of Depression era settings. As for *Horsefeathers,* from which a few scenes are shown in the background when Reynolds meets an endangered nightclub singer at the Roxy, the Marx brothers' mugging at the audience stands as another, perhaps unintended, comparison. For neither Eastwood nor Reynolds bothers to act. Their fans, after all, know who they are from other movies.

City Heat, then, is a concoction in which lavish and expensive attention has been paid to the ingredients: New York streets, a period private eye office, as convincing a batch of gangster torpedoes as one could hope to see, sheets of rain in the downtown Manhattan night. But as for the pie that comes out when these are all mixed together, it has the consistency of a thing baked strictly to be pushed in someone's face.

THE STORY THAT WON

Arthur Tress

The November Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Robert S. Hudson of Anderson, South Carolina. Honorable mentions go to Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California; D. Horton of Ross, Ohio; Tina Floyd of Cochran, Georgia; Scott and Rosemary Harshbarger of San Francisco, California; C. L. Zebrowski of Spencer, Massachusetts; Billie Broomfield of Clifton Springs, New York; Stuart Brynien of Brooklyn, New York; Mary Steele of Grinnell, Iowa; Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa; Mary Ann Hanada of Portland, Oregon; and Gil Anderson of Barstow, California.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT? by Robert S. Hudson

Farnsworth was not totally to blame; his wife had a hand in it, too. After all, she had bought the book that gave him the idea; he had never read Poe before. And it was her incessant reading that made him do it.

You'd think she lived for books alone. While he was off to stonemason's school, she read. While he was gathering materials, she read. While he was building the wall, she read. As far as she was concerned, Farnsworth didn't exist. And, now that she was sealed inside the basement wall, she read.

It seemed to be a comfortable enough arrangement. For the two years she had been down there he had brought her new books every Friday afternoon, which he passed through a tiny opening in the wall. She seemed content with her books, and he and his new live-in were very content with her absence from the upstairs living quarters.

But two things bothered Farnsworth a little: he never gave his wife anything except her books, and his new live-in was starting to scan the upstairs library.

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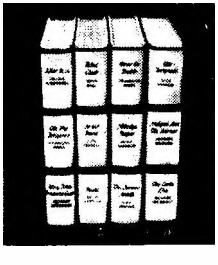

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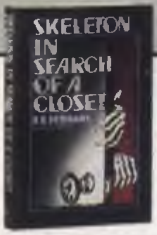

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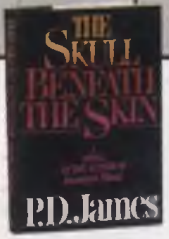

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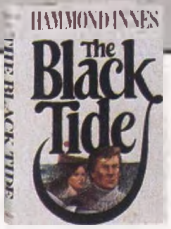

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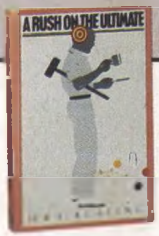

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