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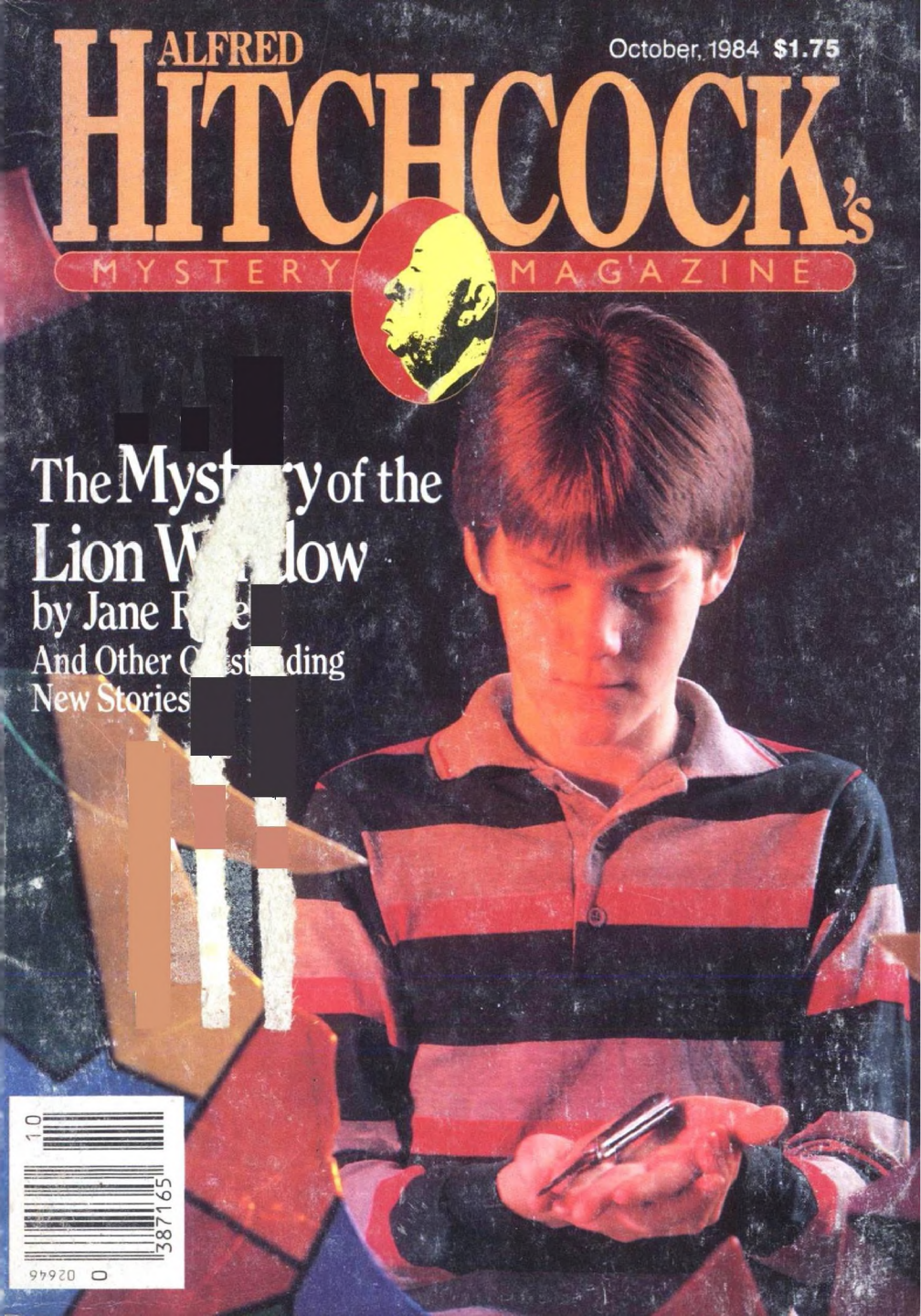
by Jane R[illegible]e

And Other O[illegible]st[illegible]ding New Stories



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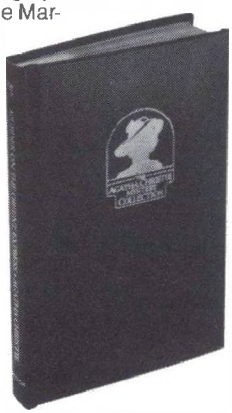

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In this issue we are welcoming a number of writers to AHMM's pages, and we have discovered enough about some of them to be able to pronounce them a varied group indeed. Jane Rice, author of our cover story, "The Mystery of the Lion Window," has been published in such magazines as the *Ladies' Home Journal, Collier's, Cosmopolitan, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction,* and *McCall's*—but this is her first mystery. She paints, is widely traveled, makes her home in the South, likes movies and flea markets, and collects old bottles.

Chet Williamson, author of the eerie tale "Season Pass," has also been published in F&SF, as well as *The New Yorker, Playboy, Twilight Zone,* and *Games,* and also collects things: "pulp magazines, and writers like Hammett and Chandler." He is a former actor and present writer and producer of business theater for conventions, and has a special affection for baseball. "Gandhi at the Bat," his *New Yorker* story, will be part of a new Hal Prince musical.

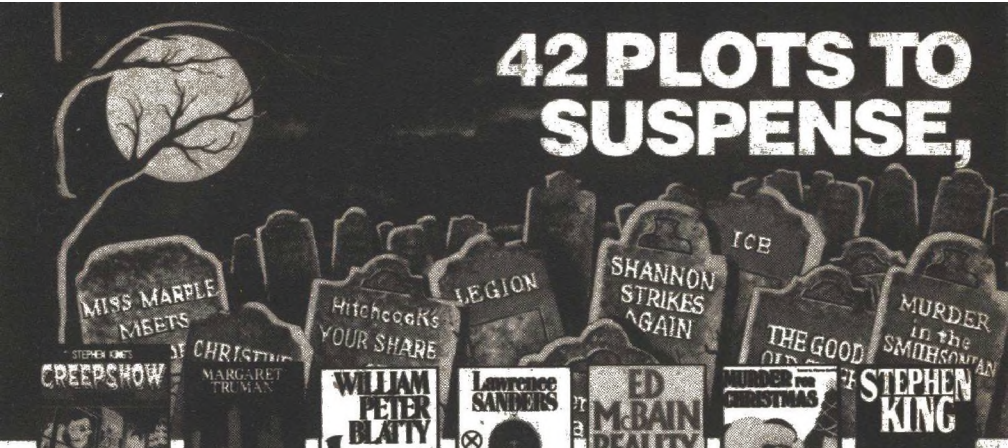
Thomas Berdine ("The Bystander") is a social worker, the father of five children, and lives with his family on a farm in Oregon. Jack Connor ("Jailbait") is a teacher of writing and author of a number of nonfiction pieces, some of them having to do with birding.

But Missourian Robert Chesmore, author of "Twins," may top everybody: he tells us he "traveled about Minnesota and Wisconsin with a banjo player and a one-eyed dog during the Depression, playing little clubs." He is presently a dance band pianist and piano teacher and author of some half dozen mystery stories appearing in *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine.*

A number of the above stories have something in common, however different they—and their authors—may be, and that is the surprise ending, a favorite Hitchcock device, as everyone knows. The "twist" ending, as it's often called, isn't all that easy to bring off—though lots of people try—but practically everyone seems to like reading a story that contains one. Which has reminded us of a photograph we turned up one day while on the lookout for Mysterious Photographs, one it seemed to us we had a special

(continued on page 6)

42 PLOTS TO SUSPENSE,



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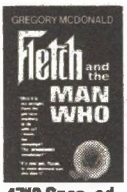

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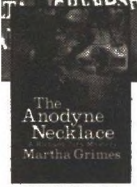

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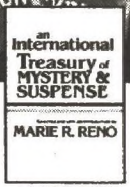

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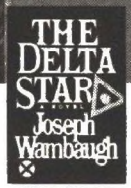

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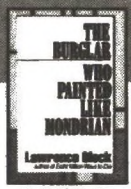

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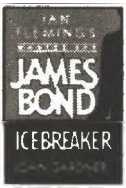

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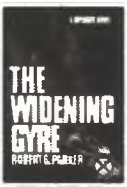

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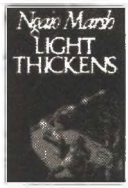

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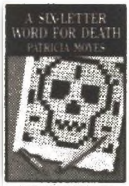

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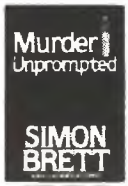

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(continued from page 2)

reason to enjoy. Even trees, it appears, like to have a shot at twist endings from time to time!

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Some notes about things going on around the country in the mystery field:

A new mystery bookstore has opened in Atlanta, Ga., The Science Fiction & Mystery Book Shop, Ltd., at 752½ North Highland Avenue NE. They have, they say, "the widest selection of mystery, detective, adventure, horror, thriller, science fiction and fantasy titles in the southeast." If you're in that part of the world, you might want to inspect their wares.

For fans of Elizabeth Linington (a.k.a. Lesley Egan and Dell Shannon), a new quarterly newsletter, *Linington Lineup,* devoted to her work. It is edited by Rinehart S. Potts, a longtime acquaintance of the author's; a one-year's subscription is $12. Send your check to Mr. Potts at 1223 Glen Terrace, Glassboro, N.J. 08028.

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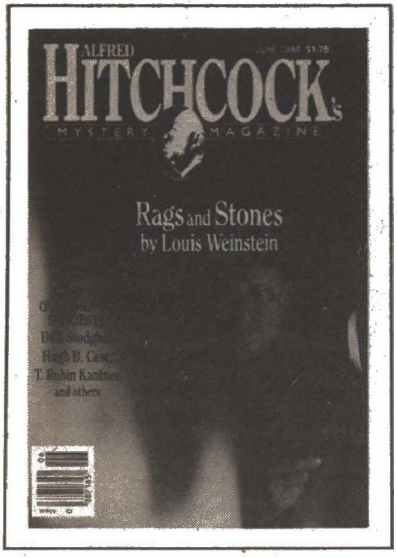

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The Mystery Of The Lion Window

by Jane Rice

"We're almost there," Linda Eagles said.

She pointed to the winding double row of trees ahead. "Honey locusts. That's why Locust Grove. I think heaven must smell like honey locust blossoms. Wherein, I might add, the bees engage in brazen bacchanalias. Although a platter of Dulcie's hot fried apple pies is about as close to locust blossom heaven as you can get."

She twisted in the bucket seat to face him. "Dan, I want you to like them."

Daniel Zysik removed one hand from the steering wheel and

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

stroked her cheek with the back of a forefinger. "The bee bacchanalias? The fried pies?"

"The family," she said, refusing to be teased. "And there's a bunch." The corners of her mouth lifted in a gamin grin. "Grandfather and Grandmother Eagles were shamelessly prolific." The grin faded. "Mostly, though, I want you to like Papa who, for openers, will probably act the part of the doughty colonel to the hilt."

She heaved a sigh. Said, "Do you *have* to tell him?" And, without waiting for a reply, "I don't see why. I simply *don't* see why!"

"Linda, we've been over this and over this," Daniel said, his tone that of someone whose patience is being worn thin by an unreasonable child. "The skeleton in the closet has to be yanked out, aired, and laid to rest. Before we're married. And that is that."

"It's not all that much of a skeleton!"

"Then what's the difference?"

"Exactly! Why tell him? What if he goes through the ceiling?"

"He'll have to go through."

"But it wasn't your fault. What's more—"

"What's more, I'm right and you know it," Daniel interrupted. "Now quit looking like a wet kitten with its back up."

"When you look like a redheaded bulldog, you *get* my back up."

Daniel swung the little car between stone gateposts each topped with a granite pineapple. "So far, so good. The symbols of welcome aren't draped in black."

"I still miss Yoo and Hoo."

"Come again?"

"Y-o-o and H-o-o. Two eagles. When I was small, I thought they could be princes under a magic spell. I'd shout 'yoo hoo' at them and reel off a lot of jabberwocky, hoping they'd turn back into princes and crown me a princess and give me an ermine cloak. After a while they got nicknamed Yoo and Hoo."

"Maybe the jabberwocky worked, but they turned into pineapples."

"They didn't. Papa gave them the pitch when he changed the name of the farm from Twin Eagles to Locust Grove. I sulked for weeks. My one chance at princesshood down the drain."

She drew a deep, satisfied breath.

"*Smell.* Isn't it terrific!"

"Terrific," Daniel said, his eyes on the white pillared residence seemingly awash in a sea of umbrella tables at the end of the avenue of trees.

Some farm, Peabody commented dryly from inside Daniel's head.

Daniel inched the car in among earlier arrivals ranged along a low fieldstone wall separating the lawn from a verge of gravel that served as a parking area, and switched off the motor.

"The homeplace," Linda said, with a sprightly wave that failed to conceal her nervousness. "Where you are about to be initiated into the tribal rite of an Eagles family reunion."

Is that all family or did her father hire extras? Peabody asked.

Knock it off, Daniel told him.

"There he is," Linda said.

On the verandah, a stocky figure in a Mark Twain suit and a black string tie consulted his watch. Peered in the direction of the driveway, his attitude expectant.

Linda slipped her hand into Daniel's. "Let's go."

Daniel gave her cold fingers a reassuring squeeze. "He's waiting for you," he said. "No need for me to horn in on that. I'll bring up the rear. I think he's spotted you. He has. See? Go on. Go."

She fitted into the picture flawlessly, he noted, as she ran lightly up the flagstone walk. He unkinked his lanky frame. Watched her pause to embrace a thin, elegant woman with blued hair. Saw how at home she was in this plush setting that she took for granted. Observed how glad she was to be back as she flung herself into the outstretched arms of her father, whose welcoming bear hug lifted her off her feet.

Daniel went up the walk, conscious of the discreet glances cast in his direction. He could surmise the murmured remarks. "That's him. A real carrot top. Has the map of Ireland all over his face. Writes detective stories, I hear. Nothing against him, understand, but it's not the same as being in business. . . . "

He was aware of an unease, about the size of an ice cube, in the pit of his stomach.

On the positive side, the hungry days were over, thanks to his creation of Peabody, an estate auctioneer whose trade, plus his monumental curiosity, led him into peculiar byways where suspense and intrigue lurked in every corner. On the negative side there were not even any pretend-ermine cloaks in Linda's immediate future as Mrs. Daniel Zysik.

The bluehaired woman came to greet him. She proferred her birdbone hands. Said, "I'm Linda's Aunt Florence. And you have to be . . . " His name deserted her. Daniel visualized it floating off, leaving behind a vapor trail with a Z in it somewhere.

"Daniel Zysik," he supplied, taking her hands in his.

Peabody gave him a nudge. *She'd have remembered a handle like*

Chalmers Wainwaring Vanderfleet St. Ambrose with no trouble whatsoever.

"Of course," Florence Eagles said, as if she had overheard Peabody's comment and agreed. And, unabashed, "I'm notoriously hopeless at names. Always have been." With an attempt at levity, she added, "It's probably a genetic flaw of some kind."

She disengaged her hands without appearing to have made the effort. Indicated the premises with a graceful gesture.

"Welcome to Locust Grove," she said.

"It's a pleasure to be here," Daniel lied.

Shaking hands with Colonel Eagles was the polite equivalent of arm wrestling, Daniel decided.

Linda caught his eye. Telegraphed, *The doughty colonel.*

Daniel telegraphed back, *Behold how I didn't give at the knees.*

He returned his attention to Colonel Eagles, who was saying, "... and Linda tells me you're originally from the City of Brotherly Love. Great city, Philadelphia. Proud heritage. Full of tradition. Any chance you might know the Lancaster-Peeles? Have a property on the Main Line, in Stratford. The Millstone."

"The Main Line was out of my league," Daniel replied, equably. "I grew up on the south side in one of those neighborhoods with a pub or a poolroom on every other corner."

Linda and her aunt spoke simultaneously, both suggesting he might like to freshen up a bit. They sounded capable of marching him off in lockstep if necessary.

Linda led him through the entrance hall and into a library shafted with cathedral color by a sunlit Tiffany window above a window seat cushioned in blue velvet. She wheeled about, her fists knuckled on her hips.

"Pubs and poolrooms," she threw at him. "You didn't have to lug that nugget in by the scruff of its neck. That was being a reverse snob. You're just as bad as Papa. Worse!"

She stamped her foot. "What you should be doing is making an effort to—"

"Alert him," Daniel interposed. "You can also look like a wet cat. Did you know that?"

"Daniel Zysik, you are the most exasperating man I have ever known!"

"You must not have known very many. What do you do that's exasperating? I mean besides stamp your foot and make derogatory comments."

"I suppose being told I look like a wet cat isn't derogatory! Honestly, sometimes I could—" She broke off. Said, "You know this soundtrack reads like we're on the brink of a divorce, and we're not even officially engaged."

"I was under the impression you had agreed to marry me. I call that being officially engaged."

"Well, *I* don't. For your information, officially engaged is when the engagement has been announced."

"Then, boss lady, you will be officially engaged before this shindig is over, if I have to announce it myself, at the top of my lungs, amid a hail of buckshot."

"Shindig! *Boss* lady! Of all the—" She stopped. Said, in a tiny voice, "This is awful. What if we behave like this . . . "

"After we're married? We will. I guarantee you. It's nothing to get in a swivet about. Unless we let it throw us. Which we won't. Hey, there . . . it's me, Dan . . . you remember me . . . sure you do . . . I'm the one with the wraparound arms . . . see? . . . there, that's better . . . "

They were interrupted by a child's giggle from the doorway.

"I saw you smooching," the small intruder said as they moved apart. And, to Daniel, "What's your name?"

"Daniel Zysik. What's yours?"

"Amelia Bransford Eagles. I like my name more better. You've got a funny name."

"Why, Amelia Eagles!" Linda remonstrated. "Where are your manners? What would your mother say!"

"Don't feel impelled," Daniel interposed. "A rose by any other, and all that."

"That *is* what she said." Amelia pointed at Daniel. "She said he's got a funny name." She scissored one leg across the other. "I have to go to the bathroom."

Alone, Daniel moved towards two ancestral oil portraits side by side above the mantelpiece. What would they say if they knew the particulars? Easy. "Young man, leave. At once. Find someone else to marry."

"My parents. Edward and Isabelle Eagles," Florence Eagles said from the threshold. She came to stand beside him. "Charming, aren't they? He with his Vandyke and silver headed cane. She with her lace fan and double strand of pearls. I wonder what they would say if they could be here today."

Daniel gave her a sidelong glance. Was she attempting com-

munication on an impersonal level?

"What do you think they would say?"

"That they were still as happy as ever. Theirs was a storybook love story. They met at a Mardi Gras houseparty and before Mardi Gras was over had created a scandalous brouhaha by eloping into the night. She was sixteen. He was twenty-six. You can imagine the dire predictions. The beauty part, though, was that they lived happily ever after. They really did. There was never a cross word between them." She winced as the sharp crack of a bat was succeeded by a tinkling smash of breaking glass.

She shrugged. Dismissed the incident as of no great concern. Said, "At least it wasn't the Tiffany window. I love what those colors do for this room. The original was indescribably ugly. A rendition of our coat of arms in muddy yellows and browns. A tongued lion rampant among scrolls bearing the admonitions 'Truth, Honor, Fidelity.' "

Her eyes twinkled. "At any rate I considered them admonitions when I was in hair ribbons and Mary Janes. They cut sharply into my forays on the kitchen cookie jar."

Peabody inquired, *What happened to the lion window?*

Who cares?

I care. Ask. I won't give you any peace until you do.

Florence Eagles was obviously taken aback by Daniel's question. "Why . . . why, it was broken into smithereens all over the terrace during a storm," she said.

Her attention was claimed by a convergence around a table on the lawn.

"Oh, dear," she said. "I have a feeling the baseball may have connected with the punchbowl."

She excused herself and left to investigate.

Daniel considered the portraits.

Never a cross word, Peabody said. *What in hell kind of a marriage was that?*

Dull.

"Aren't they sweet," Linda said, walking in to rejoin him. "I'm sure Aunt Florence gave you the essentials. I saw her leaving as I was coming downstairs." She gazed up at the portraits. "When I was little I didn't connect this Isabelle with my frail old grandmother upstairs with her foot tub, and her magnifying glass, and her box of things. My grandfather died before I was born. I wish I could've known him. That Vandyke grabs me."

She appraised Daniel's chin.

"No go," Daniel said. "Amelia would be convulsed."

Linda burst out laughing. "Guess what she said. She said you reminded her of Charley."

"Charley?"

"Charley is what she calls her lovey."

"Wow. That's better than pineapples."

"You haven't seen her lovey. Come on. Before Dulcie and Harrison begin to think they've been left out."

When they reached the kitchen, Daniel found that Dulcie's dumpling face and small swift feet belied her age. She handed over an arrangement of deviled eggs to one of the helpers employed for the occasion and smothered Linda in a bosomy embrace. Harrison and Daniel shook hands and exchanged amenities above a baked turkey.

"Whooeee, take a look at that red head," Dulcie exclaimed, letting go of Linda to examine Daniel with an analytical eye.

She'd be good on a homicide squad, Peabody said. *Wouldn't miss a trick.*

"I see what's coming," Dulcie said. "Redheaded twins. My! Won't *that* be a baptizing."

"Dulcie, *shush,*" Linda protested in mock dismay. "You'll scare him off."

Dulcie chuckled. "Don't say you wasn't warned," she said to Daniel. "They run in the family. Skip one generation, land in the next."

So that was the real significance behind Yoo and Hoo, Daniel thought, and wondered, idly, what had prompted the colonel to dump the made-to-order name Twin Eagles for Locust Grove, a hackneyed replacement at best.

While Linda, Dulcie, and Harrison plunged into a three-way jumble of homecoming conversation, he sampled a biscuit. Ate a radish and two olives.

Peabody inquired, *Doesn't it strike you as odd that the so-called lion window—*

Dulcie chimed in and broke the connection. "You children shoo off now," she said to Linda and Daniel. "Come back later. Cooking and gabbing don't mix, and I got to get this reunion on the road."

Linda took Daniel up the back stairs and down the hall to the guest room he would occupy overnight. She left with the request that he hurry so he could be introduced around before Harrison rang the dinner bell.

His bag had preceded him. In the lovely, well-appointed room, which smelled of wax and lemon polish, the bag looked like something he'd bought off a bargain table. At a rummage sale. A basement rummage sale.

Halfway to the adjoining bathroom he halted, turned, and squinted thoughtfully at the thin, fine window curtains eddying gently into the bedroom, stirred by a passing breeze.

Peabody said, *The lion window wouldn't have blown out all over the terrace. It would have blown in all over the window seat.*

Yeah. Yeah, it would've. Guess what. I don't give a hoot.

In the bathroom the commode was noiseless. The wash basin marble. The faucets dolphins. The soap embossed. The hand towels linen. The mirror unresponsive.

Maybe Linda is right, Daniel told his reflection. *Why upset the applecart?*

Peabody said, *Since the lion window landed on the terrace, that means—*

Get lost, Peabody. You weren't invited.

Daniel threw his mirrored image a salute. Barked, "About face . . . MARCH."

Linda was waiting for him in the hallway.

"Did I hear a seal in there with you?" she asked.

"That was a sergeant I used to know," Daniel said. "Helluva guy. Nothing floored him. Lead on."

In spite of his attempts to be convivial, Daniel felt his expression becoming fixed. His conversation languished. The Eagleses and their numerous progeny began to have a homogenous sameness, as if they had stepped *en masse* out of advertisements extolling the good life.

Names and faces melded together.

Linda, chatting vivaciously with four people at once, messaged, *They* like *you.*

He gave her a wide, false smile. Thought, *Wait a while.*

Amelia streaked by, shrieking in his direction, "If you wanna pleeeeze her, kiss your girl and squeeeeze her!"

Harrison appeared, wearing a white jacket. He squared his shoulders. Rang the dinner bell.

Surprisingly, Daniel found he was hungry. As he ate, his spirits rose. The colonel's spirits had no doubt *soared,* he thought, when he hadn't tucked his napkin into his shirt collar or sawed away at the country ham, holding his fork in an upright baseball grip.

He could visualize the colonel's mental notations under the heading:

ZYSIK

1. South Philadelphia. Umph. But, water over the dam.
2. Table manners up to snuff.
3. Occupation unconventional but at least he's not holding up his pants with a rope.
4. Demeanor acceptable.
5. Income? Find out.
6. Zysik odd name but pronounceable.

SUMMATION

Could be worse.

Hang on, Daniel told him. *There's more.*

He had a mental picture of how it would be. The library. The ritual of the proferred box of Havanas, even though refusal was a certainty. The brandy. The preliminary skirmishing. The moment of truth. The colonel staring at him as if he had spit on the flag.

He forked in a mouthful of candied sweet potatoes and tried not to think about it.

The moment arrived sooner than expected. Without warning.

The repast was over. The residue was being cleared away. There was a lazy hum of renewed chatter. Laughter. The shouts of children. Blue whiffets of tobacco smoke ascended here and there. Amelia had claimed Linda for a partner in a peanut-on-a-knife relay race. A horseshoe-pitching contest was getting under way.

Colonel Eagles tapped the ash from his cigar. Daniel concluded he had added number seven to his list.

7. Zysik not a joiner.

In a brusque but well intentioned, and good humored, attempt at conviviality, the colonel said, "How did a redheaded Irishman like you get a name like Zysik?"

"Zysik was my mother's name," Daniel answered evenly. "My father could've been Irish. I've seldom given him much thought. You see, I never knew who my father was. My mother wasn't married."

A butterfly zigzigged by, en route to the flowerbeds. Under Harrison's supervision, the long serving table was being dismantled.

From the house drifted a ragged harmony of voices accompanied by a piano.

"Linda knows?"

Daniel nodded.

For a wordless moment the two men appraised each other. Then Colonel Eagles pushed himself upright. Clamped his cigar between his teeth. Strode off in the direction of the house.

Daniel's jaw tightened. *End of round one.*

He arose. *Round two, coming up.*

He followed at a slower pace, relieved that Linda, convoyed by the excited screams of Amelia, was engrossed in navigating the hazards of a serpentine obstacle course featuring peach baskets and croquet wickets.

The downstairs was adrift with those who had meandered in, beckoned by the music and the singing. Except for the upstairs sitting room, which was occupied by a sprawl of teenagers watching TV, the second floor was free and clear. A closed door at the far end of the hall opened into a broom closet. He tried the last door. A flight of uncarpeted stairs led upward.

From above came the hint of cigar.

Daniel shut the door behind him. Climbed the steep stairsteps. Emerged into an attic, ghostly with the discards of years.

Colonel Eagles sat on a sheet-draped armchair.

His eyes engaged Daniel's. Held.

Peabody said, *He'd have made a good weight guesser.*

"I came up here to get this settled," Daniel said. "And I intend to get it settled. Now."

The colonel gave an almost imperceptible nod, as if he had gauged Daniel's weight to the exact pound. He stood up. Positioned his cigar across a stray Mason jar lid on a nearby table. Stalked across the attic. Peeled a derelict bedspread from a hodgepodge of pictures stacked against the wall. Located the one he wanted. Removed it. Leaned it against a barrel.

Though the framed photograph had faded, the two young men in their college caps and blazers remained eloquent of a bygone era.

The colonel rescued his cigar. Resettled himself in the armchair. Said, "You may as well find a seat."

He puffed his dying cigar alight and, when Daniel was seated, used it as a pointer.

"The Eagles twins," he said. "My father and his brother. Edward

and Jason. Edward is the one on the right. He was considered the handsomer of the two. I suspect this was because he had the Eagles nose and that dimple. Be that as it may, he was top dog, according to notations made at intervals in my Grandfather Benjamin's journal, which I found in that trunk you're sitting on.

"Edward was born first, talked first, walked first. Had Jason backed off the map from the word go. You name it, he was ahead by a length. Stayed ahead, too. Caught the most fish, bagged the most game, won consistently at cards, waltzed off with the prettiest girls. Had a reckless streak a mile wide.

"Never grew up," he added, succinctly. He sent a blue pencil of cigar smoke in the direction of the photograph. "For example, on his twenty-seventh birthday, having imbibed too freely, he broke a leg trying to jump from the stable roof to the back of a moving horse. Missed. Made another attempt when his leg was out of the cast. Missed again. Broke the same leg. Thereafter he walked with a limp but didn't let it faze him. He seemed to be in continual motion, like the pump on the oil well that paid for everything.

"Jason was the quiet one. Enjoyed books. Music. Understood the land. Had a knack for carving what his father called 'doodads.' Bent backwards to sidestep an argument.

"Basically they were as different as the two sides of a coin. Except in one respect."

He flipped his cigar ash in the general direction of a cracked jardiniere. "They both wanted the same girl. Isabelle. The girl Jason met for the first time when she arrived here on Edward's arm, as a bride.

"This isn't conjecture. Among the other memorabilia I unearthed in that trunk was a shoebox full of snapshots. Family, friends, and who knows. At picnics and parties, in touring cars and canoes, clowning under the mistletoe, wearing funny hats on New Year's Eve . . . and where she was, Jason was.

"That Jason was enamored of his brother's wife is obvious once your suspicions have been aroused. However, before anybody got wise, there was a shooting tragedy and that was the end of Jason."

A chorus of cheers floated up from the lawn, as though in vocal approval of young Jason Eagles' tragic death.

The colonel acknowledged the hapless timing with a tight smile. Said, "The supposition was that he caught his foot in a vine. Stumbled. Fell. And his loaded gun sent him into Kingdom Come.

"My Grandfather Benjamin's journal failed to provide precise details. 'Edward,' he wrote, 'having gotten his brother home, is in

a state of shock. He has locked himself away from us.' And Edward remained locked away from them until after the funeral, when my grandfather recorded: 'Jason was laid to rest this morning. Edward remained incommunicado. This afternoon, after all entreaties once more failed, we forced the door; but Edward sits hunched with his head in his hands. A pitiable sight. Isabelle, poor child, has collapsed and is under sedation.'

"I presume along in there somewhere was when this photograph was relegated to the attic for fear it'd send Edward further up the wall." He brushed absently at a streak of dust on his sleeve.

"I can see how that hunting calamity happened," he went on. "As plain as day."

He made a tent of his fingers. Contemplated the middle distance.

"Back then," he began, "there was a lot of game around here. And varmints. Not so much any more. The land is pretty well hunted out. Nowadays they use a fox for an excuse to get dressed up in red coats. But in those days foxes were considered a real nuisance."

As the colonel talked on, a scene formed in Daniel's writer's eye. The tail end of a day took shape . . . a bright and blowy late October afternoon . . .

The wind rattles a wintry forewarning from the skeletal cornstalks left standing in a field through which two fox hunters are moving.

A few late-flocking blackbirds wheel overhead.

A sentry crow caws from the limb of a tree in a copse. His warning is picked up and repeated. Caw . . . caw . . . caw . . . The crows flap from their perches and fly off. Black rags.

Ahead, a pair of hounds suddenly give voice, veer towards the thin thicket of trees. From the farther side, a fox streaks out and away . . . the hounds in yelping pursuit.

The two hunters are in silent agreement. The wind is in their favor. The fox will lose the hounds in the hollow where the stream runs through, and will circle back to high ground.

They head for the copse where they wait, camouflaged by the play of sunlight and shadow and the scattering flights of leaves.

The yelping diminishes. Takes on a frustrated quality. Becomes sporadic. The dogs have lost the scent.

Presently, a crow caws. Is answered and, nearer, caws again. The first gun signals the back-up gun. The fox is coming. They ready themselves.

Their prey appears at the edge of the little wood and, almost laughing, trots in towards the hunters. Senses danger. Both hunters shoot simultaneously.

The colonel drew the palm of one hand along his jaw. "A breach of etiquette," he said. "Especially when only one gun is aimed at the fox."

Daniel swallowed. "Good Lord," he said, softly, his eyes on the photograph. "Edward killed him."

The colonel shook his head. "No," he said. "No. On the contrary. Edward was the one who had his good looks splattered into the underbrush."

"You said—"

"That the shooting was the end of Jason? It was. It was indeed. Jason, as Jason, ceased to exist. He slipped Edward's wedding ring on his own finger. Exchanged watches and switched coats and whatever else was necessary. Smeared up his face to get by that first . . . " his voice tailed off.

He examined the end of his cigar. Began again. "Everybody accepted the corpse as Jason's. Why wouldn't they? In the commotion, Jason, as Edward, quickly made himself scarce and stayed scarce as long as he could.

"When they forced the door, he must've resembled a disheveled, red-eyed, unshaven, idiot tramp. Under the circumstances who'd have noticed anything else? And, day by day, the black beard grew into a disguise for his undimpled chin.

"Push me that piece of crockery, will you?"

The jardiniere made available, he stubbed out his truncated cigar. Leaned back in his chair. Said, "To mimic a limp is child's play. The Eagles nose is more a matter of flared nostrils than size. Memory blankouts would be blamed for anything and anyone he didn't know and should've. The eventual Vandyke became an accepted distinction. The dimple was forgotten. He never fully mastered his brother's loopy handwriting but it was close, and time did its work. Besides, who'd doubt the authenticity?

"To phase out the horsey, poker playing, fish-camp and duck-blind buddies would be a breeze. Nobody wants a borderline Jonah along when Lady Luck is involved. Ultimately, everybody would take it for granted that breakneck, go-for-broke Edward Eagles had finally settled down.

"If my father ever had a twinge of remorse, I'm unaware of it. He actually *liked* to sit and read on the window seat in the library

below a window, gone now, bearing the inscriptions 'Truth, Honor, Fidelity.' "

Ask him what happened to that window, Peabody said. *Florence Eagles wasn't telling the whole truth.*

If you've an ounce of sense, don't butt in.

"You're wondering how I got on to this? By a fluke of circumstances." Momentarily the colonel was lost in retrospection.

He is eleven years old, recuperating from mumps. Dulcie has jounced off with her beau in a tin flivver, to attend a revival. His sister and brothers have gone to the horse show. The early Sunday afternoon is as boring as it is hot. Even the pillows are hot. The insidious Dr. Fu Manchu has failed to maintain his usual degree of insidiousness and has joined the Sunday funnies on the floor. The unfinished jigsaw puzzle is too picky.

What to do?

He sits up, crosslegged. Tests his jaws. Swings his legs over the edge of the bed. Stands. Wobbles to the window.

His father is limping off in the direction of the orchard. The white cat has caught a mole and crouches over it on the back walk.

"Ssssst," he hisses down at the cat. The cat glares up at him, its baleful eyes as shiny as the heavy green glass candy dish on the library table.

Candy.

He issues orders. "Send out scouts."

The scouts navigate a narrow defile, scoot down a steep ravine and into a clearing.

His mother is reading the paper in a chaise on the verandah.

"Ambush on the left. Make for the cave."

In the library he helps himself to the candy. Spins a mounted world globe and—POW—fires a gumdrop at it. Kneels on the window seat and peers through the lion's red tongue.

He has landed on Mars. By the orchard fence the other lone survivor from Asteroid ST37 has already turned red and is . . .

His wits desert him as, out on the verandah, his mother begins screaming. Terrible, ear-splitting screams, as if she has lost her mind.

He realizes. The cat has padded on to the verandah bearing a present. The mole.

His father has heard the screams and is running back through the Martian landscape. *Racing* back. He kneels there, riveted,

watching his father running like the wind. His knees pistons. His gimpy leg miraculously cured. The sight is unbelievable and, for some reason, scary.

His mother has stopped screaming. He can hear her scolding the cat and slapping the newspaper to make the creature leave. He knows she will come inside now, and he slips out and weaves up the stairs and back into bed, where he pulls the sheet over his head.

The colonel blinked. Straightened. Repeated, "By a fluke of circumstances." Said, "I accidentally discovered my father's game leg was a myth." He related the incident.

"I verified my discovery in the next several weeks by hiding and spying. When he thought he was alone in an empty house, or down at the stable, or over in the orchard, he was no more afflicted with a limp than the man in the moon.

"I knew, in a vague way, he had had a long ago illness. A kind of a 'brain fever.' And that I'd had an uncle who had died of something or other that was impolite to mention.

"I began to mull this over and decided my father had a mental quirk which had been swept under the rug, and that there might be a streak of insanity in the entire family. In *me*.

"I wondered if my grandmother had kept a diary, and sneaked up here and commenced going through boxes and barrels and trunks, which is how I happened upon my Grandfather Benjamin's journal. And newspaper clippings. And correspondence. The manner of my uncle's death was a big relief. He hadn't died in an insane asylum. Then, bits and pieces of things began to hitch together and pick up steam when I found the shoebox, and they solidified the afternoon I opened a cardboard carton containing small personal effects that had belonged to this dead Uncle Jason.

"The contents of that carton bothered me. There was something out of kilter among the souvenirs. I must've sifted through them twenty times. Item by item. But I couldn't figure out what nagged at me. Finally, I gave up. Put the box back. Gave it a kick.

"What happened next was strange," he said, slowly, tugging an ear. "The answer came like a touch on the sleeve . . . there's no pocketknife . . .

"The impression of having been prompted was so strong I was rooted to the spot. I remember listening, and fighting an impulse to cry out, 'Is anybody there?'

"You see," he digressed, shaking off the memory, "you get to

know a knife. I haven't met a whittler yet who didn't carry a good stout knife, such as a barlow knife. Jason would've carried such a knife, and he'd have known that knife like he knew his own two thumbs. He would have thought twice before he parted with it.

"What I was beginning to glimpse through the cracks in the surface was too godawful to accept. I slammed the lid on my guesswork, but what I'd stirred up kept escaping like cats out of a bag. The limp. The Vandyke. The handwriting. The crumbling letter from somebody named Adelaide who was indignant because 'Edward' had looked her straight in the face in a hotel lobby in Chicago and had passed on without speaking. Even I could beat my father at a card game as simple as rook.

"I had nightmares. My father wore a grinning fox like a coonskin cap, and played mumblety-peg with a faceless figure to see who'd keep the knife. Or, they'd wrestle for it. Sometimes the fox did a dance, as they do on occasion, in the moonlight. Eerie . . . eerie," he said, his eyes clouded in recollection. "I'd wake up in a sweat.

"Anyhow, to prove I was wrong became an obsession. I hunted for that knife, for the sole purpose of *not* finding it. And I never did find it. I didn't have to, after the day I plucked a newly carved little peachstone basket from the pocket of a jacket he'd slung in the crotch of a peach tree. If I'd reached in and pulled out a rattlesnake . . .

"At the very last, there in that copse, he hadn't been able to let the knife go. Who would note its absence? Nobody. I was the illegitimate son of a murderer who had killed his brother and duped my very own mother into a lifelong relationship out of which my sister, my brothers, and myself were the end product."

He grimaced. "Dealt out cold like that just about takes the wind out of me yet. When you're eleven and have accumulated a certain amount of barnyard information, believe me it lays you out flat.

"I got so I couldn't look my mother in the face. I instigated fights, with anybody, at the drop of a hat. At night, every creak was Edward Eagles unable to rest until justice was done. In the daytime I walked around with his lifeless body strapped to my back. I halfway expected lightning to fork out of a clear sky and strike my father dead. Truth, Honor, and Fidelity weren't worth the powder to blow them up. At odd moments I would be seized with fits of terror. I walked in my sleep . . ."

The splintering crash brings him awake. He is in the library, which is black as crows one instant, a livid green the next. Candy

is strewn about him on the floor. There is a jagged hole in the lion window. The storm drags a teeming curtain across the terrace where a broken tree limb juts at an angle, like the mast of a sunken ship.

He turns at a sound behind him. His sister Florence stands in the doorway, owl-eyed, barefooted, in her nightgown. Her mouth is an O. Her hands are pressed tightly against her cheeks.

She tiptoes in. Takes his arm. Draws him away. "Don't cry," she whispers. "They'll think the tree branch did it."

When he rouses the following morning, the episode has the unreality of one of his nightmares. The hour is dawn. The room is pink. The storm has passed. Florence has waked him. She is wearing her sneakers, her heavy coat, and is carrying her sandpail. He wonders, groggily, if she is running away to the seashore in the middle of March and has come to tell him goodbye.

She places a cautionary forefinger against her lips. The finger is bleeding. "Sh," she whispers, "shhhhh." In a breathless rush, she says, "I picked up every last bitty bit of Mama's dish and dumped it by the library table. They'll blame the cat."

She licks the bloody finger. Gives him a gap-toothed smile brimming with approval. Offers him a cookie.

" . . . and sleepwalking one stormy night," the colonel continued, "I heaved a heavy object through Truth, Honor, and Fidelity. The next night, afraid I'd pull another stunt in my sleep, I tied a string from the bedpost to my big toe, and when my brothers poked fun of this arrangement, I lashed out with the first thing handy. A croquet mallet I kept stashed under the covers in case Edward Eagles paid me a nocturnal visit and wasn't all that ectoplasmic.

"Everyone must've breathed a sigh of relief when I was enrolled in a military academy the following September." He essayed a short laugh. "Funny how one situation leads to another. If it hadn't been for the whole bloody business that led to the croquet mallet, I wouldn't be a colonel."

He lifted a shoulder. Spread a hand. "Time and autumn leaves and a guilt complex have much in common. They cover up. As the years went by, my hobgoblins diminished, plus the fact that combat duty diminishes just about everything."

Daniel nodded.

"I made a few changes, to give Time an assist, but not many. I'd intended to take my father's portrait down, stuff it in the fireplace, and set a match to it when my mother passed away. But I didn't.

"Understand, I despised this man. He was made of the same stuff as the choirboy who kills the basso profundo and goes joyriding in his car. But he was devoted to my mother. They never uttered a cross word to each other. I had to admit he'd also been a good father, and when the oil well petered out, his peaches kept us afloat until he got a cannery going. We'd have sunk, otherwise.

"I haven't changed my mind that he was a blackguard and deserved to be hanged. I've just let him hang where he belongs. Next to the one he loved so much he was willing to do what he did to get her. Why am I telling you this? I don't know, any more than I know why water goes down the drain counterclockwise when you pull the plug."

From the lawn came the ringing clang of a horseshoe against an iron stake, and a spatter of masculine acclaim.

The colonel jerked a thumb in the direction of the applause. "I've always figured what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Or anybody else."

"I'll buy that," Daniel said.

"As one bastard to another, welcome to the clan," the colonel said. "And . . . thanks for pulling the plug."

The two men arose. Shook hands.

The reunion was over. Only a few remained to spend the night because of distance. Twilight had deepened across the deserted lawn. In the house, lamps had been lit, and a cold buffet supper lay ready in the dining room.

In the library, waiting for the others to come down, Daniel regarded the two portraits.

There wasn't a shred of solid evidence. A Vandyke, and a doodad carved from a peachstone didn't signify a doggone thing. The limp probably wasn't much of a limp to begin with, and even if it was, the human body could react to stress in herculean ways, as he had reacted to the wild screams of Isabelle on that long ago Sunday.

The boy hid and spied, remember? Peabody said. *The limp was faked.*

He saw what he thought he would see. He was eleven, for corn sake. His observations were colored by his expectations.

He didn't expect to find the shoebox, and the rest of the stuff, Peabody said. *Look, if an eleven-year-old kid can smell a monkey in the woodpile that many years afterwards, you can bet your bottom dollar that Edward guessed. There must've been enough bad vibes in that copse to alert a city the size of New York. What had been*

building blew. *And Edward Eagles wound up dead and unrecognizable. Whether Jason blasted his brother deliberately or, for once, was simply the fastest gun is beside the point. The* leitmotif *was Isabelle, and Jason realized, with a terrible joy, she was his, if he could swing it.*

You're forgetting the connubial aspect. A wife would know the difference.

Yes. She would, wouldn't she. That's the clincher.

You're saying . . .

Yes. I'm saying she knew. Whoever said 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' was right on the button. Edward, the playboy, got tired of her. Mardi Gras was long gone. A sixteen-year-old bride around his neck became a drag. To return to New Orleans was unthinkable, as far as Isabelle was concerned. What to do? Well, there was besotted Jason, like a ripe peach, ready for the picking. Jason pulled the trigger, but she loaded the gun, so to speak. I suspect she collapsed with relief *when Edward was buried. You could write a period thriller on this one.*

Daniel put his hands in his pockets and, whistling tunelessly, strolled to the Tiffany window, leaden now against the dusk.

Or a play, Peabody persisted. *You've always wanted to do a play. Let the playgoers in on the secret. Jason knew she knew, and she knew he knew she knew. That's why the never-a-cross-word bit. The unspeakable accusations they might hurl at one another, if they ever got started, were a Damoclean sword. Believe me, the audience will identify with that totally. Also, they must've entertained many dark, purple thoughts about the possibility that the other might indulge in a cathartic, last minute, deathbed confession. Or, worse, a sudden, unbearable, hydra-headed surge of conscience that would spill the beans all over the place. The first act curtain could come down on that screeching to-do out on the verandah during an otherwise calm Sunday afternoon.*

Daniel moved to the library table and ran a finger around the beaded fringe of a lamp.

The discovery of the peachstone basket . . . no, the discovery of the barlow knife itself could be the climax for the second act, the intensity heightened by the rumble of a growing storm and flashes of lightning that illuminate the inscriptions Truth, Honor, Fidelity on the lion window.

"Penny for them," Linda said, coming into the room.

"I was thinking about a barlow knife."

"What about it?" She searched through a dish of nuts.

"Nothing about it. I don't even know what a barlow knife looks like."

"It's a large, single-bladed jackknife. Made to last." She found an almond. Offered it to him.

He declined the offering. Said, slowly, "How do you know?"

"My Grandmother Isabelle had one in her grandmother box." She popped the almond in her mouth. Resumed her quest.

"Grandmother box?"

"Actually it was an old picnic hamper filled with a conglomeration of things. What made the things fascinating were the stories she concocted to go with them. Secret stories for us two alone. She said secrets made your eyes bright and your cheeks pink." She located another almond.

"What was the story of the barlow knife?"

"Um . . . I forget. Something about a captive damsel in distress and a woodcarver who turned the damsel's captor into a fox, shot the fox, and rode off with the damsel, who lived happily ever after. Something like that."

"What became of the grandmother box?"

"When she died, I preempted it. No contest. Nobody else was the least interested in either the hamper or the contents. Gradually, my acquisitions lost their allure, were mislaid, broken."

"The barlow knife?"

Linda discontinued her search for almonds. "Today of all days you're intent on a plot revolving around a barlow knife. Right?"

"Wrong. I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole. Nevertheless . . . do you know what happened to the knife? My idle curiosity has become monumental."

"I traded it to a migrant worker's boy for a, quote, turquoise, unquote, ring that turned my finger green. Not one of my nicer memories."

"We'll feed it to the butterbirds in Xanadu."

"If you say so."

"I say so."

"Very well."

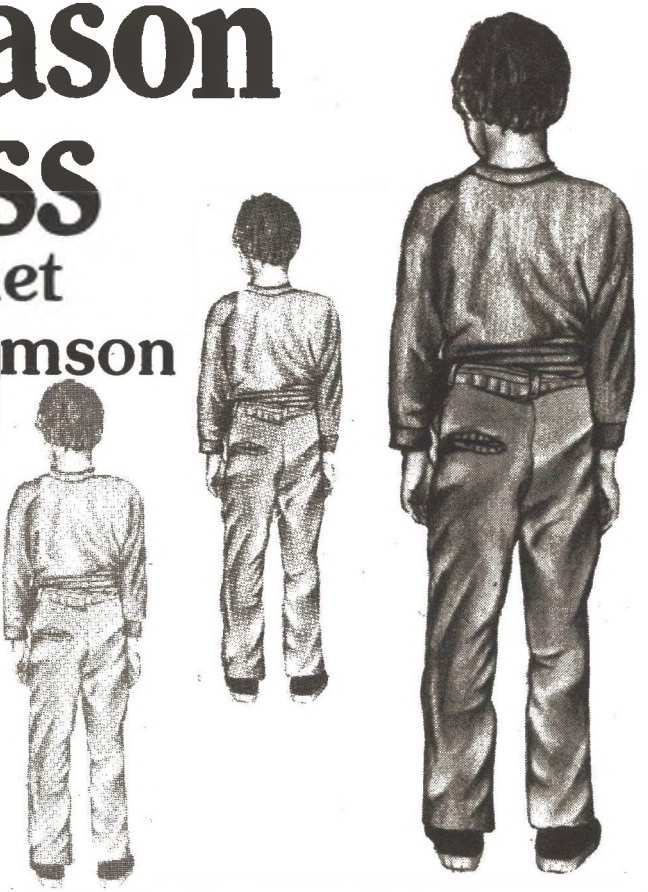
About this play, Peabody said.

You haven't been listening. I said I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole. Leave. I'm busy.

"Smooching sure does look *slippery,"* Amelia said, from the doorway.

Season Pass

by Chet Williamson



I didn't know what Mr. and Mrs. Younger were when I first saw them. To me, they were just one more older couple who'd come out to Magicland for a sunny afternoon of watching the dolphin show, the stage act, and maybe taking in one of the tamer rides—the carousel, or the Tunnel-of-Chills. I was sure I'd seen them before, for there was an easy familiarity about them. They looked at home, sitting on the bench near the bandshell, under the few oaks the new owners had let stand when they changed the old Rocky Grove Park into Magicland ten years before.

I wasn't here then, at least not as a security guard. But I came as a guest that first summer, as did almost everybody for a hundred miles around, to

Illustration by Steven Cieslawski

see what had been done to the grove. Some had liked the change. I hadn't. The park had been sanitized away, the grotesque, laughing figures in the funhouse alcoves sold to collectors, the old rides like The Whip and The Octopus prettied up with fiberglass shells and cartoon animals. The Penny Arcade became the quarter arcade, and the flip movies that had intrigued my brother and me as boys were gone, replaced by video screens and pinball machines that offered only three balls for two bits. Everything was bright and clean and shiny. I hated it.

I didn't come back after that first visit until this spring, when I answered the ad for security guards. The office where I worked laid me off in March, and though the Magicland stint paid far less, I thought it would be a pleasant way to spend the summer while keeping my eyes open for something better. And I was hungry for something better.

I used to think that hunger was a good thing, something that made us grow. Maybe open hunger, honest ambition, still is. But when hunger disguises itself as something else—kindness, maybe—it turns ugly, makes us less than human.

To look at the Youngers, you never would have imagined that hunger in them. When *I* first looked at them with more than casual interest, I guessed that they were in their early sixties. He was gray at the temples and near the top, but there were still dark brown patches. She too had streaks of gray-white, but the tawny hair around the whiteness made it look almost platinum in contrast. Neither was overweight, and both their complexions were healthily ruddy. The only outward signs of age were that the man limped slightly and carried a cane, and both wore thick bifocals. Their clothing was neat and clean, if a bit out of date. They looked well cared for, as one might make a suit last for years by judicious handling.

The Youngers. God, how that name suits them. So many don't. A potential assassin named Hinckley? A successful one named Oswald? Those are the names of buzzard towns and cartoon rabbits. But Younger—that sums up their deeds nicely, while smacking of the outlaw family, too, though I doubt a connection. What *my* Youngers have done is soft and subtle, far from gunshots and holdups.

I noticed them, *really* noticed them for the first time, giving candy to a kid. I was twenty yards behind where they were sitting on their bench, and there was one of those sudden hushes that comes to the park once in

a while, and I easily heard what they said.

"Young fella?" The man's voice was hearty and friendly. The boy, about ten, stopped but didn't say anything. "Want this?" the man went on, holding out a chocolate bar.

I tensed. I kept hearing my mother and father and teachers and the state trooper who visited the school once a year saying, *"Never take candy from strangers."* For kids, it replaced the commandment about adultery.

"We just can't eat two," the woman said kindly. "And it'll melt in this hot sun. Won't you take it?"

The kid came closer and smiled a little. He looked cautious, like he'd heard the warnings, too, but shrugged and took the candy. I guess he figured there were people all around, and that's what I figured as well. "Okay. Thanks a lot," he said, and walked away with the candy. I watched the couple a moment longer, just long enough to see them smile at each other, as if to enjoy a good deed shared. But there was something else in the look, something more than gratification at giving away a thirty-five-cent candy bar.

I started to notice the Youngers every day then, occasionally walking around the park but mostly just sitting on the bench near the bandshell, whether a show was going on or not. For the life of me, I didn't see how people were able to sit through "Babes on Broadway" once, let alone five times a day, six on weekends, but the Youngers were always there, holding the bench like a fort, watching with interest as our "professional cast" butchered songs from *A Chorus Line* and *Oklahoma!*, or when little kids scrambled up into the bandshell between shows and pretended that they were our music school dropouts who moved their mouths to the canned tunes.

And they kept giving away candy, too. I'd see them do it once or twice a week, and since I spent only a little of my time watching them, they must have done it far more frequently than that.

It was the last week of July when I got suspicious. I saw the woman give a candy bar to a little girl of six or seven. I smiled, for I'd written the couple off as just nice, generous folks with no grandchildren of their own to spoil, getting their parental kicks by making kids happy with chocolate. But a few hours later, I saw the same little girl, white as a skull, sitting with her worried parents in the nurse's station.

Little kids are always getting sick in the park—the station doles out twenty or thirty doses

of Pepto-Bismol a day to deal with the gut-wrenching mixture of rides and junk food. But the little girl didn't look nauseated. She looked drained, as if something were eating at her. I checked back an hour later, but Jeanie, the nurse, told me the girl felt better and that she and her parents had gone.

I'm a suspicious type to begin with—always been a little paranoid—so the combination of candy and illness put me on my toes, and I began thinking about the kind of crazies who put razor blades in apples. Something in the candy? A little rat poison? A shot of Raid? Were these nice old folks retired elementary schoolteachers with a taste for vengeance? I decided to keep a closer eye on the sweet old couple the next day.

I was stationed at the rear of the grove a full hour before they walked in at nine thirty and sat on their usual bench. They talked softly, but from their expressions and the gentle tones that drifted back to me, I knew it was the talk that people make when they've been with each other for a long time and are happy to stay that way. They looked up at the trees, stretched, turned, situated themselves differently. At times he would put an arm around her, or they held hands, and often they didn't touch at all. Finally she took two paperbacks from her big straw purse, handed one to the man, and they both began to read. It looked like a long day.

At ten forty-five, when the park was beginning to fill up and people were grabbing benches for the eleven o'clock "Babes on Broadway," the woman got up and went to the nearest snack bar. I followed and watched as she bought two Cokes and four candy bars, then returned to the bench, giving a Coke to her husband and setting the candy between them. In five minutes they gave one away to an Oriental kid and his younger brother. There was no way they could have doctored it. I saw them all the time, watching their hands and the candy through the slats in the bench. All she did after she made the offer was pick up the chocolate bar and put it in the kid's hand, and watch and wave as the boys scampered away.

I've got to confess that I was a little disappointed at not being able to nab two kiddie-poisoners, but the relief of knowing that if there *were* people like that they weren't in *my* park more than made up for it. I gave the couple a clean bill, and left the grove feeling better about human nature.

But after lunch I saw the Oriental boy in the nurse's station, and that cool lump settled in my throat again. With him

were the younger boy and a woman, obviously his mother, and I walked over to them. "Tummy ache, huh?" I said, trying not to sound too interested.

The woman smiled and nodded, not saying anything. The boy just looked ahead, his face pale. But the younger child answered. "I told him not to ride that scary ride, but he did it."

"Yeah," I said sympathetically, "that happens, especially when you eat a lot of candy, too. You have any candy today, champ?" I asked the older boy.

"Not him, not him," said the younger one. "*I* had a chocolate bar."

"You? . . ." I hoped I didn't look as dumb as I felt.

"Sam gave it to me. A lady gave it to him and he gave it to me."

"Uh-huh. You feel okay though, huh?"

"Yeah, I feel okay."

"Is something wrong?" said the woman, understandably curious about my interest in her son's diet.

"No, no," I smiled, and left the station after a nod to Jeanie, who was also looking at me strangely.

I didn't get it, but I wanted to, so I went back to the grove and parked behind the old couple again. This time I didn't have long to wait. They gave a little girl a candy bar in less than fifteen minutes after I'd gotten there, and this time I trailed the kid, who joined some friends, showed them the candy, and broke it up into pieces to share. A half hour later, after only two rides and nothing else to eat, she began to slow down and look a little sick. She sat on a bench with one of her friends while the others tackled the Sooper-Loop, but in a few minutes she was back on her feet, as though whatever had troubled her had passed quickly, and I let her get lost in the crowd.

Coincidences. It was possible, but I didn't believe it, so I decided to find out a little more about the generous golden-agers who so dependably held down that bench. I figured they'd have to have season passes, so the next morning I asked Pete, the old guy who heads the ticket-takers, to do me a favor. I told him there was a couple I'd seen in the park whom I thought I knew, but that I couldn't place their names, and maybe he'd check for me when they showed their passes. I thought it sounded dumb, and the frown he gave me showed that he did, too, but he said he would. I stood by his side until I saw the couple walking in from the parking lot. The man's cane was gone, and there was no sign of a limp. I nudged Pete and pointed in their direction. When

he saw them, he crumpled up his mouth as if he'd tasted vinegar. "Don't need to see their pass," he said softly. "Name's Younger. Carl and Ethel Younger."

"You know them?"

"Never spoke to them. But I've seen their passes enough times that I remember their names."

I felt I had something. "How long have they been coming to the park?"

Old Pete snorted. "They've had season passes ever since this place got civilized. And before that . . ." He paused.

"What?"

He turned and looked at me, his gray eyes stone cold and serious. "They were here when I ran The Whip. In the old days. Used to be over by the grove."

"I remember," I said. And I did, from when I was a kid.

"I remember them from then," he went on. "They used to sit by the bandshell all the time, talking to kids." His eyes narrowed. "What are you really interested in them for?"

"I told you, I . . ."

He smiled grimly. "Yeah, you told me."

"They must have been a lot younger then," I said with a little smile, trying to get him back on the track.

"They looked pretty much the same as they do now."

"Well then, they age well."

"Damn right they do," old Pete said. "I ain't run The Whip for twenty-five years, and I saw them a long time before that." My smile vanished. "Anything else? Or can I get to my work now?"

I thanked him and went to the nearest water fountain. My throat had gone dry. Pete must have been wrong, I thought. Twenty-five years? Hell, they looked sixtyish now, so if they were sixty back when Pete had seen them first, that meant they must be eighty-five, ninety, even older.

I walked over to the grove again and watched them. When Carl Younger got up, he walked briskly over to the snack bar to buy the candy. When he returned, they sat and talked, then started to read their books. Neither, I noticed, was wearing glasses. I moved closer, so that I stood a couple of yards behind them. The grayness I'd seen in their hair at the start of the summer had nearly vanished, and Carl Younger's hand that lay on his wife's shoulder looked strangely smooth and youthful for a man of his years.

They didn't seem to notice me, and in a while a young girl passed, and Ethel Younger looked up. "Miss," she said, "would you like this candy? I'm afraid we bought too many for just us."

The girl hesitated, then looked

at me standing nearby in my uniform, as if asking for permission. I gave a little nod, and just as I did, both Youngers turned around and saw me. Their smiles never faded, and after only a flicker of interest touched their shining eyes, they looked back at the girl. Ethel Younger held out the candy bar. The girl smiled back, said "thank you" softly, and took it, her fingers just brushing those of the woman as the exchange was made. She tucked the candy in a red plastic purse, and walked away.

The Youngers looked straight ahead, apparently neither curious nor bothered by my being there. But there was a smugness to the set of their shoulders, a stealthy triumph in the way they held their heads. My heart was beating quickly, and I felt my ears growing hot. They had done something, something while I was standing right there beside them, and it was as if they knew I couldn't stop them, as if they were laughing inside over the great joke they'd played.

I choked down my anger until I thought I could speak clearly. Then I sat down on the bench next to Ethel Younger, looking at her face in profile, her blue eyes staring out across the benches, the crow's feet in their corners only small lines now, almost unnoticeable.

"What?" I said quietly. Her head didn't turn, but her eyes shifted, looking at a spot on the ground a yard in front of my feet. "What are you doing?"

She looked at me then, her head pivoting slowly. "Doing?" Her eyebrows arched in a question.

"To the kids," I said, still almost whispering. "To the children."

Now Carl Younger was looking at me, too, leaning forward slightly to see past his wife. "I don't know what you mean," he said calmly.

"I've been watching you," I said. "You give them candy and they get sick."

Carl Younger shrugged. "I'm sorry to hear that." Then he smiled. "I hope they get better?"

"Yeah," I said. "They get better."

"I hope there's nothing wrong with the candy," said Ethel Younger. "We buy it right here at the concession stand."

"I know. I've seen you buy it."

"Oh." Her mouth grew round. Her teeth were very white. "And have you seen us do anything to it afterwards?"

"No. You don't touch it."

She cocked her head. "Well then . . .?"

"It's not poison," I said. "It's not the candy."

She looked at her husband, then back at me. "Well then," she repeated.

I nodded. "That's what I want to know. Well then, what?" I stood up in front of them, trying to look big, look tall, look like my silly gray and gold uniform meant more than it did. "It's *you,*" I said. "I want to know what the hell you're doing here."

Carl Younger gave an exasperated smile. "What does anyone do here? We enjoy the shows, we look at the people, we never had any children of our own, so it's nice to be able to give . . ."

"We take," Ethel Younger said, interrupting her husband, who jerked his head around to look at her, panic in his eyes. "Ethel . . ." he warned.

"No," she said, waving her hand as if she were brushing off a fly, her voice suddenly low and cold. "We take."

"Ethel, shut up . . ."

"It doesn't matter." She kept looking at me, a smirk on her face. "Let him know. He deserves to know. After all these years, he's the only one, the *only* one to notice."

Carl Younger just looked at her in surprise for a moment, then back at me. Then he smiled, too, a smile that turned to a smirk just as nasty and self-confident as his wife's. "You're right," he said. "It won't matter. Who'd believe him? What could he do?"

"You want to stop talking about me like I'm not here?" I said harshly. I didn't like the way they were watching me. But it wasn't hunger, just the overwhelming desire to share a secret they'd kept for years, an unknown accomplishment they were proud of.

"Sit down then," Ethel Younger said, patting the bench. "Sit down and we'll talk to you," and she held out a hand as if expecting me to take it.

"I'd rather stand."

"Suit yourself," she shrugged.

"You said you take. What did you mean? *What* do you take?"

"We take a little time," she said. "Is that so much? I mean, certainly people have asked *you* for a little time—'do you have a few minutes?' " She laughed softly, genuinely amused. "That's all they lose. Maybe more than a few minutes, maybe some days, a week or two, perhaps a month, but they never know it. They never miss it."

"You take . . . time?" I repeated.

"Time is what it boils down to. Actually I suppose you could call it a little strength . . . a little . . ."

"Vitality," her husband said.

"Yes," she nodded. "Vitality. And as you so cleverly noticed, it may make them ill for a bit, but children are always getting ill in amusement parks, aren't they? And they recover. They feel fine in an hour or so. They grow up, they grow old—maybe not quite as old as they would

have, but what are a few days to an old person? Unless you can take those days . . . and multiply them."

"You touch them," I said dully. "When you give them the candy, you touch them."

"Yes. Just a touch." She smiled again. "A touch, I do confess't!" and then she laughed. "It feels so *good* to confess it, so good for someone to know at last. You've no idea how hard it . . ."

"How do you do it?"

She shook her head shortly and looked at her husband, who raised his eyebrows. "How do you walk?" she replied. "It's been so long since we've had to think about it that I doubt if we could explain it in words, even to ourselves. It's just something we *do*."

"Instinctive," said Carl Younger.

"Yes, instinctive. We had to learn at first. Self-taught, I don't quite remember how. But once we knew we *could*, once we were able to control it, it became quite second nature. One short season of sharing, and we are primed, charged, secured from the grip of Gerontion until the next summer. And then we begin again." She sighed. "Retirement has proved to be a most rewarding time."

I had to ask it. "How old are you?"

She smiled coyly. "What a rude question. One I won't answer because I doubt you'd believe me. But old enough to have forgotten how we got this old." She shook her head, frowning. "Don't look so sour. What we take is so very slight, never even missed. And there's nothing you can do about it now, is there?" She replaced the frown with a warm smile, the same one she'd used when offering the chocolate bars. "No hard feelings?" she asked, and held out her hand.

I couldn't touch it. Instead I backed off, bumping into the next row of benches. Then I turned and walked away from them, away from the bandshell and the grove, unable to make myself look back at the pair of them sitting there. And the three candy bars on the bench beside them.

I don't know what I thought at first. I *couldn't* think, couldn't accept something so crazy, so implausible, so totally unreal. So I walked my rounds and looked for slug users, and I didn't go past the bandshell to see if the Youngers were still there. I knew they would be.

It wasn't until I was in my street clothes and on my way home that I began to try to deal with what they had told me as a reality, even if a reality created from an aging couple's cruel fantasy. At the best, they were crazy. At the worst, they

were . . . far worse. Either way, I had to get them out of the park.

Or did I? What harm had they really done? Assuming that what they had told me was only their own pitiful delusion, they did no harm at all, except for contributing to tooth decay and nausea, and who was I to stop them? I think that was the main reason I didn't want to believe them—I simply didn't know what to do if it were true. It was a lot easier to consider them wacky old coots with a gift for healthy longevity than to believe otherwise.

But I couldn't help myself. I *did* believe them. Ethel Younger had been sane. Her eyes had been as clear and as honest as a child's. And as young.

Well then? she had asked, and I asked myself—well then?—trying to find a path out, to find a way to do nothing and still be able to live with myself. What the hell, I thought, popping open a fourth beer at my kitchen table, what's a week to an eighty-year-old? And how many kids would even live to be seventy or eighty anyway, with the shape the world was in? Would anybody even be around in good old 2060? What did it matter? And I flopped into bed, mind and room both spinning, thankful that tomorrow was my day off. As I fell asleep, I kept seeing Ethel Younger's white teeth smiling confidently at me, her mouth moving, telling me what she'd told me earlier that day, replaying it in my mind to reassure me that I need do nothing, because *they never miss it . . . nothing you can do about it . . . what we take is so very slight . . .*

. . . once we were able to control it . . .

My eyes snapped open, and the room started to roll again, but it was only my outer senses that had had too much beer. My inward mind was suddenly clear, remembering those words so vividly—*once we were able to control it*—and remembering everything else, too, so that it all fit together like a snap-lock puzzle. There must have been a time, then, when they were learning, when they *couldn't* control the power they had. And it was because of that time, not all that long ago, that I would do what I had to do.

The next day, Sunday, I woke up early and went to Magicland dressed in my street clothes. I showed my pass, got in before opening time, and went to the grove and sat on the Youngers' bench, waiting for them. It was cool, with a hint of rain in the air, and the light jacket I wore felt good. They arrived ten minutes after the park opened. When they saw me, they slowed down, but didn't turn back, just kept coming toward me until

they were right next to me.

Ethel Younger smiled. Her husband didn't. "Another visit?" she said.

I nodded. "Your passes," I said. "May I see them?"

She pursed her lips. "You're not in uniform today."

"I'm still a guard. I can show you my I.D

"That won't be necessary." She dug into her purse and came up with a plastic card that she held out to me.

"Just put it on the bench beside me," I said, not touching it.

"My, aren't we peevish this morning," she said, doing as I asked.

"Now yours," I told Carl Younger. He hesitated, then took his pass from his wallet and placed it next to his wife's. I picked them up and looked at them. The faces in the photos looked ten years older than those of the people standing in front of me. I bent the soft plastic in two and put the passes into my pocket. "Your passes have expired. They're not good any more."

Carl Younger's face got red, and he opened his mouth to speak, but his wife's raised hand stopped him. Though her eyes looked calm, her mouth had drawn down and her nostrils had widened.

"I believe you're wrong," she told me. "The expiration date is September tenth. This is only August fifth."

I shook my head.

"Perhaps we should take this up with your superiors."

"That's fine," I said. "But he'll believe me, not you. And when I tell him you've been giving candy to kids . . ."

"That's not against the law!" Carl Younger burst in.

" . . . and asking them for certain things in exchange . . ." I went on.

"That's a *lie,*" Ethel Younger cried.

It was my turn to shrug. "Why would I lie about a thing like that? What point would it serve?"

"You'd need witnesses."

"Would you want it to go that far?" I asked her. "You want people to know your date of birth?"

Then she laughed, softly at first, but it grew louder, until tears started to form in the smooth corners of her eyes. "He *believed* us!" she said, clapping her husband on the shoulder. "Carl, he actually believed our story!"

Carl Younger smiled uncomfortably, then started to laugh himself. It was forced and phony, but it didn't matter. I knew she was lying.

"Such a silly story!" she went on, "and . . ."

"Shut up," I said, my fear lost in anger. "It's too late for that. Just like it's too late for Jimmy."

She stopped laughing. Her husband continued for a few seconds afterward. "Jimmy," she said condescendingly, as though it were all a joke. "And who is Jimmy?"

"*Was* Jimmy. My brother. My younger brother. Died when we were kids. Died fast, just got sick and died in two days. The doctors thought it was leukemia but were never really sure. That was the same summer my hair turned gray. The other kids thought it was funny. Ten years old and gray hair."

The Youngers weren't smiling any more.

"You hadn't quite gotten it down by then, had you? Not quite able to control it, huh?"

Her mouth opened, trembled, and shut.

"And last night I put it all together. After thirty years I remembered, and it all went click. And I knew why you looked so familiar the first time I saw you this summer. I'd seen you before. Hadn't thought about it for years, but it was still back there. Not every day strangers give you candy. One each. You gave us a candy bar each. A long time ago, *you* probably don't remember. But then why would you? Why remember one out of so many?"

I bit the inside of my lip. My words had been coming in a rush, and I didn't want to get upset, emotional. I had a job to do. "It's time to stop now," I said. "You took too much. Get out of this park and don't ever come back. But I'll be watching you, and if you ever try to touch another child, I'll kill you both." I pushed back the front of my jacket just far enough to let them see the butt of the .38 Special I had wedged in my waistband.

Faces pale, they turned without a word and walked away. I followed them to make sure they left the park, and then I followed them to their home, a small house on a quiet residential street in a town fifteen miles from Magicland. Their lights went off at midnight, and I drove to my place, got my bag, woke up the security head with a phone call, and told him I had to go out of town for a week or so.

I think a week's about right. To obtain youth with just a touch must be more addictive than any drug, and I can hardly blame them for slipping. In the past few days we've been to two zoos, a library, three museums, and two small town parks with playgrounds. Although they look for me, they haven't seen me. But they will soon.

Today they bought some candy.

A Peculiar Landscape Of Death

by Robert Gray

"It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process."
Henry James

It was a good day for a funeral. At the cemetery, low, dark clouds sprayed a cold rain in the faces of a couple of dozen mourners gathered around the coffin. They huddled under black umbrellas, but the rain was swept across an open meadow and mingled with tears on their solemn faces.

The minister read quickly, his assistant trying to shield him with an umbrella that the wind kept tugging away from its proper station. His leather bound Bible was safe beneath a clear plastic bookcover, but he still hesitated occasionally, trying to read between droplets on the page.

Henri and Laura Cavanaugh stood off to one side. Edna Garner, the deceased, was an old friend of Laura's family, one of those final, glowing embers from a livelier time in Saratoga's history. Edna's niece had been a schoolmate of Laura's, but Laura came to the funeral primarily because her mother had

Illustration by Eric Marcus

asked her to represent the family there. Henri came along to hold the umbrella.

Everyone recognized everyone else. They had all smiled weakly and exchanged somber greetings outside the church earlier. That was the way of this city during the off-season. Those who remained through the harsh upstate winters formed an unofficial club that only met for the odd wedding or funeral.

Most of them said nothing to Henri. It was an accepted fact that poor Laura had married beneath her station, and they blamed Henri for this. It was still a mystery to them. They had never been able to figure out what an attractive, intelligent, middle-aged woman like Laura had seen in this dishevelled former racetrack columnist with his shaggy, graying hair and chaotic mustache. Not only was he a decade older than she, but he was common and antisocial as well.

Henri didn't really care. When he and Laura were working on a case, she usually handled that end of the social scale anyway. She was clubhouse and he was backstretch. He enjoyed playing the role of her inadequate, proletarian husband in the presence of her friends. It gave him an edge. Once the first few haughty looks were out of the way, he usually became the invisible man at these functions and learned a great deal.

There was nothing more for the minister to say. He closed the book and handed it to his anxious assistant. Then he went over to the family and murmured a few appropriate words. The small crowd dispersed in groups of three or four, careful to stay clear of the grave's muddy edges. Henri held the umbrella over Laura's head as she approached the three people who remained behind.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," she said, taking the pale, outstretched hand of Edna's niece in her own and squeezing it gently. She bent over and kissed the woman's proffered cheek. "My mother asked me to convey her deep sympathy. She's been ill and couldn't chance coming out in this awful weather."

"Thank you, Laura," Elizabeth replied. Her face was the same shade of spectral white as her hand, exaggerated further by her black dress and veil. Her husband, Paul Goddard, stood to the left, wearing a tailor-made black suit. He held onto an umbrella with one hand and his toupee with the other. Both were in imminent danger of blowing away. Not ready to risk either, he nodded his greeting to Laura.

On the right was a young

man, probably in his mid-twenties, a handsome boy with a bright, lightly freckled face and thick crown of blond curls. He was staring at the coffin, silent and withdrawn. Elizabeth did not introduce him.

Laura mumbled the usual "if there's anything we can do" and said goodbye.

"Glad that's over with," muttered Henri as they were walking down the narrow road back to their car. The rain had let up now that they were nearing shelter again.

"Don't be too sure," Laura replied, nodding toward a large man who was leaning against their black Mercedes sedan. He wore a raincoat with the collar turned up and a tweed cap that did a lousy job of keeping the rain off his face.

Henri extended his hand to Detective Sergeant David McKerney. "Afternoon, Mac. How's it going?"

"Henri . . . Mrs. Cavanaugh."

Against all odds, the detective sought to maintain a wall of formality between himself and the Cavanaughs. He had been working upstate for almost ten years, after an earlier fifteen in the Bronx that had given him ulcers and a bullet in the neck. All that remained of the bullet was a faded scar that he usually hid with turtleneck sweaters like the cable-knit he was wearing.

The ulcers were another matter. Unfortunately for him, the violence and daily frustrations of the city had been replaced by Mr. and Mrs. Henri Cavanaugh. In years past, he had done everything short of arrest to make them stop meddling in the investigations assigned to his department. His own colleagues sometimes complained loud enough for McKerney to get heat from his superiors. Perhaps worst of all was the undeniable fact that the Cavanaughs had a knack for this sort of thing, and on more occasions than he cared to recall had stumbled onto key evidence or suspects before anyone else. Since they didn't accept payment for what they called "favors" to their friends, he couldn't even get them for practicing without a license.

McKerney had decided a couple of years ago that the only way to handle the situation was to keep the Cavanaughs and his department out of each other's way. Whenever there was a case he suspected Henri and Laura would nose in on, the detective sought them out early in the game to warn them about getting too close. It rarely did much good, but at least it made them a little wary of his people.

It also encouraged them to call when they came up with answers, which never hurt his status in the department.

"What've you got for us this time, Mac?" asked Henri. He loved tormenting McKerney and prompting that classic dirty look the question never failed to put on the detective's face.

"Looks like you're already involved, as usual." McKerney nodded in the direction of a black limousine that was slowly making its way down a road on the other side of the cemetery.

"Oh . . . " Henri glanced at Laura, then made an educated guess. "You mean the Edna Garner case."

McKerney nodded. He swiped impatiently at the water that had accumulated on the brim of his cap. It was steadily dripping onto his nose. "We should talk somewhere comfortable."

"Why don't you follow us home," said Henri as Laura walked around the car and got in on the driver's side.

Twenty minutes later they were seated in the converted study that served as the Cavanaugh office, staring at a lively blaze in the marble fireplace. It was still cool outside, but the sun had finally managed to break through gaps in the clouds. It provided some illumination through four stained glass windows depicting turn-of-the-century horseracing and hunting scenes. In addition, several lights had been switched on in the study to take the edge off the darkness that was a natural result of walls lined with floor to ceiling bookcases.

Henri poured coffee and served Laura and McKerney, who were seated in the two leather armchairs in front of the sturdy oak desk. The polished surface was disturbed only by a replica of a Roaring Twenties telephone and a thick address book.

After delivering the coffee, Henri carried his own cup and saucer behind the desk and sat in the antique swivel chair, which was also made of oak. A slender bookcase was directly behind him, flanked on either side by a pair of the windows. He smiled at the detective, who set his cup and saucer precariously on the arm of his chair, took a notebook out of his coat pocket, flipped through a few pages, and found what he was looking for.

He read swiftly, as if covering ground he assumed was already familiar to them.

"Okay, here we go . . . Edna Garner . . . Deceased found in library, slumped in chair, book on floor along with crystal cordial glass, contents spilled on carpet . . . blah,blah,blah, the

usual stuff . . . no signs of violence . . . "

"What was the book?" asked Laura. She lifted the coffee cup to her lips and watched McKerney turn back a page.

"Let's see. Where was that? Oh yeah. Not a book exactly. It was like a catalogue of paintings from a gallery in New York, Andreck's . . . An old one, 1964. We'll check it out, but I don't think it means much."

"So we're not the only ones who think this death was a little suspicious," lied Henri. He noticed out of the corner of his eye that Laura had begun to turn to look at him with a shocked expression, but she reined in her emotions and took another sip of coffee instead.

"It doesn't seem that unusual, really," said the detective. "Mrs. Garner was over eighty, had a real weak heart, was on medication. She had no business drinking alcohol in the first place, but her maid says she always had a little nip in the afternoon. We don't suspect foul play."

Henri leaned forward, put his hands flat on the desk, and kept his eyes on McKerney. "But you did an autopsy."

"Procedure in suicide cases."

"And?"

"Sleeping pills. Not much, really, but enough to push her ticker over the edge."

"Why wasn't any of this in the paper?" asked Laura.

"It's a local case, and the family used old contacts to keep it quiet. We went along, provided they cooperated fully with our investigation. Which they have."

Laura excused herself and took the coffee things to the kitchen. Henri waited until she was gone before he spoke again. "You'll have to forgive her, Mac. She knew the family. Old ties and all that."

McKerney's face reddened. "You mean you were just there as regular mourners?"

"Did I say that?"

"Damn!"

McKerney slammed his notebook shut and stood. "Listen, Henri, it's all over now, okay? Do me a big favor. Leave it alone, will you? All we're doing is tying up loose ends."

Henri shrugged. "It's none of our business, is it?"

McKerney put on his patented "if only I could believe that" scowl and left the study. Laura met him in the hall and provided escort to the front door.

Henri reached in one of the desk drawers and stopped the tape machine that had just recorded their conversation. He touched the rewind button so they could review the information McKerney had been kind enough to provide.

Then he picked up the

telephone and called Jeff.

"Do you really think we should get involved?" asked Laura, looking up from a thick cookbook. She was reading aloud a recipe for Mandarin Stuffed Chicken Breast while Henri moved around the kitchen following her directions. "I mean, we usually wait until we're asked. That has been, as they say, company policy. Did you put salt and pepper on those?"

"Not yet," Henri answered, laying out the four boneless chicken breasts on a large cutting board. They looked like fleshy, earthbound butterflies.

He was working at a counter near the sink while Laura sat at the butcher block trestle table in the middle of the room. Although the high ceilinged kitchen was more than a century old, its appliances, cabinets, and work areas were contemporary. The only drawback was the size of the room, which put everything at inconvenient distances. Henri was thinking about that as he crossed the room to get the salt and pepper out of a spice cabinet near the stove. He brought them back and shook generous doses of each on the chicken.

"Laura, I know it's probably none of our business, but when has that ever stopped us? Aren't you curious? Those three at the funeral rubbed me the wrong way. Besides, it's been too quiet here lately."

"You're incorrigible. By the time we get through there won't be a family skeleton left in Saratoga. You really love tearing down the grand old traditions, don't you?"

"Like inheritance murders, you mean? Does it say how much lemon juice?"

Laura smiled. She glanced down at her cookbook. "No."

"Good," said Henri, putting his thumb over the top of the bottle and sprinkling drops of lemon juice on the chicken. He then laid thin slices of prosciutto and cheese across them, topped by a half dozen Mandarin orange slices piled in the center of each breast.

"What else?"

Laura checked the recipe. "That's all."

"Doesn't seem like enough."

"Henri, how about sticking to the recipe for a change?"

"Don't be silly. How am I going to become a master chef if I don't experiment?"

Laura sighed as she watched him walk back over to the spice cabinet and contemplate. She winced as he reached for the Tabasco sauce. "Henri, you've got to be kidding."

"What? No courage, my dear?

Where's your sense of adventure? I just want to add a touch of spice to your life."

He twisted the little cap off as he was returning to the counter. Laura cautioned him to take it easy, but Henri poured several potent drops of the stuff on each chicken breast.

"Laura, what do you know about Edna Garner?"

"Only what my mother has told me now and then. She was a big patron of art, invested often and wisely. Her house is practically a museum, I understand. As I remember, though, my mother didn't have much respect for Edna's knowledge or taste. Her kindest description of it was eclectic."

Henri flopped a chicken breast in various directions, each time knocking out oranges. "How am I supposed to fold these damn things? I don't know anything about her taste, but I'll bet her heirs will still make a bundle off the collection, if it's as big as all that."

"No doubt. Her niece, Elizabeth, the one at the cemetery, is the only heir as far as I know. She'll probably get most of the collection as well as the house, but it wouldn't surprise me if some things had been bequeathed to museums. Try folding over those pieces of skin on the sides, dear."

Henri took one piece in each hand and crisscrossed them, pulling gently until they felt secure, but not to the point where the oranges would squeeze out again. "I knew there was a reason why I married you. Who was that kid with them, the blond guy?"

"I don't know. A guess would be that he's an artist living in the gardener's cottage on the grounds. It was converted into a studio decades ago. There was an article on it in the New York *Times* back in the late sixties. Edna collected painters as well as paintings. She married three artists during her lifetime and supported dozens more. That boy was probably one of her final 'discoveries.' Some of them actually did quite well. In fact, two of her husbands gained respectability and five figure prices through Edna's contacts and encouragement."

Carefully picking up the lower end of the breast, Henri rolled it forward over the crossed side pieces, and miraculously the stuffing remained inside as a tight roll was formed.

"Bravo!" said Laura, slamming the cookbook shut with a flourish and coming over to give him a congratulatory hug.

With no time to spare for social niceties, and riding the crest of his culinary momentum, Henri quickly rolled the other three before his amnesiac

fingers forgot the moves. Laura opened a bottle of white wine that had been chilling in the refrigerator and poured them a celebratory toast.

Henri picked up a spatula and slid it under the chicken breasts one at a time, carefully lifting them into an oiled roasting pan. He brushed the skin with melted butter, seasoned the outside, and sprinkled a dash of oregano on the top for visual effect. He washed his hands and then stepped back. Inspired by the subject of their conversation, he stretched out his arm and stared down its length at a cocked thumb, as if getting the chicken in proper perspective.

"Truly a work of art, Mr. Cavanaugh," said Laura, sipping her wine as she handed a glass to Henri. "Still life of fowl and fruit? Portrait of a bird in hand? Well done. And I have a marvelous idea for dessert, *mon cher.*"

The telephone rang. Laura picked it up, said "yes" three times, "ah" once, and finished with an uncharacteristic "you bet." Henri put the chicken in the oven and looked over at his wife, his question conveyed wordlessly.

"That was Jeffry, calling from New York," she answered. "Before he left Saratoga this morning, he found out that Edna's maid has been moonlighting as a waitress at the harness track. He's also managed to get a copy of the catalogue from Andrek's Gallery. He's taking the first plane back to Albany and wants us to meet him at the track tonight."

Jeffry Dalton often worked undercover for the Cavanaughs. He used to be a jockey, wanted to be an actor, but had temporarily settled for the sometimes dubious assignments from Henri that usually called upon all of his disparate talents. To maintain his effectiveness and anonymity, Jeffry seldom came to the Cavanaugh house. Meetings were arranged.

Henri checked the temperature on the oven, then reached for his wine. "So much for dessert."

Laura ordered dinner in the clubhouse dining room, though she had no intention of eating it. Henri's Mandarin Chicken with Tabasco still rested uncomfortably somewhere in her digestive tract. She had checked earlier to find out what station Edna's former maid was working and had arranged to be seated there. The girl's name was Mary.

It was still early. Almost an hour remained before post time

for the first race. On a rainy Tuesday night in the spring, there probably wouldn't be much of a crowd, so the pace in the clubhouse was leisurely.

The dining room was built in a style similar to that of the large, enclosed grandstand next door. But instead of tightly packed seating, the clubhouse offered its patrons an ascending series of wide steps on which tables and chairs were comfortably arranged with both hunger and handicapping in mind.

Laura sipped her gin and tonic and watched a dozen horses working out on the track far below. Twilight was settling on the area. Dark clouds, though less ominous than they had been earlier, still reduced the setting sun to an occasional peek through rare gaps. The track lights were all turned on, wide banks of brilliant illumination atop high poles that surrounded the half mile oval.

The track was listed as "sloppy" on the infield tote board and looked at least that bad as pacers splashed by the finish line, past the high clubhouse windows and into the first turn.

A track program lay beside Laura's plate. It was opened to the first and second race entries, though Laura only pretended to study it.

"Another cocktail, ma'am?" asked the waitress, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere and now stood beside the table.

"Yes, please." Laura moved her glass closer to the edge of the table and sneaked a quick glance at the girl. She was in her early twenties and, though Laura hated the expression, she looked mousy. Her face was small and her eyes darted nervously about, looking everywhere but at her customer. Her thin, black hair was cut too short and pulled back from her face with two flower barrettes. "Doesn't seem very busy tonight."

"No, ma'am. Pretty slow."

"I don't know how you girls make enough money to survive during the off-season."

Mary forced a tight smile and picked up the empty glass. "Most of us have other jobs, I guess."

"Really? What else do you do?"

"I work days for some local people, cleaning and such," she said, then her face changed, a slight fluttering of emotion that was immediately subdued. She seemed resolved on keeping her troubles private.

"Now I recognize you. Weren't you at Edna Garner's, the poor dear?"

"Yes, ma'am, but I'm afraid I don't remember . . . "

"Oh, I was in and out a few times with my husband on social calls. I'm sure you were too

busy to notice. My husband is an artist."

"Ahh," the girl said. That single expression spanned a wealth of understanding. Laura was taken from the ranks of meddlesome, demanding customers and placed on a shelf reserved for friends of Mary's former employer. No doubt the girl imagined a complete profile of Laura. She had worked at Edna Garner's long enough to grow accustomed to the coming and going of a procession of artists looking to the old woman for that big break.

Laura concentrated on her program so Mary wouldn't feel uncomfortable about leaving. It was not a good idea to have her suspect that this was an interrogation.

A few minutes later she returned with a fresh drink and set it on the table. "Is your meal all right, ma'am?"

"Yes, yes, it's fine. I'm just not very hungry." Laura ran her fingertips around the rim of the glass and watched the horses for a moment, then turned and looked up at the girl. "I just thought of something horrid. You weren't the one who found Edna's body, were you?"

"No, ma'am, thank God." She folded her arms across her chest and leaned her weight to one side. She was staring hard at the racetrack, but Laura knew her mind was elsewhere. "I go home at four. Mrs. Garner was in the library when I left. I stopped in to say goodbye and see if there was anything she needed, but she said no. She looked tired, kind of weak and all, but I'd seen her like that before so I didn't pay it much mind until the next day when I found out . . . "

Laura sipped her drink and nodded sympathetically, trying to maintain the illusion that this was just idle conversation between two local women on a slow night at the track. "You must be glad you weren't there. Who did find her?"

"You must know her niece, Elizabeth? Well, she and her husband came out later that night and . . . "

"Isn't that awful? I didn't think Edna looked despondent the last time I saw her. It was quite a shock when I learned she might have taken her own life."

"I know. But the funny thing was that when I stopped to see her, I didn't think she was depressed, really. I mean she had reason to be, with her health problems and all, but to me she seemed upset, like angry but not excited angry. More like woozy, tired angry. Hopeless like. And she said to me, all she said, she said, 'The gate is

closed.' She kept saying that."

"I wonder what she meant," said Laura, moving food around on her plate with a fork.

"Who knows? I told the police, but they said she was probably already drugged and didn't know what she was talking about. If only I'd noticed she was in trouble, I could have . . ."

"Now, now, dear. There's nothing anyone could have done. Are you still working there?"

"No way. The niece is talking about moving in, but she told me that she wants to run the place herself. Nothing personal, she says, just that I bring back too many bad memories."

"That wasn't very nice."

"No, ma'am, but that's how it goes sometimes. I'm not complaining. I wouldn't want to stay around that house myself with Mrs. Garner not there any more."

"Well, I'm sure they'll give you a nice reference."

Mary forced a professional smile and excused herself. Laura had the feeling that this conversation lasted as long as it did because Laura seemed to be a potential employer. When that possibility ended, so did their talk.

Henri was sitting on a crowded bench at the south end of the grandstand building, first floor, watching the Rangers-Canadiens hockey game. The television was an alternative for horseplayers who were too depressed to see another race, though it took some practice to keep your eyes off the closed circuit monitor, just to the left of the TV, where every race was shown twice.

He doodled in the margin beside the third race entries with a small green pencil he had bought with his program. He was surrounded by people, most of them men, who were alternately cursing and cheering the hockey players and the harness drivers.

The horses running in the third race had just finished their first lap and were entering the clubhouse turn in pairs. To kill time, Henri had placed a bet on a nice little speed horse, figuring that with all the mud and water splashing around, a horse that could get out in front early might discourage its competition and hang on to the end. At the moment, however, his choice was trapped in fourth place along the rail. Three more horses would probably have to go by him before there was sufficient room to get to the outside and move on the leaders. That wasn't likely to happen.

It didn't.

Henri waited until the re-

sults were declared official. Then he watched one of the Canadiens misfire from point blank range on an open goal. Everybody cheered. The guy sitting next to him said that this was the Rangers' year to go all the way. On that note, Henri decided it was time to leave and headed outside.

Jeff was waiting for him about halfway up the stretch, standing near the rail as he watched some trotters flash by during their workouts. A former jockey, he was just tall enough to see over the fence. Henri noticed that because of this he did not assume the normal pose, which was to lean against the metal top with arms folded. Instead, he remained back a step or two, as if disdaining the ordinary in favor of this more studious attitude. He had an intense, preoccupied look on his round face that didn't quite fit with his avowed dislike of harness racing. He looked like a horseplayer.

Jeff wore faded bluejeans, handsome cowboy boots, and a red windbreaker with DANDEE FARMS STABLE printed across the back. Henri knew there was no such place because he had bought the jacket himself, along with dozens of others with similar, nonexistent names. He just wished that Jeff wouldn't waste it on a night like this when it wasn't needed. Those jackets were a great icebreaker at almost any track. The sight of an unknown stable eyeing local stock drew track people, and their information, to you quicker than sharks to blood. All you had to do was back this up with a few well-chosen fables and have an instinct for how far you could extend the lie, depending upon the person you were talking with. But tonight he didn't want to be noticed.

Henri stopped next to Jeff and leaned against the fence. "How's it going, kid?"

"No brain, no pain." Jeff slammed his rolled program against the rail and muttered an obscenity. "I bet that damn three horse last race."

Henri decided not to mention the jacket. "So did I, sports fan, so did I. Guess the driver believed the old saying that speed kills."

"Wasn't that something, man? No way you take back a speed horse, the only one in the race, and tuck him third when they're going out in thirty-two and change. What a fool."

"That's how it goes sometimes," Henri said, watching as two mud-spattered horses trotted past on their way back to the barns. One of them, scheduled to run in the sixth race, had a washy coat and didn't look ready to run anywhere.

Jeff turned a couple of pages and made a note of it in his program. "Laura said you came up with something," Henri remarked.

"Yeah. Remember I told you I had this friend who was in a crummy summer stock play in Connecticut with me a couple of years ago? She's a real art fiend, used to drive into the city every chance she got. Now she lives there, in the Village, and works for a gallery. I looked her up, and she helped me find the owner of Andrek's, which, it turns out, closed about ten years ago. He still lives in New York, but he checked out of the art world for the greener pastures of Wall Street. He said he didn't want to talk about art any more, said it had been a 'juvenile' fling."

"But?"

"But he still had a few old catalogues at his house and was willing to part with one in particular for a small fee. He only did one show for Edna Garner. Guess she spread her money around galleries like she did artists."

"How small was his fee?"

Jeffry grinned and turned to watch two pacers as they flew by during their workouts. "Is five hundred small enough? It wasn't easy to come up with on an out-of-work actor's salary, let me tell you."

With a quick movement, the catalogue was transferred from inside Jeffry's jacket to Henri's.

"Check's in the mail, Jeff. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Turns out this catalogue's even existing is kind of strange. The owner told me that usually a small time artist would never rate a catalogue of his works at a show like that. Only a major leaguer would get one. But it seems Edna Garner was responsible. She'd done it before, too, financed the whole publication just to give one of her husbands first class treatment. The way this guy was talking, she was quite the ringmaster. She'd set up a show in a New York gallery, then drag all her rich friends in to buy the stuff. He said that the main reason he shucked the art business was that there weren't enough Edna Garners around. He still remembered that it was the only time he sold every piece at a show, including one she bought herself. How about that?"

Henri nodded, shifting the slender catalogue under his sportcoat to keep it from falling out. "Nice work, Jeff. Gives us a lot to start with."

"There's more. My friend knows Edna's final discovery, a kid named Michael Wills. They were in a school somewhere when he was chosen, so to speak, plucked from the

masses. The interesting thing is that it was Mrs. Garner's niece's husband who knew him first and introduced him to the old lady. Don't know if it means anything, but I thought it was a little suspicious."

"Might be. But I can't figure it. Why would any of them kill a sickly old woman? They're all young enough. She probably wouldn't have lasted much longer anyway, and they could have inherited everything nice and legal."

Jeffry shrugged. He was in the search and collection end of the business. Analysis was neither his interest nor his problem.

Henri sighed and turned to leave. "Like Mac said, maybe there's nothing to it. . . . I don't think we'll need anything else, Jeff. Now it just comes down to a little breaking and entering . . . in a civilized manner, of course."

The following afternoon, they drove out to the Goddard house, a single story cottage near Saratoga Lake. It was attractive in its way, but definitely a step or two down from the Garner estate back in town.

"Nobody home," said Henri when he returned to the car after ringing the doorbell several times. He had also peeked in the garage windows. "Both cars are gone. Suppose they've set up housekeeping already at the big house?"

"Could be," Laura replied as she started the engine and backed out of the short driveway.

They drove across the city. Laura spun the steering wheel and eased the Mercedes onto a wide, elm-bordered avenue where the Garner estate was just one of many elegant old homes. They parked at the curb and walked alongside the high, spiked wrought iron fence to an electronically operated front gate. Laura pressed the button embedded in one of the posts. Moments later, Elizabeth's voice crackled indistinctly.

"Yes? Yes? Who's there?"

"Elizabeth? This is Laura, Laura Cavan . . . I mean Woodward. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I might stop and see how you were doing."

"Oh . . . all right, Laura. Come in."

The crackling noise ceased, and the gate slowly opened. They moved into the cobblestoned yard and walked toward the enormous, three story house. Like many others in Saratoga, it was an elaborate conglomeration of nineteenth century styles and adornments, a testament to the restless wealth and lack of self-restraint that

had infected its creators. It combined a dizzying array of towers and gables, high balconies, cupolas, and bay windows. A worn mansard roof wrapped around the top story, and many of the dormer windows on the attic level were made of stained glass, though few people would ever be likely to venture up there to see them from inside.

The front door was an intimidating slab of oak, at least ten feet high and four or five wide, intricately carved with animal and forest scenes. Henri rapped the brass wolf's head knocker three times. They waited a minute before the handle slowly started turning. The door was too thick for them to have heard approaching footsteps, but it swung open with surprising ease. Elizabeth's thin, pale face peeked around the edge.

"Hello, Laura," she said, then glanced vaguely in Henri's direction, which he took to be her greeting. He responded in kind by saying nothing. "Come in. Come in."

They followed her down a long hall, its parquet floor setting their footsteps echoing against the walls and high ceiling. The passage was lined with marble statues of Greek gods. Henri thought the whole population of Olympus must be there, though most of them had not aged gracefully, missing an arm or two here and a head there.

The living room was cavernous and arranged rather haphazardly. Most of the furniture was appropriate to the Victorian setting. There were many stiff-backed cathedral chairs, some love seats, and two elegant sofas, all scattered about the area in unrelated groupings. They were upholstered primarily in red, but there was also a bit of purple here and there that matched the heavy drapes on high, narrow windows looking out on a long neglected garden and lawn. In a far corner, a leather recliner and a portable television hid in the dark like outcasts.

The beige walls were filled with paintings of every imaginable size and type. It was difficult to concentrate on individual works because they were all crammed together, frame against frame, in such a way that none of them stood out. Still, Henri noticed a large, dark portrait from another century that was surrounded by two small landscapes, a colorful abstract of geometrical figures, a three dimensional collage of carpenter's tools, and four separate versions of Harry Truman's grinning face.

In spite of the distractions, Henri's attention was immediately drawn to the abstract be-

cause he hated it. Trying to understand what the artist was doing in this chaotic blend of circles, triangles, and squares, yellows, blues, and reds, he could only shake his head. Laura had tried her best to educate him on the finer points of modern art, but he still felt as if somebody was telling a joke and he was the only person in the world who didn't get it.

Elizabeth and Laura sat together on the other side of the room. She offered them sherry, but they declined. Henri wondered if Laura had been as surprised as he was at the choice of refreshment. Elizabeth poured herself a generous portion in a wine glass and drank greedily, wincing as the liquid hit her throat.

"It was nice of you to come, Laura. I know we haven't seen much of one another over the years, but I do appreciate having someone here with me today. I've been so . . . confused lately . . . " She blushed and stared at the carpet, then looked across the room to where Henri was studying another painting. "Sorry . . . I have no right to burden you."

Laura reached over and touched her hand. It was bone cold. "Nonsense, dear. I told you I wanted to help if I could. Elizabeth, maybe you shouldn't be in this house for a while."

"That's what Paul says. He wants us to keep living out at the lake, but . . . but I just can't run away from all this. I have responsibilities." She looked around the room. Laura detected a sense of reverence in her voice. She thought she also detected a little hint of madness, but dismissed that as her overactive imagination.

"Elizabeth, was your aunt despondent in the days before she passed away?" asked Laura, immediately regretting her choice of words, wishing she could retract the question.

"Killed herself, you mean," Elizabeth hissed, fierce anger showing in her suddenly hard eyes. Then, just as quickly, she collapsed in tears, her small body trembling.

"What the hell's . . . Who are you?" screamed Paul as he stormed into the room. He rushed across the area between them, stumbling over an end table, and sat down on the sofa next to his wife, who spun around and fell into his protective embrace. He was glaring at Laura. "I said who the hell are you?"

Laura sat back on the love seat, relaxed, and trained a haughty look on her new adversary. She spoke calmly. "My name is Laura Cavanaugh. We met at the funeral. That is my husband, Henri."

Paul's face reddened even more when he saw Henri inspecting a miniature landscape, his back to these proceedings, arms folded. "What right do you people have barging into our home and . . . "

He stopped short when Detective McKerney walked into the room, accompanied by Michael, the young artist from the gardener's cottage.

"I was just coming back from town and met him outside," Michael said to Paul. "He was about to ring the bell, but I said I'd show him in. Okay?"

Paul nodded. He seemed to have regained control of himself. Even McKerney looked remarkably calm under the circumstances. Usually when Henri and Laura were caught underfoot, he fumed.

"Sorry to bother you during cocktail hour, folks," said McKerney to nobody in particular. "But I wanted to clear up just a few last details before we put this one to bed for good. Mrs. Goddard, I'm afraid we have no choice but to rule this a suicide. The lab says it was no accident. Considering your aunt's health problems . . . I don't mean to be cruel, but . . . "

Elizabeth sobbed, which unnerved the detective. She didn't seem to be hearing a word he said. She clutched a lace hanky, wringing it with nervous fingers as she held it to her eyes. There was a long moment of silence in the room while McKerney and the artist sat down with the rest of the group. The detective took out his notebook and fished through his pockets for a pen.

Henri uttered a loud "hunh" from the other side of the room. Everyone turned to see what was going on. He was running his finger along the tops of some of the frames, then poking through the narrow spaces beside them as if checking for cleanliness.

"Be careful, sir," said Michael, leaning forward in his chair. "Some of those paintings aren't hung too well. I've been changing the fixtures behind them, but I'm a long way from being finished."

Henri took his hand away from the painting he had been inspecting, a New England scene, and stared at the young man. Then he reached up and lifted it off the wall to examine the fixture.

"Excuse me, sir," said McKerney, employing this formal tone in front of strangers. "Would you mind putting that back and joining us over here. I'd like to get your names if I might."

But after carefully rehanging the work, Henri moved even farther away from the group,

studying the next set of paintings. He locked his hands behind his back and leaned slightly forward, looking remarkably like a lifelong museum devotee, though the truth was that the only artist he had ever given two cents for was Jenness Cortez. Her paintings of the Saratoga racing world, or rather prints of her paintings, were practically the only things he had brought with him when he moved in with Laura. He had a personal theory that hinged on the idea that if a painting did not have a racehorse in it, it wasn't art.

McKerney was reviewing the circumstances of Edna Garner's death one final time (so he promised) and vowing not to bother them again. Paul, still angry about finding Henri and Laura bothering his wife, was barely under control, and several times added an expletive to his curt, monosyllabic replies.

McKerney let this go. Laura noticed that although he was scribbling on his notepad after each question, his attention seemed to be focused on Henri, who was now circling the room, peeking behind one painting after another. Henri stopped finally, then took out the gallery catalogue and flipped through a few pages until he found what he was looking for. McKerney had turned his attention to the artist.

"Okay, Michael, one more time. What was . . . " he began, but Henri interrupted.

"Listen, kid, when you were changing these fixtures, did you by any chance tamper with the paintings themselves?"

"Well, I took them to the studio and cleaned them, if that's what . . . Wait a minute. Who is this guy? Why should I talk to you?" He chuckled and glanced to McKerney for support.

"Get him over here!" fumed Paul, standing up and planting both feet as if getting ready to charge across the room himself. Laura uncrossed her legs and subtly hooked one foot through a stool. If Paul made a move toward Henri, she was prepared to check his momentum by kicking it in his path.

McKerney seemed to agree with the other two men. He tried to silence Henri with a dirty look, but that did not work.

"You're right, Michael," Henri continued. "There's no reason at all for you to talk to me. But the detective here might be interested in your reasons for choosing which paintings should be cleaned and rehung first."

"What are you talking about?" asked McKerney.

"Yeah!" the artist agreed.

Henri removed a small painting from the wall and carried it across the room. He laid it gently on Laura's lap. "I'm talking about the fact that although none of these paintings was hung very well, you cleaned and repaired them in kind of a random way. There is no order at all to your choices."

"So? I'll have you know I was only doing that as a favor to Mrs. Garner. She was very grateful."

McKerney turned to look at Henri. The situation was quickly getting beyond his control. Paul was sitting down again, his face a mask of indifference, but not a very good mask. Henri gave Laura the Andreck's catalogue, open to a specific page, but kept his eyes trained on the artist.

"Laura, can you find seven things wrong with the picture on your lap, like when you were a kid?" Henri said.

Laura studied the painting. It was a scene in which the Garner estate figured prominently. Painted from across the street, the front of the house could be seen between two elm trees and behind the iron fence. Laura recognized the artist's name, Daniel Sanborn. He had been Edna's second husband. His relationship with her, combined with an adequate talent and his untimely death at forty, caused his work to sell often and at a steadily inflating price.

She looked in the catalogue and found the same painting. Then she noticed what Henri was talking about. The front gate was closed tight in the painting on her lap, but the top latch was unhooked. In the catalogue the latch was also unhooked, but a hair-thin streak of gray paint had been added to create the illusion that the gate was open just a crack. The forger had made a point of copying the latch, but had carelessly neglected that finishing touch. Now Laura saw other imperfections. Shutters weren't quite the same. A gable was off center. One of the elm trees was slightly altered.

"My friends in the business tell me that art forgers make a nice dollar these days," she said, almost to herself, then added: "Is that so, Michael?"

"Just one second," sputtered the young man, whose beatific good looks were growing harsher by the moment.

Henri cut in. "I noticed you picked only small works to 'clean,' as you called it. And you stayed away from Edna's most valuable stuff, the big names. Harder to market, aren't they? Since fewer people had seen these, you could still make a nice buck and not do a particularly great job. Just take them down to your studio on the pre-

text of a cleaning, make a decent copy, and have it hanging on the wall again in a couple of days, right?"

Henri asked McKerney if they could speak privately. The detective shrugged and followed him to a distant corner. Michael watched them closely. Paul comforted Elizabeth, who was now reacting to yet another shock.

Their conference lasted several minutes as they spoke in subdued tones, with McKerney at first shaking his head, then gradually changing direction and beginning to nod his agreement. The detective returned to the group. Henri remained behind, staring out a window as he heard McKerney announce that he was arresting Michael for, among other things, fraud and murder.

"You have the right to remain silent . . . "

"Wait a minute!" Michael shouted.

" . . . can be used against you in court. You have . . . "

"I said wait a minute! I'm not taking this whole rap alone."

"Shut up, idiot! Get a lawyer," said Paul, who pushed Elizabeth aside and moved to stand again. McKerney pointed a threatening finger at him and he stopped. Elizabeth sat stone rigid, her eyes glazed, unable to hear any of this.

"It was his idea, all of it," said Michael, nodding toward Paul. "I just did the work, that's all, and I didn't kill anybody."

"Neither did I, I told you that," said Paul, fear beginning to replace anger in his face. "I don't know who . . . "

They all looked at the statue that was Elizabeth.

McKerney was chewing a mouthful of leftover Mandarin Chicken in the Cavanaugh study. He was going to have to swallow it sooner or later, but he didn't want to. He was sitting behind the desk after making some phone calls. Henri and Laura occupied the chairs in front of the desk, drinks in hand.

"How is it?" Henri asked expectantly.

"Mmmph," McKerney replied, finally getting it down and deciding to let his opinion rest with that statement alone. "I suppose I should thank you for meddling again. I wish you'd show my people a few of your tricks."

Laura swirled the scotch and soda around in her glass. "Nonsense, we simply have the time on our hands for details, that's all. And speaking of timing, your showing up was right on cue. Were you following us?"

" 'Course not. I had the Gar-

ner place staked out. When I saw you going in, I figured my work was done. I was right, as usual. Henri, how the hell did a mug like you figure out that painting was a fake?"

Henri grinned. "It wasn't so tough. I just had to find the one painting that was in the house and also in the catalogue, the one that Edna had bought for herself. We had a hunch that something in that book had upset Edna Garner enough to cause what happened. I just slogged around until I found it."

"We started wondering about the possibility of forgeries when we discovered that Paul had convinced Edna to let Michael use her studio," Laura continued. "It was the first time ever that Edna hadn't chosen her own young artist, and it went against a long standing precedent. It became fairly obvious that Paul married Elizabeth for money, only to discover that she wouldn't be getting much of her aunt's fortune until the old girl passed away."

Henri picked up the story. "So Paul decided to start making early withdrawals by having copies made of some of her lesser known works and selling the originals under the table to disreputable dealers. He'd probably seen a copy of the will at some point because he knew which ones were going to come into their possession and which were to be given to museums. That's why the so-called cleaning procedure was so haphazard. Then Edna discovered the con."

"Yes, dear old Edna," said Laura. "For all her pretensions, and delusions of grandeur, she wasn't a technical expert. She never would have uncovered the scam herself. They had to make a crucial mistake. And they did, by not doing their homework thoroughly."

"You mean the painting you found at the house," said McKerney.

"Precisely." Laura finished her drink before continuing. Henri got up to freshen them and get one for the detective, who decided he was off duty. Henri suspected it had something to do with the chicken. "She wouldn't have noticed changes in any of the other works that were 'cleaned,' but when they made the mistake of copying a Sanborn, she must have looked just a little closer. Maybe it was nostalgia that made her take it down that night. Whatever the reason, the differences in the way the house looked in the copy must have caught her eye. That's why she was mumbling 'the gate is closed' over and over when her maid left for the day. She had compared the forgery

to its counterpart in that old catalogue, just as we did. As you suspected, Sergeant McKerney, she had already taken the overdose when her maid came in to say goodbye."

"Then it was suicide and not murder," said McKerney, accepting the drink from Henri, who returned to his chair.

Henri set his glass on his knee and nodded slowly. "I'm no judge, Mac, but I read all the reactions today as genuine. Elizabeth was heading toward a nervous breakdown from the time her aunt died. The news that her husband had been conning her was enough to push her over the edge. Michael was a pawn with talent and greed; he didn't have the guts to act on his own. Paul, on the other hand, probably would have murdered her, or bullied Michael into doing it for him, if he'd known that Edna had found them out."

"What do you mean?" asked McKerney.

"Paul's no genius, but I don't think even he would be stupid enough to set up a murder and put that catalogue, the key piece of evidence, in her hands. That's why he had no idea what we were up to at the house until it was too late. I'm sure he didn't know that Edna killed herself because of him. He must have assumed like everyone else that it was poor health and maybe loneliness that sent her off the deep end."

Laura was staring into the liquid depths of her glass, which she held with both hands. There was a sad edge to her voice. "It was a kind of murder, though, wasn't it. The poor old woman lost everything. She was ill, had outlived everyone she loved most, and then discovered that her only remaining treasures were being stolen by her own relatives. . . . It isn't hard to see why . . . "

The three of them sat together in silence, each lost in personal, melancholy thought. The setting sun made the stained glass windows seem incandescent, but it still felt dark and cold inside.

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HARDROCK

by Gary Erickson

The cat needed killing. He was old, mean, smelly, toothless, covered with grey hairs matted into indistinguishable piles. He hissed at me when I came home.

Times were tough. Bill Brewster told me he'd had his cat put to sleep by the vet and it had cost him thirty dollars. Not to mention the impersonality of it all.

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

"I'll tell you," he said, a cigarette dangling from his lips, "if I had to do it again, I'd do the job myself. Save the thirty bucks and feel like I'd seen Hubie through to the end."

I decided to profit from Bill's experience. I'd take Hardrock out to a deserted road, put a single, nearly painless bullet through his senile head, and save the trouble and expense of the vet.

It wouldn't be easy—Hardrock and I had been together over ten years. Still, he wasn't the same. He'd forgotten what his litter box was for, and instead of purring I got hissing. Why pay the vet to do what I was responsible for doing? Besides, I was a good shot, had taken first place in the annual turkey shoot last fall. Almost painless, certainly fast.

He looked suspicious as we drove. It had been a while since we'd gone for a drive together, mainly because of Hardrock's constant diarrhea. The rifle was in the trunk. As I found the deserted road and hit the turn signal, a brief, unhappy impulse told me to go home—to forget it—to pay the thirty bucks and spare myself. I didn't pay any attention to it.

Of course, I haven't told you the worst. I was married once. Maria never liked the cat: That is, until our divorce—then she acted as if it were her firstborn and an inconsolable loss. Her actual firstborn, *our* firstborn, Stanley—now, he was the second problem. He did like the cat. Always.

If my ex-wife knew what I was about to do, she'd try to get custody of Stanley—which is what she did every time she didn't like what I was doing. First it was the live-in girlfriend. The judge dropped that one, but did give me a look. Then it was visitation, and she gained ground there. The judge said I *had* to let her see Stanley. I suppose I could go into all the reasons why I didn't agree, but I won't; I figured I was lucky to get custody at all, so I let that slide. She didn't want Stanley any more than she wanted Hardrock but she insisted she did, and between her job and her inheritance she had enough money and enough charm to convince numerous lawyers to pursue numerous suits, numerous movements against me. She claimed I was unfit, cruel, unstable, a drunk, a drug addict, a philanderer, a philistine, a bad manager, a poor cook, a god-dammed *man,* for christsake. But I still had Stanley and I still had Hardrock, and even though I'd always "won," I was just about broke from defending myself in court. Lawyers aren't cheap, especially good ones, and I hadn't messed around.

Hardrock hissed at me, interrupting my visions of Maria's finger

wagging at me across a courtroom floor. He crawled into the back seat and defecated on the vinyl seats. It began to smell.

The last time.

He hissed in a sort of off way as if to draw my attention to what he'd done, but I ignored him.

Stanley and Hardrock had grown up together, and if Stanley knew what I was about to do, he'd never forgive me. When he was older he might, but not now. And Maria! She'd say it was "cruelty to animals," "mental cruelty" to Stanley, "murder." "Typical," she'd say, bursting at the judge like before, and for a brief moment I again saw myself in court, Maria's finger pointed at me accusingly with Stanley half huddled behind her skirts, crying, his eyes stained red with disbelief and betrayal. An eight-year-old doesn't understand getting old, getting slow, losing control over your bowels, feeling little pains all over.

"I'm doing this because I love you, Hardrock. I'm sorry, but it's better I do it than somebody who doesn't know you." *And hasn't cleaned up after you for the last three years.*

The smell got worse, and any remaining doubts vanished. I was going to kill the cat. My cat. Stanley's cat. The cat that used to curl around my neck and purr. And worse, I was going to do it to save thirty dollars. To save the cost of an injection, I was going to dispatch the cat I'd lived with for over a decade. I was going to do a hit on a housecat. My cat. Hardrock.

I stopped the car where the road narrrowed into open country roads of gravel and fine dust.

"Come on, Hardrock. Let's go for a walk."

He hissed loudly at me and deftly crawled into the back window ledge, seemingly daring me to try to catch him. I grabbed at him.

Had he still had his teeth I'm sure he would have displayed them at that moment, for as I grabbed at him, Hardrock—old, mellow, hard-sleeping, heavy-eating, not-a-care-in-the-world Hardrock — suddenly revealed his true wolverine soul and with an amazing amount of agility, zoomed from the ledge to the top of the front seat, then bounded out the open window. With a single, beastly, backward snarl, he began trotting down the road, the fur on his tail looking like fudge stuck to a snow bunny's tail. *He knows.*

I threw open the trunk, snatched the rifle from it, slammed a full clip into it, and took aim at his backside. He was wobbling down the road like an overloaded squirrel and I almost had him in my sights, but I decided that a mercy killing must be merciful

and to shoot him in the back would be, somehow, weirdly unfair.

This was not going the way I'd planned it at all. I'd imagined a long monologue full of sound and purpose; a sort of pre-eulogy, with Hardrock understanding everything, perhaps even nodding.

But here he was—running. Running away!

It didn't take long to catch up with him, and I soon found him sitting against a pile of gravel like a furry grey bull's-eye, and afraid of not having another chance, determined that quick was best, aimed and fired.

And missed.

But not entirely. When the bullet hit him, Hardrock instantly discovered that life is sweetest when most threatened and his heart got the message and he came to full alert and vanished in a blur of grey fur. Escaped. Gone. Missing.

I found blood, but I didn't find Hardrock. By the time I gave it up it was dark. In the rear view mirror I peered into the face of a monster under the dome light. A wanton cat killer who had used the lure of trust to murder . . . no, that was too kind . . . to *wound* a domestic cat and leave it at the edge of the civilized world, bleeding, old, tired; shot, for God's sake! To save thirty dollars, an animal's life, no, a *friend's* life had been exchanged. A Judas with thirty saved dollars and a single bullet casing left. That was me.

I drove home in silence, the windows down. Hardrock's essence still with me.

I lied to Stanley when he asked where I'd been. I said I'd been to the store, not out ten miles in the country trying to kill his best friend.

I lied again when his mother called the next day.

"Stanley said Rocky ran off." Her voice indicated disbelief.

"Yeah. He's not here. You know how cats are. They come back."

"He hasn't stayed away overnight for years! You never should have had that cat anyway. I sure as hell hope you're taking better care of my boy than my cat. If anything happens . . ."

Maria went on with clear and vague threats both, and in time I simply listened, fearing that any statement I made would be taken down and produced in some future courtroom. At times I suspected she recorded our conversations. I knew she kept notes.

I dreamt about Hardrock that night. I saw him driving up in a police car with the sirens going. I dreamt that he'd bitten my face and clawed my eyes while a dozen judges in billowing black robes held me down.

The next morning, tired and shaken, I found myself lying again before I'd had coffee.

"Dad, do you think Hardrock will come home today?"

"He might, Stan. He might."

But Hardrock was dead. Or dying a horrible death, perhaps lying barely conscious while field mice bit deeply into his flesh. Hardrock could barely handle walking across the room to stuff himself, much less survive the wilderness wounded.

In my original scenario, I'd buried him under high piled rocks—a sort of frontier burial—but his running away had spoiled his painless, good death and I now imagined maggots and worms fighting flies where once his eyes had been: decay instead of warmth. Hardrock wasn't coming home. His blood was on the sand. I'd seen it, touched it. I glanced at my hands—sure they were covered with blood—sure that Stanley could see it.

But, of course, there was no blood. Still, the way Stanley looked at me haunted me.

That night as I tried to go to sleep I remembered in painful detail the day I'd purchased him. How I'd brought him home. And the bed and the toys, the collar with our names on it, the bell and the scratching post . . . the trips to the vet, the kitty litter, the tons of food. Hardrock would only eat Mrs. Pamper's catfood. Nothing ordinary for him. Or cheap. Besides the thirty, I thought coldly, I'm saving at least two bucks a day in expenses. Murder was profitable.

And then I heard sobbing from the end of the hall.

I found Stanley lying at the end of his bed, crying softly, curled like a . . . yes, cat.

"What's wrong, Stan?"

"I miss Hardrock," he bellowed, his face a terrible image of sorrow, trembling lips, tears crawling down his face. I was consumed with shame. "Dad, I think he might be dead," he sobbed. "He wouldn't run away from home, would he? We were never mean to him." He shot me a questioning look through his tears as if to say, "I know *I* wasn't mean to him."

I held him.

"He might have been hit by a car," and this brought a fresh howl, "but I'm sure he didn't run away. Or maybe somebody kidnapped him. He was awfully cute," I lied. And both of these might have happened. I didn't think for a second that either one of them had, but it was possible.

"He was old."

"He wasn't *that* old, Dad. You wouldn't run away when you got old, would you?"

And I had an image of an older Stanley driving me, old, wheezing, half-blind, poop in my shorts, down a gravel road with a rifle in the trunk.

"No, but cats aren't people," I said to reassure myself, "and Hardrock wasn't really himself. I'm sure some nice people found him. He's probably sleeping right now." *In the belly of a bear.*

"But he's got his collar on with his name and stuff." He looked at me with hope.

Oh my God! I'd forgotten to remove his collar. I was going to do it after I'd shot him.

"Yes, his collar," I said as calmly as possible. "Maybe it fell off."

We got nostalgic then and talked about cute things Hardrock had done over the years and in time Stanley fell asleep.

Maria's lawyer called the next day. He hinted darkly that Maria was extremely concerned about my ability to exercise proper care in my supervision of "disputed property" and that "God knows" he didn't want to end up going to court again over a cat but he had promised Maria that he would call and say what he had to say, and he had but we both knew his heart wasn't in it. I said little, wishing I'd had an attorney on retainer to refer him to.

As soon as we hung up I went to look for Hardrock's body . . . and collar. I combed heavy brush, deep woods, looked in the treetops. Not a trace. The blood was still there, fading into nothingness, but I found not a single track, nor a clue as to where he might have gone off to die. I lied to Stanley again that night when I returned.

Stanley was having another dream. I heard the crying right away because I couldn't sleep. I had visions of my name in the newspaper—MAN MURDERS SON'S PET FOR MONEY—and saw Hardrock's body with the incriminating collar on it in a plastic bag on a table with my rifle lying next to it with a tag on it, plaster casts of my footprints, charts of blood samples. I imagined eyewitness testimony from Maria about the time I'd kicked him—saw Stanley tearful, surrounded by woeful looking psychiatrists shaking their heads and pointing at me.

I thought I heard a funny noise as I was walking to his bedroom, a sort of scratching sound. Then it went, just as quickly, away. *The wind.*

"Dad, I was dreaming that Hardrock was hungry and alone."

I comforted him, promising, *almost,* that we might get another

cat, something I saw as extremely unlikely.

His head suddenly shot up away from my chest. "Did you hear that?" he said sharply.

"What?"

"I thought I heard a meow."

The poor kid hears cats in his mind. What have I done?

But then I heard it. A scratching sound again. On the screen door downstairs. Then a meow.

Stanley got to the door first and jerked it open.

A three-legged cat with an infected stump stood there. It was Hardrock.

"We've got to get him to the vet, Dad."

And we did.

He needed surgery, medication, "in-house treatment," "follow-up care." The bill came to four hundred and thirty-six dollars.

That was five years ago. He still lives with us.

Everybody suspects that I was the one who blew his leg away —they look at me in a strange way sometimes when I'm near the cat. I have to be extra careful that nothing happens to him.

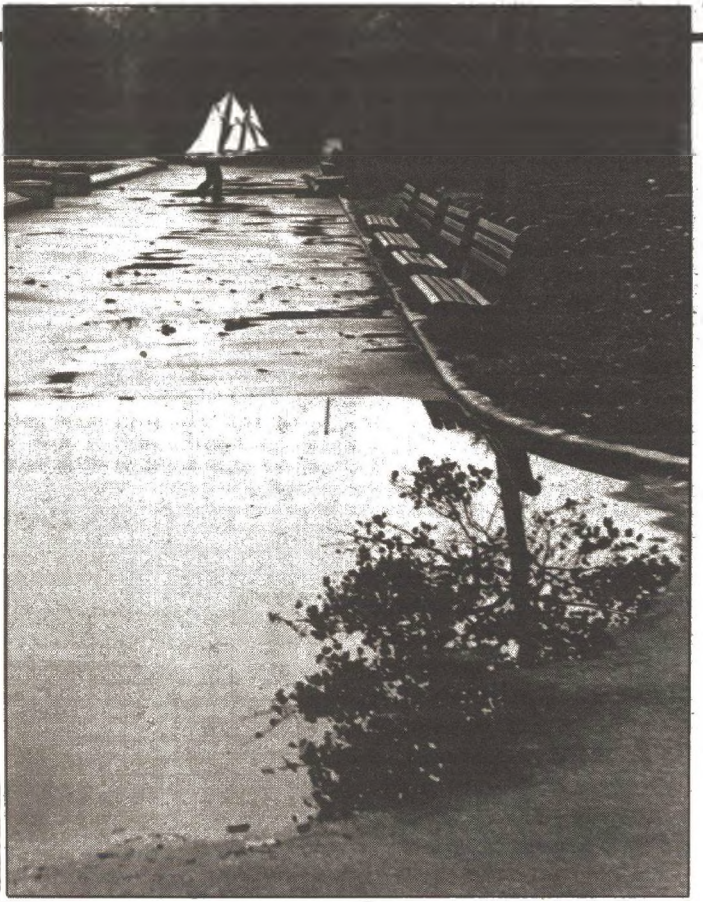
Hardrock looks at me sometimes late at night as if he knows he's safe. He limps over and craps at my feet.

Maria and I have been to court over summer vacations, medical records, and parent-teacher conferences, and although she has tried to bring up the "maiming" of Hardrock, my lawyer (the latest) won't let her. He's good. Not cheap, but good.

Stanley hardly ever does anything with the cat, having developed interests in other things, like video games and girls. So mainly it's just the two of us. The vet says that it's almost a miracle the way Hardrock hangs on. She says she's never seen anything like it. She told me once that she thought he would have to be put to sleep years ago, but that his "accident" seemed to have instilled in him a fierce desire to live. I only smiled.

I took a pillow once and put it over him, but as soon as he woke up I couldn't go through with it. I had my chance and blew it. So we go on, both getting older. Some days I think he'll always be here. Maria would like that.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Andre Kertesz

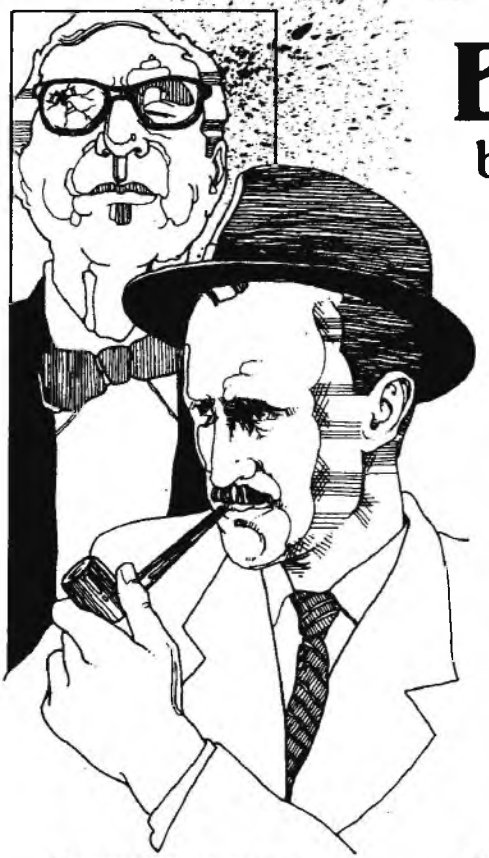
When ships grow legs and take off across the park . . . well, all around town rafts of rumors are afloat and strange doings afoot. (Secret shipping lanes could come into it.) We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. 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 May Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

The Bystander

by Thomas Berdine



The first thing you thought about Jerold Darby was that he was English. The second was that he was a phony. He didn't go so far as to affect an accent, except when "in his cups," but the polished turn of his speech, the way mustache and pipe came together in a trim line, the cool half-liddedness of his gaze, all combined beneath a kind of halo of dapper tweediness to evoke an unmistakable Englishness. "Of course I'm a fraud," he was willing to admit, if pressed, with nevertheless an airy panache reminiscent of Sir John Gielgud, "but then, who isn't?" After which one had to either

Illustration by George Thompson

take him or leave him.

Third, you wondered why he bothered. Was it a pathetic facade or some sort of obtuse challenge? His fellow employees at the department store varied between the two notions. Marybeth Darby, "the little wife," no longer so little, seemed to hold to the former. Perhaps Jerold's manner indicated a lack of ambition or an irritating excess of dreaminess. Fortunately for Jerold, her energies were largely devoted to becoming the Tupperware queen of Brooklyn.

It was in fact from one of Marybeth's Tupperware errands that Jerold was playing hooky that fall Saturday morning. You would have spotted him easily as he stood atop the high stoop of his tobacconist, Griswold and Holmes, in Brooklyn Heights. He had just ended a leisurely half hour of sniffing and chatting with Tibbits, the little clerk, and was sipping a fresh pipeload of an interesting new blend Tibbits had recommended. It promised to be a cool day, with some rain in the air, which gave an opportunity for his umbrella to be festooned upon his arm just so. His fingers played lightly at the wide lapel of his London Fog as he perused the scene about him. The narrow street, lined with small shops and high, old fashioned brownstones, was quiet and nearly deserted. He allowed his gaze to wander up and down the sidewalk, picking out an occasional passerby. Jerold fancied himself, and perhaps was, a keen observer of human nature.

He was following the progress of an elderly gentleman with a cane when a grey Mercedes sedan glided noiselessly across his line of vision, coming to a stop at the curb on the opposite side of the street. It was a somewhat difficult angle from Griswold and Holmes's doorstep, but the car appeared to hold two men, the driver in the front seat and a second man in the back, both on the near side. They wore hats and overcoats, the cut and quality of which were not lost on Jerold's practiced eye even through the tinted glass. There was quiet good taste, he thought.

Neither of the men moved to get out of the car. They appeared to be waiting for something, or, more likely, someone. Jerold surmised as much from their lack of idle conversation and the steady concentration with which they looked out upon the street.

Jerold naturally took the usual precautions against appearing blatantly curious. He had leaned back into the recessed doorway and pretended to scan the entire street with slow, generous turns of his head, observing his party peripher-

ally and in snatches. He removed his pipe from his mouth and tinkered with it. He rocked to and fro on his heels, surveying the sky for the first droplets of rain. He had in mind Peter O'Toole. Or a slightly more intellectual Sean Connery. He did try to restrain himself somewhat as his imagination flitted through a gamut of possibilities for the men in the Mercedes. They were, however, were they not, on an errand of some little importance? And there was, was there not, at least a hint of the clandestine about them? In the deadpan set of those two faces, something more than simple boredom? Whatever, they would never detect his oblique participation in their affairs, so cleverly fashioned was his demeanor.

Several minutes wore on. Jerold had begun to feel that he could not much longer retain his position there on the stoop. He had already knocked out his pipe, methodically cleaned the stem and reamed the bowl, and meticulously fitted the two back together again as if there were something special about the operation. He had glanced at his watch, yawned broadly, and unbuttoned and rebuttoned his raincoat. Just as his repertoire was bottoming out and he was getting a little bored, a young man in a windbreaker bobbed into view from the sidewalk on the near side of the street and sauntered diagonally across toward the automobile. The rear door opened and the man slid in. Jerold saw him unzip his jacket quickly and, just as the door closed again, he thought he saw something green and shiny, like wrapping paper, flash for a moment in the interior of the back seat.

Suddenly the street was filled with sirens. Police cars approached from both directions. The men in the Mercedes began wildly spilling out of the far side doors. The windbreaker dashed into view beyond the car, his arm extended in a blurred, desperate effort, flinging a small, thin, squarish object high into the air, nearly lost to sight in its spinning, edgewise flight. The street was exploding with uniformed policemen with guns drawn. A chaos of shouting and running replaced the sirens. Jerold's eyes were following the flight of the little spinning object. It bounced and skipped fantastically on its corners along the cornice of a brownstone, then down, bounding from a second story awning to ricochet off a porch railing, and down again to scamper across the narrow street just behind the running feet of yet another squad of policemen. It turned sharply and trotted along the curb a short distance and then, like a small dog suddenly

discovering that its master is not on the other end of the leash, spun about and lay down upon its side to wait.

The furious commotion in the street continued. When Jerold brought his attention back to it, he saw that all three of the men from the Mercedes were being pushed roughly against the wall of an adjacent building, where they were subdued and spread-eagled. Their bodies and the automobile were searched. One of the men continued to struggle and cursed loudly over the shouts of the policemen, screaming "Police brutality!" over and over. Jerold dodged back into the tobacco shop—a canny reflex, he thought—just as a few of the plainclothes detectives began to stare widely about the scene. Tibbits, at the front window, greeted him with raised eyebrows.

"Mr. Darby! Are you still here?"

"Mm, ah, yes. Could you give me another four ounces of this blend? It's awfully good and, ah, I've a friend I thought . . . I was just standing on your doorstep when, ah . . ."

The clerk's watery blue eyes looked back at him. Jerold felt himself breathing too hard.

"Frightful melee going on out there," the clerk said. "Wonder what those devils were up to. Did you see what happened?"

"Yes, well, not really."

He searched Tibbits' eyes and wondered if he were behaving suspiciously. Glancing back out into the street, he saw that several policemen were now busy looking about the vicinity of the Mercedes. Some looked up. Others pushed trash cans aside and poked into the nooks and crannies of the cellarways.

"It happened nearly in front of you, didn't it?" Tibbits asked.

"Yes, well. Almost. It all happened so quickly, I'm afraid by the time I noticed anything was happening it was nearly over."

Two policemen climbed a fire escape and inspected window ledges. Another appeared on the roof above, shaking his head at those looking up. A plainclothesman on his hands and knees was certain he detected something in a storm drain, and flashlights were summoned. In a doorway a uniform with his hat off and nightstick dangling heavily from his belt interviewed an old woman in her robe and slippers, her arms hugging her tummy. A small, shiny bump rose and fell on Tibbits' jawline. Rising inside Jerold, filtering up through the thrill of the scene before him and his bemusement that it had seemed to jump so straight from his own fantasies, there was something else sneaking into recognition: a profound pleasure with himself. He was still calm. His cool presence of mind

was intact. In the thick of it he was still thinking clearly, fastening his critical faculties on the matter at hand in the best English spirit, plotting his next move even as the clerk's inquiring eyes were suddenly turned upon him. And far back in his mind, behind everything else, a small voice, a child's axiom: finders keepers.

"Bloody efficient, those police blokes," he said.

The clerk made a smile at his little joke. They watched together the remainder of the events in the street. The three culprits were being hustled into separate police cruisers that had been brought up in a line at the curb. The grey Mercedes had already been hooked to a tow truck and was being slowly drawn away. Jerold held his breath as one of the detectives, a short, stocky man with an air of superiority, frowned and looked up the street in the direction of the package.

"Look at that," Tibbits murmured. "My word. What do you make of it, Mr. Darby?"

"Who knows?" Jerold put a touch of bright nonchalance in his voice. "Maybe some big gangsters, like on the telly."

Tibbits laughed politely. The line of police cars had begun moving away, their sirens sounding their progress. Surely now they would notice it. The sirens would die down suddenly, the line of black-and-whites would come to an important halt. Hah! Here it is! It was right under our noses all the time! Jerold reached for the door.

"Don't you want that other four ounces?"

Jerold stood with the door half open.

"Oh. I'd forgotten. All the excitement."

"It won't take a minute." Tibbits pottered down the aisle to the row of glass humidors at the far end of the counter. Biting his lip, Jerold closed the door.

"Let's see. Which was it now, Mr. Darby? We went through quite a lot of them, didn't we? Was it Number Thirty? No. Let's see . . . do you recall, Mr. Darby?"

"Ah . . . Thirty-one."

"No . . . no . . . I'm quite certain it wasn't Number Thirty-one."

"Oh really, I'm almost positive."

"No, you see, Thirty-one I would remember, as I just this morning blended it up. I would have remembered if it was Thirty-one. Here, perhaps if I take a whiff, you know."

"Sure. Here." Jerold hurriedly unbuttoned his coat and fished his tobacco pouch out of his sweater pocket. Tibbits lowered his thin nose into the pouch with a look of professional concentration on his face, sniffed,

stared at the wall beyond, then sniffed again.

"Hmmm. I'm not sure."

"Thirty-four! It was Thirty-four. That's right! I remember now."

"Thirty-four? Oh my, no. This is quite different from Number Thirty-four."

"Yes, I'm sure of it! Let's have four ounces of Number Thirty-four."

Tibbits smiled ingratiatingly but firmly. "Oh sir, I'm quite certain it wasn't Thirty-four. Here. Smell for yourself . . . where did I put that scoop? . . .ah, here."

Jerold was obliged to sniff. With the small, shiny green package lying at the curb, waiting for some wide-eyed child, some passing shopper, waiting for him, Jerold's nose could tell him nothing. In anguish, he sniffed back and forth between his own pouch and the scoop of Number Thirty-four.

"See?" Tibbits smiled again. "Or, heh heh, *smell,* I should say." With unperturbed patience the clerk proceeded from one humidor to the next, sniffing and staring into space.

"Look," Jerold said desperately, with what he hoped was just the right note of brusqueness, "what say I leave a pinch of this with you and I'll stop by again this afternoon. I have some errands to run for the missus."

Tibbits' face pinched in hurt consternation. "It shouldn't take but a minute really. Ah! Yes! Here it is. Number Forty! Remember now?" Again Jerold was forced to sniff.

"Yes, of course, that's it. I knew there was a four in it somewhere."

The clerk measured and packaged. Jerold strolled casually back toward the front window. There were now only two of the plainclothes detectives left, standing together with their heads down as they talked. They seemed about to leave. Better this way, he thought. As he turned back again toward the rear of the store, he saw that Tibbits had been watching him, and he wondered again if he were behaving oddly.

"Did you want that gift-wrapped for your friend?"

"Ah. No, that will be fine."

"It won't take but a minute. I have some of these decorator pouches. Quite nice really."

"Oh, well, yes, sure."

"Here. Why don't you take a look at these and pick out one you like." The clerk placed a rack of brightly striped foil packages on the counter before him and then disappeared behind the curtain at the back of the salesroom. Blood rushed to Jerold's cheeks. The sound of running water came from the back room. Hastily taking one of the pouches from the rack

and laying it on the counter, Jerold again went to the front window, taking care not to tread too heavily. The detectives were just leaving. He moved back from the window a step and watched as the unmarked car executed a three-point turn-around and drove off down the street, in the opposite direction from the package. A bit of luck. Yes, much better this way, he thought again. Cog by cog, even to the exasperating delay at the hands of the clerk, the machine of fortune moved in his favor. Maybe, that is. Now he must take action quickly. Where was that damned little clerk? With resolve he returned to the back of the shop.

"Mr. Tibbits."

No answer. He raised his voice. "Mr. Tibbits!"

Water gurgled. He waited. The clerk appeared suddenly in a sweep of the curtain, drying his hands.

"So sorry. Call of nature, you know."

"I'll take this one." The cellophane package containing four ounces of Number Forty was placed with wonderful deliberateness into the striped foil package, and before he could object, Tibbits was busy affixing a ridiculous yellow bow over the seal of the flap. It didn't seem to want to stick.

"That's fine, really, just the way it is."

"Very well." At last the item was placed on the counter before him. Tibbits pecked at the huge, ornate, old fashioned cash register.

"That will be . . . four . . . dollars and . . . .twenty-eight . . . cents. There you are."

"I think I have the right change."

But he didn't and another eternity of pleasantries ensued as Tibbits made change for a twenty.

"Sure there's nothing else I can get for you, now?"

Jerold shook his head, smiled, waved a casual salute, and was out the door.

"Oh Mr. Darby! . . ."

He stepped back in. "Yes?"

"Your umbrella."

"Oh. Thank you." Smiling and smiling he retrieved the umbrella and again, with another nod and wave, went out. On the top step he took a deep breath and shrugged his raincoat up on his shoulders. The street was empty again. Looking neither left nor right he went down the steps and started up the street. The pounding of his heels on the sidewalk vibrated in his frame as he walked, and the light in the street seemed very bright. His eyes, casting ahead, fastened upon —was it? A car came toward him, a young couple in an old Comet, and passed. A small dog was yapping frantically in a

room of one of the brownstones across the street. He was seized by a sudden impulse to look back. He bent down quickly and untied and retied his shoelaces, glancing upside down at the street behind him. Nothing. The polished toes of his shoes winked at him. It was really going to happen. He tried to visualize it precisely. What's this? . . . someone has lost a package . . . But what was he doing? There was still time not to. He could simply walk past. Come back later . . . it might still be there. When he straightened, his legs were trembling. Just a few more steps. It was just there, on display before the entire yawning glassy face of Finnegan's Bookstore. He jumped as a garbage can lid hit the pavement to his left and a big yellow cat raced down an alley and disappeared round a dark corner, so that truly he was thinking nothing at all as he bent and took the slim, surprisingly hefty, book-like object in his hand. The cool surface of the green wrapping paper sent a chill up his backbone as he tucked his prize under his arm and strolled, heart hammering, one step, two steps. He wished now the street were more crowded. He picked up his pace. A tug at his elbow. He spun around.

"Young man . . . excuse me . . . young man . . ."

The elderly gentleman with the cane whom he had seen earlier clutched at his arm. The decrepit face was frantic.

"Young man!"

"Yes sir, what is it?"

"You musn't do this." The old man's hooked finger was shaking unmistakably at the object peeking from under Jerold's arm. Jerold felt the ground drop from beneath his feet. The weird hand tightened its grip on the cloth of his coat.

"Please let go of my arm!"

"Listen to . . ."

Jerold tried to pull away, but the old man clung to him. With a jerk that surprised Jerold by its powerful effect, he sent the old man sprawling onto the sidewalk. Without thinking, he half bent toward the old man to help him up, then recoiled. What was he doing? The old face turned up to him, the mouth working noiselessly. Jerold wheeled and hurried away. The sidewalk stretched out before him again as he leaned into his stride. He was not aware of beginning to run, but once running he ran as he had never run before, full tilt, his legs twirling frantically as he rounded the corner, regained his balance, and raced on. Two blocks ahead was a subway entrance.

He slowed abruptly to a walk and glanced behind, trying not to gasp so noisily as he went down the steps. In front of the

token booth he was unbuttoning his coat to get at his change pocket when his arms were pinioned from behind. The package was snatched away and he was shoved face first against the grill. The token vendor was yelling "Hey man! Hey man!" as Jerold fainted and fell to the floor.

He came to with a sharp stab of pain between his eyes. He could not move. As in a dream, he was half-walked, half-carried up into the rain and bundled into the back seat of a car. Finally he saw badges and knew who had him. The eyes turned upon him should have been filled with mockery and disgust, but instead they were merely empty. Though he was spoken to, no one seemed to listen to his answers, not as if they did not believe him but as if he were saying nothing at all.

In a basement room a pretty young policewoman gently hung a board on his neck. Her contralto voice affected him strongly. "Look straight ahead, please. . . . Thank you. Now to the left . . ." As the three aspects of Jerold's face were slapped with photoflash, he had a vision of Marybeth's face when she arrived to cart him home, dragged from her soft Bay Ridge couch to this dungeon of blank eyes and peeling green paint.

"My wife says I have a great profile."

"Take a seat over there, please."

At last he was taken to a small, narrow room containing only a table and three chairs. The walls and ceiling were of sound absorbent panels with elaborate patterns of tiny holes where sound went in but did not come back out. He waited what seemed a very long time until the door opened and two men in shirtsleeves entered. One Jerold recognized as the short, beefy detective who had remained so long in the street in front of the tobacco shop. The other, a larger man, stationed himself out of view behind Jerold. The short man sat down opposite Jerold and regarded him with matter-of-fact malevolence, but some part of Jerold was glad to get started. He would take his schoolboy's scolding and then it would be over. The man behind him spoke first.

"You have the right to remain silent; you have the right to have an attorney present; you . . ."

Jerold nodded his head as the policeman went on. Finally the man at the table spoke.

"You'll have to speak up, Mr.—ah, Darby is it? I see you nodding your head, but I don't speak that language. You want to remain silent? You want a

lawyer? One nod for yes, two for no."

"Oh, nothing, fine. Fine. I just meant I understood what he was telling me.Those were my rights, right? It's okay, I'll gladly answer any questions you have. Really, I'm terribly embarrassed by all of this."

"Mr. Darby, I am Captain Tullio, this is Lieutenant Rice. There are a few questions we do have."

Jerold extended his hand to Captain Tullio and started to say "Glad to meet you," but the proferred hand was ignored with such force that he gave up the effort in midsentence. A quick, sarcastic smile struggled against Tullio's deadpan mouth and lost. Behind him Lieutenant Rice moved about, just beyond the edge of his vision. He turned to find Rice leaning down quite close to him. His eyes were a beautiful, clear-sky blue.

"Mr. Darby—that is your correct name, is it?—Mr. Darby, we're fair-minded guys, Captain Tullio and I. And if you will refrain from wasting our time, we may be able to recommend to the district attorney that he not waste quite so much of your time."

This was nearly indecipherable to Jerold. It had started out sounding not too bad, but decidedly there was a nasty joke at the end. Of course the tough-cop stuff was *de rigeur*, he knew, and he did have it coming to him. Still, he had to say something.

"How much time does one get for picking up litter from the sidewalk?" His own boldness frightened him a little, but Lieutenant Rice actually smiled and seemed genuinely amused. Jerold's spirits perked up.

"That's good, Darby. That's very good. Isn't that good, Joseph?"

"We knew it would be, didn't we, Curly? We understand, Jerold, that this is a bit of a comedown for you, having to deal with two lowly New York flatfoots. But, you see . . . we really do *have* you."

Before Jerold could reflect upon Tullio's meaning, Rice was on him again from behind.

"You made a few mistakes this time, Sir Jerold. Your, ah, boldness is, of course, legendary, and we are, all of us, including our friends from Interpol—who send their regards—delighted, and I do mean delighted, to at last make your acquaintance in person. But now, as you must see, the game is up."

And then Tullio again, but Jerold was not listening very well. He felt himself smiling.

". . . to try to grab the goodies when it all fell apart on you, very daring and all, but now you must begin to see that that was a small error, eh what?"

"A real screw-up ak-chew-wally," added Rice, enjoying himself.

"Additionally, we have an eyewitness to your actions immediately before, during, and after the bust went down. We have all manner of interesting details."

Jerold visualized Tibbits' pinched, acidic smile, heard his offended, upright citizen's voice.

"So you see," Tullio went on, "we really do have you. Although we are not such peasants that we cannot enjoy your performance—and really, it's *wonderful*—your friends with the Mercedes are not nearly so entertained. It has dawned on them that without your little mistake" (Rice chuckled through his nose close by Jerold's ear) "the bust would not have stuck very well. Lack of one essential ingredient, don't you know." Tullio's manner expanded until he began rising from his chair as he continued. "But now, thanks to your impeccable sense of form, we have contact, propeller, zoom! No, Jimmy, they are not happy with you *at all.* You are, what you say, *solo, perduto, abandinato.*"

Jerold heard his own laughter, sounding a bit high and girlish. It was some moments before he could calm himself.

"I'm sorry . . . please, excuse me. It's just . . . This is fantastic! I wish you would tell me what it was that was in that package. I didn't even get a chance to peek!"

"That's beautiful, Jim. We love it."

"It brings tears to the eyes, Joseph. A rare performance. And we've got it on tape, too."

"You're an innocent bystander, right, Jim?"

"Uh, actually, yes, right!" Again Jerold felt a surge of giggling coming over him.

"You're such a cute guy, Darby. Want to give us a few one-liners about the old man?"

"Oh. The old man. That *was* bad. I treated him shabbily. And he was even trying to . . ." Tullio had quietly slid two large color photographs across the scarred Formica table top until they rested side by side directly in front of Jerold.

"Treated him shabbily! Yes. I guess so!"

"Murdered him in cold blood!"

A high-pitched ringing filled Jerold's skull as the still images before him filled his sight. There, from the old man's gaping mouth, a dark stream flowed across the sidewalk to the margin of the photograph.

"We're going to get you for murder, too, Mr. English Jimmy!"

Finally alone in a cell, Jerold paced. He had never felt more exhausted in his life, but he could not

think of sleep. He had talked and talked, wept, begged for common-sense understanding. "That's beautiful, Jim." They kept saying, "tell it to us again." And he had, until at last the words would not string themselves together any more. Six steps to, six back. His mind rolled through the scenes of his day, an entirely different movie now. A macabre paradox chased him up and down within the cell: he would pay for the only true misdeed he had performed that day.

Down and down onto the sidewalk the old man sprawled. Jerold leaned toward him. If only he had listened to his true self, just a two-second pause, an ounce of humanity. The hooked old finger trembling in the air. "Young man . . ." What had the old man tried to tell him? It would never be known. And *what* was in that damned package?

Towards morning the pale light seeping in through the high, barred window reminded him that he had not eaten. He went to the cell door and rapped with his knuckles. Yet another surprise. The sound of flesh upon steel is no sound at all.

Marybeth was mercifully absent when he was arraigned that morning in a huge, nearly empty courtroom. He tried again to tell his story but was interrupted by the judge.

"This is not the time for that, Mr. Darby. Is your lawyer present in court this morning?"

His lawyer turned out to be a fat young man with an unpronounceable last name who was somehow related to Marybeth's Tupperware distributor. A babyish frown planted itself and took root in the round face as Jerold told him the story. He seemed unable to think of anything pertinent to ask.

"Mrs. Darby is waiting downstairs," he finally managed.

Marybeth was already seated on the opposite side of the wire-meshed glass when he was escorted into the visiting area. She stared at him wordlessly from her abyss of social disgrace. When he smiled sheepishly, she burst into fresh tears.

"What do you want me to do?" she demanded.

He did not know. There seemed hardly anything he did know.

Later Van Leuwenhook, the fat young lawyer, came back, still with the frown. He had just returned from a conference with the district attorney.

"I want to know, right now, what was in that package," Jerold said.

Van Leuwenhook's chest swelled perceptibly as he opened a newspaper in front of his client.

ROSE CROWN JEWELS RECOVERED
THEFT RING SMASHED

"Ridiculous," murmured Jerold.

"Some very hot rocks," Van Leuwenhook pronounced knowingly.

In a dramatic climax to a lengthy international investigation, police arrested four men Saturday morning and recovered the famous Rose Crown jewels. Among those arrested was Gerald Edward Darby, 38, believed by police to be "English Jimmy," long sought in connection with a number of major unsolved jewel thefts in Britain and Western Europe. A large amount of cash, reportedly in excess of $1 million, was also seized in the precisely-timed raid.

The Rose Crown jewels are famed as the most historically important gems in Britain aside from the crown jewels themselves. They were stolen last February from a vault in the main office of Sotheby's, London. The whereabouts of the gold and silver crown into which the 27 large emeralds and 9 diamonds were set are not known at this time.

The arrests occurred at 10:38 A.M. in a Brooklyn Heights side street as the gems were allegedly being transferred to buyers. Those arrested were James A. Campbell, 27, Anthony J. Giancani, 61, William T. Frank, 54, and Darby. Darby was taken into custody several minutes later than the other men and had the Rose Crown jewels in his possession, according to police.

Darby, allegedly "English Jimmy," was arraigned in Brooklyn Municipal Court this morning and is being held on $1 million bond. Darby is also being held in connection with the death of a bystander during the Saturday morning arrest incident. Charges are expected to be filed soon, according to a press release from the district attorney's office. The dead man remains unidentified.

"Damn!"

There were related stories on pages B-7, C-13, and C-14, and in the magazine section, all about the history of the Rose Crown jewels, the fascinating career of English Jimmy, and a piece of inflated speculation about Jerold himself, complete with high school graduation picture. Jerold skimmed them frantically. What he needed to know most of all was nowhere to be found.

"How did he die?"

"Who?"

"The old man."

"Old man?"

"Here! 'Bystander during the arrest incident'!"

"Oh. Don't you know?"

"No! I *don't!*"

Van Leuwenhook stared at him incomprehendingly for several moments. Very evidently the young frowner was now a member, along with Rice, Tullio, the judge, and who knew how many others, of a growing league uniformly unable to translate into meaning Jerold's simplest utterances.

"At least I don't think I know. Please . . . just tell me."

"Shot in the back of the head, once, with a handgun."

"Thank God!"

At last the babyish frown was dislodged, replaced by a look somewhere between awe and horror.

Alone again in his cell in the security block before lights out, Jerold consumed as much of the other newspapers' stories as he could. He felt as if he had touched bottom and was struggling back to the surface. He had not caused the old man's death. But Van Leuwenhook had been utterly opposed to a polygraph examination. "Even if you were innocent, you might fail from emotional upset. I asked, since you insisted. The D.A. wasn't interested, either. He thinks someone like you could beat the machine. He says he doesn't need it anyway. They have you cold. It's just a loser for you all the way, Jim, er, Jer."

"I don't care. I want the lie detector."

Van Leuwenhook had fumed and fussed and gone away finally agreeing, but he had succeeded nonetheless in convincing Jerold that even the lie detector might not save him. Everything else improbable had occurred. Why not that, too? He could see it now, the polygraph examiner's face—he imagined he looked like Tibbits—in a row along with Rice, Tullio, and company. The same look. "That's beautiful. Tell it again."

The newspapers were no more help than before. The old man's identity was not very important in the midst of such a news extravaganza. There was nothing about him beyond the single statement in the lead article he had read earlier that day. He could not be sure the omission was even curious.

The story of English Jimmy was basically that although they had come close to catching him a few times, no one, until now, had known who he was. Even in the few instances, such as the present one, when accomplices had been arrested, and even

when they had been tried and convicted, no one had been able to give up the identity of the "master thief" himself. Apparently even English Jimmy's buyers never got to meet him. His method was utterly simple and very effective. Gems, paintings, and collectibles were passed to the buyers' couriers through the use of "blind drops," with the purchase money passing back through the same method. To the knowledge of the authorities, English Jimmy had been doublecrossed only once. That problem he had dealt with promptly, with a "triple cross" that had landed the offending accomplices in prison. English Jimmy's thefts had spanned a dozen years and nearly as many countries. His trademark, aside from his impeccable execution, his daring, and the fact that he worked alone, was a note made of pasted-together letters and left at the scene of each theft, saying simply, "Thanks again. Jim," or "It's Jim again." At the scene of the Rose Crown theft the note had said "Keep trying, Cookie. Jim."

Interesting stuff, but the dead man—what about the dead man? His recollections of the old man had run through his mind so many times that he could no longer be sure what was memory and what was speculation, hope, or desire about the memories. He could not escape the feeling that he was missing something, something that was just there, waiting to be seen from a slightly different angle. What was it that was odd about the old man? Or was there anything odd at all? Everything, or nothing? And, too, he wondered if there were yet more surprises in store for him.

He had not long to wait. The polygraph examination was not what he had imagined at all. The examiner was friendly, almost to a fault. Jerold was told what questions he would be asked even before the electrodes and straps were fastened to him, and then he was given a chance to practice with some inconsequential questions about his sex life. When Jerold voiced his dismay to Van Leuwenhook, he was told that, indeed, polygraph examinations depended largely upon a kind of game played by the examiner with the subject.

"Sort of a head game, Jerold."

Of this Jerold had no doubt. It all seemed to be sort of a head game, with his head but their rules, a copy of which was not obtainable. Consequently he tried to make himself ready for anything the following day when he was taken from his cell and escorted once more to the police interrogation room.

Neither Tullio nor Rice

greeted him as they seated themselves on the opposite side of the table. Both seemed unnaturally subdued. Rice proceeded to empty the contents of a large manila envelope onto the table. Jerold watched with interest while his personal belongings, taken from him the day of his arrest, were named off one by one as Rice pushed them across the table to him. Rice's voice sounded dry and tired.

"If you'll just sign here, Mr. Darby. This acknowledges receipt of your things. Then, as you know, you are free to go. Your lawyer is waiting downstairs."

Jerold could only stare back at them. He could not imagine how Marybeth had managed to raise a million dollars, unless . . .

"Don't think you've given us the slip," Tullio said, "just because you stuck us with the *pasta*. You're still charged with conspiracy, and you're still under suspicion of homicide. Do I make myself clear?"

"What?"

The policemen exchanged looks.

"Did you say I passed?"

Tullio's face went black and he started to rise from his chair despite Rice's restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"Pasta! Pasta! Pasta!"

"Pasta?" Jerold repeated dumbly. "You mean 'pa-sss-dduh'? Lie detector test? Passed the polygraph exam?"

Rice was actively restraining Tullio now.

"Lie detector test! I don't care what the lie box says! We're still gonna get you! You hear me?"

"You mean I didn't pass?"

"Joe! Easy! Come on. Go get a cup of coffee, willya?"

Tullio was firmly pushed out the door. Rice, returning, tried to keep his voice calm.

"Yes, you passed. So what?" He sighed hugely as he plumped a large forefinger onto the signature line of the property envelope. "Come on. Sign this and get the hell out of here."

Jerold signed and hastily began scooping his things up, stuffing them into his pockets —wallet, key chain, two pipes, pipe reamer, a package of pipe cleaners, a dollar and thirty-five cents in loose change, the silly gift-wrapped package of tobacco, and his own leather tobacco pouch, which dropped to the floor and burst open. He knelt and tried to scoop the tobacco back in, but in his nervous hurry he only succeeded in spilling more. A small, curled slip of paper bearing a neatly handwritten "#31" peeked up at him from the scattered spill of Turkish and black Latakia. Exasperated, Jerold grabbed the wastebasket from the corner

and, laying it on its side, tried to push the mess into it.

"You can leave that," Rice said. "The cleaning man will get it later."

"Quite all right. I always clean up after myself."

"It's okay. Forget it! Get outa here, willya?"

Jerold felt as if he were stumbling as he went to the door. Halfway out he looked back at Rice. Tears welled in Jerold's eyes.

"I don't care what you think. I didn't kill that old man!"

Downstairs Jerold was taken in tow by Van Leuwenhook just in time to avoid the approach of an angry man Jerold recognized as his erstwhile "accomplice." Outside he was ushered too slowly through a gauntlet of flashbulbs and shouted questions. More reporters were waiting on the front steps of the house in Bay Ridge. Jerold could just barely stand to watch the first dose of his own story as it came over the five o'clock news. Peering in from the dark hallway over the motionless crown of Marybeth's head, he endured his own face in TV clown color, his own voice high, whiny, and improbable: "... huge mistake, actually..."

Then Police Commissioner So-and-so, under fire, with Tullio looking glum and ugly in the background.

"... modern methods of artificial gem fabrication actually extremely difficult for the naked eye to de... Scotland Yard appraisers, yes... no, you can't see them... no comment ... no... That's all gentlemen... no... no... we are reevaluating all evidence."

Jerold knew vaguely that he should be taking some satisfaction from the embarrassment of the police and from the obvious downfall of Tullio in particular. He didn't, nor could he summon any enthusiasm for the idea, put forward by Van Leuwenhook and encouraged by Marybeth, that he sue for defamation of character.

"A brilliant touch, don't you see?" the round barrister had crowed.

He didn't see. His depression remained untouched by the rollick in the next day's newspapers.

POLICE FOOLED BY PASTE IMITATIONS

ROSE CROWN JEWELS STILL MISSING

WILL ENGLISH JIMMY SLIP AWAY AGAIN?

In succeeding waves the media swarmed over him. There were telephone interviews, doorstep interviews, living room interviews. There were Marybeth interviews.

He began refusing to go to the phone. He was not at home to visitors. He did not go out. From behind the front window curtains he watched the daily lurkers in his Bay Ridge street, the ingenious round of tan Novas, powder-blue Darts, beige Biscaynes, all with that obvious stamp of anonymity that everywhere marks the unmarked car.

With Jerold "suspended indefinitely" from his job but not fired, practical-minded Marybeth suggested he begin making the rounds of Tupperware parties with her.

"It's the least you can do," she said, and he supposed she was right.

Marybeth was bustling about in the kitchen, banging dishes into the cupboard and shoving the chairs under the table with slightly too much force, so that they scraped flatulently on the linoleum.

"Get ready! It's time to go!"

"I'm not going, Marybeth."

He was hiding in the newspaper. Crowded toward the fold by a three-quarter-page department store ad, at last some information.

DEAD BYSTANDER IDENTIFIED

The man killed in the Rose Crown arrest incident on October 10 in Brooklyn Heights has been identified as Adrian John Cooke, 51. No address was given by police. Police Commissioner Abrams announced the identification in a brief press release this morning. Reached by telephone, he declined further comment.

"All evidence in the homicide is still being evaluated," he said. No charges have been made in connection with the death. Sources who ask not to be identified indicate Gerald E. Darby, 38, suspected to be notorious jewel thief English Jimmy, is still a prime suspect in the case.

Darby's attorney, Karl Van Leuwenhook, has accused police of "the worst form of character assassination" and indicated today he will seek dismissal of obstruction of justice and other charges against his client.

"Getting quite famous, aren't we?"

This had become Marybeth's most dangerous gambit. If he contradicted her, she would go on and on. If he apologized, she would go on and on.

"This is just great, Jerold. While you mope around the house, I have to go out and support the family. That's just great!"

She stood by the kitchen door. *Adrian John Cooke, age 51 . . .*

"You've got to stop being so morose about this, Jerold."

No address . . .

"Goodbye!"

Marybeth marched to the front door in a swish of nylons and crammed herself into her overcoat.

"Don't over-exert, Lovey!"

Slam. A vacuous hush fell over the house. Jerold tossed the paper aside. His relief at being alone quickly evaporated, and he roamed the house in search of some diversion. Unbidden, The Day of the Package was running again on his silver screen. He loaded his briar and tried to smoke, but it seared his tongue. What had Adrian John Cooke seen in the street?

He gave up on his pipe as he was passing the bathroom and went in to knock it out in the toilet. He watched as the noisy swirl took the burnt tobacco down. The old finger trembled before him. "Young man . . ." And then it came, quite easily, in a rush of certainty immediately accompanied by a second realization. No wonder I missed it, he thought. He felt himself blushing and experienced a moment of self-loathing. Adrian John Cooke was Jerold Darby's very opposite: an Englishman masquerading as an American. No seventy- or eighty-year-old American, but a fifty-one-year-old Englishman. And there was something else, something just as obvious, but the doorbell had been ringing for some time. Lost in thought and forgetting his resolve to stay away from the front door, he quickly went down the stairs to the foyer. On his doorstep stood a smiling young man with thick glasses and a flamboyant mustache. Jerold instantly recognized the plasticized press credential clipped to his lapel.

"Oh, look, don't you guys ever quit?"

"Just a few questions, Mr. Darby. I promise not to take much of your time."

"Look! I'm telling you I've had it with you guys! No more questions, no more interviews. Please go away!"

"Actually, Mr. Darby, the subject of press harassment is just what I'm interested in. You may have seen something about it in *Time* last month. I've been following your story and, frankly, I think you're getting a bum deal."

Jerold had seen the article in *Time* and it *was* just what was happening to him. He looked the reporter up and down and said nothing. It would be a treat to speak with someone sympathetic for a change. Perhaps this was the break he needed.

"Really, I promise not to be a nuisance. No pictures."

"Very well. Come in."

In the hallway Jerold apologized for his rudeness and offered the reporter some tea, which was accepted. He felt his spirits rise somewhat as he put the kettle on and got out cups and saucers. He returned to the living room, sat down in the chair opposite the sofa—and let out a long breath. A different man sat across from him. Gone were the spectacles and mustache. A shiny, blunt-nosed revolver was pointed at his chest.

"Let's get right down to it, Darby. Where are the rocks?"

"You're . . ."

"Yah. Your partner in crime."

It was the package thrower.

"Campbell?"

"I don't have time for chitchat, Jim. Start talking. Where are they?"

"Listen, you're making a big . . ."

"Listen, punk! Mister Notorious Jewel Thief! You're nothing to me. I've got nothing to lose. I'll blow you away if I have to. Now give them up."

Campbell's eyes were full of desperate life. The muzzle of the gun was a quivering black hole. Jerold squeezed his eyes shut and tried to push down the sensation rising from his belly.

"Please."

Campbell grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pressed the cold muzzle against his temple.

"Okay, okay, just let go!"

The grip on his shirt tightened until he was choking. The package thrower's stare bore into him through mean, intent eyes. Jerold was trying desperately to think fast, but nothing came to him except the probable last sensation of a bullet punching into his brain.

"Please . . . I can't . . . talk when you're choking . . ."

Campbell released him and stepped back.

"The money's been paid, Jim. To you or the police, it doesn't matter to them. We want the goods."

Jerold was trembling so hard he could barely speak.

"Honest," he managed, "I don't have them."

"Then I'm gonna blow your brains out. It's all the same to me."

"They'll get you for murder."

Campbell laughed suddenly and began pacing back and forth in front of Jerold. As his agitation increased, he walked in widening circles until his circuit included the entire living room. All the while he was wagging the pistol in Jerold's direction as if carrying on a one-sided conversation in semaphore. Finally he halted directly in front of Jerold, still wagging the gun.

"*I* didn't make the switch, Jim. Therefore *you* did. Period. You're not talking your way out

of this. As for a murder charge, you should talk. And anyway I stand a lot better chance with the law than with them. They're not playing, Jim, and they want those rocks. Now, I don't have a lot of time. I'm gonna count to ten."

"You're being set up, Campbell, just like me."

"One."

"It's perfect for *him*. I die as English Jimmy and you go to prison."

"Two . . . three . . ."

"Okay!"

"Four . . ."

"Okay, okay!"

". . . Five . . ."

"Hey, come on, willya!"

"Start talking."

And so Jerold talked.

Dusk was gathering in the narrow street as Campbell's car, with Jerold at the wheel and Campbell directly behind holding the gun at his neck, eased to the curb and stopped opposite the tobacco shop. Together they studied the lighted window. The icy feeling was returning to Jerold's stomach. He had done all right while preoccupied with the business of driving, but now here they were. Campbell, somehow guessing that the drive was Jerold's only real hope of escape, had directed him through a wild maze of back streets, the muzzle of the gun twitching each time Campbell turned to look out the back window.

Jerold's back-up plan, such as it was, had taken shape in like manner as their route through Brooklyn, turning and turning, doubling back, all the way down to Williamsburg and back up through Park Slope, fully as much a product of Campbell's whims and suspicions as his own frantic maneuverings.

"For tricks like this you get to be a world famous thief? You've got to be kidding."

"Complexity is the mark of an amateur, Campbell."

And no, Campbell would not wait outside while Jerold went in alone.

"So why haven't you gone back already and grabbed them yourself? Too high and mighty for a simple B and E?"

"You may have noticed I've been enjoying a certain level of police supervision of late."

And no, Jerold would not now be permitted to make use of his considerable talents on the back door in the darkness of the alley—a relief, as Jerold wondered what made him think there was a back door.

"What makes you think the clerk hasn't found them? You think he hasn't gone in there to take a leak since the last time you were there?"

"Trust me. I know what I'm

doing. I did when I left them there."

"Turn here. I don't know, Jim. Sounds like a movie I saw once."

And please, let there be a back door.

A shadow had crossed the front window and a customer emerged onto the stoop. They watched as the man, smoking, buttoned his coat and looked about. A light went out in a neighboring shop and Campbell whispered a curse: the shopkeeper would be coming out in a moment. But the gun came away from Jerold's neck, as if Campbell were finally taken by some vague sense of camaraderie now that they were about to begin.

"Let's go," said Jerold.

"Wait."

Jerold turned and looked him in the eye. "He'll be closing."

Campbell, again in mustache and glasses, thought for a moment, then nodded and showed Jerold the gun one last time before putting his hand in his coat pocket. "You be real careful," he warned as he opened the car door. The man on the stoop descended and passed them on the sidewalk. Darkness had fallen.

At the sharp report of the shop door closing, Tibbits looked up. His eyes widened and his mouth in his thin face became very small. He stood still, half-stooped over the counter and staring, as Jerold and Campbell walked down the aisle toward him.

"Hi, Tibbits."

Tibbits straightened but did not reply.

"This is my friend. Andre. The one I told you about. He'd like a few ounces of that special blend of yours. Number Thirty-one I believe it was."

"Mr. Darby. You know you shouldn't be here. This is harassment. I shall call the police."

"Or was it Number Thirty-four?"

"It wasn't my fault, you know. I only answered what they asked me."

"That's a lie. You called them. They told me so."

Jerold sensed Campbell, at his elbow, becoming agitated. Tibbits' attention, too, was on Campbell.

"Thirty-four or Thirty-one, which was it now?"

"This is nonsense."

"He's right, Jim," Campbell spoke up suddenly. "Let's can the chatter and move it along."

"Thirty-four or Thirty-one?"

"I don't remember."

"But you were so sure before."

"You can have whichever you want. Bargain price. But then you have to leave."

The clerk's shiny eyes darted back to Campbell.

"Certainly. Why don't you

and Andre decide—you know, *sniff* out the difference—while I make use, if you don't mind, of your facilities. Call of nature, you know." And he was just at the curtain.

"There is no bathroom."

"Eh? No bathroom? . . ."

Campbell turned quickly to face Jerold, his hand starting to come out of his coat pocket.

"Just a washstand," Tibbets said. "No toilet."

As if lifted into a different realm of slow time and bright, clear space while Campbell bore down upon him and all thought stopped—everything, much too late, laid out before him—Jerold mumbled in an almost offhand way, one sentence nearly on top of the other, "But there is a back door, isn't there," and "Watch out, Campbell." The first was lost to Campbell but the second, not so much heard as seen in Jerold's face, stopped him in his tracks. Both together heard the odd change of tone that came over the voice of the little clerk.

"Make no mistake, Campbell, I know how to use this. Drop the gun, very slowly, without turning around, and then you may take off that ridiculous disguise."

Campbell looked at Jerold. Jerold nodded. Moving carefully, Campbell drew his pistol from his coat and let it drop to the floor. Like a chastened schoolboy following directions to the letter, he obediently peeled off the mustache and took off the eyeglasses, letting those too drop to the floor. Jerold could not restrain himself.

"Is that the same gun you used to kill Inspector Cooke?"

"My, my. Aren't we a clever little idiot. No, as a matter of fact, it is not. The water in the Verrazano Narrows is incredibly deep. This little beauty is merely the fully registered gun of a poor tobacco clerk defending himself against two known criminals bent upon settling a well-defined and ever-so-publicized grudge. It's almost too perfect. Clever Darby will finally get his fondest wish and become an Englishman, a famous one at that. Posthumously, however."

"You went out that back door and shot him right after he tried to warn me."

"Yes, dear boy. Actually, I went out twice."

"While I was still here, to pick up the package yourself."

"You *are* a clever boy. Yes, and saw Cookie's beady little eyes positively glaring at me from Finnegan's front window. Gave me quite a fright, as you may guess. But I'm so grateful. Words . . . ." he paused, wiggling the gun with a quick display of teeth, ". . . cannot express."

"They'll get you."

"Nay, nay, clever Darby. With dear Inspector Cooke no longer on my tail and the infamous English Jimmy gone to his cruel but just deserts, we have only to dispose of my erstwhile comrade, Mr. Campbell here, who is the only one who really knows anything at all. I hate double-crossers, Campbell."

The package thrower shrank back as the gun was leveled at his chest. A very small whimper escaped him.

"However, I do confess that I am moderately impressed with your ingenuity and might be persuaded in the direction of clemency in exchange for the property which is still rightfully mine."

Campbell's understanding rose up ever so slowly from the depths of his terror and perplexity.

"What?"

"The jewels, Campbell. I want the damn jewels back."

"What?"

"My patience, man, is not unlimited. Give them up!"

"You don't have them?"

Flushed, sensing that something was up, English Jimmy turned first his eyes and then his gun back upon Jerold. Campbell plodded stupidly on.

"If you don't have them, then who does?"

"I do."

English Jimmy's gun clattered loudly onto the glass counter and he raised his hands. The voice, familiar but not immediately recognized, had been preceded into the room by a huge black revolver that hovered somewhere just off Jerold's shoulder on the edge of his vision, and had been followed by the swish of Tullio's sudden bulk coming through the curtain. Rice and two patrolmen burst in behind him. Rabbit turned fox, English Jimmy changed back again, trembling violently as he was handcuffed and led away.

The back room of Scarpetti's Ristorante, where Tullio had escorted Jerold with a mixture of bullish insistence and worried solicitude, was filling up with boisterous policemen all wanting to get a look at "English Jerry." Tullio brusquely shooed them away and plied Jerold with a second glass of chianti.

"Terrible wine, I know. I'll get you something else. Eat a little antipasto at least, will you. You make me feel bad." He had already informed Jerold of the considerable reward coming to him for the recovery of the Rose Crown jewels, had already complimented him for his courage, his quick-wittedness, had already telephoned Marybeth that her husband was a hero. Still, there seemed something else.

"There never were any paste imitations?"

"Only here." Tullio winked and jabbed a comical thumb at his forehead.

"I had to think of something. That was a hell of a fiasco I had on my hands."

"Because of me."

"No. We blew it. *Madonne!* That damned little green package right under our noses!"

"So it was a trick right from the beginning."

"Yes. Lucky it worked. Thanks to you."

"You and Rice are pretty good actors."

"Can't help it. Comes from watching all those cop shows on TV."

"But you never suspected Tibbits?"

"Well, no."

"How did you find us there?"

"Followed you."

"Followed?"

"Sure. We're cops. It's what we do for a living."

"Why all the secrecy about Cooke?"

"He wasn't supposed to be there. Very bad form. Scotland Yard under cover right in the middle of our show without us knowing. He got caught up in it. He was close to Jimmy for a long time but kept missing him. Even Cooke's superiors didn't know where he was."

"Too bad."

"Yes. But what is it, Jer? What's really on your mind?"

Jerold drank his wine and ate an olive.

"I have a confession to make."

"Please, I'm off duty."

"No. Listen. I do some acting myself. But I've got to tell you . . . I didn't really have anything figured out until right there, when it was too late. I'd like to pretend differently, but really it all just . . ."

"Never mind. Just be quiet about that. You don't tell about me risking your life for you, and I won't tell about you not being the new Sherlock Holmes."

Jerold poured himself another glass of wine. He already knew the answer to his last question, and also knew that he had the answer coming to him.

"So, when did you realize I wasn't guilty?"

"Right away."

"Right away?"

"Hey, come on, give me a break. Think I can't recognize an innocent bystander when I see one?"

UNSOLVED

by

George J. Summers

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

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Three suspects, named Adam, Brad, and Cole, were questioned at different times about the murder of Dale.

Each of the following three statements was made by one of the three men:

1. Adam is innocent.
2. Brad is telling the truth.
3. Cole is lying.

Statement [1] was made first; but statements [2] and [3] are not necessarily in temporal order, though each refers to a statement made earlier.

I. Each man made one of these statements, referring to another of the suspects.

II. The murderer, who was one of the three men, made a false statement.

Which one of the three men was the murderer?

See page 147 for the solution to the September puzzle.

TWINS

by Robert Chesmore

I have always pretty much known what was going on in our little town of Gradyville; I guess some people think old Mack Owens is a bit on the nosy side, but the truth is just that I care about our citizens and am interested in their affairs.

I think I'm pretty tolerant, too. I could even find some good in Jake and Judd, the identical Caspar twins. True, they were a pair of teenage hell-raisers ripping around on their motorcycles, disturbing a lot of people and scaring some, and they have been arrested a couple of times for malicious mischief. Also Sheriff Kearny had taken Judd in one time for carrying a concealed .22 caliber pistol in his leather jacket.

Still, I had seen them pick up a little dog that had been run over on Main Street and take it to the vet. Of course, they were probably the ones who ran over it in the first place, but they had had the kindness to take care of the animal anyway.

Naturally, though, my tolerant feeling toward the twins was strained on that warm summer night when I found old Fred Cameron dying in the weeds of the vacant lot next to his rooming house and heard what he had to say.

Illustration by Nicola Cuti

Fred had lived in our town only about a month. He had put up the money for the Ajax restaurant and turned the restaurant over to his nephew, Corliss Miller, to run. The Millers arrived in town at the same time as Fred. I got my information about the purchase of the restaurant from the former owner.

It was evident that Fred had plenty of the old scratch. If I had any doubts about that, they were removed as I observed Fred's way of doing things. He spent every night at the Cue Tavern playing poker. He lost more often than not, and with the money he brought into the game, the stakes sometimes got pretty high. He laughed uproariously when he lost and generally bought a round of drinks for everyone in the house before the place closed at one A.M.

If he felt any pain from losing, it was probably alleviated by the condition he was in from drinking boilermakers—his favorite tipple—throughout the night. He liked to down his shot in one quick motion, then nurse the beer along for twenty minutes or so. In five or six hours that adds up.

Everybody liked him and liked winning money from him. He had a great sense of humor and knew a lot of good stories.

The Caspar twins had a sense of humor, too.

Sometimes they would be shooting pool in the Cue and when Fred left to go home they would go out and race up Main Street to Hickory, circle the block, and wait in the darkness for Fred at the corner of Elm and Second Street.

Just as Fred, swaying slightly no doubt, was crossing the street and about to enter the vacant lot next to his house, they would zoom up on their bikes and scare the pants off him.

At least it scared him the first time. He told the boys in the Cue about it and laughed as hard as the rest of them.

After they did it to him three or four times, though, you could tell it was getting under his skin. When he ordered drinks around he would say, "Everybody but the kids."

Red Elkins, the owner of the Cue, wouldn't have served them anyway because they weren't old enough, but it was the principle of the thing, and the twins would give Fred an icy stare—especially chilling because of the grin that went with it, which seemed to be saying, "Just you wait."

They actually weren't even supposed to be in the place, and when Red Elkins noticed the bad feeling that was developing between them and his best customer, he told the twins to get out and stay out.

I began walking Fred home frequently, partly to keep the twins

from heckling him and partly because in his condition he was fair game for a mugger. I'm fifty years old, but I'm pretty big and nobody much messes with me.

I wish I had been walking with him on the night I found him prone in the weeds of the vacant lot with the bullet hole in his chest—lying there, bleeding and drunk—near to being *dead* drunk as it turned out.

One day, sometime before all that, I was in the Ajax restaurant chatting with my old friend Dan O'Brien. We had ordered hamburgers, and Corliss Miller called our orders back to the kitchen.

"Two burgers, Babe."

Dan said, "I used to call my wife Babe, God rest her soul."

Corliss and Babe were both probably in their forties. They ran the place by themselves except when things were busy. Then they used a waitress or two—high school kids generally.

Corliss was tall and mostly bald, with a long, lean face and pouches under his eyes. Babe was short and dumpy. Neither made any effort to be friendly, and to my knowledge nobody in town was well acquainted with them.

Dan and I were just starting on our hamburgers when there came a yell from Babe in the kitchen. Corliss dashed through the door to the back, and Dan and I followed, thinking we might be of help.

The kitchen was filled with smoke, and flames were curling up from the griddle. Corliss grabbed a fire extinguisher and turned it on the stove, meanwhile cussing Babe out at the top of his voice. The fire went out right away, and Corliss looked at us as if to say, what the hell are you doing here? Dan and I, having no desire to linger in the fumes, went back to our hamburgers.

When we left the restaurant we fell to talking about the Corliss Millers, the most common subject of conversation, I suspect, in our town except when the Caspar twins had stirred up some fresh excitement.

Speculation was rife as to where they came from and why they kept to themselves so much that nobody seemed to know anything about them. Even the uncle, Fred Cameron, seemed to have very little to do with them, though it was assumed that he had moved to town to keep an eye on the Ajax, since he had his money in it.

Old Fred lived just two doors from me, and occasionally in the afternoon he would sit on his landlady's porch. Sometimes I stopped

and visited with him, and once I mentioned the grease fire at the Ajax.

"I suppose Corliss got pretty upset," Fred commented.

"He was cussing a blue streak."

I asked him if the Caspar twins were still heckling him.

"Oh, they're sore at me because they can't come in the Cue, and they make a smart-ass remark once in a while, but I can live with it."

"I suspect that's as far as they'll go," I said. "Somebody else might mug you, though, you coming home crocked from the Cue with money in your pocket. You'd better be careful."

He chuckled. "Generally the boys in the game have cleaned me out so a mugger wouldn't get much."

It was a time of warm, sunny days and balmy nights, and I generally went for a walk after dinner. Lilac time had come and gone, but the scent of roses and peonies drifted my way occasionally.

On the night of Fred's murder I walked past the Cue Tavern, not stopping in as I usually did because I was on the way over to see Dan O'Brien, who was in bed with the flu.

I glanced in at the boys playing poker. Fred was reared back laughing, a pretty good indication that he had just dropped a bundle. He laughed when he won, too, but when he lost you would think it was the biggest joke in the world.

I've wished many times I hadn't gone over to Dan O'Brien's. He wasn't that sick anyway, and if I'd stopped at the Cue, I might have walked Fred home and saved his life.

It was a little after one A.M. when I left Dan's house. I passed the Cue. It was closed and dark.

I went down Main and met the Caspar twins roaring up the street, their bikes shattering the stillness of the night. They ignored me.

I turned up Elm and was cutting across the vacant lot when I heard a faint moan that sent fear cutting into me like a knife. I thought of Fred immediately.

I found him lying in the weeds with a stain, black in the moonlight, in the middle of his chest.

I dashed to the street and yelled. There was a light in an upstairs window of Jed Sloan's house, and when I saw his silhouette at the window I hollered, "Somebody's mugged Fred Cameron—get Doc Fitch—an ambulance—quick!"

I hurried back to Fred and leaned over him. "You hurting bad?" I said.

"Naw." Alcoholic fumes engulfed me. He truly was feeling no pain, I decided.

"What happened?"

"Goddam twins shot me," he said and grinned.

So that was it. I hated to think it was the twins who had done it, but there it was.

Then, even in the shape he was in, he couldn't resist making a joke. In the middle of sort of a gurgling laugh he said, "You ever hear the one about the two Swedes—"

His eyes closed and the grin faded. Blood began to trickle from the corner of his mouth. I turned his head so he wouldn't choke on it. I took his hand to let him know somebody was still around.

I wished the damn ambulance would hurry up and get there.

It did, eventually, in probably a lot less time than it seemed to me. I heard it slither to a stop on the gravel street.

A couple of paramedics carried Fred on a litter to the ambulance. I got in with him. At the hospital they whisked him away, and I was left alone in the lobby till Sheriff Kearny came in. He nodded to me, then went down the hall.

He came back in a few minutes. "No chance talking to him now. They think he's bought it. Understand you found him?"

I said I had and told him Fred had said it was the twins who shot him.

"I'll be damned," Kearny said. "I locked them up a few minutes ago for disturbing the peace. Well, they'll keep. Let's go see the place where you found Fred."

I showed Kearny the spot. After looking around a bit he said, "If they don't find the bullet in him, I'll have to come back in the morning and hunt for it. You say all he said was that the twins shot him?"

"That's all. He might have told me more, but he had this story he wanted to tell me about a couple of Swedes. He didn't finish that, either."

"Well," Kearny said, "if he dies, I guess his last conscious moments were happy." He put a hand on my shoulder. "I know you liked old Fred, but there's nothing more you can do for him. Go home and go to bed."

The next morning I learned that Fred had died and that Jake and Judd Caspar were still in the slammer.

The Ajax was closed all day. I caught a glimpse of the Millers going into Blake's Funeral Home, I supposed to make

the arrangements for the funeral of Corliss's Uncle Fred.

I talked to the sheriff later that day. They'd found a .22 caliber bullet in Fred.

"I'd like to find the gun that matches that bullet," Kearny said. "It wasn't on the twins when I picked them up, and we couldn't find it in the vacant lot or on the street. Incidentally, it's damn strange that the twins would go roaring away from the scene and attract all that attention to themselves."

Maybe it was Kearny's questioning attitude that caused the idea to blossom in my head.

Probably it didn't mean a damn thing, but I told Kearny about the grease fire at the Ajax and how Corliss had cussed Babe out.

"Hmm," Kearny said. "Think I'll go over there in the morning. Come along if you like."

We took the back booth in the Ajax. From there we could see the rear of the serving counter.

Corliss came over to take our orders.

"Hamburgers like usual," said Kearny.

"Onion on mine," I added.

"Our condolences," the sheriff said.

"Thank you," said Corliss. "We'll miss Fred. We were very close."

I found that hard to believe.

Corliss's long face was drawn into a caricature of woe. The bags under his eyes were limp blobs of flesh.

"I just noticed," Kearny said, "you don't have that .22 under the counter any more, lying there next to the cups and saucers."

I thought Corliss's face turned a shade whiter.

He said, "I sold it to a guy I used to know who was passing through. I was afraid the kids working for me would get to fooling around and have an accident."

"You can't be too careful," Kearny said.

Corliss was wiping his hands with a kind of nervous motion against his apron. Could be grease on his hands, I thought.

Or maybe perspiration; he seemed mighty tense.

Kearny said, "Happen to remember the name of the guy you sold the gun to?"

"No. What difference does it make?"

Kearny let the question hang in the air.

It was still hanging when we'd finished our sandwiches and left the Ajax.

A few days later I was walking down Main Street. Dan O'Brien had recovered from the flu and was sitting on the bench in front of the post office across the street. He motioned for me to come on over.

I knew what he wanted. Like I said before, I pretty much know what goes on in Gradyville, and some people think I'm a bit too curious about the affairs of others. In that respect, though, I have plenty of company in this little town, and for pure, single-minded nosiness I think Dan O'Brien must lead the pack.

Just as I was starting across the street, the Caspar twins came along on their bikes. Instead of revving up to scare hell out of me, they slowed to let me cross. A few hours in the pokey had done them a world of good.

I sat down next to Dan and awaited the inquisition.

He, along with the rest of the town, knew that Kearny had gotten a warrant and found, in Corliss's house, the pistol that matched the bullet they'd picked out of Fred. The warrant probably wasn't legal, but the farther you get from the center of power, the more people tend to improvise, and Gradyville is about as far from the center of power as you can get.

Dan also knew that Jeff Knudson, Fred's lawyer, had let it slip that Fred had talked to him about cutting Corliss and Babe out of his will, and that they probably knew about Fred's intention and beat him to the punch.

Unprofessional gossip by Knudson, I suppose, but that's Gradyville.

Dan wanted to know what it was like, finding Fred there in the weeds.

I told him it was a hell of a feeling, like finding somebody had poisoned your dog.

Dan said, "People seem to think you had a hand in directing Kearny's suspicion toward Corliss and Babe, but nobody knows what it was you did."

I reminded him of the grease fire at the Ajax. "Babe was in the kitchen," I said. "Corliss yelled 'Babe' two or three times. Finally he got real worked up and hollered 'Goddammit, Chloris' as loud as he could."

Dan thought this over for a minute, then he said, "Corliss and Chloris. You suppose Babe wasn't his missus? Sounds like the kind of names somebody might give a pair of twins."

"That's what I thought," I said.

FICTION

JAILBAIT

by Jack Connor

Nick Bakker was leaning on a rake in the equipment shed, studying the rainclouds, when the white BMW swung into the parking lot. His heart lifted. The rain wouldn't last, but Diane was here.

The car stopped fifty yards away. Diane kissed her father, waited while he U-turned, then walked toward the shed.

"I've got just one rule for lifeguards," the park supervisor, Mr. Kilbourne, had told Nick the first day. "Keep your eyes *on* the water and *off* the jailbait." Diane Simmons was definitely jailbait: she was fifteen; Nick was twenty. But Kil-

Illustration by John Jinks

bourne was rarely around, and Diane was a long-legged redhead with an amazing collection of gut-wrenching bathing suits.

"Hi, can I come in there?"

"As long as you don't stand too close. I've been known to lose control of my worst instincts."

Diane smirked—part of her act was pretending she didn't like his flirting—then looped her towel around her neck and stepped inside.

"Well, another rainy day at this grungy beach."

"Hey, I work here."

"Like I said, another day at this grungy beach." She stood on tiptoe to pull a pack of cigarettes out of the front pocket of her jeans, lit one, and tossed the match on the sand. "I was supposed to go into the city today. My father had a contract to sign with some airline and then he was going to take me to lunch at The Four Seasons. But his agent called last night to tell him to sit tight. It looks like the competition is going to offer him even more."

Diane's father was the town's celebrity. The television commercials he directed had been winning awards for years and he had even been interviewed by *People* magazine.

"Sally just about tore her hair out. Somehow she's gotten it into her head that he's promised to use her in one of the first airline spots and it's going to be her big break."

Sally Mifflin was a girl who had knocked on the Simmonses' door one night a couple of months ago, after hitchhiking down from New Hampshire. She told Mr. Simmons she considered him a cinematic genius and begged him to let her appear in one of his commercials. She had been living at the house ever since.

"I keep telling her there's no way he can use her unless she loses some of the weight off her thighs. And my father has told her about nineteen times she should think about getting into camera work or production or something, but she never takes the hint. Lately he's also been hinting she ought to find her own place to live, but she hasn't picked up on that yet, either." Diane blew a smoke ring toward the roof. "Like my father says, Sally wouldn't know a hint if it stuck out its ugly neck and bit her in the ass."

Nick didn't smile. He had met Diane's father once. Mr. Simmons had been his Little League coach for a single game, when Nick was ten. In the third inning after Nick made a stumbling catch of a sinking liner Mr. Simmons raved about it. "Hey, that was one beautiful

grab. Sweet and slick. I think you've got some talent; I mean real talent. Now tuck your shirt in so you *look* like a ballplayer." The next inning, while Nick was standing in center field, another boy came trotting out to his position. "I don't care how good you are, Slick," Mr. Simmons said when Nick reached the bench. "If you want to play on my team, you're going to listen when I talk and you're going to keep your shirt in your pants. Now sit down, tuck it in, and try to remember what you learned today."

Mr. Simmons failed to show the following week—or for any other games that season—but Nick had remembered what he learned. Several years later, when Mrs. Simmons ran off to no one knew where, without even leaving a note, it was supposed to be a shocking event: a woman abandoning the most successful man in town. Nick wasn't shocked. He figured she'd probably just gotten sick of listening when Mr. Simmons talked.

"So what's new and exciting in your life lately?" Diane asked. "Catch anybody throwing sand yet today?"

"This storm took me by surprise," said Nick. "I thought I'd played the whole thing like the master assassin I am, but now I could be in trouble. If that raft moves any farther."

"What are you babbling about?"

"Do you know what anchors the chains to that raft? A barrel filled with concrete. It weighs about a jillion pounds and it's usually stuck way down in the muck. It's not stuck today, though. You see how the whole raft is drifting to the left? I just have to pray it doesn't move much more." He lowered his voice, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah, the secret is you're on drugs."

"I guess you can't."

She smirked. "Okay, tell me."

"There's a body under that raft."

"Oh, ick! Shut up."

"You'll be happy to know who it is."

"Come on. Shut up."

"You didn't see Sally this morning, did you?"

"She never wakes up before the soaps start."

"This morning she did. Don't ask me why, but early this morning she came down here for a swim. Maybe she was trying to work some of that fat off her thighs, I don't know. But when I got here, there she was, sunbathing out on the raft. No one else was around; the place was completely deserted. I knew you wanted to get rid of her, and I realized this was my chance to show you how des-

perate I am for your bod. So I slid into the water real quiet—"

"This is gross."

"And I swam out there, using the special silent stroke they taught us in Boy Scouts. She never heard a sound. She screamed a little when I yanked her off the raft, but the water stopped that real quick. Then it was easy. I just dragged her to the bottom, lifted the barrel up, and stuck her under. You should have seen how her arms and legs were going wild when I swam away."

"That is not funny."

"Murder is never funny."

"You *are* on drugs."

Nancy Richardson appeared at the side door, holding her beach towel over her head. "Hey, what are you two doing in there?"

"He's telling me dirty stories."

"Great, I love dirty stories."

"Not the kind he tells." Diane stepped through the doorway. "Let's go play some Donkey-kong."

Nick watched them go. Nancy ran across the beach to the woods, holding the towel over her head, and disappeared down the path that led to the 7-Eleven. Diane sauntered across the sand. No rain was going to make *her* run. As she reached the woods she stopped to adjust her sandals. She was balanced on one leg when the thunder cracked again, loud and close. She hopped about two feet. Nick grinned. She wasn't as sophisticated as she wanted to be.

Of course, he wasn't either. If the guys back at college could see the macho-man pose he kept up in front of the high school kids at the park, they'd fall over laughing. Wimpy the Chump they called him in the frat. When last spring he'd let it slip that his parents would be away in Europe all summer, his roommate had exploded, "*You* with a free house for two months? What a waste! That's like giving a night with Bo Derek to a guy in a coma."

One of Nick's fantasies was showing up at the frat with his arm around Diane. Twenty to fifteen was off limits, but twenty-two to seventeen was respectable, and twenty-three to eighteen no one would think twice about. He'd be graduated by then, but they could drive out there together for a homecoming party or something. "Hey, guys," he'd say going up the steps. "I just wanted to show you what I was waiting for all those years."

By noon the sun was out again, and the regular weekday crowd of mothers, kids, and senior citizens had assembled. As usual,

the littlest kids were going in first. He climbed up into the chair and put on his sunglasses.

Kilbourne had promised to hire another lifeguard, but here it was August already and it hadn't happened. Nick was on duty alone from ten to five six days a week. The first week he had sat bolt upright, scanning the swimming area back and forth like a robot. The water was dark. If someone went under, you'd have to be looking right at them to notice. He'd gone home each night exhausted from tension and anticipation. But, the lake was small and mostly shallow, and gradually he'd learned which kids had to be watched, which mothers could be trusted to watch their own, when he had to be alert, and when he could relax. None of the five people he'd had to rescue so far had been in any real danger. The job had become easy enough—and pleasantly dull.

When the girls returned, they set up camp in the their usual spot at the far corner of the beach, where it swung back toward the woods. Diane faced the water while she peeled off her T-shirt and stepped out of her jeans. He exhaled: she was wearing her skimpiest suit, the green one with knotted string sides. Yeah, Diane was only jailbait at the moment. But anyone who wouldn't be willing to wait a couple of years for a girl like that to grow up had to have something wrong with his imagination.

Nancy waded out to hip level, and dived in. Diane waited until she reached the raft, then followed. She swam out backstroke and pulled herself up the ladder, arching her neck to let the water flatten her hair. The two of them walked to the far end of the raft to peer over the edge, down the rope to the anchor barrel. Nancy was giggling. They'd been talking about him, it was nice to see.

After a moment, Nancy jumped in feet first, holding her nose.

When she came up ten seconds later, she kicked herself up out of the water directly onto the raft and said something to Diane that made both girls look his way. Nick put his hand to his throat, stuck out his tongue, and wiggled his legs. Diane ignored him and bent over to look into the water. Then she dived in head first.

She stayed down longer than he expected, half a minute or so, and when she surfaced she was racing for shore. She ran out of the water and down the woods trail, a fist over her mouth. Nancy followed, stopping on the beach to gather their towels and clothes. She

shaded her eyes to look his way again, and he gave her a big shrug. What had they seen down there—a catfish?

By four thirty the sky had clouded once more and the parking lot was empty. Nick was contemplating an early exit—Kilbourne never checked on him —when Nancy came walking across the beach.

"Diane's pretty upset, you know."

"Yeah, what did you two think you saw out there?"

"Diane said it was Sally."

Nick laughed. "Well, I warned her."

She looked at him. "She called her father from the 7-Eleven. He's upset, too."

"She told her *father?*"

Nancy nodded.

"That she thought she saw a *body* on the bottom of this lake?"

"She was scared to death."

"You two piss me off, you know that? Christ, now Mr. Simmons is going to have my hide."

"Sally wasn't home this morning."

"I'm the one who said that. I just made it up."

"After Diane told her dad your story about eight times, he hung up the phone and went looking for her. Then he called us back—he couldn't find her anywhere in the house."

"Well, hell, I don't know anything about it. She must've gone for a walk. Or maybe she finally got sick of waiting around for her big break."

"Okay, but there *is* something out there under the raft."

"Right."

"There *is.*"

"Yeah, muck. Muck and an old barrel."

"It was white and I saw it move. Diane said that was her arm waving."

"Did Diane explain how someone would be waving her arm after she'd been sitting on the bottom all day?"

"Don't talk like that. Maybe the current was moving it. Whatever it was."

"This is a lake, you twerp. Lakes don't have currents."

"Hey, nix you. You're the one who's the twerp. I didn't have to come all the way back here to tell you what happened. Go out there and pull it up."

"Nancy, there's nothing out there."

"There *is* something out there. And I don't want to have nightmares about it for the next month."

He swam out with his eyes closed. He hated dark water. Once in lifeguard training he had had to find a weighted rubber dummy in a lake like this one. Sweep and recover, they

called it. You were supposed to breaststroke across the pitch-black bottom, pushing your hands through the muck as far as you could reach. He couldn't do it—he couldn't make himself extend his arms. When on his seventh or eighth dive he ran face first into the dummy, he bolted to the surface, where he had to tread water while he steeled himself to go down and touch it again.

As he neared the raft now, he opened his eyes. The coppery gloom led quickly to black. And the barrel was at least ten feet down.

He grabbed the raft's ladder. On the beach Nancy was lighting a cigarette. "Where am I supposed to look?"

She stepped forward. "What?"

"Where's the corpse?"

"Follow the chain."

He pulled himself down hand over hand. It was more like twelve feet, and cold. Something jabbed him in the chest. He batted it away and opened his eyes. A white snake. He found the barrel under his feet and pushed up to the surface.

"The white thing's a *nylon strap.*" He held up his fingers. "About this thick."

"Pull it up."

"I can't. It's tied to the barrel. Come on in; I'll show you."

She took a step backwards. "No, thanks."

He dived again. Those two girls wanted to be scared, that was the truth of it. They were still kids, really; they only looked like adults. He placed both feet carefully on the barrel and fumbled with the knot. No way he could untie it in the dark, holding his breath. Could he tear it off? He yanked at the strap; the barrel rolled and slid out from under him. His feet went into the slime up to his ankles. He sprang for the surface, kicking hard.

Nancy was already walking away. When he shouted "Hey!," she seemed to pick up the pace, and before he could swim to shore, she was gone.

The phone woke him finally. In his dream it'd been an alarm clock he couldn't reach to shut off. He shuffled into his parents' bedroom. "Hello?"

"You immature son-of-a-bitch."

"Mr. Kilbourne, I—"

"Do you realize I just got the worst phone call I've ever had in my life? I'm awake. My wife's awake."

"I'm really sorry about this whole thing."

"Simmons is going to sue me. Do you realize that?"

"What for?"

"What for! I hired you. I'm responsible for you."

"But what can he sue you for? I made up a story. It was a mistake, I know—"

"That was his lawyer on the phone! You think you know more about what they can sue for than his lawyer does? Simmons has been driving all over town looking for that girl what's-her-name ever since his daughter called him. Now he's sitting at his lawyer's house so upset he wouldn't even talk to me. I'll tell you one thing, Bakker. You listening?"

"I'm real sorry about this. Honest."

"You're not going to get another job in this town, I promise you that. I want you up in that chair tomorrow until I find someone to take your place. Then I'm kicking you the hell out of there and I better not find out about you trying to work anywhere within fifty miles of here. If I do . . . Well, you just try it and you'll see what I can do."

The phone banged.

Nick walked downstairs to the kitchen. The clock read one thirty-five. He drank a glass of milk. Then he opened the directory under the kitchen phone. If Mr. Simmons answered, he'd hang up.

The phone rang once. "Daddy?"

"You cost me my job today, Diane. Thanks a lot."

"You drowned my father's girlfriend!"

"Christ almighty, Diane. I was dumb to tell you that story, but you're even dumber to believe it. And your father—your father is a complete moron. All those commercials must've burned out his brains."

"You're psychotic, that's what you are!"

She was sobbing, almost choking. He took a deep breath. With a father like she had, who wouldn't have a distorted sense of reality? "Okay, listen, Diane. Calm down."

"I've got a gun here. You come near this house and I'll shoot you, I swear."

"Diane, relax. You're getting yourself all wound up."

"Every time I close my eyes I see her arm down there and then it looks like her face staring up at me. I'll never forget this day for the rest of my life."

"Diane, please. The only thing down there was an old strap."

"That was her arm."

"That was not her arm. It was a piece of nylon about a foot long and about two inches wide. It's all a coincidence. Sally must've split today because she wanted to try her luck elsewhere. I didn't know anything about it. If I did, I swear I never would've told you that story."

"When I told my father, it put him into some kind of shock. He

made me tell him the whole story over and over again. 'Are you sure it was her?' he kept asking. 'Are you positive it was her?' What could I say? It was her all right."

"But Jesus, Diane, it wasn't her."

"It *was!*"

"Diane, you need some sleep. You're not thinking straight. I'm going to hang up now. I'm not doing you any good. Go into the bathroom and take some aspirins. Then just get into bed and—"

"Why? So you can come kill me next?"

"Really, this is a ridiculous conversation. Is there a neighbor you could call? Maybe someone could come over and sit with you until your father comes home."

"Yeah, and he's got a gun, too. He'll shoot you the second he sees you."

"Diane, listen. I want to confess something to you just so you can relax your mind and forget this whole mess. I'm not the cool college guy I've been pretending to be all summer. I'm really the biggest chicken in the world. In my fraternity do you know what my nickname is? *Wimpy the Chump.* I'm going to be a junior next year and haven't even had a date yet. Not one date yet. I'm too chicken to ask anyone out."

He sighed. "Actually, you're the first girl I've ever made friends with in my whole life."

"I saw her arm. It was waving goodbye."

"Jesus H. Christ! I give up! You're right, Diane, I did it. It *was* her you saw. I'm a homicidal maniac! Call the police! Call the National Guard! Tell your father to drag the lake! Why didn't he do it this afternoon? What's he waiting for?"

She hung up.

He tore the receiver out of the phone with such fury the cord snapped out and sailed past his head. He roared, charged outside, and slammed the receiver into the driveway—where it bounced without breaking and landed softly in his mother's rhododendron.

The next morning his stomach was so knotted he had to roll out of bed. He forced himself to eat half a cup of yogurt, then shuffled outside to his car. The sky was dark, at least.

As he turned down the street to the park, the wind picked up and some leaves swirled up from the side of the road. It might even rain so hard no one would come all day. Maybe, he was thinking as he turned into the entrance, he'd have a little bit of luck for once.

Three vehicles were parked

on the beach: a white BMW, a police car, and a pickup truck with CAPTAIN ED'S SCUBA SCHOOL painted on its door. Mr. Simmons and two policemen were standing together, their shoes almost touching the water. Thirty feet away, just inside the kiddie ropes, a diver in a wet suit and aqualung was spitting into his face mask.

Simmons glanced over his shoulder as he heard Nick's car coming across the sand, then whirled fully around and pointed. "That's him!" he shouted. Then he charged. Nick braked, rolled up his window, and locked the door a moment before Simmons reached it. He snarled and yanked at the handle so the door rattled. "I'll show you how funny murder is, you pervert!" He snatched at the windshield wiper, ripped it loose, and hammered the glass with it until one of the cops wrestled him away.

The cop lifted him off the ground in a bear hug, and stumbled. Both fell. As Simmons tried to scramble up, the cop locked his legs around his waist and held him. "Come on, Mr. Simmons. You've had a long night. Don't get yourself in trouble now."

The other cop tapped on Nick's window. Nick rolled it down.

"You're Bakker?"

Nick nodded.

"Mr. Simmons' fiancée is missing and his daughter says you said you drowned her here yesterday."

" 'Murder's never funny,' that's what he told her." Simmons yelled. " 'I lust after your bod'! She's *fifteen* years old! She's in *ninth* grade! He's a goddamn sex freak!"

The cop squatted so his head was level with Nick's. He had bright green eyes and looked like a rational person. "So what's this all about?"

"It was a joke."

"A joke?"

"A joke that got out of control."

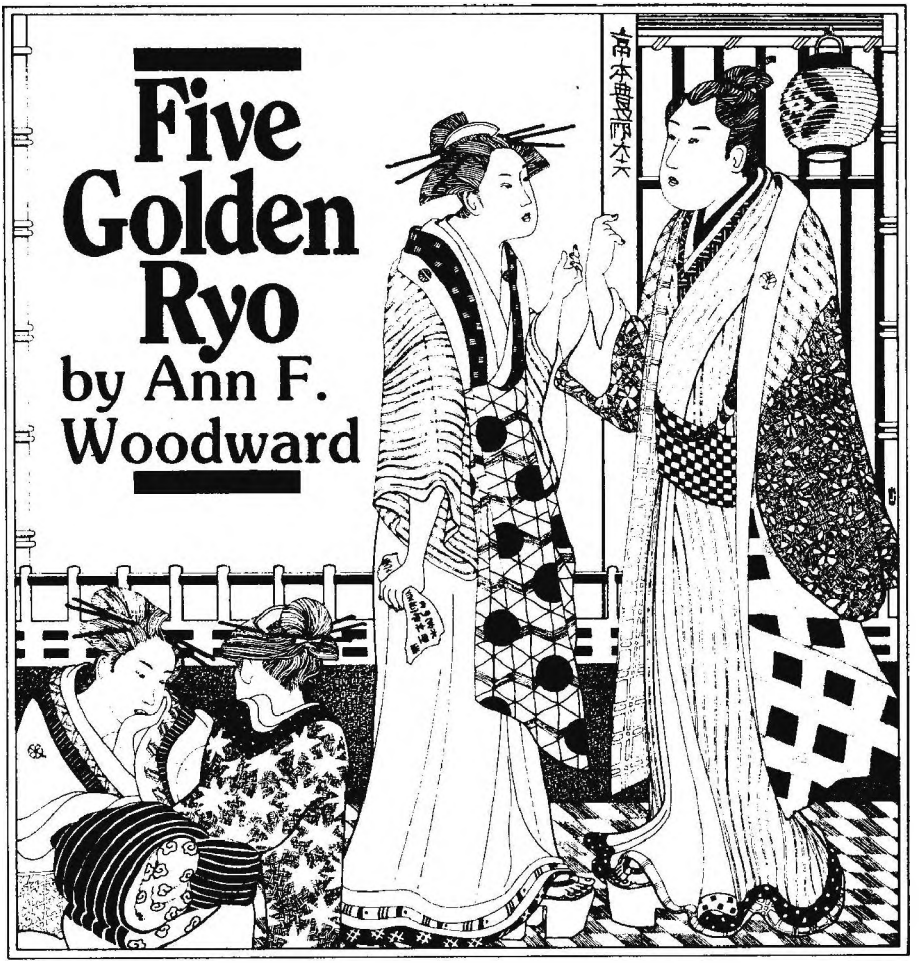
"Well, I've got news for you, son." He took his notebook from his shirt pocket, flipped it open, and uncapped his pen. "Nobody here is laughing."

Nick laid his head on the steering wheel. "This is one of the worst things that's ever happened to me."

The diver shouted. He had one arm on the raft's ladder and the other around something big and gray floating in the water. He lifted it up. Even in the distance, the color of Sally Mifflin's face showed she'd been down too long for there to be any hope for her.

Five Golden Ryo

by Ann F. Woodward



The great capital of Heian-Kyo lay dark and serene under a low autumn moon. Almost square within its walls, the city was a mosaic of roofs, which were sparse in the dilapidated southwest section and thickly crowded near the palace enclosure at the center of the northern edge. The northeast corner of the square was particularly rich with tile and sedge roofs, gardens and trees. It was here that the land began to rise toward the mountains and the houses of nobility crowded the slopes. Circling the northeast side, protecting the city in that unlucky direction, the mountains received the benign light of the setting moon, which lit white the tops of trees that would be red and gold in the sun, fell into the courtyards of dozens of temples, and finally passed beyond the peak

Illustration by Kurt Wallace

of Mount Hiei, the crown of this temple-filled barrier to evil demons.

Within the palace walls guards patrolled, thrumming their bowstrings at intervals of two hours, to mark the time. Even though they had already called out the Hour of the Ram, and so it was not long until dawn, Lady Aoi and many others in the palace were still awake because of the beauty of the night and because of the crown prince's music. The poor little crown prince, Aoi thought.

The emperor had been ill with fever for a week now and earlier in the day had called for the crown prince, telling him that he expected soon to leave this world and that the prince should prepare himself to take the throne. The prince was only sixteen and had never wanted to be emperor. His mother had not come from the strong clan that usually married their girls to the men of the royal family, and he expected opposition and endless trouble if he were to succeed his half-brother, the present emperor. Playing the flute was all he had ever cared for, and his skill and inventiveness were such that his father, as a last gift, had given him Yama no Hime, a flute famous for generations, its mellow bamboo sheened from the hands of his ancestors.

He played softly because of the threatening illness that weighed on the whole city, but every note floated clearly throughout the domestic section of the grounds. Even the guards stood still more often, pulled less forcefully on their bowstrings when the hours arrived, called in rounder tones that all was well.

Aoi, almost dreaming on her pallet near the door to the garden, heard the lightly repeated notes of attempted resolution that flew off into runs and wails and dropped to bass tones and climbed again to the steady pulse of a single note, breaking and hesitating. Autumn is the time of sadness, of memory and regret, of illness and frailty and resignation, of pondering the gift of life that is so briefly held, so easily taken away. Why then, wondered Aoi, do I feel this contentment? She felt that she was all spirit, lifting and sailing on the tide of the prince's notes, moving toward a place of stillness, knowledge, and peace.

Suddenly, in mid-rise, the music stopped and there was only the sound of wind, of a leaf scratching its points along the polished wood of the verandah, stopping and then scratching on again. Aoi turned away from the night, her hands drawn to her forehead in tight misery, deprived of the hope of finding the dawning that the flute had worked toward, hardened and solidified by the giving up of the search, dropping into sleep like a stone into a well.

Waking was labor unwillingly taken on. What weariness to lift the mind to rational thought! Movement was pleasure but uprightness seemed impossible, so weighty and unrested were her legs, her back. She achieved sitting when her maid scratched at the door panel and she sat glum and heavy while her hair was dressed, her bedding folded away, and her breakfast brought. The sight of soup improved her mood, and she took a long time drinking it, meticulous with her chopsticks, stirring and admiring the movement of green bits of onion and seaweed, dainty and precise in closing the slender tips of the chopsticks to take each piece from the bottom of the bowl.

Outside, mist hung over the little pond of her courtyard, the late chrysanthemums were fat with water drops, and the vines of her beloved blue flowers were yellow and bare against the fence.

"When the warbler sings
Even the garden rocks find souls.".

She did not write the lines, but their appearance in her mind cleared away her gloom and it was with a certain cheerfulness that she turned to choosing robes to wear. Ah, Aoi, she thought, it is always the things of the world that raise your spirits. Will you never be able to loosen their hold? Remembering duty, she dressed with haste and started for the emperor's quarters, where she was helping in the sickroom.

Holding her skirts away from the damp path, she was about to cross the first little streambridge when a young page met her and asked her to come to see the crown prince's tutor. She protested that she was on her way to relieve one of the night nurses, but the boy said she must go with him and pulled her urgently by the hand.

The tutor was a serious, gentlemanly man, white-haired and straight. Aoi found him standing before the closed doors to the prince's rooms, turning this way and that in his waiting but never moving his back from the seam of black lacquer where the door panels met. He greeted her with only a release of breath, looked carefully about for observers, then slid back one door and urged her inside.

The room was shadowed and damp, both the shutters and the blinds still raised, mist thick beyond the verandah. To one side, a cushion lay at an angle, as if disturbed from its alignment; beside it were a long wooden box and a brocade case; in front of it, the

famous flute rested on a low stand with two shallow hooks that kept it from contact with the floor. Except for the usual chests, brazier, and painted screen, that was all there was to see.

Aoi looked in puzzlement at the tutor, who stood mutely and almost imploringly at her side, as if asking her to see more here than he could. She turned back to the room, realizing now what it was empty of. There should have been a young prince here, sleepy perhaps, perhaps still in his bed, protesting that it was too early to begin lessons.

"They have stolen him away." The tutor spoke with despairing finality, as if what he said were a known fact that he would give his life to change.

"Tell me carefully," said Aoi.

"He was here last night, we all heard him play." He shook his head and frowned a little. "He is not ready to be emperor. Maybe he will never be ready, but now he certainly has not the strength to stand against them, though he is determined that they shall not rule him."

Aoi understood that he spoke of the clan that everywhere pervaded the government, sending its men into every department, marrying its women into every high rank, furnishing empress after empress, influencing the choice of infant or underage emperors so that the clan head, who was also an imperial grandfather, ruled as regent or prime minister. Aoi was of the same clan and glad of it, but she recognized the faults into which a century of supremacy and unending ambition had led them.

"Do they fear him then, if he should become emperor?" She could not suppress her tone of surprise.

"He would be a nuisance to them. And so I think they have taken him away. He never would have been appointed crown prince, you know, except that his father so loved his mother. She was made Second Empress very late, just before the old emperor retired. And before he died, he forced them to appoint her son to be the next crown prince, threatening to haunt them all if they didn't." He stopped speaking and held his lips firmly closed. "I have told no one, but I knew I could trust you and you must help me."

"Do you think we can find him and bring him back? Without ever admitting that he is gone?" Aoi felt her mind spinning from one possibility to the next as she caught up with the tutor's reasoning. She remembered the sudden break in the music, as if he had been interrupted. Interrupted and taken away? She felt completely without resources, if that were to be their problem. Ex-

amining the scene of the empty room, she tried to imagine the effective violence that had caused only slight disarrangement of a cushion. How fortunate that the flute was not damaged, she was thinking. Then she gazed long at the old flute on its rack.

"There is something strange here," she said. "If he was surprised and taken by force, would he have stopped to put the flute so carefully on the stand?"

The tutor snapped his head around to look at her, startled, relieved to hear even this faint beginning of doubt of his explanation. Suddenly he strode across the room, his heels striking echoes from the floor.

"His shoes?" He was murmuring to himself as he hurried to the garden verandah, where low wooden pattens would customarily stand waiting until they were needed. "Gone! They are not here!" He turned with triumph in his face. "He has just gone out, he is walking or . . ."

"They could have taken the shoes, too." Aoi spoke carefully, afraid of encouraging him to his hope. "And he has always been used to caring for the flute. Please don't . . ." She almost reached out a hand to the tutor, who stood giddy with speculation across the room. Taking a deep breath, she forced her mind to practical matters.

"You are right, it may be best not to say anything yet about his absence. But we must do everything we can to find him at once because if he is gone too long before they are told, they will question us—and rightly."

She spoke to him of looking for footprints and dropped articles, of side paths and quiet places in the garden where the prince might be. She told him the name of the gardener who tended her plot of herbs and who could be trusted to help, and of the old servant in the emperor's quarters who could fetch her if he needed her. Then she went, distracted and worried, to the emperor's rooms, where the ladies looked at her strangely and wondered how anyone with any self-respect could allow herself to sleep late at such a time.

By early afternoon it was apparent to Aoi that she must make herself available to the tutor, so that they could confer as often as needed. The emperor was sleeping, though still hot and restless with fever, and there were three others besides Aoi to tend him. She let herself fall a little sideways, as if from a spell of dizziness, and easily convinced them that she, too, was ill. Helped by a young woman, she returned to her room and drooped against her maid, O-hana, until the girl was gone. Then O-hana was surprised to see

her mistress refusing to lie down, but grinding ink and reaching for writing paper and brush.

"There is trouble. Take this . . ." she stopped to write ". . . to the tutor of the crown prince."

After O-hana had left, Aoi sat by the brazier, which was barely warm, the crumbling slices of charcoal filmed with gray ash. The day was still cloudy and damp, a scent of decay rising from the courtyard, the bushclover stripped of leaves and whispering in the wind. All this coming and going, she thought, will soon be noticed. Truly we haven't much time.

"He is coming," O-hana said when she returned. She was too well trained even to look questioningly at Aoi, but her face was stretched and taut with not knowing and it was obvious that she kept her eyes down with effort as she withdrew and slid the door shut. Would the tutor be hurrying along the paths, arousing curiosity, Aoi wondered, or did he have some guile, as did all other palace residents? She grasped the long metal fire-chopsticks and stirred the charcoal to relieve her tension.

There was a little scratch at the door and O-hana slid it open smoothly, announcing the tutor with smiling politeness and ushering him carefully to a cushion across from Aoi. After adding a little charcoal to the brazier and receiving murmured instructions from Aoi that they should not be bothered, she left.

The tutor dropped his public social mask and spoke with a hard edge to his voice.

"I came in the other side of this building, so it would not be obvious that I was calling on you." Aoi relaxed a little. At least he will not make matters worse through carelessness, she thought. "There is news," he said, holding out to her a scrap of cheap cloth with writing on it. She smoothed it against the bare floor, holding it at top and bottom to straighten out the wrinkles.

The writing was irregular because of great variations in the amount of ink retained by an apparently rough writing implement. It did not look as if it had been done with a proper writing brush, but Aoi could not guess what had been used. The letters were all of the simple *kana* alphabet used by women, with none of the Chinese characters that clustered so thickly in men's writing. Yet there was a certain style and flow in the forming of the lines of the message, even though the implement had been blunt and unreliable.

As soon as she read it, she knew that the prince himself had written it.

"This messenger will come again at the Hour of the Cock. Give him five golden ryo and I will be returned to the land above the clouds. Greetings to young Sei-san and to everyone."

Aoi read aloud the sentences on the square of cloth, stumbling at times and helped by the tutor, who had already deciphered it. Ransom! That was a ploy of pirates and brigands. Could they assume, then, that he was not in the hands of his enemies? Or was this deviousness to mislead them? And why such a small amount? Five ryo was an insulting ransom for a crown prince. Could it be that they didn't know whom they held?

"How did you receive this?" she asked.

"A child came to the main gate and gave it to the guard, saying it was for the teacher." He folded the cloth as it had been when he received it, showing Aoi his name, again in alphabetical letters, on the outside. There were creases where the ends had been tied, and a small bit of brown leaf had caught in one of them.

"Well, it all seems quite plain," said Aoi. "Returning to the land above the clouds is certainly no mystery." The life of the court was always referred to that way, to indicate its superiority. "Five ryo will make a small enough bundle that a child can carry it without attracting notice. And oh, Blessed Amida, there is not much time until the Hour of the Cock, by the look of the light!" She looked at the tutor.

"Yes," he said, "I have five ryo of gold. They are part of the prince's financial resources. It is strange to handle coins, they are so seldom used now that silk robes and chits for rice pay for almost everything."

"What puzzles me," said Aoi, "is this last part. 'Greetings to young Sei-san and to everyone.' Why should he take the trouble to send greetings? And do you know anyone named Sei-san, who is also young? Is it some friend of the prince?"

"I have not been able to think whom he means."

"It seems to me that this may be important, just because it is odd and we can't explain it."

"Um." The tutor hardly answered, his mind on the Hour of the Cock. "Forgive me, I must make certain arrangements. I will wait myself for the child to return. But I must find someone to follow him—it was a little boy of about eight—and it must be someone unconnected with me or with the prince. I don't want the guards to observe two of the prince's people hanging about at the gate. Perhaps the gardener you mentioned—what do you think?"

"Yes, he should do." Aoi too was following her own thoughts, saying to herself, Sei-san, *young* Sei-san.

Left alone by the tutor's departure, Aoi called O-hana and asked her to make the room as dark as possible, not just to foster the idea of her supposed illness, but to give her an atmosphere in which she could concentrate. She felt pity for O-hana, so aware that something was wrong, so disciplined in not asking about it. But time was short; already the Hour of the Monkey had been called and by the next hour, when the child returned, it would be almost dark. She had no time for explanations.

Beginning in her mind at the first letter of the message, she called up each word and each line. Why had he written in the women's style, as if he did not know the proper Chinese for what he had to write? No man would willingly give such an appearance of ignorance. She tried to imagine the prince, held by force, and the circumstances in which he had written. The strange gaps and shaggy marks in the writing made it look almost as if it had been done with a stick—a stick, pounded at the end to split it into many fibers, would write in just that way.

Musing on pounded sticks, Aoi formed a mental picture of a frightened young prince captive in rough country. She bent forward, her eyes closed, protecting against any unhelpful influence her intense following of an idea. She saw, coming into the darkness behind her eyes, the stick-brush and she brought into being the hand holding it, the silk robe on the arm—no, that would have been taken away at once, such robes had value—some coarse covering on the arm and on the body. Leaves and moss to sit on—there had been a piece of leaf on the cloth. Ink? Ink in such surroundings? She passed beyond ink to threatening thieves, but the faces she conjured up so frightened her that she went back to the message.

Could such men write? Perhaps a little, if they had been at all to a temple school. Anyone with education, used to properly formed writing, would surely have trouble reading what they produced, though. And it would be all in *kana,* the letters that represent sound. The scene she had created with such effort fled before the clarity of her new idea. They could only read *kana,* so they would not allow him to write any Chinese letters they couldn't understand, lest he trick them.

"O-hana!"

The door slid open at once.

"Ah, O-hana!" Aoi was smiling, gesturing to her to come in. "Open everything! Well, just a little. I need light." She had re-

membered her pretended illness. It would not do to have her shutters up.

Hastily Aoi dropped more water on the inkstone and ground the black ink-stick into it, round and round, with no care for nicety. Loading her brush, she wrote quickly, substituting as she went, changing the note into part *kana* letters and part Chinese characters, as it would normally have been written. She blessed the youthful stubbornness that had made her force her father to teach her Chinese when she was young. O-hana sat watching, reassured by Aoi's expression of delight.

There was nothing unusual until she came to the greeting to Sei-san.

"Wakai sei-san to mina-san ni doozo yoroshiku."

That was what was written. She put down the Chinese letters for *wakai,* young. But the *sei* of *sei-san,* which *sei* should it be? There were dozens. There was good reason for all those different symbols to differentiate among the many meanings of one sound, in Chinese. Aoi straightened, looked around the room, not really seeing, her mind busy. O-hana knelt beside the door, silent and watching.

Sei, sei. Her own name, Aoi, was *sei* in Chinese. Could the message refer to her? But she was not young. She turned again to the paper and wrote the Chinese letter for the *sei* of her name, "blue." Then seeing it, she understood. "Blue" and "young" were the same letter, and he had written "young" to tell them which *sei* to think of. The rest followed easily. "Blue" for *sei; san* was the usual polite title used with the names of persons, but the same sound, if the Chinese letter were used, could be "mountain." So *sei-san* became, in Chinese letters, Blue Mountain: Aoyama.

"They are holding him at Aoyama," she said to O-hana, as if O-hana would understand.

"Which one?" O-hana spoke calmly, willing to wait for the rest.

"Unh?"

"There are two Aoyamas, one close by, near Mount Hiei, one over to the west."

"Um. That's right." Aoi looked at the message again. Well, let us carry this a little farther, she thought. The next letter after *sei-san* was *to* and that, too, could be changed to Chinese. "East!" The pronunciation was a little different but she was sure that the prince meant them to read it "east."

Everything about this explanation for that odd last sentence seem to Aoi right. Sure that he was on Aoyama and in danger, she felt the great pressure of time. Writing swiftly, she put down the essence of her discovery and sent it by O-hana to the tutor, hoping he could be found at once. Limp from the strain of her effort and frustrated that now she could only wait, Aoi settled restlessly by the brazier, stirring the charcoal, sometimes half rising to her knees, then sitting again to wait.

O-hana returned and said she had found the tutor and that he sent thanks. She brought a short note which said he agreed with her interpretation and was on his way at once to the prince's mother's family, who would surely send out a party of men to Aoyama. He asked her to pray for their success in finding the crown prince.

Aoi knew the waiting would be hard. She spent some of the time explaining to O-hana what had happened, and they were still talking when the bowstrings hummed and the Hour of the Cock was called. Aoi wondered who would give the gold to the little boy and if, after all, the prince would be found somewhere in the city, if the gardener was successful in following him. Just as shadows were gathering in the room, a small cough outside the door indicated the presence of someone who had come to see Aoi. O-hana went quickly to open the door, and the old gardener kneeling there bumped his head on the floor in a deep bow and asked to report to the lady.

He moved just inside the door panels, knelt again, doubled himself over in another bow, and began mumbling.

"Wait, wait," said Aoi. "I can't hear you. Come nearer."

Instead of moving, he spoke louder. "I was at the gate, all right . . ."

"Sh-h!" Both Aoi and O-hana were alarmed. Kneeling so near the door, he could be heard from outside. "Come nearer! Don't mind about your dirty clothes. And speak quietly!" O-hana grasped his arm and almost pulled him across the floor. Now understanding, the old man put his head forward and the two women did the same. They sat in a huddle by the brazier, like plotters, like thieves, thought Aoi.

"He came, and I was hanging about near the market stalls, *ne?* He said something to the guard and there were some other children there and they wanted to talk to the guards, too. So there were eight or ten there with him, and the guards got angry and sent them all away. That one, though, he wouldn't go. He was supposed

to take something away and he wouldn't leave without it; he was afraid, I guess. But no one came to meet him, and the guards pushed him off with the flats of their bows and he had to give up."

Having begun his story, the gardener sat up for a while, wiping his hands along the jute of his wrapped and baggy trousers, getting his breath. Then he leaned forward again and the three heads bent together and he continued.

"I had a hard time following him, he went so slow. He turned off the Second Avenue right away and headed south, but he went into every alley and little track he came to, and I just managed to keep him in sight without letting him know I was behind him." He sat up and huffed a little, pleased to have a part in this secret emergency and relishing his own cunning. Remembering the end of his mission, however, his chest fell and creases ran across his forehead.

"I lost him, though." He dipped his head and spoke looking at his knees. "He came to a corner where there is a well, lots of people, *ne?* I could keep him in sight among adults, but a whole crowd of other children came running around him. They were playing a game, *ne?* And he went in with them and they flew around every which way and then they were all gone and I lost him. I don't know where he went and so I failed. My shame is more than I can speak."

Aoi sent O-hana to bring a bolt of linen for him, a generous gift meant for comfort as much as reward. "He went off with them, you said? Then he must have returned to his own neighborhood. If you know where you were, then it should be possible to find the place again, should we need to."

The gardener drew away a little, sliding backward, still on his knees, bowing again to the floor. "I always know where I am in the city," he said, injured now, not looking up. He took the cloth when O-hana returned, expressed effusive thanks, and backed away out the door.

So the gold had not been sent. Not sure how much that increased the danger to the prince, Aoi thought that a little praying would not hurt, and she spent the evening and part of the dark night addressing the goddess Kannon, the merciful one. The wind came up, leaves rattled down, and branches beat against the roof. Aoi slept until first light, then suddenly woke, feeling that she had never closed her eyes.

O-hana, when she came, was as composed as ever, but her mouth was tight at the corners. She greeted Aoi with quiet care, as if she really were ill as she had pretended to be. Aoi thought that the pose of illness would suit her exactly until she knew what had

happened to the prince. It was cold and on her breakfast tray was a curled red leaf, still flecked with rime. O-hana had put it there for her to see because the weather had changed; the soft days were gone and the Frost Month had begun.

In mid-morning, a messenger came to the door and handed in a letter to O-hana.

"A certain person is sleeping very late at his grandfather's house. It seems he has been there all along.

'Leaving my mother,
I went straight to the temple.' "

Aoi read this and, breathing in, felt relief fill and lift her. The quotation was from a poem about a girl who did not go straight to the temple, as she said, but took a side path to see her love.

She wrote the appropriate answering quote on a piece of red paper, red for joy.

"Only the grass and the bees
Know that I walked the wooded path."

Aoi recovered surprisingly quickly from her supposed illness, and the emperor, too, was soon better and taking an interest again in facing his duties. He was too discreet to say it, but everyone knew that he thought it fortunate he had not left the world and entered the priesthood as many did when they were about to die. The crown prince returned to his quarters, and his servants accepted the story of an impulsive visit to his grandparents.

Aoi continued to serve the emperor during his recovery, but the time would soon come when she would no longer be needed and could return to the princess she served as lady-in-waiting. The tutor had told her how the prince had been abducted and how his grandfather's men had found him in an open camp on the mountain. She expected, however, that the prince would come himself to thank her for her help. His message came just after she had set the day for her return to the princess.

He came after the evening meal. Aoi greeted him with quickly imposed restraint because of some new dignity in his manner. To honor her, he had dressed carefully, wearing a deep red outer robe of Chinese silk over a light yellow unlined robe and loose trousers of plum blue.

After he was seated, O-hana brought hot wine and a tray of carefully arranged fruit. Once he had thanked Aoi formally for her intuition and quickness of mind in the matter of his secret message, and presented to her the gift of a magnificent writing box, he seemed not to know how to go on to the tale of what had happened to him that night. Aoi saw that she must help him if she was to hear a full account as she longed to do.

"I do not understand how they could have been so bold as to come right into your rooms to take you."

"No, no," he said, "it wasn't like that at all." Beginning then, he told her about it, becoming more natural and animated as he went.

His playing that evening had been an expression of despair about becoming emperor, which at that time had looked certain to happen soon. He had stopped when his feelings became too much for the music to contain and he had gone to the garden, needing the release of movement.

"Raked sand and mossy streambanks were not for me that night," he said. "I went to the darkness of the back wall, behind the storehouses. And I walked right into them, three men who had just come in over the wall. I almost said 'Excuse me' and then realized they didn't belong there and I started to yell. But they grabbed me and held my nose and mouth shut and I felt myself about to die—all in the space of a moment."

He spoke with the awe of a very young man who has had to face his mortality, still trying to understand that he could have died then, with no preparation and little realization of what was about to happen.

They had tied him with headcloths, blocking his breath whenever he resisted. He said he could hardly understand their speech, and he assumed they had come in from the country, driven from their rented land by taxes and starvation, as was the case with so many thieves. They seemed to be frightened to have captured a live boy, but they took him with them and gave up whatever other plan they might have had.

"They threw me over the wall, just like a bag of millet, two of them swinging me and then, up and over."

Aoi drew in a sharp breath and made small sounds of sympathy. "You must have been frightened."

"No." He looked straight at her. "No. That is the important thing. I was angry. I was so angry that I thought my blood would burst from every pore. If I had been free, I would have attacked everything within reach. And probably I would not be here now." He

laughed, looking at Aoi and stopping to choose a crisp slice of pear from the tray.

"When I realized . . . when I calmed and realized that I was not frightened and crying, I thought to myself that I must be a man. And *then* I was afraid because I knew the responsibility of being a man, I knew that I must use my brain to try to get out of this trouble, that it was important for me to remain alive because I am the crown prince. After that, no matter what they did, I was calm. You would be surprised how much thinking can be done at a time like that."

Aoi felt herself beaming with pleasure at this young man who had had the good fortune to have his maturity forced upon him and the good sense to recognize it when it came. He went on with the story.

They had taken him to a house and removed every article of his clothing, to trade for rice and dried fish and drink. He gathered that they were still new to the city and terrified of staying there with a prisoner, so they had dressed him in rags of discarded clothing and marched him outside the walls and into the hills. There had been a child sleeping in the house and they woke him and took him along. The word "Aoyama" had been plain in their speech. By dawn they were camped in the forest; after sleeping for a while, he was given a little water but no food.

When it came time for the ransom message, a great argument arose about what to ask for. Rice was all they knew, but they saw at once that they must settle on something small that could be collected and carried away secretly. One of them had once been a priest, and he knew a little more of the world than the other two, who had never before left their farms. He suggested a golden ryo.

"One ryo?" said Aoi.

"They had never seen one, you see, and anything gold was really beyond their comprehension, I think. A ryo, you know, is a large, heavy coin, but even that they seemed not to know."

"Did they know they had the crown prince in their hands?"

"No. I told them I was in the emperor's service. I didn't look much like a prince by then, or even like a civilized person." The prince's eyes were vivid with laughter and memory. "You can imagine how I was dressed and how chafed and sore I was by that time."

"Terrible. It must have been terrible! What kind of men were they, to know so little?"

"You have seen the farmers bent over in the fields tending the

rice. After a lifetime of that, they do not look much like us. And can you imagine living among so much rice and not having enough to eat, because of taxes?"

"And the note?"

"Ah. The one who had been a priest was proud that he knew how to write. He pulled out a tiny piece of ink-stick, but he had lost his brush. They found a stone with a shallow cavity, put in a little water, ground the ink, and then made a brush from a crushed mulberry stem."

Aoi felt a small bloom of satisfaction that she had been right in her guess.

"It was hard to find something to write on. I had had paper in the front of my robe, but they had taken everything of mine. They looked for birch and tried writing on a piece of bark, but the combination of the bark and the twig brush and the man's poor handwriting produced nothing but illegibility. So I said I would help. I think they had almost forgotten me, by that time."

He told one of them to take off his headband. "Headbands are useful things, apparently. They had already tied my feet with one." After practicing, the prince had decided the cloth would do for writing. They dictated the message.

"Give us gold or he is finished."

The prince told them that no one would understand such a message, that a certain politeness was necessary in communication with the palace or the Great Ancestor Amaterasu would become angry. They said they had never heard of such a thing, and the prince told them that was just because they knew so little about the land above the clouds, that Amaterasu was the special protector of all in the palace and that she could cause the sun to disappear or to throw off a bolt of light that would burn up the whole mountainside, if she were angered. He told them that they should ask for five ryo, if they didn't want the whole thing treated as a joke, and that the greeting to Sei-san was a final necessary courtesy that no one would dare omit. His talk of Amaterasu so frightened them that they submitted to his ordering of the note, only insisting that he write without using Chinese characters.

"It is fortunate for me that my tutor asked your help."

"Please don't thank me too much. He would have guessed, too, but he had much more to think about than I did." Aoi had long ago learned the virtue of modesty. She bowed slightly, and when

she looked up again, the prince's face had changed so that she was alarmed. His eyes were cold and his face like stone.

"All that was like a game, like going out hunting with some reckless friends. But the next part was bad."

The boy was sent off with the note, and they waited for his return. There was no food except a handful of rice for all of them together; one of them found a few mushrooms to add to it, but the prince was not given any. The fire was small, and the wind searched out every loose place in his clothes. Before sleeping, they tied him again hand and foot.

Even under such conditions, the men slept, one or the other rousing at times to renew the fire. The first arrow killed the fire-maker, knocking him backward with the shaft clear through him. Before the others could rise, the old grandfather and his men were among them and the other two were killed where they lay.

"They had been in the woods all night, searching, when finally they caught the smell of smoke on the wind. The trees were thrashing so that I didn't hear them approach, and I was as surprised as the others."

"You were not asleep?"

He looked at her with a blank, unconscious disdain. "You cannot imagine what it was like."

Aoi was silent. There was no sentiment in his look, only a cool weighing of his experience, a storing away of all he had learned.

"One thing still bothers me—the boy. My teacher has told me that the five ryo were not given to him. He didn't return to the mountain, as he was told to do. . . . I know now what it's like to be alone."

"Don't worry," said Aoi. "I think we can find him."

"And do you think," said the crown prince, "that five ryo would pay a temple to take him in?"

Aoi smiled and answered with a poem.

"The sweet persimmon
Is the one the frost has touched."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Jeeves And The Kid Clementina

by P. G. Wodehouse

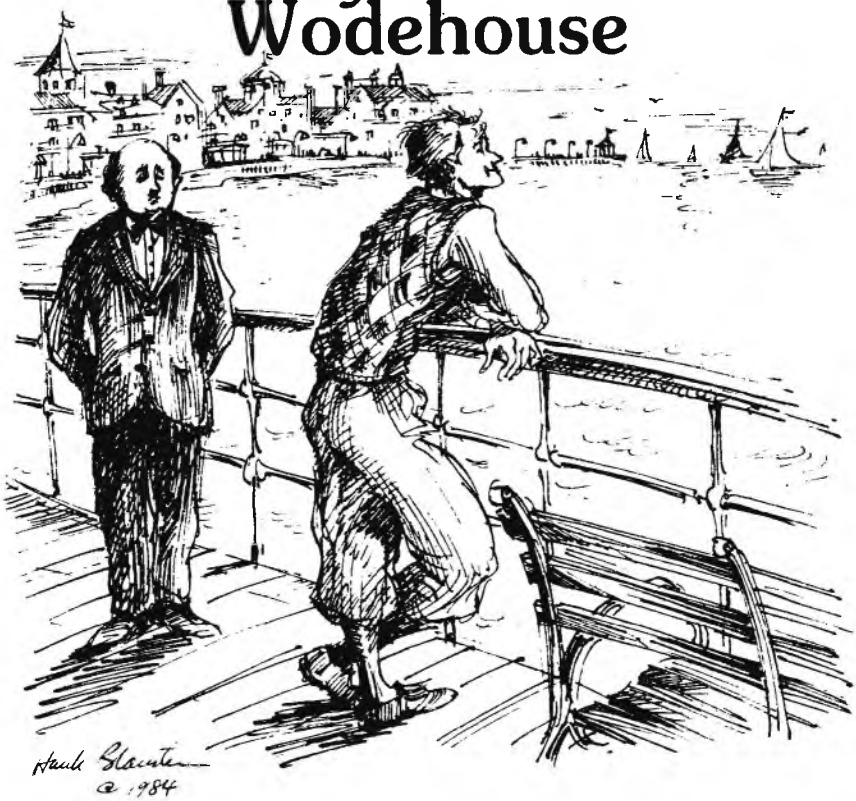


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

It had been well said of Bertram Wooster by those who know him best that, whatever other sporting functions he may see fit to oil out of, you will always find him battling to his sixteen handicap at the annual golf tournament of the Drones Club. Nevertheless, when I heard that this year they were holding it at Bingley-on-Sea, I confess I hesitated. As I stood gazing out of the window of my suite at the Splendide on the morning of the opening day, I was not exactly a-twitter, if you understand me, but I couldn't help feeling I might have been rather rash.

"Jeeves," I said, "now that we have actually arrived, I find myself wondering if it was quite prudent to come here."

"It is a pleasant spot, sir."

"Where every prospect pleases," I agreed. "But though the spicy breezes blow fair o'er Bingley-on-Sea, we must never forget that this is where my Aunt Agatha's old friend, Miss Mapleton, runs a girls' school. If the relative knew I was here, she would expect me to call on Miss Mapleton."

"Very true, sir."

I shivered somewhat.

"I met her once, Jeeves. 'Twas on a summer's evening in my tent, the day I overcame the Nervii. Or, rather, at lunch at Aunt Agatha's a year ago come Lammas Eve. It is not an experience I would willingly undergo again."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Besides, you remember what happened last time I got into a girls' school?"

"Yes, sir."

"Secrecy and silence, then. My visit here must be strictly incog. If Aunt Agatha happens to ask you where I spent this week, tell her I went to Harrogate for the cure."

"Very good, sir. Pardon me, sir, are you proposing to appear in those garments in public?"

Up to this point our conversation had been friendly and cordial, but I now perceived that the jarring note had been struck. I had been wondering when my new plus-fours would come under discussion, and I was prepared to battle for them like a tigress for her young.

"Certainly, Jeeves," I said. "Why? Don't you like them?"

"No, sir."

"You think them on the bright side?"

"Yes, sir."

"A little vivid, they strike you as?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I think highly of them, Jeeves," I said firmly.

There already being a certain amount of chilliness in the air, it seemed to me a suitable moment for springing another item of information which I had been keeping from him for some time.

"Er—Jeeves," I said.

"Sir?"

"I ran into Miss Wickham the other day. After chatting of this and that, she invited me to join a party she is getting up to go to Antibes this summer."

"Indeed, sir?"

He now looked definitely squiggle-eyed. Jeeves, as I think I have mentioned before, does not approve of Bobbie Wickham.

There was what you might call a tense silence. I braced myself for an exhibition of the good old Wooster determination. I mean to say, one has got to take a firm stand from time to time. The trouble with Jeeves is that he tends occasionally to get above himself. Just becaue he has surged round and—I admit it freely—done the young master a bit of good in one or two crises, he has a nasty way of conveying the impression that he looks on Bertram Wooster as a sort of idiot child who, but for him, would conk in the first chukka. I resent this.

"I have accepted, Jeeves," I said in a quiet, level voice, lighting a cigarette with a careless flick of the wrist.

"Indeed, sir?"

"You will like Antibes."

"Yes, sir?"

"So shall I."

"Yes, sir?"

"That's settled, then."

"Yes, sir."

I was pleased. The firm stand, I saw, had done its work. It was plain that the man was crushed beneath the iron heel—cowed, if you know what I mean.

"Right-ho, then, Jeeves."

"Very good, sir."

I had not expected to return from the arena until well on in the evening, but circumstances so arranged themselves that it was barely three o'clock when I found myself back again. I was wandering moodily to and fro on the pier, when I observed Jeeves shimmering towards me.

"Good afternoon, sir," he said. "I had not supposed that you would be returning quite so soon, or I would have remained at the hotel."

"I had not supposed that I would be returning quite so soon myself, Jeeves," I said, sighing somewhat. "I was outed in the first round, I regret to say."

"Indeed, sir? I am sorry to hear that."

"And, to increase the mortification of defeat, Jeeves, by a blighter who had not spared himself at the luncheon table and was quite noticeably sozzled. I couldn't seem to do anything right."

"Possibly you omitted to keep your eye on the ball with sufficient assiduity, sir?"

"Something of that nature, no doubt. Anyway, here I am, a game and popular loser and . . ." I paused, and scanned the horizon with some interest. "Great Scott, Jeeves! Look at that girl just coming on to the pier. I never saw anybody so extraordinarily like Miss Wickham. How do you account for these resemblances?"

"In the present instance, sir. I attribute the similarity to the fact that the young lady *is* Miss Wickham."

"Eh?"

"Yes, sir. If you notice, she is waving to you now."

"But what on earth is she doing down here?"

"I am unable to say, sir."

His voice was chilly and seemed to suggest that, whatever had brought Bobbie Wickham to Bingley-on-Sea, it could not, in his opinion, be anything good. He dropped back into the offing, registering alarm and despondency, and I removed the old Homburg and waggled it genially.

"What-ho!" I said.

Bobbie came to anchor alongside.

"Hullo, Bertie," she said. "I didn't know you were here."

"I am," I assured her.

"In mourning?" she asked, eyeing the trouserings.

"Rather natty, aren't they?" I said, following her gaze. "Jeeves doesn't like them, but then he's notoriously hidebound in the matter of leg-wear. What are you doing in Bingley?"

"My cousin Clementina is at school here. It's her birthday and I thought I would come down and see her. I'm just off there now. Are you staying here tonight?"

"Yes. At the Splendide."

"You can give me dinner there if you like."

Jeeves was behind me, and I couldn't see him, but at these words I felt his eye slap warningly against the back of my neck. I knew

what it was that he was trying to broadcast—viz. that it would be tempting Providence to mix with Bobbie Wickham even to the extent of giving her a bite to eat. Dashed absurd, was my verdict. Get entangled with young Bobbie in the intricate life of a country house, where almost anything can happen, and I'm not saying. But how any doom or disaster could lurk behind the simple pronging of a spot of dinner together, I failed to see. I ignored the man.

"Of course. Certainly. Rather. Absolutely," I said.

"That'll be fine. I've got to get back to London tonight for revelry of sorts at the Berkeley, but it doesn't matter if I'm a bit late. We'll turn up at about seven thirty, and you can take us to the movies afterwards."

"We? Us?"

"Clementina and me."

"You don't mean you intend to bring your ghastly cousin?"

"Of course I do. Don't you want the child to have a little pleasure on her birthday? And she isn't ghastly. She's a dear. She won't be any trouble. All you'll have to do is take her back to the school afterwards. You can manage that without straining a sinew, can't you?"

I eyed her keenly.

"What does it involve?"

"How do you mean, what does it involve?"

"The last time I was lured into a girls' school, a headmistress with an eye like a gimlet insisted on my addressing the chain-gang on Ideals and the Life To Come. This will not happen tonight?"

"Of course not. You just go to the front door, ring the bell, and bung her in."

I mused.

"That would appear to be well within our scope. Eh, Jeeves?"

"I should be disposed to imagine so, sir."

The man's tone was cold and soupy: and, scanning his face, I observed on it an "If-you-would-only-be-guided-by-me" expression which annoyed me intensely. There are moments when Jeeves looks just like my aunt.

"Right," I said, ignoring him once more—and rather pointedly, at that. "Then I'll expect you at seven thirty. Don't be late. And see," I added, just to show the girl that beneath the smiling exterior I was a man of iron, "that the kid has her hands washed and does not sniff."

I had not, I confess, looked forward with any great keenness to

hobnobbing with Bobbie Wickham's cousin Clementina, but I'm bound to admit that she might have been considerably worse. Small girls as a rule, I have noticed, are inclined, when confronted with me, to giggle a good deal. They snigger and they stare. I look up and find their eyes glued on me in an incredulous manner, as if they were reluctant to believe that I was really true. I suspect them of being in the process of memorizing any little peculiarities of deportment that I may possess, in order to reproduce them later for the entertainment of their fellow-inmates.

With the kid Clementina there was nothing of this description. She was a quiet, saintlike child of about thirteen—in fact, seeing that this was her birthday, exactly thirteen—and her gaze revealed only silent admiration. Her hands were spotless; she had not a cold in the head; and at dinner, during which her behavior was unexceptionable, she proved a sympathetic listener, hanging on my lips, so to speak, when with the aid of a fork and two peas I explained to her how my opponent that afternoon had stymied me on the tenth.

She was equally above criticism at the movies, and at the conclusion of the proceedings thanked me for the treat with visible emotion. I was pleased with the child, and said as much to Bobbie while assisting her into her two-seater.

"Yes, I told you she was a dear," said Bobbie, treading on the self-starter in preparation for the dash to London. "I always insist that they misjudge her at that school. They're always misjudging people. They misjudged me when I was there."

"Misjudge her? How?"

"Oh, in various ways. But, then, what can you expect of a dump like St. Monica's?"

I started.

"St. Monica's?"

"That's the name of the place."

"You don't mean the kid is at Miss Mapleton's school?"

"Why shouldn't she be?"

"But Miss Mapleton is my Aunt Agatha's oldest friend."

"I know. It was your Aunt Agatha who got mother to send me there when I was a kid."

"I say," I said earnestly, "when you were there this afternoon you didn't mention having met me down here?"

"No."

"That's all right," I was relieved. "You see, if Miss Mapleton knew I was in Bingley, she would expect me to call. I shall be

leaving tomorrow morning, so all will be well. But, dash it," I said, spotting the snag, "how about tonight?"

"What about tonight?"

"Well, shan't I have to see her? I can't just ring the front door bell, sling the kid in, and leg it. I should never hear the last of it from Aunt Agatha."

Bobbie looked at me in an odd, meditative sort of way.

"As a matter of fact, Bertie," she said, "I had been meaning to touch on that point. I think, if I were you, I wouldn't ring the front door bell."

"Eh. Why not?"

"Well, it's like this, you see. Clementina is supposed to be in bed. They sent her there just as I was leaving this afternoon. Think of it! On her birthday—right plumb spang in the middle of her birthday—and all for putting sherbet in the ink to make it fizz!"

I reeled.

"You aren't telling me that this foul kid came out without leave?"

"Yes, I am. That's exactly it. She got up and sneaked out when nobody was looking. She had set her heart on getting a square meal. I suppose I really ought to have told you right at the start, but I didn't want to spoil our evening."

As a general rule, in my dealings with the delicately-nurtured, I am the soul of knightly chivalry—suave, genial, and polished. But I can on occasion say the bitter, cutting thing, and I said it now.

"Oh?" I said.

"But it's all right?"

"Yes," I said, speaking, if I recollect, between my clenched teeth, "nothing could be sweeter, could it? The situation is one which it would be impossible to view with concern, what? I shall turn up with the kid, get looked at through steel-rimmed spectacles by the Mapleton, and after an agreeable five minutes shall back out, leaving the Mapleton to go to her escritoire and write a full account of the proceedings to my Aunt Agatha. And, contemplating what will happen after that, the imagination totters. I confidently expect my Aunt Agatha to beat all previous records."

The girl clicked her tongue chidingly.

"Don't make such heavy weather, Bertie. You must learn not to fuss so."

"I must, must I?"

"Everything's going to be all right. I'm not saying it won't be necessary to exercise a little strategy in getting Clem into the

house, but it will be perfectly simple, if you'll only listen carefully to what I'm going to tell you. First, you will need a good long piece of string."

"String?"

"String. Surely even you know what string is?"

I stiffened rather haughtily.

"Certainly," I replied. "You mean string."

"That's right. String. You take this with you—"

"And soften the Mapleton's heart by doing tricks with it, I suppose?"

Bitter, I know. But I was deeply stirred.

"You take this string with you," proceeded Bobbie patiently, "and when you get into the garden you go through it till you come to a conservatory near the house. Inside it you will find a lot of flower pots. How are you on recognizing a flower pot when you see one, Bertie?"

"I am thoroughly familiar with flower pots. If, as I suppose, you mean those sort of pot things they put flowers in."

"That's exactly what I do mean. All right, then. Grab an armful of these flower pots and go round the conservatory till you come to a tree. Climb this, tie a string to one of the pots, balance it on a handy branch which you will find overhangs the conservatory, and then, having stationed Clem near the front door, retire into the middle distance and jerk the string. The flower pot will fall and smash the glass, someone in the house will hear the noise and come out to investigate, and while the door is open and nobody near Clem will sneak in and go up to bed."

"But suppose no one comes out?"

"Then you repeat the process with another pot."

It seemed sound enough.

"You're sure it will work?"

"It's never failed yet. That's the way I always used to get in after lockup when I was at St. Monica's. Now, you're sure you've got it clear, Bertie? Let's have a quick run-through to make certain, and then I really must be off. String."

"String."

"Conservatory."

"Or greenhouse."

"Flower pot."

"Flower pot."

"Tree. Climb. Branch. Climb down. Jerk. Smash. And then off to beddy-bye. Got it?"

"I've got it. But," I said sternly, "let me tell you just one thing—"

"I haven't time. I must rush. Write to me about it, using one side of the paper only. Goodbye."

She rolled off, and after following her with burning eyes for a moment I returned to Jeeves, who was in the background showing the kid Clementina how to make a rabbit with a pocket handkerchief. I drew him aside. I was feeling a little better now, for I perceived that an admirable opportunity had presented itself for putting the man in his place and correcting his view that he is the only member of our establishment with brains and resource.

"Jeeves," I said. "You will doubtless be surprised to learn that something in the nature of a hitch has occurred."

"Not at all, sir."

"No?"

"No, sir. In matters where Miss Wickham is involved. I am, if I may take the liberty of saying so, always on the alert for hitches. If you recollect, sir, I have frequently observed that Miss Wickham, while a charming young lady, is apt—"

"Yes, yes, Jeeves, I know."

"What would the precise nature of the trouble be this time, sir?"

I explained the circs.

"The kid is AWOL. They sent her to bed for putting sherbet in the ink, and in bed they imagine her to have spent the evening. Instead of which, she was out with me, wolfing the eight-course table-d'hôte dinner at seven and six, and then going on to the Marine Plaza to enjoy an entertainment on the silver screen. It is our task to get her back into the house without anyone knowing. I may mention, Jeeves, that the school in which the young excrescence is serving her sentence is the one run by my Aunt Agatha's old friend, Miss Mapleton."

"Indeed, sir?"

"A problem, Jeeves, what?"

"Yes, sir."

"In fact, one might say a pretty problem?"

"Undoubtedly, sir. If I might suggest—"

I was expecting this. I raised a hand.

"I do not require any suggestions, Jeeves. I can handle this matter myself."

"I was merely about to propose—"

I raised the hand again.

"Peace, Jeeves. I have the situation well under control. I have had one of my ideas. It may interest you to hear how my brain

worked. It occurred to me, thinking the thing over, that a house like St. Monica's would be likely to have near it a conservatory containing flower pots. Then, like a flash, the whole thing came to me. I propose to procure some string, to tie it to a flower pot, to balance the pot on a branch—there will, no doubt, be a tree near the conservatory with a branch overhanging it—and to retire to a distance, holding the string. You will station yourself with the kid near the front door, taking care to keep carefully concealed. I shall then jerk the string, the pot will smash the glass, the noise will bring someone out, and while the front door is open you will shoot the kid in and leave the rest to her personal judgment. Your share in the proceedings, you will notice, is simplicity itself—mere routine work—and should not tax you unduly. How about it?"

"Well, sir—"

"Jeeves, I have had occasion before to comment on this habit of yours of saying 'Well, sir' whenever I suggest anything in the nature of a ruse or piece of strategy. I dislike it more every time you do it. But I shall be glad to hear what possible criticism you can find to make."

"I was merely about to express the opinion, sir, that the plan seems a trifle elaborate."

"In a place as tight as this you have got to be elaborate."

"Not necessarily, sir. The alternative scheme which I was about to propose—"

I shushed the man.

"There will be no need for alternative schemes, Jeeves. We will carry on along the lines I have indicated. I will give you ten minutes' start. That will enable you to take up your position near the front door and self to collect the string. At the conclusion of that period I will come along and do all the difficult part. So no more discussion. Snap into it, Jeeves."

"Very good, sir."

I felt pretty bucked as I tooled up the hill to St. Monica's and equally bucked as I pushed open the front gate and stepped into the dark garden. But, just as I started to cross the lawn, there suddenly came upon me a rummy sensation as if all my bones had been removed and spaghetti substituted, and I paused.

I don't know if you have ever had the experience of starting off on a binge filled with a sort of glow of exhilaration, if that's the word I want, and then, without a moment's warning, having it disappear as if somebody had pressed a switch. That is what hap-

pened to me at this juncture, and a most unpleasant feeling it was—rather like when you take one of those express elevators in New York at the top of the building and discover, on reaching the twenty-seventh floor, that you have carelessly left all your insides up on the thirty-second, and too late now to stop and fetch them back.

The truth came to me like a bit of ice down the neck. I perceived that I had been a dashed sight too impulsive. Purely in order to score off Jeeves, I had gone and let myself in for what promised to be the mouldiest ordeal of a lifetime. And the nearer I got to the house, the more I wished that I had been a bit less haughty with the man when he had tried to outline that alternative scheme of his. An alternative scheme was just what I felt I could have done with, and the more alternative it was, the better I would have liked it.

At this point I found myself at the conservatory door, and a few moments later I was inside, scooping up the pots.

Then ho, for the tree, bearing 'mid snow and ice the banner with the strange device "Excelsior!"

I will say for that tree that it might have been placed there for the purpose. My views on the broad, general principle of leaping from branch to branch in a garden belonging to Aunt Agatha's closest friend remained unaltered; but I had to admit that, if it was to be done, this was undoubtedly the tree to do it on. It was a cedar of sorts; and almost before I knew where I was, I was sitting on top of the world with the conservatory roof gleaming below me. I balanced the flower pot on my knee and began to tie the string about it.

And, as I tied, my thoughts turned in a moody sort of way to the subject of Woman.

I was suffering from a considerable strain of the old nerves at the moment, of course, and, looking back, it may be that I was too harsh; but the way I felt in that dark, roosting hour was that you can say what you like, but the more a thoughtful man has to do with women, the more extraordinary it seems to him that such a sex should be allowed to clutter up the earth.

Women, the way I looked at it, simply wouldn't do. Take the females who were mixed up in this present business. Aunt Agatha, to start with, better known as the Pest of Pont Street, the human snapping-turtle. Aunt Agatha's closest friend, Miss Mapleton, of whom I can only say that on the single occasion on which I had

met her she had struck me as just the sort of person who would be Aunt Agatha's closest friend. Bobbie Wickham, a girl who went about the place letting the pure in heart in for the sort of thing I was doing now. And Bobbie Wickham's cousin Clementina, who, instead of sticking sedulously to her studies and learning to be a good wife and mother, spent the springtime of her life filling ink-pots with sherbet—

What a crew! What a crew!

I mean to say, what a *crew!*

I had just worked myself up into rather an impressive state of moral indignation, and was preparing to go even further, when a sudden bright light shone upon me from below and a voice spoke.

"Ho!" it said.

It was a policeman. Apart from the fact of his having a lantern, I knew it was a policeman because he had said "Ho!" I don't know if you recollect my telling you of the time I broke into Bingo Little's house to pinch the dictaphone record of the mushy article his wife had written about him and sailed out of the study window right into the arms of the Force? On that occasion the guardian of the Law had said "Ho!" and kept on saying it, so evidently policemen are taught this as part of their training. And after all, it's not a bad way of opening conversation in the sort of circs in which they generally have to chat with people.

"You come on down out of that," he said.

I came on down. I had just got the flower pot balanced on its branch, and I left it there, feeling rather as if I had touched off the time-fuse of a bomb. Much seemed to me to depend on its stability and poise, as it were. If it continued to balance, an easy nonchalance might still get me out of this delicate position. If it fell, I saw things being a bit hard to explain. In fact, even as it was, I couldn't see my way to any explanation which would be really convincing.

However, I had a stab at it.

"Ah, officer," I said.

It sounded weak. I said it again, this time with the emphasis on the "Ah!" It sounded weaker than ever. I saw that Bertram would have to do better than this.

"It's all right, officer," I said.

"All right, is it?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes."

"What you doing up there?"

"Me, officer?"

"Yes, you."

"Nothing, sergeant."

"Ho!"

We eased into the silence, but it wasn't one of those restful silences that occur in talks between old friends. Embarrassing. Awkward.

"You'd better come along with me," said the gendarme.

The last time I had heard those words from a similar source had been in Leicester Square one Boat Race night when, on my advice, my old pal Oliver Randolph Sipperley had endeavored to steal a policeman's helmet at a moment when the policeman was inside it. On that occasion they had been addressed to young Sippy, and they hadn't sounded any too good, even so. Addressed to me, they more or less froze the marrow.

"No, I say, dash it!" I said.

And it was at this crisis, when Bertram had frankly shot his bolt and could only have been described as nonplussed, that a soft step sounded beside us and a soft voice broke the silence.

"Have you got them, officer? No, I see. It is Mr. Wooster."

"Who are you?"

"I am Mr. Wooster's gentleman's personal gentleman."

"Whose?"

"Mr. Wooster's."

"Is this man's name Wooster?"

"This gentleman's name is Mr. Wooster. I am in his employment as gentleman's personal gentleman."

I think the cop was awed by the man's majesty of demeanor, but he came back strongly.

"Ho!" he said. "Not in Miss Mapleton's employment?"

"Miss Mapleton does not employ a gentleman's personal gentleman."

"Then what are you doing in her garden?"

"I was in conference with Miss Mapleton inside the house, and she desired me to step out and ascertain whether Mr. Wooster had been successful in apprehending the intruders."

"What intruders?"

"The suspicious characters whom Mr. Wooster and I had observed passing through the garden as we entered it."

"And what were you doing entering it?"

"Mr. Wooster had come to pay a call on Miss Mapleton, who is a close friend of his family. We noticed suspicious characters crossing the lawn. On perceiving these suspicious characters, Mr. Wooster despatched me to warn and reassure Miss Mapleton, he himself

remaining to investigate."

"I found him up a tree."

"If Mr. Wooster was up a tree, I have no doubt he was actuated by excellent motives and had only Miss Mapleton's best interests at heart."

The policeman brooded.

"Ho!" he said. "Well, if you want to know, I don't believe a word of it. We had a telephone call at the station saying there was somebody in Miss Mapleton's garden, and I found this fellow up a tree. It's my belief you're both in this, and I'm going to take you in to the lady for identification."

Jeeves inclined his head gracefully.

"I shall be delighted to accompany you, officer, if such is your wish. And I feel sure that in this connection I may speak for Mr. Wooster also. He too, I am confident, will interpose no obstacle in the way of your plans. If you consider that circumstances have placed Mr. Wooster in a position that may be termed equivocal, or even compromising, it will naturally be his wish to exculpate himself at the earliest possible—"

"Here!" said the policeman, slightly rattled.

"Officer?"

"Less of it."

"Just as you say, officer."

"Switch it off and come along."

"Very good, officer."

I must say that I have enjoyed functions more than that walk to the front door. It seemed to me that the doom had come upon me, so to speak, and I thought it hard that a gallant effort like Jeeves's, well reasoned and nicely planned, should have failed to click. Even to me his story had rung almost true in spots, and it was a great blow that the man behind the lantern had not sucked it in without question. There's no doubt about it, being a policeman warps a man's mind and ruins that sunny faith in his fellow human beings which is the foundation of a lovable character. There seems no way of avoiding this.

I could see no gleam of light in the situation. True, the Mapleton would identify me as the nephew of her old friend, thus putting the stopper on the stroll to the police station and the night in the prison cell, but, when you came right down to it, a fat lot of use that was. The kid Clementina was presumably still out in the night somewhere, and she would be lugged in and the full facts revealed, and then the burning glance, the few cold words, and the long

letter to Aunt Agatha. I wasn't sure that a good straight term of penal servitude wouldn't have been a happier ending.

So, what with one consideration and another, the heart, as I toddled in through the front door, was more or less bowed down with weight of woe. We went along the passage and into the study, and there, standing behind a desk with the steel-rimmed spectacles glittering as nastily as on the day when I had seen them across Aunt Agatha's luncheon table, was the boss in person. I gave her one swift look, then shut my eyes.

"Ah!" said Miss Mapleton.

Now, uttered in a certain way—dragged out, if you know what I mean, and starting high up and going down into the lower register, the word "Ah!" can be as sinister and devastating as the word "Ho!" In fact, it is a very moot question which is the scalier. But what stunned me was that this wasn't the way she had said it. It had been, or my ears deceived me, a genial "Ah!" A matey "Ah!" The "Ah!" of one old buddy to another. And this startled me so much that, forgetting the dictates of prudence, I actually ventured to look at her again. And a stifled exclamation burst from Bertram's lips.

The breath-taking exhibit before me was in person a bit on the short side. I mean to say, she didn't tower above one, or anything like that. But, to compensate for this lack of inches, she possessed to a remarkable degree that sort of quiet air of being unwilling to stand any rannygazoo which females who run schools always have. I had noticed the same thing when in *statu pupillari,* in my old headmaster, one glance from whose eye had invariably been sufficient to make me confess all. Sergeant-majors are like that, too. Also traffic cops and some post office girls. It's something in the way they purse up their lips and look through you.

In short, through years of disciplining the young—ticking off Isabel and speaking with quiet severity to Gertrude and that sort of thing—Miss Mapleton had acquired in the process of time rather the air of a female lion-tamer: and it was this air which had caused me after the first swift look to shut my eyes and utter a short prayer. But now, though she still resembled a lion-tamer, her bearing had most surprisingly become that of a chummy lion-tamer—a tamer who, after tucking the lions in for the night, relaxes in the society of the boys.

"So you did not find them, Mr. Wooster?" she said. "I am sorry. But I am none the less grateful for the trouble you have taken, nor lacking in appreciation of your courage. I consider that you have

behaved splendidly."

I felt the mouth opening feebly and the vocal chords twitching, but I couldn't manage to say anything. I was simply unable to follow her train of thought. I was astonished. Amazed. In fact, dumbfounded about sums it up.

The hell-hound of the Law gave a sort of yelp, rather like a wolf that sees its Russian peasant getting away.

"You identify this man, ma'am?"

"Identify him? In what way identify him?"

Jeeves joined the symposium.

"I fancy the officer is under the impression, madam, that Mr. Wooster was in your garden for some unlawful purpose. I informed him that Mr. Wooster was the nephew of your friend, Mrs. Spenser Gregson, but he refused to credit me."

There was a pause. Miss Mapleton eyed the constable for an instant as if she had caught him sucking acid-drops during the Scripture lesson.

"Do you mean to tell me, officer," she said, in a voice that hit him just under the third button of the tunic and went straight through to the spinal column, "that you have had the imbecility to bungle this whole affair by mistaking Mr. Wooster for a burglar?"

"He was up a tree, ma'am."

"And why should he not be up a tree? No doubt you had climbed the tree in order to watch the better, Mr. Wooster?"

I could answer that. The first shock over, the old sang-froid was beginning to return.

"Yes. Rather. That's it. Of course. Certainly. Absolutely," I said. "Watch the better. That's it in a nutshell."

"I took the liberty of suggesting that to the officer, madam, but he declined to accept the theory as tenable."

"The officer is a fool," said Miss Mapleton. It seemed a close thing for a moment whether or not she would rap him on the knuckles with a ruler. "By this time, no doubt, owing to his idiocy, the miscreants have made good their escape. And it is for this," said Miss Mapleton, "that we pay rates and taxes."

"Awful!" I said.

"Iniquitous."

"A bally shame."

"A crying scandal," said Miss Mapleton.

"A grim show," I agreed.

In fact, we were just becoming more like a couple of lovebirds

than anything, when through the open window there suddenly breezed a noise.

I'm never at my best at describing things. At school, when we used to do essays and English composition, my report generally read "Has little or no ability, but does his best," or words to that effect. True, in the course of years I have picked up a vocabulary of sorts from Jeeves, but even so I'm not nearly hot enough to draw a word-picture that would do justice to that extraordinarily hefty crash. Try to imagine the Albert Hall falling on the Crystal Palace, and you will have got the rough idea.

All four of us, even Jeeves, sprang several inches from the floor. The policeman uttered a startled "Ho!"

Miss Mapleton was her calm masterful self again in a second.

"One of the men appears to have fallen through the conservatory roof," she said. "Perhaps you will endeavor at the eleventh hour to justify your existence, officer, by proceeding there and making investigations."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And try not to bungle matters this time."

"No, ma'am."

"Please hurry, then. Do you intend to stand there gaping all night?"

"Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. Yes, ma'am."

It was pretty to hear him.

"It is an odd coincidence, Mr. Wooster," said Miss Mapleton, becoming instantly matey once more as the outcast removed himself. "I had just finished writing a letter to your aunt when you arrived. I shall certainly reopen it to tell her how gallantly you have behaved tonight. I have not in the past entertained a very high opinion of the modern young man, but you have caused me to alter it. To track these men unarmed through a dark garden argues courage of a high order. And it was most courteous of you to think of calling upon me. I appreciate it. Are you making a long stay in Bingley?"

This was another one I could answer.

"No," I said. "Afraid not. Must be in London tomorrow."

"Perhaps you could lunch before your departure?"

"Afraid not. Thanks most awfully. Very important engagement that I can't get out of. Eh, Jeeves?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have to catch the ten thirty train, what?"

"Without fail, sir."

"I am sorry," said Miss Mapleton. "I had hoped that you would be able to say a few words to my girls. Some other time perhaps?"

"Absolutely."

"You must let me know when you are coming to Bingley again."

"When I come to Bingley again," I said, "I will certainly let you know."

"If I remember your plans correctly, sir, you are not likely to be in Bingley for some little time, sir."

"Not for some considerable time, Jeeves," I said.

The front door closed. I passed a hand across the brow.

"Tell me all, Jeeves," I said.

"Sir?"

"I say, tell me all. I am fogged."

"It is quite simple, sir. I ventured to take the liberty, on my own responsibility, of putting into operation the alternative scheme which, if you remember, I wished to outline to you."

"What was it?"

"It occurred to me, sir, that it would be most judicious for me to call at the back door and desire an interview with Miss Mapleton. This, I fancied, would enable me, while the maid had gone to convey my request to Miss Mapleton, to introduce the young lady into the house unobserved."

"And did you?"

"Yes, sir. She proceeded up the back stairs and is now safely in bed."

I frowned. The thought of the kid Clementina jarred upon me.

"She is, is she?" I said. "A murrain on her, Jeeves, and may she be stood in the corner next Sunday for not knowing her Collect. And then you saw Miss Mapleton?"

"Yes, sir."

"And told her that I was out in the garden, chivvying burglars with my bare hands?"

"Yes, sir."

"And had been on my way to call upon her?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now she's busy adding a postscript to her letter to Aunt Agatha, speaking of me in terms of unstinted praise."

"Yes, sir."

I drew a deep breath. It was too dark for me to see the superhuman intelligence which must have been sloshing about all over the surface of the man's features. I tried to, but couldn't make it.

"Jeeves," I said, "I should have been guided by you from the first."

"It might have spared you some temporary unpleasantness, sir."

"Unpleasantness is right. When that lantern shone up at me in the silent night, Jeeves, just as I had finished poising the pot, I thought I had unshipped a rib. Jeeves!"

"Sir—"

"That Antibes expedition is off."

"I am glad to hear it, sir."

"If young Bobbie Wickham can get me into a mess like this in a quiet spot like Bingley-on-Sea, what might she not be able to accomplish at a really lively resort like Antibes?"

"Precisely, sir. Miss Wickham, as I have sometimes said, though a charming—"

"Yes, yes, Jeeves. There is no necessity to stress the point. The Wooster eyes are definitely opened."

I hesitated.

"Jeeves."

"Sir?"

"Those plus-fours."

"Yes, sir?"

"You may give them to the poor."

"Thank you very much, sir."

I sighed.

"It is my heart's blood, Jeeves."

"I appreciate the sacrifice, sir. But, once the first pang of separation is over, you will feel much easier without them."

"You think so?"

"I am convinced of it, sir."

"So be it, then, Jeeves," I said, "so be it."

Solution to the September "Unsolved":

We know the ships were sunk a month apart . . . and in the fall. The capitalizing of the word SON suggests the three fall months in that order: September, October and November and the birthday date of the 24th gives us the three dates of the sinkings. Since the sinkings took place off Boston, we can see right away that the salaries and savings fit the latitude and longitude. We then have:

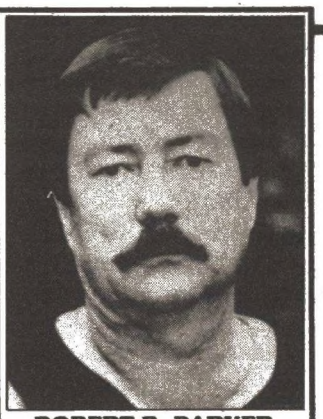
Vessel 1 sunk Sept. 24 at Lat 43°N., Long 65° 30′ W.

Vessel 2 sunk Oct. 24 at Lat 41° 30′ N., Long 67° 15′ W.

Vessel 3 sunk Nov. 24 at Lat 42° N., Long 68° W.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Kathleen Krueger.

ROBERT B. PARKER

Looking for a private eye who's just a little bit different from the pack? How about a loner who narrates his own adventures, and does so with plenty of sass and sympathy? A guy who hails from Boston, wears a size forty-eight jacket, and had the good sense to quit smoking way back in 1962? Still interested? And you haven't guessed his name yet? I'll give you a few more clues, then.

Our hero runs five miles daily. He's got a soft spot for kids, he's blessed with a bright and beautiful girlfriend, and his favorite beer is Amstel. He drinks it "in a tall glass the way the hops gods had intended." And he hates it when people shorten his surname to "Spense." You'll note that he, like the poet, spells "Spenser" with an *s*, not a *c*. He's quite particular about that, too.

So meet Spenser (with an *s*), a very independent P.I. who stars in nine novels by Robert B. Parker (with, we hope, more to come). Spenser . . . the gourmet cook . . . the self-styled "macho man" who desperately tries not to be a chauvinist. Spenser—who can be quick and deadly. Spenser—who can kill . . . and cry later.

The Spenser mysteries are contemporary, often graphically violent and hard-bitten, dealing with very ugly subjects:

political fanatics, dope pushers, mobsters, loan sharks—and murderers all. In *A Savage Place,* Spenser goes to Hollywood to protect a beautiful TV reporter whose life has been threatened, and he doesn't come home unchanged. But generally he dwells in Boston and its New England environs, where there is plenty of home-grown corruption, vice, greed, and mayhem to keep him busy. *Looking for Rachel Wallace* is the favorite of many Spenser fans, for in it he is hired to protect a well-known feminist author who's been receiving death threats, and the counterpoint of tough-guy Spenser and an equally tough lesbian is sizzling. *Valediction* takes Spenser into the secret ways of a questionable "church" whose members act brainwashed; and *The Godwulf Manuscript* leads the investigator onto a college campus when he's hired to recover a stolen illuminated manuscript. Spenser searches in Boston's notorious "Combat Zone" to find a runaway girl who's turned to prostitution. And a lakeside cabin in Maine is one of the settings in *Early Autumn* (my personal favorite) where Spenser tries to give an unloved fifteen-year-old boy the skills to survive in a harsh world. The boy, Paul Giacomin, in subsequent books joins the cast of characters who regularly inhabit Spenser's world, along with Susan Silverman, his lover; Lieutenant Martin Quirk; and the very special Hawk—who defies description. You just have to meet Hawk, that's all.

In fact, you just have to meet all of Robert B. Parker's characters, especially the endearing Spenser, whose smart-assed speech is always getting him into trouble—and making readers chuckle. Describing himself on a tedious surveillance: "I crossed my arms on my chest. After a while I uncrossed them. Always self-amusing. Never without resources." That's a true statement, for Spenser is rarely lacking in ingenuity, daring, and muscle. Some may find his readiness to kill—"self defense" only in the broadest definition of the words—a little dangerous, a little too close to vigilantism. It bothers his girlfriend, and it may bother you, too. And certainly some readers may find the explicit violence and sex and profanity a little too realistic for their tastes.

But if you like your detective stories gritty and honest, with a dash of wit, then I recommend Robert B. Parker's "Spenser" mysteries.

(Paperback editions are available from Dell.)

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Ten Years Beyond Baker Street pits our old friend Holmes against the evil Dr. Fu Manchu, and the tale is filled with the comforting and predictable: Holmes in disguise; Fu Manchu's diabolical enslavement of a young Eastern woman; escapes from Fu's Oriental henchmen. But Cay Van Ash, biographer of Sax Rohmer (Fu Manchu's creator), has added a few twists and fleshed out the characters and plot to make this one of the more satisfying "sequels" to follow Conan Doyle's originals. There are chases in a newfangled auto, for one thing, and Holmes is at his most irascible and unapproachable throughout the trip. But most notably, this adventure is narrated by Dr. Petrie (Watson makes no appearance at all, alas), who narrated the Fu Manchu stories. Petrie's style is an authentic period one, and his relationship to Holmes is only superficially reminiscent of Watson's. Thus we can sit back and let Petrie tell the tale in his own words, without comparing this new adventure to Doyle's. I recommend it to all Sherlock Holmes fans. (Harper & Row, $14.95, 337 pp.)

Toby Peters is a smart-aleck L.A. private eye who works in pre-World War II America. In Stuart Kaminsky's latest, **Catch a Falling Clown** (Penguin Books, $3.50, 182 pp.), Toby is hired by young Emmett Kelly to find out who is sabotaging the modest summer circus he's traveling with. With the aid of his buddies—a dapper midget, a young maintenance man, and his landlord-dentist—Toby escapes from the lion's mouth (literally) to catch a psychopath. If you want a fast, breezy read, with names dropped from another era, you'll enjoy this one.

Another new entry is **Death of a Harvard Freshman** by recent Radcliffe grad Victoria Silver (Bantam Books, $2.95, 232 pp.). Eleven freshmen in a Russian Revolution seminar at Harvard discuss the grisly death of Rasputin—and then one of them is murdered in much the same way. This sets bright, irreverent Lauren to thinking, and assisted by her outrageously gay buddy Michael, she begins to "investigate" what the police have determined was a riverside mugging. This is lively, entertaining, and very youthful, with the Harvard background fully exploited and amusingly painted. A fast read, and lots of fun if you don't take it too seriously. Victoria Silver doesn't, and she seems to be having a ball.

Fans of Joseph Hansen's Dave Brandstetter mysteries will be pleased to hear that there's a new novel. **Nightwork** sends Brand-

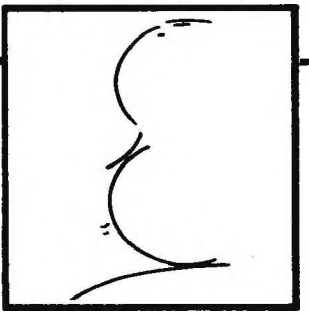
stetter to a very poor, violence-ridden suburb of L.A. to investigate the murder of an independent trucker; the insurance company who hired Dave wants to know why someone put a bomb in the trucker's vehicle. Somebody is also beating up the man's wife, and has already terrorized the family of the man's best friend, another trucker who suddenly died of illness a month earlier. A strange woman known as "The Duchess," a crazy old man who claims he was once Ramon Navarro's lover, and a parolee who may or may not still be leading a street gang—all these play their roles in the drama, as Dave and his young black lover place themselves in peril to learn the truth, and expose the murderer. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, $12.95, 172 pp.)

Lewis (Shifty) Anderson is a close-up magician, an expert card trickster and sleight-of-hand entertainer. He is also an avowed lover of horseracing, as well as the narrator in William Murray's **Tip on a Dead Crab.** The title refers to that rare and wonderful no-lose tip, where a gambler is risking nothing—and taking all—but for Shifty's friend, a professional handicapper named Jay Fox, the situation at Del Mar Racetrack this season inexorably evolves into the opposite of a "dead crab," except that the game becomes deadly. The players here are a beautiful French woman who owns a string of thoroughbreds, her estranged husband, his Las Vegas connections, and the band of "regulars": Jay, Shifty, and their old track friends. Murray has written an evocative novel filled with the sights and sounds and smells of the track, and peopled with modern characters who linger in memory long after the season at Del Mar has closed. (The Viking Press, $13.95, 230 pp.)

SoHo, the artists' colony in lower Manhattan, is the setting for **A Creative Kind of Killer**, a fresh first novel by Jack Early (Franklin Watts, $12.95, 224 pp.). Our hero is Fortune Fanelli, an ex-cop turned private eye, a single parent with two teenaged kids and a widowed mother who still runs the nearby butcher shop in Little Italy. The novel opens when a young couple, sauntering down the quiet streets of art galleries and punk clothing stores, spots a window display that's unusual even for the artsy neighborhood: one of the mannequins, part of a kinky "bondage" display, appears to be bleeding. The victim was a runaway, and Fanelli is hired by the girl's uncle to find her young brother, also missing. This is snappy and fun; the plot is neat, the characters are original and believable; and Early has a steady hand when painting the street life of SoHo and its environs. I recommend this one for something different.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



When an attractive young widow takes in a dissolute novelist who has addressed the literary society in her town, she seems to be letting herself in for nothing but trouble. He has a disguised homicidal urge, and it is only stimulated by her serving him food, giving him money, and sharing her bed. Her life is temporarily spared when the writer decides to use her as a lure to attract a young man for whom he has a homosexual attraction. It develops, though, that the seemingly innocent widow has had three husbands, each of whom died in a violent accident. Is the novelist actually the one being set up—as **The 4th Man** of the title?

The premise is a familiar one, and for Hitchcock fans the interest of watching the widow for hints as to whether or not she is a murderer will also be familiar. In *The 4th Man* the Dutch actress under scrutiny, Renée Soutendijk, has a cool, impenetrable beauty that recalls Grace Kelly and Janet Leigh, both of whom were favorites of Hitchcock. The trouble, though, comes when this all-Dutch production, like most European imitations of Hitchcock, insists on being more than a mystery.

The camera lingers on a madonna-like mother and child, on advertising posters, and on assorted street and building signs. Together, a bleeding statue of Christ and spilled tomato juice hint that the writer is facing death. By the end, though, it has become clear that these signs are not at all intended as mystery clues, for we never learn whether or not the widow is a murderer. Instead, author Gerard Reve proves to have been indulging himself in a somewhat dubious attempt to bring together homosexuality and Catholic mysticism.

The camera angles of *The 4th*

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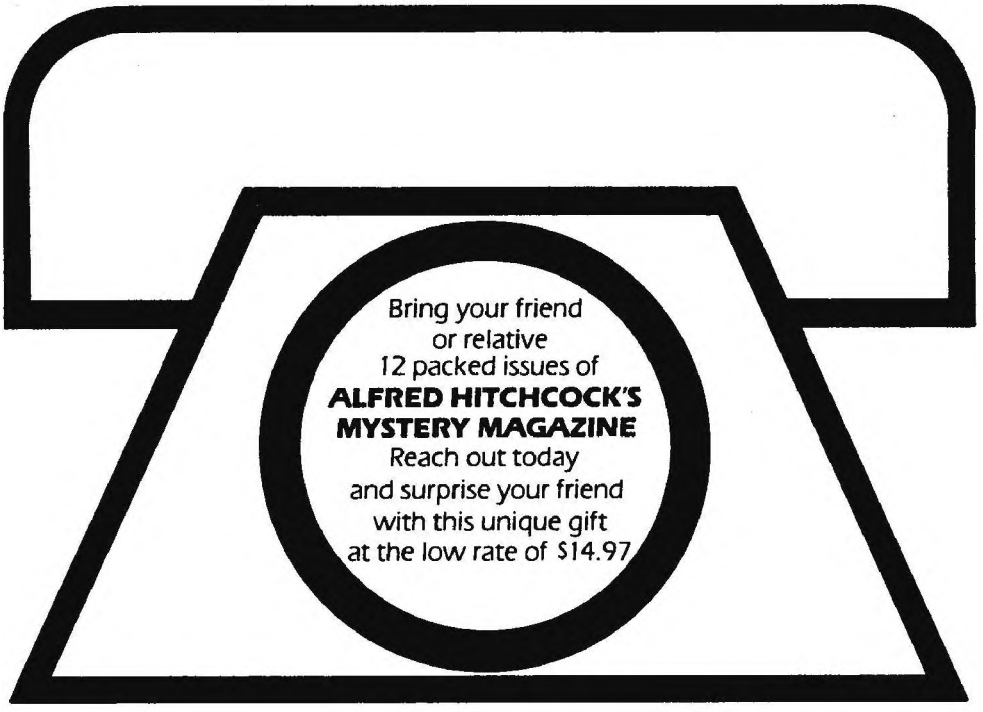

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James Stewart, John Dall, and Farley Granger in *Rope*.

Man are meant to provoke comparisons with Hitchcock. What they call to mind, though, is not so much Hitchcock's technical skills as his economy of treatment. The Catholicism in *I Confess* (1952) was more serious than *The 4th Man's* and in **Rope** (1948) his treatment of homosexuality was more subtle. The latter movie, one of those currently in re-release around the country, is based on the Leopold-Loeb murder case. Two young men gratuitously strangle a friend to death at the outset. The rest of the movie, which is really a filmed play, takes place in adjacent rooms during the two hours following the murder.

The killers have ghoulishly planned a dinner party, at which they serve the dead boy's father off the trunk in which they have stuffed the body. The title refers to the length of rope used for the killing, which they insolently produce in the course of the party. As in those of his movies where he turns the viewer into a guilty-feeling voyeur, Hitchcock here makes us want to reach out and stop the cocky murderers from giving themselves away. Eventually one of them, played by Farley Granger, grows hysterically frightened, and his overacting—a rarity in a Hitchcock movie—spoils the effect.

Jimmy Stewart gives a remarkable performance as the former prep school teacher of the two young men. His role is as different as can be imagined from the diffident, awkward, ordinary guy he usually played. Here he is an introspective, ironic, verbally fluent intellectual. He comes to the party, and in the course of the evening gathers the hints and clues dropped by the murderers. It is a tribute to Stewart and to Hitchcock that the sleuthing is as compelling as if the audience did not already know exactly what had transpired.

THE STORY THAT WON

Arthur Tress

The May Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by K. J. Franks of Wooster, Ohio. Honorable mentions go to P. J. Groeneveldt of Hinton, Alberta, Canada; Becky Lorberfeld of Marlboro, New Jersey; E. W. Simonsen of St. Francis, Wisconsin; Robert Loy of Summerville, South Carolina; Donald Domonkos of Astoria, New York; B. Newton of Saline, Michigan; John L. Reilly of Clearwater, Florida; Jane Broudy of Chicago, Illinois; A. E. Greenwood of Newbury Park, California; Robert F. Cain III of Oak Park, Illinois; Sherrard Gray of Greensboro Bend, Vermont; Le Roy D. Davis of Florence, Colorado; and Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alberta, Canada.

FINE FEATHERED FIENDS by K. J. Franks

The lagoon was that indescribable lustrous blue of the Indian Ocean, and the air near dusk was crisp and clean, but Murphy, clutching the satchel to his chest, saw nothing but the utter emptiness of the sky and the quickly disappearing speck of the seaplane.

"What's with those idiots?" he moaned. "Are they blind?" He shook his head, trying to quell the panic that was suddenly surging up from the pit of his stomach. Why had the plane left? Why had the plane that was to pluck him, stolen crown jewels and all, from this godforsaken backwater Asian country simply buzzed the minaret and then headed full-throttle out to sea?

With mounting dismay, Murphy reviewed his instructions. He had come to this isolated minaret, as ordered; he had climbed to the observation platform, laid the three loaves of bread in a Y-pattern on the roof to signal success to the plane, all according to plan. What could have gone wrong?

Movement on the water below caught his eye. A small native fishing boat was gliding toward him, and as it neared, a man Murphy recognized as the local constable stood up. "Mr. Murphy, I presume?" the man shouted, hands cupped to mouth.

At the sudden noise, a hundred sea birds, petrels and gulls, exploded from the roof in startled flight, a hundred ravenous, insatiable birds, slightly less hungry now than when they had landed.

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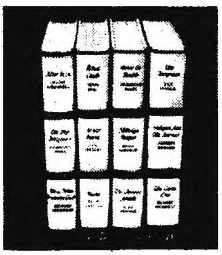

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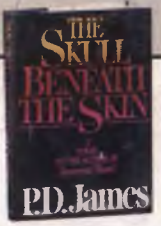

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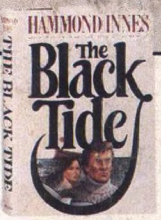

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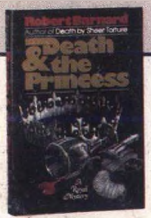

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