

# ELLERY QUEEN'S ANTHOLOGY

1966  
MID-YEAR  
EDITION

7/6d

VOLUME 11

**14** SHORT  
STORIES

John Steinbeck  
Frances & Richard  
Lockridge

John Dickson Carr  
MacKinlay Kantor

Gerald Kersh  
Mignon G. Eberhart  
Edmund Crispin

Thomas Walsh  
L. A. G. Strong

Vincent Starrett  
Stephen McKenna

L. J. Beeston  
Clarence Budington  
Kelland

Ellery Queen

**2** SHORT  
NOVELS

Hugh  
Pentecost

Cornell  
Woolrich



**4** NOVELETS

Erle  
Stanley  
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EDITED BY

*"Ellery Queen"*

DAVIS PUBLICATIONS, INC. 505 PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK, N. Y. 10022

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 59-13341

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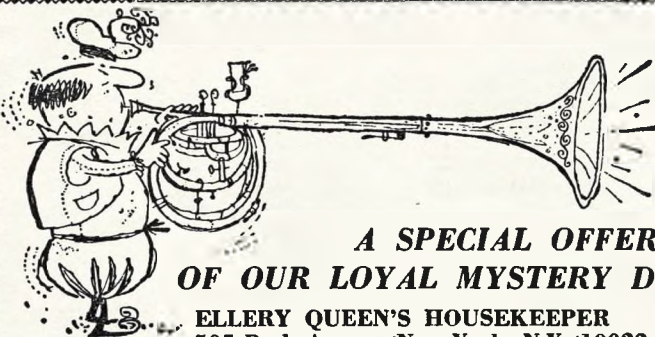
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## Cornell Woolrich

### All At Once, No Alice

*This short novel by Cornell Woolrich is an excellent example of what the critics have said about the work of Cornell Woolrich-William Irish. It illustrates Anthony Boucher's phrase juste—"the enormous impact of the everyday-gone-wrong"—or as Woolrich himself expresses it, "Things like this don't happen in broad daylight."*

*The Woolrich-Irish stories have been called "spine chillers"—gripping spellbinders calculated to breed goose pimples, induce shivers, and sometimes even stand your hair on end. The Woolrich-Irish tales "evoke terror," compelling readers to "share the agony of the hunted and the terror of the doomed." At his best, this modern master of the sinister, especially as it lurks in and around the commonplaces of everyday living, builds a powerful atmosphere of shock, fear, and violence. Look for all of these, in small or large measure, in this short novel which is a contemporary variation of a classic and irresistible suspense situation, with the equally irresistible title, "All At Once, No Alice."*

*In the world of "everyday-gone-wrong," Cornell Woolrich's description of detective Ainslie is especially worth noting: "He was just another man like me, maybe five years older, maybe an inch or two shorter. He could feel cold and hungry and tired, just as I could. He could believe a lie, just as I could. He couldn't see around corners or through walls, or into hearts, any more than I could." The anti-hero? No, not really . . .*

#### **Detective: AINSLIE**

**I**T WAS OVER SO QUICKLY I ALMOST thought something had been left out, but I guess he'd been doing it long enough to know his business. The only way I could tell for sure it was over was when I heard him say, "You may kiss the

bride." But then, I'd never gone through it before.

We turned and pecked at each other, a little bashful because they were watching us.

He and the motherly-looking woman who had been a witness—I

guess she was his housekeeper—stood there smiling benevolently, and also a little tiredly. The clock said one fifteen.

Then he shook hands with the two of us and said, "Good luck to both of you," and she shook with us too and said, "I wish you a lot of happiness."

We shifted from the living room, where it had taken place, out into the front hall, a little awkwardly. Then he held the screen door open and we moved from there out onto the porch.

On the porch step Alice nudged me and whispered, "You forgot something."

I didn't even know how much I was supposed to give him. I took out two singles and held them in one hand, then I took out a five and held that in the other. Then I went back toward him all flustered and said, "I—I guess you thought I was going to leave without remembering this."

I reached my hand down to his and brought it back empty. He kept right on smiling, as if this happened nearly every time, the bridegroom forgetting like that. It was only after I turned away and re-joined her that I glanced down at my other hand and saw which it was I'd given him. It was the five.

That was all right; five thousand of them couldn't have paid him for what he'd done for me, the way I felt about it.

We went down their front walk

and got into the car. The lighted doorway outlined them both for a minute. They raised their arms and said, "Good night."

"Good night, and much obliged," I called back. "Wait'll they go in," I said in an undertone to Alice, without starting the engine right away.

As soon as the doorway had blacked out, we turned and melted together on the front seat, and this time we made it a real kiss.

"Any regrets?" I whispered to her very softly.

"It must have been awful before I was married to you," she whispered back. "How did I ever stand it so long?"

I don't think we said a word all the way in to Michianopolis. We were both too happy. Just the wind and the stars and us. And a couple of cigarettes.

We got to the outskirts around two thirty, and by three were all the way in downtown. We shopped around for a block or two. "This looks like a nice hotel," I said finally. I parked outside and we went in.

I think the first hotel was called the Commander. I noticed that the bellhops let us strictly alone; didn't bustle out to bring in our bags or anything.

I said to the desk man, "We'd like one of your best rooms and bath."

He gave me a sort of rueful smile, as if to say, "You should know better than that." . . . "I only wish I

had something to give you," was the way he put it.

"All filled up?" I turned to her and murmured, "Well, we'll have to try some place else."

He overheard me. "Excuse me, but did you come in without making reservations ahead?"

"Yes, we just drove in now. Why?"

He shook his head compassionately at my ignorance. "I'm afraid you're going to have a hard time finding a room in any of the hotels tonight."

"Why? They can't all be filled up."

"There's a three-day convention of the Knights of Balboa being held here. All the others started sending their overflow to us as far back as Monday evening, and our own last vacancy went yesterday noon."

The second one was called the Stuyvesant, I think. "There must be *something* in a city this size," I said when we came out of there. "We'll keep looking until we find it."

I didn't bother noticing the names of the third and fourth. We couldn't turn around and go all the way back to our original point of departure—it would have been mid-morning before we reached it—and there was nothing that offered suitable accommodations between: just filling stations, roadside lunchrooms, and detached farmsteads.

Besides, she was beginning to

tire. She refused to admit it, but it was easy to tell. It worried me.

The fifth place was called the Royal. It was already slightly less first-class than the previous ones had been; we were running out of them now. Nothing wrong with it, but just a little seedier and older.

I got the same answer at the desk, but this time I wouldn't take it. The way her face drooped when she heard it was enough to make me persist.

I took the night clerk aside out of her hearing.

"Listen, you've got to do something for me, I don't care what it is," I whispered fiercely. "We've just driven all the way from Lake City and my wife's all in. I'm not going to drag her around to another place tonight."

Then as his face continued impassive, "If you can't accommodate both of us, find some way of putting her up at least. I'm willing to take my own chances—go out and sleep in the car or walk around the streets for the night."

"Wait a minute," he said, hooking his chin, "I think I could work out something like that for you. I just thought of something. There's a little bit of a dinky room on the top floor. Ordinarily it's not used as a guest room at all, just as a sort of storeroom.

"You couldn't possibly both use it, because there's only a single-width cot in it; but if you don't think your wife would object, I'd

be glad to let her have it, and I think you might still be able to find a room for yourself at the Y. They don't admit women, and most of these Knights have brought their wives with them."

I took a look at her pretty, drawn face. "Anything, anything," I said gratefully.

He still had his doubts. "You'd better take her up and let her see it first."

A bellboy came with us, with a passkey. On the way up I explained it to her. She gave me a rueful look, but I could see she was too tired even to object as much as she felt she should have.

"Ah, that's mean," she murmured. "Our first night by ourselves."

"It's just for tonight. We'll drive on right after breakfast. It's important that you get some rest, hon. You can't fool me, you can hardly keep your eyes open any more."

She tucked her hand consolingly under my arm. "I don't mind if you don't. It'll give me something to look forward to, seeing you in the morning."

The bellboy led us along a quiet, green-carpeted hall, and around a turn, scanning numbers on the doors.

He stopped three down from the turn, on the right-hand side, put his key in. "This is it here, sir." The number was 1006.

The man at the desk hadn't exaggerated. The room itself was lit-

tle better than an alcove, long and narrow. I suppose two could have got into it; but it would have been a physical impossibility for two to sleep in it the way it was fitted up. It had a cot that was little wider than a shelf.

To give you an idea how narrow the room was, the window was narrower than average, and yet not more than a foot of wall-strip showed on either side of its frame. In other words, the window took up nearly the width of one entire side of the room.

I suppose I could have sat up in the single armchair all night and slept, or tried to, that way; but as long as there was a chance of getting a horizontal bed at the Y, why not be sensible about it? She agreed with me in this.

"Think you can go this, just until the morning?" I asked her, and the longing way she was eyeing that miserable cot gave me the answer. She was so tired that anything would have looked good to her right then.

We went down again and I told him I'd take it. I had the bellboy take her bag out of the car and bring it in, and the desk clerk turned the register around for her to sign.

She poised the inked pen and flashed me a tender look just as she was about to sign. "First time I've used it," she breathed.

I looked over her shoulder and watched her trace *Mrs. James Can-*

*non* along the lined space. The last entry above hers was *A. Krumbake and wife*. I noticed it because it was such a funny name.

The desk clerk had evidently decided by now that we were fairly desirable people. "I'm terribly sorry I couldn't do more for you," he said. "It's just for this one night. By tomorrow morning a lot of them'll be leaving."

I went up with her a second time, to see that she was made as comfortable as she could be under the circumstances. But then there was nothing definitely wrong with the room except its tininess, and the the only real hardship was our temporary separation.

I tipped the boy for bringing up her bag, and then I tipped him a second time for going and digging up a nice fluffy quilt for her at my request—not to spread over her but to spread on top of the mattress and soften it up a little. Those cots aren't as comfortable as regular beds by a darned sight. But she was so tired I was hoping she wouldn't notice the difference.

Then after he'd thanked me for the double-header he'd got out of it, and left the room, I helped her off with her coat and hung it up for her, and even got down on my heels and undid the straps of her little sandals, so she wouldn't have to bend over and go after them herself.

Then we kissed a couple of times and told each other all about it, and I backed out the door.

The last I saw of her that night she was sitting on the edge of that cot in there, her shoeless feet raised to it and partly tucked under her, like a little girl. She raised one hand, wriggled the fingers at me in good night as I reluctantly eased the door closed.

"Until tomorrow, sweetheart," she called gently, when there was only a crack of opening left.

"Until tomorrow."

The night was as still around us as if it were holding its breath. The latch went *cluck*, and there we were on opposite sides of it.

The bellboy had taken the car with him just now after he'd checked her in, and I had to wait out there a minute or two for him to bring it back up again at my ring.

I stepped back to the turn in the hall while waiting, to look at the frosted-glass transom over her door; and short as the time was, her light was already out. She must have just shrugged off her dress, fallen back flat, and pulled the coverings up over her.

Poor kid, I thought, with a commiserating shake of my head. The glass elevator panel flooded with light and I got in the car. The one bellhop doubled for liftman after midnight.

"I guess she'll be comfortable," he said.

"She was asleep before I left the floor," I told him.

The desk man told me where the

nearest branch of the Y was, and I took the car with me as the quickest way of getting over there at that hour. I had no trouble at all getting a room, and not a bad one at that for a buck.

I didn't phone her before going up, to tell her I'd got something for myself, because I knew by the way I'd seen that light go out she was fast asleep already, and it would have been unnecessarily cruel to wake her again.

I woke up at eight and again I didn't phone her, to find out how she was, because in the first place I was going right over there myself in a few more minutes, and in the second place I wanted her to get all the sleep she could before I got there.

I even took my time, showered and shaved up good, and drove over slowly, to make sure of not getting there any earlier than nine.

It was a beautiful day, with the sun as brand-new-looking as if it had never shone before; and I even stopped off and bought a gardenia for her to wear on the shoulder of her dress.

I thought: I'll check her out of that depressing dump. We'll drive to the swellest restaurant in town, and she'll sit having orange juice and toast while I sit looking at her face.

I braked in front of the Royal, got out, and went in, lighting up

the whole lobby the way I was beaming.

A different man was at the desk now, on the day shift, but I knew the number of her room so I rode right up without stopping.

I got out at the tenth, went down the hall the way we'd been led last night—still green-carpeted but a little less quiet now—and around the turn.

When I came to the third door down, on the right-hand side—the door that had 1006 on it—I stopped and listened a minute to see if I could tell whether she was up yet or not.

If she wasn't up yet, I was going back downstairs again, hang around in the lobby, and give her another half hour of badly needed sleep.

But she was up already. I could hear a sound in there as if she were brushing out her dress or coat with a stiff-bristled brush—*skish, skish, skish*. So I knocked, easy and loving, on the door with just three knuckles.

The *skish-skish-skish* broke off a minute, but then went right on again. But the door hadn't been tightly closed into the frame at all, and my knocking sent it drifting inward an inch or two.

A whiff of turpentine or something like that nearly knocked me over, but without stopping to distinguish what it was, I pushed the door the rest of the way in and walked in.



Then I pulled up short. I saw I had the wrong room.

There wasn't anything in it—no furniture, that is. Just bare floorboards, walls, and ceiling. Even the light fixture had been taken down, and two black wires stuck out of a hole, like insect feelers, where it had been.

A man in spotted white overalls and peaked cap was standing on a stepladder slapping a paint brush up and down the walls. *Skish-skish-slop!*

I grunted, "Guess I've got the wrong number," and backed out.

"Guess you must have, bud," he agreed, without even turning his head to see who I was.

I looked up at the door from the outside. Number 1006. But that was the number they'd given her, sure it was.

I looked in a second time. Long and narrow, like an alcove. Not more than a foot of wall space on either side of the window frame.

Sure, this was the room, all right. They must have found out they had something better available after all, and changed her after I left last night.

I said, "Where'd they put the lady that was in here, you got any idea?"

*Skish-skish-skish.* "I dunno, bud, you'll have to find out at the desk. It was empty when I come here to work at seven." *Skish-skish-slop!*

I went downstairs to the desk again, and I said, "Excuse me.

What room have you got Mrs. Cannon in now?"

He looked up some chart or other they use, behind the scenes, then he came back and said, "We have no Mrs. Cannon here."

I pulled my face back. Then I thrust it forward again. "What's the matter with you?" I said curtly. "I came here with her myself last night. Better take another look."

He did. A longer one. Then he came back and said, "I'm sorry, there's no Mrs. Cannon registered here."

I knew there was nothing to get excited about; it would probably be straightened out in a minute or two; but it was a pain in the neck. I was very patient. After all, this was the first morning of my honeymoon.

"Your night man was on duty at the time. It was about three this morning. He gave her 1006."

He looked that up too. "That's not in use," he said. "That's down for redecorating. It's been empty for—"

"I don't care what it is. I tell you they checked my wife in there at three this morning, I went up with her myself! Will you quit arguing and find out what room she's in, for me? I don't want to stand here talking to you all day; I want to be with her."

"But I'm telling you, mister, the chart shows no one by that name."

"Then look in the register if you

don't believe me. I watched her sign it myself."

People were standing around the lobby looking at me now, but I didn't care.

"It would be on the chart," he insisted. "It would have been transferred—"

He ran the pad of his finger up the register page from bottom to top. Too fast, I couldn't help noticing: without a hitch, as if there were nothing to impede it. Then he went back a page and ran it up that, in the same streamlined way.

"Give it to me," I said impatiently. "I'll find it for you in a minute." I flung it around my way.

A. *Krumbake and wife* stared at me. And then under that just a blank space all the way down to the bottom of the page. No more check-ins.

I could feel the pores of my face sort of closing up. That was what it felt like, anyway. Maybe it was just the process of getting pale.

"She signed right under that name. It's been rubbed out."

"Oh, no, it hasn't," he told me firmly. "No one tampers with the register like that. People may leave, but their names stay on it."

Dazedly, I traced the ball of my finger back and forth across the white paper under that name, *Krumbake*. Smooth and un-rubbed, its semi-glossy finish unimpaired by erasure.

I held the page up toward the light and tried to squint through

it, to see whether it showed thinner there, either from rubbing or some other means of eradication. It was all of the same even opacity.

I spoke in a lower voice now; I wasn't being impatient any more.

"There's something wrong. Something wrong about this. I can't understand it. I saw her write it. I saw her sign it with my own eyes. I've known it was the right hotel all along, but even if I wasn't sure, this other name, this name above, would prove it to me. *Krumbake*. I remember it from last night. Maybe they changed her room without notifying you down here."

"That wouldn't be possible; it's through me, down here, that all changes are made. It isn't that I don't know what room she's in; it's that there's absolutely no record of any such person ever having been at the hotel, so you see you must be mis—"

"Call the manager for me," I said hoarsely.

I stood there waiting by the onyx-topped desk until he came. I stood there very straight, very impassive, not touching the edge of the counter with my hands in any way, about an inch clear of it.

People were bustling back and forth, casually, normally, cheerily, behind me; plinking their keys down on the onyx; saying, "Any mail for me?"; saying, "I'll be in the coffee shop if I'm called."

And something was already trying to make me feel a little cut off

from them, a little set apart. As if a shadowy finger had drawn a ring around me where I stood, and mystic vapors were already beginning to rise from it, walling me off from my fellowmen.

I wouldn't let the feeling take hold of me—yet—but it was already there, trying to. I'd give an imperceptible shake of my head every once in a while and say to myself, "Things like this don't happen in broad daylight. It's just some kind of misunderstanding; it'll be cleared up presently."

The entrance, the lobby, had seemed so bright when I first came in but I'd been mistaken. There were shadows lengthening in the far corners that only I could see. The gardenia I had for her was wilting.

The manager was no help at all. He tried to be, listened attentively, but then the most he could do was have the clerk repeat what he'd already done for me—look on the chart and look in the register. After all, details like that were in the hands of the staff.

I simply got the same thing as before, only relayed through him now instead of direct from the desk man. "No, there hasn't been any Mrs. Cannon here at any time."

"Your night man will tell you," I finally said in despair, "he'll tell you I brought her here. Get hold of him, ask him. He'll remember us."

"I'll call him down; he rooms right here in the house," he said.

But then with his hand on the phone he stopped to ask again, "Are you quite sure it was this hotel, Mr. Cannon? He was on duty until six this morning, and I hate to wake him up unless you—"

"Bring him down," I said. "This is more important to me than his sleep. It's got to be cleared up."

I wasn't really frightened yet, out-and-out scared; just baffled, worried, and with a peculiar lost feeling.

He came down inside of five minutes. I knew him right away, the minute he stepped out of the car, in spite of the fact that other passengers had come down with him. I was so sure he'd be able to straighten it out that I took a step toward him without waiting for him to join us. If they noticed that, which was a point in favor of my credibility—my knowing him at sight like that—they gave no sign.

I said, "You remember me, don't you? You remember checking my wife into 1006 at three this morning, and telling me I'd have to go elsewhere?"

"No," he said with polite regret. "I'm afraid I don't."

I could feel my face go white as if a soundless bombshell of flour or talcum had just burst all over it. I put one foot behind me and set the heel down and stayed that way.

The manager asked him, "Well, did the gentleman stop at the desk perhaps, just to inquire, and then

go elsewhere? Do you remember him at all, Stevens?"

"No, I never saw him until now. It must have been some other hotel."

"But look at me; look at my face," I tried to say. But I guess I didn't put any voice into it; it was just lipmotion, because he didn't seem to hear.

The manager shrugged amiably, as if to say, "Well, that's all there is to it, as far as we're concerned."

I was breathing hard, fighting for self-control. "No. No, you can't close this matter. I dem—I ask you to give me one more chance to prove that I—that I—Call the night bellboy who carried up her bag for her."

They were giving one another looks by now, as if I were some sort of crank.

"Listen, I'm in the full possession of my faculties, I'm not drunk, I wouldn't come in here like this if I weren't positive—"

The manager was going to try to pacify me and ease me out. "But don't you see you must be mistaken? There's absolutely no record of it. We're very strict about those things. If any of my men checked a guest in without entering it on the chart of available rooms, and in the register, I'd fire him on the spot. Was it the Palace? Was it the Commander, maybe? Try to think now, you'll get it."

And with each soothing syllable,

he led me a step nearer the entrance.

I looked up suddenly, saw that the desk had already receded a considerable distance behind us, and balked.

"No, don't do this. This is no way to—Will you get that night-to-morning bellhop? Will you do that one more thing for me?"

He sighed, as if I were trying his patience sorely. "He's probably home sleeping. Just a minute; I'll find out."

It turned out he wasn't. They were so overcrowded and undermanned at the moment that instead of being at home he was sleeping right down in the basement, to save time coming and going.

He came up in a couple of minutes, still buttoning the collar of his uniform. I knew him right away. He didn't look straight at me at first, but at the manager.

"Do you remember seeing this gentleman come here with a lady, at three this morning? Do you remember carrying her bag up to 1006 for her?"

Then he did look straight at me—and didn't seem to know me. "No, sir, Mr. DeGrasse."

The shock wasn't as great as the first time; it couldn't have been, twice in succession.

"Don't you remember that quilt you got for her, to spread over the mattress, and I gave you a second quarter for bringing it? You must

remember that—dark blue, with little white flowers all over it—”

“No, sir.”

“But I know your face! I remember that scar just over your eyebrow. And—part your lips a little—that gold cap in front that shows every time you grin.”

“No, sir, not me.”

My voice was curling up and dying inside my throat. “Then when you took me down alone with you, the last time, you even said, ‘I guess she’ll be comfortable’—”

I squeezed his upper arm pleadingly. “Don’t you remember? Don’t you remember?”

“No, sir.” This time he said it so low you could hardly hear it, as if his training wouldn’t let him contradict me too emphatically, but on the other hand he felt obliged to stick to the facts.

I grabbed at the hem of my coat, bunched it up to emphasize the pattern and the color of the material.

“Don’t you know me by this?” Then I let my fingers trail helplessly down the line of my jaw. “Don’t you know my face?”

He didn’t answer any more, just shook his head each time.

“What’re you doing this for? What’re you trying to do to me? All of you?”

The invisible fumes from that necromancer’s ring, that seemed to cut me off from all the world, came swirling up thicker and thicker about me. My voice was strident

with a strange new kind of fear, a fear I hadn’t known since I was ten.

“You’ve got me rocky now! You’ve got me down! Cut it out, I say!”

They were starting to draw back little by little away from me—to prudently widen the tight knot they had formed around me. I turned from one to the other, from bellhop to night clerk, night clerk to day clerk, day clerk to manager, and each one as I turned to him re-treated slightly.

There was a pause, while I fought against this other, lesser kind of death that was creeping over me—this death called *strangeness*, this snapping of all the customary little threads of cause and effect that are our moorings at other times.

Slowly they all drew back from me step by step, until I was left there alone, cut off.

Then the tension exploded. My voice blasted the quiet of the lobby. “I want my wife!” I yelled shatteringly. “Tell me what’s become of her. What’ve you done with her? I came in here with her last night; you can’t tell me I didn’t . . .”

They circled, maneuvered around me. I heard the manager say in a harried undertone, “I knew this was going to happen. I could have told you he was going to end up like this. George! Archer! Get him out of here fast!”

My arms were suddenly seized from behind and held. I threshed against the constriction, so violent-

ly that both my legs flung up clear of the floor at one time, dropped back again; but I couldn't break it. There must have been two of them behind me.

The manager had come in close again, now that I was safely pinned, no doubt hoping that his nearness would succeed in soft-pedaling the disturbance.

"Now will you please leave here quietly, or do you want us to call the police and turn you over to them?"

"You'd better call them anyway, Mr. DeGrasse," the day clerk put in. "I've run into this mental type before. He'll only come back in again the very minute your back's turned."

"No, I'd rather not, unless he forces me to. It's bad for the hotel. Look at the crowd collecting down here on the main floor already. Tchh! Tchh!"

He tried to reason with me. "Now listen, give me a break, will you? You don't look like the kind of a man who—won't you please go quietly? If I have you turned loose outside, will you go away and promise not to come in here again?"

"*Ali-i-i-ice!*" I sent it baying harrowingly down the long vista of lobby, lounges, foyers. I'd been gathering it in me the last few seconds while he was speaking to me. I put my heart and soul into it. It should have shaken down the big

old-fashioned chandeliers by the vibration it caused alone.

My voice broke under the strain. A woman onlooker somewhere in the background bleated at the very intensity of it.

The manager hit himself between the eyes in consternation. "Oh, this is awful! Hurry up, call an officer quick, get him out of here."

"See, what did I tell you?" the clerk said knowingly.

I got another chestful of air in, tore loose with it. "Somebody help me! You people standing around looking—isn't there one of you will help me? I brought my wife here last night; now she's gone and they're trying to tell me I never—"

A brown hand suddenly sealed my mouth, was as quickly withdrawn again at the manager's panic-stricken admonition.

"George! Archer! Don't lay a hand on him. No rough stuff. Make us liable for damages afterwards, y'know."

Then I heard him and the desk man both give a deep breath of relief. "At last!" And I knew a cop must have come in behind me.

The grip on my arms behind my back changed, became single instead of double, one arm instead of two. But I didn't fight against it.

Suddenly I was very passive, unresistant. Because suddenly I had a dread of arrest, confinement. I wanted to preserve my freedom of

movement more than all else, to try to find her again. If they threw me in a cell, or put me in a straitjacket, how could I look for her, how could I ever hope to get at the bottom of this mystery?

The police would never believe me. If the very people who had seen her denied her existence, how could I expect those who hadn't to believe in it?

Docile, I let him lead me out to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The manager came out after us, mopping his forehead, and the desk clerk, and a few of the bolder among the guests who had been watching.

They held a three-cornered consultation in which I took no part. I even let the manager's version of what the trouble was pass unchallenged. Not that he distorted what had actually happened just now, but he made it seem as if I were mistaken about having brought her there last night.

Finally the cop asked, "Well, do you want to press charges against him for creating a disturbance in your lobby?"

The manager held his hands palms out, horrified. "I should say not. We're having our biggest rush of the year right now; I can't take time off to run down there and go through all that tommyrot. Just see that he doesn't come in again and create any more scenes."

"I'll see to that all right," the cop promised truculently.

They went inside again, the manager and the clerk and the gallery that had watched us from the front steps—inside the hotel that had swallowed her alive.

The cop read me a lecture, to which I listened in stony silence. Then he gave me a shove that sent me floundering, and said, "Keep moving now, hear me?"

I pointed, and said, "That's my car standing there. May I get in it?" He checked first to make sure it was, then he opened the door and said, "Yeah, get in it and get out of here."

He'd made no slightest attempt to find out what was behind the whole thing—whether there was some truth to my story or not, or whether it was drink, drugs, or mental aberration. But then he was only a harness cop. That's why I hadn't wanted to tangle with him.

This strangeness that had risen up around me was nothing to be fought by an ordinary patrolman. I was going to them—the police—but I was going of my own free will and in my own way, not to be dragged in by the scruff of the neck and then put under observation for the next twenty-four hours.

Ten minutes later I got in front of the first precinct house I came to, went in, and said to the desk sergeant, "I want to talk to the Lieutenant in charge."

He stared at me coldly.

"What about?"

"About my wife."

I didn't talk to him alone. Three of his men were present. They were just shapes in the background as far as I was concerned, sitting there very quietly, listening.

I told it simply, hoping against hope I could get them to believe me, feeling somehow I couldn't even before I had started.

"I'm Jimmy Cannon, I'm twenty-five years old, and I'm from Lake City. Last evening after dark my girl and I—her name was Alice Brown—we left there in my car, and at one fifteen this morning we were married by a Justice of the Peace.

"I think his name was Hulskamp—anyway it's a white house with morning glories all over the porch, about fifty miles this side of Lake City.

"We got in here at three, and they gave her a little room at the Royal Hotel. They couldn't put me up, but they put her up alone. The number was 1006. I know that as well as I know I'm sitting here.

"This morning when I went over there, they were painting the room and I haven't been able to find a trace of her since.

"I saw her sign the register, but her name isn't on it any more. The night clerk says he never saw her. The bellboy says he never saw her. Now they've got me so I'm scared and shaky, like a little kid is of the dark. I want you men to help me. Won't you men help me?"

"We'll help you"—said the Lieu-

tenant in charge. Slowly, awfully slowly; I didn't like that slowness—"if we're able to."

And I knew just what he meant; if we find any evidence that your story is true.

He turned his head toward one of the three shadowy listeners in the background, at random. The one nearest him. Then he changed his mind, shifted his gaze farther along, to the one in the middle.

"Ainslie, suppose you take a whack at this. Go over to this hotel and see what you can find out. Take him with you."

So, as he stood up, I separated him from the blurred background for the first time. I was disappointed. He was just another man like me, maybe five years older, maybe an inch or two shorter. He could feel cold and hungry and tired, just as I could. He could believe a lie, just as I could. He couldn't see around corners or through walls, or into hearts, any more than I could.

What good was he going to be?

He looked as if he'd seen every rotten thing there was in the world. He looked as if he'd once expected to see other things beside that, but didn't any more. He said, "Yes, sir," and you couldn't tell whether he was bored or interested, or liked the detail or resented it, or gave a rap one way or the other.

On the way over I said, "You've got to find out what became of her. You've got to make them—"

"I'll do what I can."



He couldn't seem to get any emotion into his voice. After all, from his point of view, why should he?

"You'll do what you can!" I gasped. "Didn't you ever have a wife?"

He gave me a look, but you couldn't tell what was in it.

We went straight back to the Royal. He was very businesslike, did a streamlined, competent job. Didn't waste a question or a motion, but didn't leave out a single relevant thing either.

I took back what I'd been worried about at first; he was good.

But he wasn't good enough for this, whatever it was.

It went like this: "Let me see your register." He took out a glass, went over the place I pointed out to him where she had signed. Evidently he couldn't find any marks of erasure any more than I had with my naked eye.

Then we went up to the room, 1006. The painter was working on the wood trim by now, had all four walls and the ceiling done. It was such a small cubbyhole it wasn't even a half day's work.

He said, "Where was the furniture when you came in here to work this morning? Still in the room, or had the room been cleared?"

"Still in the room; I cleared it myself. There wasn't much—a chair, a scatter rug, a cot."

"Was the cot made or unmade?"  
"Made up."

"Was the window open or closed when you came in?"

"Closed tight."

"Was the air in the room noticeably stale, as if it had been closed up that way all night, or not noticeably so, as if it had only been closed up shortly before?"

"Terrible, like it hadn't been aired for a week. And believe me, when I notice a place is stuffy, you can bet it's stuffy all right."

"Were there any marks on the walls or floor or anywhere around the room that didn't belong there?"

I knew he meant blood, and gnawed the lining of my cheek fearfully.

"Nothing except plain grime, that needed painting bad."

We visited the housekeeper next. She took us to the linen room and showed us. "If there're any dark blue quilts in use in this house, it's the first I know about it. The bell-boy *could* have come in here at that hour—but all he would have gotten are maroon ones. And here's my supply list—every quilt accounted for. So it didn't come from here."

We visited the baggage room next. "Look around and see if there's anything in here that resembles that bag of your wife's."

I did, and there wasn't. Wherever she had gone, whatever had become of her, her bag had gone with her.

About fifty minutes after we'd first gone in, we were back in my

car outside the hotel again. He'd done a good, thorough job; and if I was willing to admit that, it must have been.

We sat there without moving a couple of minutes, me under the wheel. He kept looking at me steadily, sizing me up. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

I threw my head back and started to look up the face of the building, story by story. I counted as my eyes rose, and when they came to the tenth floor I stopped them there, swung them around the corner of the building to the third window from the end, stopped them there for good.

It was a skinnier window than the others. So small, so high up, to hold so much mystery. "Alice," I whispered up to it, and it didn't answer, didn't hear.

His voice brought my gaze down from there again. "The burden of the proof has now fallen on you. It's up to you to give me some evidence that she actually went in there. That she actually was with you. That she actually *was*. I wasn't able to find a single person in that building who actually saw her."

I just looked at him—the kind of a look you get from someone right after you stick a knife in his heart. Finally I said with quiet bitterness, "So now I have to prove I had a wife."

The instant, remorseless way he answered was brutal in itself. "Yes, you do. Can you?"

I pushed my hat off, raked my fingers through my hair, with one and the same gesture. "Could you, if someone asked you in the middle of the street? Could you?"

He peeled out a wallet and flipped it open. A tiny snapshot of a woman's head and shoulders danced in front of my eyes for a split second. He folded it and put it away again. He briefly touched a gold band on his finger, token of that old custom that is starting to revive again, of husbands wearing marriage rings as well as wives.

"And a dozen other ways. You could call Tremont 4102. Or you could call the marriage clerk at the City Hall—"

"But we were just beginning," I said bleakly. "I have no pictures. She was wearing the only ring we had. The certificate was to be mailed to us at Lake City in a few days. You could call this Justice of the Peace, Hulskamp, out near U.S. 9; he'll tell you—"

"Okay, Cannon, I'll do that. We'll go back to headquarters, I'll tell the Lieutenant what I've gotten so far, and I'll do it from there."

Now at last it would be over. Now at last it would be straightened out. He left me sitting in the room outside the Lieutenant's office, while he was in there reporting to him.

He seemed to take a long time, so I knew he must be doing more than just reporting; they must be talking it over.

Finally Ainslie looked out at me, but only to say, "What was the name of that Justice you say married you, again?"

"Hulskamp."

He closed the door again. I had another long wait. Finally it opened a second time and he hitched his head at me to come in.

The atmosphere, when I got in there, was one of hard, brittle curiosity, without any feeling to it. As when you look at somebody afflicted in a way you never heard of before, and wonder how he got that way.

I got that distinctly. Even from Ainslie, and it was fairly oozing from his Lieutenant and the other men in the room. They looked and looked and looked at me.

The Lieutenant did the talking. "You say a Justice Hulskamp married you. You still say that?"

"A white house sitting off the road, this side of Lake City, just before you get to U. S. 9—"

"Well, there is a Justice Hulskamp, and he does live out there. We just had him on the phone. He says he never married anyone named James Cannon to anyone named Alice Brown, last night or any other night. He hasn't married anyone who looks like you, recently, to anyone who looks as you say she did. He didn't marry anyone at all at any time last night—"

He was going off some place while he talked to me, and his voice was going away after him.

Ainslie filled a paper cup with water at the cooler in the corner, strewed it deftly across my face, once each way, as if I were some kind of a potted plant, and one of the other guys picked me up from the floor and put me back on the chair again.

The Lieutenant's voice came back again stronger, as if he hadn't gone away after all. "Who were her people in Lake City?"

"She was an orphan."

"Well, where did she work there?"

"At the house of a family named Beresford, at 20 New Hampshire Avenue. She was in service there, a maid; she lived with them—"

"Give me long distance. Give me Lake City. This is Michianapolis Police Headquarters. I want to talk to a party named Beresford, 20 New Hampshire Avenue."

The ring came back fast. "We're holding a man here who claims he married a maid working for you. A girl by the name of Alice Brown."

He'd hung up before I even knew it was over. "There's no maid employed there. They don't know anything about any Alice Brown, never heard of her."

I stayed on the chair this time. I just didn't hear so clearly for a while, everything was sort of fuzzy.

". . . Hallucinations . . . And he's in a semi-hysterical condition

right now. Notice how jerky his reflexes are?"

Someone was chopping the edge of his hand at my kneecaps. "Seems harmless. Let him go. It'll probably wear off. I'll give him a sedative." Someone snapped a bag shut, left the room.

The Lieutenant's voice was as flat as it was deadly, and it brooked no argument. "You never had a wife, Cannon!"

I could see only Ainslie's face in the welter before me. "You have, though, haven't you?" I said, so low none of the others could catch it.

The Lieutenant was still talking to me. "Now get out of here before we change our minds and call an ambulance to take you away. And don't go back into any more hotels raising a row."

I hung around outside; I wouldn't go away. Where was there to go? One of the others came out, looked at me fleetingly in passing, said with humorous tolerance, "You better get out of here before the Lieutenant catches you," and went on about his business.

I waited until I saw Ainslie come out. Then I went up to him. "I've got to talk to you; you've got to listen to me—"

"Why? The matter's closed. You heard the Lieutenant."

He went back to some sort of locker room. I went after him.

"You're not supposed to come back here. Now look, Cannon, I'm telling you for your own good,

you're looking for trouble if you keep this up."

"Don't turn me down," I said hoarsely, tugging away at his sleeve. "Can't you see the state I'm in? I'm like someone in a dark room, crying for a match. I'm like someone drowning, crying for a helping hand. I can't make it alone any more."

There wasn't anyone in the place but just the two of us. My pawing grip slipped down his sleeve to the hem of his coat, and I was looking up at him from my knees. What did I care? There was no such thing as pride or dignity any more. I would have crawled flat along the floor on my belly, just to get a word of relief out of anyone.

"Forget you're a detective, and I'm a case. I'm appealing to you as one human being to another. I'm appealing to you as one husband to another. Don't turn your back on me like that, don't pull my hands away from your coat.

"I don't ask you to do anything for me any more; you don't have to lift a finger. Just say, 'Yes, you had a wife, Cannon.' Just give me that one glimmer of light in the dark. Say it even if you don't mean it, even if you don't believe it, say it anyway. Oh, say it, will you—"

He drew the back of his hand slowly across his mouth, either in disgust at my abasement or in a sudden access of pity. Maybe a little of both. His voice was hoarse, as if he

were sore at the spot I was putting him on.

"Give me anything," he said, shaking me a little and jogging me to my feet, "the slightest thing, to show that she ever existed, to show that there ever was such a person outside of your own mind, and I'll be with you to the bitter end. Give me a pin that she used to fasten her dress with. Give me a grain of powder, a stray hair; but prove that it was hers. I can't do it unless you do."

"And I have nothing to show you. Not a pin, not a grain of powder."

I took a few dragging steps toward the locker-room door. "You're doing something to me that I wouldn't do to a dog," I mumbled. "What you're doing to me is worse than if you were to kill me. You're locking me up in shadows for the rest of my life. You're taking my mind away from me. You're condemning me slowly but surely to madness, to being without a mind. It won't happen right away, but sooner or later, in six months or in a year—well, I guess that's that."

I fumbled my way out of the locker room and down the passageway outside, guiding myself with one arm along the wall, and past the Sergeant's desk and down the steps, and then I was out in the street.

I left my car where it was. What did I want with it? I started to

walk, without knowing where I was going. I walked a long time, and a good long distance.

Then all of a sudden I noticed a lighted drug store—it was dark by now—across the way. I must have passed others before now, but this was the first one I noticed.

I crossed over and looked in the open doorway. It had telephone booths; I could see them at the back, to one side. I moved on a few steps, stopped, and felt in my pockets.

I found a quill toothpick, and I dug the point of it good and hard down the back of my finger, ripped the skin open. Then I threw it away. I wrapped a handkerchief around the finger, and I turned around and went inside.

I said to the clerk, "Give me some iodine. My cat just scratched me and I don't want to take any chances."

He said, "Want me to put it on for you?"

I said, "No, gimme the whole bottle. I'll take it home; we're out of it."

I paid him for it and moved over to one side and started to thumb through one of the directories in the rack. Just as he went back inside the prescription room, I found my number.

I went into the end booth and pulled the slide door closed. I took off my hat and hung it over the phone mouthpiece, sort of making myself at home.

Then I sat down and started to undo the paper he'd just wrapped around the bottle. When I had it off, I pulled the knot of my tie out a little farther to give myself lots of room. Then I took the stopper out of the bottle and tilted my head back and braced myself.

Something that felt like a baseball bat came chopping down on the arm I was bringing up, and nearly broke it in two, and the iodine sprayed all over the side of the booth.

Ainslie was standing there in the half-opened slide.

He said, "Come on outta there!" and gave me a pull by the collar of my coat that did it for me. He didn't say anything more until we were out on the sidewalk in front of the place.

Then he stopped and looked me over from head to foot as if I were some kind of a microbe. He said, "Well, it was worth coming all this way after you, at that!"

My car was standing there; I must have left the keys in it and he must have tailed me in that. He thumbed it, and I went over and climbed in and sat there limply. He stayed outside.

I said, "I can't live with shadows, Ainslie. I'm frightened, too frightened to go on. You don't know what the nights'll be like from now on. And the days won't be much better. I'd rather go now, fast. Show her to me on a slab at the morgue and I won't whimper.

Show her to me all cut up in small pieces and I won't bat an eyelash. But don't say she never was."

"I guessed what was coming from the minute I saw you jab yourself with that toothpick."

He watched sardonically while I slowly unwound the handkerchief that had stayed around my finger all this time. The scratch had hardly bled at all. Just a single hairline of red was on the handkerchief.

We both looked at that.

Then more of the handkerchief came open. We both looked at the initials in the corner. *A. B.* We both, most likely, smelled the faint sweetness that still came from it at the same time. Very faint, for it was such a small handkerchief.

We both looked at each other, and both our minds made the same discovery at the same time. I was the one who spoke it aloud.

"It's hers," I said grimly; "the wife that didn't exist."

"This is a fine time to come out with it," he said quietly. "Move over, I'll drive." That was his way of saying, "I'm in."

I said, "I remember now. I got a cinder in my eye, during the drive in, and she lent me her handkerchief to take it out with; I didn't have one of my own on me. I guess I forgot to give it back to her. And this—is it."

I looked at him rebukingly. "What a difference a few square inches of linen can make. Without it, I was a madman. With it, I'm a

rational being who enlists your cooperation. I could have picked it up in any five-and-ten."

"No. You didn't turn it up when it would have done you the most good, back at the station house. You only turned it up several minutes after you were already supposed to have gulped a bottle of iodine. I could tell by your face you'd forgotten about it until then yourself. I think that makes a difference. To me it does, anyway."

"And what're you going to do about it?"

"Since we don't believe in the supernatural, our only possible premise is that there's been some human agency at work."

I noticed the direction he was taking. "Aren't you going back to the Royal?"

"There's no use bothering with the hotel. D'you see what I mean?"

"No, I don't," I said bluntly. "That was where she disappeared."

"The focus for this wholesale case of astigmatism is elsewhere, outside the hotel. It's true we could try to break them down, there at the hotel. But what about the Justice of Peace, what about the Beresford house in Lake City? I think it'll be simpler to try to find out the reason rather than the mechanics of the disappearance.

"And the reason lies elsewhere. Because you brought her to the hotel from the Justice's. And to the Justice's from Lake City. The hotel was the last stage. Find out why

the Justice denies he married you, and we don't have to find out why the hotel staff denies having seen her.

"Find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there, and we don't have to find out why the Justice denies he married you.

"Find out, maybe, something else, and we don't have to find out why the Beresford house denies she was a maid there. The time element keeps moving backward through the whole thing.

"Now talk to me. How long did you know her? How well? How much did you know about her?"

"Not long. Not well. Practically nothing. It was one of those story-book things. I met her a week ago last night. She was sitting on a bench in the park, as if she were lonely, didn't have a friend in the world. I don't make a habit of accosting girls on park benches, but she looked so dejected it got to me.

"Well, that's how we met. I walked her home afterwards to where she said she lived. But when we got there—holy smoke, it was a mansion! I got nervous, said, 'Gee, this is a pretty swell place for a guy like me to be bringing anyone home to, just a clerk in a store.'

"She laughed and said, 'I'm only the maid. Disappointed?' I said, 'No, I would have been disappointed if you'd been anybody else, because then you wouldn't be in my class.'

"She seemed relieved after I said

that. She said, 'Gee, I've waited so long to find someone who'd like me for myself.'

"Well, to make a long story short, we made an appointment to meet at that same bench the next night. I waited there for two hours and she never showed up. Luckily I went back the next night—and there she was. She explained she hadn't been able to get out the night before; the people where she worked were having company or something.

"When I took her home that night I asked her name, which I didn't know yet, and that seemed to scare her. She got sort of flustered, and I saw her look at her handbag. It had the initials *A.B.* on it; I'd already noticed that the first night I met her. She said, 'Alice Brown.'

"By the third time we met we were already nuts about each other. I asked her whether she'd take a chance and marry me. She said, 'Is it possible someone wants to marry little Alice Brown, who hasn't a friend in the world?' I said yes, and that was all there was to it.

"Only, when I left her that night, she seemed kind of scared. First I thought she was scared I'd change my mind, back out, but it wasn't that.

"She said, 'Jimmy, let's hurry up and do it—don't let's put it off. Let's do it while—while we have the chance'; and she hung onto my sleeve tight with both hands.

"So the next day I asked for a

week off, which I had coming to me from last summer anyway, and I waited for her with the car on the corner three blocks away from the house where she was in service.

"She came running as if the devil were behind her, but I thought that was because she didn't want to keep me waiting. She just had that one little overnight bag with her.

"She jumped in, and her face looked kind of white, and she said, 'Hurry, Jimmy, hurry!' And away we went. And until we were outside of Lake City, she kept looking back every once in a while, as if she were afraid someone was coming after us."

Ainslie didn't say much after all that rigmarole I'd given him. Just five words, after we'd driven on for about ten minutes or so. "She was afraid of something." And then in another ten minutes, "And whatever it was, it's what's caught up with her now."

We stopped at the filling station where Alice and I had stopped for gas the night before. I looked over the attendants, then said, "There's the one who serviced us."

Ainslie called him over, played a pocket light on my face.

"Do you remember servicing this man last night? This man, and a girl with him?"

"Nope, not me. Maybe one of the oth—"

Neither of us could see his hands at the moment; they were out of



range below the car door. I said, "He's got a white scar across the back of his right hand. I saw it last night when he was wiping the windshield."

Ainslie said, "Hold it up."

He did, and there was a white cicatrice across it, where stitches had been taken or something. Ainslie said, "Now whaddye say?"

It didn't shake him in the least. "I still say no. Maybe he saw me at one time or another, but I've never seen him, to my knowledge, with or without a girl." He waited a minute, then added, "Why should I deny it, if it was so?"

"We'll be back, in a day or in a week or in a month," Ainslie let him know grimly, "but we'll be back—to find that out."

We drove on. "Those four square inches of linen handkerchief will be wearing pretty thin if this keeps up," I muttered dejectedly after a while.

"Don't let that worry you," he said, looking straight ahead. "Once I'm sold, I don't unsell easily."

We crossed U. S. 9 a half hour later. A little white house came skimming along out of the darkness. "This is where I was married to a ghost," I said.

He braked, twisted the grip of the door latch. My hand shot down, stopped his arm.

"Wait; before you go in, listen to this. It may help out that handkerchief. There'll be a round mirror in the hall, to the left of the door, with

antlers over it for a hatrack. In their parlor, where he read the service, there'll be an upright piano, with brass candle holders sticking out of the front of it, above the keyboard. It's got a scarf on it that ends in a lot of little plush balls. And on the music rack, the top selection was a copy of *Kiss Me Again*. And on the wall there's a painting of a lot of fruit rolling out of a basket. And this housekeeper, he calls her Dora."

"That's enough," he said in that toneless voice of his. "I told you I was with you anyway, didn't I?"

He got out and went over and rang the bell. I went with him, of course.

They must have been asleep; they didn't answer right away. Then the housekeeper opened the door and looked out at us. Before we could say anything, we heard the Justice call down the stairs, "Who is it, Dora?"

Ainslie asked if we could come in and talk to him, and straightened his necktie in the round mirror to the left of the door, with antlers over it.

Hulskamp came down in a bathrobe, and Ainslie said, "You married this man to a girl named Alice Brown last night." It wasn't a question.

The Justice said, "No. I've already been asked that once, over the phone, and I said I hadn't. I've never seen this young man before." He

even put on his glasses to look at me better.

Ainslie didn't argue the matter, almost seemed to take him at his word. "I won't ask you to let me see your records," he said drily, "because they'll undoubtedly—bear out your word."

He strolled as far as the parlor entrance, glanced in idly. I peered over his shoulder. There was an upright piano with brass candle sconces. A copy of *Kiss Me Again* was topmost on its rack. A painting of fruit rolling out of a basket daubed the wall.

"They certainly will!" snapped the Justice resentfully.

The housekeeper put her oar in. "I'm a witness at all the marriages the Justice performs, and I'm sure the young man's mistaken. I don't ever recall—"

Ainslie steadied me with one hand clasping my arm, and led me out without another word. We got in the car again. Their door closed, somewhat forcefully.

I pounded the rim of the wheel helplessly with my fist. I said, "What is it? Some sort of conspiracy? But *why*? She's not important; I'm not important."

He threw in the clutch, and the little white house ebbed away in the night-darkness behind us.

"It's some sort of a conspiracy, all right," he said. "We've got to get the reason for it. That's the quickest, shortest way to clear it up. To take any of the weaker links, the

bellboy at the hotel or that filling station attendant, and break them down, would not only take days, but in the end would only get us some anonymous individual who'd either threatened them or paid them to forget having seen your wife, and we wouldn't be much further than before.

"If we can get to the reason behind it all, the source, we don't have to bother with any of these small fry. That's why we're heading back to Lake City instead of just concentrating on that hotel in Michianopolis."

We made Lake City by one A.M. and I showed him the way to New Hampshire Avenue. Number 20 was a massive corner house, and we glided up to it from the back along the side street, and braked across the way from the service entrance that I'd always brought her back to. Not a light was showing.

"Don't get out yet," he said. "When you brought her home nights, you brought her to this back door, right?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, did you ever actually see her open it and go in, or did you just leave her here by it and walk off without waiting to see where she went?"

I felt myself get a little frightened again. This was something that hadn't occurred to me until now.

"I didn't once actually see the door open and her go inside, now

that I come to think of it. She seemed to—to want me to walk off without waiting. She didn't say so, but I could tell. I thought maybe it was because she didn't want her employers to catch on that she was going around with anyone. I'd walk off, down that way—"

I pointed to the corner behind us, on the next avenue over. "Then when I got there, I'd look back from there each time. As anyone would. Each time I did, she wasn't there any more. I thought she'd gone in, but—it's funny, I never saw her go in."

He nodded gloomily. "Just about what I thought. For all you know, she didn't even belong in that house, never went in there at all. A quick little dash, while your back was turned, would have taken her around the corner of the house and out of sight. And the city would have swallowed her up."

"But why?" I said helplessly.

He didn't answer that. We hadn't had a good look at the front of the house yet. As I have said, we had approached from the rear, along the side street.

He got out of the car now, and I followed suit. We walked down the few remaining yards to the corner, and turned and looked all up and down the front of it.

It was an expensive limestone building; it spelled real dough, even looking at it in the dark as we were. There was a light showing from the front, through one of the

tall ground-floor windows—but a very dim one, almost like a night light. It didn't send any shine outside, just peered wanly around the sides of the blind that had been drawn on the inside.

Something moved close up against the door facing, stirred a little. If it hadn't been white limestone, it wouldn't have even been noticeable at all.

We both saw it at once. I caught instinctively at Ainslie's arm, and a cold knife of dull fear went through me—though why I couldn't tell.

"Crepe on the front door," he whispered. "Somebody's dead in there. Whether she did go in here or didn't, just the same I think we'd better have a look at the inside of this place."

I took a step in the direction of the front door. He recalled me with a curt gesture. "And by that I don't mean march up the front steps, ring the doorbell, and flash my badge."

"Then how?"

Brakes ground somewhere along the side street behind us. We turned our heads and a lacquered sedan-truck had drawn up directly before the service door of 20 New Hampshire Avenue.

"Just in time," Ainslie said. "This is how."

We started back toward it. The driver and a helper had got down, were unloading batches of camp chairs, and stacking them up

against the side of the truck, preparatory to taking them in.

"For the services tomorrow, I suppose," Ainslie grunted. He said to the driver, "Who is it that died, bud?"

"Mean to say you ain't heard? It's in alla papers."

"We're from out of town."

"Alma Beresford, the heiress. Richest gal in twenty-four states. She was an orphan, too. Pretty soft for her guardian; not another soul to get the cash but him."

"What was it?" For the first time since I'd known him, you couldn't have called Ainslie's voice toneless; it was sort of springy, like a rubber band that's pulled too tight.

"Heart attack, I think." The truckman snapped his fingers. "Like that. Shows you that rich or poor, when you gotta go, you gotta go."

Ainslie asked only one more question. "Why you bringing these setups at an hour like this? They're not going to hold the services in the middle of the night, are they?"

"Nah, but first thing in the morning; so early there wouldn't be a chance to get 'em over here unless we delivered 'em ahead of time."

He was suddenly staring fascinatedly at the silvery lining of Ainslie's hand.

Ainslie's voice was toneless again. "Tell you what you fellows are going to do. You're going to save yourselves the trouble of hauling all those camp chairs inside,

and you're going to get paid for it in the bargain. Lend us those work aprons y'got on."

He slipped them something apiece; I couldn't see whether it was two dollars or five. "Gimme your delivery ticket. I'll get it receipted for you. You two get back in the truck and lie low."

We both took off our hats and coats, put them in our own car, rolled our shirtsleeves, put on the work aprons, and rang the service bell. There was a short wait and then a wire-sheathed bulb over the entry glimmered pallidly as an indication someone was coming.

The door opened and a gaunt-faced sandy-haired man looked out at us. It was hard to tell just how old he was. He looked like a butler, but he was dressed in a business suit.

"Camp chairs from the Thebes Funerary Chapel," Ainslie said, reading from the delivery ticket.

"Follow me and I'll show you where they're to go," he said in a hushed voice. "Be as quiet as you can. We've only just succeeded in getting Mr. Hastings to lie down and try to rest a little."

The guardian, I supposed. In which case this anemic-looking customer would be the guardian's Man Friday.

We each grabbed up an armful of the camp chairs and went in after him. They were corded together in batches of half a dozen. We could have cleared up the

whole consignment at once—they were lightweight—but Ainslie gave me the eye not to; he wanted to have an excuse to prolong our presence as much as possible.

We went down a short delivery passageway, then up a few steps into a brightly lighted kitchen.

A hatchet-faced woman in maid's livery was sitting by a table crying away under one eye-shading hand, a teacup and a tumbler of gin before her. Judging by the redness of her nose, she'd been at it for hours. "My baby," she'd mew every once in a while.

We followed him out at the other side, through a pantry, a gloomy-looking dining room, and finally into a huge cavernous front room, eerily suffused with flickering candlelight that did no more than heighten the shadows in its far corners. It was this wavering pallor that we must have seen from outside of the house.

An open coffin rested on a flower-massed bier at the upper end of the place, a lighted taper glimmering at each corner of it. A violet velvet pall had been spread over the top of it, concealing what lay within.

But a tiny peaked outline, that could have been made by an up-tilted nose, was visible in the plush at one extremity of its length. That knife of dread gave an excruciating little twist in me, and again I didn't know why—or refused to admit I did. It was as if I instinc-

tively sensed the nearness of something familiar.

The rest of the room, before this monument to mortality, had been left clear, its original furniture moved aside or taken out. The man who had admitted us gave us our instructions.

"Arrange them in four rows, here in front of the bier. Leave an aisle through them. And be sure and leave enough space up ahead for the divine who will deliver the eulogy."

Then he retreated to the door and stood watching us for a moment.

Ainslie produced a knife from the pocket of his borrowed apron and began severing the cord that bound the frames of the camp chairs together. I opened them one at a time as he freed them and began setting them up in quadruple rows, being as slow about it as I could.

There was a slight sound and the factotum had tiptoed back toward the kitchen for a moment, perhaps for a sip of the comforting gin. Ainslie raised his head, caught my eye, speared his thumb at the bier imperatively. I was the nearer of us to it at the moment. I knew what he meant: look and see who it was.

I went cold all over, but I put down the camp chair I was fiddling with and edged over toward it on arched feet. The taper-flames bent down flat as I approached them,

and sort of hissed. Sweat needled out under the roots of my hair.

I went around by the head, where that tiny little peak was, reached out, and gingerly took hold of the corners of the velvet pall, which fell loosely over the two sides of the coffin without quite meeting the headboard.

Just as my wrists flexed to tip it back, Ainslie coughed warningly. There was a whispered returning tread from beyond the doorway. I let go, took a quick side-jump back toward where I'd been.

I glanced around and the secretary-fellow had come back again and was standing there with his eyes fixed on me. I pretended to be measuring off the distance for the pulpit with my foot.

"You men are rather slow about it," he said, thin-lipped.

"You want 'em just so, don't you?" Ainslie answered. He went out to get the second batch. I pretended one of the stools had jammed and I was having trouble getting it open, as an excuse to linger behind. The secretary was on his guard. He lingered too.

The dick took care of that. He waited until he was halfway back with his load of camp chairs, then dropped them all over the pantry floor with a clatter, to draw the watchdog off.

It worked. He gave a huff of annoyance, turned, and went in to bawl Ainslie out for the noise he had made. The minute the door-

way cleared, I gave a cat-like spring back toward the velvet mound. This time I made it. I flung the pall back—

Then I let go of it, and the lighted candles started spinning around my head, faster and faster, until they made a comet-like track of fire.

The still face staring up at me from the coffin was Alice's.

I felt my knees hit something, and I was swaying back and forth on them there beside the bier. I could hear somebody coming back toward the room, but whether it was Ainslie or the other guy I didn't know and didn't care.

Then an arm went around me and steadied me to my feet once more, so I knew it was Ainslie.

"It's her," I said brokenly. "Alice. I can't understand it; she must—have—been this rich girl, Alma Beresford, all the time—"

He let go of me, took a quick step over to the coffin, flung the pall even farther back than I had. He dipped his head, as if he were staring nearsightedly.

Then he turned and I never felt my shoulder grabbed so hard before, or since. His fingers felt like steel claws that went in, and met in the middle. For a minute I didn't know whether he was attacking me or not; and I was too dazed to care.

He was pointing at the coffin. "Look at that!" he demanded.

I didn't know what he meant.

He shook me brutally, either to get me to understand or because he was so excited himself. "*She's not dead.* Watch her chest."

I fixed my eyes on it. You could tell only by watching the line where the white satin of her burial gown met the violet quilting of the coffin lining. The white was faintly, but unmistakably and rhythmically, rising and falling.

"They've got her either drugged or in a coma—"

He broke off short, let go of me as if my shoulder were red-hot and burned his fingers. His hand flashed down and up again, and he'd drawn and sighted over my shoulder.

"Put it down or I'll let you have it right where you are!" he said.

Something thudded to the carpet. I turned and the secretary was standing there in the doorway, palms out, a fallen revolver lying at his feet.

"Go over and get that, Cannon," Ainslie ordered. "This looks like the finale now. Let's see what we've got."

There was an arched opening behind him leading out to the front entrance hall, I suppose, and the stairway to the upper floors. We'd come in from the rear, remember. Velvet drapes had been drawn closed over that arch, sealing it up the whole time we'd been in there.

He must have come in through there. I bent down before the mo-

tionless secretary, and, with my fingers an inch away from the fallen gun at his feet, I heard the impact of a head blow and Ainslie gave the peculiar guttural groan of someone going down into unconsciousness.

The secretary's foot snaked out and sped the gun skidding far across to the other side of the room. Then he dropped on my curved back like a dead weight and I went down flat under him, pushing my face into the floor.

He kept aiming blows at the side of my head from above, but he had only his fists to work with at the moment, and even the ones that landed weren't as effective as whatever it was that had been used on Ainslie. I reached upward and over, caught the secretary by the shoulders of his coat, tugged and at the same time jerked my body out from under him in the opposite direction; and he came flying up in a backward somersault and landed sprawling a few feet away.

I got up and looked. Ainslie lay inert, face down on the floor to one side of the coffin, something gleaming wet in the part of his hair. There was a handsome but vicious-looking gray-haired man in a brocaded dressing gown standing behind him holding a gun on me, trying to cow me with it.

"Get him, Mr. Hastings," panted the one I'd flung off.

It would have taken more than a gun to hold me, after what I'd

been through. I charged at him, around Ainslie's form. He evidently didn't want to fire, didn't want the noise of a shot to be heard there in the house.

Instead, he reversed his gun, swung the butt high up over his shoulder; and my own headfirst charge undid me. I couldn't swerve or brake in time, plunged right in under it.

A hissing, spark-shedding sky-rocket seemed to tear through the top of my head, and I went down into nothingness as Ainslie had.

For an hour after I recovered consciousness I was in complete darkness—such utter darkness that I couldn't be sure the blow hadn't affected my optic nerve.

I was in a sitting position, on something cold—stone flooring probably—with my hands lashed behind me, around something equally cold and sweating moisture, most likely a water pipe. My feet were tied too, and there was a gag over my mouth. My head blazed with pain.

After what seemed like an age, a smoky gray light began to dilute the blackness; so at least my eyesight wasn't impaired. As the light strengthened it showed me first a barred grate high up on the wall through which the dawn was peering in. Next, a dingy basement around me, presumably that of the same New Hampshire Avenue

house we had entered several hours ago.

And finally, if that was any consolation to me, Ainslie sitting facing me from across the way, in about the same fix I was. Hands and feet secured, sitting before another pipe, mouth also gagged. A dark stain down one side of his forehead, long since dried, marked the effect of the blow he had received.

We just stared at each other, unable to communicate. We could turn our heads. He shook his from side to side deprecatingly. I knew what he meant: "Fine spot we ended up in, didn't we?" I nodded, meaning, "You said it."

But we were enjoying perfect comfort and peace of mind, compared to what was to follow. It came within about half an hour at the most. Sounds of activity began to penetrate to where we were.

First, a desultory moving about sounded over our heads, as if someone were looking things over to make sure everything was in order. Then something heavy was set down: it might have been a table, a desk—or a pulpit.

This cellar compartment we were in seemed to be directly under that large front room where the coffin was and where the obsequies were to be held.

A dawning horror began to percolate through me. I looked at Ainslie and tried to make him understand what I was thinking. I



didn't need to—he was thinking the same thing.

She'd been alive when we'd last seen her, last night. Early this same morning, rather. What were they going to do—go ahead with it anyway?

A car door clashed faintly, somewhere off in the distance outside. It must have been at the main entrance of this very house we were in, for within a moment or two new footsteps sounded overhead, picking their way along, as down an aisle under guidance.

Then something scraped slightly, like the leg rests of a camp chair straining under the weight of a body.

It repeated itself eight or ten times after that. The impact of a car door outside in the open, then the sedate footsteps over us—some were the flat dull ones of men, some the sharp brittle ones of women—then the slight shift and click of the camp chairs.

I didn't have to be told its meaning; probably Ainslie didn't either. The mourners were arriving for the services.

It was probably unintentional, our having been placed directly below like this; but it was the most diabolic torture that could ever have been devised. Was she dead yet, or wasn't she? But she had to be before—

They couldn't be that low. Maybe the drug she'd been under last night was timed to take fatal effect be-

tween then and now. But suppose it hadn't?

The two of us were writhing there like maimed snakes. Ainslie kept trying to bring his knees up and meet them with his chin, and at first I couldn't understand what his idea was. It was to snag the gag in the cleft between his two tightly pressed knees and pull it down, or at least dislodge it sufficiently to get some sound out. I immediately began trying the same thing myself.

Meanwhile an ominous silence had descended above us. No more car-door thuds, no more footsteps mincing down the aisle to their seats. The services were being held.

The lower half of my face was all numb by now from hitting my bony up-ended knees so many times. And still I couldn't work it. Neither could Ainslie. The rounded structure of the kneecaps kept them from getting close enough to our lips to act as pincers. If only one of us could have made it. If we could hear them that clearly down here, they would have been able to hear us yell up there. And they couldn't all be in on the plot, all those mourners, friends of the family, or whoever they were.

Bad as the preliminaries had been, they were as nothing compared to the concluding stages that we now had to endure listening to. There was a sudden concerted mass shifting and scraping above, as if everyone had risen to his feet at one time.

Then a slow, single-file shuffling started in, going in one direction, returning in another. The mourners were filing around the coffin one by one for a last look at the departed—the departed who was still living.

After the last of them had gone out, and while the incessant cracking of car doors was still under way outside, marking the forming of the funeral cortege, there was a quick, business-like converging of not more than two pairs of feet on one certain place—where the coffin was. A hurried shifting about for a moment or two, then a sharp hammering on wood penetrated to where we were, and nearly drove me crazy.

They were fastening down the lid.

After a slight pause that might have been employed in reopening the closed-room doors, more feet came in, all male, and moving toward that one certain place where the first two had preceded them. These must be the pallbearers, four or six of them.

There was a brief scraping and jockeying about while they lifted the casket to their shoulders, and then the slow, measured tread with which they carried it outside to the waiting hearse.

I let my head fall inertly downward as far over as I could bend it, so Ainslie wouldn't see the tears running out of my eyes.

Motion attracted me and I looked blurredly up again. He was shaking his head steadily back and forth. "Don't give up, keep trying," he meant to say. "It's not too late yet."

About five or ten minutes after the hearse had left, a door opened surreptitiously somewhere close at hand; and a stealthy, frightened tread began to descend toward us, evidently along some steps that were back of me.

Ainslie could see who it was—he was facing that way—but I couldn't until the hatchet-faced maid we had seen crying in the kitchen the night before suddenly sidled out between us. She kept looking back in the direction from which she'd just come, as if scared of her life.

She had an ordinary kitchen bread knife in her hand. She wasn't in livery now, but black-hatted, coated and gloved, as if she had started out for the cemetery with the rest and then slipped back unnoticed.

She went for Ainslie's bonds first, cackling terrifiedly the whole time she was sawing away at them. "Oh if they ever find out I did this, I don't know what they'll do to me! I didn't even know you were down here until I happened to overhear Mr. Hastings whisper to his secretary just now before they left, 'Leave the other two where they are—we can attend to them when we come back.'"

"Which one of you is her Jim-

my? She confided in me; I knew about it; I helped her slip in and out of the house that whole week. I took her place under the bedcovers, so that when he'd look in he'd think she was asleep in her room.

"They had no right to do this to you and your friend, Jimmy, even though you were the cause of her death. The excitement was too much for her, she'd been so carefully brought up. She got this heart attack and died. She was already unconscious when they brought her back—from wherever it was you ran off with her to.

"I don't know why I'm helping you. You're a reckless, bad, fortune-hunting scoundrel—Mr. Hastings says so. The marriage wouldn't have been legal anyway; she didn't use her right name. It cost him all kinds of money to hush everyone up about it and destroy the documents, so it wouldn't be found out and you wouldn't have a chance to blackmail her later.

"You killed my baby! But still he should have turned you over to the police, not kept you tied up all ni—"

At this point she finally got through, and Ainslie's gag flew out of his mouth like one of those feathered darts kids shoot through a blow-tube.

"I *am* the police!" he panted. "And your 'baby' has been murdered, or will be within the next few minutes, by Hastings himself, not this boy here. She was still

alive in that coffin at two o'clock this morning!"

She gave a scream like the noon whistle of a factory. He kept her from fainting, or at any rate falling in a heap, by pinning her to the wall, and took the knife away from her.

He freed me in one-tenth of the time it had taken her to rid him of his own bonds.

"No," she was groaning hollowly through her hands, "her own family doctor, a lifelong friend of her father and mother, examined her after she was gone, and made out the death certificate. He's an honest man, he wouldn't do that—"

"He's old, I take it. Did he see her face?" Ainslie interrupted.

A look of almost stupid consternation froze on her own face. "No. I was at the bedside with him; it was covered. But only a moment before she'd been lying there in full view. The doctor and I both saw her from the door.

"Then Mr. Hastings had a fainting spell in the other room, and we ran to help him. When the doctor came in again to proceed with his examination, Mr. Chivers had covered her face—to spare Mr. Hastings' feelings.

"Dr. Meade just examined her body. Mr. Hastings pleaded with him not to remove the covering, said he couldn't bear it. And my pet was still wearing the little wrist watch her mother gave her before she died—"

"They substituted another body for hers, that's all. I don't care how many wrist watches it had on it," Ainslie told her brutally. "Stole that of a young girl approximately her own age who had just died from heart failure or some other natural cause, most likely from one of the hospital morgues, and put it over on the doddering family doctor and you both.

"If you look, you'll probably find something in the papers about a vanished corpse. The main thing is to stop that burial; I'm not positive enough on it to take a chance. It may be she in the coffin after all, and not the substitute. Where was the interment to be?"

"In the family plot, at Cypress Hill."

"Come on, Cannon; got your circulation back yet?" He was at the top of the stairs already. "Get the local police and tell them to meet us out there."

Ainslie's badge was all that got us into the cemetery, which was private. The casket had already been lowered out of sight. They were throwing the first shovelful of earth over it as we burst through the little ring of sedate, bowing mourners.

The last thing I saw was Ainslie snatching an implement from one of the cemetery workers and jumping down bodily into the opening, feet first.

The face of that silver-haired devil, her guardian Hastings, had focused in on my inflamed eyes.

A squad of Lake City police, arriving only minutes after us, were all that saved his life. It took three of them to pull me off him.

Ainslie's voice was what brought me to, more than anything else. "It's all right, Cannon," he was yelling over and over from somewhere behind me. "It's the substitute."

I stumbled over to the lip of the grave between two of the cops and took a look down. It was the face of a stranger that was peering up at me through the shattered coffin lid. I turned away, and they made the mistake of letting go of me.

I went for the secretary this time; Hastings was still stretched out more dead than alive. "What've you done with her? Where've you got her?"

"That ain't the way to make him answer," Ainslie said, and for the last time throughout the whole affair his voice wasn't toneless. "*This is!*"

*Wham!* We had to take about six steps forward to catch up with the secretary where he was now.

Ainslie's method was right at that. The secretary talked—fast.

Alice was safe; but she wouldn't have been much longer. After the mourners had had a last look at her in the coffin, Hastings and the secretary had locked her up for safe-

keeping—stupefied, of course—and substituted the other body for burial.

And Alice's turn was to come later when, under cover of night, she was to be spirited away to a hunting lodge in the hills—the lodge that had belonged to her father. There she could have been murdered at leisure.

When we'd flashed back to the New Hampshire Avenue house in a police car, and unlocked the door of the little den where she'd been secreted; and when the police physician who accompanied us brought her out of the opiate they'd kept her under—whose arms do you think were the first to go around her?

"Jimmy—" she sighed a little, after we took time out from the clinches—"he showed up late that night with Chivers, in that dinky little room you left me in.

"They must have been right behind us all the way, paying all those people to say they'd never seen me.

"But he fooled me, pretended he

wasn't angry, said he didn't mind if I married and left him. And I was so sleepy and off guard that I believed him.

"Then he handed me a glass of salty-tasting water to drink, and said, 'Come on down to the car. Jimmy's down there waiting for you; we've got him with us.' I staggered down there between them—that's all I remember."

Then she remembered something else and looked at me with fright in her eyes. "Jimmy, you didn't mind marrying little Alice Brown, but I don't suppose Alma Beresford would stand a show with you—?"

"You don't suppose right," I told her gruffly, "because I'm marrying Alice Brown all over again—even if we've gotta change her name first.

"And this ugly-looking bloke standing up here, name of Ainslie, is going to be best man at our second wedding. Know why? Because he was the only one in the whole world who believed there really was a you."



## John Steinbeck

### How Mr. Hogan Robbed a Bank

*John Steinbeck, the world-famous author of THE GRAPES OF WRATH and TORTILLA FLAT and other never-to-be-forgotten books, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. The award came as no surprise—indeed, many critics wondered why it was so long in coming. But Mr. Steinbeck himself can still surprise us—by this story, for example: a crime story about a bank robbery; but not so surprising from a writer of John Steinbeck's stature is the "innardness" of this story—the compact study of an American small town, much of it by implication . . .*

ON THE SATURDAY BEFORE LABOR Day, 1955, at 9:04½ A.M., Mr. Hogan robbed a bank. He was forty-two years old, married, and the father of a boy and a girl, named John and Joan, twelve and thirteen respectively. Mrs. Hogan's name was Joan and Mr. Hogan's was John, but since they called themselves Papa and Mama, that left their names free for the children, who were considered very smart for their ages, each having jumped a grade in school. The Hogans lived at 215 East Maple Street, in a brown-shingle house with white trim—there are two. 215 is the one across from the street light and it is the one with the big tree in the yard, either oak or elm—the biggest tree in the whole street, maybe in the whole town. That's pretty big.

John and Joan were in bed at the

time of the robbery, for it was Saturday. At 9:10 A.M., Mrs. Hogan was making the cup of tea she always had. Mr. Hogan went to work early. Mrs. Hogan drank her tea slowly, scalding hot, and read her fortune in the tea leaves. There was a cloud and a five-pointed star with two short points in the bottom of the cup, but that was at 9:12 and the robbery was all over by then.

The way Mr. Hogan went about robbing the bank was very interesting. He gave it a great deal of thought and had for a long time, but he did not discuss it with anyone. He just read his newspaper and kept his own counsel. But he worked it out to his own satisfaction that people went to too much trouble robbing banks and that got them in a mess. The simpler the better, he always thought. People

went in for too much hullabaloo and hanky-panky. If you didn't do that, if you left hanky-panky out, robbing a bank would be a relatively sound venture—barring accidents, of course, of an improbable kind, but then they could happen to a man crossing the street or anything. Since Mr. Hogan's method worked fine, it proved that his thinking was sound. He often considered writing a little booklet on his technique when the how-to rage was running so high. He figured out the first sentence, which went: "To successfully rob a bank, forget all about hanky-panky."

Mr. Hogan was not just a clerk at Fettucci's grocery store. He was more like the manager. Mr. Hogan was in charge, even hired and fired the boy who delivered groceries after school. He even put in orders with the salesmen, sometimes when Mr. Fettucci was right in the store too, maybe talking to a customer. "You do it, John," he would say and he would nod at the customer, "John knows the ropes. Been with me—how long you been with me, John?"

"Sixteen years."

"Sixteen years. Knows the business as good as me. John, why he even banks the money."

And so he did. Whenever he had a moment, Mr. Hogan went into the storeroom on the alley, took off his apron, put on his necktie and coat, and went back through the store to the cash register. The

checks and bills would be ready for him inside the bankbook with a rubber band around it. Then he went next door and stood at the teller's window and handed the checks and bankbook through to Mr. Cup and passed the time of day with him too. Then, when the bankbook was handed back, he checked the entry, put the rubber band around it, and walked next door to Fettucci's grocery and put the bankbook in the cash register, continued on to the storeroom, removed his coat and tie, put on his apron, and went back into the store ready for business. If there was no line at the teller's window, the whole thing didn't take more than five minutes, even passing the time of day.

Mr. Hogan was a man who noticed things, and when it came to robbing the bank, this trait stood him in good stead. He had noticed, for instance, where the big bills were kept right in the drawer under the counter and he had noticed also what days there were likely to be more than on other days. Thursday was payday at the American Can Company's local plant, for instance, so there would be more then. Some Fridays people drew more money to tide them over the weekend. But it was even Steven, maybe not a thousand dollars difference, between Thursdays and Fridays and Saturday mornings. Saturdays were not terribly good because people didn't come to get

money that early in the morning, and the bank closed at noon. But he thought it over and came to the conclusion that the Saturday before a long weekend in the summer would be the best of all. People going on trips, vacations, people with relatives visiting, and the bank closed Monday. He thought it out and looked, and sure enough the Saturday morning before Labor Day the cash drawer had twice as much money in it—he saw it when Mr. Cup pulled out the drawer.

Mr. Hogan thought about it during all that year, not all the time, of course, but when he had some moments. It was a busy year too. That was the year John and Joan had the mumps and Mrs. Hogan got her teeth pulled and was fitted for a denture. That was the year when Mr. Hogan was Master of the Lodge, with all the time that takes. Larry Shield died that year—he was Mrs. Hogan's brother and was buried from the Hogan house at 215 East Maple. Larry was a bachelor and had a room in the Pine Tree House and he played pool nearly every night. He worked at the Silver Diner but that closed at nine and so Larry would go to Louie's and play pool for an hour. Therefore, it was a surprise when he left enough so that after funeral expenses there were twelve hundred dollars left. And even more surprising that he left a will in Mrs. Hogan's favor, but his double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun he

left to John Hogan, Jr. Mr. Hogan was pleased, although he never hunted. He put the shotgun away in the back of the closet in the bathroom, where he kept his things, to keep it for young John. He didn't want children handling guns and he never bought any shells. It was some of that twelve hundred that got Mrs. Hogan her dentures. Also, she bought a bicycle for John and a doll buggy and walking-talking doll for Joan—a doll with three changes of dresses and a little suitcase, complete with play make-up. Mr. Hogan thought it might spoil the children, but it didn't seem to. They made just as good marks in school and John even got a job delivering papers. It was a very busy year. Both John and Joan wanted to enter the W. R. Hearst National *I Love America* Contest and Mr. Hogan thought it was almost too much, but they promised to do the work during their summer vacation, so he finally agreed.

During that year no one noticed any difference in Mr. Hogan. It was true, he was thinking about robbing the bank, but he only thought about it in the evening when there was neither a Lodge meeting nor a movie they wanted to go to, so it did not become an obsession and people noticed no change in him.

He had studied everything so carefully that the approach of Labor Day did not catch him unprepared or nervous. It was hot that summer and the hot spells were



longer than usual. Saturday was the end of two weeks heat without a break and people were irritated with it and anxious to get out of town, although the country was just as hot. They didn't think of that. The children were excited because the *I Love America* Essay Contest was due to be concluded and the winners announced, and the first prize was an all-expense-paid two days trip to Washington, D.C., with every fixing—hotel room, three meals a day, and side trips in a limousine—not only for the winner, but for an accompanying chaperone; visit to the White House—shake hands with the President—everything. Mr. Hogan thought they were getting their hopes too high and he said so.

"You've got to be prepared to lose," he told his children. "There are probably thousands and thousands entered. You get your hopes up and it might spoil the whole autumn. Now I don't want any long faces in this house after the contest is over."

"I was against it from the start," he told Mrs. Hogan. That was the morning she saw the Washington Monument in her teacup, but she didn't tell anybody about that except Ruth Tyler, Bob Tyler's wife. Ruthie brought over her cards and read them in the Hogan kitchen, but she didn't find a journey. She did tell Mrs. Hogan that the cards were often wrong. The cards had said Mrs. Winkle was going on a

trip to Europe and the next week Mrs. Winkle got a fishbone in her throat and choked to death. Ruthie, just thinking out loud, wondered if there was any connection between the fishbone and the ocean voyage to Europe. "You've got to interpret them right." Ruthie did say she saw money coming to the Hogans.

"Oh, I got that already from poor Larry," Mrs. Hogan explained.

"I must have got the past and future cards mixed," said Ruthie. "You've got to interpret them right."

Saturday dawned a blaster. The early morning weather report on the radio said: "Continued hot and humid, light scattered rain Sunday night and Monday."

Mrs. Hogan said, "Wouldn't you know? Labor Day."

Mr. Hogan said, "I'm sure glad we didn't plan anything." He finished his egg and mopped the plate with his toast.

Mrs. Hogan said, "Did I put coffee on the list?"

He took the paper from his handkerchief pocket and consulted it. "Yes, coffee, it's here."

"I had a crazy idea I forgot to write it down," said Mrs. Hogan. "Ruth and I are going to Altar Guild this afternoon. It's at Mrs. Alfred Drake's. You know, they just came to town. I can't wait to see their furniture."

"They trade with us," said Mr. Hogan. "Opened an account last week. Are the milk bottles ready?"

"On the porch."

Mr. Hogan looked at his watch just before he picked up the bottles and it was five minutes to eight. He was about to go down the stairs, when he turned and looked back through the opened door at Mrs. Hogan.

She said, "Want something, Papa?"

"No," he said. "No," and he walked down the steps.

He went down to the corner and turned right on Spooner, and Spooner runs into Main Street in two blocks, and right across from where it runs in, there is Fettucci's and the bank around the corner and the alley beside the bank. Mr. Hogan picked up a handbill in front of Fettucci's and unlocked the door. He went through to the storeroom, opened the door to the alley, and looked out. A cat tried to force its way in, but Mr. Hogan blocked it with his foot and leg and closed the door. He took off his coat and put on his long apron, tied the strings in a bowknot behind his back. Then he got the broom from behind the counter and swept out behind the counters and scooped the sweepings into a dustpan; and going through the storeroom he opened the door to the alley. The cat had gone away. He emptied the dustpan into the garbage can and tapped it smartly to dislodge a piece of lettuce leaf. Then he went back to the store and worked for a while on the order

sheet. Mrs. Clooney came in for a half a pound of bacon. She said it was hot and Mr. Hogan agreed.

"Summers are getting hotter," he said.

"I think so myself," said Mrs. Clooney. "How's Mrs. standing up?"

"Just fine," said Mr. Hogan. "She's going to Altar Guild."

"So am I. I just can't wait to see their furniture," said Mrs. Clooney, and she went out.

Mr. Hogan put a five-pound hunk of bacon on the slicer and stripped off the pieces and laid them on wax paper and then he put the wax-paper-covered squares in the cooler cabinet. At ten minutes to nine Mr. Hogan went to a shelf. He pushed a spaghetti box aside and took down a cereal box, which he emptied in the little closet toilet. Then, with a banana knife, he cut out the Mickey Mouse mask that was on the back. The rest of the box he took to the toilet and tore up the cardboard and flushed it down. He went into the store and yanked a piece of string loose and tied the ends through the side holes of the mask and then he looked at his watch—a large silver Hamilton with black hands. It was two minutes to nine.

Perhaps the next four minutes were his only time of nervousness at all. At one minute to nine he took the broom and went out to sweep the sidewalk and he swept it very rapidly—was sweeping it,

in fact, when Mr. Warner unlocked the bank door. He said good morning to Mr. Warner and a few seconds later the bank staff of four emerged from the coffee shop. Mr. Hogan saw them cross the street and he waved at them and they waved back. He finished the side-walk and went back in the store. He laid his watch on the little step of the cash register. He sighed very deeply, more like a deep breath than a sigh. He knew that Mr. Warner would have the safe open now and he would be carrying the cash trays to the teller's window. Mr. Hogan looked at the watch on the cash register step. Mr. Kentworthy paused in the store entrance, then shook his head vaguely and walked on and Mr. Hogan let out his breath gradually. His left hand went behind his back and pulled the bowknot on his apron, and then the black hand on his watch crept up on the four-minute mark and covered it.

Mr. Hogan opened the charge account drawer and took out the store pistol, a silver-colored Iver Johnson .38. He moved quickly to the storeroom, slipped off his apron, put on his coat, and stuck the revolver in his side pocket. The Mickey Mouse mask he shoved up under his coat where it didn't show. He opened the alley door and looked up and down and stepped quickly out, leaving the door slightly ajar. It is sixty feet to where the alley enters Main Street, and

there he paused and looked up and down and then he turned his head toward the center of the street as he passed the bank window. At the bank's swinging door he took out the mask from under his coat and put it on. Mr. Warner was just entering his office and his back was to the door. The top of Will Cup's head was visible through the teller's grill.

Mr. Hogan moved quickly and quietly around the end of the counter and into the teller's cage. He had the revolver in his right hand now. When Will Cup turned his head and saw the revolver, he froze. Mr. Hogan slipped his toe under the trigger of the floor alarm and he motioned Will Cup to the floor with the revolver and Will went down quick. Then Mr. Hogan opened the cash drawer and with two quick movements he piled the large bills from the tray together. He made a whipping motion to Will on the floor, to indicate that he should turn over and face the wall, and Will did. Then Mr. Hogan stepped back around the counter. At the door of the bank he took off the mask, and as he passed the window he turned his head toward the middle of the street. He moved into the alley, walked quickly to the storeroom, and entered. The cat had got in. It watched him from a pile of canned goods cartons. Mr. Hogan went to the toilet closet and tore up the mask and flushed it. He took off his coat and

put on his apron. He looked out into the store and then moved to the cash register. The revolver went back into the charge account drawer. He punched *No Sale* and, lifting the top drawer, distributed the stolen money underneath the top tray and then pulled the tray forward and closed the register. Only then did he look at his watch and it was 9:07½.

He was trying to get the cat out of the storeroom when the commotion boiled out of the bank. He took his broom and went out on the sidewalk. He heard all about it and offered his opinion when it was asked for. He said he didn't think the fellow could get away—where could he get to? Still, with the holiday coming up—

It was an exciting day. Mr. Fettucci was as proud as though it were his bank. The sirens sounded around town for hours. Hundreds of holiday travelers had to stop at the roadblocks set up all around the edge of town and several sneaky-looking men had their cars searched.

Mrs. Hogan heard about it over the phone and she dressed earlier than she would have ordinarily and came to the store on her way to Altar Guild. She hoped Mr. Hogan would have seen or heard something new, but he hadn't. "I don't see how the fellow can get away," he said.

Mrs. Hogan was so excited, she forgot her own news. She only re-

membered when she got to Mrs. Drake's house, but she asked permission and phoned the store the first moment she could. "I forgot to tell you. John's won honorable mention."

"What?"

"In the *I Love America* Contest."

"What did he win?"

"Honorable mention."

"Fine. Fine—Anything come with it?"

"Why, he'll get his picture and his name all over the country. Radio too. Maybe even television. They've already asked for a photograph of him."

"Fine," said Mr. Hogan. "I hope it don't spoil him." He put up the receiver and said to Mr. Fettucci, "I guess we've got a celebrity in the family."

Fettucci stayed open until nine on Saturdays. Mr. Hogan ate a few snacks from cold cuts, but not much, because Mrs. Hogan always kept his supper warming.

It was 9:05, or :06, or :07, when he got back to the brown-shingle house at 215 East Maple. He went in through the front door and out to the kitchen where the family was waiting for him.

"Got to wash up," he said, and went up to the bathroom. He turned the key in the bathroom door and then he flushed the toilet and turned on the water in the basin and tub while he counted the money. \$8320. From the top shelf of the storage closet in the bath-

room he took down the big leather case that held his Knight Templar's uniform. The plumed hat lay there on its form. The white ostrich feather was a little yellow and needed changing. Mr. Hogan lifted out the hat and pried the form up from the bottom of the case. He put the money in the form and then he thought again and removed two bills and shoved them in his side pocket. Then he put the form back over the money and laid the hat on top and closed the case and shoved it back on the top shelf. Finally he washed his hands and turned off the water.

In the kitchen Mrs. Hogan and the children faced him, beaming. "Guess what some young man's going on?"

"What?" asked Mr. Hogan.

"Radio," said John. "Monday night. Eight o'clock."

"I guess we got a celebrity in the family," said Mr. Hogan.

Mrs. Hogan said, "I just hope some young lady hasn't got her nose out of joint."

Mr. Hogan pulled up to the table and stretched his legs. "Mama, I guess I got a fine family," he said. He reached in his pocket and took out two five-dollar bills. He handed one to John. "That's for winning," he said. He poked the other bill at Joan. "And that's for being a good sport. One celebrity and one good sport. What a fine family!" He rubbed his hands together and lifted the lid of the covered dish. "Kidneys," he said. "Fine."

And that's how Mr. Hogan did it.



## Frances and Richard Lockridge

### Dead Boys Don't Remember

*Richard Lockridge and his wife, the late Frances Lockridge, did not write many short stories. The ones about Captain M. L. Heimrich appeared in "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine," either as originals or as reprints, and all of them are precious to fans and aficionados alike. Perhaps Richard Lockridge will decide to continue the series—EQMM sincerely hopes so . . . In the one we now bring to you, Captain Heimrich is involved with his professional concern—murder. It was because this deep sense of involvement made Captain Heimrich much more than an objectively inquiring detective that he was called in on the kidnaping of a ten-year-old boy. Dead boys tell no tales . . .*

#### **Detective: CAPTAIN HEIMRICH**

THE BUS STOPPED AT THE HEAD of Blueberry Lane and red warning lights blinked fore and aft. Behind it, two cars halted obediently, and then a third came round the bend of the state road and stopped, too. One car, with equal obedience, pulled up facing the blue and yellow school bus, and that was at 3:20 of a Friday afternoon in late May.

Rodney Burke got off the bus, carrying his schoolbooks. He was towheaded and sturdy and a few months more than ten years old. The boys and girls who remained in the bus made shrill sounds, as if something very exciting were happening.

There was nothing actually ex-

pecting under way—School Bus No. 3, of District No. 1, had made its scheduled stop at Blueberry Lane, so that Rodney Burke could get off and walk half a mile along a shaded, little-used road to the sprawling white house he lived in. It was the back way home; the conventional way was by the town road which paralleled the state road, and it was on the town road that the Franklin Burke house fronted—fronted distantly, as became so large a house, so deep in spreading lawns.

Several of the boys and girls yelled, "Bye, Rod!" as if he were going on a long journey from which return was improbable. Rod waved and yelled back—yelled.

"Bye, kids," as if this were indeed a parting. Then, bareheaded, the sun bright on his bright hair, he walked into the lane—walked out of the sun into the shade, into the flecked pattern of shadow and sunlight which moved gently on the road surface.

The road curved after a hundred yards or so and Rodney Burke—walking in the middle of the roadway, wearing a striped shirt and denim trousers and sneakers—went around the bend in the lane, out of sight from the state road. But the bus had pulled away by then.

It takes a boy of ten varying times to walk half a mile on a shady lane, depending on how much of a hurry he is in and, of course, on what shows up. If deer show up, for example, he stops to look at deer, partly because deer look so expectantly at people, partly because they are very pretty creatures, and when they finally decide to bound away the white of their tails is like froth on breaking waves.

But Rod was seldom a boy to dawdle: he was a boy of projects, most of which involved building something. Usually he came up the garage drive—sometimes running—within ten minutes after the bus stopped, and one could set clocks by the bus.

Janice Burke was working in her annual garden, partly because it needed weeding—as didn't it always?—and partly because it was an experience of infinite sweetness

to see her son coming along the drive, with the afternoon sun bright on his hair. Janice was a little flushed—it was quite warm for May—and she was a little older than most mothers of boys of ten.

The Burkes had waited a dozen years before they had had a child, so that Rodney had seemed rather a miracle. He still did. They tried, of course, not to let him know it, nor make too much of an only child. "We mustn't fuss over him," they told each other, and usually managed not to.

Is it "fussing" over a boy to notice if he takes ten minutes longer than usual to walk half a mile through a lane in which there are no perils? There is no reason to be anxious if he is twenty minutes later than usual—probably the bus is late. But at twenty minutes of four, Janice Burke stood up in her garden and shielded her blue eyes with a grubby hand as she looked into the sun, since the boy would come out of the sun. And five minutes later she walked—to meet him, she told herself—along the garage drive and around the garage, where the field road ran down to Blueberry Lane. When she saw the field road empty, she began to hurry and then to call, "Rod, Rod?"

When she ran back from the empty lane, her breath came shudderingly. In the house she went to the telephone and drew deep, but still shuddering, breaths as she dialed, and tried to make her voice

steady as she spoke. But her voice still shook. Rod had left on the bus with the others; they were sure of that at the school. And the bus had been on time, and Rod had got off at the usual place. Harry Bigham, who drove the school bus and had just returned to the garage from his last trip, was sure of that.

Janice Burke was reaching toward the telephone again, but it rang under her hand and she snatched at it. She said, "Yes?" in a voice not like her own.

"Mrs. Burke?" a man's voice said, and she said, "Yes. Oh, *yes!*"

"We've got the boy," the man said. It was a voice like any voice. "We'll tell you what to do tomorrow. You hear what I'm saying?"

"Yes," she said. "*Yes! Rod is—*"

"He'll be all right if you do what we tell you," the man said. "If you pay what we tell you." And then his voice faded, as he turned from the telephone. But she could hear him say, "Bring the kid here."

Then she heard Rod's voice—oh, his voice, *his* voice. "Mama?" Rod said. "*Mama! They—*"

She heard a click and the telephone was dead. She called into it—called the boy's name. Then she fainted. Franklin Burke, coming home early from the city, walked into the living room in time to see his wife sway in the chair and fall from it.

Janice came quickly back to an

ugly world and clung to her husband, shaking—and told him.

It was not a decision which many have to make; it is a decision to be reached in agony. Nothing one does is better than any other thing, surer than any other. Franklin Burke called the State Police, to whom country people turn most readily. The police told him, when they came—not noisily and as much as possible by back roads—that he had done the right thing, and hoped they were telling him the truth.

They told him, too, that it looked like the work of professionals, and that the chances were better if that was so. Professionals wanted money; they wouldn't panic; wouldn't—they didn't finish that, or need to, and again they hoped that they were right.

"I'll pay anything I've got . . ."

"Only," the captain in charge of Troop K said at Hawthorne Barracks, "only, the kid's ten, isn't he? Old enough to remember faces. Remember places. He won't remember if he's dead."

"No," Captain Heimrich—Captain M. L. Heimrich, whose concern is with murder—said. "No, he won't remember if he's dead. He may be already."

They did not, of course, say that to the Burkes—to the tall, gray-haired man with face set hard, to the white-faced woman, whose eyes



stared in terror and disbelief, and who would not let a doctor give her sedatives. "I've got to be here," she said, and said it over and over and over, "be here when he comes back." But the Burkes knew without being told . . .

The polish of professional crime showed in several ways. On that the various police agencies agreed—and by Saturday morning everybody was in on it. The police of the villages and cities of Westchester and Putnam counties were in on it, and the sheriffs of the counties, and the New York City police and the F.B.I. And, of course, the New York State police, with whom it began. They all agreed the crime was professional, and probably the work of city professionals, since professionals are, for the most part, city men.

There was the deftness of the kidnaping itself. It was not by chance that a car had waited at just the right time, just the right distance along the lane, for Rodney Burke. (The car had pulled to the soft shoulder of the narrow lane and left tire tracks.) It was not by chance that the boy was the son, and the only son, of people with the money the Burkes had, or that their house, and the lane leading toward it, were isolated in the town of Van Brunt, near the Hudson.

It was not by chance that the letter which came in Saturday's mail was typed (new typewriter, almost

without idiosyncrasies) on white paper one could buy anywhere, or that there were no fingerprints to guide, except those of postal clerks on the envelope. The letter had been mailed in midtown Manhattan. The letter read:

*Price is \$100,000. Raise it by Monday and you will be told what to do. It will be tough for the boy if you get new bills, or big ones.*

All planned, the police thought—shrewdly planned, with no amateurs involved. Ruthlessly planned. They'll kill him, Captain Heimrich thought, one man in thousands hunting a stolen child—hunting with nothing much to go on, and nothing much to hope for, and haunted by the memory of a woman whose eyes looked and looked, and saw nothing. Probably dead already, Heimrich thought, on Saturday afternoon, and he followed a lead which would take him nowhere.

They had, after some thought, decided to let the newspapers have it. Professionals would know already that the police were in it; the outermost filaments of the web they lived in would have quivered that news to the center.

If enough people heard about it, somebody might see something, remember something. Many did, of course. Leads came from everywhere. Rodney Burke, age ten, fair hair, blue eyes, 84 pounds, was everywhere.

By Saturday afternoon he had

been seen as far away as the West Coast. (The police doubted that. A car had been used, probably still was being used. But they checked everything, since anything was possible.)

A boy (surely Rod) had been seen running along a sidewalk in Mt. Kisco. They found the boy, who had been going to the grocery for his mother, and running because he wanted to run. (And who did not look at all like Rod.) The Virginia State Police closed in on a motel in Emporia because a boy was crying loudly in one of the rooms and sobbing out, "I want to go home." The boy was six. He was crying because he wanted to go home.

Heimrich, alone in an unmarked car—the police were spread thin to spread wide—drove down a long, rough driveway toward a house secluded in the woods. He drove down the drive because somebody had seen a car drive down it earlier, and somebody was quite sure the people who owned the house were in Europe. They were going on as little as that.

The house, when Heimrich came to it, was a rather large house—a house which had accumulated largeness over years. It was set in a green cup of lawn, with woods edging it. There was a car, with city license plates, parked where the drive widened. Heimrich stopped close behind the city car and got out, and as he got out a man came

to the door of the house, and then onto the flagstones.

He was a young man in a polo shirt and slacks—a pleasant-looking young man, who smiled at Heimrich pleasantly. Heimrich told him about Rodney Burke and the smile vanished and the man swore. He said that kidnaping was the dirtiest business there was.

"Yes," Heimrich said. "This is your house, Mr.—?"

"Baxter," the man said. "No. Friends letting me use it. Only been here a couple of hours. Drove up from town and—" He stopped. His eyes narrowed. "Empty house," he said. "You think—?"

"Now, Mr. Baxter," Heimrich said. "We're looking everywhere, naturally. You've been through the house?"

"All this?" Baxter said, and motioned toward the sprawling house behind him. "Must be a dozen rooms. All we need is a couple of them." He paused. "Got friends coming up later," he said, and then, "You want to look? Come on."

He might as well, as long as he was there, Heimrich said. But it would be time wasted, as the morning had been time wasted, and now half the afternoon.

It was. They went together from room to room—looked into the attic and the basement, looked in bedrooms and kitchen and in three shining bathrooms. "Nice place," Baxter said, as they came into the living room, with the house

searched and nothing found. "Lucky people. How about a drink?"

"No," Heimrich said. "I'll be getting on. Thanks for—" He stopped, as if listening. Baxter waited.

"Wish I could do more," Baxter said.

"Yes," Heimrich said, but not as if he were answering the pleasant young man in slacks and polo shirt. It was, instead, as if Baxter's voice had interrupted something, as if music were playing which Heimrich strained to hear.

"You hear water dripping anywhere?" Heimrich said. "Bathrooms? Kitchen?"

Baxter looked surprised, puzzled. Then he shook his head slowly, and listened, too. Listening carefully, he heard a faint sound which seemed to come from everywhere, and from nowhere—a kind of grating sound, rhythmical, with metallic pings marking the beat. The sound had just begun.

"I hear it now," Baxter said. "Just barely hear it. Something running in the house? Refrigerator, or—"

"Probably," Heimrich said. "Well, sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Baxter."

It might work that way. Heimrich went out onto the terrace, with Baxter in the living room, looking after him curiously. Heimrich looked around for what he wanted and found it. It was near the edge of the grass, a cube of cement blocks rising three feet above the

lawn. It was capped by a heavy metal cover.

Heimrich started to walk toward it, and Baxter came out of the house and watched him. A pocket of Baxter's slacks bulged, heavily. So it wasn't going to be that way.

Heimrich whirled as Baxter reached toward the heavy pocket, and Heimrich was the quicker. "Now, Mr. Baxter," Heimrich said in his soft voice from behind a steady revolver, "we'll go have a look in the pump house. Good place to lock a small boy up in, wouldn't it be? Cover too heavy for a boy to lift and—*better drop it, Mr. Baxter.*"

The man who called himself Baxter dropped it. He wasn't pleasant-looking any more. He went ahead of Heimrich toward the concrete cube.

"Get the cover off," Heimrich told Baxter, and Baxter got the cover off. It was heavy enough—far too heavy to be moved by a boy who, to push against it, would have to balance himself on iron rungs set close to the inner wall of the pump house.

The boy balanced himself on the rungs now and started to come out—and saw Baxter and started to go down again.

"All right, son," Heimrich said. "All right, Rod. You can come out, now."

It was like hide-and-go-seek, and the game over, and everybody home safe. Rodney Burke came

out, blue eyes wide. He shrank away a little from Baxter, who did not move, and looked at Heimrich and said, "Are you a policeman, sir?"

"Yes," Heimrich said. "How did you start up the pump?"

"Anybody knows that," Rodney told him, and was evidently surprised that everybody did not. "There's a faucet. So they can drain the tank to clean it. And when the water comes out, the pressure goes down and the pump starts and—"

"Of course," Heimrich said, gravely, and kept his revolver pointed at Baxter, who had never heard of this before.

"It's an old-style pump," Rod said. "Metal pipes. They use plastic now, mostly. Because with metal pipes the noise the pump makes telegrams—no, telegraphs through them and into the house—"

"Yes," Heimrich said. "See it now, Mr. Baxter? Water pumps don't start up until enough water's

been run out of the pressure tank. And—*there wasn't any water running in the house, was there?*"

"I saw a car come up," Rodney said. "Through the little window. The venti—ventilator? And I thought I'd just try. Maybe somebody'd hear. Because when I yelled nobody could—"

He stopped. "Gee," he said. "I left the water running. Pump the well dry."

Before Heimrich could do anything, Rodney seemed to bounce to the top of the pump house. He went down into it. He came back out of it. "All right now," Rodney Burke, country boy, trained to country ways, said, and the sun was bright on his bright hair.

Baxter, city man, used to city ways, looked at Rodney Burke. He began to shake his head slowly. It had looked like a perfect set-up—a perfect place to keep a boy in until he decided what to do with him. How was a city man to know?



## L. A. G. Strong

### You Can't Love Two Women

*L. A. G. Strong, member of the Irish Academy of Letters, had an almost unbelievable range of interests and "variety of talents"—novelist, short-story writer, poet, essayist, critic, radio and television actor-writer, teacher, lecturer, and director of a famous London publishing house—and he was remarkably successful in all his pursuits. His literary work won praise on both sides of the Atlantic for his adroit characterization and plotting, for his clarity of style, for his wit and shrewd observation. "You Can't Love Two Women" is one of his finest stories . . .*

HE HAD PLANNED IT ALL EXACTLY. Muriel was going up to town on the 1:52, and he was supposed to be going with her. They were to be independent of each other till half-past four, when he was to meet her for tea at the Chadwickes'; and they were coming home on the 6:05.

He told Muriel to start for the station ahead of him, as he might be kept late at the office. It was a necessary part of the plan that he should not arrive on the platform till a minute or so before the train started. He had taken his ticket beforehand, at the office in the town where they knew him well and where they entered up the number of each ticket in a ledger.

The train was in when he reached the incline leading up to the station, and the big engine, shining in the sunlight, let off important clouds of steam and ut-

tered every now and again a raucous, sustained snort. Maurice pulled his hat over his forehead, took a platform ticket, and hurried through the barrier.

As he expected, Muriel was in the very front of the train. She gave him the inexpressive smile which she kept for public occasions. "I've kept a seat for you," she said, with a hint of emphasis in her tones, suggesting that the keeping had caused some resentment on the part of other occupants of the compartment. She would get her own way, but she was perhaps just as glad that he had turned up to prove that she was keeping the seat legitimately.

"Thanks." He stood fumbling at the pockets of his overcoat, which was hanging open. Then he looked up at her with a well-feigned dismay. "Oh, Lord, I've nothing to read. I must get a magazine. I've just time."

"Maurice—surely? The train's just about to start."

"That's all right. I'll get in farther down."

And he ran down the platform without waiting for further argument. General Waiting Room—this would do. He dived in, burying himself into his coat, and a minute later had the satisfaction of seeing the train slide past the yellow windows. Almost at once a little crowded local came bustling in, and it was easy to join the crowd and give up his platform ticket at the barrier; the collector was too busy to do anything but watch the hands that offered him tickets.

That was all right. He had a clear hour now. He would go back by a different bus route, which landed him half a mile from home, and get into the flat by the back way. There was a bare chance that someone he knew might see him, but it was very unlikely; and after all, one had to take some chances. He had lots of time to dodge back by the most improbable little streets.

What was that tag out of *Patience*?—"You can't love two women at once," or something to that effect; to which the fool answered, "Can't you though!" Maurice's face twitched. He had had ample opportunity lately to consider that proposition in all its aspects. You might be able to be in love with two women at once, but you couldn't carry on the business as if each was the only one and cope with a

full day's work as well. Since Merrick had been ill, he'd had more than he could manage at the office. Scarcely time for Muriel, let alone Vera. Oh, hell, hell, hell! It all ran round in his head like Catherine wheels—great aching circles of fire. He had all he could do not to stand still and stamp on the pavement and cry out in sheer nervous exasperation at the burden of it. Steady, though! He must keep a clear head for what lay before him.

The problem was going to be solved all right—the Gordian knot cut. He gave a quick little snigger, tucking his chin down inside his coat collar. That was more like it, perhaps. *Something* had to be done. To go on as he had been was simply to court a breakdown. And he knew what a nervous breakdown meant. Collapse, mental and physical. He had had as much as he could stand—just about as much as he could stand.

No one knew him on this bus route. Strange in what narrow channels the streams of a community ran! A small town, fifty miles from London: yet by simply getting into a bus that traveled almost parallel to his own, he was plunged at once into a quite unknown stream—people whom he had never seen and who had never seen him.

It was twenty to three when he walked up the back stairs to the flat. He had put on his shoes with the rubber soles. No one heard him, no

one saw him. The door opened noiselessly, and he slipped inside. He went into the little sitting-room, lit the fire, dragged the sofa forward from the wall, and drew the one curtain that faced a neighboring house. Then he went into the bedroom and returned with an eiderdown and a rug, which he threw over the end of the sofa. Back again to the bedroom, he pulled out the bottom drawer of the wardrobe, groped in the back of it, and took out a long, narrow box. There was something inside it, wrapped in tissue paper. He felt it to make sure it was there, and put the box on the bed. Lastly, he took out his wallet and looked into a pocket in which there were two or three little slips of paper. Satisfied, he laid it on the bed beside the box.

Now there was nothing to do but wait . . .

It was just seven minutes past three when his strained ears heard a light step, followed by a rattle of the letter-box. Instantly he was at the door, and the tall, graceful figure stood silhouetted, smiling, before him. It was a picture he had seen very often in the last six months. The same actions and sensations were precisely repeated: her soft "Hullo, Maurice, dear," the shutting of the door, the darkness, her cool fragrance as he penned her in against the wall and took her in his arms. Then, with a trembling

hand, he opened the sitting-room door and she stepped in front of him, taking in everything with a glance, pulling off her fur gloves, making some trivial remark, still smiling.

What was it that made her so damnably attractive? She wasn't beautiful, with her snub nose and her wide, strong mouth. Her hands and feet were rather large, too. Yet she had some undefinable neatness, an elasticity, a buoyance in her step, the carriage of her head, something provocative and yet endearing, which made people call her "little Vera"—though, in fact, she stood well above average height. It was an outside which expressed uncommonly well her vivid, careless personality.

Her marriage had not been a success—far less of a success than his with Muriel. She admitted that. Yet she made light of it, never complained, appeared philosophically to take it as all in the game. "Oh, I thought that was part of a wife's job," she would say, and smile at him with innocent eyes as he scolded her for not resisting some fresh enormity.

He watched her now as she took off her scarf. She always stood in front of the fire to do this, and put it with her gloves on the corner of the mantelpiece. Then he would take her hand and lead her to the sofa, sitting her down beside him.

"Well, little Vera."

"Well?"

"How are you?"

"I'm all right. How are you?"—all prelude to the first kiss upon her cool, steady lips that always smelled of lavender.

Well—since he could no longer bear the strain of both—it had to be Vera or Muriel. Vera was exotic, a temptress: Muriel was his own, his companion, till death did them part. Death?

Good Lord, they were right about hell being here, on earth. Even the good times were paid for by wretched fits of nerves and depression. The notes, the furtive appointments, the necessity of finding out where Muriel was going to be—he wasn't made for carrying on an intrigue. What seemed to exhilarate some men only tormented him. The sense of treachery . . . absurd, illogical, oh, he knew that. He had reasoned it all out long ago, yet he somehow found it hard to meet Muriel's eyes.

The affair wasn't really serious, in the sense that it would have been if Vera and Muriel were rivals. There was no question as to which of the two he chose to live with. In that, the fundamental sense, he was perfectly loyal. Yet, telling himself all this savagely over and over again, he felt guilty, and, latterly, distraught. It had become unbearable—and he would end it today. Even with the familiar cool touch of Vera's lips upon his own, he was resolute.

Gently he loosed himself from

her. "Just a minute," he whispered, and made a little gesture toward the next room. She held him with her eyes, looking up into his, strangely earnest.

"Don't be long," she said.

He tried to speak, swallowed angrily, and answered, "I won't"—more loudly than he had intended: then he went out and closed the door.

Once in the bedroom, he pulled off his coat and waistcoat, rolled his sleeves up above the elbow, and took from the back of the wardrobe a faded old yellow bathgown, all stained and smeared. He had used it to protect his clothes while making up a troupe for amateur theatricals, and the front of it was a mass of dried grease paint. No one would be likely to find it, stuffed away in the bottom of the old trunk whence that morning he had taken it out.

He stood for a moment in front of the long glass, looking at himself. A pale, serious face looked back at him. The brown eyes confessed nothing of their intent. They looked the same as usual. Turning away with a sigh, he picked up the box and the wallet. This was a time to act. He did not know when another chance would come.

He went back to the sitting-room, softly closing the door behind him. Vera was kneeling on the floor in front of the fire, holding out her hands to it. The red, steady glow fell softly on her bare arms and



shoulders. She did not look up as he came in.

Moving softly, he came behind her. With demoralizing suddenness, his heart began to beat frantically, like the crying of a bird upon which a cat has pounced. Steadying himself, he put the wallet on the sofa and opened the box.

Vera half-turned her head at the rustle of the tissue paper; then she leaned forward and laid it sideways on her knees, with a little contented sound. She was waiting for his arms to steal round her and draw her back to him.

Very quietly he put the box down beside the wallet. In his right hand was a long knife with a carved blade and handle, and his left hand moved across to join the other upon the long hilt. He took a step forward.

"Mau—rice." It was a slow, lazy whisper. She would rouse and turn round. His chance would be gone.

Fixing his gaze on a point just inside her left shoulder-blade, he grasped the knife in both hands, raised it, and literally fell upon her with all his might. The blow came straight down; her body in its doubled-up position resisted the impact, and Maurice fell sprawling to one side. Picking himself up like lightning, he sprang away. The knife had gone in almost up to the hilt.

For a moment she remained doubled forward, her head on her knees. Then the head craned back;

she tried to straighten herself up, stuck—like a hen he had seen, crushed by a car and desperately trying to rise—and fell suddenly sideways. She kicked, thrusting one foot against the stove, but seeming not to feel it; her hands reached out, clutched the sofa, and she began to drag herself up. Her head was thrown back, the forehead a mask of wrinkles, her eyes staring, fixed on the wall, seemingly quite unconscious of him; and through her open mouth she made a queer indrawn sound, "Aw-w-aw-aw-a-w—"

As he watched, she pulled the top part of her body upright, leaning backward over the knife—farther, farther back—her lips drawn away from the gums; she coughed, and went all limp, rolling over with her face toward him on the carpet. Her eyebrows rose once or twice as if in surprise. Then her face became sleepy and peaceful as a child's. She uttered a gentle little sigh, and was still.

It was a full minute before he dared to move. His hands were shaking uncontrollably in reaction from the effort. Holding them out in front of him, he steadied them somewhat by an effort of his will. Then, going as near to the window as he dared, he scanned the front of his bathgown. Not a speck of blood on it! One long streak on his right forearm—that was all. Get rid of that first.

He went swiftly into the bathroom, and in a few seconds that splash of evidence was gone. Now, then, he must get a move on. Hesitating with his hand on the door, he had the idea that when he went in he might find her sitting in front of the fire, as before. That would be disconcerting. A mistress with nine lives, eh? It was almost a relief to find her lying as he had left her. A dark stain was slowly spreading over the carpet.

He crossed to the sofa, opened the wallet, and took out the three little slips of thin paper. If they were going to get him, if he had to swing for it, he'd give the public something to talk about. This was to be no commonplace murder. Each of the little slips had typed on it a bizarre and meaningless sentence. *So time goes by, whitening old city churches*, read one. That would keep them guessing. Another was a text from the Epistle to the Romans, about Sodom and Gomorrah. They might think he was mad, but they would notice them all right. Headlines. . . . He might even get off as a madman.

The slips were typed, but not on his own typewriter. He had tapped them out under pretense of trying a machine for sale at a stationer's in the town, while the assistant was getting him a particular size of envelope he knew was kept upstairs. The paper might be identified, though he had kept the typing clear of the watermark; but what if it

were? Hundreds, thousands, of people used it.

Rolling up the slips, he bent over the body, inserted one in each nostril, and the third in the mouth, between the teeth and underlip. That was all. Now to get away.

Ten minutes later he was hurrying to the terminus of the bus which had brought him out. By good luck, he had hardly any wait at all. The winter dusk was already beginning to fall; it was a foggy, dull day.

Seated in the bus, he reviewed his plans. He had a ticket, which the clerk at the office would swear to giving him, and whose number would check in the ledger. This ticket he was now going to use. The 3:57 would get him up to town too late to join Muriel at the Chadwicks', but in plenty of time to meet her on the 6:05 and explain that his business had kept him. That business was a weak spot, of course, but he would put in one or two quick calls which would show he had at any rate been in town that afternoon. Muriel would be ready to say he had come up by the 1:52, and his ticket would be found among the day's collection at Paddington. (He only hoped they didn't check them after each train!)

At this end no one knew where Vera had gone. She lived only a few hundred yards away, and she had come straight to the flat, so that her maids would be witness that she had not left home till three.

Actually, she was dead within ten minutes of entering the flat, and he was away in less than ten minutes after that. True, his alibi was flimsy, but this very point was in his favor. When on earth, his counsel would ask, could he have found time to commit the murder? The 3:57 got to town by a quarter to five. From then on he would contrive to be seen by several people. The prosecution would not have matters all their own way, even if they did run him in. Unless someone had seen him coming in or going out of the flat, and he was pretty sure nobody had.

"Have you ever seen this in your husband's possession, madam?" (Holding up the knife.)

"Never," Muriel would reply, with perfect truth; for he had bought it in an old curiosity shop in Devonport a long time ago, and it had been stowed away somewhere among his things ever since.

Or perhaps they didn't examine a wife when her husband was on trial? He couldn't remember.

When the bus reached the station, he wrapped a scarf round his mouth and scuffled through the barrier with his head down, enduring as best he could the agonizing minutes before the train arrived. It was not long, but it might have been a whole year of his life. At last the train came. Getting into a carriage crowded with country folk, he at once disappeared behind a newspaper, and, by a queer trick

of the mind which came as a complete surprise to him, managed to forget what had happened for whole minutes together. He wasn't well, that's what was at the back of it all. He wasn't well; the strain had been taking it out of him frightfully.

The moment the train reached Paddington he jumped into a taxi and made for an address in Notting Hill, to a friend of his who had a small, one-man office, and who could therefore be relied upon to be in. Dismissing the taxi at the corner of the street, Maurice went quickly along and mounted the rickety stair. *Come in and wait—back in five minutes*, said a confident message on a card pinned to the door. Excellent. He went in and picked up a paper. It took him two or three minutes to realize that it was the same paper he had been reading in the train.

A reckless plunging on the stair suddenly announced the owner's return, and a second later he entered.

"Oh, it's you! I say I'm awfully sorry. I was kept much longer than I expected. You haven't been waiting long I hope?"

Maurice glanced at the clock. "Not long. Only about twenty minutes."

"I say I am sorry I'd no idea."

"Oh, that's all right. I've nothing particular to do. Fact is," he forced a smile, "I was just wondering if I'd drawn another blank."

"Another?"

"Yes, I went all the way out to see Baines, and he wasn't in." That was good. It had only just come into his head. Baines *was* out that afternoon, as he happened to know. He was covering up his tracks in grand style.

"Oh, well," his host stretched out a cigarette case, "I'm glad you found me, anyway."

It hardly seemed worthwhile making other calls, after that, but he looked in at two places on his way back to the station. Then there seemed to be a queer gap in his memory, for the next thing he knew, he found himself walking up the platform carrying some of Muriel's parcels, with no clear idea of how he got there.

"Here," she said, halting beside a door, "this will do."

Going back. Home. Up from the station, up the stairs, in the door.

He turned his mind away, rubbed a clear patch on the window, and tried to look out. The lights of a factory whirled derisively by. He shuddered and steeled himself to endure the long, barren, eternal journey. Why did people nod their heads in a train, the fools? His head was nodding too, he supposed. How idiotic they must all look—nodding in fatuous, rhythmic assent to some unheard proposition; relying in the only way they could devise to the unanswerable question—why did they

exist at all? The whole thing was symbolic of humanity answering the major riddles—obstinate, endless assertion instead of reason.

And other questions. Was she dead? *Nod—nod—nod*. Did they know who had killed her? *Nod—nod*. Would he be caught? *Nod—nod—nod*. Would he hang?

The train rushed over the joints of a junction and swung away on a new path into the darkness.

And every nod, every clitter-clock, clitter-clock of the wheels, was carrying him so much nearer to—to what had happened. He turned his mind away resolutely and tried to read the back of the man's paper opposite. Muriel was in her corner, her eyes closed, one hand delicately against her cheek. She met all the disagreeable things of life like that, gracefully, fastidiously. Her composure was very precious to her. Well, she'd need it soon.

He fell to reviewing all the steps he had taken to build up an alibi. Flimsy enough, they looked—full of great black gaps through which the huge arm of the law could suddenly shoot and grab him. A light shiver ran down his spine. But, so far, he was not so much frightened of the consequences as curious—academically, disinterestedly curious—to see how it would all work out. Would the local police tackle it, or would they call in the Yard at once? Recalling himself with a jolt, he fixed his eyes upon the jog-

gling paper opposite him, and with great concentration read something very silly about an actress who was being sued for breach of contract.

At last, after ages so long that his whole life and several previous existences seemed to have been spent in the same hideous compartment, the train slowed down, and they stepped out into the chill air of the platform. They took a taxi, because of Muriel's parcels. In precisely the same way as one turns one's mind away while the dentist fixes a drill in his machine, Maurice turned his mind to any externals it could seize upon during the journey up.

"Two and six, is it?" he was repeating presently. "Two and six, eh?" And he took the money out of his pocket and counted it over twice, with great deliberation, before the action would register in his consciousness at all. "Oh, ah, yes—two and six." The man was looking at him. "Well, here you are. Good night."

He was walking up the stairs, his arms full of parcels. His heart seemed to be beating distinctly, sharply, rather than fast; and at once he saw a picture of it, as a sort of cylinder with two convex ends, swinging imperatively against the surrounding tissues.

"All right. I have a key."

Muriel's manner seemed a bit constrained. She had looked at him strangely, he thought. Pooh! All fancy. It shows how one's conscience can run away with you. Oh,

Lord, here they were, in the dark little hall, only a few yards, only a door away from it! He almost ran down the passage to the bedroom, stumbling in at the door, and shedding his parcels on the bed in a heap. He kept his back turned on Muriel, for the lower part of his face seemed to have become all loose and uncontrolled. Muriel put down her bag, took off her hat, leaned forward to scrutinize her face in the dressing-table mirror; then went out of the room, without speaking.

Sick and shaking, he caught hold of the bedpost and held on. She went along the passage. She was outside the living-room door. No—she had gone into the bathroom. He brushed his forehead and tried vainly to moisten his lips. This was awful, awful, his mind kept saying. It—ah. She had come out again. He heard her turn the handle of the livingroom door, switch on the light. . . . Shutting his eyes, he nerved himself for her scream.

It did not come. He could hear her moving about in the room. He—she—oh, Lord, this was past all bearing, worse than any outcry. Something told him that his eyes were staring in his head; he ducked, not daring to look in the glass, and ran out into the passage, falling, lurching, swaying, with hands outstretched against the cold walls; tottered to the open door of light; grasped the doorpost, the knuckles sticking out white from the back

of his hand, and, with a rending, terrible effort, pulled himself into the room and looked on the floor in front of the fireplace.

There was nobody. Nothing at all.

"Ah—ha—ha-ha!" A little, shrill, whimpering laugh sounded in the room, and he realized that it had come from his own throat. Frantically he raised his eyes. Muriel was staring at him in amazement and distaste.

"Whatever is the matter with you, Maurice!" she exclaimed.

"The matter?"

"Yes." She came a step nearer. "You've been behaving in the queerest way all afternoon." She gave a half-laugh, looking closely into his eyes. "You haven't been drinking, have you?"

"Queer? I—why, what's been the matter with me?" He got the words out, but all the time his mind was trying to cope with the staggering thing she had just said. *All afternoon*. Queer all afternoon. That's what she had said.

Muriel laughed again. It was her way of turning aside her irritation. "I don't know what's the matter with you," she answered. "All I know is that you've been behaving very queerly all afternoon. They were all wondering what was the matter with you. I could see they were."

His mouth fell open. "They—who were?"

"Why, at the Chadwicks', of

course. You wouldn't say a word to a soul, except once, when you were quite unnecessarily rude to old General McKie."

"At the Chadwicks'!" he shouted. "You don't know what you're saying! At the Chadwicks'?"

"Why, Maurice, whatever is the matter with you! Of course you were at—oh, my darling! Maurice!"

For he had begun to laugh—soundlessly at first, a horrible, silent shaking; and then he was screaming, sobbing, laughing, calling out

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How soon afterward he did not know, he found himself on his knees, holding on tight to her, his head in her lap; and she was stroking his hair, soothing him, comforting him as if he were a tiny child. "There, there, my darling, it will be all right. There's nothing to be frightened of. Nothing. Nothing at all."

And presently he was calmer; quite quiet. He knelt, his arms around her, looking over toward the bookcase with wide eyes, realizing the truth. The breakdown—what he had been afraid of—had come. This was it; all this. Everything. He had spent the afternoon unconsciously, an automaton, while his consciousness had been busy . . . here. The whole story—the precautions, the details, the vivid enactment—he could see it all now, the fantastic, pettifogging logic of

the disordered mind. And the imagination—what he had done to Vera. Good God, if that was delusion, what was there to hold on to in life?

Steady—that was the way to go off again. He held on tight to Muriel for a minute.

“Do you know,” he blurted, “I thought I’d—” And then he broke off short. He’d have enough troubles without that. Least said the better, eh?

With gradually narrowing eyes, he listened to all the soothing things Muriel was saying over the top of his head. She’d been noticing how tired he was getting, how overworked. He needed a change. A

nice rest, and a change. They’d go off together—

“That knife,” he exclaimed suddenly, looking up at her. “I haven’t had that for years. I remember now. I gave it away, years ago.”

“Yes, darling. Of course you did. Don’t worry about it any more,” and she went on again, how all he needed was a rest. Then he realized he needn’t trouble to guard his tongue. Anything he said would be attributed to his breakdown. Poor little Muriel! She was frightened, badly frightened, and putting a splendidly brave face on it.

He got up and sat beside her on the sofa, putting his arms around her, telling her not to be frightened.



## Erle Stanley Gardner

### The Clue of the Scattered Rubies

*Erle Stanley Gardner himself probably doesn't remember how many different series characters he has invented, dating back to his earliest stories in pulp magazines; their number, while not legion, is still staggering. Of course, today we all know Perry Mason, the wizard of the courtroom, and Donald Lam (by A. A. Fair); and many of us remember "The D.A.," Douglas Selby, and larcenous Lester Leith, and perhaps Ed Jenkins, the Phantom Crook. But how about Ken Corning, the forerunner of Perry Mason, and Señor Arnaz de Lobo, and the Patent Leather Kid, and the firm of Small, Weston & Burke, and the desert detective, Whispering Sands, and the human fly, Speed Dash (Gardner's very first series character), and Major Brane and Black Barr and Larkin and Hard Rock Hogan and Skarle . . . and Sidney Zoom and his police-dog helper, Rip, whom we now "revive" in a novelet that reads like a house afire.*

*Zoom belongs to the era of the detective story when a criminal investigator could bear so onomatopoeic a name (suggestive, say, of a sharp, sudden thrust upward mingled with a sense of doom), an era when the private detective was invariably a tall, lean, hawk-eyed night prowler, an era when the sardonic sleuth could have a special "in" with the Police Department and live (believe it or not) on a palatial yacht . . . ah, nostalgia! Ah, those good old days of S. S. Van Dine, and Erle Stanley Gardner, and yes—of Ellery Queen . . .*

#### **Detective: SIDNEY ZOOM**

**R**AIN SHEETED INTERMITTENTLY out of the midnight skies. Between showers, fitful stars showed through drifting cloud rifts. Street lights, reflected from the wet pavements in shimmering ribbons, were haloed in moisture.

The feet of Sidney Zoom, pacing the wet pavements, splashed heedlessly through small surface puddles. Attired in raincoat and rubber hat, the gaunt form prowled through the rainy night, his police dog padding along at his side.



Sidney Zoom loved the night. He was particularly fond of rainy nights. Midnight streets held for him the lure of adventure.

The police dog growled throatily.

Sidney Zoom paused, stared down at his four-footed companion. "What is it, Rip?"

The dog's yellow eyes were staring straight ahead. His ears were pricked up. After a moment he flung his head in a questing half circle as his nose tested the air.

"Go find, Rip."

Like an arrow the dog sped forward into the night, his claws rattling on the wet pavement. He ran low to the ground, swift and sure. He leaned far in as he rounded a corner, then the night swallowed him.

Sidney Zoom walked as far as the corner where the dog had vanished, then stood waiting. He heard footsteps, the rustle of a raincoat, then a dark figure bulked upon him.

A flashlight stabbed its way through the darkness.

"What are you doin' here?" grumbled a deep voice.

The hawklike eyes of Sidney Zoom stared menacingly.

"Who are you?—and put out that damned flash!"

The beam of the flashlight shot up and down the long, lean, whipcorded strength of the man, and the grumbling voice rumbled again.

"I'm the officer on the beat. It's no

time for a man to be standin' out on a street corner, and lookin' into the night as though he was listenin' for something. So give an account of yourself, unless you want to spend a night in a cell."

Sidney Zoom turned his eyes away from the glare of the light, fished a leather wallet from an inside pocket, and let the officer see a certain card.

That card bore the signature of the Chief of Police.

The officer whistled.

"Sidney Zoom, eh?" he said in surprise. "I've heard of you and of your police dog. Where's the dog?"

Zoom's head was cocked slightly to one side.

"If you'll quit talking for a moment I think we can hear him."

The officer stood stock-still, listening. Faintly through the night could be heard the barking of a dog.

"It's around the other corner," said Zoom.

The officer grunted. "What's he barkin' at?"

Sidney Zoom's long legs started to pace along the wet pavement. A sudden shower came rattling down on their shiny raincoats.

"The best way to find out," said Sidney Zoom, "is to go and see."

The officer was put to it to keep up with the long legs.

"I've heard of some of your detective work," he said.

He gave the impression of one who wished to engage in conversa-

tion, but the pace was such that he needed all his wind.

"And of your dog," puffed the officer.

Sidney Zoom paused, motioned to the officer to halt, raised his head and whistled. Instantly there came an answering bark.

Zoom's ears caught the direction of that bark, and he lengthened his stride. The officer ceased all efforts to keep step and came blowing along, taking a step and a half to Zoom's one.

A street light showed a huddled shadow. The dog barked again, and Sidney Zoom pointed.

"Something on the sidewalk," he said.

The officer started to talk, but thought better of it.

Zoom's stride became a running walk. His lean form was vibrant with excitement.

"Someone lying down," he said.

The dog barked once more—a shrill, yapping bark, as though he tried to convey some meaning. And Zoom interpreted the meaning.

"Dead," he said.

The officer grunted his incredulity.

But Zoom had been right. The man was dead. He lay sprawled on the pavement, on his face, his hands stretched out and clenched, as though he had clutched at something.

There was a dark hole in the back of the man's head, and a welling stream of red had oozed down

until it mingled with the water on the sidewalk, staining it red. The hat was some ten feet away, lying flat on the sidewalk.

The man had on a coat, trousers, heavy shoes. But there were pajamas underneath. The bottoms of the pajamas showed beneath the trousers, and the collar of the pajama coat showed where the coat lapel had been twisted backward.

The officer felt the wet wrists of the corpse.

"Dead," he said.

"That," remarked Sidney Zoom dryly, "is what the dog told me. He'd have come running to me, urging haste, if the man were still living."

The officer looked up with glittering eyes.

"You kidding me?" he asked.

Zoom shrugged. Experience had taught him the futility of seeking to explain canine intelligence, highly developed, to anyone who had had no experience with it.

The officer turned the figure over. Zoom's hand thrust out, caught the officer's arm.

"Wait," he said, "you're destroying the most valuable clue we have!"

The officer's eyes were wide.

"I'm just turnin' him over."

He had paused, the corpse precariously balanced on one shoulder and hip, the head sagging downward.

"Precisely," Zoom nodded, "But you'll notice that the shoulders of

the coat, on the upper part around the neck, are quite wet. That shows he's been out in the rain for some time.

"But the back of the coat is almost dry. That means he was walking, facing the rain, that he hasn't been lying very long on his stomach here. Otherwise the back of the coat would have been quite wet. But if you turn him over before we check on these things, and the back of the coat touches the wet pavement, we'll have no way of determining the comparative degrees of wetness."

The officer grunted.

"You're right about the shoulders," he said, feeling them with an awkward hand. "And the front of his coat is sopping wet. It looks as though he'd been walkin' toward the wind, all right."

Zoom ran his fingers over the coat. His eyes held that glitter of concentration which marked his rising interest.

"Now the wind," said Zoom, "was blowing in the same direction the head is pointing. Which means that he was either turned around, after the shot, or that he had changed the direction of his walk. You'll notice that he has no socks on, that the shoes are incompletely laced, and the strings hastily tied around the ankles.

"Apparently the man had retired for the night, when something aroused him, sent him hurriedly

out into the rain with only essential clothes on.

"He was shot in the back of the head. Probably the shot coincided with a clap of thunder, since no one seems to have heard it, and it's a district where there are apartment houses. He probably has been dead less than a quarter of an hour . . . Let's have the flash on his face, officer."

The beam of light played on the cold face. It disclosed the features of a man somewhat past the middle fifties. His face was covered with gray stubble. His hair was thin at the temples. The high forehead was creased with scowl-wrinkles. The mouth was a firm, thin line, almost lipless. Deep calipers showed that the corners of the mouth were habitually twisted downward.

"A man," said Sidney Zoom, "who seldom smiled."

The officer's hand went to the coat pocket. "Lots of papers in this pocket. You notify headquarters, I'll stay here and watch."

Zoom's eyes focused on the wet pavement, some three feet beyond the corpse.

"Officer, raise your flashlight a bit higher—there!"

"What is it?"

The rays of the flashlight were caught by something that glowed an angry red.

Zoom walked over to it, stooped, and picked it up.

"A red bead, or a synthetic ruby, pierced for stringing on a neck-

lace," he said, "and I think there's another one a little farther on. Let's see."

The officer elevated the flash. Once more there was a dull gleam of angry red in the darkness.

"From the direction he was trav-elin'," said the officer.

Zoom picked up the second bead, stalked back to the corpse.

"Look in his hands," he suggest- ed.

The officer pried open the left hand. It was empty. He pulled back the fingers of the right hand. Half a dozen red beads glittered in the reflection of the flashlight, their color suggestive of drops of congealed blood.

Zoom scowled thoughtfully.

"Is that a bit of white thread there?" he asked.

The policeman bent forward.

"It is that. What do you make of it?"

Zoom stared in unwinking thought at the small cluster of red gems. "They may be genuine rubies, but I doubt it. Notice that they graduate slightly in size. Evi- dently they were strung on a neck- lace. There's a chance, just a chance, that the necklace was worn by the person who fired that fatal shot, that the man clutched at this person, caught the necklace in his hand and ripped out a section of it. Then, when that person fled from the shooting, more of the rubies dropped . . . but I doubt it."

The officer lurched to his feet,

letting the body slump back on the wet pavement.

"It's gettin' too much for me," he said. "I don't want to leave the body, even if I do know you're all right. You go in that apartment house, get a telephone, and notify headquarters."

Zoom nodded. "Stay here, Rip," he said. "I'll be right back."

The dog slowly waved his tail in dignified acquiescence. Zoom crossed the street to an apartment house.

The outer door was locked, and the lobby was dark. Zoom's fore- finger pressed against the button below the apartment marked *Man- ager* until he received a response. When a fat woman with sleep- swollen eyes came protestingly to the door, Zoom explained the situa- tion, was led to a telephone, called headquarters, and reported the finding of the body.

Then he returned to the officer. The dog was crouched on the wet pavement, his head resting on his paws. He thumped his tail on the pavement by way of greeting, oth- erwise remaining immobile. The officer was going through the pa- pers in the dead man's pocket.

"Seems to be a Harry Paine," he observed here. "Looks like he tried to carry all his correspondence in his pocket. The address is here, too. It's 5685 West Adams Street. And here's some legal papers—looks like he'd been in a lawsuit of some kind . . . The papers have been carried

around for some time. You can see where the pencil marks have rubbed off on 'em and polished up until they're slick."

Zoom nodded. He was studying the face of the dead man.

"Ain't you interested in these papers?" asked the officer.

Zoom's expression was one of dreamy abstraction.

"I'm more interested in the character of the man," he observed. "He looks to me like an old crank, a man who never smiled, who had no compassion, no kindness. Look at those hands! See the gnarled grasping fingers . . . Do you believe in palmistry, officer?"

The policeman grunted, "Baloney."

Zoom said nothing for a few seconds.

"It's strange," he then remarked, "how character impresses itself upon every portion of a person's body. Hands, feet, ears, shape of the nose, the mouth, the expression of the eyes . . . everything is shaped by that intangible something we call a soul."

The officer, squatted on the wet pavement by the side of the corpse, lurched to his feet.

"You're talkin' stuff that don't make sense," he growled. "This here is a murder case, and the law has got to catch the person that did the murder. What's the character of the dead man got to do with it?"

Sidney Zoom's reply consisted of one word. "Everything."

He reached for the papers which had been in the pocket of the corpse.

"Murders," the officer observed, "are everyday affairs. Handle 'em as routine and you get somewhere. Identify the dead guy, see who wanted him bumped off, round up the evidence and maybe give a little third degree at headquarters, and you're ready for the next case."

Sidney Zoom said nothing. In the distance could be heard the wailing of sirens.

"There are powder marks on the back of the head," said Zoom, after the siren had wailed for the second time. "Let me have your flashlight."

The officer handed it to him. Zoom circled the gutter with its rays, steadied his hand abruptly, then pointed.

"There it is."

"There what is?"

"The empty shell. See it, there in the gutter? He was shot with an automatic. The ejector flipped the shell out into the street, the running water from that last burst of rain washed it down into the gutter."

The officer bent and picked up the shell.

"You're right. A forty-five."

The siren wailed again. Lights glittered from the wet street, and the first of the police cars swung into the cross street, then hissed through the water to the curb.

Another car followed close behind. Then there sounded the

clanging gong of an ambulance. Thereafter, events moved swiftly.

Detective Sergeant Gromley was in charge of the homicide detail, and he heard the officer's report, checked the facts from Sidney Zoom, and started the men gathering up the various clues.

They started tracing the trail of the blood-red beads, found that they led to an apartment house about fifty yards away. They were spaced at almost even intervals, and they glistened in the rays of the searching spotlights.

The district was largely given over to apartment houses, and the wailing sirens had brought watchers to the windows.

Officers started checking to find out if anyone had heard the shot, if anyone had noted the time, if there had been any sound of running feet.

Sergeant Gromley scanned the apartment house where the trail of red beads ended and uttered an exclamation of triumph as he pointed to the row of mail boxes in the vestibule, each faced with a printed name cut from a visiting card.

"Notice Apartment 342," he said. "The name's been torn out of there within the last half hour or so. See, there's a wet smear on the cardboard backing, and . . . it's a little smear of blood! See it?"

He turned toward the lobby

where a man in a bathrobe was peering curiously.

"Where's the manager?" asked Gromley.

"I own the place. My wife and I run it."

"Who's the tenant in Apartment 342?"

The man scowled, ran his fingers through his tousled hair.

"I think it's a woman. Paine or some such name. That's it, Paine, Eva Paine. Ain't her name on the mail box?"

"Come on," Gromley said to his broad-shouldered assistants. "Let's go."

They crowded into the elevator. Sidney Zoom took the stairs, Rip at his heels.

"Here, you," grunted the man in the bathrobe, "you can't bring a dog in here!"

But Zoom paid no attention. His long legs were pistons as he went up the stairs two at a time.

But the officers were getting out of the elevator as Zoom reached the upper corridor. The stairs emerged at the end opposite the elevator shaft, and the apartment they wanted was close to the elevator.

One of the men pounded on the door.

It was opened almost immediately by a girl in a kimono. She stared at them in wide-eyed silence.

Sergeant Gromley pushed unceremoniously past her.

"We want to ask you some questions," he said.

The others crowded into the room, which was used as a sitting room during the daytime, a bedroom at night. The wall-bed had been let down, apparently slept in, but the sheets were folded neatly at the corners. The girl must be a quiet sleeper, or else had not been in bed long.

She was dressed in a kimono of bright red which enhanced the gleam of her eyes, the red of her lips, the glitter of the lights on her hair, which was glossy black.

"You're Eva Paine?" asked Sergeant Gromley.

"Yes. Of course. Why?"

"Know a Harry Paine?"

"Y-y-yes, of course."

"Why do you say 'of course'?"

"He's my father-in-law."

"You married his son?"

"Yes."

"What's the son's name?"

"Edward."

"Where is he?"

"Dead."

"When did you see Mr. Harry Paine last?"

She hesitated at that, made a little motion of nervousness.

"Why, I can't tell. Yesterday afternoon, I think. Yes, it was yesterday afternoon."

"Aren't very certain, are you?"

She lowered her eyes.

"I'm a little confused. What is the idea of all of you men, who seem to be detectives, coming here and asking me questions? I've done nothing."

Sergeant Gromley shook his head belligerently, aggressively.

"No one accused you of it—yet."

"What do you want?"

"Information."

"About what?"

"About who might have had a motive for murdering Harry Paine."

The girl came to her full height. Her face paled. Her eyes widened until the whites showed on all sides of the irises. Her forehead wrinkled with horror.

"Murdered?" she asked.

Her voice was weak, quavering.

"Murdered!" snapped Sergeant Gromley.

"I—I don't know anything about it."

"Was there bad blood between you?"

She hesitated, then became almost regal in her bearing.

"Yes," she said, "and I'm glad he's dead—if he is dead. He was a brute—a stingy, narrow-minded, bigoted, selfish brute."

Sergeant Gromley nodded casually. The character of the dead man was of no consequence to him. It did not matter to him how much the man might have deserved to die. Only the fact that the law requires vengeance mattered to him.

"Who murdered him?"

"I—I don't know."

"Have you a necklace of rubies, or imitation rubies, or red glass beads? Think carefully. Your an-

swer may mean a lot to you—and don't lie."

"What have red beads got to do with it?"

"Perhaps nothing, perhaps a lot. Have you such a necklace?"

Her lips clamped tightly.

"No!"

"Do you know anyone who has such a necklace?"

"No!"

Sergeant Gromley remained undisturbed. There was a lot of ground to cover yet, and the veteran investigator had no fear of lies. The only thing that caused him consternation was a suspect who would not talk. Given one who would answer questions, he was always certain of ultimate triumph.

"Where have you been since nine o'clock?"

"In bed."

Sergeant Gromley raised his eyebrows.

"Since nine o'clock?"

"Yes."

The answer was surly this time, defiant, as though she had been trapped into some answer she had not anticipated and intended to stick by her guns.

"What time did you retire?"

"At the time I told you—nine o'clock."

The sergeant's smile was sarcastic. He looked over the graceful lines of her figure, the striking beauty of the face.

"Rather early for a young and

attractive widow to retire on a Saturday night, isn't it?"

She flushed. "That is none of your business. You asked me a question, and I answered!"

Sergeant Gromley's smile was irritating. His manner was that of a cat that has a mouse safely hooked in its claws and is willing to torture the creature for a time.

"Rather a coincidence that I chose the hour of nine o'clock and that you answered so promptly. I am just wondering, Mrs. Paine, if you hadn't resolved to give that bedtime story as an alibi. When I asked you where you've been since nine o'clock—rather than where you've been during the last hour—you said 'in bed' because you had expected the question to be different. Then, having said it the first time, you decided to stick to your story."

She was cool, but her shoulders were commencing to rise and fall with rapid breathing.

"Your reasoning is too complicated for my childlike brain. Just confine yourself to necessary questions, please."

Gromley continued to press the point. "It is rather a peculiar coincidence that I should have been the one who predicted the exact time of your retirement, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "That, also, is a question I cannot answer."

She swept her eyes momentarily from the sergeant to the ring of curious faces which were watching



her. And as Sidney Zoom caught her eyes, his long forefinger lifted casually to his lips and pressed firmly against them.

Her eyes had left his face before the significance of the gesture impressed her. Then they darted back with a look of swift questioning in them. But Zoom, taking no chances that his signal might be seen and interpreted by one of the officers, was rubbing his cheek with slow deliberation.

The girl returned her eyes to the sergeant, but now there a look of puzzled uncertainty in them.

"Do you know what the weather is like?" asked Sergeant Gromley.

"It's showering."

He smiled again.

"Really, Mrs. Paine, you are remarkable. It was quite clear at nine o'clock. The showers started about nine forty-five and continued steadily until just before midnight."

She bit her lip.

"And you were asleep?" pursued the sergeant.

Triumph gleamed in her eyes as she swooped down on the opening he had left her with that eagerness which an amateur always shows in rushing into the trap left by a canny professional.

"I didn't say I was asleep."

"Oh, then, you weren't asleep?"

"No, not all the time."

"And that's the way you knew it was raining?"

"Yes. The rain beat against the window. I heard it, got up and

looked out. There was some lightning and thunder too."

"And that's the only way you knew it was raining?"

"Yes."

"And you weren't out of this room after nine o'clock tonight?"

"Would I be likely to leave it, dressed this way?"

"Answer the question. Were you out of this room after nine o'clock?"

Instinctively her eyes sought those of Sidney Zoom.

This time there could be no mistaking the impressive significance of the gesture he made—the forceful pressing of a rigid forefinger against his closed lips.

"Answer the question," barked Sergeant Gromley.

"No," she said. "I didn't leave this room."

But her eyes were hesitant, helpless, and they looked pleadingly at Sidney Zoom.

The sergeant pounced, pushed aside a filmy bit of silk, reached a long arm under the edge of the bed, and brought out a pair of shoes.

"These your shoes?"

She knew then that she was trapped, for the shoes were soaked with rain. The knowledge showed in the sudden panic of her eyes.

She looked at Sidney Zoom, and suddenly stiffened.

"I have answered quite enough of your questions, sir. I will not

make any more statements until I have seen a lawyer."

Gromley simulated surprise.

"Why . . . Why, Mrs. Paine, what could you possibly want to see a lawyer about? Has any one made any accusations against you?"

"N-no . . ."

"Do you expect accusations will be made?"

She drew in a lungful of breath preparatory to speaking, then raised her eyes once more to Zoom's face.

"I have nothing more to say," she said.

The sergeant snapped out a rapid barrage. "Is it your custom to put powder on your cheeks, lipstick on your lips, have your hair freshly done up at one o'clock in the morning? Or were you expecting a call from the police, and just wanted to look your best?"

It was plainly a relief to her that she did not need to answer the question. She simply shook her head, but the panic of her eyes was even more evident now.

Sergeant Gromley turned to the men.

"Frisk the place, boys."

He spoke quietly, but the effect of his order was instantaneous. The men scattered like a bevy of quail. Drawers were pulled open, skilled fingers explored the contents. They even went to the bed, felt in the mattress, probed in the pillowcase.

Sergeant Gromley kept his eyes

on the panicky eyes of the young woman.

"It might be much better for you, later on, if you told the truth now," he said gently, trying to make the fatherly tone of his advice break through the wall of reserve that had sealed her lips.

He was almost successful. The touch of sympathy in his voice brought moisture to her eyes. Her lips parted, then clamped tightly closed again.

"I have nothing more to say."

One of the officers turned from the dresser.

"Look what's here," he said.

He held up a fragment of necklace made of fine red beads.

"Where was it?"

"Hidden. Fastened to the back of the mirror with chewing gum. You can see where the string was broken, then it was tied up at the ends and stuck to the back of the mirror."

Sergeant Gromley grunted. "Let's see the gum."

The officer handed him a wad of chewing gum. The outside was barely dry, had not yet commenced to harden.

Sergeant Gromley riveted his eyes on the young woman once more.

"Yours?" he asked.

She glanced swiftly at Sidney Zoom, then shook her head.

Sergeant Gromley was sitting with his back to Sidney Zoom. He

spoke now, quietly, evenly, without raising his voice.

"Zoom, I've heard of you, heard of some of the help you've given the department. It's customary to exclude all civilians from questionings such as these. I let you remain because of your record. Unfortunately, you seem to have taken advantage of my generosity."

Sidney Zoom's voice was sharp.

"Meaning?" he asked.

Sergeant Gromley kept his back turned.

"Do you think," he asked, "that I am an utter fool?"

Zoom snapped, "Do you want me to leave the room?"

"Yes," said Gromley, without turning his head.

Sidney Zoom reached the door in a few strides.

"Come, Rip."

Their feet sounded in the corridor, the man's pounding along, the dog's pattering softly on the uncarpeted floor at the sides of the hallway. There was a sardonic smile on the features of Sidney Zoom as he gained the ground floor of the apartment house. Here he walked to the outer lobby and surveyed the row of brass letter boxes, each fitted with a lock.

Zoom paused to take from his pocket a pair of gloves. They were thin, flexible gloves, yet they insured against any casual fingerprints being left behind.

"Fools!" he muttered under his breath.

Then he took from a pocket a bunch of keys. They were not many in number, but each had been fashioned with cunning care by a man who had made the study of locks the hobby of a lifetime.

The third key he tried clicked back the bolt of the mail box of Apartment 342.

Zoom reached a gloved hand inside the aperture, removed a wadded scarf of silk. Within the scarf were several hard objects which rattled crisply against each other.

They might have been pebbles, or bits of glassware, but Sidney Zoom wasted no time in looking to see. He simply dropped the entire bundle, scarf and all, into one of the pockets of his coat, then went out into the night.

He stopped at the nearest telephone and called the best criminal attorney in the city.

"This is Zoom speaking. The police are trying to pin a murder charge on a young woman, a Mrs. Eva Paine, who lives in apartment 342 at the Matonia Apartments. They're there now. I'm retaining you to handle the case under the blanket arrangement I have with you. Get out there at once. Tell her to keep quiet and see that she does. That's all."

And Zoom clicked the receiver back on its hook.

He knew that the attorney would be there in a matter of minutes. Zoom kept him supplied with various cases which attracted the in-

terest of the strange individual whose hobby was the prowling of midnight streets and the matching of wits with both criminals and detectives.

Then Sidney Zoom summoned a cab and was driven to the palatial yacht on which he lived. Only when he was safely ensconced in his stateroom did he open the package which he had taken from the mail box.

It was filled with jewels, strung, for the most part, into necklaces.

It was 10 o'clock in the morning.

The musty air of police headquarters was filled with that stale odor which comes to rooms which are in use twenty-four hours a day.

Captain Bill Mahoney, a small man in the early fifties, but equipped with a large mind, raised dark, speculative eyes and regarded Sidney Zoom thoughtfully.

"Sergeant Gromley," he said, "wants to place a charge against you for aiding and abetting a felon."

"The felon being whom?" asked Zoom.

"The Paine girl."

Zoom tapped a cigarette impatiently on the table, rasped a match along the sole of his shoe, lit the cigarette, snapped out the match with a single swift motion of his arm.

"Sergeant Gromley," he said, "is a dangerous man. He is dangerous to innocent and guilty alike."

Captain Mahoney's voice remained quiet. "He's the best interrogator in the department."

"Perhaps."

"And he tells me you interfered with him in the Paine case."

"He's right. I did."

"That's serious, Zoom. We've orders to allow you to cooperate because you've always had a passion for justice, and you've helped us clear up some difficult cases. But you're going to lose your privileges."

Captain Mahoney was never more quiet than when enraged. Zoom had known him for years in a close friendship which was founded on mutual respect. Yet Captain Mahoney would have been among the first to have admitted that, despite their long friendship, he knew virtually nothing of that strange, sardonic creature who interested himself in odd crimes.

"I'm afraid, Zoom, I shall have to ask you to surrender your courtesy star and your commission as a special deputy. I'm sorry, but you knew the rules, and you infringed on them."

Sidney Zoom took the articles from his pocket, passed them over, heaved a sigh.

"I'd anticipated that, and I'm glad. I can do more by fighting the police than by cooperating with them."

He jackknifed his huge form to its full height, strode toward the door. His hand was on the knob

when Captain Mahoney's quiet voice stabbed the tense atmosphere of the room.

"That," he said, "disposes of my duty as an officer. Now, Zoom, would you mind telling me—as a friend—why you took advantage of the confidence this department reposed in you?"

"Because," replied Zoom, "Gromley was about to outwit an innocent woman and pin a murder on her."

"He's done it anyway."

"No. He hasn't."

Captain Mahoney fished a cigar from his pocket, slowly bit off the end. His dark, luminous eyes regarded Zoom with curious speculation.

"Do you know who murdered Harry Paine?" he asked.

"No. But I know who didn't."

Captain Mahoney lit his cigar.

"I wish I'd been there last night."

"I wish you had, Captain."

Mahoney's eyes gleamed above the first puff of blue smoke from his cigar.

"Because if I had been, I'd have sensed that your interference was for the primary purpose of getting yourself kicked out. I'd have figured that you wanted to leave that room without exciting attention, and you took that way of doing it."

Zoom whirled, strode back to his chair, sat down, and laughed.

"Bill," he said, "it's a good thing you weren't there. You're too clever for me."

Captain Mahoney had not moved. He twisted the cigar slowly, thoughtfully, then flashed his black eyes at Zoom's hawklike face.

"And I have an idea you wanted to be relieved of your courtesy commission on the force because you're figuring on a fast one, and don't want any sense of ethics to stand in your way."

Zoom said nothing. For a few moments they smoked in silence.

"Bill," said Sidney Zoom, at length, "you're human. Do you want to solve that Paine murder?"

Captain Mahoney spoke cautiously. "Gromley says it's a perfect case, but that you and your lawyer have interfered with his proof and now he may not be able to turn over enough evidence to get a conviction."

Zoom leaned forward.

"If you'll put your cards on the table, Bill, I'll try and clear up the case for you."

"If I put my cards on the table," asked the police captain, "will you put yours on the table?"

Zoom's answer was explosively prompt. "No!"

"Why not?"

Zoom laughed lightly.

"Because I'm going to play with a marked deck."

"You think the woman *isn't* guilty?"

"I'm certain of it."

"It would hurt the police a lot if we should try to pin a murder rap on her and then have it turn out to

be a mistake," said Bill Mahoney slowly.

Zoom knew that he had won.

"Get your hat, Bill," he said.

Captain Mahoney reached for his hat.

"Where to?"

"To Harry Paine's place, out on West Adams. I'll drive slowly, and you can tell me what the police have found out while we're driving."

"Sergeant Gromley would have a fit if he knew what I was doing," sighed the Captain.

But Mahoney had seen Sidney Zoom perform seeming wonders on many previous occasions, and beyond the sighed regret, he showed no other signs of hesitancy.

As they purred along in Zoom's high-powered car, his police dog crouched in the back, Captain Mahoney gave Zoom a brief summary of the facts the police had discovered.

"It's a family fight. Guess old Paine was a man who had at least one killing coming to him. He had a son, Edward, who fell in love with Eva, the girl. Paine kicked the boy out. The boy started on doing some gem business, buying and selling. He was making good. Then, one day, he was killed, suddenly.

"There wasn't any insurance. The girl found herself widowed, with a stock of gems that had to be sold. She started having the estate probated so that she could get title

to the gems, and old Paine sued the administrator.

"It developed that there was an illegality about the marriage. He'd known it all along and had been saving it as a weapon. Therefore, Eva wasn't the boy's widow. Harry Paine was the only surviving relative. There wasn't a will, so Paine claimed the gems. The court gave them to him. He and his lawyer took possession of them yesterday afternoon.

"The girl didn't have any money to carry on a fight. But she had some of her husband's old effects. Among these was a key to the house. Apparently, the girl sneaked out to Paine's house after everyone had gone to bed and stole the jewels.

"She'd have made a good job of it, too, because no one suspected she had a key. But she was just a little clumsy in the getaway and knocked over a chair. That woke old Paine up.

"He dashed after the burglar, but she eluded him and got out. He started to chase her in his pajamas, then came back, got into his clothes, and went after her again.

"He told his attorney he'd caught a glimpse of her, running into the wind and rain, and had recognized her. He was furious and wanted to catch her red-handed."

Zoom shot Captain Mahoney a swift glance.

"Told his attorney? What was

his attorney doing there at midnight?"

"He lives in Paine's apartment house. Paine was a funny old codger. He went in for collecting things—stamps, first editions, whatnot. And he was a litigious old cuss, always in court. He sued his neighbors, sued the dealers who sold him things, sued the paving contractors who worked on his street, sued everybody.

"He got a white-haired old lawyer that he found somewhere, down and out, and took the lawyer to live with him in his house. And he always kept the lawyer busy. Then he got a butler who's a character, looks like an old pug; and there's a Chinese cook. That's the household. Quite a crew, I'd say."

Zoom nodded.

"That," he said, "is just about how I figured the case."

Captain Mahoney shot him a shrewd glance.

"How'd you figure any of that out?"

"There were legal papers in the pockets of the corpse," he said, "and the latest of them was a case where he'd sued the administrator for title to jewelry his son had had at the time of his death. A copy of the judgment was in his coat pocket at the time. The cop on the beat found it."

Captain Mahoney squinted.

"Well," he said, "here's the way Gromley reconstructs the case. Old Man Paine started after the girl and

didn't catch up with her until he was almost at her apartment. He grabbed at her and clutched a string of synthetic rubies she was wearing, a present from her husband.

"She broke away, shot him, then turned and fled to her apartment. She was panic-stricken, and ditched the jewels and the gun. She probably was so excited she didn't know he'd broken the necklace when he grabbed at her.

"She was afraid they'd be coming for her, however, so she ripped her name off the mail box and then went to her apartment to pack. She heard the sirens and knew any woman who started to leave the apartment house while the police were there would be stopped and questioned.

"So she pretended she'd been in bed and waited to see if the police were coming. If they hadn't found her she'd have ducked out as soon as the police left. She figured that if they did find her she could stall them off. And she might have done it if it hadn't been for Gromley's questioning."

Zoom shook his shoulders as though to relieve them of some weight.

"That's what I didn't like about Gromley. He's clever, and he used his cleverness—not to reason out what must have happened there at the time of the murder but to trap the girl. It wasn't fair."

Captain Mahoney smiled mechanically.

"Things in this world aren't always fair. But they're fairly efficient. It's the result that counts."

Zoom gave a single expletive.

"Bah!" he said.

"Still believe in divine justice, eh?" asked the police captain.

"I've seen something closely akin to that save several innocent people from the death penalty," said Zoom.

Captain Mahoney shook his head.

"You've been lucky, Zoom. But it wasn't divine justice. It was your own cleverness, plus the fact that you've got sufficient money to ride your hobby as far as you want to."

Sidney Zoom said nothing.

"That's the place," remarked Captain Mahoney. "The big house with the iron gate and the padlock."

Zoom made a single comment.

"Yes," he said. "It looks like the type of place he'd have lived in."

"Evidently you didn't take a shine to old Paine."

"No, I didn't. His character showed on his face, even in death."

"It takes all sorts of people to make a world, Sidney."

Zoom's answer was typical. "All sorts of things come up in a garden. But one pulls out the weeds."

Captain Mahoney sighed.

Zoom abruptly reverted to the clues which had led the officers to the crime.

"Would you ever have found the girl if it hadn't been for the beads?"

"You mean the synthetic rubies broken from the string?"

"Yes."

"Eventually, I think."

"But the beads were the clue?"

"Naturally. They led from the corpse to the outer door of the apartment."

"Of the apartment house, you mean."

"Well, yes."

Zoom fastened his hawklike eyes on the man who was staring at him with sudden curiosity.

"Did it ever strike you as being a bit strange, Bill, that the beads only went as far as the *outer* door of the apartment house? Also, that they were spaced so evenly? Why weren't there any beads between the outside door and the entrance to the girl's apartment?"

Mahoney laughed.

"There you go, Zoom, with one of your wild theories. The beads were the girl's, all right. We've identified those beyond any doubt. And the rest of the string was found behind the mirror in her room where she'd tried to conceal it. She'd put it there. There was the imprint of a finger in the surface of the chewing gum. It was her fingerprint."

"What happened was that the man she'd shot broke the string of beads with his death clutch. They were spilling all over the street, but the girl didn't know it until she got to the door of the apartment house. Then she gathered up what was



left, probably some that were on a thread that had dropped down the front of her dress.

"She knew she had to hide them. She wanted to put them where the police would never find them. By that time she knew they had been spilling, leaving a trail directly to the apartment house. That's why she pulled the card off of the mail box. She knew the officers would trail those beads and if they found a card bearing the same last name as the dead man's they'd come right up."

Zoom stretched, yawned, smiled.

"Did you notice, by any chance, if there was a cut on the fingers of Eva Paine?"

Captain Mahoney's glance was gimlet-eyed.

"Yes. There was. What made you think there might be?"

"The edges of the card container on the letter box were pretty sharp, and she was in a hurry. I thought she might have cut herself."

"And that such cut accounted for the red stain on the mail box?"

"Yes."

"I think," said Captain Mahoney, very deliberately, "that we'll go on in. You've told me too much—and not enough."

Zoom uncoiled his lean length from behind the steering wheel, grinned at the officer. "Come on."

They walked up a cement walk, came to the porch of the house. An officer on duty saluted the Captain, regarded Zoom curiously. The po-

lice dog padded gravely at the side of his master.

The door swung open. Two men stood in the hallway.

Captain Mahoney spoke their names to Zoom in a voice that was informative, but not social.

"Zoom, this is Sam Mokeley, the butler, and Laurence Gerhard, the lawyer."

Zoom nodded, stalked into the hallway, suddenly turned to the two men.

"I want to see two things," he said. "First, the room from which the jewelry was taken; second, the bed where Harry Paine slept."

The lawyer, white-haired and cunning-eyed, swept his pale eyes over Zoom's tall figure, keyed up with controlled energy.

"Show him, Mokeley," he said to the butler.

The man nodded. "This way, sir."

He was all that Captain Mahoney had described—massive, heavy-handed, his ear cauliflowered.

"Here is the room, sir. The gems were in a concealed cabinet back of the bookcase. Only a very few people knew of that bookcase."

But Sidney Zoom did not even glance at the place of concealment. Instead, he dropped to his hands and knees and started crawling laboriously over the edges of the carpet, his fingers questing over every inch of the carpeted surface.

He remained in that position, searching patiently for some three

or four minutes. If he found anything he gave no sign. As abruptly as he had assumed the position, he straightened to his full height, then looked at the two men.

"The bedroom," he said.

"This way, sir," said the butler.

They trooped into the bedchamber. It was a dank, chilly place, suggestive of fitful sleep or restless thoughts.

Zoom inspected the cheerless room.

"Where," he asked the butler, "did Paine keep his gun?"

The lawyer cleared his throat.

Zoom shot him a glance.

"I asked the butler," he said.

The butler's face was wooden.

"I haven't seen him with a gun for some time, sir. He used to have one, a thirty-eight, Smith and Wesson, sir."

Zoom strode to the dresser, started yanking open the drawers.

There were suits of heavy underwear, coarse socks, cheap shirts. In an upper drawer was a pasteboard box with a green label on the top. The sides were copper-colored. Zoom pulled out the box, ripped open the cover, turned it upside down.

On the dresser cascaded a glittering shower of brass cartridges—cartridges for a .45 automatic.

The lawyer cleared his throat again. Then he shrugged and turned away. Zoom stared fixedly at Captain Mahoney. "I want to see the Chinese cook."

Captain Mahoney motioned to the butler.

"Come with me."

They left the room. The lawyer cleared his throat.

"Going to say something?" asked Zoom.

"Yes," said the attorney. "I was about to remark that it was a nice day."

The door opened again and Captain Mahoney escorted the butler and the Chinese cook into the room. The cook was plainly nervous.

"Ah Kim," said Captain Mahoney.

Zoom looked at the man. The slant eyes rotated in oily restlessness.

"Ah Kim," said Zoom, "do you know much about guns?"

Ah Kim shifted his weight.

"Heap savvy," he said.

Zoom indicated the pile of shells.

"What gun do these fit?"

"Alla samee fit Missa Paine gun. Him forty-five, automatic."

Zoom turned on his heel, faced the lawyer.

"You made out Paine's will."

It was a statement rather than a question. The pale eyes of the lawyer regarded Zoom unwaveringly.

"Yes," he said.

"Who were the beneficiaries?"

The lawyer pursed his lips.

"I would rather answer that later, and in private."

Captain Mahoney glanced at

Zoom, then fixed the attorney with his dark, thoughtful eyes.

"Answer it now," he said.

The lawyer bowed. "Very well. The property—what there is, and it's considerable—is left share and share alike to the two servants, Ah Kim and Sam Mokeley."

The Chinese heard the news with a bland countenance that was utterly devoid of expression. Sam Mokeley gave a gasp of surprise.

The lawyer bowed.

"I wasn't going to tell you until the investigation was over, but Paine left all his property to you two."

"He didn't leave anything to Eva Paine?" asked Zoom.

"Naturally not," said the lawyer. "The girl was utterly unscrupulous. She testified falsely in the lawsuit over the gems. She broke into the house and committed burglary."

Zoom nodded acquiescence.

"Do you ever read the Bible, Mr. Gerhard?"

The white-haired man smiled.

"I have read it," he said dryly.

"It is an excellent passage," commented Sidney Zoom, "which remarks that the one who is without sin may throw the first stone."

The lawyer's lips settled in a straight line.

"If you mean anything personal by that," he snapped, "you had better watch your tongue. There is a law in this state against libel. Your attitude has been hostile ever since you entered this place."

It was apparent that the grizzled veteran of many a courtroom battle was aggressive whenever his personal integrity was assailed.

Zoom bowed.

"You are mistaken," he said. "My attitude is that of an investigator."

He turned to Captain Mahoney.

"The murder," he said, "is solved."

Captain Mahoney stared at him.

"Who killed him?"

Zoom smiled. "Since there is a law against defamation of character, I will say nothing, but will refer you to absolute means of proof. A step at a time and we will uncover the matter . . . Rip, smell the gentlemen."

And Sidney Zoom waved his hand—a swift flip of his wrist.

An animal trainer would have known that it was the gesture more than the words that made the police dog do what he did. The effect was uncanny. The dog walked deliberately to each of the three men and smelled their clothing with bristling hostility.

"Come, Captain," said Sidney Zoom.

He turned and stalked from the room, Rip following.

"We will leave the car parked here," said Zoom as they reached the porch, leaving behind them three very puzzled individuals, "and start walking by the shortest route toward the girl's apartment."

Captain Mahoney fell into step.

"Zoom," he said quietly, "have

you any idea of just what you're after?"

Zoom's answer was a monosyllable. "Yes."

They strode forward, walking swiftly.

"Search," said Zoom, and waved his arm.

The dog barked once, then started to swing out in semicircles, ranging ahead and to either side of the two men.

They walked rapidly and in silence. Captain Mahoney was hard put to keep up the pace. From time to time his anxious, speculative eyes turned upward to Zoom's face. But the rigid profile was as though carved from rock.

It was not until they had approached the place where the body of the murdered man had been found that the dog suddenly barked three times, came running toward them, then ran back toward a vacant lot.

Here was a patch of brush, behind a signboard. The ground was littered with the odds and ends that invariably collect in vacant lots.

"I think," said Zoom, "the dog has found something."

Captain Mahoney sprinted and was the first to arrive at the patch of brush. He parted the leaves. The dog pawed excitedly, as though to help.

Captain Mahoney straightened and whistled.

"Call back the dog, Zoom.

There's a forty-five automatic on the ground here. There may be fingerprints—if so, I want to preserve them."

Zoom gave a swift command.

The dog dropped flat on his belly, muzzle on forepaws.

Captain Mahoney took a bit of string from his pocket. He lowered it until he had it slung under the barrel of the automatic; then he tied a knot and raised the gun.

Zoom muttered his approval. For there were fingerprints on the weapon.

"Now, Captain, if you don't mind, we'll return to Paine's house and see if we can identify the gun. As a favor to me, I wish you'd tell no one where this gun was found."

Captain Mahoney sighed.

"Zoom, I'm going to give you a free hand—for a little while."

"Come on then," said Zoom.

They returned to the house as rapidly as they had made the trip from it, presenting a strange pair—the tall man with the hawklike eyes, the shorter officer, carrying a gun dangling on a string.

The butler let them in.

Zoom ordered him to summon the lawyer and the cook.

They gathered in the living room, a restless group of men, evidently under great nervous strain.

"Ah Kim," said Zoom, "is that Mr. Paine's gun?"

The Chinese let his eyes slither to the gun, then to Zoom's face.

"Same gun," he said.

"Beg your pardon, sir," interposed the butler, "but it's *not* the same gun. Mr. Paine's gun had a little speck of rust on the barrel, just under the safety catch."

Zoom's grin was sardonic.

"Oh," he said, "I thought you described Paine's gun as being a thirty-eight revolver, not a forty-five automatic."

The butler's face was like a mask.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Captain Mahoney regarded the man curiously.

"Anything further to say, Mokeley?"

"No, sir."

Zoom nodded. "No," he said, "he wouldn't have."

Mahoney's eyes were thoughtful.

"We've got to have proof, you know, Zoom. We may satisfy ourselves of something, but before we can do anything, we've got to get enough evidence to satisfy a jury."

Zoom started to talk. His voice was crisp, metallic.

"Let's look at the weak points in the case they've built up against the girl. Let's analyze the clues and see what must have happened.

"Paine had the gems here. He heard a noise, found the gems gone—stolen.

"Something made him sufficiently positive to start out after the girl. That something must have been some tangible evidence. Let's suppose, as a starting point, it was finding part of a broken necklace—

some synthetic rubies strewn over the floor.

"Naturally, he scooped up those rubies, to be used in confronting the girl. He started after her. He was walking toward the wind. It was raining. He got wet. That didn't deter him.

"But before he reached the apartment where the girl lived, something caused him to turn back. What was that something? We can be fairly sure he didn't get to the apartment. Otherwise he'd have raised a commotion—he was that sort. And he was facing in the other direction when he was shot from behind, with his own gun.

"Now what would have caused him to turn back? What would have caused him to surrender his gun? Certainly someone, in whose advice he must have had implicit faith, overtook him and convinced him that he was going off on a wrong track, that he should return and summon the police.

"Then, when that person had secured possession of the gun, he waited for a clap of thunder and shot Paine in the back of the head.

"That person had picked up more of the scattered rubies. He used them to leave a trail to the front door of the apartment house where the girl lived. Those rubies weren't spaced the way they would have been had they dropped off a necklace. They'd have hit the sidewalk in a bunch and scattered. They were spaced just as they

would have been had someone dropped them with the deliberate intent of causing the police to go to that apartment house.

"Now the only person I can think of who would have been able to dissuade Mr. Paine, cause him to surrender his gun, and turn him back, is . . ."

Sidney Zoom stared at the lawyer. Gerhard laughed.

"Cleverly done, Zoom, but not worth a damn. Your theory is very pretty, but how are you going to prove the necklace was broken here in this room? You got down on your hands and knees when you first came in here. You were looking for some of the rubies. But you were disappointed. Your interest in the girl has led you to concoct an ingenious theory. But it won't hold water—before a jury."

Zoom turned to the Chinese.

"Bring me the vacuum cleaner, Ah Kim," he said.

The servant glided out.

The butler exchanged glances with the lawyer.

The Chinese returned with the vacuum cleaner. Sidney Zoom opened it and took the bag of sweepings from the interior. He opened it on the floor.

Instantly it became apparent that the dust contained several of the rubies. They glowed in the light from the massive windows.

"Yes," said Zoom, "I looked for the rubies here. When I couldn't find them I knew I was dealing

with an intelligent criminal. But I did see that a vacuum cleaner had been run over the floor recently."

The lawyer frowned.

"That, of course," he said, "is rather strong evidence, Zoom. Ah Kim would have profited by the death. He has acted suspiciously several times. There's a chance you may be right."

Zoom's smile was frosty.

"Ah Kim couldn't have dissuaded Harry Paine from going on to the girl's apartment," he said slowly, impressively. "And I don't think it will be Ah Kim's prints that we find on that gun."

The attorney regarded the gun intently.

"Ah, yes," he said, "the fingerprints on the gun. Well, it's certain they're not mine, since I wouldn't have profited by the death of my client. I have lost by it. He kept me in a law practice."

The butler squirmed.

"Meaning that you're pointing suspicion at me?" he asked.

The attorney shrugged. "The fingerprints," he said, "will speak for themselves."

"Well," said Captain Mahoney, "we'll take the fingerprints of the men here, and—"

"Perhaps," suggested Zoom, "we can also look over the clothes closets. We might find evidence that one of them was out in the rain last night. And it's peculiar that the bed of Harry Paine shows no evidence of having been slept in.

Everyone agrees he jumped out of bed to pursue the burglar.

"I wouldn't doubt if there were clean sheets put on the bed, and the bed made up fresh because the old sheets and pillowcase might have shown that he kept a gun under his pillow."

The attorney spoke slowly.

"The fingerprints on the gun are the most important evidence. A jury will act on those. The other things are mere surmise."

"As a matter of fact," pursued the attorney, "the butler *was* out for a little while last night. I tried to locate him just after Mr. Paine went out and—"

The butler's motion was so swift that the eye could hardly follow it. He had edged near the gun which lay on the table. With a sweep of his hand he scooped it up and fired, all in one motion.

The attorney's stomach took the bullet. A look of surprise spread over his countenance; the look was wiped out by the impact of two more bullets.

Sam Mokeley jumped back, waving the gun at Zoom and Captain Mahoney.

"Get your hands up," he said.

But he had forgotten something—the police dog.

The animal sprang, a tawny streak. Teeth clamped on the wrist that held the gun. Seventy-five pounds of hurtling weight, amplified by the momentum of the rush, crashed downward on that extend-

ed arm. The dog flung himself in a wrenching turn.

The weapon dropped from nerveless fingers.

Captain Mahoney stepped forward, handcuffs glistening.

"Let go, Rip, and lie down," said Zoom.

The police dog relaxed his hold.

Sam Mokeley extended his wrists for the handcuffs, the right wrist dripping blood from the dog's fangs.

"Put 'em on," he said, his voice calm, his face utterly without emotion. "I got that lying, cheating, murdering double-crossing lawyer. You're right in everything, only both Gerhard and I went after Paine.

"The lawyer put up the plan to me. I have a criminal record. He knew it. He got me the job here. He proposed that we had a chance to kill off old Paine and blame the murder on the girl. He'd stick by me, and I'd split my inheritance with him.

"He made me do the shooting so I'd be in his power. But I don't know how in hell you ever found the gun. We took it down to the bay and dumped it in the water."

Captain Mahoney turned to Sidney Zoom.

"Certainly, Captain. I had to victimize you a little to set the stage. Rip's well trained and intelligent, but even he couldn't have done what he appeared to do. The fingerprints on the gun are my own. I knew that the murder had been

committed with a single shot from a forty-five automatic. Therefore I bought a similar gun, put fingerprints on it, and buried it where Rip could see it.

"When I told him to search for the gun, he naturally thought we were playing a game. He went to the place where I had planted the weapon—after I'd led him to the general vicinity. I thought it might help us in a showdown."

Captain Mahoney stared angrily at Zoom.

"And you left it loaded, ready to shoot, because you thought that—"

Zoom shrugged.

"As you said, you need evidence to convict."

Captain Mahoney sighed.

"Zoom, you're the most ruthless devil I ever saw work on a case . . . And how about the girl? Even if you have the right hunch about her, she must have come here and stolen the gems. She broke the necklace, didn't realize it until she got back to her room. Then she found a part of the string, and, of course, tried to conceal it . . . and she tore the name off the mail box. I wonder if she didn't conceal those gems in the mail box. Do you know?"

Sidney Zoom met his gaze.

"Do you know, Captain, you're rather clever—at times. But I don't think even you are clever enough to ever find out what became of those gems—or to get a provable case against the girl for their theft. You

know it takes evidence to convict.

"Personally, I have an idea those gems will eventually be sold to a collector who will be glad to pay a top price with no questions asked—and that eventually the girl will receive the present of a sum of money."

Captain Mahoney licked his lips.

"Zoom, your ideas of justice are, perhaps, all right at times. But you're sworn to enforce the law. You've got to do your duty."

Zoom grinned.

"You forget you made me turn in my badge and special commission. Come, come, Captain, you're going to get lots of credit for having solved a murder case so swiftly and efficiently. Let it go at that.

"And while you're talking about the law, remember there's always a higher law than those made by man."

Captain Mahoney took a deep breath.

"Zoom, what a strange mixture you are! Big-hearted about some things to the point of taking risks, ruthless about others!"

"I live life as I see it," Zoom observed.

Captain Mahoney went to the telephone.

"Send the homicide squad, the coroner, and the wagon," he said, when he got headquarters, "and tell Sergeant Gromley to lay off that Paine woman. He's got a wrong hunch."



## Thomas Walsh

### “I Killed John Harrington”

*What is a murderer's conscience? A “thing in him that is soundless and alive, that moves under his thoughts as formless as fog.” And what is a detective's conscience? Among other things, the conviction that loan sharks are more animals than men . . . A story by a contemporary master of the human interest cops-and-crooks tale that tugs irresistibly at your emotions . . .*

**Detective: POWELL**

IT WAS RAINING AS WALTER CAME out of the bank—a soft spring rain that darkened the pavement before the steps and made a fuzzy golden glow of the tall street lamp at the corner. Falling on his face it was cool, immeasurably cool, the touch of it delicate and calm on his cheeks, soothing and quiet to his mind. He lifted his pale sharp face gratefully against it, going up Ellinton Street as the voices of young Kennelly and Joe Watts began to sound in the passage behind him, and pretending that he did not hear when Ally Harding shouted something after him about a car—why didn't he come along with them?

Silently and quickly he went up Ellinton Street, past the group in the doorway of the Five-and-Ten that, protected by umbrellas and the glistening dark shine of raincoats, waited there for the bus. After two blocks he came to the boulevard,

where it was darker, colder, rainier, with the high buildings gone, and the open wind-swept space of the river on his right. Cars and buses went by fast with a slithery hiss of tires on the wet roadway; his bus, Number Four, rumbled by before he had gone a hundred yards.

It was, at half-past 5, stuffed with people, with folded newspapers, with faces and hats and extended arms swinging on the straps. He should have been in it, Walter thought; standing there by the fat man, holding onto his strap. And for a moment, as he looked into it, it seemed that he was there, swaying by the fat man, and the fascination, the compulsion, the curious urging tremor that had moved in him all day was strong again—a force that grew and grew until he did not dare to breathe for fear that breath would burst it.

He shivered, not from cold, for

his face was hot again under the rain, but because of what might have happened if he had taken the bus. He could picture it clearly; he could feel the thing burst in him, and the flow of words swept from his lips. Listen, he might have said, touching the fat man's arm, and waiting until the fat man's face turned to him. You're reading about Louie Marion; you're learning how and when they're going to execute him tonight, because he killed John Harrington—because they think he killed John Harrington. Aren't you? But he didn't really kill him. I did, he could have told the fat man. I did. I killed John Harrington.

I killed him because he caught me, because he switched on the light and when I turned he was sitting at his desk, holding his gun, and I had to fire before he could. I didn't mean to kill him. I thought the gun would scare him—that's why I brought it. But when the lights came on and I saw him I fired before I thought, my finger moved before I told it to. Still I killed him; he fell across the desk on his face, and I ran out and across the lawn and got away. No one saw me. But I killed him.

"Why"—the fat man might have said. And, frightened, he'd have tried to get away. And then Walter could have shouted it out to all of them, to all the faces, to all the astounded eyes, with the thing in him burst now, and irresistible.

The guy's Walter Robinson, a voice might have said. I know him—sure. He lives on Shepherd Avenue and he's got a cute wife and a couple of kids. Maybe he's nuts. Maybe—call a cop, buddy. Stop here. There's one. Hey! Hey! This guy—

Walter went on, through the rain. A fool would have taken the bus; but he wasn't a fool. He knew that all he had to do was keep away from people, stay by himself, and it would be all right. In five hours it would be all over; in five hours Louie Marion would be dead. For five hours he'd have to be very careful; he'd have to fight the thing in him that was soundless and alive, that moved under his thoughts, always, always, as formless as fog, more substantial than light. But he could beat it, Walter thought; he had to beat it. He knew what it was.

Once in a book—a Russian book—he'd read about it. There was a man who had committed a crime, who could never forget it, though no one knew about it; he thought of it all the time until one day, on the street, before a crowd of strangers, he'd got down on his knees and put his face against the earth and shouted out the thing he'd done. It had been fantastic. A man doing that! Yet, Walter thought, it's true. He could see it now. It was the crowd that did it, the people that didn't know, the people that must know. If the Russian had been clever, he'd have stayed by himself. Then, Walter thought, he could

have beaten it. In five hours Louie Marion would be dead; between eleven and twelve, the papers said, he'd go to the chair. No one would know. They'd forget Louie Marion, as they'd forget John Harrington. And he'd be safe. He'd be safe until he died.

He wasn't a fool. He'd keep quiet. He'd— It faintly surprised him to find himself in Shepherd Avenue, before his house. Mechanically he climbed the steps and went inside. The clock on the living-room mantel showed him it was twenty to seven. Mechanically he looked at it, and added five hours to it in his mind. He wasn't a fool. No one, not even Eleanor—

The thought seemed to stop in him, frozen, while he walked into the kitchen, and said: “Hello, there,” and hit young Walter on the head with his rolled-up evening paper. He couldn't kiss Eleanor because she was bent over the oven, basting the roast, so he said, cheerfully and loudly, “Raining out. That smells good,” and touched her elbow for a moment. When he had washed his hands and removed his coat the meal was ready, and all he had to do was sit down, with the paper propped before him, and his head bent over it as if he were reading.

While Eleanor served and poured young Walter's milk, she told him what a day it had been. Young Walter was an imp; and the baby had been cranky all afternoon. For a

while then, as they ate, she was quiet, though all the time Walter could feel her eyes studying him.

“What is it?” she asked, after he had forced down his last bit of potato and pushed back his chair. “What's wrong, Walter? Why are you looking so queer?”

“Silly,” Walter said. He bent over and kissed the back of her neck, and again, suddenly and without warning, the thing in his mind quivered, pressing and enormous. He could tell her now; he could say, “Eleanor, I killed John Harrington.” Without effort, those few words—and she would know. “Eleanor, listen—”

“Don't go imagining things,” he said, with a painful breath. “Don't be childish.”

Her eyes were worried and anxious. “But, Walter—”

He went into the living room. She would have been frightened, too, he thought, like the fat man. White, terrified, she'd have drawn away from him in the first reflex of horror, of involuntary revulsion. Even Eleanor—

He mustn't tell her. He knew that. Keep to himself, alone, in a spot where no one would hear him if he shouted it out. All he had to do was walk and walk, in quiet streets, in the rain. In five hours it would all be over. No one knew. After tonight no one would ever know.

Very quietly he took his hat from the peg in the hall and slipped out

through the front door. Half an hour later, in a little shop on North Avenue he stopped for some cigarettes and then went on again, downtown, passing Lothrop Street, and Rayner, and Clinton, coming then to the row of tall gray apartment houses, with the little park before them, and McLean Place on the other side of that, dark, quiet, peaceful. All he had to do was walk through the park, not turning into McLean Place when the paths crossed, not standing as he often had under the big oak, and staring at the third house down, on the left.

He wouldn't do that tonight. He'd go past it to the river, to the benches that would be deserted tonight, even by lovers, to the darkness where he would be alone. And still when he didn't do that, when he turned without hesitation and took the left-hand path, going past the oak to McLean Place, and walking along the pavement there until he was outside the third house down, he felt no surprise. It was all right, he thought; he wasn't going to go in. Anyone could stop here to look at the house. That wasn't a crime. A crank could even go up the small stoop, the way he was doing now, ringing the bell at the top, and asking the maid if Mr. Worth was home. He hadn't told; he hadn't said a word; he could slip out now, with the maid gone, vanished in the dim hall, and no one left to watch him. Or he could even

stay, as he was doing, and wait for Martin Worth. Even yet there was nothing definite, nothing that could not be changed, taken back. He wasn't a fool, Walter thought; he wasn't going to—

Martin Worth, the State's Attorney, was a heavy-set man past forty, rather bald, with dark, sharp eyes and a masterful mouth. Opening a door on the right, showing Walter in before him with a brief smile and a nod of his head, he switched on the lights, took a cigar from his lips, and closed the door behind him.

"I'm Worth," he said. "You wanted to see me?"

Walter nodded. When he spoke his voice was a little loud, but not shaky at all. It seemed to come out of him with a strength of its own.

"It's about Louie Marion," he said.

Deep lines tightened infinitesimally around the other man's mouth. "Sorry," he said curtly. "Your coming here was useless, of course. There's nothing I can do. Only the governor can help him now. He'll be executed in three hours, man. You're a relative?"

Now that he was about to speak, the pressure, the urging that had drawn at his mind in the bank, was completely gone. He knew he could stop; but, oddly, he didn't want to.

"No." He shook his head again. "I killed John Harrington."

Martin Worth stared at him, his lips gaping in a stupid "O" around the end of the cigar.

"Indeed!" he said, recovering himself after a moment. "Indeed! Ah—" The sharp eyes passed over Walter; the deep voice became very calm and soothing. "Just sit here for a moment, young man. If you'll excuse me—"

Martin Worth was familiar with cranks; his manner was perfect and unalarmed. He was almost out in the hall before Walter realized what he was going to do.

"Give me a moment," Walter said, without raising his voice, so quietly that Martin Worth turned around and stared at him with perplexed dark eyes. "I'm assistant cashier at the Third National Bank—maybe you remember seeing me there, Mr. Worth, when you come in to see Mr. Quarrier. I'm just outside his office, at the desk by the gate. You came in to see him a week ago—last Tuesday."

Something that might have been recognition showed in the other man's face. Walter went on, levelly and without emotion, as he saw it.

"Over two years ago I got in a jam. Someone I knew gave me a tip on the market, and I thought if I had a thousand dollars I could make two or three. Only I didn't have a thousand dollars. The bank had. I took it. In a week, when the stock went up, I thought I could pay it back. Then the stock went

down. In a week I didn't have a dollar."

"Here," Worth said, quiet and sharp. "What are you talking about?"

Very easily, without any hesitation, the words came from Walter. He had been framing them in his mind, he thought, for eight months.

"That put me in a spot, Mr. Worth. I had to get that thousand dollars. I went to the one man who might let me have it—John Harrington."

"You knew he was a loan shark?"

"I'd heard talk. I told him if he gave me the money I'd pay him twenty-five dollars a week until it was all returned, and I signed a paper that I thought said that. When he gave me the cash I put it back, and then every week I paid him twenty-five dollars. For a year and a half—almost two thousand dollars."

Looking at him uncertainly, Worth said nothing. Walter went on.

"I thought that was enough, but he said it wasn't; he said the twenty-five dollars was just the weekly interest rate I'd agreed to pay. He said I hadn't even touched the principal yet, and that if I didn't keep on paying he'd tell the bank. I knew they'd fire me, and I knew I couldn't pay him any more than twenty-five dollars a week. The way it was I told my wife I'd been

cut, and went without lunches and cigarettes. Then I thought I'd steal the paper I signed, so that he wouldn't have any proof, and the bank wouldn't believe him. They liked me there. If he couldn't show the paper, I thought he mightn't even come down. No one else knew what I'd done.

"A couple of nights later I went out to his house on Appleton Road to steal it. I brought a gun with me although I didn't mean to hurt him. I thought just showing it to him if he caught me would scare him. He—"

"You remember that night?" Worth asked suddenly, leaning forward. "Not the date—the weather?"

As he answered it Walter thought that the question would have trapped a crank. The date a man could find in the paper. The weather he wasn't likely to bother looking up.

"It was raining. A thunderstorm. When I got off the bus at Appleton Road all the street lights were off. The storm must have knocked down a wire."

Now under the level words that night shaped up again, slowly and vividly, with a kind of stark, unmoving preciseness—a picture forming and growing clear on some inner part of his brain so that once more he was in the darkness of that ninth of October, in that great windy blackness beaten through and drumming with the

sound of raindrops on the earth. There were no lights in the house. It was past twelve, the road was deserted; he stood again under the trees; he felt again the cold, desperate urging that had allowed him to stop only for a moment, and then drove him forward, across the lawn, through the darkness that was a friend and cold terror.

There was no sound but the rain. No one challenged him. He found a cellar window whose rotten wood snapped under the pressure of his knife blade. He crawled inside. His voice was low now, dry and husky. It seemed to follow and no longer precede the phantom resurrected actions in his mind.

"I got upstairs, into his offices. There I snapped the lock off his files with a chisel I'd brought with me. It took me a couple of minutes to find the paper I'd signed and the notes of the payments I'd made—everything that had my name on it. Just as I had them in my pocket and was turning to get up, the lights went on. He must have heard the noise I made forcing the lock. I saw him behind the desk with a gun in his hand and I fired before he could fire at me. Before he even said anything. Before I meant to. As soon as the light went on I must have pulled the trigger. He fell across the desk, on his face."

Staring at him, quiet and purposive, Martin Worth said: "The lock was broken on his files. That's true. We never did find out why

Louie Marion—"Watching Walter carefully, he reached behind him for the phone.

Walter did not listen to what he said. He felt a vast disinterest in Martin Worth, as if the stocky man were not at all important; part of him, confounding time and reality, was kneeling before a file on one knee, watching the top of a man's head that swung a little, humorously, on a gray blotter, and then got quite still. Part of him smelled the strong smoke confined in a quiet room, thin and gray and almost motionless. And part of him, too, must have answered the questions that Martin Worth shot out at him, as soon as he put down the phone. Then perhaps ten minutes later the doorbell rang, and Worth opened the door to the hall.

"Show him in here, Mary," he said. "It's you, Powell?"

A tall thin man came in, took off a shabby felt hat, and looked down at Walter with light eyes that were tired and quiet and extraordinarily calm, as if nothing could ever surprise them very much. For a minute or two Worth talked to him, keeping tight hold of his arm; then he turned, and the cigar was jabbed suddenly at Walter.

"All right. Tell your story."

Walter told it. The thin man, silent, leaned against the desk and considered Walter gravely, with an air of taking his tone, his expression, his features, and weighing them quietly and slowly. He asked

no questions until Walter had finished; then he said mildly: "How was he dressed? This Harrington?"

In the instant before he fell forward, dead across the desk, John Harrington looked at Walter again, faintly surprised, his mouth slightly open, his brows raised.

"A bathrobe," Walter said dully. "A dark one, red or brown. He had on a shirt inside it. No tie."

All the time, watching them, Worth had been puffing the cigar savagely, yanking it out of his mouth as if he were going to speak, putting it on the ashtray, picking it up again.

"Now listen," he said, before Powell could speak again. "You see the spot this puts me in? You see that? Say it's a put-up job—say he's a friend of Louie Marion's—and I stop the execution. Then I'm a fool—I'm the county's A-One sucker. I'm all washed up. The papers will never stop kidding me. And if it's true, if it really—"

The cigar performed incredible gestures of perplexed and angry bewilderment.

"You worked on the case—you were one of the men that found him the next morning, when his clerk couldn't get in. You ought to know whether he's lying. If it's true why didn't he tell us all this before? Why does he wait until the last night, until—my God!—there's only three hours left?"

"Why didn't you?" Powell asked, looking at Walter.

"Because I thought he'd be released, or reprieved. I knew he was innocent—I was sure they'd acquit him. When they gave him the chair I thought the governor would commute his sentence." Walter pressed his palms tightly against his temples. Something ached in his head, dreadfully. "I had a wife and kids to look out for. This Louie Marion was a gangster. I told myself he deserved it—that he'd probably killed a man, or more than one, in his life. The last couple of weeks I just thought I'd let him take it. No one knew and I thought I could do that. Even tonight I meant to do it. But I couldn't—I don't know why."

For a moment the thin man looked at Walter thoughtfully, and then he nodded and pushed away from the desk.

"Well?" Martin Worth's head came down and forward between his shoulders, questioning and aggressive. "You've got his story now. You ought to know—"

"Maybe I ought to," Powell said, blinking his tired eyes carefully. "Only I don't, Mr. Worth. If you ask me whether he's lying, I'd say no. It doesn't look like an eleventh-hour stall. I'd say he was telling the truth. The funny part is that I still think Louie Marion did the job."

"So he's right and he's wrong," Worth said, dangerously quiet. "That's your answer?"

Without seeming to feel the danger, rather meditatively Powell swung his hat around on his index finger and stared at it.

"I'm a cop, Mr. Worth—I ain't a magician." The tired eyes lifted to the other's face and stayed there for a while. "If you want me to make up your mind for you, you're asking for something I can't do. I'd suggest something if you wouldn't think it was screwy. I'd suggest getting in your car and going out to Appleton Road and having this Robinson show us what he did. If something's phony that's the place to spot it—right where it happened. Harrington's brother's out west somewhere, sick; he didn't even get here for the funeral. So nothing's changed. Everything's the way it was the night Harrington got rubbed out. If you think that's too screwy—"

"Nothing," Martin Worth said bitterly, "is too screwy in a spot like this. Come on."

He drove very fast. In ten minutes they were in Appleton Road, and Worth, in the dimly lighted hallway, was shouldering the caretaker brusquely out of the way.

"If you've been here before," he said, "you'll know the way this hall is furnished. Describe it."

Walter didn't have to make an effort to remember. It was very clear in his mind—the strip of carpet, the one chair, the little table, the long narrow picture of the Battle of Gettysburg over it. He led them down



the hall then, and before the closed door of the office he told them where the files were, and the desk, with the bronze ashtray, made of two outstretched palms, on the blotter atop that, just right of the inkwell.

In the office, after they had looked at the mark his chisel had made on the drawer of the filing cabinet, Martin Worth said softly, "I guess that's it. He couldn't get all that out of the papers, Powell. I'm calling the governor. It's ninety-three now."

Looking vaguely dissatisfied, Powell nodded; he kept one thumb under his chin and nibbled on the knuckle of a forefinger. Walter sat before him, quietly, with his head in his hands. It was over now; it was queer that he felt nothing, neither exultation nor despair. He wasn't glad that he had saved Louie Marion; nor was he sorry. Why had he done it? *Why?*

Even now the answer was unclear. The choice had stood apart, detached from emotion, in his mind—what was it, after all, but the choice of Eleanor and the kids, or a man like Louie Marion? Which of them were to be saved? It had simmered down to that; truth or justice or mercy or conscience were obscure words, scarcely understood. They had nothing to do with it. He wouldn't tell. A thug like Louie Marion! And Eleanor.

"Then get him, damn it," Worth

shouted into the phone. "And get him before ten o'clock. Phone me here as soon as you locate him. I'll be waiting. It's new evidence, man. If I don't get your call in fifteen minutes I'll phone the warden myself. I'll have to."

Hanging up, "A dinner party," he said bitterly to Powell. "And the secretary didn't know whether he should be disturbed."

"Uh-huh," Powell answered, with an absent nod, staring down at Walter as if he didn't see him, as if his thoughts were inward, searching for something else. "This Louie Marion," he said, after a pause. "What did you think of his story? How did you feel about him, Mr. Worth?"

"The way everyone else felt. I'll never be as certain of anything again. Guilty."

"Guilty," Powell said, plucking a bit of thread from his coat sleeve and rolling it about between his fingers with a small, preoccupied frown, "guilty as hell. It was all practically perfect. There's a cop that ducks in a doorway down the street when it begins to rain that night. He sees Louie Marion come out of this house and get into his gray coupé. Then there's a guy parked with his girl on the river drive, and he sees this same gray coupé pull up near him and a guy get out and throw a gun into the river. The guy he identified as Louie Marion. We know Louie wanted a cut on Harrington's loan-shark

take; we know Harrington wouldn't give it to him. All that is like these new screws they have out—the more stress you put on them, the tighter they grip."

"Twenty to ten," Martin Worth said, looking at his watch. "I'm giving him till the hour. No more! What are you talking about now?"

"Louie Marion," said Powell, looking sad and meditative and a little angry. "Being as long on Homicide as I have you get feelings about things, about people. You know that, Mr. Worth. Your office and ours work the same way; talk to everybody involved until one of the stories kind of twists around inside you. Why? Well, I couldn't tell you that. An intuition, you could call it, or a hunch. You just know, see? Proof's another matter. Proof's what we work for after we get a line on where to start. Even the cases that never get to a jury aren't as tough as the papers make out; we know who did the job even when we can't dig up proof enough to take him into court. The first time I heard this Louie Marion's story I said that's the guy. I just knew it, understand. He checked all the way down the line."

Pausing there, he regarded Walter for a long moment.

"Get up," he said finally, nibbling on his finger again. "Go over to the door. Say we ain't here. You're alone, like that night, un-

derstand. You do just what you did then."

Martin Worth gave an impatient little chirk of the lips.

"Go ahead," he said, with a heavy note of irony. "Let's reconstruct a crime eight months old. Let's find out what really happened."

"Why not?" Powell gazed at him placidly. "The room ain't been touched, Mr. Worth. Say it's curiosity; say it's the feeling we both had about this Louie Marion. Say it's that hunch I was just talking about. Go on," he told Walter. "With everything the same, understand. Everything."

Rising stiffly, Walter got up and went over to the door, stopping there with his back behind it. There was something that wasn't the same, he thought; for a moment he couldn't remember what it was.

"The lights," he said then. "They were off. I had a flashlight."

There were three lamps in the room, all lit. The one near the window and the one over the easy chair, Powell snapped off by walking across to them and clicking their buttons; only the small outspreading cone of the desk lamp was left on when he nodded to Walter to start.

Inside him as he started to cross the suddenly quiet room Walter felt his heart begin to beat so fast and hard that it was difficult for him to breathe. Martin Worth's bald head made a white blob in the shadow; behind the desk Powell's thin body

was almost invisible. Neither of them spoke; only his feet on the rug scuffed forth a small sound to break the silence.

He reached the files and knelt before them, and as he turned he saw Powell bend forward slightly, into the light of the desk lamp.

"You opened that drawer," Powell said. "The second one from the top. Now it takes you a minute to look through it. Now you pick out your papers. Now—"

The desk lamp vanished in a rush of darkness that was as swift and violent as a blow.

"The hell!" Martin Worth sounded panicky. "What are you doing? Put on that light!"

"Half a minute," Powell said. "Nothing's going to happen, Mr. Worth. You're looking through that drawer now, Robinson. You're hunting for your papers. You can't find them right away."

On one knee, rigid, Walter crouched by the files. When Powell stopped speaking, when the deep silence spread out smoothly and without a ripple through the deep blackness, it seemed that nothing had changed. Time flowed back; it was a night in October. In a moment John Harrington would turn on the lights.

And then the lamp came on—the one light on the desk, throwing sharply through black shadow its downthrust yellow funnel of vision. The chair behind it, incredibly, was empty.

It took Walter a moment to speak, in a husky tone he had to push physically from his dry throat.

"That's all. As soon as the lights came on I swung around and saw him. I fired before I thought. That's how it happened."

Rubbing his two thumbs, very gently, out over his brows, Powell looked down at Walter and said nothing. He shouldn't have been hopeful, Walter thought; this had all been insane from the beginning. Powell could doubt it, if he wanted to; but a man could not forget what his own eyes had seen, what his own hands had done.

It might have happened again tonight, in that moment of darkness. He fired and John Harrington fell, and in the long narrow mirror on the wall behind him Walter could remember how his knee had been reflected, with his hand resting on it, holding his gun that had very lazy, very gray smoke curling upward from the barrel. Mechanically now his eyes moved upward to see that again, but in the shadow behind the desk he saw only the vague impression of Powell's long face floating as if disembodied above the empty chair.

"The lights," he said dully. "They were all on. Not only that one on the desk. I could see the mirror behind you."

"They couldn't have been on," Powell said, and his eyes, with an instant's gleam in them, moved across to Martin Worth. "Anybody

sitting at this desk could only turn on the desk lamp. The others work from the switch by the door. Watch."

Moving quickly, he went across to the switch by the door and snapped the button in. Darkness fell, complete and savage. Then his hand must have moved again, for they came on in an instant, all three lamps. There was no shadow behind the desk. Walter saw the mirror.

He said huskily, "That's how they were."

Powell's voice had a patient, slow exasperation in it: "They couldn't be. If the wall switch was on, all the lamps are on. You can turn them off by touching their buttons, but they'll only come on again, all at once, if this switch is turned on again. Nobody sitting at that desk could turn them on all at once. You see that, Mr. Worth?"

"I see it's five to ten," Martin Worth growled. "I'm calling the warden. Maybe he'll listen to me. And what's the good of this? What do you think you're doing? This man confessed without any pressure. We didn't ask him to. He could be frightened enough now to start lying. Or it's a detail he might have forgotten. It can't change things."

"Don't call the warden," Powell said. It was quiet, and it was an order, so that Worth gaped up at him in blank-faced surprise. "Remember the cop's story, Mr. Worth—the

one that saw Louie Marion come out of here and get into his coupé? That cop said it was just beginning to rain then—he'd stepped into a doorway probably hoping it wouldn't keep up. Robinson here said he got off the bus when the storm was at its height—that puts him here *after* Louie Marion. See that? He said it was a bad thunderstorm and the street lights—"

He stopped there. "They were off," he continued, after a moment. "Ain't it obvious why, Mr. Worth? A line was knocked down somewhere in the storm; I remember the electric clock in my kitchen was half an hour slow the next morning. Current in this part of town was off half an hour, then. That's why the house was dark when Robinson came in; and that's why the lights came on all at once while Harrington was sitting at his desk. He didn't touch the switch. He couldn't, and get back to the desk while Robinson turned around. Those lights came on naturally when current was restored. See that?"

"Absurd!" Martin Worth said, but there was an uncertain expression in his eyes. "Then you have John Harrington sitting here in the dark, watching a man jimmy open his files and take out his papers—you have him sitting there ten minutes maybe with a gun in his hand, watching all that, and not saying a word. Why?"

In a soft voice, as if he were talk-

ing to himself, Powell said: "Because he's dead. Because Louie Marion knocked him off before the storm began, before he had a chance to use the gun he'd pulled, and left him sitting there. Then the lights go off and Robinson comes; and they go on and he's blinded a little and he sees Harrington and he's in a panic and he fires before he gets a good look at him and Harrington falls across the desk and Robinson runs out of here without even touching him. He's dead, sure—*only he was dead before Robinson fired at him!* He had to be."

It was so quiet in the room after he stopped speaking that Walter felt the silence in the beating of his own heart.

"What?" Martin Worth asked, in a dazed voice. "What?"

"He was dead sitting there," Powell said, not persuasively or with any effort at conviction—just as if he were stating a dry surety of fact. "A living man would have said something; one as yellow as Harrington would have plugged you without taking a chance, without turning on the lights, from the back. Kneeling there with a flashlight you were a perfect setup. The lights were the thing that fooled you, like they fooled me; when they came on you'd think a living man turned them on, and when you saw only Harrington in the room, sitting there, you'd figure he was

the living man. All the time it was only the current being restored."

Martin Worth smashed a fist on the desk. "Maybe we're both crazy. We convict a man for a crime and he claims he's innocent. We don't believe him. A man comes to us and confesses and we don't believe *him!* You're trying to clear him now, Powell. And I'm crazy enough to believe you may be right. And just to make it perfect it's ten o'clock. One hour left! My Lord," he ended hopelessly, rubbing his face and staring at Walter. "You said Harrington fell forward across the desk after you fired. How did that happen—if he was already dead? There was only one bullet hole in his body."

Crossing to the files, Powell knelt down in front of them and faced the desk. Walter watched him, afraid to move or speak, an enormous iron hand seeming to take his body, shake it down its length, release it and grasp it again in time to the pounding in his chest that couldn't be his heart.

The empty desk chair, upholstered in leather, with deep wings on either side of it and the impression of a body still darkening the back between the wings, was ten feet from them.

"You fired," Powell said slowly. "Say you missed him. Then you had to hit the chair. You had to."

Very cold, rigid between the shakings of that enormous hand, Walter seemed able to move only

his head, turning it slowly, with Powell, as the big man crossed the room, and unclasped a penknife when he reached the chair.

Swiftly, with a faint hissing sound, the blade cut through the leather covering the right wing. Strips of dirty gray cotton batting curled out in Powell's hand until the wooden support was revealed behind them. After a while he muttered something softly, straightened, and swiveled the chair around so that the other wing was before him.

Perspiration beaded his forehead as he bent above it. The knife slashed again. But no bullet would be there, Walter thought; and if it wasn't there it was nowhere, for there was no mark of its passage in the smooth leather stretched across the back. This was insane. He'd killed a man and nothing could change that. Nothing could—

The bullet was about six inches down from the top, imbedded deeply in the wooden support. When Powell had carved it free, very slowly and carefully, he balanced it for an instant in his palm before extending it to Martin Worth.

"Your gun," he asked Walter. "What was it?"

Walter stared up at him. A voice that didn't seem to move his frozen lips said thickly: "A thirty-eight. It's home. It's—the papers said a forty-one killed him; I know that. But I thought somebody had made a mistake—or that it was a trick,

perhaps, that they suspected someone else had killed him and put that in as a trap. I never thought it meant I didn't kill him. Mr. Powell—"

But Powell was looking at Martin Worth. "A forty-one," he said, "did kill Harrington. This thirty-eight didn't even touch him. And Robinson wouldn't know—couldn't know—that this was a thirty-eight unless he fired it himself. You see that, Mr. Worth? He ain't been within ten feet of it since I dug it out. His thirty-eight didn't kill Harrington—it just lodged in here, between the wing of the chair and the back, in the crack there that just closed over it without leaving any mark. That's why we didn't find it before; that's why I knew tonight it had to be in that crack if it was any place. This thirty-eight only knocked the chair back. It's swiveled, Mr. Worth. See?"

With one hand he pressed the back away from him. As soon as he released it the seat tilted forward again and remained a moment swinging uneasily.

"The bullet knocked it back all the way, with enough impetus in the rebound to jerk it forward again. Harrington's dead weight toppled him across the desk. That's how he fell."

There was a funny, ringing emptiness in Walter's mind that told him all this was unbelievable, a dream; it hadn't really happened. Not even if Martin Worth was look-

ing down at him and saying something in a puzzled tone about unlawful entry. Armed, too. That—

“You’re figuring loan sharks are human,” Powell said. “I never did, myself. Me, I’d remember this Robinson’s got two kids and he needs his job. If I was a betting man I’d lay five to one he’s going to turn green the next time he sees a stock market report in the paper.”

Worth looked thoughtful. “You could be right. What on earth could I charge him with? You can’t attempt murder on a dead man. Or can you, Powell?”

He frowned at Walter. Then the phone on the desk tinkled and he looked at that, but he didn’t pick it up.

Then they were in the car again, and it stopped at the corner of Shepherd Avenue and Powell opened the door. Walter got out.

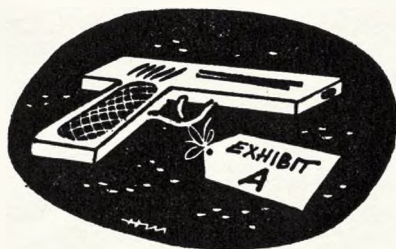
He turned when he reached the pavement and looked at them. “Can I—” he began, in a shaky voice.

“Go home,” Martin Worth said moodily. “Don’t bother me again. What the devil can I tell the governor for busting up his dinner party? Have you any ideas, Powell?”

Sadly, with a great deal of effort, Powell managed to wink at Walter.

“I guess,” he said, “I’m fresh out of them, Mr. Worth.”

From the corner, after they had gone, Walter could see the lighted windows of his living room. He could think of Eleanor now; he knew she was waiting for him. He could run, too, through the dark quiet street, until he was at the steps, and up them, and opening the door.



## **MacKinlay Kantor**

### **The Grave Grass Quivers**

*There is no short cut, no royal road, to quick and enduring success. The so-called "writing game" is full of heartache and heart-break. Take, for example, the case of MacKinlay Kantor. Today Mr. Kantor is one of the highest paid contributors to national magazines, but it was no "open sesame" for him. At the age of 18 he won first prize in a short-story contest. Being young, Mr. Kantor thought that his future as a writer was now assured. But the hard truth was, it had barely begun. He did not make his next literary sale for nearly six years!—enough to discourage even an encouraged "pro." And it was not until twelve years after he had won the contest that Mr. Kantor gained any real financial or critical success—with the publication of his memorable Civil War novel, LONG REMEMBER.*

*Yes, even for the "big name" writers, even for some of the biggest, it's usually a long voyage home, with storms and doldrums and even shipwrecks en route, and only an occasional record passage to renew confidence and bolster faith. And the editor (one half of our dual personality) only helps: he cannot call himself the captain, or even the steersman; he is but a part of the crew who bring the ships, big and little, into home port—and sometimes he is only a member of the crew who man the mouse-like tugs. But remember—and this often sustains a harassed editor—a mouse once gnawed a lion to freedom . . .*

#### **Detective: DR. MARTINDALE**

**W**E WERE ALONE, OUT THERE in the soft spring sunshine. There was no one to disturb us. We dug silently, carefully.

The clinging, black earth came up at every shovelful—moist and alive with the richness of the prairies. We had been digging for ten minutes, when my shovel struck

against something, and something cracked.

After that, it wasn't long before we began to uncover things. "Murdered," Doc said, once, and then he didn't talk any more.

It began in Doc Martindale's office, which, as soon as he retired.



was to be my office, on a cool spring afternoon in 1921.

"How's it going?" asked Doc.

"I guess it'll be pretty slow here, to live," I said, childishly.

"Not much excitement," agreed Doc. He went to the door and picked up a copy of the *Cottonwood Herald* which a boy had just tossed over the banisters. . . . "Yes, local news is slow, pretty slow. There's a sample of a Cottonwood thriller."

It told of the plans for Arbor Day. The children of the public schools were going to set out some trees as a memorial to the local boys who had died in the World War.

. . . and selected as their choice, American elms. The trees will be planted on the Louis Wilson farm, above the Coon River. Mr. Wilson has agreed to donate a small plot of ground for this purpose. It is thought that these trees, standing on a high hill above the river and overlooking a majestic view of our city will be a fitting memorial.

Ceremonies are to begin at 2 p.m., and it is urged that all local people attend. Rev. J. Medley Williams of the Baptist Church will deliver a—

Doc pulled his gray beard and laughed. "A few meetings, a church social, once in a while a fire or an auto accident! Once in a blue moon we have a divorce. Life

comes—and goes—without much hullabaloo."

Then I had to laugh also, and a bit sheepishly. "I guess I'm rather silly. Of course those are the important things in most people's lives. But I would like to get called in on a nice, exciting murder once in awhile!"

Doc was silent for a moment. He appeared to be thinking heavily, as if he had taken me seriously. "Murders," he said, after a moment. "Once before the war, a Mexican section worker stabbed his wife. Then back in '96, an insane farmer shot his neighbor. But, come to think about it, those are the only murders we've ever had here in all my years of practice." He seemed much impressed. "Think of that, think of that! Only two murders since 1861."

"And who," I inquired idly, "was murdered in 1861?"

He tugged at his beard again, and cleared his throat. "Well," he said, slowly, "It was my father and my brother."

"Oh." And I scarcely knew what to say. "I'm sorry, Doctor, I—"

"No matter." He shrugged. "It's a long time. I was just a boy then."

My curiosity was aroused. "What are the details, Doctor? That is, if you don't—"

"Oh, I don't mind. . . . Sit down and take it easy." He fumbled around for his matches, and his fat, brown cigar had been fog-

ging the room for several minutes before he began.

"My brother Titus—he was a lot older—had run away from home when he was small, and gone West with some folks. He didn't come back until the spring of '61. And when he came, what a time!"

He laughed his short, dry laugh.

"Titus had struck it rich. He had about seven thousand dollars in gold with him.

"Pa and Titus decided to take the gold to Hamilton. There was a sort of bank opened up there, and the folks were afraid to risk keeping so much money around home.

"They were pretty careful, too, and didn't tell around town much about what they planned. They started out at night, figuring to get clear away from Cottonwood and the settlers who knew them, before daylight. Pa and Titus were big strapping men. They looked very strong, setting up on the board laid across the plank wagon box, and Titus carried a navy revolver on his hip and a Sharps rifle across his knees."

Doc Martindale shifted his fat, bumpy body in his old swivel chair. "And that," he said, "was the last we ever saw them.

"On the evening of the second day after my folks left," Dr. Martindale continued, "a farmer from the Salt Creek neighborhood rode up in front of our house, and said that he had seen our team down in a clump of willows by Little Hell

Slough, hitched to a wagon, and that the men folks were not with the wagon. The team had been dragging around, and tried to go home, but they got hung up in the willows."

Old Doc was silent for several minutes.

"That was a terrible night," he said, simply. "Before we all got down to Little Hell Slough—most of the neighbors were with us—we found the team in those willows, pretty muddy and hungry, and tangled up in the harness, too.

"None of the stuff in the wagon had been taken except—sure: the gold was gone. The blankets were still there, and Titus's rifle, but his navy revolver wasn't anywhere around. And there was no other sign of Pa and Titus.

"I drove Ma and the girls home, in that wagon. Ma sat there beside me on the board, stiff and solemn. Once she said, 'Georgie, if they're gone and gone for good, you'll get the man who did it. Won't you?' I began to cry, of course. I says, 'Yes, Ma. I'll take care of you always, Ma. . . . But if they're dead, it wasn't a man who killed 'em. It was men. One man wouldn't be a match for Titus alone.'"

Doc was buried in the thickening shadows of the office. I couldn't see his face any more.

"Then I went back with the men. We searched the river, up and down the hills around Cotton-

wood, too, clear down the East Fork. And never found a thing.

"In that wagon there was just one clue—just one thing which made it certain in our minds that they were dead. That was a little spot of dried blood on the floor of the wagon, right behind the seat. About half as big as your hand. Seemed like, if they'd been shot off the wagon, there'd have been more blood. Then, too, the horses were a fairly young team and they might have cut loose and run away if any shooting had started.

"It was always the general opinion that the murderers had disposed of the bodies in the river. But, personally, I always hung to the idea that Titus and Pa were killed in some mysterious way, and their bodies buried. The fact is that the entire community searched for a week, and then gave it up. No other clue was ever discovered, and no further information of any kind was ever unearthed.

"I didn't quit searching for months. Eli Goble helped me, too; he worked like grim death. But we couldn't find a thing."

I asked, "Who was Eli Goble?"

There was the dull scraping of Doc's shoes on the floor. "Seems to me that you cashed a check this noon, boy. Where did you cash it?"

Somewhat perplexed, I told him. "At the bank across the street."

"Well, that's Eli Goble. And where are you living temporarily

—until you can find rooms or an apartment to your liking?"

"At the—Oh, of course, Doctor. The Goble Hotel."

He chuckled. "Everything in this town's Goble, boy. He came here in '59 with a man named Goble, but that wasn't Eli's real name. He had heard that his folks came from Ohio, but didn't know anything about it. You see, his family was killed in the Mint Valley massacre, about 1840, and he had been kidnaped by the Indians. Lived with the Sioux until he was sixteen—could talk the language like a native, too. In fact, lots of folks used to think he was part Indian. But he wasn't. And during the search, he thought all the trailing experience which he had had when among the Indians, might be of some account. But even that didn't help. We couldn't find a thing."

I said, slowly, "He's rich, now?"

Doc sighed, and began to hunt around for the light switch. "Suspecting Eli Goble, are you?" He chuckled. "I don't believe anybody ever did, before. He never had a cent to his name for years after that. A few months later he enlisted in the army, served all through the war, and didn't come back here till 1867. In the meantime, through someone he met in the army, he had been trying to get track of his family. And eventually he succeeded. Found the original family, back in Ohio. He got what money was coming to him, brought it out here

to Cottonwood, invested it carefully, and made good. He retained the name of Goble, for convenience's sake. Now he's almost ninety, but he's one of the richest men in the state, and one of the tightest. He never lets go of a nickel until the Goddess of Liberty yells for mercy."

The big yellow light hissed into being. It glared down on the white-enameled table, the glistening cabinets and instruments, the old desk and rows of books. Doc Martindale stood there in the middle of the office and nodded his head. "That's the story, boy. Real live mystery, just sixty years old this spring. . . ."

We were just putting on our hats, and Doc was struggling into his old brown slicker, when the telephone rang. Martindale took up the receiver. "Doctor Martindale speaking."

"Oh," he said, after a moment. "Well." And then he winked quickly at me above the telephone. "Did you use any of that stimulant I left last time? . . . Yes. I'm leaving the office, now, to go home, and I'll stop in. Yes."

He replaced the receiver on its hook. "Speak of the devil," he said. "Eli Goble's just had another heart attack. Nothing to get excited about. He has them frequently, but in between times he's up and down and around. We'll stop in to see him for a minute."

The Goble house was only a few minutes' drive from the main business streets. . . . Lights glowed

from most of the windows, as we came up the sidewalk. "You can tell that Eli's flat on his back," said Doc. "If he was around, he wouldn't let them burn all that electricity."

The old man watched us from his pillow, with black, red-rimmed eyes, deeply sunk beneath the moldy fuzz of his eyebrows. . . . He was breathing heavily.

"Well, Eli. How do you feel? This is Dr. Patterson, Eli."

The old man seemed to glare broodingly at me.

"Don't feel—so—good," Goble managed with difficulty. "Plagued heart seems—like—played out on me."

Martindale began to open his bag. "Oh, nothing to worry about, Eli. We'll fix it all up right." He made a perfunctory examination. "You'll feel better soon, Eli. Sleep tight."

The old man mumbled and coughed; and we went down the shadowy stairway, through the gloomy, over-ornate hall, and out to the front door.

It was four o'clock the next afternoon when Doc Martindale and I arrived at the office, following a round of calls on widely separated cases. Beyond a few hasty reports to the girl whom Doc Martindale kept in his office during the mid-day hours, we had enjoyed no contact with the town of Cottonwood since 10 a.m.

When we returned in Doc's old

touring car, it was to find the *Cottonwood Herald* spread on the table with plenty of black ink decorating the front page.

### ELI GOBLE GIVES PARK TO CITY

Local Businessman and Pioneer  
Settler Decides on Memorial

*Plans Changed for Tomorrow's  
Dedication*

At a special meeting of the city council this afternoon, it was unanimously agreed to accept the gift tendered by Eli Goble, revered Civil War veteran and early settler in Cottonwood, who today offered to give the town of Cottonwood some thirty acres of beautiful woodland, to be known as "Goble Memorial Park."

It is understood that Mr. Goble has been ill, and that is the reason for a delay in his plans.

"The grand old man of Crockett County" stipulated in the terms of his gift that the proposed Memorial Grove of trees should be set out somewhere in the new park area. This necessitated a hasty change in plans. Instead of being planted on the north hill, on the Louis Wilson farm above the Coon River, the trees will be set out on the brow of the east hill, which is included in the thirty acres donated by Mr. Goble.

A big parade, forming in the

city hall square, and proceeding across the east bridge toward the new park, will officially open the Arbor Day ceremonies at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. Following an invocation by Rev. J. Medley Williams, the Cottonwood city band will—

We leaned there, side by side with our hands upon the desk, and read that newspaper story.

Doc tapped the paper with his forefinger. "I'll go on record as saying," he declared, "that this is the first thing Eli Goble ever gave away in his life—at least the first thing in which there wasn't some chance of his getting value received out of it. And I don't see what he can get out of this, except glory. . . . Eli doesn't care a rap for glory. Listen to Editor Nollins calling him, 'the grand old man of Crockett County.' That's because Eli holds a mortgage on the *Herald* building."

Two patients drifted in for examination. . . . When I left, an hour later, I looked back to see Doctor Martindale sitting there in his swivel chair, a tired hulk, still reading the *Cottonwood Herald*.

At five-thirty in the morning, Old Doc was beating on my door. I arose, startled, and feeling that nothing short of peritonitis or a breech delivery could have made him summon me so insistently.

He came into the hotel room and waited while I threw on my clothes.

"What is it?" I asked, between splashes of cold water.

"We're going out and do a little digging," he said.

I nodded. "Appendectomy? Or what?"

"Nothing so unimportant," Doc replied. And his eyes looked as if he had been awake all night—red-rimmed and circled. . . . "Real digging. No one will know where we are. If Mrs. Gustafson takes a notion to sink and die while we're away, she'll just have to sink and die." He said it with seeming brutality. I was still too sleepy to press him for more details, or to wonder what it was all about.

But when we got out to the curbing in front of the hotel, and I glanced into the rear seat of Doc's car, there lay two spades, a scoop-shovel and a pickax.

I turned with an exclamation of astonishment.

"Get in," said Doc. And I did, without any more words. He drove down Main Street, north on Kowa Avenue, and under the Burlington viaduct. We seemed to be heading north of town. Two minutes later our car was making the Coon River bridge rattle and bang in every loose joint.

"This is the Louis Wilson farm," said Doc. "Hm. I reckon we can turn here past the Cedar school, and drive down the lane past the timber."

At the furthest corner of the cornfield we climbed out, taking

the shovels and ax with us. Doc was breathing hoarsely, but the strange pallor had left his face. . . . His eyes were bright and intent; there was something almost furious in their gleam.

He led me through a fringe of oak timberland, skirting two brushy ravines, and coming out on a sloping knoll where one solitary oak tree stood, stunted and twisted by many winds. The grass beneath our feet was coarse, tangled, flat-bladed. Native prairie sod, without a doubt. . . . Far away, a band of crows was circling over the river, cawing with faint and raucous cries.

"This is the north hill," said Doc. "There's the town."

It was a very high hill, this bald mound on which we stood. Beneath us the Coon River swung in a flat band of glistening brown.

The thin, brittle grass of the barren hill was tufted with hundreds of pale, lilac-pastel flowers. The blossoms grew on short, fuzzy stems; the petals shaded from white to purple, with a heart of yellow in each flower.

"They're beautiful," I said, "I never saw anything like them before. What are they?"

"Wind-flowers. Easter flowers. Or I guess the more modern name is pasque-flower. Pretty things, aren't they? One of the earliest we have around here. . . . Well, I'm going to get busy."

Doc dropped the shovel he was

carrying, and I was just as willing to relinquish the heavy load in my own arms. I went over and sat down against the gnarled oak tree, which was the only tree on all that bald, brownish hill. A million facts and statements and conjectures seemed boiling in my brain; I could make nothing out of them.

Before my eyes, Doc Martindale was behaving in a very strange manner. He was walking slowly in vague, indefinite circles, his eyes staring at the ground in front of him. Occasionally he would move up beyond the brow of the hill and sweep the surrounding area with his eyes. I had the strange notion that Doctor George Martindale, after unloading the sad story of his youth, had taken two days in going deliberately and completely insane.

He thrust a small piece of stick into the ground, moved away, surveyed the spot carefully, and then came back to set up another stick, several feet from the first. He repeated this process two more times. He now had an uneven rectangle, eight or ten feet long, marked at its corners by the bits of stick. "We'll try it here," he said.

Without another word, he removed his coat, lifted the pickax, and sent its point into the ground.

I cried, "Wait a minute! Won't people down in the town see us up here?"

"They'll think we're cows or pigs," said Doc.

And, as I have said before, we

were alone—out there in the thin sunshine of early morning. We dug silently. Neither of us spoke a word. After Doc had penetrated some two feet in depth, at one side of the rectangle, he moved out toward the middle of the space he had marked. I followed, with my shovel.

We had been digging for about ten minutes, when we began to find things.

"Murdered," said Doc.

We were finding them, picking out the disordered relics from the rich earth where they had lain so long. Tibiae, ribs . . . phalanges . . . the rusty remains of an ancient revolver.

Doc straightened up, and spoke to me gently. His face was set and strained; it might have been cast in iron. "There's a sheet and a grain sack or two in the car," he said. "Will you go over and bring them?"

I was glad of the opportunity to get away for a few minutes. When I came back, Doc had most of the bones covered with his coat. The knees of his trousers were dark and earthy; he had been kneeling in the loose mold of the grave, picking out the smaller fragments.

"I want a witness," he said, shortly. "Take a look at this." From beneath the coat he withdrew a human skull and turned it slowly for me to see. There was a complete and noticeable fracture, such as might have been caused by the blow of a sharp ax. "The other is

the same way," he added, and replaced the skull tenderly.

Then I spoke for the first time. "Can you identify them?"

"Easily," he said. "There's a Masonic pocket-piece, the revolver, and knives and things. . . . The pocket-piece is the best bet. It's engraved with Pa's name. Not corroded at all. I rubbed it up and could read the engraving."

Wisely, he made no attempt to identify or isolate the separate skeletons. The bones made awkward bundles, in the grain sacks. We worked slowly, carrying them and the shovels back to the car. I was too stunned by the grim reality to ask any questions. We went away and left that uneven black hole in the middle of the blooming wind-flowers.

Back in town, we went to Doc Martindale's garage, behind his little house on Omaha Street, and left the bundles there. Then we hurried to the office; fortunately there had been no phone calls at either house or office. It was after seven o'clock, and yet I had no desire for breakfast.

Doc sat at his desk and thumbed through a stack of old letters and notebooks. "Clell Howard's living in Long Beach," he muttered. "Got his address somewhere. . . . And Eph Spokesman is with his niece out in Portland. I've got to send telegrams right away." Then, strangely enough, he seemed to discover me standing there. "You go around

and look at Mrs. Gustafson and that greenstick fracture and the little Walker boy; tell them I'm busy on an emergency case. Don't say a word to anybody."

"I won't," I promised.

He said, "And be sure you don't forget the parade. It forms at 2 p.m., at the city hall square. You'll want to see that." And then he turned back to his rummaging.

I had all of the bedfast patients bandaged and dosed and sprayed and examined before 1:30 p.m. At two o'clock I was standing, with a group of pleasant and gossipy citizens, on the steps of the Cottonwood city hall. The triangular "square" was blooming with the gay sweaters and dresses of hundreds of school children who darted wildly underfoot, seething and yelling in a mad half-holiday.

At twenty minutes after two, the crowd was somewhat impatient. There had been a large turn-out; the Boy Scouts were there, and the members of the American Legion, chafing and shifting in line. There was even a huge truck, splashed with vivid bunting, on which were the grove of memorial elms all ready to be set out, their dirt-encrusted roots sticking from beneath the scarlet shimmer of flags, like so many witches' claws.

This crowd was waiting for Eli Goble, albeit waiting impatiently. If a man was so kind as to give away thirty acres of land, one could



at least expect him to show up for the dedication.

It was almost two-thirty before a big Cadillac touring car slid around the corner of the Phillips's oil station, and the crowds in that vicinity began a desultory hand-clapping. Yes, it was Eli Goble. I could see that bearded, skeleton shape sitting hunched in the rear seat, a Navajo blanket across his knees. His narrow-eyed son, vice-president of the bank, was driving.

Some fortunate fate had directed me to take up my station on those steps, above the mass of children. For I had a clear and unobstructed view of Doc Martindale, accompanied by a fat, pink-faced man who seemed very nervous, emerging from a dark stairway across the street.

I vaulted over the concrete railing beside me, and shouldered through the knotted humanity. Once or twice I had a quick glance at Doc and the pink-faced man, over the heads of the crowd. They were walking rapidly toward the corner where the Goble car was parked; the pink-faced man was drawing a folded paper from his pocket, and he seemed more nervous than ever.

We reached the corner simultaneously. A benign citizen, who wore a white silk badge, "Chairman," fluttering from his coat, was leaning at the side of the car, conversing with Eli Goble and his son.

"Daniel," said Doc Martindale.

The chairman turned.

"Get up on the city hall steps," Doc directed him, "and announce to the crowd that Mr. Goble's physician refuses to allow him to participate in the exercises. Then get them started with their parade."

Daniel began to stammer and sputter.

"Go 'long with you," ordered Doc, firmly. He opened the door of the back seat, and he and the pink-faced man slid in beside Eli Goble. And then Doc saw me standing there. "Get in the front seat, Dr. Patterson," he called, and before I knew it, I was sitting beside Vincent Goble, who was too excited to even bow.

"I don't understand this," he said importantly. "You're carrying things off with a very high hand, Doctor Martindale. It is my father's wish that—"

Doc's lips were thin and firm beneath his scraggly beard. "You keep your mouth shut, Vincent," he said. Vincent Goble gasped. "Drive around the corner on Queen Street, out of this crowd, and pull up at the curb."

The younger man's face was flaming with rage, but he obeyed the command. The Cadillac purred ahead, past the corner, past the alley, past the crowd. A block away it drew up beside the curb.

Vincent Goble and I swung around to face the trio in back. Eli Goble sat in the middle, clutching and contracting his hands against

the red triangles of the Navajo blanket.

"Go ahead, Ed," said Doctor Martindale.

The little pink-faced man gasped apologetically, and fluttered the folds of the paper in his hand. He began a whispered jumble of phrases: "As sheriff of Crockett County, it is my duty to place you, Eli Goble, under arrest. You are charged with the murder of Titus Martindale, and William Martindale, on or about the twenty-fourth of April, in the year 1861—"

Vincent Goble snarled. The old man still sat there, motionless except for the parchment hands which twisted in his lap. "Ain't true," he managed to whisper. "It—ain't true."

"You cowards!" cried his son. The banker's face was livid. "You'd devil the very life out of an old man with some crazy superstition like that! You'd—"

Doc Martindale said, "Drive up to the sheriff's office, Vincent. We want to talk things over."

"Like hell I will! Like—"

Ed Maxon, the sheriff, gulped fearfully. "Yes, Mr. Goble. That's right. Have to ask you to bring your father up to my office."

And so, we went. Vincent, cursing beneath his breath, Doc Martindale silent as the tomb, Ed Maxon twisting and rubbing a damp hand around his collar. And Eli Goble sitting there under the blanket, his eyes like black caverns, and say-

ing: "I—never done it. You'll see. I never done—that."

"You saw the gold at the house. And made up your mind—"

"No."

"You followed them out there on the east prairie. Or maybe you were lying there, waiting for them."

"I never—done it."

"Say, Doctor Martindale! If my father should have another heart attack and die while you're questioning him—"

"Now, Mr. Goble, you—"

"I'm a physician, Vincent. And Eli's my patient. I'll look out for him if he starts to faint. . . . Eli, you killed them from ambush."

"I never. Never did."

"Then you left the bodies in the wagon, took the team, and drove out to the north hill. It was a long drive—must have taken hours to get out there. But you figured that nobody ever went up there, and it was away from the beaten track, and would be a good place to hide the bodies."

"I—I—George, I'm an old man. I—"

"Damn you, Martindale! You—"

"Sit down, Vincent, and shut up. I'm not going to fool with anybody today. . . . Let's take your pulse, Eli. . . . Hm. Guess you can stand it. All right. You buried them out on the north hill. Maybe you drove the wagon back and forth over the grave—an Indian trick. Trick you learned from the Sioux. And prob-

ably you scattered lots of grass and brush around."

"No. No."

"Titus had his gun strapped on; you left them in the ground, just as they were. You didn't take anything out of the wagon except those buckskin bags. Then you drove clear around town again, forded the river opposite Salt Creek, and drove over by Little Hell Slough. You left the team there, and skinned out. Took the gold somewhere and hid it, probably."

"Ain't so. Lie. . . ."

"Then you laid low, and waited to join in the search. You were clever, Eli. Clever as an Indian. . . . You helped me search, too. Oh, how we searched! We even went right across that north hill. But we never saw anything that looked like a grave. . . . You kept it covered up, Eli. You were smart."

"Don't. . . . Don't talk so—I can't—"

"By God, you let my father alone!—"

"Now, Mr. Goble. Please. Control yourself. Please—"

"You concluded that seven thousand dollars was a big fortune. Well, it was. Worth waiting for. So you enlisted in the army, took your chances—I'll give you credit for nerve there, Eli—and turned up after the war with that story about finding your relatives and your family property back in Ohio. Yes, you were smart."

"I never—never done it."

"Why did you give this park to the city?"

"Mmmmm. I—"

"The *Herald* carried that Arbor Day announcement, night before last. And right away you had a heart attack. And the next morning you came out with that gift to the city. *Provided*—"

"Vincent. Vincent. Make 'em let me—"

"I'll—"

"Here, hold him!"

"I've got him. Now, Mr. Goble, you'll have to sit down."

"Don't be a fool, Vincent. This is true—all true. It's taken me sixty years to find out, but I've found out. . . . You gave that park to the city of Cottonwood, Eli Goble, *provided* that they set out the memorial grove over there, on the east hill, instead of on the north hill. You didn't want anybody digging on the north hill, did you? It had never occurred to you to buy Louis Wilson's farm, so there wouldn't be a chance of people digging that ground up."

"No. . . . Don't talk so, George! . . . Old. I'm an old an'—"

"Well, it was the first thing you ever gave away, in your life. And it set me to thinking. I thought, 'Why didn't Eli want that memorial grove planted up there?' And then, I began to understand things. I went up there this morning. Doctor Patterson was with me—I have a witness to what I am now about

to relate. He saw me dig; he saw me find things. I found *them*, Eli."

Vincent Goble was slumped forward, his head buried in his hands. Eli sat there in the sheriff's big chair, staring across the table. He seemed to be looking squarely through the opposite wall.

"They were murdered, Eli. Their skulls had been broken. A heavy, sharp blow at the back of each skull. I found them."

The old man's lips were gray and rubbery. He whispered. "No, I never done it. Can't prove it was me."

"A hatchet, Eli. Someone had thrown a hatchet—or maybe two hatchets, in quick succession. They were sitting on that wagon board, in the bright moonlight. It would have been easy for anyone who could throw a tomahawk."

Doc fumbled in the breast pocket of his coat, and brought out three folded squares of yellow paper. "I'll read to you all," he said calmly. "Three telegrams. The first one I sent myself, early this morning, to Clell Howard, in Long Beach, California, and to Ephriam Spokesman in Portland, Oregon. . . . Remember those names, Eli? . . . Clell was mayor here, once. And Eph Spokesman—everybody knew him. Here's my telegram: 'Please reply by wire completely and at my expense. During the old days at Cottonwood, what man was skillful at throwing a knife or hatchet. Search your recollection and reply at once.'

"Here's the first reply I got. It came from Ephriam Spokesman's niece. Came about eleven o'clock. You can read it yourself, gentlemen. It says, 'Uncle Eph very sick but says man named Goble thought to be a half-breed was only one who could throw hatchet. Wants to hear full details why you ask.'

"Along about eleven-forty-five, I got a telegram from Clell Howard. Here it is: 'Hello old neighbor regards to you. Am almost ninety but recall perfectly how I lost five dollars betting Eli Goble couldn't stick hatchet ten times in succession in big tree by Halsey blacksmith shop.'"

The room was perfectly still, except for the hoarse sputtering in Eli Goble's throat. "No," he whispered tremulously. "No."

Doc Martindale pointed to the further corner of the dusty old room. There was a table, which none of us had noticed before, and on that table was a white sheet, rumpled and bulky. . . . "Eli," said Doc, quietly. "They're over there. In the corner."

The aged man stiffened in his chair. His back arched up, the shoulders quaking; his claw hands seemed wrenching a chunk of wood from the table in front of him.

"Father!" his son cried.

Eli Goble shook his head, and dropped back in his chair, his deep-set eyes dull with a flat, blue light. "The dead," he whispered. "They

found me. . . . They're here in this room. I done it. I killed them. Titus and Bill. Yes. Yes."

Vincent Goble dropped down, his head buried in his arms, and began to sob—big, gulping sobs. The sheriff twisted nervously in his seat.

"George. You—you gonna send me to—prison? You gonna have them—hang me? I'm old . . . I done it. Yes."

Doc Martindale cleared his throat. "Yes, you are old, Eli. Lot older than I am. It's too late, now, to do anything about it. I told my mother I'd get the man, and—But I can't see what good it would do, now, to send you to jail or even try you for murder."

Sheriff Maxon wiped his forehead. "The law," he said shrilly, "the law must take its course! Eli Goble, you must—"

"No," said Old Doc, decisively. "I'm running this show, Ed. Without me, without my testimony and the case I've built up, there isn't any show against Eli. I won't prosecute him, or furnish evidence."

"But he confessed to this murder!" shrilled Maxon. "He—"

Doc nodded. "Orally. Yes, but what if Vincent and Dr. Patterson and myself all swear that he never confessed? What if I destroy—the evidence!"

Maxon shook his head and bit his lips.

"How much is your father

worth?" asked Doc of Vincent Goble.

The banker lifted his face, on which the weary, baffled tears were still wet. "Couple of million, I guess."

"All yours," whispered Eli.

"Maybe," Doc nodded. "Seven thousand dollars. Quite a nest egg, in those days. Like fifty thousand, now. Or even more. . . . No, gentlemen. Money won't do me any good. It can't bring back Titus and my father. But it can still do good. Yes."

Eli Goble's eyes had closed, like dark windows on which ragged curtains had been drawn. "I've seen 'em—I've seen 'em. Always. Since I got old—they come back. . . . I had to give in. Yes."

"You'll go home," said Doc. "I'll give you something to put you to sleep. Then, after you have a little rest and get your strength back, you'll have a lawyer up at your house. . . . You will give, to this county in which you live, one million dollars for the purpose of founding and endowing a modern hospital, where every inhabitant can secure the best medical and surgical attention, free of charge. How does that sound?"

Head still buried in his arms, Vincent Goble nodded drunkenly. His father had opened his eyes and was shivering, still staring through the blank wall ahead of him. "Yes. Anything. . . . I give—anything. But take me away. I want to go—"

home. . . . I'm old. I don't want to stay in—this room. I don't want to stay with—*them*."

After Eli Goble was in bed, and asleep, Doc and I came out into the damp warmth of the spring afternoon. Martindale looked ten years older than he did the day before. "After this," he said, "after everything is taken care of, I'll let things go. . . . You look after the practice beginning next Monday."

Our feet sounded flat and talkative, echoing on the long sidewalk. "One thing," I said. "I can't understand how you found the place. I can see how you reasoned out the rest—about that grove and about

Eli Goble's not wanting the trees planted up there. But how did you know where to dig? We could have been up there for days, turning the soil."

Doc felt in his pocket for a cigar which wasn't there. "Wind-flowers," he said quietly. "They were scattered all over that hill. Beautiful, like you said. . . . But I knew enough to dig where there were no wind-flowers. The grass on that hill looked pretty much alike, all over, but there weren't any flowers growing in that place I marked off. Those little purple flowers are funny. They only grow on native soil. You can't get them to grow where the sod has ever been turned."



## Roy Vickers

### Blind Man's Bluff

*The "inverted" detective story was invented in 1912 (in THE SINGING BONE) by R. Austin Freeman, creator of Dr. Thorndyke. The most important writer of "inverted" detective stories in our time was Roy Vickers, creator of the Department of Dead Ends. "Inverted" detective stories are case histories of crime—"a minute and detailed description" of each crime, "setting forth the antecedents, motives, and all attendant circumstances." Readers "see the crime committed, know all about the criminal." By comparison with Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke stories, the tales of Vickers' Department of Dead Ends are not as deductively conceived, and the nature of the evidence is not as scientific or irrefutable; but compared with the earlier Freeman classics, the Vickers modern classics are more gripping in their psychological interest, and they generate a much greater suspense. The Vickers "inverted" detective stories project a kind of realism unmatched in their field. That realism is neither drab nor prosaic; it is shot through with the credible fantasy which occurs so often in real life—that peculiar touch of the unreal which somehow stamps all works of genuine imagination with the very hallmark of reality . . . Here is one of Mr. Vickers' Department of Dead Ends novelets, as factually fascinating in its authenticity of detail as the ironic account of a true crime . . .*

#### **Detective: INSPECTOR RASON**

UNTIL HE COMMITTED MURDER, Robert Swilbey was a model citizen. Everyone admired him for one or another of his qualities, including the go-getters who admired only his business abilities. The example of his courage under a devastating affliction helped other sufferers. Many who knew him well would speak of him almost

reverently.

Yet he was, in vulgar parlance, a tough guy, with a toughness that would have frightened any gangster who had brain enough to understand it—a toughness with which even Scotland Yard was impressed.

"That man," said Chief Inspector Karslake, "practises all the vir-

tues as if they were vices." All that, from Karslake, after a single murder!

His father was a country solicitor who, perceiving Robert to be something exceptional, scraped and saved and sent him to the Bar. He died when Robert was twenty-three, leaving him about a thousand pounds. Having no influence, Robert at first secured only dock briefs in defense of impecunious criminals. Through these he soon attracted favorable attention. But as his income remained perilously low, he occupied his spare time in writing sketches for West End revues—cheeky little seven-minute playlets—with enough success to enable him to carry on at the Bar without dipping into his small reserve.

His knowledge of law was but little above the average, but his advocacy was of a high order, and he had the adroitness of an old hand in humoring his Judges. His early success was helped, in some measure, by his magnificent physique, his full-toned voice, and his handsome face. Win or lose, he always made the most of his case. As generally happens to young defenders who show consistent ability, the Crown gave him a chance to function as prosecutor.

In his fourth year at the Bar, when he was twenty-six, he earned nearly a thousand pounds—six hundred in practice—the balance deriving from a minute share in

the royalties of a revue to which he had contributed three playlets. He was already crawling along the road to success—a road along which he intended to gallop.

He had surprised himself by falling in love with Mildred Keltson, the daughter of a doctor who had attended him for a trifling ailment. Women tended to favor him: he had had his share of adventures and believed himself free from the danger of a serious entanglement. But Mildred did not appear to him as an entanglement. Tall and exquisitely shaped, with grey-green eyes and chestnut hair, intelligent and perceptive but temperamentally docile, she attracted him as he had not been attracted before. Considered impartially, he told himself, she was an ideal wife for a man such as himself. He proposed and was accepted in February: they were to be married in the Easter vacation.

In this phase he is seen only as a successful young man obviously destined for a brilliant career. He was bumptious, but no more so than any other rising barrister, and certainly no tougher. The toughness was, as it were, flashed into being, a few days before the Easter vacation by a wretched woman called May Dinton, the associate of a burglar whom Swilbey was prosecuting.

It required no great ingenuity on Swilbey's part to destroy the alibi the girl was trying to create for her



man. But he carried on for another hour and with some subtlety, extracted from her additional facts which aggravated the prisoner's guilt.

At dusk, when Swilbey was returning to his lodgings, May Dinton appeared from behind a pillar box.

"You got my boy seven years when the cops said the judge 'ud only give 'im three," she accused.

"My dear girl, what the cops say has nothing to do with me. I am sorry if you have been made unhappy, but you know that sort of thing is my job."

"You did more than you had to do for your pay. Twistin' my words round like that! You've made Ted think I ratted on him. But he won't think it any more—*now!*"

He had seen her draw a broad-stoppered bottle from under her coat: he supposed indifferently that she was about to swallow poison. He put up no guard—with the result that some three fluid ounces of vitriol splashed into his face.

On regaining consciousness after the operation, he asked when he would be likely to recover the use of his eyes. The doctor stalled, but broke down under Swilbey's expert questioning.

"Very well! Perhaps you'd better take the full shock while you are under our care. I am very sorry, Mr. Swilbey—there is no hope at all. Moreover—well, bluntly, old

man, for appearance's sake, you'll have to wear two glass eyes."

"Thank you," said Swilbey. In the time it took to utter those two words he re-planned his career.

Inspector Karslake himself had come to the hospital. They were personally acquainted, and respected each other's work.

"D'you feel strong enough now, Mr. Swilbey, to tell us what happened?"

"I haven't the least idea."

It was not the smallest of Swilbey's achievements that he was able to think clearly while his body was racked with pain.

"We know it was May Dinton," prompted Karslake.

"But you can't prove it or we shouldn't be talking about it—you'd charge her. Sorry, Karslake! I can't afford vengeance. Got to be very economical. Got to avoid law courts. Got to forget I was once a lawyer."

The bumptious young barrister had been drowned in three ounces of vitriol, and Swilbey's unquenchable vitality was already creating a new personality, which had to be coddled during its infancy. He must forget May Dinton as well as the Law. The new personality must have no grievance against life, or it would not make the grade.

Through a nurse, he wrote to Mildred: *Please don't come to see me until the pain has passed. Pain*

*in your presence would confuse me.*

These words show he was aware that, no matter how much his personality might change, he would still have a normal nervous system, would still be sensitive to the charm of women, with all its disturbances. Mildred, of course, would be in charge of that side of his life. So there need be no disturbances.

Mildred's father visited him every day. Swilbey found the visits tedious, except when they were talking about Mildred.

"You'll very soon feel well enough to let her come, won't you?"

"Practically ready now. Say the day after tomorrow."

"I'll tell her." Dr. Keltson cleared his throat. "There's one thing I want to mention before then. I can safely say that Mildred will keep her promise to marry you, if she sees that you wish to—er—hold her to it."

"There's no means by which a man can 'hold' a woman to such a promise."

"Oh, yes, there is, my friend!" The father was fighting for his daughter's happiness and dared not soften his words. "When Mildred accepted you, you were on the threshold of a brilliant career. She must have looked forward—quite properly—to sharing fame and prosperity with you. By a tragic accident you can now offer her only

poverty and a treadmill of small services to yourself. Show that you expect her to stick to you, and she will. As would any woman of character."

Dr. Keltson had done his painful duty. The answer brought him but cold comfort.

"You want me to humbug her with a wistful little speech about my not having the right to blight her life. Wistfulness is not in my program. You needn't worry. I shall not blight her life. I shall give her a square deal."

He meant what he said. Indeed, Swilbey never lied to himself nor anyone else—except, eventually, to the police. But he failed to see that in the matter of Mildred he had appointed himself judge in his own cause—to his own ultimate ruin.

When she came to the hospital, he was still bandaged—was in a chair on a terrace overlooking the river. A motor launch was passing and he did not hear her approach.

"I'm here, Robert," she said and thrust her hand in his. The significance of having to announce herself to him upset her self-control. A tear dropped on his wrist.

"Darling, you've got the wrong slant on this!" he exclaimed eagerly. "To us it won't make any essential difference. I've adapted my thoughts to it and know I can manage it. Listen! Believe! I'm telling the truth and not just trying to cheer you up. These last few seconds—while I've been holding your

hand—I've taken a great leap forward. You've touched some nerve or other. I can *visualize!*"

"I'm glad, dear, but I don't understand. Go on talking about it—it'll make it easier."

"Darkness!" he exclaimed. "At first you're always waiting, waiting for the light. Having breakfast in total darkness! It muddles your other senses, produces a sort of animal fear. I found difficulty in thinking of things by their shape and color. But now—holding your hand—I can see the sun shining on your hair, making the wavy bit in front look like copper wire. I can get the angle of the sun, too. It doesn't matter a damn if the sun isn't actually shining at the moment. The important thing is that I can visualize the effect of light under the stimulus of an emotional urge—meaning you. That guarantees I shall be able to visualize stage lighting."

Fascinated by the mechanism of his own brain, he pursued his thoughts in silence, which she broke.

"While you're here, could I come every day to teach you Braille?"

"I'm not going to learn Braille—nor anything else the blind learn. I'm not going to be a blind man. I'm an ordinary man, who can't see."

That which she believed to be his pathetic courage, his gallant faith in the wreck of himself, destroyed her judgment—though it is easy to

see, even at this stage, that there was no pathos in his courage, and that he had not been wrecked by his blindness.

"This is the program. I've got one toe in the theatre with those sketches. I intend to plant both feet. Now, when I've paid up here I shall have about fourteen hundred pounds, all told. I shall want five hundred for my working expenses, which will include the purchase of a dictaphone."

He proceeded to detail a practical plan of domestic finance. "Allow a hundred and fifty for our honeymoon and unforeseen expenses after we move in, and we shall have a reserve of eighteen months at the rate of five hundred a year. I shall be well in the swim within six months. Have you made notes of all this?"

"Yes, Robert." Prudence was awakening. Suppose he were not "well in the swim"—ever?

"If you'll see my bank manager we'll fix a power of attorney so that you can deal with the checks and the contracts. Remember, I can't sign my name. By the way, you'll have to do a lot of reading for me at first. Shall you mind?"

She answered that she would not mind. Her tone made him ask:

"I say, darling! The program as a whole? Including me? I've been rushing on, building a new life on your shoulders. Feel like it—or not?"

She was, in the words of her fa-

ther, a woman of character. To leave him in the lurch would be utterly impossible. She bent and kissed him.

"It will be wonderful—building together," she said, which was exactly what he had expected her to say. He visualized the expression on her face as she said it. But the visualized expression was quite different from her actual expression of honest doubt of herself and him.

"I shall have these bandages off in a fortnight," he told her—and altogether failed to visualize the shudder that followed his words.

For the next few years we see Robert Swilbey as the embodiment of the virtues extolled in the literature of success. In him character really did triumph against enormous odds. He did laugh at his setbacks. He did believe that failure was impossible. Also, of course, "luck came to him who earned it." His stage plays happened to be adaptable to a certain comedian in whom Hollywood had sunk a good deal of capital, and Swilbey's rates rose with each success.

In the first year he climbed on Mildred's shoulders more than he realized. Indeed, Mildred herself did not know that it was she who put him so quickly into the West End. His first full-length farcical comedy was tried out in the provinces, seven months after their wedding. It was under-capitalized

and badly mounted and was in some danger of collapse, when Turley Wain saw it in Liverpool.

Wain was a company promoter, mainly in the cotton market, with no expert knowledge of the theatre, who had the amateur's belief that he could spot a winner. He was impressed by Swilbey's dynamic drive, but he was more impressed, in a different way, by Mildred's courage and devoted care. He could see that he was in a position to dictate terms, but in Mildred's presence he held his hand and let Swilbey drive him. True that he eventually made money out of the play. But Swilbey made so much that he was able to finance his next play himself. Before the run had ended, Wain came to live in London and thereafter saw much of Mildred, without suspecting danger.

At the end of six years, living in affluence and with strong financial reserves, Swilbey believed that his marriage was as successful as his career. He was unaware that after the first eighteen months of struggle Mildred had been extremely unhappy. Even on their honeymoon he had refused to perceive that her feeling for him had become exclusively maternal and protective. This feeling had been steadily thwarted by his progressive efficiency.

While they were still comparatively poor she had the arduous task of keeping him abreast of

events and ideas by reading to him for long stretches every day. Then she had to take him for walks and in the intervals run the home with inadequate assistance. But the comradeship of it sustained her, gave her a sense of fulfillment.

Yet even in this first phase of their marriage, she had what one may call the first premonition of the ultimate disaster. She took her fear to her father.

"He drives himself so hard, Daddy. And although in a way it's all so splendid, I'm a little worried as to whether it's quite—healthy. I know you'll think I'm a fool—I think so myself—but this happens. When we're discussing plans for the week, he speaks as if he and I were making arrangements about someone else. He even says: '*he* must go to that rehearsal, and if we can get *him* back in good time we'll let *him* try a re-write of that last scene before *he* goes to bed.' The frightening part is that it's not meant to be funny. He only speaks like that when he is very concentrated."

"There's nothing in that," said Dr. Keltson. "I suspect you've been reading some stuff about split personality without, my dear, quite understanding what you read. I'm no psychiatrist, but I can tell you that, though it does attack exceptionally clever people sometimes, there's no fear at all with a balanced, mentally disciplined man like Robert. I've never met any man I admire

more—for mental discipline, I mean."

Six years later she again approached her father on the same subject.

"He's begun to 'split' me now," she told him. "Yesterday, I read a contract to him. He said: 'Ah! *There's* something for him to tell his wife!' And he did tell me, last night. He always does tell me how wonderful he is. This time, he spoke as if I knew nothing about the contract."

Dr. Keltson was still unimpressed. He asked: "Anything else? Has he any morbid habits?"

"Not that I know of. But I see so little of him except for business, or when others are there. He won't go for walks any more. He 'goes for a row' in that rowing contraption in the gym that makes a noise like a real boat on real water. And a bicycle-thing that can make him feel he's going up and down hills. And he has a journalist to read to him. If anything gets in his way he invents an expensive gadget so that he need not ask me to help him. He has so built things round him—things and persons—that I don't believe he any longer wishes he could see. Perhaps that's morbid."

"You aren't happy with him, Mildred, are you?"

"No!" She added: "What makes it uncanny is that he *is* happy with me. I suppose I'm beastly to him pretty often. It never hurts his feelings. He never retaliates—just clever-

erly makes me feel ashamed of myself. And then"—she shuddered—"we make up!"

"Well, at least he is loyal to you. At the back of my mind—"

"Loyal?" It was as if she asked herself a question. "Women run after him. He's so big and strong—and handsome, if you can ignore his poor, staring eyes. But I think he's afraid they might put him out of his stride. He's positively Victorian with them. When he's going to rehearse a new actress he sends for me. He says to the girl: 'It's essential that I should be able to visualize you. May I touch you?' And then I have to chip in and say something pleasant."

"At the back of my mind—"

"*'May I touch you!'*" she repeated bitterly. "With me standing by to make it impersonal and uncompromising. That's what I'm for. I'm not his wife. I'm just—*women!*"

"At the back of my mind, my dear girl, there has been for some time the feeling that I ought to warn you that there are whispers about your friendship with Mr. Wain. I know there can be nothing in it—but there it is!"

About the same time the whisper reached Swilbey.

Every Tuesday night Swilbey gave a party in his house in St. John's Wood, a couple of miles from theatre-land. For the rest of the week he was strictly not-at-home to anybody to whom he had

not given a definite appointment.

In the lofty L-shaped drawing-room that was also his working room he would hold an inner court round his gadget-laden armchair.

Now and again he would rise and walk among his guests, who were required merely to avoid impeding his progress. His system enabled him always to know where he was standing in his house or in the theatre. On first nights he could walk unaided to the proper spot from which to take his author's call—for which purpose he wore spectacles and a careful make-up; for he did not wish his public to know that he "could not see."

It was by the bend of the "L" that he overheard the whisper; and for the first time since he lost his sight he found himself shirking a reality.

For some days he vacillated. Mildred's behavior to himself was the same as it had been for years. He worked out ways of asking her for details—a frank approach. But in his heart he was afraid of receiving a frank answer that would break the smooth routine of his career. On the fourth day he wrote to Wain, under a thin pretense of being able to offer him another flutter in the theatre.

He received him, as he received everybody, alone in the drawing-room.

"I say, old man! Some infernal scandalmongers have been coupling your name and Mildred's. I

thought you and I had better get together about it. Cards on the table and all that!"

He was alarmed by the length of the pause before Wain answered.

"Before I say anything else, Swilbey, I have nothing to confess to you. I've never so much as touched her hand. I can't imagine what is being said. We have always taken care not to give the talkers a chance."

That killed the last hope that there might be nothing in it. Wain seemed to think that Mildred had already discussed it.

"I'd better go on." Wain's voice sounded unctuous and sentimental. "I've been in love with her for years, and shall be all my life. But I doubt whether she knows it's any more than friendship. Anyhow, if circumstances were normal I would speak to her—then ask you for a divorce. I've told you all there is to tell, Swilbey."

"I appreciate that." The fellow, thought Swilbey, was a mere sentimentalist, who would run from a challenge. "But I don't follow that bit about 'normal circumstances.' Why not speak to her? I have never regarded women as property. I stake no prior claim. How do we know she wouldn't be happier with you?"

Sentimentalist or not, Wain shook the edifice of six years with his answer.

"Swilbey, you asked for cards on the table. So you'll let me say that

we both know she would be happier with me—if I could retain my self-respect. But how could I? Knowing I had taken his wife from a blind man?"

In the recesses of Swilbey's brain, a voice was speaking about Swilbey: *That'll upset him—calling him a blind man! Mind he doesn't do anything rash.*

Through darkness the other voice, that of Wain, penetrated.

"To Mildred your well-being is a sacred mission, Swilbey. Her power of attorney has more than legal significance. She stands between you and the outside world with which you could not cope, even with all your assistants and servants. You would be the first to acknowledge that you owe your career not only to your own qualities but also to hers."

Again came the illusion of an inner voice speaking: *Look out! That'll make him worse. Wain is telling him that he's a blind man living on the charity of his wife's eyes.*

"I quite agree." Swilbey's voice was calm as ever. "By the way, years ago—when I was starting—did you finance my play because of Mildred?"

"N-no. At least, I don't think so. Not altogether. Does it matter, now?"

The personality had been thumped into numbness. Only the mannerisms remained active—and

some resolution he did not yet understand. Swilbey rose from his chair.

"I'm glad we've had this talk. One way and another, Wain, you've been a factor in my life. I would like to be able to visualize you. May I touch you?"

"Of course! I'm a shrimp compared with you."

"Yes, you're shorter. And you've kept slim." The hands crept lightly to the head, crept over the features, outlining the heavy, prominent chin with a dimple in it, crept below the chin to the throat—

*Don't let him do anything rash!*

But how would it be possible to keep "him" quiet? For the first time for six years consciousness of the perpetual darkness returned, and with it the animal fear.

At six o'clock, Menceman, the journalist, came as usual with a digest of the day's papers. Swilbey barely heard a word throughout the hour's reading. At seven-thirty, when he was going upstairs to prepare for dinner, he crashed into the balustrade.

The parlormaid, who had been with him for years, gasped with astonishment. Never before had she seen him miss his direction.

"Have you hurt yourself, sir?"

"No, thanks. My foot slipped," he lied.

That evening, alone with Mildred in her little sitting-room upstairs, he got up to go to bed, fal-

tered, and then: "Will you take me to my room, please?"

Sheer astonishment made her ask: "Why, Robert?"

"Because I'm blind!" he cried, and broke down like a child.

The next day Mildred beat down his protests and took him for a holiday up the river where he could scull for hours while she steered. The first nervous crisis passed. She made no mention of Wain.

He evolved, during that holiday, an interim personality—an understudy to sustain the role of Robert Swilbey. All the mannerisms were faithfully copied, but the inspiration was lacking. The interim personality could not write dialogue that sparkled with clever nonsense. He was working then on *Playgirl Wanted*, but had to abandon it before he had completed the first act.

"Menceman, I'm going to try my hand at straight drama. I shall have a background of police work, treated realistically. You might begin by going through the verbatim reports of trials, picking out the small points overlooked by intelligent murderers."

Now and again, the inner voice would register a half-hearted warning. *He's planning to kill Wain. Better humor him.*

"David Durham advised me to have a model theatre on the table beside me, as he does," he told Mildred. "Of course, my sense of touch isn't developed enough for



that sort of thing. But I could rig up a model stage at the other end of the drawing-room." He meant at the short end of the "L." "Scale about one to four I should think. I could use it, too, for rehearsing special scenes."

He spent sixteen hundred pounds on what became not a model but a miniature stage, with many of the fittings of a full-sized stage. Unable to concentrate enough for original work, he rehearsed revivals on the miniature stage.

At rehearsals he necessarily worked through a subordinate stage manager.

"I want to be able to handle the rigging myself—get the feel of the controls," said Swilbey, because he now knew that he intended to hang Wain, thereby giving the murder the outward semblance of an execution.

There is no doubt that Swilbey planned the murder of Wain in minute detail. But there is considerable doubt whether he meant to carry it out. Remember that day-dreams and fancies and castles-in-the-air possess a special kind of reality to a playwright—they become as real to him as a parcel of speculative shares is to a business man.

In a sense, Swilbey soothed his wounded ego by murdering Wain every night. The taunt of being a blind man, who could only hold his woman by invoking her pity,

was nightly avenged by the fatal blow that was not actually struck. Nightly, too, the heads of Scotland Yard were made to confess themselves beaten by the dazzling brilliance of Robert Swilbey—a man who, as it happened, could not see.

Certain it is that for two years he made no attempt to use the "engine of death," as counsel called it—more simply, the essential parts of a gallows, disguised as rigging for shifting scenes and the heavier stage properties. Nor did he take any step to lure Wain to the house. Ironically, Wain was, as it were, put on the spot by Mildred herself.

"I want to ask something of you, Robert," she began. "About Turley Wain. It's two years now since he gave you an explanation. He told me at the time that you had been very kind to him."

"He was very kind to me. I told him I'd fix a divorce, if you wanted it."

He hoped she would say she had never, and would never, want a divorce. But she did not. The darkness came down on him again.

"We exchanged parting gifts. I have only seen him once since then. Today. He is very changed. I drew from him that things have gone very badly with him, and he expects to be made bankrupt. Will you help him?"

"Of course, I will! Apart from your friendship with him, he did me a good turn when he financed *Brenda Gets Married*."

He felt her approaching. The darkness vanished as he visualized her physical beauty against the background of a sun-lit flower garden. She thanked him warmly—because he had said he would help Turley Wain.

"When shall I tell him to come and see you about it?"

In the nightly murder Wain always arrived at five-thirty on a winter afternoon. And Mildred was always out of the house. He reminded himself now that, on Fridays, Mildred always visited her parents, who were in retirement in Canterbury.

"Next Friday at five-thirty," he answered, and added: "February fifteenth—my birthday—good omen for Wain!"

*It was about five-thirty when he came, Inspector. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier pieces. That was part of the scene in which the police, every night, were "hopelessly baffled."*

On Friday Mildred left for Canterbury after lunch; she would stay for dinner, returning on the last train.

At five-thirty precisely, the parlormaid announced Wain. Speaking from the miniature stage, Swilbey greeted him with the opening lines composed two years ago.

"Hullo, Wain! I've just finished here. You haven't seen this little rig-out before, have you?" Swilbey

could hear the parlormaid drawing the curtains. He spoke loudly enough for her to hear. "It's the engineering I'm proud of. Have to haul everything up to the flies when we want a change. With the double reduction on these pulleys, a child could manage it—designed the whole thing myself. How's that for a blind man, eh! Have a cigarette?"

He felt for his cigarette case in one pocket and another. Like many a sighted man, he was never sure of his pockets.

"You dropped it on that bench, sir." The parlormaid left the curtains, hurried to the stage, recovered the cigarette case, and handed it to Swilbey.

Wain, who did not know that the very word "blind" was a danger signal, made polite murmurs. When Swilbey heard the parlormaid draw the last curtain, he said:

"Let's go and sit down. I won't bother to put the tackle away."

Back together down the short arm of the "L," a left turn into the long arm, to his armchair and the group of chairs round it. Swilbey felt the hands of his watch. Five thirty-four. Not a minute to waste.

"Mildred told me you might go bankrupt. How much do you want?"

"Bankruptcy is one thing. There's another!" Judging by his voice, Wain had gone to pieces—he was almost cringing. "To leave out technicalities, I got caught in a landslide, Swilbey. I swear to you

I didn't try to save myself at the expense of others. I threw in all my own resources, including even my furniture, when I need not have done so. It wasn't nearly enough. In trying to save the investments of others I committed a technical breach of the criminal law. At this moment I am actually wanted by the police."

"Better give me the figures!" Thirty-eight minutes past five. The babble must not last more than another four minutes. And he mustn't forget Wain's cigarette. It might set the house on fire—which would disarrange the plan.

Wain seemed to shrink from coming to the point.

"Last week a detective came to see me. Very decent fellow. Karslake. He knew you when you were at the Bar. I drew wool over his eyes because I didn't want to be arrested there and then. And now I'm keeping out of his way."

"Wain, old man, how much do you want?"

"The technical breach—well, five thousand pounds would cover that. But look here, Swilbey, I've no excuse for asking you."

"Yes, you have. You and Mildred together made it possible for a blind man to make a living. My career pivots on you two. She hinted that you might want a wad of ready cash. Come with me."

Swilbey felt some squeamishness in promising money that would never be given. But there is no gen-

tlemanly method of committing murder.

"D'you mind putting your cigarette out, old man? Have to be careful of fire where we're going."

On the way back round the turn of the "L," to the rehearsal theatre, he asked:

"And what about the bankruptcy?"

"Astronomical! Fifty thousand pounds, if a penny!"

"Hm! We'll have to talk about that later. We're going over the stage. That door at the back is still in use. All right! I can manage. In their own place, the blind can manage as if they were not blind. Mind that pulley!"

Wain, as he had himself said, was a shrimp beside Swilbey. Moreover, he did not know how to use what little weight and strength he had. So the "compensatory fantasy" was translated into reality without muscular strain.

When Wain was dead, Swilbey turned on the main switch which flooded the stage with light. The room lights of the short arm of the "L" had been turned on by the parlormaid.

The parlormaid! Halfway to the corner he stopped. He had had a sudden mental picture of the parlormaid handing him his cigarette case after he had dropped it on the bench.

"If I've dropped anything this time—"

He went back to the stage and

groped on the bench: he was leaving when his foot touched something on the floor which ought not to have been there. He bent down.

"That damned case again!" Like frightened snakes, his fingers slid over the tessellated pattern of the slim gold case. "Phew! I had a sort of intuition. Subconscious memory. Good! It means 'he' won't make any mistakes!"

He thrust the case into his breast pocket and hurried away.

At four minutes to six Swilbey, back in his gadget-laden armchair, switched on the radio. Luck again came to him who had earned it. A drama critic was talking.

At six punctually, just as the radio critic was finishing, Menceman, the journalist, came in.

Swilbey turned off the radio and spoke as if Wain were sitting near him.

"Wain," he said, "let me introduce Mr. Menceman who—"

"There's no one in the room but ourselves, Mr. Swilbey."

"Oh, then Wain must have slipped out—I had to listen to that critique. You've heard of Wain—of course! My fairy godfather. Backed my first play. Badly hit in the Slump. Let's have the Slump news first."

There was no fear of Menceman strolling about the room, turning the bend of the "L" and seeing the corpse.

Swilbey gave his full attention. The plan was fulfilling itself.

Menceman would leave at seven. By domestic routine a housemaid would discover the body of Turley Wain at seven-thirty, by which time he would be in his room dressing for dinner.

But at nine minutes to seven the sequence of the plan was broken by the house telephone.

"An officer from Scotland Yard, sir. Chief Inspector Karslake. He wants to speak to Mr. Wain."

For a second only Swilbey hesitated.

"Mr. Wain left a long time ago. But tell Mr. Karslake I would like to see him if he can spare the time."

With a nod he dismissed Menceman and concentrated on the problem of the detective.

Swilbey held out his hand and waited, as the blind do, for Karslake to grip it.

"It's good to see you after all these years, Mr. Swilbey. I always take the wife to one of your plays when I get the chance."

"And it's good to hear your voice!" echoed Swilbey. "We must have a chat sometime. At present you've got something on your mind, and Wain has told me what it is. You may take it that will be settled at once—in full."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, since he's a friend of yours. All the same, I can't stop the machinery at this stage, as you know. Can I see him, please?"

"He's not here," said Swilbey. "Left about six."

There was a short, strained silence.

"Mr. Swilbey, his coat and hat are in your vestibule."

"Surely not! Wait a minute." On the house telephone he spoke to the parlormaid.

"What time did Mr. Wain leave?"

"He hasn't left, sir. I thought he was in the drawing-room with you."

Swilbey repeated the girl's words.

"Then d'you mean to say he sneaked out of the room without saying goodbye or anything?" asked Karslake.

"Apparently, he did. I'd told him what I could do for him, and we'd really finished. I asked him to excuse me for a few minutes as I wanted to hear the end of a dramatic critique on the radio. At six, when Menceman came in—you saw him just now—I began to introduce them, when Menceman told me Wain wasn't here."

Karslake noted a half-smoked cigarette on the ashtray by his side: nothing in the tray within Swilbey's reach. That tallied with what Swilbey was saying.

"He left the room, then, but not the house," said Karslake.

"He wouldn't wander about my house without permission," asserted Swilbey. "It's much more likely that he heard Menceman arrive and thought it was you coming to collect him. He was in a very nervy state."

"If he left the house—without his hat and coat—which way did he go?" pressed Karslake.

Swilbey had seen that question coming—had seen, too, that he was in no danger, provided he did not shirk the logic of his position.

"He could have got into the garden by going through the door at the back of my rehearsal stage, and along the corridor. That door was locked on this side. If he slipped out that way, it must be unlocked now."

"Can I have a look at that door?"

Swilbey stood up.

"Come with me," he invited. "The stage is in this room—round the corner."

Karslake followed Swilbey round the corner of the "L." A corpse, as such, could not shake Karslake's nerve. But his nerve was shaken this time, partly because he thought, for a second or two, that the corpse was a stage property.

Looking some thirty feet down the short arm of the "L," he saw a well-lit stage-set of a saloon bar. Left back, at an angle, was the bar, with shining pump handles; left, a pin-table; right, a bench in green plush; and centre, a human form suspended by its neck in what appeared to be a noose attached to the hook of a pulley block.

Two paces nearer he recognized the features of Turley Wain.

"What?" Swilbey stopped in his stride. "Did you speak?"

"No. It's all right." Karslake was

thinking quickly. "Carry on, please, Mr. Swilbey."

Swilbey, a couple of feet ahead, walked on. With the steadiness of a sighted man, he stepped on to the stage. He passed within a dozen inches of the man who was obviously dead. So to the back of the miniature stage.

"Nothing doing!" exclaimed Swilbey. "The door is still locked on this side."

Fascinated, Karlake watched Swilbey return, wondering whether, this time, he would collide with the dangling corpse. Again there were a dozen inches to spare. Perhaps, he reflected, the blind always walked in the same track in familiar surroundings.

"Surely it isn't worth investigating, Karlake! The charge against him is pretty certain to be dropped, after restitution. Forget it for a few minutes and have a drink."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Karlake, who had meantime satisfied himself that there was no hope of saving life.

Back, with the blind man, round the corner of the "L" to his chair. Swilbey sat down. Sitting gave him the range of all the gadgets. He leaned forward and opened the door of a cabinet.

"Whiskey, gin or—"

"Whiskey, please." Karlake glanced uneasily at a row of decanters. "Allow me!"

"It's all right, thanks. You sit down." Swilbey's voice had a slight

edge to it. He passed his guest the whiskey decanter, a tumbler and a siphon, then held out his hand for the return of the decanter.

"Can I pour yours for you, Mr. Swilbey?"

"No, thanks!" Swilbey's tone barely escaped rudeness.

Karlake watched Swilbey pour his own drink with a deftness that made his hands seem like independent agents, able to think and act for themselves. Meantime, he was groping for a line of action. That corpse, actually in the same room with them, presented a tricky problem in presence of mind.

"Cigarette, Karlake?"

"Oh—er—thanks!"

Swilbey thrust his hand into his breast pocket for his cigarette case—kept it there for seconds as if his arm were paralyzed. Then he tried his side pockets.

Karlake saw a thin, tessellated gold cigarette case on the ledge, flush with the dictaphone. But he had observed that Swilbey was very touchy about being helped. So Karlake said nothing.

"Dammit, I thought I had my case on me!"

Karlake was glad of the respite. His mind on the corpse, he watched Swilbey's hand creeping, spiderlike, along the ledge by the dictaphone.

"Ah, here it is!"

For an instant the hand hovered, quivering over the case as if it were puzzled. Karlake dismissed this

cerie fancy, took the offered cigarette, and made his decision.

"To come back to Wain for a moment," said Karslake, "you might tell me exactly what happened while he was here."

This was the cue for the scene in which the police were "hopelessly baffled."

He had but to repeat the oft-repeated words.

"It was about five-thirty when he came. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier pieces. Then we came back here and talked. He told me he had committed a technical breach of the criminal law and that he was playing tag with you. Mentioned you by name and said you remembered me. I said I'd let him have the five thousand in the morning. Then he explained that he would be in for a civil bankruptcy to the tune of fifty thousand pounds. I said bluntly I couldn't manage that much—after which things became mildly unpleasant."

"What sort of unpleasantness?"

"After I'd turned down the fifty thousand idea, he said something about the five thousand being wasted—that it would be cheaper for all if he jumped off Waterloo Bridge on a dark night—the usual suicide threat that is never implemented. Between ourselves, Karslake, I don't like that man. He financed my first play. I admit he was thundering useful to me at the time, and I'm glad to let him have the five

thousand. Fifty thousand is another pair o' shoes. So I made the excuse that I had to listen to the radio critique. And I suppose he buzzed off in a huff as well as a panic.

"He's coming here tomorrow morning for the five thousand, and he's sure to surrender to you as soon as he's got it, so you don't have to worry. Have another drink?"

"No thanks. May I use your telephone?"

Karslake dialed the Yard, asked for an internal number, then gave Swilbey's address.

"Homicide!" said Karslake. "I'll be here when the team arrives." He hung up. "Wain is on that stage of yours, Mr. Swilbey—with his neck in that scene-shifting tackle."

"My God! Doing it in my house!" exclaimed Swilbey. "That's a dirty, malicious trick, Karslake! The publicity will do me no good—no darned good at all."

It was near the truth to say that Robert Swilbey was disappointed when it appeared that the police were not "baffled"—that they hadn't the wit to see that there was anything to be baffled about. On the other hand, he received, in the Coroner's court, a severe shock which put him momentarily in fear of his life. For the Coroner described exactly how Wain had been murdered—which Swilbey had thought no one could ever guess.

"Accident," said the Coroner to

his jury, when all the evidence had been heard, "may be ruled out. If you are to return a positive verdict, therefore, you must decide between murder and suicide. Let us consider what evidence, if any, supports the theory of murder."

He dwelt on the virtual impossibility of anyone entering the drawingroom without the servants or Swilbey being aware of it—he elaborated obvious absurdities.

"Apart from such absurdities, you have to postulate—to sustain the hypothesis of murder—a very powerful man who suddenly attacked the deceased, constricting his victim's throat so that he could not cry out—or the servants, to say nothing of Mr. Swilbey, would have heard him. For this purpose he used a curtain cord, an item in the fittings of the stage set. This hypothetical murderer then proceeded, in the clumsiest possible manner, to attach his victim to the hook on the pulley block.

"As you have been told, the device of a noose, or slip-knot, was not employed. A curtain cord, itself a stage property securing a curtain on the stage set, was wound round the throat of the deceased in such a manner as to make four complete coils. This cord was tied at the back of deceased's neck with three knots—the kind of simple knot which one uses for one's shoe laces, the difference being that this simple knot was tied three times instead of once. Through three of the coils,

the hook beneath the pulley block was inserted, greatly increasing the pressure of the coils round the neck. The hands were unbound. Medical evidence as to the condition of the hands—and microscopic examination of the ropes above the pulley block—make it clear that the unhappy man attempted to free himself by reaching above his head and pulling on the ropes.

"Why did our hypothetical murderer permit this attempt to frustrate his purpose? Add that this eccentric murderer must have swung the dead, or unconscious, body in such a way that the shoes could be pressed into the upholstery of the bench—and you may come to the conclusion that no such person as the murderer existed."

The Coroner had reconstructed the murder in order to ridicule the theory of murder. As a dramatist, Swilbey knew the danger of playing tricks like that on an audience, who would sometimes pick up an unexpected angle. But the fact of his blindness—above all, Karlslake's evidence of his behavior in the presence of the corpse—headed off suspicion.

Swilbey's dread was dispelled when the Coroner went on to say what Swilbey had intended him to say.

"On the hypothesis of suicide the deceased slipped silently away when Mr. Swilbey turned on the radio. After adjusting the pulley to the height he required, he wound



the curtain cord round his throat, as one might wind a narrow scarf, and tied it, as described, at the back. He stood on the bench, worked the hook under the coils, then swung himself off the bench. Police measurements, on the chart before you, show that the ropes would then swing, pendulum-wise, to the centre of the stage, bringing the feet of the deceased within three and a half inches of the floor.

"Like many a suicide and would-be suicide before him, he repented of his act before it had been completed, and tried to interrupt it. Had he secured himself with a noose, he would in all probability have succeeded. To free the hook from the coils of curtain cord was a great deal more difficult than loosening a slip-knot—doubly so, through the fact that his jaw was large and prominent."

The jury, ever ready to believe that a simple explanation must be the true one, accepted the Coroner's interpretation. Only Chief Inspector Karslake was heard to mumble that the suicide had been clear-headed enough to measure the pendulum swing, correct to three and a half inches. After a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, public interest in the case evaporated.

On the evening following the inquest, Robert Swilbey resumed work on the first act of *Playgirl Wanted*, abandoned two years previously. The play was put on the following autumn. It ran all

through the following year.

Eighteen months later he was at work on another play—when the end came.

A junior detective from another department flung open the door of the Department of Dead Ends and ushered in a seedy individual with patched trousers but a very decent sports coat.

"This is Mr. Joe Byker, sir," said the detective facetiously. "Hensons', the pawnbrokers, 'phoned us. Mr. Byker was trying to pawn this." He laid on the table a slim gold cigarette case with a tessellated design. "Mr. Byker says the case is his and he bought it with his own money."

Among the burglaries, petty thefts and whatnot on Detective-Inspector Rason's file were eleven missing gold cigarette cases, five with tessellated design. He opened the case in the hope of finding some identifying mark.

*For Remembrance* he read. No name. No initials.

"You bought it, eh, Byker! From a man in a pub whose name you don't know?"

"No, sir. I bought it right enough, a matter o' six weeks ago, off a respectable dealer name o' Clawsons, Theobalds Road."

"They're second-hand clothes dealers, Byker."

"That's right, sir. Matter o' six weeks ago I bought this 'ere sports coat as I'm wearin' this very minute, sir, and I didn't know till this

morning when I was havin' me breakfast that I'd bought that cigarette case with it. In here it was, sir." He took the coat off. "In between these two bits o' stiffening—that's where I had to cut the lining to get it out. And me walking about with it for a matter o' six weeks."

Clawson, the dealer, was able to supply the name and address of the man from whom he had bought the sports coat. Interviewed by Rason, the vendor of the coat was inclined to be indignant.

"Yes, I sold it to Clawson's—and what's the matter with that? The missus gave it to me to do what I liked with."

"And who is the missus?"

"Mrs. Swilbey—wife of the gentleman who writes all them plays. I'm his gardener."

Swilbey, a writer of plays! In a few minutes Rason remembered the freak suicide of eighteen months ago. Byker would drop in for "stealing by finding" if Mrs. Swilbey would consent to prosecute, he reflected on his way to the house in St. John's Wood.

"Perhaps you could tell me, Mrs. Swilbey, whether this is your husband's cigarette case?"

"It looks like it. I wonder where he dropped it!"

Mildred took the case, opened it, and caught her breath.

"No," she said. "It is not my husband's."

"But you do know whose it is,

Mrs. Swilbey!" It was a statement, not a question.

"It belonged to a friend of ours who—is dead. A Mr. Wain. I gave it to him myself. It is exactly like the one I gave to my husband—bought at the same place. That's why I thought at first it was his."

"Mr. Wain," repeated Rason. "I remember. Very sad. You're sure this is the case you gave Mr. Wain?"

"Quite!" She added the name of the jeweler where she had bought both cases. "How did it come into your hands, Mr. Rason?"

"It has been stolen," answered Rason, and bowed himself out.

He checked up at the jeweler's, then decided reluctantly that he must bring Chief Inspector Kar-slake into it.

"He was a lawyer once," warned Kar-slake, as it was Rason's case. "You won't get him to admit anything. But I'll stooze you all I can."

At five-thirty that afternoon they were being shown into the "L" shaped drawing-room. Kar-slake introduced Rason with a somewhat elaborate heartiness.

"I've got to worry you about the estate in bankruptcy of the late Turley Wain, Mr. Swilbey," said Rason.

"Before we start, Mr. Swilbey," cut in Kar-slake, "d'you mind if we smoke?"

"Do! Here, have a cigarette!" Swilbey felt in one pocket and then another, then found his cigarette case on the ledge that was flush

with the dictaphone. "I don't know anything about Wain's affairs."

Rason observed the cigarette case. It looked exactly like Wain's—the same tessellated design. It would feel the same to a blind man—and that was all Rason wanted to know.

"What an extraordinary thing!" exclaimed Rason. "That case is exactly like Turley Wain's." He added carefully. "You may remember—it dropped out of Wain's pocket—onto the floor of your stage—during the poor chap's struggles."

There was a tiny perceptible stiffening of the large frame. But it was the long pause that made Rason sure of his ground.

"I don't remember, because I was never told," said Swilbey.

"You didn't need telling! You picked the cigarette case up after you had killed him. You thought it was yours, because it feels the same. And you put it in your pocket. It was in your pocket when you were sitting in here, offering Mr. Karslake a cigarette."

"Any ass can make wild assertions!" snapped Swilbey. "Are you in this foolery, Karslake?"

"Well, Mr. Swilbey, I must say I do remember your offering me a cigarette out of a gold case."

"Then I wonder, my dear Karslake—" Swilbey had pounced as,

years ago, he would pounce on a witness—"I wonder whether you also remember that the case was *not* in my pocket, as I thought it was, but on this ledge here?"

"Y-yes, I do remember, now you mention it, Mr. Swilbey." Karslake spoke as one making a reluctant admission. "Rason, I think you'll have to apologize."

"Wait a minute!" said Rason. "*Suppose* the case on the ledge there, out of which he offered you a cigarette, was his own case? And *suppose* Wain's case, which Swilbey had put in his pocket, had slipped down the lining. And *suppose*—"

"Suppose my grandmother's foot!" Swilbey emitted a roar of laughter. "Karslake, haven't you taught this man any evidence?" Swilbey leaned forward in the direction of Rason. "My good man! If you could prove that I put Wain's cigarette case in my pocket—eighteen months ago, mark you!—we would not be talking about it. Mr. Karslake would charge me with murder—wouldn't you, Karslake?"

"Yes," said Chief Inspector Karslake. In sudden silence the distant rumble of traffic seemed to fill the vast drawing-room. Presently Karslake added: "Perhaps you'd like to ring the bell Swilbey, and tell them to pack you a suitcase?"



## Edmund Crispin

### The Crime by the River

*We once expressed the opinion that Edmund Crispin's "The Crime by the River" is one of the cleverest short-short stories ever written in the English language; and we were gratified to learn later that Anthony Boucher, mystery critic of "The New York Times" and of "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" shared our high opinion of this dazzling short-short . . .*

#### Detective: THE SUPERINTENDENT

NO, THE HOUSEKEEPER SAID, SHE was sorry, but the Chief Constable still wasn't back from London. He ought to be arriving any time now, though, so if the Superintendent would care to wait. . . . The Superintendent said that he would wait in the garden.

But it was the farmhouse across the river, rather than the gentle air of the October evening, which made him decide to stay out of doors.

At first he was resolute in ignoring its summons. Then, as time wore on, his determination weakened. And presently (as in his heart of hearts he had known must happen in the end) he found himself crossing the leaf-strewn front lawn, found himself halted by the bedraggled hedge at the far side and staring over the stream at the out-building where Elsie the servant-girl had kept her last assignation. . . . Death by strangling.

Across the river, a figure, unidentifiable in the failing light, emerged from the stables, then trudged through the yard. It was Wregson, obviously: Wregson the retired Indian Civil Servant, Wregson the tenant of the farmhouse, Wregson the widower, Wregson the pathetic, Wregson the bore; Wregson who had no doubt been fussing in the stables over the horse he had bought that morning. . . .

Glumly the Superintendent watched him until he disappeared from view. In a few weeks' time the Superintendent, too, would be retiring.

*I'll be glad to be done with it, he said to himself now; my God, yes, I'll be glad to get away from it all.*

The sound of a car roused him, and he returned to the house. "Here we are, sir," he said with a cheerfulness he was far from feeling, as he helped the Chief Consta-

ble out of the driver's seat. "Conference go off all right?"

"Hello, Tom." The Chief Constable was thin and old, and his complexion looked bleached. "The conference? Oh, the usual thing, you know: too many speeches and too few resolutions. Ruddy awful hotel, too."

"What time did you leave Town?"

"Two o'clock."

"Well, that's not bad going. . . . I've had a packet this afternoon, sir. Do you want a bath or a meal or something first, or shall I—"

"No, I'd rather stretch my legs. Let's stroll down to the river."

At first they walked in silence—the companionable silence of men who have worked together amicably for many years. Then, as they came in sight of the farmhouse on the opposite bank, the Superintendent nodded towards it and spoke.

"That's where it happened, sir—almost on your own doorstep, really. It's the servant-girl, Elsie. Throttled in an out-building some time this afternoon."

The Chief Constable took his time about assimilating this. Presently he nodded. "Yes, I've only visited Wregson twice," he said. "Mostly it's been the other way about. But I think I remember seeing the girl."

"I daresay she was striking enough." But the Superintendent spoke from inference only: it was a stiff and staring thing, a purple-

tongued horror, that he had actually seen. "It wasn't a premeditated job, sir, as far as I can make out. Just someone in a sudden passion. And I had it from Dr. Hands that the girl came to him a couple of weeks ago for a pregnancy test: result positive. You can see what that points to."

"Yes." The Chief Constable's head was hunched down between his shoulders as he stared in front of him into the gathering dusk. "A very well-worn track, that one. . . . Has Wregson still got his nephew staying with him?"

"Yes, he's still there." A flabby, fluttering young man, the Superintendent had thought, like the furry, overblown kind of moth. "He and Wregson are the prime suspects, obviously." For a moment his voice trailed away; then, with something of an effort: "Seeing that they were neighbors of yours, sir, I didn't—"

"My dear chap, they may be neighbors, but they certainly aren't friends. No, you mustn't let that worry you. But of course, I'm interested to know how things stand."

"Well, sir," said the Superintendent, perceptibly relieved, "briefly, it's like this. Dr. Hands says the thing happened between 1 and 3 P.M., approximately. The body was found by Wregson at about 5. They'd had an early lunch, which the girl served, and after that neither of the men set eyes on her—so they say. From lunch onwards the nephew says he was alone in

his room, working. About 2 o'clock Wregson rode over here to look you up, hoping you'd be back—"

"So he's bought himself a horse at last, has he? He's been talking about it for long enough. . . . Yes, sorry, Tom. Go on."

"Well, he didn't find you, of course, so he rode back again and arrived home about a quarter to 3. From then on he didn't see the nephew, and the nephew didn't see him—so they say."

The Chief Constable took his time about this, too. It was a trait, the Superintendent reflected, which had been increasingly in evidence since his wife's sudden and tragic death two years before. And God knows, living alone in this great barn of a house with no one but an aging servant for company—

But by the time the Superintendent reached this stage in his meditations, the Chief Constable was functioning again. "Any fingerprints?" he asked.

"Only Wregson's and the girl's and the nephew's so far—what you'd expect. But then, if it was an outsider who did it, he wouldn't have needed to leave any prints. All he'd have to do, if the girl was waiting for him in the out-building, would be to go through an open gate and an open door, and there he'd be. As to footmarks—well, the ground's as hard as brass."

They had reached the river bank

and were standing beside a tree half of whose roots had been laid bare by the water's steady erosion. Midges hovered above their heads. On the far bank, the dinghy in which Wregson had been accustomed to scull himself across on his visits to the Chief Constable bumped lazily against its mooring post, and in the kitchen window of the farmhouse a light went on. . . .

"Not an easy one, no," the Chief Constable was saying. "You'll be finding out about Elsie's boy friends, of course, and I suppose that until you've done that you won't be wanting to commit yourself."

He looked up sharply when there was no reply, and saw that the Superintendent was staring out over the water with eyes that had gone suddenly blank. "Tom! I was saying that I imagined. . . ."

But it was a long while before he was answered. And when at last the answer came, it was in the voice of a stranger.

"But you're wrong, sir," said the Superintendent dully. "I know who did it, all right."

Fractionally he hesitated; then: "I tell you frankly," he went on with more vigor, "that I haven't got anything that would stand up in court. It's like the Rogers case, as far as that goes. . . . It's like the Rogers case in more ways than one."

The Chief Constable nodded. "I remember. . . ."

EDITORS' NOTE: *By this time you have probably guessed the identity of the strangler. But in this story the identity of the murderer is not the measure of the author's ingenuity. The significant question is: How does the Superintendent know who killed the servant girl? What is the all-revealing clue which the author has given you with complete fairness? We warn you, it is not a simple clue to spot. It is one of the cleverest, one of the subtlest clues we have come upon in a long time. Indeed, the solution of a full-length detective novel could easily have hinged on this single point.*

Presently the Chief Constable stirred, saying:

"Yes, I'm glad it's over. I don't know that I ever seriously intended to try and bluff it out, but living's a habit you don't break yourself of very easily, and— Well, never mind all that." He was trying hard to speak lightly. "By the way, Tom, what did I do—leave my driver's license lying on the scene of the crime?"

The Superintendent spoke carefully: "When I told you that Wregson came over to look you up at 2 o'clock, you assumed I said *r-o-d-e*—as, in fact, I did—when you

ought to have assumed I was saying *r-o-w-e-d*."

The Chief Constable considered. "Yes. Yes, I see. If I'd really left town at lunch-time, I shouldn't have known anything about Wregson's buying a horse. And without a horse he would have sculled across the river—*r-o-w-e-d*—as he always did before. Well, well. Tom, I'm not at all sure what the drill is in a situation like this, but I should imagine you'd better get into direct touch with the Home Office."

"There's no case against anyone else, sir." The Superintendent's voice was deliberately expressionless.

"Thanks very much, but no. Now that Vera's dead—"

He grimaced suddenly. "However, I'm too much of a coward to want to hang about waiting for the due processes of law. So, Tom, if you don't mind. . . ."

A mile and a half beyond the house the Superintendent stopped his car in order to light a cigarette. But he never looked back. And even in Wregson's farmhouse, where they were starting their makeshift evening meal, no one heard the shot, no one marked, across the dark stream, the new anonymous shadow under the willow tree.



## L. J. Beeston

### £5000 for a Confession

*In our opinion L. J. Beeston is one of the most underrated writers of the pure "thriller," of the sheer, nail-biting, edge-of-your-chair melodrama (in the best sense of that maligned word) in the entire mystery field. He mixes a powerful drink, does Mr. Beeston, and here are his ingredients for a Literary Old-Fashioned: take a journalist, a doctor, an actor-manager, and an amateur detective—put them (almost said pour them!) into divan chairs in the lounge of The Yellow Club (definitely fin de siècle)—stir in a blood-curdling situation—shake, serve, and you have "£5000 for a Confession"—and hold on to your head! . . .*

AT ABOUT HALF-PAST TEN ONE night Westram came into the lounge of The Yellow Club.

"The floodgates of heaven are opened; just listen to it!" he said, lowering himself into a divan chair. He looked round at the few men in the circle of firelight. "Where's Berbaska?" he asked.

"Billiards," said Woods, a doctor.

"Where do you come from, out of the rain?" yawned Shepperson, an actor-manager.

"I have been trying to sit out *The Crimson Stare*, at the Peerage Theatre," answered Westram.

"And failed, of course. So will *The Crimson Stare*. I had the first offer of it. Parts of it are balderdash, and the rest piffle."

"A trenchant criticism," said McLeod, a journalist. "You are severe, Shepperson; you generally are severe."

There entered into the period of fifteen minutes which followed this brief dialogue a rather peculiar atmosphere. It started presumably from the time when Westram had dropped in. He seemed tired and out of spirits, and he kept jerking his neck round towards the door.

At 11 o'clock Berbaska came in from the billiard room. He came complaining that "his luck was infernal; that it was always infernal," and he took up a position right in front of the fire, standing with his back to it—an irritating habit of his; but he was not a popular man at the club.

"Westram asking for you," said McLeod. "Wake him up."

"Who's asleep?" snapped Westram. "I'm not. Neither do I want Berbaska particularly. There were so few of you when I came in, and I wanted more. I have something I



should like to say to you chaps. The truth is I wasn't at the Peerage Theatre tonight; I wasn't at any theatre. I have been in a slum off the East India Dock Road. I have been with a man who is hiding from justice—or, rather, a miscarriage of justice. He is hiding there like one of the East India Dock rats; and the amazing part of the story—but I'm going too fast.

"I have got to be careful. The man is the best friend I ever had, and I don't want him laid by the heels through my chattering. I must invent a name—let's call him Presland. Rather more than a year ago the police were after him on a common or garden charge of burglary, but he did not wait for arrest. Now this part of the story is ordinary, and can be told in a few words. Presland had been brought up by an English baronet and statesman, though no relation. A hard rein was put on him, and he broke from it. He was ordered out of the house like a dog. Three days later he returned—so runs the charge against him—came in the dead of night, put together certain valuables in the way of trinkets and plate, was interrupted by a servant, knocked the unfortunate domestic down and killed him, and bolted with the plunder.

"Presland knew better than to linger when he knew that his late guardian had flung him to the police. The evidence was perfectly clear. He had left fingerprints

aplenty; there was the damning story of the poor old servant.

"So much for the unexciting part of my story. Now for the other.

"A year after Presland vanished from all human tracks, an old aunt, who had cut him throughout the past, quarreled with the statesman-baronet, and by way of spite left all her considerable wealth to her disgraced nephew. The spite wouldn't have had any cutting edge, of course, if the old lady had continued to live; but she died soon after.

"My poor friend Presland was a rich man—if he knew it. He had only to come out from obscurity and say, 'Give me my thousands!' But first he would have to take his trial for housebreaking and murder; and so he continued to lie *perdu*—as most of us would, in the circumstances.

"Suddenly I was startled to hear from him. He was in London and begged me to see him. I went, and found him in abject poverty.

"At that time I had no doubts about his being guilty. How could I? The evidence was clear as lightning against a thundercloud. Yet almost his first words were to assure me that he was absolutely innocent. Did I believe him? I did. Old esteem, backing his simple and earnest statement, was enough for me. Yes, I believed him, and that in spite of the fact that he added nothing to his assurance. It was palpable to me that he did not want

to add anything, and I did not press him.

"He knew about the legacy. He knew of the dawn that was waiting for him, but first he would be compelled to pass through the prison night. He shrank from it. How could I advise him otherwise?"

"I chose a better way: I made up my mind to institute inquiries on my own account and see if I could get to the bottom of the mysterious affair. I seemed to have a clear field; no one had muddied the track because no one doubted that Presland was guilty.

"On paper it seems so easy to be an amateur detective, but in practice it is different. However, my time is my own, and I was not stopped by difficulties, nor disheartened by wrong theories. I struck a clue; I followed it up with patience and perseverance, and I found my man!"

Westram paused on a note of triumph.

"Or you think you have," sneered Berbaska.

"Oh, I have got him all right."

"Good egg, Westram!" laughed Woods. "Does he know that you have him?"

"He has not the slightest idea."

"Can you net him?" demanded McLeod, a trifle excited.

"Unfortunately—no. Convinced as I am of his guilt, there are one or two dark spots which beat me every time."

"Detective Westram has his limitations," mocked Berbaska.

"Don't jibe," said Shepperson. "Go on, Westram; you really are becoming entertaining."

"I must admit that I find the situation exasperating, almost maddening," continued the narrator. "Just another link, or perhaps two, and my chain of evidence would be complete. As it is, if I tried to throw the chain over him now he would elude or snap it; and I have to be very wary, or he may take fright and clear off. I considered the matter from every angle, and when I realized that it was a true deadlock, I went to Presland and told him all that I had done on his behalf.

"He was deeply interested, profoundly grateful, and burned with anxiety to throw light on the obscure places of that track which lead from the crime to that man whom I *know* to be guilty. But although his intellect is keener than mine, and with so much more at stake, we could work out no method of pinning our man to the ground. And while we argued and I worked, I began to suspect that the quarry had caught wind of our design.

"I communicated my fears to Presland, but he had anticipated them, and was ready with as remarkable a countermove as can be imagined. He said:

"There is a possible way out of this *impasse*, and we ought to try

it. The hour in which I am cleared of this charge is the hour in which I claim my property. Having used up all our ideas to defeat the enemy, we must now negotiate with him. Go to him, Westram; put all your cards upon the table; offer him five thousand pounds for a full confession."

"Oh, glory!" interrupted McLeod.

"Now what do you think of that?" cried Woods.

"Excellent," chuckled Shepperson.

"Excellent nothing," snorted Berbaska. "Where was this Presland chap to get his five thousand from?"

A general murmur told that the question had got home.

"Oh, do not you worry, Brebaska," smiled Westram.

"I? Worry? Am I the mysterious man at the end of your mysterious track?"

Westram threw back his head in silent laughter. "That is a good joke, Berbaska," said he. "Will you allow me to keep it up, in order to give point to my story? Now let us assume—idiotically, of course—that you *are* the culprit. If I were to say to you, here and now, 'Write me down, in the presence of all these witnesses, a complete acknowledgment of the crime, and I will hand to you, here and now, the sum of five thousand pounds,' what would you say?"

Berbaska's reply was instantane-

ous. "I should say, 'Show me your five thousand,'" he snapped.

"And a damn good answer too," chuckled Shepperson.

"Right!" said Westram. "Here you are, boy."

There was a flutter of excitement as Westram produced a fat roll of banknotes from an inside pocket and handed them to Berbaska.

The latter hesitated, flushing a little, then examined the roll. "All in one-hundred-pound Bank of England notes," said he, when he had finished. He handed them back to Westram. "How did your friend Presland manage it?" he demanded.

"He didn't manage it. He couldn't. Those notes are my notes. I am not a poor man. For a friend's sake one takes a risk occasionally. He will pay me back when he comes into his property. I shall offer that substantial sum to the man concerned. It will mean a disclosure of my hand, but I will chance that. Better chance it than wait until the fellow disappears, for I feel that he suspects the net which I have been weaving round him."

"Endeavoring to weave round him," corrected Berbaska.

"Endeavoring is the word."

"Keeping the joke going," said Berbaska, apparently not ill-pleased to find himself giving entertainment to the rest, "if you were to offer those notes to me I should suggest that they were bogus."

"Five thousand pounds in bogus

notes? How is it possible that I could get such things? Besides, you could have them tested. But they are good stuff, Berbaska, I assure you."

"Oh, come," remonstrated McLeod, "don't forget that you are keeping a jest rolling."

"Exactly," said Berbaska with a faint smile. "I presume, Westram, that—continuing the sham idea of my being guilty—if I were to put down a confession and receive the money for it, you would give me a sporting chance to make a get-away?"

"Certainly. Your arrest would not much interest me. It is the clearing of my friend's name and his receiving his property that counts with me. Time would be allowed for you to vanish—five thousand pounds and all."

"How much time?"

"How much would you want?"

"A week?"

"A week you should have."

"I should have to accept your word."

"My word and pledge given before everyone here."

Shepperson threw himself back with a guffaw of laughter. "Take him on, Berbaska! Take him on!" he said.

"Upon my word, there is something refreshing in this," chuckled McLeod.

Woods opened his lips to speak, then checked himself. He looked intently at Berbaska, as if he saw,

with his keen professional eye, something in the latter's furtive gaze and slightly paled face which interested him.

After Shepperson's laughter a silence ensued. Berbaska, still standing before the fire, looked down at his boots; Westram watched him, half-amusedly.

Presently Berbaska said, still looking down: "This man whom you have in your mind will be altogether unprepared for such a remarkable offer."

"Oh, I don't know. He is a cool card, full of resource. Would *you* be unprepared? Would *you* want time to turn the proposition over and over, and perhaps find, too late, that it had been withdrawn?"

There was another pause. Suddenly Berbaska looked up. "No," said he. "I should close with it."

"Good man," purred Westram. "Let us keep this ball rolling. Paper! Paper! Berbaska is about to put down a confession!"

"Of sorts," interjected McLeod.

"Keep it short, or you will spoil this joke," advised Shepperson.

"But what the deuce can he say?" laughed another member.

"Don't make it too plausible, Berbaska," cried another, "or you will have to prove an alibi later on."

Woods watched Berbaska curiously.

The latter paid no attention to the chaffing. Buried in a divan chair, with a paper pad upon his knee, he commenced to write. He

wrote quickly, only now and again pausing reflectively. Westram kept lighting a pipe, but it would not draw properly, or he was nervous, for it continued to go out. He tossed match after match into the open fireplace.

Suddenly Berbaska replaced the cap on his fountain pen. "There you are," said he calmly.

Westram put out a hasty hand.

"Wait!" added the other. "If I were the guilty man and this document were a genuine confession, what kind of fool should I be to hand it to you before getting the money?"

"One of the hide-bound variety," grinned Shepperson.

Westram, on whose cheeks a spot of red was beginning to glow, looked puzzled. He answered:

"There is something in that, but I could not hand you five thousand pounds for a piece of writing that might prove worthless."

"I'll hold the money for him," interposed Woods quietly. "If the confession satisfies you, Westram, I'll see that Berbaska gets it."

"Good old Woods!" cried Shepperson. "He is taking it seriously."

Westram passed the banknotes to Woods, and received from Berbaska the few pages of writing. In a moment an intense concentration appeared to make him forget his surroundings. His eyes, unnaturally bright and eager, scanned what Berbaska had put down. The red spots in his cheeks grew bigger; an

excitement which created a general wonder had gripped him.

"Are you satisfied?" asked Berbaska, in a harsh voice.

"My theory was correct," cried Westram, his voice shaken by triumph. "What I believed to have happened that night did happen. I had an idea that the common-organ garden burglary which occurred at the baronet's house that night was just a blind to cover something deeper. And it *was* a blind. This paper proves it!"

"I say, Westram, what is exciting you?" demanded McLeod.

"Has Berbaska read the riddle?" cried Shepperson.

"Certainly he seems to know all about it," said Woods dryly.

Berbaska lashed out: "All *you* have to do is hand over that money."

"When Westram gives the word, yes," was the calm reply.

"Keep cool, gentlemen; it is only a joke, you know," exhorted Shepperson.

"What is Berbaska's solution of the conundrum, Westram?" questioned another.

Westram quieted himself. "A most ingenious explanation," said he. "It would entirely account for my friend Presland's queer silence. There was a woman in the case—that is, Berbaska's solution makes it so. According to his story, Presland went to the baronet's house at a late hour to see a niece who was staying with her uncle, the states-

man. They were in love with one another, and Presland went to say goodbye—went stealthily, like a thief. The tryst was interrupted by a servant. Although the fellow knew better, he put an abominable construction on the matter, and demanded hush-money. Presland knocked him down. His head struck the corner of a table, and he subsequently died. The alarm was raised, and my friend fled. For the girl's sake he breathed no word of what had occurred.

“So runs this part of Berbaska's solution. How does he get at his facts? He gets at them by making himself a guest at the house that night; says he was there himself; saw and overheard. And it is this part of the story which corresponds with so many of my own discoveries, which completes them absolutely.

“Berbaska makes himself out a guest at the house. He accuses himself, in this clever story, of having had his eye on a certain State paper in the keeping of the baronet. He secured it that night, but to cover his tracks he made it seem the work of an ordinary burglar. He removed several articles of worth from the house and deposited these in the depths of an unused well, where they still are. His idea was to make it appear that the paper, in its receptacle, had been unwittingly taken away by the cracksman. A smart idea. No sooner was his work accomplished, so he says, than Pres-

land appeared upon the scene—came in his secret and stealthy fashion. What followed, you know. It is all day-light-clear now, and this signed confession, which you have all witnessed, saves Presland and condemns the writer—Berbaska!”

Westram closed the sentence with a snarl of triumph.

“Easy, easy!” interposed McLeod. “You mean that it *would* save the first and damn the second if it were a true admission, and not fiction.”

“Tear the thing up,” said Shep-person curtly.

“That is for Berbaska to say,” cut in Woods.

“Be so good as to hand him his five thousand,” ordered Westram, his voice quivering with excitement.

All at once a tense and electric excitement gripped every man in the room. The question *Is it real?* stared from every pair of eyes.

“Here you are, Berbaska,” said Woods.

The latter took the roll of notes and plunged them into a side pocket. He bestowed one defiant and savage glance upon the transfixed company.

“A week, mind!” he snarled at Westram.

“A week: no more, no less.”

The next moment Berbaska was gone.

A hubbub broke out, every man starting to talk at once. Westram motioned for silence.

“I have to assure you all that the

transaction was a perfectly genuine one," he said. "My reason for approaching it in so indirect a fashion was because I thought it would tempt the fellow, by leaving him a loophole for escape. And then I wanted witnesses. I have been on his track for weeks and weeks, and he was beginning to feel it. I thought I could angle for him better in the way I chose, and I was right. I made it a business proposition, and I pulled it off!"

"Most extraordinary," exclaimed Shepperson.

"And you really will give him seven days in which to clear out of the country?"

"Did I say seven days?" answered Westram hesitatingly.

"We are under that impression," replied Woods coldly. "Of course if you—"

He was interrupted in a startling manner. The door was hurled open with violence, and Berbaska came rushing in. He ran straight at Westram, who recoiled suddenly. Everyone started to his feet.

"You infernal liar!" cried Berbaska in a shrill tone. "You think you have cheated me, do you?" He was on the point of throwing himself upon Westram when Shepperson flung himself between the two men.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Berbaska foamed. "Ask *him!*" he exploded. "Liar! Liar! There are two detectives waiting for *me*

downstairs, and he—he put them there!"

Shepperson wheeled. "Is that true, Westram?" he snapped.

"It looks like it," said the other.

"But you haven't got me yet!" shouted Berbaska. "See here!" And before anyone could guess at his intention he rushed at the open fireplace and with bare fists crushed the entire roll of notes into the flames.

"So much for your cursed money, at any rate!" he snarled.

"Let it go," mocked Westram. "I have his confession, and that is good enough for me."

"Is it? Is it?" Berbaska almost screamed. "You thought all the fooling was on your side, did you? But I was ready for you! I put all that down with my own fountain pen, with an ink that fades ten minutes after it is used! You fool! What good will a blank sheet of paper be to you?"

He had not finished shouting before Westram was putting the boast to the proof. There was a rush to look over his shoulder.

The ink was fading so rapidly that the first half of the confession had already disappeared.

"He has beaten me!" gasped Westram.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Shepperson.

There was a roar of excitement, and it was terminated in an astonishing manner.

Berbaska turned with the utmost coolness to the three men who were

endeavoring to draw the glowing mass from the flames.

"Let it alone, you chaps," said he. "Those are not banknotes. Here is the original roll, in my pocket. Cast your admiring eyes on Westram; throw your applauding orbs on me. We have been rehearsing, for the special benefit of our hard-to-please actor-manager here, a little sketch

entitled *A Live Thrill*, by William Westram and James Berbaska. Shepperson, my good man, will you buy?"

With a single effort Shepperson, who prided himself in coolness in all emergencies, pulled himself together.

"British, American, and Colonial rights," said he.





## Gerald Kersh

### Karmesin and the Crown Jewels

*Karmesin is either the greatest crook of all time or the greatest liar of all time—take your choice. But either way you can't lose—either way he is a pure delight. In this (mis)adventure, Karmesin undertakes to supply "King" Tombola with a certain object—for the modest fee of \$7,000,000 . . .*

#### Criminal: KARMESIN

KARMESIN WAS SAYING, "IT IS A convention of you journalists to say that burglary is the most underpaid profession in the world. *Tfoo* to that!"

"What do you mean, *tfoo*?" I asked. "It stands to reason—"

"—I know, I know. Counting the time your average burglar spends in jail, what with one thing and another, his earnings work out at somewhat less than a street sweeper may rely on for honest labor. And he has no union to fall back on, either. Aha, yes! Here, you speak of your *average* burglar. You might as well say: *Writers end in the gutter*. Generally, they do. But did Dickens? Did Thackeray? Did Tennyson? I do not observe Erle Stanley Gardner grinding a barrel-organ, or Agatha Christie lining up for soup. Do you? No. Your master craftsman will make his way, believe me! 'Average' is as much as to say 'Mediocre.' Speak

for yourself, Kersh," said Karmesin, brushing a kind of foggy dew off his mustache, which the inclemency of the weather had turned anticlockwise, while he fished out of a waistcoat-pocket a gnarled old cigarette. "Given Ethics, be a thief. Only never abandon your Ethics!"

When I began to protest, Karmesin exclaimed, "Oh, *ptoo!*" Then, casually, "Ever hear about the greatest robbery of all time?"

"Every five minutes," I said.

"I committed it," said Karmesin, "only it did not pay on account of Ethics." He added thoughtfully, "As it were, the difference between taking the Maharajah of Diapur's diamonds and snitching Bob Napkin's Waterbury watch . . . only vice versa, so to speak. Listen to me . . ."

Karmesin continued. I had listened carefully to that man's narratives for many years, in the hope of catching him out. But he never

tripped on a point of detail, or slipped on a rind of fact. Karmesin told the truth—yet that was impossible. Karmesin was a liar—but this could not be . . . One could only listen to what he had to say . . .

This was by way of being an intellectual exercise, rather than a major operation because (he said) if I got away with that which I set out to get, there would have been little profit for me and a considerable amount of loss. Not loss of money. Not even much loss of liberty, since I have never had a criminal record, never having been convicted. *Nó, no*, I should have suffered a leakage of the morale, a loss of *amour propre*, and that would have been the end of Karmesin.

Understand this: what I did was *not* for money; it was for its own sake. I was by no means short of a few thousand pounds, having recently got away with the Knoblock Emeralds. Even so I found myself sitting in a hotel which shall be nameless, wondering what to do with myself.

I could tell you a dozen stories of what I proposed to do; but nothing satisfied me. At last, I came across a note from an Argentinian who had written to me some years before, asking me to visit him. This man's name, let us say, was Tombola, and he was a 'cattle king.' Where even Texans count their steers, Tombola counted his cow-

boys—he had cows, so he sold the meat; he had beeves, so he made capital out of the hides; he had hooves, so he made glue or calf's-foot jelly or invalid food or goodness-knows-what. Every horn and bone of his beasts yielded a handle for a shaving brush made out of their bristles. Once, one of his gauchos found a stray cow bloated like a pudding: she had licked copper sulphate and discovered a copper mine for him. In due course, there was a war—old Tombola packed beef trimmings in cans shaped like truncated pyramids and made a few more millions . . . What with one thing and another, old Tombola had so much money that it was not true—only it was.

There was a time he went in for literature: some newspaper published a disparaging caricature of Tombola, so he bought it up lock, stock, and barrel, and burned the press down to the ground. Also, he liked to race horses; only if one of his horses failed to win, King Tombola had it knocked on the head . . . and the jockey was lucky if he escaped with a terrible thrashing. In effect, a character, this King Tombola. Only a megalomaniac: he had more than he knew what to do with. A couple of pounds of prime steer grilled with red pepper, an Indian girl, and he was physically content. Hence, quite seriously, when I visited him, he made me a proposition. He was in a state of frustration, having

failed in an attempt to goldplate a white Arab stallion. The horse died.

To cut a long story short, he said this: "They call me King Tombola. Where's my crown? . . . Have one made, you say? No, thank you! I want a real one, a proper one. I have been offered the crown of the Incas, and all that truck. I want the crown of the King of England, nothing less. I will pay seven million dollars in gold for it."

This gave me food for thought. Resisting King Tombola's invitation to bathe that night in a hip-bath of green chartreuse, I left next day for England to steal the Crown Jewels.

To steal the Crown Jewels, as you may be informed, is impossible nowadays. They were lifted, once, by Colonel Thomas Blood on May 9th, 1671; but this affair was juvenile delinquent stuff. Having obtained access to the Crown Jewels, it was necessary, simply, for Colonel Blood to overpower the Keeper of the Regalia—an old gentleman of eighty. I ask you—obtain access through a rabble of superannuated halberdiers and then spifficate your grandfather! Even so, Colonel Blood was caught, running away with the Crown of England under his cloak. The Merry Monarch, amused by Blood's audacity—the audacity of a little boy stealing a package of chewing gum from a drug store—pardoned him.

These are historical facts with which every bobby-soxer must be thoroughly conversant. Considering the circumstances in the year 1671, why, Colonel Blood's attempt was child's-play, and inefficiently played, at that.

But between 1671 and 1939, when I stole the Crown Jewels, two hundred and sixty-eight years had passed, and the circumstances were not the same. In 1939 there were no mere children's-page puzzle of an understaffed Guard, no trivial matter of a protective iron cage. Now, the Crown Jewels were protected by unbreakable glass and a two-inch grille of the toughest steel; I say 'unbreakable,' as it were, in the commercial sense of the term, which really means 'more than ordinarily hard to chuck a brick through.' You could burn your way through the steel and the glass that guarded the Crown Jewels, yes; but do you know what would happen when you did so?

You would break a series of electric circuits. There would be a tinnabulation to raise the devil—the Yeomen of the Guard would rush out; the River Police would fly to the spot in their fast little boats from up and down the Thames; the Brigade of Guards would be there, with fixed bayonets; the Flying Squad would be on the spot in a matter of minutes. And even that is not all: certain other electric currents would automatically close and seal all the

doors of the Jewel Room, while the platform that holds the Jewels would be electrically drawn down, out of sight and out of reach. Of all the jobs in the world, as I calculate, three are impossible: and the greatest of these impossibilities is to steal the Crown Jewels of England.

I stole them, of course; but, first, I had to choose a time and make a plan. A plan any fool can make: indeed, most of the fools I have known have come to grief by their plans. Show me the man who can choose his time, and I will show you a man of genius; and when I speak of timing, I do not mean the picking of a month, or the choosing of a week, or even the selection of an hour—I mean, getting between the finger-and-thumb of a diagnostic intellect one microscopic crumb of operative time, the one and only perfect instant. Leave it to me to find the perfect instant. In this instant I perpetrated the most stupendous robbery of all time, my friend. It is now necessary for me to go, briefly, into a little psychology—even, if you like, into a bit of metaphysics and international politics.

England, by the year 1939, was in a certain predicament for which it is difficult to find a metaphor. Say: she had forced herself to swallow too many of the hard-boiled eggs of diplomatic good will, and was therefore uneasily costive . . . Say, if you like, that she had taken

to heart too much of the philosophy of those three popular "wise" monkeys. You know them, these apes?—they squat; one covers his eyes with his paws, the second his ears, the third his mouth. Motto: *See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil*. Imbecility! The toy manufacturers, who put this rubbish out, omitted a fourth monkey holding his nose: *Smell no evil*. Shut your eyes, ears, mouth, and nostrils, and 'Evil goes roaring around the world; what? Only, so long as you don't see it, hear it, smell it, or denounce it, everything is quite all right, eh?

As I was saying, the British Government, at the time of which I speak, had fallen into a deplorably "wise" monkeyfied habit: she saw no Mussolini, heard no Hitler, spoke no Franco, and smelled no Stalin—never in history has there been such a Belshazzar's Feast of illiterates who could not read the Handwriting on the Wall! There was a European Situation—and how! as the Americans say. The term 'fifth column' had passed into the English language—a convenient term for provocation, espionage, sabotage, and treachery, it had become as familiar to the man in the street as the name of Judas Iscariot. While England and America took it out in discussion, in permutations and combinations of party lines, the totalitarians were infiltrating; so, came Munich and that uneasy pause between Prague

and Warsaw . . . the period when Mosley was putting shirts on a ragged rabble in England, and Fritz Kuhn was rounding up the scum of New York's juvenile delinquents in his Bund. And, of course—this is, for my point, most important—Hitler's agents were assisting what there was left of the old Irish Republican Army, working in Belfast and Dublin. This mob of petty nationalists and cross-eyed gunmen was reinforced by agents of Stalin.

The I.R.A. was in clover . . . I mean, that its members had resources such as passports, eighty per cent nitroglycerine dynamite, and so on. So, these misguided fellows had a picnic planting time bombs in railway cloakrooms, and so forth. Of course, they did little physical damage—killed a few women and children; but the *psychological* effect was important. They alerted, and diverted, the Metropolitan Police and the City Police. Vigilance was redoubled all around the town. Now vigilance is a very good thing in a Police Force; it keeps it up to scratch, and that is all right. But double it, without an extra force of trained men, and you make for a nervous anxiety that cuts efficiency, and sends even disciplined officers jumping out of their skins to run, blowing whistles, in the direction of a car that has backfired. It was upon these conditions that I relied when, after the Irish outrages, I chose my

time for stealing the Crown Jewels . . .

The Crown Jewels, as I have said, are guarded by something that works quicker than conscious thought: electricity. Ah, yes! but even ten million volts of lightning may be deflected by a copper spike, and run harmlessly into the ground through a copper ribbon. It has happened, on many an occasion, that a whole Borough has been plunged into darkness, the cause being a mouse—*Mus ridiculus*—that has taken a fancy to have a bit of insulated cable for breakfast . . . A train of thought here, you see?

In 1939 the Tower of London got its electricity supply through cables that ran under Tower Hill . . . Now, a calm and determined man who knew his timing could stop the power plants of the Boulder Dam itself, with a well-placed pocketful of gravel. By the same token, one properly placed darning needle could put an end to the cerebration of an Einstein, a Schopenhauer, a Karmesin; in my case, once, temporarily, it was done with a mallet . . . to proceed: it occurred to me that if I could get at the cables that fed electricity to the Jewel Room in the Tower of London, all those protective electrical gadgets would be so much old iron, and all that marvelously intricate system of wires so much old rope. *Problem One*: How to cut the current? *Problem Two*:

### How to get at the Jewels?

The best means of approach to the Wakefield Tower, where the Jewels are kept, is by the way of the River Thames. This is also the best place for a getaway, since there is always next to nobody on the bank of the river; while Tower Hill and Tower Bridge have their multitudes. It was a stimulating little problem. The only thing about it, at that time, that made me uneasy was the fact that I should be compelled to employ assistance. I dislike coadjutors, but here they were essential to the success of my plan.

So I looked up an old friend of mind named Berry—one of those master craftsmen gone wrong who turn into burglars or forgers. He had been a metal-worker once upon a time, had invented a new kind of oxyacetylene torch, got swindled out of the rights, and fobbed off with a twenty-pound note. He declared war against society in his anger and frustration, took to making portable torches for safecrackers, got involved, and wound up with three years. I saw to it that his children did not starve, and he was grateful to me. So on this one I knew I could rely. I told him what I wanted him to make and, by Heaven, he made it! It was a masterpiece—a ladder—but imagine a twenty-foot ladder, collapsible, so that you could hide it under your coat!

Berry made it out of some scrap

metal from an old airplane. One end of this ladder was fitted with sharp retractable hooks. I daresay you know that, in ancient English underworld slang, to 'hook' something is, literally, to steal it by the aid of a hook—hence, in Elizabethan times there was a fraternity of thieves called Hookers; they worked with a pole at the end of which was a retractable hook, in the use of which instrument they were remarkably skillful in taking linen off a clothesline, or even the blankets off your bed while you were asleep. Primitive stuff but, in principle, good for my purpose. At the top of my ladder, therefore, I had fitted six hooks which were to have two functions: first, to hook the ladder to the Tower wall; and, second, given the proper moment, to hook the Regalia through a hole which I proposed to burn in the steel and glass in the Jewel Room after I had cut off the current.

Berry made that oxyacetylene torch with the meticulousness of a jeweler. In its way, it was a kind of gem: the whole apparatus fitted into a gas-mask case, such as Air Raid Wardens were carrying at that time. Although Mr. Chamberlain had categorically stated that there would be no war, nevertheless wiser men so ordained it that the town was full of Air Raid Precaution Officers.

Begin to get the idea? . . . There is no disguise as effective as a uniform, because if you are wear-

ing a uniform—any uniform—nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand will look at it and not at you. Ask yourself the question: would you recognize your postman, your policeman, your milkman, if you met him on the street in plain clothes? Your grocer, even, without his apron? No. If you wish to be unrecognizable, simply look familiar.

So, I had made three A.R.P.O. uniforms. Then it was necessary to make contact with certain amenable fellows in the Tower Guard. They were Irish boys, of course, nurtured on legends about the I.R.A. Do not imagine that I imply that the Irish are a disaffected or disloyal people; they are very loyal indeed—to the myths and legends of their race. I found, partly by luck, two boys who were to be on guard at two points close to the Regalia Room, and represented myself as the fabulous Commandant Pat M'Hoginey who took the Rotunda in Dublin. I cannot speak Irish, but a very strong American accent with a certain inflection was convincing enough—with a bulge under my left armpit. These boys were incorruptible—they fell in with my scheme, waving aside all offers of reward. For the honor of Ireland, and the I.R.A., I could have the Crown Jewels; only, please, could I give them back Ulster? We parted good friends, solomonizing in Mullaly's Wine Lodge . . . What, you do

not know what it is to solomonize? For a writer, you are not very strong on general knowledge. Many Irish distillers put out little bottles of whiskey called 'babies.' One 'baby' is a heavy drink, so you divide it in two with a friend—splitting the 'baby,' as in the Judgment of Solomon.

Next, it was necessary for me to find out precisely where the electric cable traveled under the pavement to feed the Tower of London; and this I did by presenting myself to the Borough Surveyor as Mr. Cecedek, a Czech refugee prominent in textiles, looking for business premises and anxious to know about sources of electric power for his looms. Now, I had to send one of my coadjutors to steal an electrical truck from another borough, which Berry repainted with the title, etcetera, of the local Borough Council of Stepney. Also, I had to purchase a rowing boat . . . Surely, even *you* must see through my little scheme by now?

At the appointed time Berry and one other would drive the truck to the vital cable plate, put up their workmen's screen, lift the plate, and wait—with synchronized watches—for the Zero Hour, as it is called, when they were to cut the main power cables. Simultaneously, my other friend and I, in the uniforms of Air Raid Wardens, would be rowing along the Thames toward the graceful lawn that separates the Tower of Lon-

don from the river. And, as I conceived and organized it, so it occurred. We arrived at the Tower, ran to the outer wall, and climbed it by means of Berry's beautiful ladder . . . See what I mean, now, when I say that mediocrity chooses an hour where genius picks an instant! As I had arranged, precisely when we arrived at the Tower wall, Berry and the other man cut the main power cable, and it was as if the Tower of London had shut its eyes. Everything went black; but I was prepared to find my way under that blanket of dark.

We scaled the walls, reached the Wakefield Tower, and rushed to the Regalia Room. My two sentries—here was where they came in—reporting "All's well," I cut through the steel and the glass and, using the hooks of my ladder, pulled out the Imperial State Crown and the King's Crown—which alone is set with the Koh-I-Noor diamond worth two million pounds. As for the Imperial State Crown, it is encrusted with 2,783 diamonds, 277 pearls, 18 sapphires, 11 emeralds, and 5 rubies. Offhand, perhaps the most important haul I ever made. And how did I get out? Exactly the way I came in. And how did I get away? Exactly as I arrived. Because, you see, the River Police were not on patrol just then, and Scotland Yard had been alerted by me in connection with an I.R.A. plot to dynamite the House of Commons.

So I got away with those wonderful Crowns.

This took place on Friday, the first of September, 1939. You know what happened on the Sunday morning: Great Britain declared war on Germany, and although I had an incalculable fortune in my hands and had, incidentally, fallen passionately in love with the Star of Africa and the Black Prince's Ruby . . . I don't know, there happened to my heart something difficult to put into words . . . I did not mind robbing a greasy millionaire; but even him I would not take from if he were in trouble. How could I steal away something of the history of a valiant people now going into battle? Again, I said to myself: "That nice King and his kind Lady have trouble enough without this." So I nailed the Crowns up in boxes and sent them to Scotland Yard. The affair—things being as they were—was hushed up. But the Tower of London, as you know, was closed for a time; and now, things being reorganized, it would take a better man even than Karmesin to steal so much as a spoon from the Jewel Room . . .

Karmesin sighed. I asked, "What happened to King Tombola?"

With infinite scorn Karmesin said, "What, him? I intended to make him a nice little ersatz Imperial Crown, only he died through eating too much beef with red pepper. Good night."



## Aaron Marc Stein

### This Was Willi's Day

*Although a native New Yorker who still calls Manhattan his home, Aaron Marc Stein is equally at home anywhere else in the world—that is, wherever he can go with a portable typewriter. He might be plotting a story in a hammock in the Yucatan jungle or writing in an Italian hotel room, the very one in which Richard Wagner composed the second act of "Parsifal." To give you a concrete example of how Mr. Stein (who is also George Bagby and Hampton Stone) mixes his travel and 'tec-nology, the basic conception for the novelet, "This Was Willi's Day," came to the author during two rain-sodden weeks in Lucerne, Switzerland; the novelet began to take fuller shape during another downpour, but this time at the summit of the Stanzerhorn; the actual writing trailed across the French Alps and up through the Côte d'Or, and was finally completed on a hot afternoon in Paris . . . Now, travel with Mr. Stein: he will give you a vivid picture of Lucerne, and a vivid study of Willi, the Swiss gigolo . . .*

IT WAS HIS DREAM THAT GAVE WILLI joy—a dream of going and a dream of coming. He did try to picture to himself the things that might lie between, but that part of it never had more body than did the shadows on a movie screen. Always he reverted to the beginning of the dream and then to its end; for in them Willi could make every smallest detail come clear and hard and solid.

He would walk across the bridge toward the Bahnhof but he wouldn't go straight to the station. He would pause a moment at the end of the bridge where they had the pens for the ducks and the swans.

Ten francs for the maintenance of the waterfowl. Willi would drop it in the box and each time he had gone that far into the dream he would deliberately pause—to wrestle again with the one little problem which always stood alone in the whole big dream as the only thing Willi hadn't managed to lick. He could see the waterfowl when they would come around hours later. By then Willi would be well away, flying over Paris perhaps with the Eiffel Tower insignificant at his feet, or maybe already out over the Atlantic in the great plane that had risen above the clouds. Willi would glimpse himself as,

with superb boredom, he looked down on the tops of the clouds; but at this stage he would never allow himself more than the briefest glimpse, because that was part of what lay ahead; and Willi wasn't such a fool that he would leapfrog one of the best parts of the whole dream. Firmly Willi would force himself back to Lucerne to stand invisible beside the man who smelled faintly of fish. The man would open the box and take out of it the scattering of small coins and among the little coins he would find Willi's ten francs.

That was the problem. Willi could see the man look at the ten francs, finger it to convince himself that it was real, shrug it off as the ten francs of one of those Americans who never did learn to add up properly in Swiss money. That was it. The man would never know that it was Willi's ten francs and Willi wanted very much that everyone in Lucerne should know—the doorman at the Schweizerhof who used to move him on before Willi became smart enough to know it was no good loitering out front and trying to see into the lobby; the doorman at the Palace who had the long nose and knew so well how to look down it; the ticket takers at the Kursaal who so often spotted last week's ticket when Willi tried to use it to get past the door this week.

An anonymous contribution—the words had a fine rich sound

and on their fine richness Willi could dream himself away from the end of the bridge, dream himself into the Bahnhof, dream himself aboard a first-class carriage on the Zurich train. The rest was paradise. He knew that first-class carriage—knew it so well that in the dream he could even build for himself the exact feel of the seat cushion under his buttocks.

The Zurich train was really the best part of the dream. When Willi took the trains he never rode anything but first class—at least, he rode nothing else until the ticket taker would come through. Then Willi always left his seat and wandered casually off, as though he wanted to stretch his legs. Nobody had to know that he was stretching them as far as second class, where he belonged. This part of the dream, however, he could make completely real for himself. On that dream-journey he wouldn't get up to stretch his legs. Screening a superb yawn, he would flip his first-class ticket at the ticket taker.

It was after Zurich that the dream became shadowy. He knew just which plane it would be. He had all the brochures on the luxury flights and he had pored over the pictures long enough. He would sit in a cocktail bar as he flew over the Atlantic and he would be buying the drinks.

"Ask all these people what they like," he would tell the steward. "I'm buying."

It was good, but still it wasn't like feeling the seat cushion in the first-class carriage on the Zurich train. He couldn't begin to imagine what people would order to drink. Champagne? One would think that champagne would be the obvious choice, but on those luxury flights they served free champagne—it said so right there in the brochures. They served free champagne but they had a bar where Willi could buy other drinks as well. Willi, the big spender, would have to be in the bar, of course; but Willi wished he knew what one should drink there. It would have to be something so fabulous that one would be disdainful of champagne for it and what was more fabulous than champagne? Willi didn't know. He promised himself that when the time came he would know. Somehow he would find out, because on that plane he wouldn't be this Willi who was a nobody. He would be the dream Willi—in the dream Willi with the money in his pocket and the knowledge in his head.

He always wanted to loiter here in the splendors of the sky. He always wanted to loiter in the magnificence of New York, but that was the part of the dream he could never keep from running thin. There would be Willi on the Empire State Building. Attendants, so splendidly uniformed that they made the doorman at the Schweizerhof look like a luggage porter,

would bow to him from the elevator. They would greet him by name. They would click their heels. That he could imagine. He could also imagine himself in a pale yellow dinner jacket. He had seen such a dinner jacket going into the Kursaal on the night of a gala.

It would be in just such a dinner jacket that Willi would go to the Radio City Music Hall. Week after week throughout the season he would sit in his private box and throughout that vast theater—so vast that you could put ten KursaaIs into it and lose them all—people would turn their opera glasses on Willi because Willi would be so rich and so important that he would have a season's box at the greatest theater in all the world.

It wasn't that he couldn't imagine it. It was just that he couldn't make it come solid and real the way he could the first-class cushion and the way it would feel under what would then be his first-class bottom.

Despite his wanting to take it slowly, to savor every rich detail of it, his mind was always scampering away from this shadowy part of the dream, reaching for the part of it that would come solid again, the return. He would land at Zurich and the huge Cadillac would be waiting for him at the airport. He would sweep into Lucerne in the Cadillac and he would pull up at the Schweizerhof.

He would hear the whispers.

"Look at him. They say he was

once a Luzerner himself. Look at him!"

Willi looked and he felt good about what he saw. The mirror was cracked and spotted, but it served him well enough. He approved of the ruddy tan of his skin. It was the healthy, outdoor, mountain-sun look. That was essential. He approved of his dark brown eyes. Blue eyes, when they looked at a woman, always had something of hard boldness in them. Brown eyes smoldered. Willi liked to make his eyes smolder. It was an effect. He could turn it on and off at will. He rubbed his hand over his short cropped hair. The dream Willi would wear his hair longer and there would be a wave in it, but that would be later. Now it was right for it to be short. It gave him that boyish look and it was the boyish look that caught their eye every time.

It was the same way with neckties. The dream Willi would wear a necktie. It would be hand-painted and imported from Italy. It would cost a hundred Swiss francs, but that was also for later. Willi didn't have a hundred francs. He didn't even have three francs for a boat hire—not even three francs could he spare!—and anyhow neckties got you nowhere. If your throat was a good brown color and it came down straight and strong into your chest and you had good chest muscles to show, it went better without a necktie. The white shirt open half-

way down the chest—that was boyish too. It was boyish and it was sexy, a combination on which Willi was staking his whole future. He approved of the white shirt. He had washed it himself and he had starched it and pressed it and it had been worth all the trouble.

Willi slammed out of his room without even another look at its dingy meanness. He hurried along through the back streets. When he came past the Bahnhof he was still hurrying. That stretch between the station and the piers where the lake steamers tied up he knew too well. There were always plenty of them there. They would be waiting to go up the lake—to the Pilatus and the Bergenstock and the Stanzerhorn. They would be buying chocolate at the stands by the piers and they would be buying the big, expensive Italian cherries, the big, expensive Italian apricots—as if francs grew on the trees. It was no good wasting his time here.

Willi hurried past them and crossed the bridge. Going back along the more fashionable side of the lake he slowed down to a saunter. This stretch of lakefront was for him—the big shops where they sold the fabulous watches the tourists bought, the place where they had the Italian sweaters and the French neckties and the English shoes, the Schweizerhof, the Palace, the Kursaal. He looked at the expanses of lawn and the stretch of park that lay between the hotels

and the lake front and he deplored their beauty. It would suit his scheme so much better if these very best hotels were right down at the water's edge. It was one of those injustices—part of the great conspiracy that Willi had to fight—that put the de luxe hotels back from the water a little way and made those actually on the river, with their balconies overhanging the water, merely the good ones.

Slowly Willi pushed on, following the lake to the end of the town. He wished he had a watch. That was one of the measures of his ignominy—a Swiss who didn't even own a watch. Besides, it was inconvenient. Paul owned a watch and lived by his watch. Promptly when Paul's watch said 12:30, Paul went to lunch. Willi had heard the clock in the church of the Jesuits strike noon, but now it was not going to strike again before 1 o'clock and that would be too late. If Willi waited till he heard the clock strike 1, he would have too little time before Paul would have finished his lunch.

Coming around the bend, he squinted at the stretch of shore where Paul kept his boat. The boat wasn't there. Willi had to know the exact time. If Paul hadn't brought the boat in yet, then it would be fatal for Willi to loiter here—Paul was so mean about the damn boat.

Willi accosted a man and asked him the time. The man pushed his sleeve back and looked down at his wrist. The man had a watch and

Willi silently reminded himself that a watch like this would be one of the things he was going to have—gold, self-winding, and it showed the date as well as the time. Willi knew just how many francs a watch like that cost down the street at Bucherer. It was one of those large sums Willi liked thinking about. He was thinking about all those francs and they filled his mind so satisfyingly that he almost didn't hear when the man told him that it was 12:35. Willi scowled at the shore where Paul should have had his boat tied up.

Then Willi saw it. It had been pulled up out of the water and was now lying bottom-up on the grass. Willi started toward it. He began cursing. That fool, Paul, had been painting it again. That was why he had it out of the water. With the paint wet on the boards and on the seats, it would be in no condition for Willi to use it.

Not that he cared about Paul's paint, but he had to care about his own shoes and his pants. They were the only halfway decent shoes he owned and his only untorn pair of pants. He couldn't let them get smeared with paint. He might have known that Paul would choose one of the days of a *Kursaal festnacht* for painting his crazy boat. With only two nights each week at the *Kursaal* in which to operate, and only a limited number of weeks in the whole season, Willi had no time to lose. Also there was his feeling.

He'd had the feeling ever since he woke up that morning. This was going to be his day—Willi's day.

He stood over the boat and cursed the wet paint. He didn't have to touch it to know how wet it was. It glistened wetly and he could smell it. More out of angry vandalism than with any real hope, he leaned over and grabbed the newly painted boat to heave it over on its keel.

The boat came over and he grinned. Paul hadn't yet painted the seats or the floor boards and he hadn't touched up the oars. Willi dragged the boat across the grass and down to the water. He was getting paint on his hands, but hands didn't matter. He was very careful of his shoes and his pants and his shirt. The boat left smears of paint on the grass and Willi did have a passing thought for what he was doing to the paint on the boat's bottom. There would be grass stuck in it, and the gravel at the water's edge would grind against it and turn the boat into a pretty mess, but Willi had no regrets. Paul had it coming to him for being so mean about his boat. It didn't hurt the boat any if Willi used it for an hour twice a week. It wasn't as though Willi ever wanted it when Paul would be needing it. Paul had a watch and, when the watch said 12:30, Paul had to have his lunch.

Willi floated the boat and stepped into it. He was most careful to avoid getting paint on his pants or

shoes. Quickly he drove the boat out into the current. The green water ran fast toward the Bahnhof bridge, but Willi was impatient. He rowed hard, putting all the weight of his back behind the oars. It might have been wiser if he had saved himself for the long pull back when he would need all his wind and muscle to row the boat against the current, but Willi had a stout heart. He would have more than enough strength left in him for pulling the boat back, and his stout heart kept telling him that this was his day—his day of destiny.

Willi, impatient for his destiny, didn't spare himself. He shot the boat under the bridge into the river. Here, narrowly channeled between the stone-faced banks, the green water carried him along with a rush. The waterfowl rode the current, ruddering themselves toward the railings at Unter Der Egg, gathering, as they always did at meal-times, in the shadow of the hotel terrace.

Willi stopped rowing. Now he used his oars only to hold the boat steady against the current. For a couple of moments he watched the swans and the ducks. They were working as he did, maneuvering into position under the terrace, holding themselves there against the rush of the water.

Up on the terrace the linen and china gleamed in the sun. The crystal and the silver flashed light. Willi concentrated on the tables under

which the waterfowl clustered most thickly. A family with children. Willi passed them up. Children were no good to him. At the next table a young couple had wine in their glasses. A pity it had to be a couple. Then there was an old couple. Matched up against the feeling he'd had all morning, an old couple wasn't much, but he just might be wrong and he had had pretty good luck with some old pairs on other days. A meal, a tip—it wasn't much but it did help and there had been that one old couple who told him they had a son like him back home. They had bought Willi a watch. It hadn't been a very good watch but he had been regretful when he had to sell it. He would like to have kept it, not for long but just till the time when he would have the watch he meant to have.

The ducks and the swans could have the old couple for the moment. Willi focused on the champagne bucket at the far end of the terrace. There was a waiter in the way and he couldn't see the table, but he prayed that it wouldn't be another couple. He was having that feeling again, the same feeling he'd had all morning. Something was telling him this would be it. He let the current carry him the length of the terrace. The waiter moved and Willi saw her hair. He winced. It was yellow hair and, just looking at it, Willi knew that it would feel like straw under his hand. It reminded him of the mattress on the cot back

in his room, the way the rotting fabric would crack and the grayish-yellow straw would come bursting out of it.

Willi put his mattress out of his mind and concentrated on looking boyish. Deftly he brought the boat in toward the terrace, scattering the ducks and swans before him.

He came in under the table and held the boat there. The woman had a piece of roll in her hand and she waved it at Willi angrily.

"Go away," she shouted. "You've scared them. Go away."

Willi held fast and grinned at her. "*Raus*," she screamed in what she obviously believed to be German.

Willi laughed. He never looked more boyish than when he was laughing. Her rings flashed in the sun. His feeling had been so right. Diamonds and champagne and not at the Schweizerhof or the Palace, but here at this merely good hotel. Willi knew the type.

She would have it—maybe even more than the women at the Palace and the Schweizerhof. This kind was careful. This kind let it pile up in the banks. Now that Willi was holding the boat still, the swans and the ducks came edging back. The waterfowl gathered thick along the sides of the boat. One of the swans actually brushed the boat and some of the fresh paint came off green on the swan's white plumage. Willi saw it and laughed some more.

She tossed the bit of roll. Willi

was ready. As adroitly as any of the waterfowl he shot into position for it and, having the advantage in height over even the long-necked swans, Willi caught the morsel of bread between his fine white teeth. He tossed it back into his mouth and he grinned at her as he chewed it up.

She laughed. They always laughed, but she did more. She took up her knife and, breaking off another bit of roll, spread it with *pâté de foie gras*. This time it was easy. She threw it at him and it was no trick at all catching it in his mouth. They always threw stuff to him but Willi had never known one that could throw so accurately. It pleased him that she should have such a good throwing arm. Other times it had been butter on the roll and not *foie gras* and a clumsy pitch had once or twice hit Willi's shirt. That meant washing the shirt and getting it dry and pressed before evening and Willi hated washing his shirt. He had only the one presentable one.

The clock in the church of the Jesuits struck 1. He couldn't stay but a minute more. The pull back up the river against the swift current took time and it would be fatal if he didn't have the boat back before Paul finished his lunch and returned to the lake. But for one like this he was ready to push his time to the limit.

She kept it going, spreading *foie gras* on bits of roll and throwing

them to him to catch. He never missed and all the time she laughed harder. She laughed and she drank her champagne. She was a little tight. Willi could see that but he took comfort from the steady accuracy of her throwing. He told himself that she couldn't be so drunk that she would forget him by evening. Laughing harder than ever, she picked up her wine glass. With a wide sweep of her arm she splashed champagne at him. He played along and managed to catch a few drops of the wine in his mouth, but more of it soaked his shirt. He shivered. It reminded him of the time Paul had caught him with the boat and had pitched him into the icy water of the lake. Paul with his damn muscles and his damn money. Climbing mountains every weekend, pulling the boat around all the time, always making himself more and more powerful, and always eating—the way that Paul ate! Willie glanced toward the church. He had more than stretched his time. Bending his back to the oars he pulled away.

"I'm sorry," she shouted. "Come back. Don't you want some of my cake?"

He turned to grin at her, but he didn't go back. His time had more than run out. He leaned hard on the oars and fought the current. He knew this river as well as the waterfowl knew it. He knew each place where a jut of the bank channeled the current off and offered a stretch



of relatively quieter water. He took advantage of every one of those stretches, working against the current where he must, dodging it where he could. He made it under the Bahnhof bridge but here he could see the clock in the Bucherer shop window. There wasn't a hope. He had waited too long. Paul would be at the mooring. He knew just how Paul would look, his big fists clenched.

Willi told himself that he was being a fool. Here he was trying to get the boat back to the mooring, trying to tie it up and be away before Paul came back from his lunch, as though he could do that today and Paul not know the boat had been used. Willi looked down at his hands and saw the paint under his fingernails. He could imagine what the boat's bottom would look like by now. Paul could never be deceived that day.

"The hell with Paul and his boat."

Quickly he backed the boat around into the current. He was laughing again as he rested on the oars and let the water carry him under the bridge and into the river. Skillfully he steered the boat to the bank in front of the market. He caught hold of one of the stakes by the landing steps and made the boat fast. He told himself what a good fellow he was. Anyone else would have turned the boat adrift and let that fool, Paul, go chasing it down the river. It was not as if he

were going to need Paul or the boat again. His feeling had been so right. This was his day.

He left the boat and took off on a dead run. He knew Paul. Paul would already be down to the lake and have found the boat missing. Paul would be coming this way, heading down the river looking for Willi. Willi ran all the way back to his lodgings.

There he looked at himself in the mirror. He examined his shirt. The champagne had dried and there was no stain. He wanted to take it off and hang it up so that he could have it fresh for the evening. The good shirt and the good pants and the good shoes—he couldn't waste them by wearing them while he was waiting. He looked at his hands. They were green with paint. That was all right. Hands could be washed but he didn't dare take his shirt off. He couldn't be sure that some of the green mightn't come off on his shirt or his pants. He went to the cracked washstand and started working on his hands.

It wasn't easy getting the paint off. With turpentine it would have been no problem, but he didn't have any turpentine. Some of the paint came off with soap and water, but a lot of it remained. He dug it out from under his fingernails and he scrubbed at his hands as hard as he could. Then he thought of the emery board he used when he did his nails. With that he tenderly buffed the skin of his palms and his

fingers. It took him a long time and when he finally gave up, his hands were hot and all but scraped raw. There were still bits of green stuck in the creases of his skin, but there was nothing he could do about those and they didn't show unless you looked for them. Willi remembered that there had been one of them early in the summer who had told his fortune. She had read his palm. If this one wanted to read his palm, she would see the paint, but there couldn't be another like that one. It was the one who had taken him to Interlaken so that he could show her the Jungfrauoch. A whole week it had been, and then he had lived a whole month on her tip and now almost another month on what he'd managed to pilfer. She'd given him the money to pay and she'd never asked for change, but he had always given her change—that is, a little change. Americans were like that—so smart about money except that they could never count in any money that wasn't their own American dollars.

Willi changed into a shirt and pants that didn't matter. He took off his shoes and lay down on his cot. He drifted into his daydream. Leaving Lucerne—the ten francs in the box for the waterfowl. Ten francs would more than pay them back for the bits of bread he had deprived them of, and if it hadn't been Willi there would have been no butter or *foie gras* anyhow.

His thoughts went back to Inter-

laken and that wonderful week, and a nasty fear caught at him. Everything had gone so well with that one and then suddenly she'd had a letter from her husband. They never wore their wedding rings and while he had been wasting all that good time on her he could have been missing out on just the right one.

Like this one today. He had looked most particularly. There were the diamonds but no wedding ring, as though that meant anything. He remembered the hole in the mattress and now he deliberately turned to look at the straw. He grinned at it. No need to be anxious about this one, he thought happily. Who would have this one? With hair like that?

"I'll have her," he promised himself. The dollars—all those beautiful, green dollars. The thought never entered his mind that there might already have been another like him, another lad ready, even eager, to shut his eyes to the hair, to all the big and little things that were wrong with the way she looked. It wasn't that he had any delusion he might be the only man in the world who wanted the dollars. His was another delusion. It just never occurred to him that there could be another anywhere in the world who would go about it so cleverly, who would have every word and every move so carefully planned.

He tried the dream with her in it, skipping the part where she would

leave it. For his dream of coming and going, he was always alone—alone with the beautiful dollars.

Paul came slamming into the room. "This time I'm going to kill you. I'm going to wring your dirty, useless neck."

Willi yawned. "Hello," he said. "What bug is biting you now?"

"Didn't I tell you to leave my boat alone?"

"Who wants any part of your stinking boat?"

"You didn't put it in the water?"

"Was it out of the water?"

"You know it was out of the water. You know I painted it this morning. You know what a mess you made of it."

"Me? I wouldn't do a dirty trick like that. Are you crazy? Somebody plays you a trick like that and right away you go looking for your friends. Why don't you go looking for somebody who has a grudge against you? What makes you think your friends would do a thing like that to you?"

"The mark of your hands is right there in the paint."

"My hands? You know my fingerprints I suppose? You're a Sherlock Holmes now, I suppose?"

"Let me see your hands."

Willi put his hands behind his back and lay on them. "You want to compare the fingerprints, maybe? Go away. You're bothering me."

Paul slapped him. It was a heavy, backhanded slap and Paul's knuck-

les raked across Willi's mouth. Willi tasted blood.

"Show me your hands."

"Get out of my room. I'll count to ten and then I'll call the police."

Paul caught him by the arm and twisted. Willi screamed. He tried to fight it but the pain flipped him over on his face. He had his hand tightly clenched. Paul tried to open it. He picked up Willi's shoe and smashed the edge of the heel on Willi's knuckles. Willi's hand opened.

"Why don't you call the police? You don't count that slow. Call them. I'll show them your hands."

"Leave me alone."

Paul jerked Willi to his feet and slapped him again. Now Willi felt the blood run warm down his chin. He put up his hands and fought. He didn't want to fight, but he was desperate. He was thinking only of his face. He had to protect his face.

He would never have been any match for Paul but he did try to hold him off. With two good hands he might have protected his face, but one hand was all but useless. It throbbed and when he tried to close it in a fist the pain made him dizzy. He forced himself to shake the dizziness off but still the hand wouldn't close. He fought one-handed but he didn't really fight. He just kept the one hand up as a guard while he ducked and dodged. He tried to kick but it wasn't any good. Paul

was ready for that and anyhow Willi had no shoes on.

Paul's fist came through Willi's guard and smashed into Willi's face. It struck once and it struck again. Willi went down. Paul waited for him to get up and Willi could have done it, but he stayed down. He hoped that it might still be all right, that his eye wasn't going to puff. Paul jerked him to his feet and held him upright, waiting for him to take up his own weight, waiting for him to put his hands up.

Willi let his hands hang. He dangled limp in Paul's grasp. Paul slapped him, trying to make him fight. Willi wouldn't be drawn. He just rolled his head with the slaps, hoping they wouldn't mark him too much. He knew his eye was swelling, but still he hoped.

Paul let him drop and, standing over Willi, kicked him hard. Willi lay with his head buried in his arms and hated Paul, hated him and despised him. Had he been Paul and Paul Willi, he would have kicked Paul. It wouldn't have been this harmless kick in the buttocks. He knew exactly where he would have kicked Paul.

Willi lay with his head buried in his hands and listened. He heard Paul stamp out of the room and clatter down the stairs. When the downstairs door slammed, Willi moved. He pulled himself to his feet and stumbled to his mirror. His lips were cut and bleeding, but the worst of it was his eye. His eye was

hopeless. It would be a week or more before he could show that eye.

He knew it wasn't any use, but he had to try. He soaked a towel in cold water and pressed it to the eye. His hand was throbbing maddeningly. There was blood on his shirt. He thought it was a good thing that it hadn't been his better shirt and then, bitterly, that it didn't really matter any more. He took off the bloodstained shirt and soaked it in cold water, then wrapped the wet shirt around his hand. He worked on his face and his hand all the rest of the day, keeping the compresses cold. The pain ebbed but he didn't care about that. Every time he changed the compress, he looked at himself in the mirror and felt a pain that wouldn't ebb. She would have been the one. He knew it now with the most absolute certainty and now there had to be this to wreck his hopes. He'd never have another chance. He knew that also with absolute certainty.

From hour to hour he listened to the church clock strike. He heard six and he was still at it. Seven. Eight. At eight, he gave up. He had lost. Eighty thirty was the time for the Kursaal. He should already have been on his way. He studied himself in the mirror for the last time and he couldn't bear it. He threw the towel and the wet shirt into the basin and ran away blindly.

He ran till his wind gave out.

Then he slowed down to a walk, but he walked as he had run, steadily, aimlessly, mechanically, letting his feet carry him wherever they would.

When he came to the Kursaal he stopped. He circled the building, looking in through the windows, trying to catch sight of her. The yodelers were on. Then he saw her. She wasn't at a table with a drink like the other tourists. She was wandering about carrying her drink in her hand, as if she were looking for someone.

"She's looking for me," Willi muttered bitterly.

He could see her very clearly under the Kursaal lights. Those lights were kinder than the sun had been. Even her hair didn't look too bad—it might almost have been real hair. Willi dismissed her hair. He looked hard at her mink stole—pastel, soft, expensive. He forgot about his cut lip and bit hard on it. The pain reminded him, but he bit again, tasting the blood once more on his tongue.

She left the room. Thinking about her mink, Willi shivered. It was the first he realized that he had come out without even putting a shirt on. He turned away and walked down the path to the edge of the lake. He stood there looking at the water. Then he heard her voice at his shoulder, but he didn't turn his head.

"Hello," she said. "Or don't you speak English?"

Willie turned to speak to her. "I've had a misfortune," he said. "You must excuse me."

She laughed. "Aren't you cold without a shirt?" she asked.

An idea began to bloom in Willi's mind. He didn't wait for it to finish shaping itself. He stepped full into the light so that she could see him. The hell with his eye. He knew how good he looked with his shirt off and now he had nothing to lose. He chose the English words carefully.

"I can't afford to be cold," he said. "I haven't a shirt."

"Oh," She took a step away from him. She looked puzzled and uncertain.

"You don't know me?" Willi asked. "You don't remember?"

"Should I know you?"

She didn't have any idea who he was. He could see that she was simply looking for a man, any man.

"I enjoyed the *foie gras*," he said. "I hope you didn't think I was rude not waiting for the cake."

She blinked and then started laughing. "My duck," she said. "You're my duck from lunch time."

Willi clicked his heels sharply and bowed.

"Yes," he said. "Your duck."

"But what's happened to you? Have you been in a fight?"

Sighing, Willi nodded. "Robbers," he said. "Four of them." Now the idea had flowered and he didn't have to stop to examine it. He knew it was good. This was his day, was-

n't it? "I fought them as well as I could," he said, showing her the hand Paul had smashed with the shoe. "But four of them. They beat me unconscious and when I came to they were gone and had taken everything—my money, my watch, my coat, even my tie and my shirt and my shoes."

He went on and on about the shoes. The robbers had taken his and had left him these terrible things. They had even taken his trousers. One of them had been his size and while he was unconscious they had stripped him and changed clothes with him.

She took charge. Tenderly she helped him to her car. Willi hadn't dreamed of a Cadillac at this early stage. The Cadillac was to have come later. She took him to a doctor and Willi noticed that doctors were much gentler when there was money about. He looked much better when the doctor had finished with him. The bits of neat white tape against the bronzed skin weren't a bad effect at all.

After that it was clothes. Willi didn't even have to guide her. There was only one shop that kept open that late in the evening, the place that had the stuff that caught the tourist trade. She did the choosing. The English shoes, the Daks trousers, the French shirt, the Italian silk necktie, the beautiful tweed jacket. She even wanted to buy him a nylon undershirt but he wouldn't have that. He never wore an under-

shirt, he said. Besides, he always gave them change. It was good policy not to seem greedy. Not taking an undershirt was like giving her change. She even thought of the sun glasses.

"Like a Hollywood star," she said.

"But you mustn't," Willi said. "I don't know when I can ever pay you back."

"I want to dance," she said, and she bought him a beautiful billfold. She put five hundred francs into the billfold and slipped it into the pocket of the beautiful tweed jacket.

Willi took her back to the Kursaal. They did the rhumba and they even did the Charleston. Willi couldn't be bothered by the fact that the rhumba made him hurt in the place where Paul had kicked him and that the Charleston made him hurt a lot worse. They had champagne but they didn't drink much of it. Willi tried to make her drunk, but then it occurred to him that she was trying to make him drunk and he stopped worrying. She was going to be too easy, but still he was careful. He ate but he didn't drink much and, watching her, he saw that she neither ate nor drank. She was just pretending that the wine was making her gay.

They danced till the Kursaal closed and then she said she wasn't going to let him go home alone. He was hurt and she was going to go with him and take care of him. He told her that they couldn't go to his

place. He reminded her of the robbers. They had wrecked his place. They went back to her hotel and she packed a bag and then they drove over to another hotel. Willi registered them as Mr. and Mrs. It was her idea.

"I don't have to seduce her," Willi told himself gleefully. "She's seducing me."

First thing the next morning they were married and she bought him a wedding present—a gold watch, self-winding, that told the date as well as the time. Willi drove the Cadillac and it was well that the place where Paul had kicked him did hurt as he sat behind the wheel. It was as good as pinching himself. He wasn't dreaming.

It was funny. He'd had it all so completely worked out—every last detail and how he would manage it when he had the big chance. Now it was happening and he wasn't managing anything. She was having all the ideas and she acted as though she had not the slightest notion that they were actually Willi's ideas. He wondered if it could be that he had her hypnotized, that he was making her do everything he wanted her to do without even knowing he was doing it. He remembered that he had heard somewhere that certain exceptionally strong minds could do miraculous things. Willi watched his destiny shape itself and he hadn't the least doubt of the strength of his mind.

The way he had always planned it himself, it would have been a slow and careful campaign, taken move by move in a calculated sequence. He had never dreamed of a woman like this one, a woman who would rush him off his feet, who would make the moves even before he had begun to prepare her for them, who, if anything, seemed to be preparing him.

All of it happened on that very fine day—even the will. In his own planning it had always been a matter of weeks, even of months, before he could let himself so much as begin to lay the groundwork for a will. Now it was happening in such rapid sequence that it made Willi dizzy. The two-ring ceremony, buying him the watch, rushing him around to the American Consulate.

At first, the consulate baffled Willi. He had never dreamed so splendidly. The way she was received at the consulate dazzled him. She was known, she was important. They treated her with deference. Willi never opened his mouth. He just listened, trying to take it in, trying to make himself believe that it could really be this magnificent.

She was emphatic. She was definite, dictatorial. She had come to make a will. She wanted it made at the consulate. She wanted it so firmly a matter of record that there could never be any nonsense about it.

"That family of mine," she said. "You know what they're like."

They knew what her family was like. She began dictating. Willi tried to hold the amounts in his head, but they got away from him. This charity, that charity, and everything in five figures—dollars, at that, not francs.

"The residue of my estate to my beloved husband, Willi."

"Your brothers?"

"My brothers can go scratch."

There had to be four copies—one for her, one to be kept on file at the consulate, one to be sent to her lawyers in New York, one to her eldest brother.

"They might as well know right away where they stand," she said.

Willi was angry with himself. Wasn't this exactly the way he'd always wanted it? Wasn't it better than he'd ever dared to hope? Was this a time to have any anxieties or misgivings? He worked hard at putting every disquieting thought out of his mind. So he hadn't figured on anything so conspicuous as the consulate. What of that? He hadn't dreamed that it would be anything like this much money either.

It made no difference. He would have to wait, of course, but then he had always planned on being patient. He had never thought that he would get this far and then become reckless. Nothing was changed.

He didn't allow himself to think it but he knew what his real trouble was. It was the next step, the

step he had always skipped over in his dreaming. There had always been all this, and then there had been the departure—the ten francs in the box for the waterfowl, the first-class ticket to Zurich, the luxury plane across the Atlantic. In that part of it Willi was always alone and he had always known what he would have to do in between; but he had always let that part of it go with the assurance that when the time came he would know how to act.

Now the time had come.

It was no good telling himself that it wouldn't be safe to do it so soon. She had hurried him this far and now it wasn't too soon to begin the job of planning it. For his part he would need the best plan he had ever made, and he didn't feel ready to start thinking about that.

She was his princess and he was her duck. They spent the rest of the first day hilariously and extravagantly. Willi almost began to wish that she wasn't so terrible looking, but he resolutely put that thought away. She wasn't going to make Willi go soft.

He didn't put off thinking about it for long. The very next morning he began, but even then it started because she helped him. She was sick in the morning, green in the face with sickness. Even though the look of her disgusted him, Willi carefully did all the correct things. He was her devoted duck. He was



frantic with worry. He wanted to get a doctor.

She wouldn't have a doctor. She had been this way before—it would pass. He was to leave her alone. Willi would have been glad to leave her alone but he had to do the correct thing. She would have none of it. Sharply she ordered him out of the bathroom. He withdrew with dignity. He sat in the bedroom and waited, listening to her being sick the other side of the bathroom door.

His normally cheerful turn of mind took hold of him. She knew what this was and she wanted no doctor. He thought of some incurable illnesses. He almost let himself hope that she would take care of this part of it for him, too. He wouldn't even plan his next move. The jewelry she had worn the night before lay on her dressing table, the diamonds blazing in the morning sun. Willi strolled over and picked up a ring. He tried to guess what it might be worth. He tossed it in the air just as though it were another bit of bread, and like a bit of bread he caught it in his mouth. The big stone was cold against his tongue. He liked it. It seemed to him that it tasted like money. He was enjoying the thought that he didn't have to practice up on that trick any more. It had served.

He spat the ring out into his palm, carefully dried it off, and returned it to the dressing table. Her bag lay with the jewelry. He listened a moment. She was still at it behind

the bathroom door. He picked up her bag, opened it, idly explored through it. He came on a picture and looked at it with mild curiosity. It was a man, big, athletic, handsome. One of her brothers? He wondered. Not likely, the way she had talked about them at the consulate. He put the picture back and pulled out a letter. It was post-marked Venice and dated less than a week back. Willi read the letter.

"Sorry, my dear, but you did know I was married . . . never a possibility of divorce . . . my wife's religious feelings in the matter . . . sorry . . . are you certain there is no mistake . . . doctors are wrong sometimes . . . believe me, I am sorry."

Folding the letter, Willi returned it to her bag. He closed the bag and arranged everything as it had been on the dressing table. He could still hear her behind the bathroom door, but now Willie was finished with any cheerful thoughts about incurable diseases. So that was what was wrong with her! It was all right. It made no difference except for driving all the foolishness out of his head.

She'd had her own plan and her plan had called for haste. Now she had a father for her brat. She had what she wanted. Now Willi was taking over. She had been smart, but she'd picked the wrong man. She would never have been smart with Willi. She had walked straight into his trap. Now *he* could plan it

and he would enjoy planning it. It was only what she had coming to her—thinking she could use Willi! She'd find out who was using whom.

Now that he had begun thinking about it properly, the whole plan came into his head in one solid piece. It was as though it had always been there, just waiting for the moment when he would need it. It had always been there—just as the mountains had always been there. All he needed was patience. He couldn't miss, but he mustn't rush. When it happened, it had to be right. There mustn't be too many questions. It mustn't come too soon after the making of the will. Of course, he couldn't wait too long. It would have to happen before the brat came—that was certainly the outside limit. Willi was no fool. He could visualize another scene like the one the morning before.

"And the residue all to my child, Frederico."

The letter had been signed—*Yours always, Frederico.*

Before the birth of the brat certainly, and enough before so that his taking her up the mountain wouldn't look odd. A month or two would be enough to wait, and while he waited they were to be seen together, always laughing, always happy, always—the way she would say it—living it up. He could wait that long to make it look good. For a stake like this he could wait as long as he had to . . .

When she finally came out of the bathroom, he was gentle and solicitous. He was every inch her duck. She didn't want to talk about it, so he didn't talk about it. She wanted to be gay, so he was gay.

They were at lunch when she herself suggested the mountain. It was like all her other suggestions, a command. She was still rushing him, Willi thought wryly, but this she couldn't rush. He was going to wait till the time was right, but meanwhile he could start her training. There had been the hour before lunch during which he had come to feel that waiting for the right time wasn't going to be too bad. She had taken him shopping, but this was not like the emergency shopping of the first evening. That sort of thing wasn't good enough for her husband. Now it was measurements. Willi had been measured for suits, for shirts, for shoes. For Willi everything had to be made to order.

"This is just to fill in," she said airily. "This stuff will do till we go to London or Rome where we can have the right sort of clothes made for you."

In all Willi's dreaming he had imagined grand gestures—but he had never imagined anything so grand as ordering half a dozen thousand-franc suits of clothes and telling the tailor that, of course, a Lucerne tailor couldn't be really first-rate, but that these feeble thousand-franc efforts would have to do for the journey to London or Rome.

Willi had begun to think that the time he would have to wait would indeed not be wasted. He could use it for training her, but he could also permit her to train him. She would teach him how to spend money. For the first time in his life Willi was ready to believe spending money was an art in which he still had something to learn.

She left it to him to choose the mountain and he selected the Stanzhorn. They were going to concentrate on the less frequented peaks. It was to be the honeymoon celebration. The duck would take his princess to the places where they could be alone with the mountains and the snow and the sky, far away from people. There would always be a mountain railway, of course, and it would supply him all the people he would need. When the time came, the people could testify to the affection and light-hearted gayety of the newly married couple.

They rode the cable railway up the long slope to the foot of the mountain and they were as gay as a pair of children on a school holiday. They had bought some of the fine Italian cherries at the stand by the boat landing and all the way up on the train they amused themselves eating cherries. She would toss them in the air for him to catch in his mouth. Some he would catch and eat, but most he would catch by the stem, and then she would lean across to bite the fruit that dangled over his chin. It was a pleas-

ure watching them. Everybody watched.

At the top of the railway they disdained the level path that led to the hotel and struck out over the rough, steep track that led to the summit. Here Willi became protective. At least, he made a try. He took her arm. He made a great show of guiding her over the difficult footing. She was going to have to learn to depend on him, to go along the most dangerous slopes secure in her confidence that Willi would take care of her. She was to learn to depend on Willi's strong right arm, to expect that it would always be ready to reach out and snatch her safely back from death. Little by little he planned to teach her. She would learn to be foolhardy in the mountains, to depend on Willi and to trust him.

He took her arm, but laughing at him, she pulled away and went nimbly up the rocky trail with Willi in pursuit. She took those very chances he had planned on teaching her to take. Willi followed, telling himself that he might have known that here, too, she would be competent. He hadn't forgotten the accuracy of her throwing arm, but that was all right. He wouldn't have to lead her to the dangerous places: he could let her lead him.

At the summit Willi caught her in his arms and kissed her. A man and a woman were leaning on the iron railing, looking down with shuddering delight at the sheer

tumble of rocks that dropped with frightening grandeur to the velvety patch of jade that was the broad valley far below.

Willi hadn't expected her to respond to his embrace as wholeheartedly as she did. They might have been alone in their hotel bedroom, she came to him with that much abandon. Tittering, the other couple started down the path from the summit, leaving Willi alone with his princess. He led her over to the rail and together they looked down the dizzying mountainside.

A few feet below them, in a crack in the rocks, there grew one solitary spray of edelweiss.

"I must get it for you," Willi said.

"You can't get down there."

"Watch me."

Willi knew what he was doing. He gave her his stick to hold for him. Confidently he climbed over the rail. Taking a firm grip on the steel stanchion that supported it, he lowered himself till he dangled by one hand from the base of the stanchion. There was a small rock projection where he could plant his feet. He couldn't have been safer in bed. He had the stanchion firmly gripped with his good hand, and his feet were well planted. The hand Paul had battered was still not too good, but it was good enough for plucking a bit of edelweiss from the cranny in the rocks and he was not depending on the injured hand for his hold. He swung his body wide, reaching for

the little flower. It wasn't a dangerous swing but he made it look dangerous. From watching him take such chances she was going to learn to take them with him until the time would be right.

The blinding pain in his good hand jerked his body stiff. His feet slid away from the ledge where he had planted them. His head snapped up and he looked straight at her. He half expected he would see Paul standing beside her, but she was quite alone. In that rigid second he watched her raise his stick and with an easy, practised swing smash it down on his hand a second time. The hand gave way and Willi slammed downward, bouncing from rock to rock.

"That was her plan all along," Willi thought. "I had to give mine time. She didn't. She never wanted me. She wanted a father for her brat and she made sure there would be no doubt of it. The consul knows. Her brothers will know. She has the marriage license and, if any questions are asked, no one will think she could have planned to kill her husband—not a husband for whom she ordered all those new suits . . ."

Willi's last thought was the bitterest of all. She could cancel all the orders now. There was nothing to stop her. It would suit her plan to cancel them. He had thought that he needed time to build up evidence of his love and devotion. She had built faster than he had—much faster.

## Stephen McKenna

### Blackmail

*Stephen McKenna's novels are not widely known in the United States, but his audience, though small in these highly inflated best-seller days, is devoted and enthusiastic. Mr. McKenna has traveled extensively—Europe, America, Asia, Africa—usually in search of a warm climate because of his delicate health. Prolific in spite of his frail health, he still finds time for an extraordinarily active social life, for his favorite recreation of long walks, and for the opera which he is passionately fond of and which he attends every night during the season. In his social and political novels he is acknowledged to be a brilliant stylist with a masterly grasp of narrative flow. The short story we now offer has been characterized by Mr. McKenna as a "tale of intrigue and revenge" . . .*

WE WERE TALKING, HALF A DOZEN of us, about undetected crime; and as law-abiding citizens love to do, we had expended a wealth of ingenuity in arguing how we could improve on the crude methods of those criminals who were sooner or later called to account. Lonsdale, the captain of the *Istria*, propounded three devices by which a man could disappear without leaving a trace; and the ship's doctor sketched a gruesome series of murders which would defy *post mortem* examination. Our fecundity of invention was only equaled by our callousness of execution; and when the one parson on board rather incongruously joined our group, I felt he must be silently thanking heaven that we were men of substance and

position without any pressing temptation to earn a livelihood by our unscrupulous wits or to escape the consequences by our desperate resource.

"Though the fact remains," said the captain, going back to our starting-point, "that in England at least there are very few undiscovered crimes of the first order—very few indeed."

"Because," I insisted, "there are very few criminals of the first order. Take blackmail. I can't remember a single prosecution where the wretched victim hasn't been so tortured that exposure becomes preferable to slow bleeding to death. Now, I maintain that the blackmailer who drives his victim to desperation is unworthy to practise. So is the murderer who can't bide his

time. And so is any forger, coiner, or other criminal who can't work without an accomplice."

"And yet," objected the captain, "you can't hope to learn your job unless you have been properly apprenticed."

"I'm disposed to think, on the contrary," I answered, "that most great artists are self-taught. However that may be, whether it's navigating a ship or removing an appendix or preaching a sermon or—in my own field—writing a novel, I abhor the gifted, but untrained, amateur. The only time I was blackmailed, a shifty-eyed creature hinted that he knew something against me and that, if I didn't pay him ten pounds, he would—in his own words—'blow the gaff.' Well, I locked the door and telephoned for the police. While we waited for them to come, I told this fellow that he was a disgrace to his profession—using language that would probably get him seven years' penal servitude, and risking his liberty for less than he would have got if he'd called himself a piano-tuner and gone off with the drawing-room silver. If we'd had another five minutes, I'd have given him a lesson or two in his own job."

The black-bearded padre who had been the last to join us leaned forward to ask with a smile whether they might not all be given the benefit of my instruction.

"Well," I said, "the first commandment for every criminal must

be: *Thou shalt not be found out.*

The artist in blackmail must never be handed over to the police. If he is, he must bring and win an action for malicious prosecution. The word blackmail must never be used. If it is, he must bring and win an action for slander. A very dignified and sensitive ornament of society, my blackmailer is; and he works patiently . . ."

"If he can afford to wait," the padre interposed, "will he take to crime?"

"If he can't afford to wait," I rejoined, "he'd certainly better not try. Now, what is to be the skeleton in my cupboard? That I did time in my youth for illicit diamond-buying? Very well! I've turned respectable, changed my name, married a wife, and made myself a first-rate position which would crumble and disappear if anyone knew I'd spent some years working on a breakwater at the Cape. The blackmailer finds out all this and makes an excuse to meet me. In the course of conversation he lets fall that he used to know South Africa very well in old days and watches to see how I take it. If I'm unmoved, he may ask if I was ever out there, he may even say he knew a man rather like me. Then he switches off to channel-swimming, motorboat racing, anything you like; and in due course he mentions his invalid wife, who's been ordered a five-hundred-guinea operation which he can't afford."

"And if you still don't rise?" asked the doctor.

"Then he goes back to the old South African days, perhaps telling me a story of a man who was caught as an I.D.B. And he tells it as though he's saying: '*Now we understand each other.*' Well, there's nothing in all this to justify me in locking the door and telephoning for the police. Why, bless my soul, if I did, I should find myself presented with a writ as soon as he could get in touch with a solicitor to serve it!"

Captain Lonsdale pondered my advice and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Of course, you've compressed into one interview an attack which your artist would spread over many meetings," he murmured. "And your defense?"

"My only defense, if I can keep my nerve, is to indicate that the subject of South Africa doesn't interest me and to tell my servants that, if this fellow calls again, he's not to be admitted. Assuming I can do that, I've won. The second commandment for every blackmailer is: *Thou shalt know when thou art beaten.* But can I keep my nerve? The idea of exposure is very unpleasant for a highly respected citizen with a wife and family. It's not an admission of guilt if I give the fellow a hundred pounds towards his wife's operation. I've prospered; and he hasn't. Though he advances no claim and utters no

threat, in a vague way I don't want to make an enemy of the man who knew South Africa in the days of my little misfortune. If you go to work on those lines, you never come close to the law."

"You must have a certain amount of luck as well," suggested Captain Lonsdale. "If I turn blackmailer, I shouldn't know where to begin."

"That's a question of preliminary spade-work," I answered. "If the skeleton you find is in the cupboard of a cabinet minister or a millionaire, so much the easier for you; but, if you explore every cupboard you meet, you'll find a surprising number of skeletons inside them. We *all* of us have something in our lives that we'd give a good deal to suppress." I looked up to discover the black-bearded padre's eye fixed rather coldly on me. "At least, I speak for myself," I hastened to add. "I once got into a position where I'd have given the clothes off my back and my skin under the clothes to hush things up. Needless to say, I was entirely innocent."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask for the story?" inquired the ship's doctor.

"It happened so long ago," I said, "that I've forgotten half the names of the people concerned. Before the war, it was; and I should imagine the time of year was September or October, as I was going to America for a lecturing tour and had to get it finished in time to spend Christ-

mas in the South Seas. The ship we will call the *Joan of Arc*; and of several hundred passengers the only two that matter were a middle-aged American business-man, who'd been taking a cure at Nauheim, and a young American woman, who was returning home after a tour in Europe. I will call them Mr. Nelson and Mrs. Villeneuve. Each was traveling alone; and I can't tell you whether they'd ever met before they found themselves sitting together at the chief engineer's table. I was very busy, putting the finishing touches to my lectures, and I shouldn't even have noticed them if they hadn't got in my way.

"This they did quite literally. Mrs. Villeneuve's cabin was next to mine; and I used to bump into her half a dozen times a day when she was playing the fool with any man who'd skylark with her. Since Noah's ark first floated on the face of the waters I presume there has always been a woman who constituted herself the 'life and soul of the ship'; and I'd cast Mrs. Villeneuve for this part before we were out of Southampton Water. By the end of the first day she was on Christian-name terms with the wireless operators, she'd danced with every man under fifty and sat out on the boat-deck with everyone over, and she'd drunk cocktails with anybody who asked her, regardless of age. She was an attractive creature, in a flashy, impudent way, but I was not sorry when she accorded the fat

Middle-Westerner the privilege of holding her hand and paying for her drinks.

"Mr. Nelson, as I've called him, got in my way almost everywhere on the ship. When I walked round the deck before breakfast, he was stretched on a long chair in the narrowest part. When I went down to breakfast, his enormous bulk was filling the companionway. And when I went aft for my gin-and-bitters before luncheon, the smoking-room was entirely filled by Mr. Nelson. He must have been a big man at any time, but this heart-trouble had made a monster of him. Long before we got into hot weather over Banks I was beginning to feel anxious; and he was utterly reckless about his health. I shall get into trouble with the doctor here if I poach on his preserves, but I can't believe — as a layman — that any man, recently discharged from Nauheim, was wise in eating three huge meals a day, drinking all the time between, and smoking one immense, black cigar after another.

"I should think it was the promise of free champagne nightly that attracted Mrs. Villeneuve. Nelson hadn't much else to commend him; but by the second or third day out they'd definitely paired off. Their own corner in the smoking-room and a brace of cocktails waiting for them before luncheon and dinner. Their chairs side by side on deck. Instructions to the barman to keep them regularly fed with whiskies-



and-sodas as soon as the bar opened in the evening. I suppose we've all of us seen that kind of thing a hundred times. It's an inevitable part of life at sea. One thinks nothing of it, unless people make nuisances of themselves, though it left an unpleasant taste in the mouth when you heard that this woman had a husband and two children in New York and that Nelson was a grandfather.

"Their morals, however, were no concern of mine; and I didn't worry until Mrs. Villeneuve adjourned the festivities from the smoking-room to her cabin. Then I complained to the purser. I was working pretty hard and I wanted to sleep. The purser couldn't give me much satisfaction, as the people on the other side were taking it all without protest. I then tackled the smoking-room steward and asked if he couldn't carry the drinks to Nelson's quarters, but I was told that Nelson was sharing his cabin with another man. After that, I was reduced to empty threats. If Nelson disturbed me again, I said, I'd go into Mrs. Villeneuve's cabin and pitch him out. They were a bit quieter after this, but you know how thin the partitions are between a ship's cabins. There was whispering, giggling, clinking of glasses, striking of matches. . . . The next night I walked about on deck until Nelson came up for a breath of air.

"And the night after, though he didn't come up then till half-past

twelve. It was our last evening; otherwise I should have gone to the captain or given Nelson a piece of my mind. As it was, I said nothing, though we were alone on the boat-deck for ten minutes and went down to our staterooms within two yards of each other. Rather like two dogs, you know: Each waiting for the other to growl first. I was braced up to hear him say: 'So you're telling people you're going to wring my neck if I want to say goodnight to a friend?'; and he was expecting me to come out with: 'In the name of decency, why can't you stick to your own cabin?' We stalked in silent hatred past each other half a dozen times, then went below. Tonight everything was quiet in the next cabin; but, alas, by this time the desire for sleep had left me! I tried to read, but my eyes were tired; and after a very few minutes I put on a coat over my pajamas and went on deck again.

"How long I was there I can't tell you to a minute; but it was well after two before I went down again. I was wearing rubber-soled shoes and I walked as quietly as I could for fear of waking the other passengers. When I was about ten yards from my cabin, Mrs. Villeneuve's door opened and she came out in a dressing-gown and slippers. I felt sure she'd seen me, but she was evidently too much concerned with matters of greater moment; and her job at this season was to get Nelson

to bed without rousing the whole ship. It seemed that, after establishing an alibi on the boat-deck, he'd stolen back to his little friend; and to judge by appearances, he'd gone just a bit too far this time. He was absolutely incapable, sprawling across the floor of the passage in striped pajamas and leaving the question how he should get back to his cabin for someone else to answer.

"My first impulse, naturally, was to lend a hand. Mrs. Villeneuve was a tiny slip of a woman; and Nelson was seventeen stone if he was a pound. Then it occurred to me that I shouldn't be thanked for butting in. After all, if she wanted help, she could ask for it; but when a woman has been entertaining a man in her cabin at two o'clock in the morning, she doesn't generally want the world to know about it. I thought that if I gave her time to throw a bucket of water over Nelson's head, he might be able to shift for himself. If not, I must let her decide whether she would take the night-watchman or me or Nelson's stable-companion into her confidence. I went on deck again, leaving her to struggle with her friend.

"When I came back, they were both gone. And as I turned in, I heard something very like crying. I'm afraid I couldn't feel the slightest sympathy with her. She was worse than I'd imagined, drunken, immoral, and a public nuisance into the bargain. My sole consol-

tion in a disturbed night was that in four-and-twenty hours I need never give her another thought. Or so I imagined until my steward called me with the news that Nelson had been found dead in his bunk.

"The entire ship's company had to spare her a good many thoughts after that! My steward's story was that he'd found Nelson lying half out of bed, black in the face and rigid. The doctor said he must have been dead several hours. And that's all we knew by breakfast-time. Afterwards there was a formal inquiry, but it brought nothing new to light. The stable-companion swore that he'd seen and heard nothing out of the ordinary and that Nelson had been sleeping quite peacefully when he himself turned in between twelve and one. There was no call for help, no sound of a seizure. Mrs. Villeneuve testified that Nelson had been all right when he left her at midnight after coming to her cabin for a final drink; and the passengers generally, when they'd recovered from the first shock, brought in an unofficial verdict of death from natural causes.

"I felt that this might be true enough so far as it went, but it wasn't the whole truth. I couldn't say, I can't say now, whether Nelson died in Mrs. Villeneuve's cabin or in his own or on the way there: But she was lying when she pretended that he hadn't come back to

her after the All-Clear signal. And the stable-companion was lying when he said he'd seen and heard nothing. Assume, if you like, that when he turned in Nelson had been 'sleeping quite peacefully' or shamming sleep; he *probably* heard him getting up and he must certainly have heard him being brought back. In all likelihood he'd helped Mrs. Villeneuve. Only the strength of desperation enabled her to drag that weight along the passage. She couldn't conceivably have lifted it up to the bunk. No, these two had worked together and they'd agreed on their story without dreaming that anyone would upset it.

"For most of that day I argued with myself whether I ought to upset it. If there'd been the faintest suspicion of foul play, I must have put in my evidence; but in a few hours' time this miserable woman's husband, Nelson's children and grandchildren would be coming to meet the ship. How could it benefit anyone to know that he had died in her cabin, probably in her arms? I decided to hold my tongue.

"My first lecture was arranged for the night after I landed; and for more than two months I was traveling and speaking from one end of the States to the other. I saw hardly any papers, except local sheets travestying my lectures; and even the New York reporters couldn't make much copy out of the fact that one of my fellowpas-

sengers had died on the voyage. It was a disagreeable episode, but quite a common one; and gradually I ceased to think about it.

"From time to time, indeed, I speculated about the principal actors in this sordid little tragedy. Were the Nelsons mourning an exemplary husband and father? Putting up a monument to him in his hometown? And Mrs. Villeneuve? Was she turning over a new leaf? And the stable-companion? Though I never knew his name, he was the one who interested me most. This woman was in the hollow of his hand. If he chose to blackmail her, there was no limit to the pressure he could apply. At first he could threaten to tell the whole story to her husband. When he'd exhausted the possibilities of this, he could get to work in earnest. Everyone assumed that Nelson had died of heart-failure, but what if she had contributed to it? One word against another; and the only man who could judge between them was dead. If the stable-companion pretended that he'd heard a scuffle, that this woman had hit Nelson . . .

"He would, of course, have to withdraw his first story that Nelson had been asleep when he went to bed, but he could say that he had tried to shield the woman and that now his conscience was troubling him. Mark you, I don't suppose for a moment that he did any of these things; but, as a novelist, my im-

agination was stirred by the thought of the hold that he—and I, for that matter—had over this woman. At one time I seriously considered making some inquiries and telling her—by means of an anonymous letter, if need be—that if she found herself molested, there was one man who could give the true story of that night.

“In fact, I did nothing. I assumed, rather lazily, that the whole thing had blown over by now; and, as I couldn’t help Mrs. Villeneuve without revealing that Nelson had spent his last moments of life in her cabin at two in the morning, I knew she wouldn’t call on me unless she were threatened with the ‘chair.’ Besides, the more I thought over this business, the more I wanted to keep entirely clear of it. For my own comfort and convenience I had slipped away on a lecture-tour without disclosing certain important facts about an unexplained death. I had held my tongue while Mrs. Villeneuve and the stable-companion signed declarations which I knew to be untrue. If I were called as a witness, I should be in a false position from the first.

“People who aren’t lawyers are unreasonably terrified by the thought of cross-examination. On my way to the South Seas I was appalled to realize the case that even a very moderate counsel could make against me. Why did I wish to shelter this worthless woman? Had I not called her attractive?

Did she *mean* anything to me? If not, why was I impeding justice on her behalf? If so . . .? Was not my cabin next to hers? Had I not expressed my disapproval of her friendship with Nelson, my personal hostility to the man? . . . In a short time I might expect to find this death from natural causes converted into manslaughter, perhaps murder, and to learn that Nelson and I had been fighting for Mrs. Villeneuve.

“You mustn’t take this too seriously, of course. I didn’t take it very seriously myself, but it warned me against rash impulses. I did not write, even anonymously, to Mrs. Villeneuve. In holding my tongue I believe I did the right thing, the thing you would all have done, the thing I should do again if I found myself in a similar position. I now see a risk, however, which I hadn’t envisaged at the time. Going back to my theory of blackmail as a fine art, I should feel my skin pricking *rather* uncomfortably if a man told me that we’d met on the *Joan of Arc* and that his wife had been ordered an operation which he couldn’t afford. Your position becomes so infernally uncertain when it’s only your word against the other fellow’s. That’s the only skeleton in my blameless cupboard, but I maintain that we all of us have something that we’d pay to keep concealed.”

When I came to the end of my story, Captain Lonsdale inquired

whether in fact the man whom I called the stable-companion had profited by his knowledge to levy blackmail on the unfortunate Mrs. Villeneuve. I told him that I had heard nothing of them or of the other passengers from that day to this.

After a few moments' silence the black-bearded padre asked whether I thought my running away had conceivably imperiled the life or liberty of anyone else.

"The stable-companion, for instance," he explained. "If this Nelson was dragged some distance along a passage-floor, his body may well have been scratched and bruised. Fat men mark easily. Even if the ship's doctor suspected no foul play, don't you think that the relations or the port health-officer may have wondered a little?"

"The stable-companion," I answered, "would be saved by absence of motive. Why should he want to kill the fellow?"

"Oh, I don't suggest a charge of murder; but, if it was established that this Nelson was a heavy drinker and an obnoxious person generally, it's not difficult to imagine an altercation, an exchange of blows. You might get a verdict of manslaughter. Mrs. Villeneuve swears that Nelson was all right when he left her after that last drink. When the steward comes round in the morning, he finds a dead body bearing, possibly, marks of violence. If we're to believe the sworn

statements, Nelson, once inside his cabin, never left it again. The violence done him between night and morning, therefore, must have been done by someone in the cabin. Now, a word from you that you'd seen Nelson an hour or whatever it was after he left the boat-deck, seen him outside his cabin, with this woman who swore she'd last seen him an hour earlier, seen him in pajamas, dead or dying: A word to that effect would have cleared the stable-companion."

"To some extent," I agreed. "It would get him into trouble of another kind, though. What happens to his sworn statement? And the woman's?"

"They'd have to admit it was false," said the padre. "A desperate effort to save the woman's reputation. The penalty, however, for perjury is a small thing compared with the penalty for manslaughter. When it's a man's liberty against a woman's name, perhaps an estimable man against an admittedly worthless woman . . ."

I began to feel that the excellent padre was rather unfairly using my tale as a text for a sermon. I looked at my watch and stood up.

"I had little time to think," I answered. "I hope nobody did in fact suffer from my silence . . . Is anyone proposing to turn in?"

We drifted out on deck and walked with the doctor to the head of the after companion-way, where he descended to his surgery. Then

we accompanied the captain to the door of his cabin by the bridge. One by one, our party scattered; and, when I came to my own deck, only the padre was left.

"That story of yours interested me more than I can say," he murmured, as I stopped at the alley-way to my stateroom. "For *Joan of Arc* I suppose we may read *Maid of Flanders*. I knew her well in old days."

It would be ridiculous to pretend that I was not startled, but I believe I concealed my surprise.

"The North Atlantic Transport Line?"

"The same! I remember a man rather like you. Nineteen-thirteen. I forget if Burgess had swum the channel then and I've never taken any interest in motorboat racing."

I am perhaps unreasonably prejudiced against clerical humor, but I thought my companion was being rather heavy-handed in turning against me the jocular precepts which I had recommended for blackmail.

"You were on board that trip?" I asked with affected interest. "Then perhaps you recall the name of the man I've called Nelson."

"It was Lee. Maxton B. Lee. And 'Mrs. Villeneuve' was a Mrs. Kinloch Lasbury. You were only at the beginning of your career then, sir; you've prospered prodigiously since. I wish I could say the same for myself." He paused and looked at me with a slight frown, as

though he were repeating a lesson and had forgotten the next line. "The stable-companion," he then continued, "was a mining-engineer called Grainger. Sinclair was skipper. The doctor was an Irishman, O'Casey. The barman was known as William—William Hussey his full name was—and Lee's room-steward was a Welshman called Morgan."

"You have a remarkable memory," I said.

"Well, they all gave evidence," explained the padre.

"Then there *was* an inquiry?"

The black beard dipped in a deliberate nod. The dark eyes glittered suddenly as though to prepare me for the cream of the jest:

"A trial. Now you understand my asking whether your policy of silence might not have been a little hard on the prisoner. And you've heard nothing from that day to this? Well, I suppose you were in the depths of Dakota or Texas when it came on, lecturing on the present position of the English novel. It was an interesting case."

"You were there?"

The glitter turned to a blaze.

"I was the prisoner. Before that, I had been the stable-companion. After that . . . *After* that . . . For five of the best years of a man's life . . . Years that have no cash-equivalent . . . Heart-breaking years of degradation and injustice and ruin . . . For five years I was an inmate of a United States pris-

on. I suppose you're not in any great hurry for bed? I can assure you that you're not likely to sleep for a long time yet."

When I left the smoking-room, I was feeling tired and a little stupefied after several hours in a hot and noisy room. Once on deck, my head began to clear. And by the time that my companion suggested a short walk before turning in, I was at least mentally fit to attack the question whether he was an inspired practical joker, a dangerous lunatic, or a man hideously wronged and fiercely determined on revenge.

"This is about my usual time for going to bed," I told him.

"But this is an unusual occasion! Doesn't a yarn about old days appeal to you? I fear I'm not the 'dignified and sensitive ornament to society' that you would like, but five years of prison and ten of living by one's wits take off the early polish. Needless to say, I'm not a parson, but a clerical outfit is a useful disguise. There are one or two mining engineers on board this ship, but they've none of them penetrated the Reverend George Winter to the John Grainger underneath. Well, now, a sick wife is one of the few troubles I *haven't* had . . ."

"But you think I might help you on other grounds?" I interrupted. "Our acquaintance is slight. Your name . . . or names . . ."

"The New York police can identify me by my thumb prints."

"And why do you single me out?"

My companion wagged his head and laughed disagreeably:

"I'm appealing to your generosity. You observe that I make no claim and use no threats."

"I observe also that you've taken a long time to make your appeal. You've been at large for ten years, you would have me believe?"

"But till tonight I didn't see how I could make my appeal . . . convincing, shall I say? If you'd locked the door and telephoned for the police . . . My record was against me. I prefer in every way your peaceful persuasion."

"And as you paid me the compliment of attending so carefully, you doubtless remember my warning that the artistic blackmailer must admit when he's beaten. Nine times out of ten, the victim will pay. The tenth time he'll look for the whisper of a shadow of a ghost of a threat and then he'll hit back. Our conversation tonight will be repeated to the captain tomorrow, as accurately as I can recollect it. I shall ask him to call on you to corroborate it. If you stick to your guns, there'll be a Scotland Yard man waiting on the quay . . ."

My companion wagged his head in well-simulated surprise.

"If I thought that was a threat . . ." he murmured. "You don't suggest I'm trying to . . . *black-mail* you? If you mean that, if you'll say it in the captain's presence,

you'll be served with a writ as soon as I can find a solicitor to serve it."

"Scotland Yard," I said with an attempt at lightness, "will be interested to know why a mining engineer called Grainger is traveling as a parson named Winter. If you tell the captain it was all a joke and you were trying to frighten me, you *may* persuade him to accept it in that spirit, but I shall take what measures I think fit to protect myself against similar 'jokes' in future. I think we understand each other now . . ."

My companion shook his head with an expression almost of pity.

"You don't begin to understand," he told me. "Rule out the practical-joke idea. Five years in an American prison take the edge off a man's sense of humor. Rule out the idea that I'm a chance blackmailer who sees the possibilities of the story you told us tonight. I've shown you that I know the names you hid up under your 'Nelson' and 'Ville-neuve' and '*Joan of Arc*.' I can remind you, if you've forgotten, that you worked on the port side of the promenade-deck in a green-and-white striped chair with your name painted on the top; and you wrote left-handed, because you had neuritis in your other arm. I could tell you things you've never known. Lee—or 'Nelson'—was dead when you saw him. He dropped down in Mrs. Lasbury's cabin. She only wanted to drag him far enough away to keep people from thinking

he'd been with her, but she made so much noise that I came out into the alley-way. She told me what had happened; and I helped her to carry the body in. We agreed, like fools, to pretend he'd died in his sleep.

"If I'd kept my head," he went on, "I should have dressed again and gone on deck and come down later and given the alarm. He had some big bruises; and his pajamas were torn. I paid for that little mistake with five of the best years of my life. A word from you would have saved me, but you were too busy thinking of your own safety. Not that I blame you. I know what it means to have a dead body lying at your feet and one man's word against another. That Lasbury woman would have put the blame on you, me, the ship's cat, if she'd had a chance. She was terrified, dangerous. And I'd have shifted the blame to you or anyone else if I'd seen how to do it."

He broke off with a mutter of "Five years! Five mortal years!" Then he turned with a bow of fiercely ironical deference:

"You were wise to keep out of the mess. After all, you were the last man known to have seen this Lee alive. You'd told O'Casey, the doctor, that, if Lee kept you awake another night, you'd go into Mrs. Lasbury's cabin and chuck him out. My stars, I got five years on less suspicion than that! I don't wonder at your saying you'd give the clothes



off your back and the skin under the clothes to keep this little skeleton in its cupboard. It's not only that you're a well-known literary man. If there was another inquiry, you might find yourself standing where I stood. The Lees are still lamenting a valued member of their family. Mrs. Lasbury will sign and swear anything to keep out of the dock. And I . . ."

As he paused again, I invited him to go on.

"Well, I feel that somebody must compensate me for all I've gone through, all I've lost," he answered. "Until tonight I meant to divide the bill between England and America. There's been a miscarriage of justice. If the government of New York State won't make amends, the people of the two countries will. I'm writing the story of the trial and of my life in prison. The pub-

lishers have given me quite a good contract. My only trouble is that I'm not a trained writer. There have been times when I've thought of giving the whole thing up, but I need the money. I'd give it up tonight if anyone would make it worth my while."

"Have you tried the Lees or Mrs. Lasbury?" I inquired contemptuously.

The black beard dipped once more; and once more the glittering eyes fixed me with a piercing intensity which I took to mean that this was the last round.

"They couldn't pay ten thousand pounds," he answered. "And that's what I expect to make by the book and the serial rights. Nothing less than ten thousand pounds is worth my while . . . Now I mustn't keep you up any longer. We understand each other."



## Mignon G. Eberhart

### Murder on St. Valentine's Day

*The fantastic Valentine was an absurd check, but it was perfectly legal and had to be cashed—for \$20,000. But what happened after that was not legal at all . . . A story by one of the most popular mystery writers of our time . . .*

**Detective: JAMES WICKWIRE**

I LOOKED AT THE LACY OBJECT ON my desk. "What is this?"

The young, assistant cashier replied, "It's a handkerchief. Possibly intended for the Valentine trade," he hazarded thoughtfully. "It's shaped like a heart."

"I can see that!"

The handkerchief was undoubtedly heart-shaped and outlined with lace. Written on it in bright red were words and numerals. I touched the writing cautiously.

The assistant cashier said, "It's not blood. It's lipstick."

"I'm not so old I don't know lipstick when I see it," I said stiffly.

"Yes, sir," he said hurriedly. "I mean, no, sir. Shall I tell them to cash it?"

I debated, seething with exasperation. For the thing was, incredibly, a check—and a check for \$20,000. It was made out to one Ronald Murch and it was signed by Clarissa Hartridge, and Clarissa was one of my widows.

I hasten to say that I am, and, *Deo volente*, intend to remain, a bachelor. My name is James Wickwire. I am a senior vice president at the bank within whose sedate walls I have spent most of my life.

Clarissa was one of my widows only in the sense that her estate, along with that of sundry other widows, was in my care.

One way and another, my widows have caused me considerable mental anguish, due in the main to their recurrent impulses to invest money in nonexistent oil wells, or to finance expeditions for the discovery of buried pirate treasure.

Up to that day, however, Clarissa had given me very little anxiety. She had kept well within her income, never made mistakes in subtraction, and was an extremely charming and pretty woman.

Consequently I had felt deeply grateful to her, and enjoyed dining with her, and a Miss Gray who shared her house, once or twice a

year in the comfortable certainty that Clarissa would not ask me to balance her checkbook.

But this fantastic check was not merely an illusion shattered for me. It represented a large share of Clarissa's capital. The walls of the bank did not in fact rock, but I myself was shaken to the core. It was all too clear that something had happened to Clarissa and it was quite as clear what that something was. For my widows do not invariably remain widows. Sometimes they follow the same remarkable quality of impulse in choosing second husbands that they do in choosing investments.

"You say this Ronald Murch is out there now?" I asked the assistant cashier.

"Yes, sir. Young. Dark. Handsome. Presented the check as cool as you please. They brought it to me and I thought you'd better see it."

"Of course." I tapped the lacy edge of the handkerchief. Young, dark, and handsome! Clarissa was fifty if she was a day, and if I'd had my fingers on her plump little neck just then I really think I'd have twisted it. Instead I told my secretary to get Mrs. Hartridge on the telephone and then, perceiving the inquisitive gleam in the assistant cashier's pale blue eyes, I told him he could go and I'd see to it. He looked frustrated but went away.

Clarissa came on the phone and began at once to speak. "James, I

know why you're calling me," she said airily. "It's all right about the check. Cash it."

I daresay I uttered a rather strangled sound. She said coolly, "Have you got a cold, James?"

"No! What is the meaning . . ."

"I'm buying a formula for face cream."

"Face—Clarissa, this is capital!"

She laughed lightly. "Of course. I sold those Turnpike bonds."

A choking sensation gripped me. She said, "Oh, by the way, James. Can you return that check to me yourself? After you've cashed it, I mean. I don't want it to go through all that routine in the bank."

"I can understand that!" I said acidly, but she had hung up.

When I had got control of myself I sent for Mr. Ronald Murch, who was still waiting. He was, indeed, dark, young, and handsome with a charm which raked my already lacerated nerves. And to my intense surprise a young lady with a great many golden curls and a sallow but heavily made-up face was hanging fondly on his arm. He introduced her.

"This is Miss April Moon."

The young lady gave me a coquettish smile. "Soon to be Mrs. Ronald Murch," she said, and hugged his arm. "We just got the license."

I was rather taken aback, since I had believed Clarissa destined for this dubious honor. Ronald Murch nodded at the heart-shaped hand-

kerchief with its red writing. "That does look rather silly, doesn't it?" he said.

"May I ask why it is written in this remarkable way?"

For an instant something puzzled flashed in his dark eyes. "It was a whim of Clarissa's—I mean Mrs. Hartridge's. Just an impulse. She said it was suitable—lipstick, cosmetics. You see?"

"I can't say that I do," I replied shortly.

Miss April Moon giggled. "What does it matter how the old girl wanted to write it! It's legal. He gets the cash. She gets her formula. We get married."

He drew a folded paper from an inner pocket and waved it at me. "This is my new formula for face cream."

I reached automatically for the paper but he returned it quickly to his pocket. "Sorry," he said, "but it's a secret. I developed it myself. Believe me, it's an oil well."

The words struck a sensitive nerve within me. I said icily, "Does Mrs. Hartridge know of your approaching marriage?"

Miss Moon giggled. Mr. Murch assumed a businesslike air. "That has nothing to do with you, Mr. Wickwire. If you have any doubt about this check kindly phone Mrs. Hartridge."

So I was obliged to give directions to the effect that the absurd check was to be cashed. I also saw to it that the handkerchief itself was

given to me. I placed it in my desk, and there was nothing further that I could do. Clarissa's instructions had been definite. I had already exceeded such small authority as I had. And Clarissa was in love. I know little of women, but I know when I'm licked.

Scarcely an hour later Clarissa telephoned me. "James," she said, "he's dead! Ronald Murch. He's been shot. Right in my library. The police are here. They say he's been murdered. Please come!"

Clarissa's neat if unpretentious little house in the East Nineties was surrounded by policemen. Once inside the living room, a police lieutenant fell upon me, questioned me exhaustively, then told me the circumstances of the murder.

"He's in there," he said, nodding toward the tiny library which adjoined the living room. The door was open; a cluster of men, some in uniform and some in plain-clothes, moved apart a little and I could see feet in highly polished black oxfords, at an odd angle on the rug. I could not see the rest of the body.

"Shot twice," the lieutenant said. "One got him through the heart. Mrs. Hartridge claims she heard the shots and thought it was a back-fire from the street. After a time she came downstairs. Saw the guy in there, on the rug. Dead as a duck. Says she phoned to the police right away. She was alone in the house."

There were no servants in the

household, but there was Miss Gray. I said, "There's a Miss Gray who lived with Mrs. Hartridge—"

The lieutenant interrupted. "She's gone shopping. She hasn't come back yet."

"Did you find the murder gun?" I asked.

He nodded solemnly. "That's the clincher. The gun belonged to Mrs. Hartridge. She says it was her husband's. Kept in a drawer of the table in the hall. Says she hasn't touched it, knows nothing of it. There were no fingerprints. Probably she wore gloves."

"Do you mean to say you suspect Mrs. Hartridge?"

"Who else?" he said, and rose as if to end the interview.

"Wait," I said hurriedly. "She had no motive, no reason—"

He gave me a cold and skeptical look. "Listen. The guy had twenty thousand dollars in his pocket. Mrs. Hartridge admits that she gave him a check for the cash this morning. He had a key to this house in his pocket—a key to *this* house. She's an elderly widow with money. *And* he had another girl!" He eyed me triumphantly. "There was a marriage license in his pocket. What does it look like to you?"

It looked extremely serious, and I swallowed hard. "What about the girl?"

"*She* didn't kill him. We traced her right away. She's at a beauty shop getting her hair curled and

she's been there for an hour. I've sent a squad car for her."

I could not comprehend Miss Moon's unbridled desire for still more curls, but I did comprehend the solid nature of her alibi. I said, "Didn't Mrs. Hartridge tell you that she gave him the twenty thousand dollars for the purchase of a face cream formula?"

He laughed shortly. "Oh, sure. She also admitted that she'd picked him up on the street! Didn't know anything about his background! Claims she didn't know he was going to be married! Probably that's not the first money she's given him. By the way—you say you're her banker—we'll have to take a look through her canceled checks."

And I'd be obliged to give them a check written in lipstick on a heart-shaped handkerchief. It seemed wiser to tell him of it at once, give him Murch's own explanation for it, and—if possible—thus minimize its disastrous effect. So, very carefully, I related the whole incident.

But the lieutenant was again triumphant. He smacked Clarissa's little Pembroke table with a fist which nearly broke it. "That proves it! She was in love with the guy. You're a banker. Did you ever get a check written like that before?"

I was obliged to confess I hadn't. "It was an impulse," I told him again. "Lipstick—cosmetic business—there's a connection. He said he had the face cream formula. It was in his pocket."

He shook his head. "He was lying to you. So was she because she knew you'd question that check. She wouldn't have wanted you to know her real reason for giving him that money. There's no formula. I went through his pockets myself." He looked at the door as another policeman entered. "What is it, Jake?"

It was Clarissa's friend and housemate, Miss Gray, returned from her shopping trip and horrified. They ushered her into the room and let me remain while they questioned her.

Naturally I listened with some interest. I knew Miss Gray, of course. She was a pleasant, rather plain young woman, although she looked handsomer than usual that morning for the light from the window fell directly upon her, revealing a dazzling complexion which seemed to make her dark eyes glow. She wore a neat gray suit and hat and clutched a black handbag.

She knew Mr. Murch, of course, she told the lieutenant; he had been a frequent guest of Clarissa's. She had gone shopping that morning. When asked if she had talked to anyone who could identify her, she grasped the intent of the question at once, with a flash of her dark eyes. But she said that she doubted it very much. She had made only one purchase, stockings, and that was not a charge; she had paid cash. The box of stockings was on the table in

the hall. Most of the morning she had simply strolled, window shopping.

The lieutenant pounced: "Mrs. Hartridge was very fond of Ronald Murch, wasn't she? In fact, there was quite a romance going on there. Tell us the truth, Miss Gray."

She rose angrily, her eyes blazing. "That is outrageous! How dare you suggest such a thing!"

"Suppose I say that we have proof of it. Suppose I say that Mrs. Hartridge quarreled with him over a girl and shot him?"

"Then I'd say you don't know what you're talking about! There was nothing like that between them—nothing! I'll swear to it in court if it comes to that."

I interposed. "A formula for face cream seems to have disappeared, Miss Gray. Do you mind if the lieutenant—er—searches your handbag?"

She lifted her eyebrows but gave her handbag to the lieutenant, who searched it rapidly, returned it to her, and said to me, "I tell you there's no such formula, Mr. Wickwire. See here, you go and talk to Mrs. Hartridge. Get her to confess. It'll save trouble all the way around. Jake—" The policeman stepped forward. "Take him to her."

I followed Jake's broad blue back up the little stairway to Clarissa's room. Another policeman, at a word from Jake, permitted me to enter it, and Clarissa came quickly

to me. "James! I believe they think I shot him!"

She was very pretty, with blue eyes, brown hair, and an astonishing complexion—so lovely, indeed, and so much more youthful than I remembered it, that my anxiety was sharpened.

It has always been said that love beautifies a woman, and certainly she looked glowing and younger than her years. On the other hand she certainly showed no signs of grief, or, indeed, of any sort of emotion. But, of course, murderers are said to be remarkably callous and cold-blooded.

I said gloomily, "You'd better tell me all about it."

She did. Her story differed in no detail from the one she had told the police. When I asked her how young Murch had got a key to the front door, her blue eyes widened. "I don't know! I didn't give him a key."

I didn't, I couldn't believe her. "Clarissa, when and where did you meet this young man?"

This, too, squared with the lieutenant's account. She said, with deplorable candor, it was in a taxi. "That is, I was waiting for a taxi, and so was he. It was raining. A taxi came along and he offered it to me and, of course, I had to ask him to share it. We were going the same way. By the way, James, the formula for the face cream is mine. I paid for it, remember, and he had

come to deliver it to me. So be sure you claim it for me."

"Clarissa, are you telling the truth about this formula?"

"Certainly!" Her eyes snapped and she swished past me into a dressing room and back again. She had a white jar with a black top, unlabeled, in her hand. She held it under my nose. "This is the cream!"

I thrust it away with some force. After a moment I said, "Clarissa, why did you write that check in lipstick?"

She sniffed the cream, absently. "I'd never have thought of it myself. But then I realized it was an excellent idea."

I caught her by the shoulders. "Who thought of it? Who suggested it? Young Murch?"

She told me.

I went downstairs at once, and as I got to the foot of the stairs the door opened and April Moon, sobbing wildly between two policemen, surged into the hall. The lieutenant and Miss Gray emerged from the library. And there was only one course for me to take.

A flat parcel, wrapped and tied, lay on the hall table. I snatched it up. Miss Gray hurled herself upon me like a tiger defending its young. Miss Moon screamed. I thrust the flat parcel at the lieutenant and dived behind him, evading Miss Gray's fingers. Miss Gray whirled around and made for the door where the two policemen seized her.

The formula for the face cream was neatly tucked into the folds of a pair of stockings.

I explained it, although, of course, it was perfectly clear. "It's an excellent face cream. They've both been using it. Mrs. Hartridge and—" I nodded at Miss Gray whose flawless complexion was now a blazing white, as her eyes were blazing black. "Both of them wanted it. Miss April Moon only wanted the money."

"I've never used it!" Miss Moon cried. "It's no good. Ronald told me so. He said it was only a mixture of junk! He said it was a trick to get money from—" She clapped both hands over her mouth.

I said to the lieutenant, "The formula is, in fact, excellent. Obviously Murch didn't know that—he hit on it by chance. He meant merely to use the formula as an excuse to get money from Mrs. Hartridge. But both Miss Gray and Mrs. Hartridge have developed beautiful complexions by using the cream.

"Mrs. Hartridge made a deal with Murch for its purchase. He was to deliver the formula to her this morning. Miss Gray knew that it was her last chance to get the formula for herself. So she determined upon a subtle but rather neat plan."

"Huh?" The lieutenant was perplexed.

"It occurred to her to suggest a romance between Mrs. Hartridge and young Murch. It was a perfect

set-up. Elderly widow with money; charming and poor young man. When Mrs. Hartridge was actually about to write a check to Murch for the formula, Miss Gray suggested that she write it in lipstick, on a heart-shaped handkerchief, as a good omen to the cosmetic business. Mrs. Hartridge—er—did so.

"Miss Gray knew the police would eventually see the check, which was sufficiently out-of-the-ordinary to attract attention. She denied the romance, indignantly, knowing that her defense of Mrs. Hartridge would incline you to exonerate Miss Gray—for if she had shot him, she reasoned, you would expect her to leap at the suggestion of Mrs. Hartridge's guilt."

"But—" the lieutenant said, "how did she find out—"

I replied, "I suggest that Miss Gray knew Murch was to come to the house. I suggest that she returned quietly, waited for him, let him in, took him to the library—and cold-bloodedly shot him.

"Then she had to hurry. She put her own house key in his pocket—to add to the theory of a romance—snatched the formula and, probably, escaped by the kitchen door. She hid the formula in the parcel with the stockings merely, I think, because it struck her as a hiding place which was likely to be overlooked.

"So when that occurred to me, I snatched the stockings, because—well, you see if there had been



nothing of importance in the parcel she would have done nothing. Instead of that—”

Something tingled on my cheek; I dabbed at it with my handkerchief which came away with streaks of red on it from the scratches left by Miss Gray's fingernails.

Not long ago I dined with Clarissa in her new and magnificent penthouse. As possibly everyone knows, she has made an enormous amount of money from her astute marketing of a face cream called, simply but suitably, Clarissa's Cream. Perhaps much of the suc-

cess she has had in its merchandising is due to its trademark—which is a gay, red and white photograph of a heart-shaped handkerchief. It proved to be one of those extraordinary flukes of genius in advertising.

“So that,” I said, “is why you wanted the check in good condition.”

She smiled at me. “James,” she said, “I have so much money. You must tell me all about investments.”

I looked at her elegant gown, her matchless pearls, the sapphires and diamonds on her hands. “No, my dear,” I said. “You tell me.”



# Clarence Budington Kelland

## A Piece of String

*In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), Edgar Allan Poe wrote: "Now, brought to this conclusion in so unequivocal a manner as we are, it is not our part, as reasoners, to reject it on account of apparent impossibilities. It is only left for us to prove that these apparent 'impossibilities' are, in reality, not such." This great concept of detective-story technique has suffered a sea-change into something rich and strange. A later master—and we must give credit where credit is Doyle—rephrased the precept into the sharply brilliant axiom by which it is now best known. In THE SIGN OF FOUR (1890), nearly half a century after Poe had conceived the principle, A. Conan Doyle had Sherlock Holmes say for the first time: "when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." And there is an inevitability in this phrasing, a perfection of expression, which will never die.*

*Other mystery writers have re-stated the original Poe-Doyle aphorism. One of them was Clarence Budington Kelland, creator of the rustic unraveler, Scattergood Baines. Here is the great detective-story concept translated into Vermont vernacular: "When you're a-studyin' a set of facts and only two things kin possibly be true, and you know one of 'em hain't true, then the other one must be—even if it hain't possible" . . .*

### **Detective: SCATTERGOOD BAINES**

SCATTERGOOD BAINES HAD NEVER taken up automobiles. Though he could have owned a garageful had he desired, he was not the possessor even of a flivver. It was not that he disapproved of them or hesitated to use one in an emergency, but for reasons sufficient for himself.

"My habits of mind," he said

once, "works accordin' to the speed of hosses. Fur forty, fifty year I contrived my errands so's they could be run in a buggy. Now, if I was to change I'd be gittin' everywheres too soon. And there I'd be with nothin' to do, jest a-waitin' around and mebby gittin' into trouble. I calc'late I'll cling to the ol' mare."

So instead of speeding up the val-

ley road in a motor the old hardware merchant, lumberman, politician, banker, and whatnot was driving toward Coldriver in a dusty buggy whose top had been many times varnished, and which smelled of leather and horsehair and oats as only an ancient buggy can smell.

As he rounded the curve where the river escapes from the mill pond, he saw ahead of him in the dust the flutter of a skirt. It was a small skirt, because it was covering a small person who wore a perky little hat over one ear, with a feather in it that reminded Scattergood of an actress he had seen years and years ago as Rosalind. He leaned forward to stare over his mare's shoulder, and noted with approval the tiny feet taking sturdy, determined steps, and the erect shoulders and flat back, and the free, lissom, youthful swing of the hips.

Without looking back, the girl edged over toward the ditch to permit him to pass, but he drew rein and leaned an elbow on an ample leg.

"Goin' some'eres?" he asked. "Or jest exercisin'?"

"I'm going to Coldriver," she said.

"It's quite a piece yit," he observed. "Ye kin squeeze in here if ye've a mind to. Um. . . . Visitin' around here?"

He cramped the wheels, and she climbed in beside him after a swift, shrewd glance of appraisal.

"Do you know a man named Scattergood Baines?" she countered.

"Calc'late to," he replied.

"What sort of man is he?" she asked.

"Some says one thing and some says another," said Scattergood. "Depends on which side of the deal ye be. Kind of a meddlesome ol' coot, folks claim. If he's a-doin' ye a favor, you cast your vote fur him; if he's a-doin' a favor fur the other side, ye call him hard names. Nobuddy's so bad he's pizen to everybuddy, and nobuddy's so good there hain't folks to claim he'd steal aigs from under a settin' hen."

"I'm going to see him," she said.

"Business or pleasure?" he asked.

"I wouldn't have hitch-hiked all the way from New York just to get his autograph," she said tartly.

"Dew tell! All the way from New York. Um. . . . Hain't the trains still runnin'?"

"And they're still charging money to ride on them," the girl said. "And one of the things they know enough to do is watch depots." At this she bit her lip and looked at him apprehensively.

He did not appear to have noticed this somewhat sensational slip. "Hain't ye got no baggage?"

She shook a little bag that Scattergood would have described as a reticule. "Toothbrush, lipstick, compact, clean handkerchief," she said.

"Kind of a self-reliant gal, hain't ye?"

She looked up at him rather in surprise. "Why, I guess I must be. I never noticed it before."

"Beats all what qualities necessity fetches out in folks," he observed. "Wa-al, I shouldn't be a mite s'prised if Scattergood was glad to see ye."

"My father said he would be," observed the young woman. "How far is Coldriver?"

"Ye kin see it when we round the next bend."

She hesitated, but eager anxiety urged her to ask the next question: "You haven't seen a boy—a young man—along the road? One that looks like me?"

"How much like you?" asked Scattergood.

"Heaps. We're twins."

"Hain't seen him. . . . Now ye git a view of Coldriver. Slightly place, hain't it? How'd ye come to lose your brother?"

"He had to come away faster," she said.

"Um. . . . And was he comin' to see Scattergood Baines?"

"Possibly, but I think he had another reason."

"Wa-al, wa-al, and so your pa told ye to come see Scattergood."

"That was before he died," said the girl.

"Dew tell!" Scattergood was searching his memory, but there was no clue sufficient to prompt him. The mare jogged into town and across the bridge and up the hill. "I'll drive ye to Scattergood's

house. Calc'late he'll be there by the time we git to it."

"You're very kind," she said.

Presently Scattergood drove through his own gate and stopped beside the side stoop.

"Hey, Mandy!" he called. "Mandy! Come out here! Ye got comp'ny, seems as though."

The round figure of Scattergood's wife appeared in the door. She blinked in the bright sunlight and wiped her hands on her apron.

"What ye mean a-callin' me away from my oven jest when the pies has gone in? Think I got nothin' to do but come a-runnin' every time ye holler?"

"Mandy," Scattergood said mildly, "ye'll be givin' comp'ny a wrong idee."

"If I give 'em any idee what a nuisance ye be, Scattergood Baines —"

Scattergood felt the young body beside him start, and he smiled down at her.

"Times when a body learns more by keepin' his mouth shet. Mandy, here's a gal's walked all the way from New York to see me. Ye better watch out when they come's fur as that. Ye kin see my reppitation's stretchin' out."

Mandy came out now and stood on the stoop, and regarded Scattergood and his passenger with hostile eye.

"What's her name, and what's she want, and why don't ye fetch her in?" she demanded.

"I clean forgot to ask what she's called, and she hain't stated her business, and ye hain't give me no chancet to fetch nobuddy in."

"Maybe," said the girl, "I'd better not go in."

Mandy appeared very formidable and forbidding.

"Hush up," said Mandy, "and git in out of the sun away from that palaverin' ol' man. Goodness me! I warrant ye kin do with a glass of milk and a slice of apple pie. Don't stand there a-gawkin'."

The girl eyed Mandy and then smiled. "I don't know," she said, "but what maybe you're a darling."

Mandy's eyes twinkled and she jerked her head toward the door.

"But don't you want to know my name?" asked the girl.

"I calc'late you'll tell when you git ready," said Mandy.

"It is Jennifer Asbury."

"I swan to man," said Scattergood. "Not old man Asbury's daughter?"

She nodded. "And he told me if I ever got in trouble so terrible there wasn't any way out I should come and tell you," she said.

"Eat fust," said Mandy peremptorily.

She was hungry, and Scattergood sat silent as she ate ravenously. When her appetite was satisfied she turned suddenly to the old hardware merchant.

"It's murder," she said.

"Do they think you done it?"

"They think my brother Ransom did it," said Jennifer.

"Did he?" asked Scattergood.

"No."

"How d'ye know that?"

"He told me," she said simply.

"It was Grandfather who was killed in his big house. It was with a bronze warrior that belonged to Ransom, and the way it was done nobody could do it but Ranse."

"Why not?" asked Scattergood.

"Because," she explained, "Grandfather was sick, and he was always sort of funny, and he wouldn't have a window open in his room at night, because night air was poison. So all his windows were shut and locked. And he locked his bedroom door, and it stayed locked. But on account of being sick he left unlocked the door between Ranse's bedroom and his, and that is the only way the murderer could get in. And Ranse was there all the time, sitting up reading, because he was listening for Grandfather to call. And nobody went through his room. And nobody could get into Grandfather's room any other way. So it couldn't have been anybody but Ranse. And it was one of the servants who discovered it when he brought up Grandpa's breakfast in the morning and couldn't get in, so he had to come through Ranse's room. And that's how it was. And I was terribly frightened, and so was Ranse, because we saw how the police would look at it. So before the police could get there we

talked, and he decided to run away—”

“Yeah. Where to?”

“I think,” she said, “he planned to come here.”

“To see me?” asked Scattergood.

“No,” answered Jennifer. “Because Mr. Buckham lives here, and Ranse wanted to be around where Mr. Buckham was, because if Ranse didn’t do it, then somebody else did, and it was somebody pretty smart, and Mr. Buckham is very, very smart.”

“To be sure. I know Jim Buckham. Knowed him fur years. Um. . . Was your grandpa’s door locked on the inside?”

“And the key was in the lock,” said Jennifer.

“Your brother never went to sleep? Didn’t even doze off’n have a cat nap?”

“He says not.”

“And the winders was all locked inside?”

“Every one.”

“Most gen’ally,” said Scattergood, “it’s been my observation that when a body kills another feller he’s got some kind of a reason fur doin’ it. Ye don’t jest up and commit a murder fur the excitement of it.”

“Grandpa and a Mr. Stang and Ranse were trustees under Father’s will. It was all legal and I don’t understand it. Ranse was made one so he would learn about the estate. Well, Mr. Stang died, and the will said just the other two should keep

on being trustees, so if Grandfather died Ranse would be the only one. Ranse and I weren’t to get the estate until we are twenty-five.”

“Which is when?” asked Scattergood.

“In four years,” said Jennifer.

“I kind of guess maybe your grandpa cramped Ranse some, eh? Ranse he calc’lated on doin’ a mite of highflyin’, and your grandpa stood in the way of it.”

“He kept both of us on a small allowance,” said Jennifer. “That’s how it came I had to hitch-hike up here, because I didn’t have but a few dollars, and gave them to Ranse.”

“Wa-al, we got motive and we got opportunity,” said Scattergood, “and we got a locked room that no-buddy could git into but your brother. It hain’t an encouragin’ outlook.”

“But Ranse didn’t do it,” she protested.

“We’ll start out by makin’ b’lieve he didn’t, anyhow. And so your brother run off and you got the idea he come traipsin’ up here on account of Buckham?”

“I’m sure he did.”

“A body’s got to start some place,” Scattergood said. “This here’s Thursday. When was the murderin’ done?”

“Tuesday night,” said Jennifer.

“You stay put,” said Scattergood. “Mebbe ye better lock yourself into a room where Mandy can’t git at ye. She’ll talk ye deaf. We used to have

a brass monkey in the parlor, and Mandy she talked to it so constant its ears got wore down. G'-by."

"What are you going to do, Mr. Baines?"

"I'll jest kind of go here and there, and ask this and that," he said. "G'-by."

Once more he got into the old buggy and drove down to the village. Already the train had whistled, and shortly after he arrived at his hardware store and turned his mare over to the liveryman, Pliny Pickett, formerly driver of the stage that plied the Valley road, but now, in his old age, proud conductor of the railroad Scattergood had built down to the junction point, came creaking up to the piazza where Scattergood sat in his specially reinforced chair.

"Afternoon, Scattergood," he said.

"How be ye, Pliny? Eh? Keepin' well?"

"Middlin'," said Pliny. "Fetched up three drummers and six passengers, and Mis' Moon was took sick on the curves—"

"Allus is," said Scattergood. "Um . . . Buckham wa'n't on the train?"

"No."

"On it yestiddy?"

"Hain't been onto it this here live-long summer. It's them automobiles," Pliny said bitterly.

"Hain't that there Buckham's

chauffeur standin' by the pust of-fice?"

"Calc'late so."

"Know him?" said Scattergood.

"Name of Perkins," said Pliny.

"Would ye, maybe, git talkin' to this here Perkins and inquire if he's drove to New York and back this week?"

"Seems as though I'd like to know that," said Pliny.

"Or if his boss was away from home, say, Tuesday night?"

"Mebbe I'd git around to that."

"G'-by," said Scattergood.

"G'-by," responded Pliny.

Scattergood discovered as a result of this investigation that Buckham had not been driven to New York, and that, so far as Perkins knew, his employer had been in Coldriver on Tuesday and Wednesday. He, himself, had driven to Boston to deliver some documents, so could not state of his own knowledge.

Scattergood basked in the sun with closed eyes. Presently Coldriver became aware that he wrestled with a problem, because his hand stole down and loosened his shoe. Presently it was off, and the old man's bare toes wriggled energetically in the balmy air. They wriggled for half an hour, while Scattergood reviewed his knowledge of the late Mr. Asbury and his family, and of Buckham. Buckham was a lawyer. For years he had been retained by the elder Asbury, whose murder presented the puzzle under

solution. There was the connection. But why did young Ranse Asbury suspect him? Where could Buckham's motive lie? And if Buckham were in Coldriver on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, how could he have been in New York to commit the crime?

It was a six-hour drive to the city. Buckham had not left by train. He had not been driven by his chauffeur. To Scattergood it appeared he had a perfect alibi. But to the old hardware merchant nothing was so that only appeared to be so.

He continued to sit on his piazza. Presently a station wagon rounded the corner, and a comfortably stout woman of mature age alighted at the grocery store. Scattergood waited for her to emerge and then called, "How be ye, Miss Sloat?"

"How be ye, Scattergood?"

"Nothin' in my line today? Kitchenware or somethin' like that?"

She hesitated and then ambled across the road. "Glad ye spoke," she said, panting, "I nigh forgot to git me an ice pick. Mine jest disappeared straight off'm the earth. I never see the beat of how things go, and ye never git to see 'em ag'in."

Scattergood supplied the demand with deliberation, and so prolonged the conversation.

"Cookin' fur Mr. Buckham yit, hain't ye?" he asked. "I don't see how a body'd come to lose an ice pick."

"Me neither. It was there Tues-

day when I fixed his drink fur him, and when I got back Wednesday and went to look fur it, there wa'n't hide nor hair of it."

"Ye wa'n't to home Tuesday night?"

"Nellie's second was a-comin'. So he says to go along and leave some potater salad in the ice box and he'd make out. Kind of unhandy on account of Mary Bogert wantin' to go to that dance down to the Bridge. But he says we might's well make a job of it, and we done so."

"Leavin' Buckham alone in the house with his potater salad," said Scattergood.

"My son he come and drove both of us to taown around four o'clock and we both got home next day jest 'fore noon."

"Um. Buckham there when ye got back? Find him all safe 'n' sound?"

"A-settin' on the front stoop in his bathrobe," said the cook tartly.

"G'-by, Mis' Sloat."

"G'-by, Scattergood."

Here was something for Scattergood to mull over. Buckham had slept alone in his house on Tuesday night. The chauffeur had been in Boston; Mrs. Sloat and the girl had been absent. But Buckham had been there at four o'clock, and he had been there before noon the next day.

Scattergood wondered if anybody had seen the man between those hours. If Buckham had been in Coldriver at a late hour Tuesday



night, then he was eliminated as a suspect. Of course, there was no reason apparent to Scattergood why he should be a suspect anyhow—except some expressed suspicion on the part of the boy who stood accused of the murder. But that boy must have had some reason—and it was a starting point.

"Ye can't never git no'eres," Scattergood was accustomed to say, "if ye don't pick out some direction to go in. It's better to move hit or miss than jest to set."

So he had his mare hitched again and drove out toward the Handle, where summer folk resided, and stopped at Ovid Peters's farm, which lay cater-cornered from Buckham's small but comfortable house where he lived his rather unsociable bachelor's existence. Mrs. Peters was rocking on the front stoop with a pan of peas on her lap, and she nodded as Scattergood walked up the path.

"Jest happened to see ye there," said the old man, "and stopped to pass the time of day."

"Set. Can't I git ye a glass of milk or suthin'?"

"Thank ye, but it hain't long since I et," he answered. "Git a clear view of Buckham's house from here, don't ye?"

"Not," said Mrs. Peters, "that there's much to see."

"Set on the stoop evenin's, I calc'late. Sightly spot."

"Nice nights Ovid and me set here till we go to bed."

"Don't blame ye. So Buckham don't do much neighborin'."

"Keeps to himself," said Mrs. Peters.

"Don't see him much myself," said Scattergood. "Lemme see—last time I set eyes on him was on Tuesday night. Daown to the movie show around half-past nine."

"Tuesday. Don't see how ye could. All his help was gone that night, so the' wa'n't nobuddy but him to home. And his light was a goin' in his bedroom till nigh ten o'clock. Ovid 'n' me seen it turn out just afore we went to bed, and remarked he was goin' to sleep earlier 'n usual."

"You saw him turn out his light around ten?"

"We done so," said Mrs. Peters firmly.

Scattergood looked across at the house.

"Which winder's hisn'?"

"South corner."

"Did the light jest go out, or did ye notice him git up and turn it out?"

"Kind of cur'ous, hain't ye? Jest see it go out. Shade was drawed daown."

"G'-by," said Scattergood abruptly.

Mrs. Peters followed him with keen eyes. "Now, what in tunket is he a-prowlin' after?" she asked herself.

As Scattergood walked toward his buggy he saw Buckham's tall form walk across the road with fly

rod and basket, on his way to the brook. Scattergood hesitated and, after puttering around the mare for a few moments, strolled through Buckham's gate and back to the garage. Perkins was washing the big car. The station wagon stood outside, and a small maroon coupé occupied a space over at the left.

"Buckham hain't home?" asked Scattergood.

"You just missed him."

"Um. . . Don't use this here leetle car much?"

"Very seldom. Occasionally the boss drives it."

Scattergood looked about him, noticing details, without any set purpose. Under the bench his eye caught sight of a small wooden handle and he bent to pick it up. It was the handle of an ice pick with the steel broken off short. The cook's ice pick. It interested him. What would anyone want of an ice pick in a garage?

"Little car in good shape?" he asked.

"Tires aren't so good," said the chauffeur. "One of 'em was flat when I went away Tuesday mornin'." He frowned. "And the lift over the rumble seat sticks. You have to stick something in the crack and jiggle with the catch."

"Dew tell," said Scattergood, and stared at the ice pick. One could use that implement for just such a purpose. It fixed his attention on the car. "What's anybody want to git it

open fur? Nobuddy ever rides in it."

"Tools are in there," said the chauffeur. "I guess somebody had to get in to change that tire."

"Oh, somebuddy changed a tire?"

"The flat was changed when I got home. Boss must have used the little bus."

That was something to look into. Who had seen Buckham out in the little car on Tuesday or Wednesday? Certainly not Tuesday night, or Mrs. Peters would have mentioned hearing the car drive out of the yard. And, if Buckham had driven it to New York, he would have had to start by six. But Buckham had been there to turn off his light at ten.

The garage stood at the edge of a dip in the land, which fell away into the woods and down which ran a lane that traversed the farm and came out on the Bridge road half a mile away. Scattergood nodded to the chauffeur and ambled down this little-used way. He stopped now and then, whistling between his teeth, and then turned back to the Buckham house. He crossed the road again, leaving the mare to stand patiently, and kept on toward the brook. He stood at the top of the eminence, looking downward, and saw, some distance away, a man's figure moving among the young spruces. Scattergood started downward. Presently he stepped off the path and pro-

ceeded with caution until the ripple of water over its bed of stones came to his ear, and there he stood very still until a figure flitted past from one clump of young trees to another. It was not Buckham.

"Ranse!" said Scattergood in a voice little above a whisper.

The boy halted, crouched, turned a startled face toward the old man, who motioned him to approach. Young Asbury walked toward him guardedly and halted.

"Name of Baines—Scattergood Baines. Your pa'n' me was friends," said Scattergood. "Your sister's to my house this very minnit. What ye calc'late to do here a-lurkin' in the spruces?"

"I'm going," said the boy, "to twist his neck till he tells the truth."

"Um. . . . Dunno's that's the best way—even if he's got some truth to tell. If ye could solve all the problems of this here life by hittin' somebuddy on the jaw, it 'ud be perty simple. But ye can't contrive to do it. Let's you 'n' me talk."

"My father," said Ranse, "was always telling us about Scattergood Baines. I'll talk to you, sir. But that doesn't mean I promise to lay off Buckham."

"So fur, so good. We better ske-daddle a piece out of earshot. Um. . . . Now, if ye done this here murder, nothin'll save ye. If ye didn't, what I got in mind won't do ye no harm. But ye won't like it."

"Do you think I did it, sir?"

"It looks so all-fired certain ye did," said Scattergood, "that it makes a body feel some feller took pains to make it look that way. A donkey don't git to look like a zebry unless somebuddy paints stripes onto it. Looks to me like you'd been worked on with a paint brush. Huh! What makes ye think Buckham done it?"

"To keep out of jail," said the boy. "Someone has been robbing the estate. It was either Grandfather or Buckham or myself.—Buckham's the lawyer in charge of the estate.—Grandfather knew *he* didn't do it. He called me in and told me it was Buckham or myself. Queer old gentleman, Grandfather—but pretty swell when you knew him. When he told me that, he stopped and smiled at me, and said, 'So, of course, it's Buckham.' He didn't even bother to ask me or to suspect me. He knew. He went on collecting evidence and he had the file of it in his room that night. It was gone."

"That could be made to look bad fur you, too," said Scattergood.

"Who would ever suspect anyone but me when the facts came out? A jury would believe I killed Grandfather to save my skin."

"Buckham know you was told this?"

"Grandfather cautioned me not to tell a soul."

"I calc'late I got to use you fur an angleworm to ketch trout. Kin ye manage to put your dependence on

me, and kin ye manage to mebbly spend a night in jail 'thout ondue misery?"

The boy regarded Scattergood with level eyes and nodded. "Whatever you say, sir," he said.

"What," said Scattergood, "would be more natural than fur you to run off like ye done and come to git the help of the lawyer your family allus trusted?"

"I see," said the boy, and frowned.

"I'll do the talkin'," said Scattergood. "When ye git's old as I be you've had lots of practice at it. About all an old feller kin do is wag his jaw, so he gits to be good at it."

They went down to the brook, and Scattergood called Buckham's name loudly. The lawyer answered the hail, and presently they met in a little clearing. The man jerked suddenly as he saw Ransom Asbury, and then advanced with grim face.

"Got a visitor fur ye," said Scattergood. "Looks like he's in a peck of trouble, so he lit out and come a-runnin' to see the fambly lawyer. Looked to him like the' wa'n't no other place to go. So hadn't ye better leave off fishin' and come back to the house to see what kin be done?"

"I was coming to town tonight, Ransom," said Buckham. "I hope you can tell me something that will put a different face on this terrible thing."

"He needs a good lawyer to advise him," said Scattergood.

Silently they made their way to the house, and Buckham was leading the way into the living-room when Scattergood intervened. "Hain't the' no room upstairs?" he asked. "Cain't tell who'll come traipsin' in here."

"We can go up to my room," said Buckham grimly.

"Good idee," said Scattergood.

They climbed the stairs and presently were seated in the bedroom, where Buckham commenced to question Ransom as if the boy were on the witness stand. Scattergood remained silent, but his eyes scrutinized the room with a meticulous care. He had wanted to see the interior of this room, for, to him, it was the key log of the jam. Ruthlessly the lawyer bored into the boy, made him repeat every damning detail of the Tuesday night of the murder, and if his sympathies were with the client thus unexpectedly come to him, it was not easy to perceive.

"My advice to this boy," he said "is to give himself up."

"Calc'lated ye would advise that," said Scattergood.

"You agree with me?"

"To be sure. But I dunno's I'd go so fur as to advise a plea of guilty. Mebbe a good lawyer kin git him off."

"It is a possibility," said Buckham.

Scattergood cleared his throat and puffed out his cheeks. "When you're a-studyin' a set of facts," he

said, "and only two things kin possibly be true, and ye know one of 'em hain't true, then the other one must be." He paused. "Even if it hain't possible."

"I don't follow you, Mr. Baines."

"Some does," said Scattergood, "and some doesn't. If folks understood everythin' a body said it 'ud kind of kill off talk. It's askin' questions back 'n' forth that makes pleasant evenin's. Wa-al, sonny, we heard Mr. Buckham's advice. Calc'late ye better foller it. We'll be a-drivin' down to see the sheriff."

They went downstairs. Ransom Asbury eyed Scattergood askance, but received no nod or smile of reassurance.

"I'll drive the boy down in the buggy," said Scattergood. "You foler along in your car."

The boy climbed glumly into the buggy and Scattergood clucked to the mare. He grunted a couple of times and looked back over his shoulder. "It's allus easier to find suthin' if ye got an idee what kind of a object you're a-lookin' fur," he said. "Um. . . Seems as though ya hain't pleased with how events is movin'. Shu'dn't be s'prised if ye took a likin' to Sheriff Fox. Real hospitable feller."

The boy crouched hopelessly beside Scattergood, but made no rejoinder. They drew up in front of the post office, under which was the jail, and over which the sheriff maintained his office. Buckham drew up at the sidewalk, and the

three mounted the stairs. Scattergood pushed open the door at the top.

"Afternoon, Sheriff. How be ye?" he said. "Um. . . Got a boarder fur ye. Charge of murder."

"Murderin' who?" asked Mr. Fox.

"Feller in New York by the name of Asbury. Glad to see ye got a hefty deppity handy. Hey, Pазzy, go stand in front of the door. Suthin' might happen."

"When ye git around to it," said the sheriff patiently, "ye might git down to brass tacks."

"I'm amblin' along that way, Sheriff. Don't go a-pushin' and a-shovin' me. This here's a intricate business, seems as though. Got alibis into it and skulduggery and sich-like. Now, nobuddy that's got a clean conscience goes to a heap of trouble to manufacture him an alibi."

"You're tellin' it," said the sheriff.

"Wa-al, this here murder was done in a room where the doors and winders was locked on the inside. Only way in was through this here boy's room, and he was awake all night and nobuddy come through. So, bein' as how nobuddy could git in but him, and bein' as he had a motive, it looks like ye got a murderer all fixed up."

The sheriff eyed Ransom and nodded.

"Now, ye got to face a couple of alternatives: Either this here boy killed his grandpa, or he didn't.

And, if he didn't, then somebuddy must a' got into a room that was locked and then got out ag'in, leavin' it locked like he found it. Which hain't possible."

"Don't seem so," said the sheriff.

"So we'll lay down that there p'int fur a minnit," said Scattergood, "and kind of talk about alibis. Now, a feller that is in Coldriver at ten o'clock at night can't do no murder in New York about midnight."

Buckham turned suddenly and glared at Scattergood.

"No," said the old hardware merchant. "He'd have to leave fur New York along six o'clock to git there. Which he could 'a' done—but for bein' in his house four hours after that and goin' to bed and puttin' out his light. So that kind of eliminates the feller I'm talkin' about.

"Even if this feller's cook lost an ice pick, and it was found busted in the garage where the feller used it to pry open the back seat of a car to git at the tools to change a tire. That wouldn't make no difference at all."

"It wouldn't make none," said the sheriff.

"Or if he pushed the car out of the garage by hand and got in and let her coast down the lane so as nobuddy could hear his engine start nor see him a-goin'. And even if the lane runs into the Bridge road."

"Don't see what that's got to do with it. Not so long's the feller was

to home at ten o'clock," said the sheriff.

"Neighbors seen his light on all the evenin'," said Scattergood, "and seen it go off at ten. And lights don't go off like that 'thout somebuddy turnin' 'em."

"They don't," said the sheriff.

"But," said Scattergood, "the feller that was erectin' this here alibi we're discussing plumb forgot a piece of string."

"Eh?"

"About so long," said Scattergood, measuring on his finger. "It was a-danglin' to the wall bracket that holds the electric light. He clean forgot it. Wa-al, there had to be a string or suthin', or else this here alibi was as good as gold. But the string's there, Sheriff, and it's charred on the end, like it got burned through. Which is how the light come to git itself turned out at ten."

"Don't jest foller ye, Scattergood."

"Buckham follers," Scattergood said. "He tied him a weight to the chain that pulls off the light, and then he looped it to the bracket so's it wouldn't drop. And he rigs him a candle so as it'll burn about four hours before it gits to this here string and burns it through. And then the weight up and drops and off goes the light nice as anythin'."

"You're a maniac," said Buckham savagely.

"Mebby so. But, fur all that, Sheriff, I turn this here feller over to ye

charged with the murder of Ol' Man Asbury, and ye better notify the New York police."

"Kind of slender evidence," said the sheriff.

"You hang onto him jest the same, and then you send a telegraph to the New York police. What's the name of the servant that fetched up your grandpa's breakfast and found him dead?" he asked of Ransom.

"Jadkin—William Jadkin."

"Yeah. Wa-al, Sheriff, you telegraph New York to go 'n' arrest this here William Jadkin as an accessory, on account of him lettin' Buckham into the house, but mostly on account of him takin' in that breakfast and lockin' the old man's door on the inside so as it would show that way when the police come."

"Ye mean the door was unlocked, and this feller locked it on the inside when he went in there? How d'ye know?"

"If," said Scattergood, "the's only one thing that possible, why, that thing has got to be it. Nobuddy kin git into a locked room 'thout leavin' marks. But somebuddy did git in. And the door was found locked after he went out. Nobuddy went into that room but this here Jadkin. So, follerin' and in consequence of that there reasonin', Jadkin done it and is an accessory."

"Baines," said Buckham, "you're crazy. I'll make you suffer for this. I promise you."

"You'll set in one of the sheriff's cells till we git to hear from New York," said Scattergood. "I'll leave him to you, Sheriff. This here boy needs some of Mandy's cookin' to bolster him up."

It was characteristic of the old man that he did not linger after his job was done. He drove Ransom out to his house, and once more Mandy's pantry and ice box yielded up their treasures to a boy who, even yet, could not realize what had happened nor how it had come to pass.

"But, Mr. Baines," he said, "there isn't any *proof*."

"If Mr. Baines says there is," said his sister, "then there is."

It was perhaps three hours later that Sheriff Fox called on the telephone.

"Message from New York," he said. "This feller Jadkin is a crook, with his picture in the gallery. Buckham had a holt over him. He busted down and confessed the whole business, lock, stock, and barrel—and a couple of detectives is leavin' New York to come up after Buckham. I'm arrangin' fur extradition now."

"There ye be," said Scattergood. "Um. . . . All comes of an ice pick and a hunk of string no longer'n your finger."

"I think," said Jennifer Asbury, "I think it was the most wonderful thing anybody ever did, and I'll never forget it."

"Twa'n't," said Scattergood. "Jest noticin'—that's all. And bein' willin' to recognize that if things hain't one way, they got to be t'other. Folks gits overwhelmed by what their eyes and their ears tell 'em. What ye see and hear hain't no good to speak of till ye work it through the filter, and that's what your brains is fur."

"All the same, it was wonderful," said Jennifer.

"So's filters," said Scattergood, "if folks uses 'em. Ye can't keep microbes out of your drinkin' water if ye keep the filter in a box of nails in the barn. Ye got to hitch it to the

faucet and let the water run through."

"I still think it was wonderful," said Jennifer.

"Have it your own way," said Scattergood. "I don't never expect to git so aged that a mite of flatterin' won't set perty sweet onto my stummick."

"You won't git none from me, Scattergood Baines," said Mandy tartly.

"So long," said Scattergood, "as your cookin' holds up its quality I kin git along 'thout your praise. I druther have my stummick fed than my vanity."





## Vincent Starrett

### The Tragedy of Papa Ponsard

*Vincent Starrett is the first writer in the mystery field to have been awarded the most coveted of all MWA "Edgars"—the Grand Master Award. Only five other American mystery writers have been honored as Grand Masters—Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, Erle Stanley Gardner, John Dickson Carr, and George Harmon Cox . . . Here is one of Vincent Starrett's most charming stories—possibly his most charming; it will warm the vitals (and perhaps excite the cupidity) of every book lover who has a special corner in his heart for mysteries . . .*

WITHOUT HIS BOOKS PAPA Ponsard would have been lost indeed. But he no longer read them. Instead he catalogued them, every day, in his little shop in the Rue St. Jacques, behind the Pantheon and not too far from Notre Dame. It was a sorrowful and delightful task. For what is more delightful than cataloguing one's beloved books, and what is more sorrowful than writing after them a price? However, when one is a bookseller these things must be.

Three steps led downward to the bookshop of Papa Ponsard. Then a door opened with a tinkle of bells, and beyond the door was the shop, a bit dim and dusty even at the hour of noon. For rooms, like brains, are dusty things when one is old and eyes are dim with years, and there is perhaps a contagion about it all that even the doctors do not understand. Across the

shop three steps led upward to the darker mysteries of chambers beyond.

Papa Ponsard, seated on a high stool behind his high old-fashioned desk, where the light was best, could look through his window and watch the feet of those who passed along the sidewalk. This also he did daily, often for a long time, his quill pen poised above a page in the old ledger in which the cataloguing was going forward.

At such times his mild blue eyes were anxious behind their little panes of glass. There was a pair of feet he knew and feared to see. At such times, too, his granddaughter, standing on the highest of the three steps at the rear of the shop, would chide him for his negligence, her own eyes anxious.

"How comes the catalogue along, Grandfather?" she would ask. And then as like as not she

would add, "*Fiel!* You are looking again for Monsieur Gebhart. He will not come today. Depend upon it, his threat was all the merest stuff and nonsense. He would not dare."

When she had said this, or something very like it, Papa Ponsard would take his eyes away from the feet that passed along the sidewalk and bend his head again above the ledger. He would dip his quill into his inkhorn and write:

*Gaboriau (E.). Le Petit Vieux des Batignolles.*

*Paris: E. Dentu, 1876. Somewhat worn and shabby, but a sound copy of this scarce little book by our first great master of the detective story. Rebound. 30 fr.*

Or perhaps he would write this:

*Leblanc (M.). Arsène Lupin, Gentleman-Cambrioleur.*

*Paris: P. Lafitte, 1907. Vaguely soiled, but in the original wrappers so often missing. The earliest book about this Prince of Thieves, now becoming quite rare. 60 fr.*

And sometimes he would add a little star and an additional line: "*A genuine bargain.*" But indeed they were all bargains, and each price would tear the old bookseller's heartstrings . . .

Yes, without his granddaughter Papa Ponsard would have been lost indeed. It was she who, in the darker chambers behind the shop, prepared his cheese soup and called

him to it when the clocks of the city were striking the hour for that delicious repast. It was she who kept his mind away from the feet of Monsieur Gebhart. A pretty girl, and sweet as a princess in a fairy tale.

It had been a number of years since Papa Ponsard had issued a catalogue of his books. The difficulty was the printer: he insisted upon being paid. And of the many feet that passed along the sidewalk before the door of Papa Ponsard's shop, there were so few that turned down the little flight of steps and heard (if a pair of feet may be said to hear) the tinkle of the bells above the door, that printers' bills had come to be a memory of the past. Almost a happy memory, if bills *can* be a happy memory.

It was a situation not without its discouragement, as Papa Ponsard was obliged to admit; yet one that might after all be corrigible. If, for instance, there were no Monsieur Gebharts to harass and annoy one.

Meanwhile, the cataloguing must go forward. Who could say at what moment an American, loitering in the neighborhood, might drop in and purchase for 300 francs his wonderful copy of Voltaire's *Zadig*, so long the pride of Papa Ponsard's heart.

Three hundred francs! Curiously, it was the very sum he owed Monsieur Gebhart. A remarkable coincidence, as often he had mentioned to his granddaughter. Yet

when the day came, would not his heart fail him? To see his superb *Zadig* leave the window in which for so long it had reposed! To be bereft of *Zadig*! One of only forty copies on gray paper, and bound for a king's mistress! Already his heart had failed him many times at the mere thought of it. Without his *Zadig*, Papa Ponsard would have been lost indeed.

To be sure, there were other old companions in that wonderful window. Passers-by, if they had been interested, might have read some interesting titles. For Papa Ponsard loved not only his Voltaire and his Gaboriau and his Leblanc, but the whole realm of what is lightly called detective literature.

Papa Ponsard was in his way a scholar; but better still he had been for most of his long life a reader. Now his eyes were tired, but the clandestine celebrity of Monsieur Lecoq and Joseph Rouletabille and more recently, of Inspector Maigret, were part of his tapestry of memory, and the fame of London's Monsieur Sherlock 'Olmès was not unknown to him. With only a little stretch of his neck he could see the titles of some of the books in his window display.

They were a miscellaneous lot designed to catch the popular fancy; but a few "high spots" were there also, for the specialist: an indubitable English first edition of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (London, 1902); an indubitable

French first of *Les 13 Coupables* (Fayard, 1932); an indubitable first in translation of *M. Ashenden, Agent Secret* (1930), in the pleasing format of the Editions de France; and that admirable rarity, the *Histoires Extraordinaires* of the admirable Edgar Poe in the translation of Baudelaire. Could he ever bring himself to sell them if opportunity offered?

Sometimes young Valentin Nadaud ran in from next door and added his encouragement to the situation; but he looked oftener at Papa Ponsard's granddaughter than at the fabulous *Zadig*. This was not surprising, however, for she was very pleasant to look at; and books, after all, are only books when one is a Valentin Nadaud—even such a treasure as *Zadig*. There were but forty copies of Papa Ponsard's *Zadig* in all the world, as Valentin had often heard; but there was only one of Josephine Joly. She was unique.

Papa Ponsard took his eyes away from the hurrying feet in the Rue St. Jacques and observed that his granddaughter was watching him. She stood as usual on the uppermost of the three steps that led into the chambers beyond. As always he felt abashed. He spoke quickly.

"My darling, I was about to catalogue the glorious *Zadig*. I was upon the very point of taking it from the window."

"That is excellent," she smiled, "and you will just have time, for

the cheese soup is almost ready. I was about to warn you."

"It is a magnificent volume," said Papa Ponsard, "and it would grace the catalogue of any bookseller in the city. The price, of course, is ridiculous. It is worth four hundred francs if it is worth a sou."

"Then why not ask that for it? You who love your books so much must not be too modest when you come to sell. It is no compliment surely to the books."

"Ah, if I might keep it for myself! How happy I should be! I know I shall miss it when it is gone, as I should miss you, Josephine, if you were gone."

"Well, well," she laughed, "we are neither of us gone yet, Grandfather. I, at least, shall not leave you for four hundred francs or for four thousand."

"You will leave me whenever that young rogue of a Valentin says the word," said Papa Ponsard sadly.

"I shall never leave you while you need me," said Josephine, "whatever Valentin may say, or anyone else."

"That is my good girl," said Papa Ponsard, "but I should feel easier, my dear, if Monsieur Gebhart had already come and gone and we were safe."

"Safe!" cried his granddaughter. "Safe for another month, Grandfather? That is not safety. But he will not come today. And if he

does, what matter? He will go away again, as he has done before. One cannot give what one does not have. His threats are the merest *pouf!* It is only in books that poor people are thrust into the street because they cannot pay their rent. Come now, in a few moments I shall call you to come in and enjoy your soup."

"In the newspapers too," said Papa Ponsard. "Every day I read about them. It is a dreadful thing. And all my books! My *Zadig* . . ."

"It is worth four hundred francs," said his granddaughter, "and you must not catalogue it for a single franc less. The ideal! That glorious book! Remember, then, in a few moments I shall call you."

This conversation, also, had been repeated many times. In all its lines both were letter perfect.

But on this day Papa Ponsard did indeed reach into his window and remove the glorious *Zadig*. He laid it gently before him on his high desk and turned its leaves with loving fingers. He knew it almost by heart—from its title page to its colophon he could have recited its enchanting pages. Not its contents perhaps, but its pages. Upon page 7, for instance, there was the broken letter that occurred only in copies of the right edition. It had been corrected in the later smaller copies for the trade. And at page 40 there was the errata slip so often missing in otherwise perfect copies

of the original issue. Oh, it was a superb book!

Papa Ponsard dipped his pen into his inkhorn and wrote:

*Voltaire. Zadig, ou, La Destinée. Histoire Orientale.*

*Nancy: Leseure, 1748. Red morocco, with the original wrappers bound in.*

*The rare first edition of this charming little introuvable in a binding especially designed by Padeloup for Madame de Pompadour and incorporating her arms. One of forty copies on gray paper with the errata slip so often missing and the broken type face on page 7. A magnificent copy of this rare and desirable volume.*

His quill hovered for a moment over the page, and then he wrote courageously: "400 fr." In another little note he added almost confidentially: "*I have seen only one other copy of this book in 14 years.*"

For an instant his heart almost failed him. He had done it at last and his immediate impulse was to strike out all he had written. Could he really see it through? For some minutes he was immovable on his stool. Then his hand stole to the drawer of his desk.

He opened the drawer a little way and peered in. Yes, it was still there. Not even Josephine had been told of his incredible luck at the last auction he had attended. How long ago! But the packet of old pa-

pers had justified his negligible speculation.

He read the first few sentences of the manuscript under his hand, presumably a letter addressed to an Italian officer of police:

*It was about the year 1832. One day a young American presented himself at my house with an introduction from his fellow countryman, the famous novelist Fenimore Cooper . . . His name was Edgar Poe. From the outset I realized that I had to deal with a remarkable man. Two or three remarks which he made on my furniture, the things I had about me, the way my articles of everyday use were strewn about the room, and on my moral and intellectual characteristics, impressed me with their accuracy and truth. On the very first day of our acquaintance I freely proffered him my friendship and asked for his . . . At this time I had a little house all to myself in the Rue de l'Ouest. I offered to let Edgar Poe have two rooms for the duration of his stay in Paris . . .*

The bells over the door tinkled musically and Papa Ponsard looked up with a start. A spasm of fear crossed his face. But it was only young Valentin Nadaud, who had run in from next door to look upon that unique item, Josephine Joly.

"Hello, Papa Ponsard," cried Valentin, and then almost reverently he added, for he had seen the book, "*Mon Dieu! You are cataloguing the Zadig!*"

"Good day to you, young man," said Papa Ponsard severely. "And what is it to you, may I ask, if I am cataloguing my *Zadig*?" But he smiled after a moment and continued, "So long as my granddaughter Josephine is not missing from her accustomed place, I imagine you will continue to favor me with your patronage."

"True," said the young man, "true. And how is that charming young woman today? It is all of twenty-four hours since I have seen her."

"I was about to call him to his soup," responded Josephine from the top step, "and I am very well, thank you, very well indeed. You are at liberty to join us if you care to."

"That I am not," said the young man, laughing. "For I have just come from eating my own soup. It was my thought that you would have finished. You are late today, are you not?"

"Just a little. But Grandfather was cataloguing his *Zadig* and I could not interrupt him. We shall be through before long."

"Before long," murmured the old man, climbing down from his perch. "Yes, we shall all be through before long." He peered again for a moment into his open drawer and read:

*Poe had one curious idiosyncrasy: he liked the night better than the day. Indeed, his love of darkness amounted almost to a passion.*

*But the Goddess of Night could not always afford him her shade . . . so he contrived a substitute. As soon as day began to break he hermetically sealed up the windows of his room and lit a number of candles. In the midst of this pale illumination he worked or read, or suffered his thoughts to wander in the insubstantial regions of reverie; or else he fell asleep . . . But as soon as the clock told him the real darkness had come he would come in for me and take me out with him . . .*

Papa Ponsard shuffled across the room and laid a hand on Valentin's shoulder. "And mind you, Valentin, if Monsieur Gebhart comes while I am out of the shop, you are to say to him that I am—that I am—"

"That he is eating his cheese soup and will return in a few minutes," said Josephine from the doorway. "But he will not come today."

"Trust me," said Valentin. "I shall say and do exactly the right thing, whatever that may be. Perhaps it will occur to me to tickle his ribs with this dagger which I see before me." And he picked up a paper knife of curious design and tried the blunt edge with his thumb.

"Kind Heaven!" cried the old man. "Would you ruin us all?"

"Your cheese soup, Grandfather!" said Josephine firmly. "Valentin is only fooling with you."

Which was true, for Valentin, left alone in the shop, cast aside the

stiletto and looked around him for matters of greater interest. He was an impatient young man and he was very much in love. He was really only a boy.

So the *Zadig* was being catalogued at last! How often he had heard it threatened. And what matter, after all, since the catalogue was never to be printed and sent forth? It was merely another indication, another milestone passed, in the tragedy of Papa Ponsard. Just to have reached the point where he was willing to catalogue the book was an adumbration of the end.

Poor Papa Ponsard! Valentin felt genuinely sorry for him. But he felt sorrier for Papa Ponsard's granddaughter and sorrier still for himself.

He approached the desk with some curiosity; but it was not the *Zadig* that engaged his attention nor yet the secret manuscript, for Papa had closed the drawer. He read the last scratchy item in the ledger with interest, perhaps with some sense of its pathos. He read it with a little gesture of impatience. The *Zadig* was worth little more than was being asked for it. Valentin had made private inquiry of the matter himself.

Something impish smiled inside him; he plucked the old man's quill from the inkhorn and poised it above the page. With a swift glance toward the top step, the pedestal of his Josephine, he added another cipher to the widely spaced figures

that stood beside the description of the book, then hastily laid down the pen.

The price of the delightful *Zadig* stood now at 4000 francs.

Then, as the bells tinkled above the door, Valentin wheeled sharply and looked into the eyes of Monsieur Gebhart, who stood within the aperture. He had really come. What an evil-looking thing a landlord was, to be sure!

Valentin nervously recited his lesson, "He is eating his cheese soup and will return in a few minutes."

"I shall wait," said Monsieur Gebhart, not unpleasantly; but a moment later his eyes had narrowed and his smile was cold, for he had recognized this hanger-on. For an instant he had thought the old man had been able to afford a clerk.

"Young man," said Monsieur Gebhart sternly, "I have seen you here before. You are the suitor for his granddaughter's hand. You know his business. Tell me, is he able to pay?"

"I—I— am afraid not," replied Valentin sadly.

"And you? You are not prepared to help him?"

"I am sorry," answered Valentin, "but I have nothing." He drew a long breath and continued, "I am sure, Monsieur Gebhart, that all he requires is a little time."

"He has had already more than a little time," said Monsieur Geb-

hart, "and I have another tenant for the shop. I am sorry for him, of course, and for the girl."

But he did not look particularly sorry, thought Valentin. Suddenly the boy's eyes were on the paper knife. He glanced quickly away. Now was his time—now or never! But he knew at once it would be never. Such things occurred only in books and in the films.

"I am sorry too," said Valentin, and for a fleeting moment his eyes rested again on the stiletto. "And now I think I must run to my own job while it is left to me." He repeated the message, "He is eating his cheese soup and will return in a few minutes."

"I shall wait," said Monsieur Gebhart for the second time.

Then the little bells over the door jingled less happily as Valentin Nadaud hurried back to his place in the shop next door, for he could not bear to wait and see Papa Ponsard and Josephine thrust into the street. He had no doubt that it would happen just that way. He had often seen it in the films, and he had read about it in books.

Monsieur Gebhart, left alone in the shop, wandered idly to the high desk and stood for a moment looking out at the hurrying feet that passed along the sidewalk above. His eyes fell casually on the glorious *Zadig*, paused there for an instant, and looked away again. Monsieur Gebhart was not interested in books. But in the next instant his

glance was on the open ledger, and that was a book with whose uses he was well acquainted.

His eyes widened behind his horn-rimmed lenses. The last line in the ledger had caught his attention: "*I have seen only one other copy of this book in 14 years.*" Immediately above he saw the hieroglyphic that now read "4000 fr."

"The old rascal!" murmured Monsieur Gebhart incredulously.

Then for several minutes he thought furiously and with, as it seemed to him, truly remarkable clarity.

It was obvious, of course, that he was being fooled, that he had been fooled for months on end. This cunning old devil Ponsard, pretending poverty, was actually possessed of books of extraordinary value which, no doubt, he was selling at fabulous prices. 4000 francs! And the debt to him—Anatole Gebhart—his rent—was a beggarly 300.

Or was it possible that Papa Ponsard did not know the full value of his own books? It was a new thought and for a moment it staggered Monsieur Gebhart. He considered its possibilities. A book worth 4000 francs to Papa Ponsard might to another dealer be worth an even larger sum. But even at 4000 one could not lose—not for a book of which the old devil had not seen another copy in fourteen years!

There must be no doubt, mused Monsieur Gebhart, that there were



in the world books of astonishing rarity and value. Vaguely he recalled the headlines of the newspapers after an important sale at the auctioneer's. And once there had been a paragraph about an American . . . and a book . . . What was it the fool had paid for a single volume? Perhaps as much as 10,000 francs!

With an oath Monsieur Gebhart brought his fist down on the desk so that the ink jumped in the horn. Then a slow smile crossed his face and again his brain functioned with its customary shrewdness.

When the door at the top of the steps opened to admit Papa Ponsard, Monsieur Gebhart was seated comfortably in a chair, with crossed knees, in a spot remote from the high desk and the telltale ledger. There was even a kindly smile on his face.

Papa Ponsard, however, was dismayed. "*Mon Dieu!*" he cried. "I knew it! It is Monsieur Gebhart!"

Josephine's face was pale as she came forward. Immediately she began to explain. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting. We thought we heard the bells, Monsieur Gebhart, but we supposed it to be Valentin—Monsieur Nadaud—leaving the shop. And when we heard them again we thought it was Monsieur Nadaud returning."

Monsieur Gebhart was affable and magnanimous. "And no one else ever opens your door and rings

your bells?" he questioned them archly.

His pleasantry shocked them. They stared in horror at this new evidence of his wickedness. It was Josephine who answered. "Alas, no one else, Monsieur!"

"That is a great pity," smiled Monsieur Gebhart. "Come then, since my visit has so upset you, let us get to business—since the sooner that is over the sooner I shall depart. I must suppose, Papa Ponsard, that you are ready to pay the money that you owe me."

But Papa Ponsard had collapsed into a chair. Suddenly he struggled to his feet. He shuffled toward a nail driven into the wall, upon which hung his incredible hat.

"My coat, Josephine!" he panted. "My best coat, darling. There may still be time."

"Mother of God, Papa Ponsard! What is it that you would do?" cried his granddaughter. "Where is it you would go?"

"To Ricardou, my pet, my good friend Ricardou. He alone can save us now. I shall ask a little loan—just enough to get us by. If he has it, I am sure he will give it to me. Only wait a little, Monsieur Gebhart, and I think I can promise you . . ."

But Monsieur Gebhart interrupted with a cry of "Fiddlesticks!" Then he gripped himself and contrived a little smile. "My dear Papa Ponsard," he said suavely, "surely I have heard you speak of your good

friend Ricardou before. Already twice you have been to Ricardou while I waited, and once, unless I am mistaken, you returned with ten francs, which *he* had borrowed from a friend of *his*. No, no, let us put aside all thought of Ricardou. Come now, I am not inclined to be harsh, however gruff I may have seemed when I was here before. The fact is, since we last talked together I have become interested in books—in *all* books, I may say. In a small way I have become the strange thing you call, I believe, a collector.”

Papa Ponsard's mouth opened and closed without sound; he seemed to have lost his voice.

“Why should it surprise you? Only in a small way, of course. Yes, I think I may now call myself a collector, Papa Ponsard, and it is my fondest wish to own one of the fine volumes you have in your shop. I refer, of course, to your lovely *Zadig*.”

“My *Zadig*!”

“The *Zadig*!” cried Josephine, and laid her hand against her breast.

“In the circumstances you must allow me to name my own figure, however,” continued Monsieur Gebhart. “You have much to thank me for, Papa Ponsard. You are lucky that you have had a roof over your head these several months past. Very well, then, you owe me three hundred francs. I wipe out that debt! I hand you this receipt

for it, which I have written here at your desk while you guzzled your cheese soup. There, that is done. But the *Zadig* is mine for three thousand francs.”

“Three thousand francs!” Papa Ponsard screamed the word. “You offer me three thousand francs for my *Zadig*?”

Monsieur Gebhart shrugged. “I shall not go a sou higher,” he said coldly. “You must take it or leave it.”

It was at this point that Josephine Joly, with what is supposed to be a woman's intuition, reached the conclusion that Monsieur Gebhart had gone mad. However, it was a madness that spelled happiness for herself and Papa Ponsard. She spoke quickly.

“We accept your offer, Monsieur Gebhart,” she said. “It is a book he has always valued and naturally he is loath to part with it—but it is yours.”

“Then our business is concluded when I have paid you the money,” said Monsieur Gebhart. “Fortunately, I have the amount with me. You will, of course, give me a bill of sale for the volume?—signed paid in full.”

“Of course,” answered Josephine. “I have often made them out for Papa Ponsard. I will give it to you at once.”

Papa Ponsard, slumped in his chair, continued to stare blindly at the slip of paper in his hand—a re-

ceipt for 300 francs back rental that he had never paid.

When the little bells above the door had jingled happily at the departure of Monsieur Gebhart and the *Zadig* was irrevocably gone, Papa Ponsard tottered to his old desk and peered into its drawer. After a moment he continued to read the manuscript it concealed:

*In these nocturnal rambles I could not help remarking with wonder and admiration (although his rich endowment of ideas should have prepared me for it) the extraordinary faculty of analysis exhibited by Edgar Poe. He seemed to delight in giving it play and neglected no opportunity of indulging himself in that pleasure . . . He would remark with a smile of proud satisfaction that for him man had an open window where his heart was; and as a rule he accompanied that assertion with an immediate demonstration which, having me for its object, could leave no doubt in my mind about Edgar's power of divination . . .*

That was all. What a pity the manuscript was incomplete! At least two pages appeared to be missing. But how fortunate that he had been able to identify the handwriting. That flowing script, that unmistakable manner! The signature

was missing, to be sure, but it was photographed upon his mind as if the dashing syllables *Alexandre Dumas* were under his eyes. This was a treasure that no Monsieur Gebhart, no rich American, would ever take from him.

Papa Ponsard returned to his chair. A little helplessly, Josephine too sat down; the strain on her also had been considerable.

There she still sat when Valentin Nadaud entered hurriedly amid a perfect ecstasy of bells.

"He has gone?" asked the boy anxiously. "You are still here?"

"He is gone," answered Josephine, "and we are still here." And she told him what had happened.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried Valentin, understanding. "But when he comes to sell it?"

"It was his own offer," said Josephine sharply. "What do you mean? What are you thinking, Valentin?"

"I am thinking that now you are rich I must wait a little longer," said Valentin sadly.

EDITORS' POSTSCRIPT: *Try to find those books today! And at Papa Ponsard's original prices! Ah, the snows of yester-year . . .*



# Geoffrey Household

## Taboo

*Geoffrey Household, English novelist and short-story writer, has lived in "the four quarters" of the world—in England, of course, in Rumania, Spain (his "other country"), the United States, South America, the Mediterranean countries, and in the Near East (where, during World War II, he was a British intelligence officer); and everywhere he went he found material for his romantic novels and short stories about international intrigue. His most popular novel was ROGUE MALE (still in print), the story of an audacious crime—the hunting down of a dictator—which became the highly successful motion picture titled "Man Hunt." But the novelet we now give you by Mr. Household is not "romantic" in the usual sense; it is a story of superb suspense which, once read, you will never quite forget—it will never escape the tentacles of your mind . . .*

### Detectives: SHIRAVIEFF and VAUGHAN

I HAD THIS STORY FROM LEWIS BANNING, the American; but as I also know Shiravieff pretty well and have heard some parts of it from him since, I think I can honestly reconstruct his own words.

Shiravieff had asked Banning to meet Colonel Romero, and after lunch took them, as his habit is, into his consulting room; his study, I should call it, for there are no instruments or white enamel to make a man unpleasantly conscious of the workings of his own body, nor has Shiravieff, among the obscure groups of letters that he is entitled to write after his name, any one which implies a medical degree.

It is a long restful room, its harmony only broken by sporting trophies. The muzzle of an enormous wolf grins over the mantelpiece, and there are fine heads of ibex and aurochs on the opposite wall. No doubt Shiravieff put them there deliberately. His patients from the counties came in expecting a quack doctor but at once gained confidence when they saw he had killed wild animals in a gentlemanly manner.

The trophies suit him. With his peaked beard and broad smile, he looks more the explorer than the psychologist. His unvarying calm is not the priestlike quality of the

doctor; it is the disillusionment of the traveler and exile, of one who has studied the best and the worst in human nature and discovered that there is no definable difference between them.

Romero took a dislike to the room. He was very sensitive to atmosphere, though he would have denied it indignantly.

"A lot of silly women," he grumbled obscurely, "pouring out emotions."

They had, of course, poured out plenty of emotions from the same chair that he was occupying; but, since Shiravieff made his reputation on cases of shell shock, there must have been a lot of silly men too. Romero naturally would not mention that. He preferred to think that hysteria was confined to the opposite sex. Being a Latin in love with England, he worshiped and cultivated our detachment.

"I assure you that emotions are quite harmless once they are out of the system," answered Shiravieff, smiling. "It's when they stay inside that they give trouble."

"*Cál* I like people who keep their emotions inside," said Romero. "It is why I live in London. The English are not cold—it is nonsense to say they are cold—but they are well-bred. They never show a sign of what hurts them most. I like that."

Shiravieff tapped his long forefinger on the table in a fast nervous rhythm.

"And what if they *must* display

emotion?" he asked irritably. "Shock them—shock them, you understand, so that they must! They can't do it, and they are hurt for life."

They had never before seen him impatient. Nobody had. It was an unimaginable activity, as if your family doctor were to come and visit you without his trousers. Romero had evidently stirred up the depths.

"I've shocked them, and they displayed plenty of emotion," remarked Banning.

"Oh, I do not mean their little conventions," said Shiravieff slowly and severely. "Shock them with some horrid fact that they can't blink away, something that would outrage the souls of any of us. Do you remember de Maupassant's story of the man whose daughter was buried alive—how she returned from the grave and how all his life he kept the twitching gesture with which he tried to push her away? Well, if that man had shrieked or thrown a fit or wept all night he mightn't have suffered from the twitch."

"Courage would have saved him," announced the Colonel superbly.

"No!" shouted Shiravieff. "We're all cowards, and the healthiest thing we can do is to express fear when we feel it."

"The fear of death—" began Romero.

"I am not talking about the fear

of death. It is not that. It is our horror of breaking a taboo that causes shock. Listen to me. Do either of you remember the Zweiberger case in 1926?"

"The name's familiar," said Banning. "But I can't just recall . . . was it a haunted village?"

"I congratulate you on your healthy mind," said Shiravieff ironically. "You can forget what you don't want to remember."

He offered them cigars and lit one himself. Since he hardly ever smoked, it calmed him immediately. His gray eyes twinkled as if to assure them that he shared their surprise at his irritation. Banning had never before realized, so he said, that the anti-smoke societies were right, that tobacco was a drug.

"I was at Zweiberger that summer. I chose it because I wanted to be alone. I can only rest when I am alone," began Shiravieff abruptly. "The eastern Carpathians were remote ten years ago—cut off from the tourists by too many frontiers. The Hungarian magnates who used to shoot the forests before the war had vanished, and their estates were sparsely settled. I didn't expect any civilized company.

"I was disappointed to find that a married couple had rented the old shooting box. They were obviously interesting, but I made no advances to them beyond passing the time of day whenever we met on the village street.

"He was English and she Ameri-

can—one of those delightful women who are wholly and typically American. No other country can fuse enough races to produce them. Her blood, I should guess, was mostly Slav. They thought me a surly fellow, but respected my evident desire for privacy—until the time when all of us in Zweiberger wanted listeners. Then the Vaughans asked me to dinner.

"We talked nothing but commonplaces during the meal, which was excellent, venison and wild strawberries. We took our coffee on the lawn in front of the house and sat for a moment in silence—the mountain silence—staring out across the valley. The pine forest, rising tier upon tier, was very black in the late twilight. White, isolated rocks were scattered through it. They looked as if they might move on at any minute—like the ghosts of great beasts pasturing upon the treetops. Then a dog howled on the alp above us. We all began talking at once. About the mystery, of course.

"Two men had been missing in that forest for nearly a week. The first of them belonged to a little town about ten miles down the valley; he was returning after nightfall from a short climb in the mountains. He might have vanished into a snowdrift or ravine, for the paths were none too safe. There were no climbing clubs in that district to keep them up. But it seemed to be some less common accident that had overtaken him. He was out of

the high peaks. A shepherd camping on one of the lower alps had exchanged a good night with him, and watched him disappear among the trees on his way downwards. That was the last that had been seen or heard of him.

"The other was one of the search party that had gone out on the following day. The man had been posted as a stop, while the rest beat the woods towards him. It was the last drive, and already dark. When the line came up to his stand he was not there.

"Everybody suspected wolves. Since 1914 there had been no shooting over the game preserves, and animal life of all sorts was plentiful. But the wolves were not in pack, and the search parties did not find a trace of blood. There were no tracks to help. There was no sign of a struggle.

"Vaughan suggested that we were making a mystery out of nothing—probably the two men had become tired of domestic routine and taken the opportunity to disappear. By now, he expected, they were on their way to the Argentine.

"His cool dismissal of tragedy was inhuman. He sat there, tall, distant, and casually strong. His face was stamped ready-made out of that pleasant upperclass mould. Only his firm mouth and thin sensitive nostrils showed that he had any personality of his own. Kyra Vaughan looked at him scornfully.

"Is that what you really think?" she asked.

"Why not?" he answered. "If those men had been killed it must have been by something prowling about and waiting for its chance. And there isn't such a thing."

"If you want to believe the men aren't dead, believe it!" Kyra said.

"Vaughan's theory that the men had disappeared of their own free will was, of course, absurd; but his wife's sudden coldness to him seemed to me to be needlessly impatient. I understood when I knew them better. Vaughan—your reserved Englishman, Romero!—was covering up his thoughts and fears, and chose, quite unconsciously, to appear stupid rather than to show his anxiety. She recognized the insincerity without understanding its cause, and it made her angry.

"They were a queer pair, those two; intelligent, cultured, and so interested in themselves and each other that they needed more than one life to satisfy their curiosity. She was a highly strung creature, with swift brown eyes and a slender, eager body that seemed to grow like a flower from the ground under her feet. And natural! I don't mean she couldn't act. She could—but when she did, it was deliberate. She was defenseless before others' suffering and joy, and she didn't try to hide it.

"Lord! She used to live through enough emotions in one day to last her husband for a year!

"Not that he was unemotional. Those two were very much alike, though you'd never have guessed it. But he was shy of tears and laughter, and he had armed his whole soul against them. To a casual observer he seemed the calmer of the two, but at bottom he was an extremist. He might have been a poet, a Saint Francis, a revolutionary. But was he? No! He was an Englishman.

"He knew he was in danger of being swayed by emotional ideas, of giving his life to them. And so? And so he balanced every idea with another, and secured peace for himself between the scales. She, of course, would always jump into one scale or the other. And he loved her for it. But his noncommittal attitudes got on her nerves."

"She could do no wrong in your eyes," said Romero indignantly. His sympathies had been aroused on behalf of the unknown Englishman. He admired him.

"I adored her," said Shiravieff frankly. "Everybody did. She made one live more intensely. Don't think I undervalued him, however. I couldn't help seeing how his wheels went round, but I liked him thoroughly. He was a man you could trust, and good company as well. A man of action. What he did had little relation to the opinions he expressed.

"Well, after that dinner with the Vaughans I had no more desire for a lonely holiday; so I did the next

best thing, and took an active interest in everything that was going on. I heard all the gossip, for I was staying in the general clearinghouse, the village inn. In the evenings I often joined the district magistrate as he sat in the garden with a stein of beer in front of him and looked over the notes of the depositions which he had taken that day.

"He was a very solid functionary—a good type of man for a case like that. A more imaginative person would have formed theories, found evidence to fit them, and only added to the mystery. He did not want to discuss the case. No, he had no fear of an indiscretion. It was simply that he had nothing to say, and was clear-headed enough to realize it.

"He admitted that he knew no more than the villagers whose depositions filled his portfolio. But he was ready to talk on any other subject—especially politics—and our long conversations gave me a reputation for profound wisdom among the villagers. Almost I had the standing of a public official.

"So, when a third man disappeared, this time from Zweibergen itself, the mayor and the village constable came to me for advice. It was the local grocer who was missing. He had climbed up through the forest in the hope of bagging a blackcock at dusk. In the morning the shop did not open. Only then was it known that he had never returned. A solitary shot had been



heard about 10:30 P.M., when the grocer was presumably trudging homewards.

"All I could do, pending the arrival of the magistrate, was to send out search parties. We quartered the forest, and examined every path. Vaughan and I, with one of the peasants, went up to my favorite place for blackcock. It was there, I thought, that the grocer would have gone.

"Then we inspected every foot of the route which he must have taken back to the village. Vaughan knew something about tracking. He was one of those surprising Englishmen whom you may know for years without realizing that once there were men in Africa or Burma or Borneo who knew him still better, and drove game for him, and acknowledged him as someone juster than their gods, but no more comprehensible.

"We had covered some four miles when he surprised me by suddenly showing interest in the undergrowth. Up to then I had been fool enough to think that he was doing precisely nothing.

"'Someone has turned aside from the path here,' he said. 'He was in a hurry. I wonder why.'

"A few yards from the path there was a white rock about thirty feet high. It was steep, but projecting ledges gave an easy way up. A hot spring at the foot of it bubbled out of a cavity hardly bigger than a fox's earth.

"When Vaughan showed me the signs, I could see that the scrub which grew between the rocks and the path had been roughly pushed aside. But I pointed out that no one was likely to dash off the path through that thicket.

"'When you know you're being followed, you like to have a clear space around you,' Vaughan answered. 'It would be comforting to be on top of that rock with a gun in your hands—if you got there in time. Let's go up.'

"The top was bare stone, with climbs of creeper and ivy growing from the crannies. Set back some three yards from the edge was a little tree, growing in a pocket of soil. One side of its base was shattered into slivers. It had received a full charge of shot at close quarters. The peasant crossed himself.

"He murmured, 'They say there's always a tree between you and it.'

"I asked him what 'it' was. He didn't answer immediately, but played with his stick casually, and as if ashamed, until the naked steel point was in his hand.

"Then he muttered, 'The werewolf.'

"Vaughan laughed and pointed to the shot marks six inches from the ground.

"'The werewolf must be a baby one, if it's only as tall as that,' he said. 'No, the man's gun went off as he fell. Perhaps he was followed too close as he scrambled up. About

there is where his body would have fallen.'

"He knelt down to examine the ground.

"'What's that?' he asked me. 'If it's blood, it has something else with it.'

"There was only a tiny spot on the bare rock. I looked at it. It was undoubtedly brain tissue. I was surprised that there was no more of it. It must, I suppose, have come from a deep wound in the skull. Might have been made by an arrow, or a bird's beak, or perhaps a tooth.

"Vaughan slid down the rock and prodded his stick into the sulphurous mud of the stream bed. Then he hunted about in the bushes like a dog.

"'There was no body dragged away in that direction,' he said.

"We examined the farther side of the rock. It fell sheer, and seemed an impossible climb for man or beast. The edge was matted with growing things. I was ready to believe that Vaughan's eyes could tell if anything had passed that way.

"'Not a sign!' he said. 'Where the devil has his body gone to?'

"The three of us sat on the edge of the rock in silence. The spring bubbled and wept beneath, and the pines murmured above us. There was no need of a little particle of human substance, recognizable only to a physiologist's eye, to tell us that we were on the scene of a kill.

"Imagination? Imagination is so

often only a forgotten instinct. The man who ran up that rock wondered in his panic why he gave way to his imagination.

"We found the magistrate in the village when we returned and reported our find to him.

"'Interesting! But what does it tell us?'" he said.

"I pointed out that at least we knew the man was dead or dying.

"'There's no certain proof. Show me his body. Show me any motive for killing him.'

"Vaughan insisted that it was the work of an animal. The magistrate disagreed. If it were wolf, he said, we might have some difficulty in collecting the body, but none in finding it. And as for bear—well, they were so harmless that the idea was ridiculous.

"Nobody believed in any material beast, for the whole countryside had been beaten. But tales were told in the village—the old tales. I should never have dreamed that those peasants accepted so many horrors as fact if I hadn't heard those tales in the village inn.

"The odd thing is that I couldn't say then, and I can't say now, that they were altogether wrong. You should have seen the look in those men's eyes as old Weiss, the game warden, told how time after time his grandfather had fired point-blank at a gray wolf that he met in the woods at twilight. He had never killed it until he loaded his gun with silver. Then the wolf van-

ished after the shot, but Heinrich the cobbler was found dying in his house with a beaten silver dollar in his belly.

"Josef Weiss, his son, who did most of the work on the preserves and was seldom seen in the village unless he came down to sell a joint or two of venison, was indignant with his father. He was a heavily built, sullen fellow, who had read a little. There's nobody so intolerant of superstition as your half-educated man.

"Vaughan, of course, agreed with him—but then capped the villagers' stories with such ghastly tales from native folklore and medieval literature that I couldn't help seeing he had been brooding on the subject.

"The peasants took him seriously. They came and went in pairs. No one would step out into the night without a companion. Only the shepherd was unaffected. He didn't disbelieve, but he was a mystic. He was used to passing to and fro under the trees at night.

"'You've got to be a part of those things, sir,' he said to me, 'then you'll not be afraid of them. I don't say a man can turn himself into a wolf—the Blessed Virgin protect us!—but I know why he'd want to.'

"That was most interesting.

"'I think I know too,' I answered. 'But what does it feel like?'

"'It feels as if the woods had got under your skin, and you want to walk wild and crouch at the knees.'

"'He's perfectly right,' said Vaughan convincingly.

"That was the last straw for those peasants. They drove away from Vaughan, and two of them spat into the fire to avert his evil eye. He seemed to them much too familiar with the black arts.

"'How do you explain it?' asked Vaughan, turning to me.

"I told him it might have a dozen different causes, just as fear of the dark has. And physical hunger might also have something to do with it.

"I think our modern psychology is inclined to give too much importance to sex. We forget that man is, or was, a fleet-footed hunting animal equipped with all the necessary instincts.

"As soon as I mentioned hunger, there was a chorus of assent—though they really didn't know what I or the shepherd or Vaughan was talking about. Most of those men had experienced extreme hunger. The innkeeper was reminded of a temporary famine during the war. The shepherd told us how he had once spent a week stuck on the face of a cliff before he was found.

"Josef Weiss, eager to get away from the supernatural, told his experiences as a prisoner of war in Russia. With his companions he had been forgotten behind the blank walls of a fortress while their guards engaged in revolution. Those poor devils had been re-

duced to very desperate straits indeed.

"For a whole week Vaughan and I were out with the search parties day and night. Meanwhile Kyra wore herself out trying to comfort the womenfolk. They couldn't help loving her—yet half suspected that she herself was at the bottom of the mystery. I don't blame them. They couldn't be expected to understand her intense spirituality.

"To them she was like a creature from another planet, fascinating and terrifying. Without claiming any supernatural powers for her, I've no doubt that Kyra could have told the past, present, and future of any of those villagers much more accurately than the traveling gypsies.

"On our first day of rest I spent the afternoon with the Vaughans. He and I were refreshed by twelve hours' sleep, and certain that we could hit on some new solution to the mystery that might be the right one. Kyra joined in the discussion. We went over the old theories again and again, but could make no progress.

"'We shall be forced to believe the tales they tell in the village,' I said at last.

"'Why don't you?' asked Kyra Vaughan.

"We both protested. Did she believe them, we asked.

"'I'm not sure,' she answered. 'What does it matter? But I know

that evil has come to those men. Evil . . . ' she repeated.

"We were startled. You smile, Romero, but you don't realize how that atmosphere of the uncanny affected us.

"Looking back on it, I see how right she was. Women—good Lord, they get hold of the spiritual significance of something, and we take them literally!

"When she left us I asked Vaughan whether she really believed in the werewolf.

"'Not exactly,' he explained. 'What she means is that our logic isn't getting us anywhere—that we ought to begin looking for something which, if it isn't a werewolf, has the spirit of the werewolf. You see, even if she saw one, she would be no more worried than she is. The outward form of things impresses her so little.'

"Vaughan appreciated his wife. He didn't know what in the world she meant, but he knew that there was always sense in her parables, even if it took one a long time to make the connection between what she actually said and the way in which one would have expressed the same thing oneself. That, after all, is what understanding means.

"I asked what he supposed she meant by evil.

"'Evil?' he replied. 'Evil forces—something that behaves as it has no right to behave. She means almost—possession. Look here! Let's find out in our own way what she

means. Assuming it's visible, let's see this thing.'

"It was, he still thought, an animal. Its hunting had been successful, and now that the woods were quiet it would start again. He didn't think it had been driven away for good.

"It wasn't driven away by the first search parties,' he pointed out. 'They frightened all the game for miles around, but this thing simply took one of them. It will come back, just as surely as a man-eating lion comes back. And there's only one way to catch it—bait!'

"'Who's going to be the bait?' I asked.

"'You and I.'

"I suppose I looked startled. Vaughan laughed. He said that I was getting fat, that I would make most tempting bait. Whenever he made jokes in poor taste, I knew that he was perfectly serious.

"'What are you going to do?' I asked. 'Tie me to a tree and watch with a gun?'

"'That's about right, except that you needn't be tied up—and as the idea is mine you can have first turn with the gun. Are you a good shot?'

"I am and so was he. To prove it, we practiced on a target after dinner, and found that we could trust each other up to fifty yards in clear moonlight.

"Kyra disliked shooting. She had a horror of death. Vaughan's excuse didn't improve matters. He said that we were going deer stalking

the next night and needed some practice.

"'Are you going to shoot them while they are asleep?' she asked disgustedly.

"'While they are having their supper, dear.'

"'Before, if possible,' I added.

"I disliked hurting her by jokes that to her were pointless, but we chose that method deliberately. She couldn't be told the truth, and now she would be too proud to ask questions.

"Vaughan came down to the inn the following afternoon, and we worked out a plan of campaign. The rock was the starting point of all our theories, and on it we decided to place the watcher. From the top there was a clear view of the path for fifty yards on either side.

"The watcher was to take up his stand, well covered by the ivy, before sunset, and at a little before ten the bait was to be on the path and within shot. He should walk up and down, taking care never to step out of sight of the rock, until midnight when the party would break up. We reckoned that our quarry, if it reasoned, would take the bait to be a picket posted in that part of the forest.

"The difficulty was getting home. We had to go separately in case we were observed, and hope for the best. Eventually we decided that the man on the path, who might be followed, should go straight down to

the road as fast as he could. There was a timber slide quite close, by which he could cut down in ten minutes. The man on the rock should wait a while and then go home by the path.

"Well, I shall not see you again until tomorrow morning," said Vaughan as he got up to go. "You'll see me but I shan't see you. Just whistle once, very softly, as I come up the path, so that I know you're there."

"He remarked that he had left a letter for Kyra with the notary in case of accidents, and added, with an embarrassed laugh, that he supposed it was silly.

"I thought it was anything but silly, and said so.

"I was on the rock by sunset. I wormed my legs and body back into the ivy, leaving head and shoulders free to pivot with the rifle. It was a little .300 with a longish barrel. I felt certain that Vaughan was as safe as human science and a steady hand could make him.

"The moon came up, and the path was a ribbon of silver in front of me. There's something silent about moonlight. It's not light. It's a state of things. When there was sound it was unexpected, like the sudden shiver on the flank of a sleeping beast.

"A twig cracked now and then. An owl hooted. A fox slunk across the pathway, looking back over his shoulder. I wished that Vaughan would come.

"Then the ivy rustled behind me. I couldn't turn round. My spine became very sensitive, and a point at the back of my skull tingled as if expecting a blow. It was no good my telling myself that nothing but a bird could possibly be behind me—but of course it was a bird. A nightjar whooshed out of the ivy, and my body became suddenly cold with sweat.

"That infernal fright cleared all vague fears right out of me. I continued to be uneasy, but I was calm.

"After a while I heard Vaughan striding up the path. Then he stepped within range, a bold, clear figure in the moonlight. I whistled softly, and he waved his hand from the wrist in acknowledgment. He walked up and down, smoking a cigar. The point of light marked his head in the shadows. Wherever he went, my sights were lined a yard or two behind him.

"At midnight he nodded his head towards my hiding place and trotted rapidly away to the timber slide. A little later I took the path home.

"The next night our roles were reversed. It was my turn to walk the path. I found that I preferred to be the bait. On the rock I had longed for another pair of eyes, but after an hour on the ground I did not even want to turn my head. I was quite content to trust Vaughan to take care of anything going on behind me.

"Only once was I uneasy. I heard,

as I thought, a bird calling far down in the woods. It was a strange call, almost a whimper. It was like the little frightened exclamation of a woman. Birds weren't popular with me just then. I had a crazy memory of some Brazilian bird which drives a hole in the back of your head and lives on brains.

"I peered down through the trees and caught a flicker of white in a moonlight clearing below. It showed only for a split second, and I came to the conclusion that it must have been a ripple of wind in the silver grass.

"When the time was up I went down the timber slide and took the road home to the inn. I fell asleep wondering whether we hadn't let our nerves run away with us.

"I went up to see the Vaughans in the morning. Kyra looked pale and worried. I told her at once that she must take more rest.

"'She won't,' said Vaughan. 'She can't resist other people's troubles.'

"'You see, I can't put them out of my mind as easily as you,' she answered provocatively.

"'Oh, Lord!' Vaughan exclaimed. 'I'm not going to start an argument.'

"'No—because you know you're in the wrong. Have you quite forgotten this horrible affair?'

"I gathered up the reins of the conversation and gentled it into easier topics. As I did so, I was conscious of resistance from Kyra; she evidently wanted to go on scrap-

ping. I wondered why. Her nerves, no doubt, were overstrained, but she was too tired to wish to relieve them by a quarrel.

"I decided that she was deliberately worrying her husband to make him admit how he was spending his evenings.

"That was it. Before I left she took me aside on the pretext of showing me the garden and pinned the conversation to our shooting expeditions. Please God I'm never in the dock if the prosecuting counsel is a woman! As it was, I had the right to ask questions in my turn, and managed to slip from under her cross-examination without allowing her to feel it. It hurt. I couldn't let her know the truth, but I hated to leave her in that torment of uncertainty.

"She hesitated an instant before she said goodbye to me. Then she caught my arm, and cried, 'Take care of him!'

"I smiled and told her that she was overwrought, that we were doing nothing dangerous. What else could I say?

"That night, the third of the watching, the woods were alive. The world which lives just below the fallen leaves—mice and moles and big beetles—was making its surprising stir. The night birds were crying. A deer coughed far up in the forest. There was a slight breeze blowing, and from my lair on top of the rock I watched

Vaughan trying to catch the scents it bore.

"He crouched down in the shadows. A bear ambled across the path up wind and began to grub for some succulent morsel at the roots of a tree. It looked as woolly and harmless as a big dog. Clearly, neither it nor its kind were the cause of our vigil. I saw Vaughan smile, and knew that he was thinking the same thought.

"A little after eleven the bear looked up, sniffed the air, and disappeared into the black bulk of the undergrowth as effortlessly and completely as if a spotlight had been switched off him. One by one the sounds of the night ceased. Vaughan eased the revolver in his pocket. The silence told its own tale. The forest had laid aside its business, and was watching like ourselves.

"Vaughan walked up the path to the far end of his beat. I looked away from him an instant, and down the path through the trees my eyes caught that same flicker of white. He turned to come back, and by the time he was abreast of the rock I had seen it again. A bulky object it seemed to be, soft white, moving fast. He passed me, going towards it, and I lined my sights on the path ahead of him.

"Bounding up through the woods it came, then into the moonlight, and on to him. I was saved only by the extreme difficulty of the shot. I took just a fraction of a sec-

ond longer than I needed, to make very sure of not hitting Vaughan. In that fraction of a second, thank God, she called to him! It was Kyra. A white ermine coat and her terrified running up the path had made of her a strange figure.

"She clung to him while she got her breath back. I heard her say, 'I was frightened. There was something after me. I know it.'

"Vaughan did not answer, but held her very close and stroked her hair. His upper lip curled back a little from his teeth. For once his whole being was surrendered to a single emotion: the desire to kill whatever had frightened her.

"How did you know I was here?' he asked.

"I didn't. I was looking for you. I looked for you last night, too.'

"You mad, brave girl!' he said.

"But you mustn't, mustn't be alone. Where's Shiravieff?'

"Right there.' He pointed to the rock.

"Why don't you hide yourself, too?'

"One of us must show himself,' he answered.

"She understood instantly the full meaning of his reply.

"Come back with me!' she cried. 'Promise me to stop it!'

"I'm very safe, dear,' he answered. 'Look!'

"I can hear his tense voice right now, and remember their exact words. Those things eat into the memory. He led her just below the



rock. His left arm was round her. At the full stretch of his right arm he held out his handkerchief by two corners. He did not look at me, nor alter his tone.

"'Shiravieff,' he said, 'make a hole in that!'"

"It was just a theatrical bit of nonsense, for the handkerchief was the easiest of easy marks. At any other time I would have been as sure as he of the result of the shot. But what he didn't know was that I had so nearly fired at another white and much larger mark—

"I was trembling so that I could hardly hold the rifle. I pressed the trigger. The hole in the handkerchief was dangerously near his hand. He put it down to bravado rather than bad shooting.

"Vaughan's trick had its effect. Kyra was surprised. She did not realize how easy it was, any more than she knew how much harder to hit is a moving mark seen in a moment of excitement.

"'But let me stay with you,' she appealed.

"'Sweetheart, we're going back right now. Do you think I'm going to allow my most precious possession to run wild in the woods?'"

"'What about mine?' she said, and kissed him.

"They went away down the short cut. He made her walk a yard in front of him, and I caught the glint of moonlight on the barrel of his revolver. He was taking no risks.

"I myself went back by the path—carelessly, for I was sure that every living thing had been scared away by the voices and the shot. I was nearly down when I knew I was being followed. You've both lived in strange places—do you want me to explain the sensation? No? Well, then, I knew I was being followed.

"I stopped and faced back up the path. Instantly something moved past me in the bushes, as if to cut off my retreat. I'm not superstitious. Once I heard it I felt safe, for I knew where it was. I was sure I could move faster down that path than anything in the undergrowth—and if it came out into the open it would have to absorb five steel explosive bullets.

"I ran. So far as I could hear, it didn't follow.

"I told Vaughan the next morning what had happened.

"'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I had to take her back. You understand, don't you?'"

"'Of course,' I answered in surprise. 'What else could you do?'"

"'Well, I didn't like leaving you alone. We had advertised our presence pretty widely. True, we should have frightened away any animal—but all we know about this animal is that it doesn't behave like one. There was a chance of our attracting instead of frightening it. We're going to get it tonight,' he added savagely.

"I asked if Kyra would promise to stay at home.

"Yes. She says we're doing our duty, and that she won't interfere. Do you think this is our duty?"

"No!" I said.

"Nor do I. I never feel that anything which I enjoy can possibly be my duty. And, by God, I enjoy this now!"

"I think he did enjoy it as he waited on the rock that night. He wanted revenge. There was no reason to believe that Kyra had been frightened by anything more than night and loneliness, but he was out against the whole set of circumstances that had dared to affect her. He wanted to be the bait instead of the watcher—I believe, with some mad hope of getting his hands on his enemy. But I wouldn't let him. After all, it was my turn.

"Bait! As I walked up and down the path, the word kept running through my mind. There wasn't a sound. The only moving thing was the moon which passed from treetop to treetop as the night wore on. I pictured Vaughan on the rock, the foresight of his rifle creeping backwards and forwards in a quarter-circle as it followed my movements.

"Once I heard him cough. I knew that he had seen my nervousness and was reassuring me. I stood by a clump of bushes some twenty yards away, watching a silver leaf that shook as some tiny beast crawled up it.

"Hot breath on the back of my

neck—crushing weight on my shoulders—hardness against the back of my skull—the crack of Vaughan's rifle—they were instantaneous, but not too swift for me to know all the terror of death. Something leaped away from me, and squirmed into the springhead beneath the rock.

"Are you all right?" shouted Vaughan, crashing down through the ivy.

"What was it?"

"A man. I've winged him. Come on, I'm going in after him!"

"Vaughan was berserk mad. I've never seen such flaming disregard of danger. He drew a deep breath and tackled the hole as if it were a man's ankles. Head and shoulders, he sloshed into the mud of the cavity, emptying his Winchester in front of him. If he couldn't wriggle forward swiftly without drawing breath he would be choked by the sulphur fumes or drowned. If his enemy were waiting for him, he was a dead man.

"He disappeared and I followed. No, I didn't need any courage. I was covered by the whole length of Vaughan's body. But it was a vile moment. We'd never dreamed that anything could get in and out through that spring. Imagine holding your breath, and trying to squirm through hot water, using your hips and shoulders like a snake, not knowing how you would return if the way forward was barred.

"At last I was able to raise myself on my hands and draw a breath. Vaughan had dragged himself clear and was on his feet, holding a flashlight in front of him.

"'Got him!' he said.

"We were in a low cave under the rock. There was air from the cracks above us. The floor was of dry sand, for the hot stream flowed into the cave close to the hole by which it left. A man lay crumpled up at the far end of the hollow. We crossed over to him.

"He held a sort of long pistol in his hand. It was a spring humane-killer. The touch of that wide muzzle against my skull is not a pleasant memory. The muzzle is jagged, you see, so that it grips the scalp while the spike is released.

"We turned the body over—it was Josef Weiss. Werewolf? Possession? I don't know. I would call it an atavistic neurosis. But that's a name, not an explanation.

"Beyond the body there was a hole some six feet in diameter, as round as if it had been bored by a rotary drill. The springs which had forced that passage had dried up, but the mottled-yellow walls were smooth as marble with the deposit left by the water. Evidently Weiss had been trying to reach that opening when Vaughan dropped him. We climbed that natural sewer pipe.

"For half an hour the flashlight revealed nothing but the sweating walls of the hole. Then we were stopped by a roughly hewn ladder

which sprawled across the passage. The rungs were covered with mud, and here and there were dark stains on the wood. We went up.

"It led to a hollow evidently dug out with spade and chisel. The roof was of planks, with a trap door at one end. We lifted it with our shoulders and stood up within the four walls of a cottage. A fire was smoldering on the open hearth, and as we let in the draught of air, a log burst into flame. A gun stood in the angle. On a rack were some iron traps and a belt of cartridges. There was a table in the center of the room with a long knife on it.

"That was all we saw with our first glance. With our second we saw a lot more. Weiss had certainly carried his homicidal mania to extremes. I imagine his beastly experiences as a prisoner of war had left a kink in the poor devil's mind. Then, digging out a cellar or repairing the floor, he had accidentally discovered the dry channel beneath the cottage, and followed it to its hidden outlet. That turned his secret desires into action. He could kill and remove his victim without any trace. And so he let himself go.

"At dawn we were back at the cottage with the magistrate. When he came out, he was violently, terribly sick. I have never seen a man be so sick. It cleared him. No, I'm not being humorous. It cleared him mentally. He needed none of those emotional upheavals which we

have to employ to drive shock out of our system. Didn't I tell you he was unimaginative?

"He handled the subsequent inquiry in a masterly fashion. He accepted as an unavoidable fact the horror of the thing, but he wouldn't listen to tales which could not be proved. There was never any definite proof of the extra horror in which the villagers believed."

There was an exclamation from Lewis Banning.

"Ah—you remember now. I thought you would. The press reported that rumor as a fact, but there was no definite proof, I tell you.

"Vaughan begged me to keep it from his wife. I was to persuade her to go away at once before a breath of it could reach her. I was to tell her that he might have received internal injuries, and should be examined without delay. He himself believed the tale that was going round, but he was very conscious of his poise. I suspect that he was feeling a little proud of himself—proud that he was unaffected. But he dreaded the effect of the shock on his wife.

"We were too late. The cook had caught the prevailing fever and told that unpleasant rumor to Kyra. She ran to her husband, deadly pale, desperate, instinctively seeking protection against the blow. He could protect himself, and would have given his life to be able to pro-

tect her. He tried, but only gave her words and more words.

"He explained that looking at the affair calmly it didn't matter; that no one could have known; that the best thing was to forget it; and so on. It was absurd. As if anyone who believed what was being said could look at the affair calmly!

"Sentiments of that kind were no comfort to his wife. She expected him to show his horror, not to isolate himself as if he had shut down a lid, not to leave her spiritually alone. She cried out at him that he had no feeling and rushed to her room. Perhaps I should have given her a sedative, but I didn't. I knew that the sooner she had it out with herself, the better, and that her mind was healthy enough to stand it.

"I said so to Vaughan, but he did not understand. Emotion, he thought, was dangerous. It mustn't be let loose. He wanted to tell her again not to 'worry.' He didn't see that he was the only person within ten miles who wasn't 'worried.'

"She came down later. She spoke to Vaughan scornfully, coldly, as if she had found him unfaithful to her. She said to him, 'I can't see the woman again. Tell her to go, will you?'

"She meant the cook. Vaughan challenged her. He was just obstinately logical and fair.

"It's not her fault,' he said. 'She's an ignorant woman, not an anat-

omist. We'll call her in, and you'll see how unjust you are.'

"'Oh, no!' she cried—and then checked herself.

"'Send for her then!' she said.

"The cook came in. How could she know, she sobbed—she had noticed nothing—she was sure that what she had bought from Josef Weiss was really venison—she didn't think for a moment . . . Well, blessed are the simple!

"'My God! Be quiet!' Kyra burst out. "All of you think what you want to think. You all lie to yourselves and pretend and have no feelings!"

"I couldn't stand any more. I begged her not to torture herself and not to torture me. It was the right note. She took my hands and asked me to forgive her. Then the tears came. She cried, I think, till morning. At breakfast she had a wan smile for both of us, and I knew that she was out of danger—clear of the shock for good. They left for England the same day.

"I met them in Vienna two years ago, and they dined with me. We never mentioned Zweibergen. They still adored one another, and still quarreled. It was good to hear them

talk and watch them feeling for each other's sympathy.

"Vaughan refused his meat at dinner, and said that he had become a vegetarian.

"'Why?' I asked deliberately.

"He answered that he had recently had a nervous breakdown—could eat nothing, and had nearly died. He was all right now, he said; no trace of the illness remained but this distaste for meat . . . it had come over him quite suddenly . . . he could not think why.

"I tell you the man was absolutely serious. He could *not* think why Shock had lain hidden in him for ten years, and then had claimed its penalty."

"And you?" asked Banning. "How did you get clear of shock? You had to control your emotions at the time."

"A fair question," said Shiravieff. "I've been living under a suspended sentence. There have been days when I thought I should visit one of my colleagues and ask him to clean up the mess. If I could only have got the story out of my system, it would have helped a lot—but I couldn't bring myself to tell it."

"You have just told it," said Colonel Romero solemnly.



## John Dickson Carr

### The Silver Curtain

*Two famous Departments in the literature of crime and detection are represented in this anthology—Roy Vickers' Department of Dead Ends and John Dickson Carr's (Carter Dickson's) Department of Queer Complaints. It is not exaggerating by a jot or tittle to say that the Inspectors of Vickers' Department could have resolved the queer complaints, and that John Dickson Carr's Colonel March could unblock the dead ends—which is a tremendous compliment to both Mr. Carr and the late Mr. Vickers. What a classic story we would have had if Messrs. Carr and Vickers had ever joined forces! . . . In this Colonel March story we meet a young Englishman who staked everything at baccarat—and lost; then a fat, sleek stranger started him off on a modern Arabian Nights adventure . . .*

#### **Detective: COLONEL MARCH**

THE CROUPIER'S WRIST MOVED with such fluent ease as to seem boneless. Over the green baize its snaky activity never hesitated, never wavered, never was still. His rake, like an enormous butter-pat, attracted the cards, flicked them up, juggled them, and slid them in a steady stream through the slot of the table.

No voice was raised in the Casino at La Bandelette. There was much casualness; hardly any laughter. The tall red curtains and the padded red floors closed in a sort of idle concentration at a dozen tables. And out of it, at Table Number Six, the croupier's monotone droned on.

"Six mille. Banco? Six mille. Banco? Banco?"

"Banco," said the young Englishman across the table. The cards, white and gray, slipped smoothly from the shoe. And the young man lost again.

The croupier hadn't time to notice much. The people round him, moving in hundreds through the season, were hardly human beings at all. There was a calculating machine inside his head; he heard its clicks, he watched the run of its numbers, and it was all he had time for. Yet so acutely were his senses developed that he could tell almost within a hundred francs how much

money the players at his table still retained. The young man opposite was nearly broke.

(Best to be careful. This perhaps means trouble.)

Casually the croupier glanced round his table. There were five players, all English, as was to be expected. There was the fair-haired girl with the elderly man, obviously her father, who had a bald head and looked ill; he breathed behind his hand. There was the very heavy, military-looking man whom someone had addressed as Colonel March. There was the fat, sleek, swarthy young man with the twisty eyebrows (dubious English?), whose complacency had grown with his run of luck and whose wallet stuffed with *mille* notes lay at his elbow. Finally, there was the young man who lost so much.

The young man got up from his chair.

He had no poker face. The atmosphere about him was so desperately embarrassed that the fair-haired girl spoke.

"Leaving, Mr. Winton" she asked.

"Er—yes," said Mr. Winton. He seemed grateful for that little help thrown into his disquiet. He seized at it; he smiled back at her. "No luck yet. Time to get a drink and offer up prayers for the next session."

(Look here, thought Jerry Winton, why stand here explaining? It's not serious. You'll get out of it,

even if it does mean a nasty bit of trouble. They all know you're broke. Stop standing here laughing like a gawk, and get away from the table. He looked into the eyes of the fair-haired girl, and wished he hadn't been such an ass.)

"Get a drink," he repeated.

He strode away from the table with (imagined) laughter following him. The sleek young man had lifted a moonface and merely looked at him in a way that roused Jerry Winton's wrath.

(Curse La Bandelette and bacarat and everything else.)

"There," reflected the croupier, "is a young man who will have trouble with his hotel. *Banco? Six mille. Banco?*"

In the bar, which adjoined the casino rooms, Jerry Winton crawled up on one of the high stools, called for an Armagnac, and pushed his last hundred-franc note across the counter. His head was full of a row of figures written in the spidery style of France. His hotel bill for a week would come to—what? Four, five, six thousand francs?\* It would be presented tomorrow, and all he had was his return ticket to London by plane.

In the big mirror behind the bar a new image emerged from the crowd. It was that of the fat, sleek, oily-faced young man who had cleaned up such a packet at the ta-

\*All this happened when the franc was worth considerably more than it is today.

ble, and who was even now fingering his wallet lovingly before he put it away. He climbed up on a stool beside Jerry. He called for mineral water: how shrewd and finicky-crafty these expert gamblers were! He relighted the stump of a cigar in a corner of his mouth.

Then he spoke. "Broke?" he inquired offhandedly.

Jerry Winton glared at his reflection in the mirror.

"I don't see," Jerry said, with a slow and murderous choosing of words, "that that's anybody's business except mine."

"Oh, that's all right," said the stranger, in the same unpleasantly offhanded tone. He took several puffs at his cigar; he drank a little mineral water. He added, "I expect it's pretty serious, though? Eh?"

"If the matter," said Jerry, turning round, "is of so much interest to you—no, it's not serious. I have plenty of money back home. The trouble is that this is Friday night, and I can't get in touch with the bank until Monday." Though this was quite true, he saw the other's fishy expression grow broader. "It's a damned nuisance, because they don't know me at the hotel. But a nuisance is all it is. If you think I'm liable to go out in the garden and shoot myself, stop thinking it."

The other smiled sadly and fishily, and shook his head. "You don't say? I can't believe that now can I?"

"I don't care what you believe."

"You should care," said his companion, unruffled. As Jerry slid down from the stool, he reached out and tapped Jerry on the arm. "Don't be in such a rush. You say you're a boy Croesus. All right, you're a boy Croesus. I won't argue with you. But tell me, how's your nerve?"

"My what?"

"Your nerve. Your courage," explained his companion, with something like a sneer.

Jerry Winton looked back at the bland, self-assured face poised above the mineral water. His companion's feet were entangled with the legs of the bar stool; his short upper lip was lifted with acute self-confidence; and a blank eye jeered down.

"I thought I'd ask," he pursued. "My name is Davos, Ferdie Davos. Everybody knows me." He swept his hand toward the crowd. "How'd you like to make ten thousand francs?"

"I'd like it a whole lot. But I don't know whether I'd like to make it out of any business of yours."

Davos was unruffled. "It's no good trying to be on your dignity with me. It don't impress me and it won't help you. I still ask, how would you like to make ten thousand francs? That would more than cover what you owe or are likely to owe, wouldn't it? I thought so. Well, do you or don't you want to make ten thousand francs?"

"Yes, I do," Jerry snarled back.



"All right. See a doctor."

"What?"

"See a doctor," Davos repeated coolly. "A nerve tonic is what you want—pills. No, I'm not wisecracking." He looked at the clock, whose hands stood at five minutes to eleven. "Go to this address—listen carefully while I tell you—and there'll be ten thousand in it for you. Go to this address in about an hour. No sooner, no later. Do your job properly, and there may be even more than ten thousand in it for you. Number Two, Square St. Jean, Avenue des Phares, in about an hour. We'll see how your nerve is then."

La Bandelette, "the fillet," that strip of silver beach along the channel, is full of flat-roofed and queerly painted houses which give it the look of a town in a Walt Disney film. But the town itself is of secondary consideration. The English colony, which is of a frantic fashionableness, lies among great trees behind. Close to the Casino de la Forêt are three great hotels, gay with awning and piling sham Gothic turrets into the sky. The air is aromatic; open carriages clop and jingle along broad avenues; and the art of extracting money from guests has become so perfected that they find their hands going to their pockets even in sleep.

This sleep is taken by day. By night, when La Bandelette is sealed up except for the Casino, the

beam of the great island lighthouse sweeps the streets. It dazzles and then dies, once every twenty seconds. And, as Jerry Winton strode under the trees toward the Avenue of the Lighthouses, its beam was beginning to be blurred by rain.

Square St. Jean, Avenue des Phares. Where? And why?

If Davos had approached him in any other way, Jerry admitted to himself, he would have paid no attention to it. But he was annoyed and curious. Besides, unless there were a trick in it, he could use ten thousand francs. There was probably a trick in it. But who cared?

It was the rain that made him hesitate. He heard it patter in the trees, and deepen to a heavy rustling, as he saw the signboard pointing to the Avenue des Phares. He was without hat or coat. But by this time he meant to see the thing through.

Ahead of him was a street of fashionable villas, lighted by mere sparks of gas. An infernally dark street. Something queer, and more than queer, about this. Total strangers didn't ask you how strong your nerves were, and then offer you ten thousand francs on top of it, for any purpose that would pass the customs. Which was all the more reason why . . .

Then he saw Davos.

Davos did not see him. Davos was ahead of him, walking fast and with little short steps along the dim street. The white beam of the light-

house shone out overhead, turning the rain to silver; and Jerry could see the gleam of his polished black hair and the light tan topcoat he was now wearing. Pulling up the collar of his dinner jacket, Jerry followed.

A few yards farther on Davos slackened his pace. He peered round and up. On his left was the entrance to a courtyard, evidently the Square St. Jean. But to call it a "square" was noble overstatement; it was only a cul-de-sac some 20 feet wide by 40 feet deep.

Two of its three sides were merely tall, blank brick walls. The third side, on the right, was formed of a tall flat house all of whose windows were closely shuttered. But there was at least a sign of life about the house. Over its door burned a dim white globe, showing that there was a doctor's brass name-plate beside the door. A seditious house with bluepainted shutters in the bare cul-de-sac—and Davos was making for it.

All this Jerry saw at a glance. Then he moved back from the cul-de-sac. The rain was sluicing down on him, blurring the dim white globe with shadow and gleam. Davos had almost reached the doctor's door. He had paused, as though to consider or look at something; and then . . .

Jerry Winton later swore that he had taken his eyes off Davos only for a second. This was true. Jerry, in fact, had glanced back along the

Avenue des Phares behind him and was heartened to see the figure of a policeman some distance away. What made him look quickly back again was a noise from the cul-de-sac, a noise that was something between a cough and a scream, bubbling up horribly under the rain; and afterward the thud of a body on asphalt.

One moment Davos had been on his feet. The next moment he was lying on his side on the pavement, and kicking.

Overheard the beam of the light-house wheeled again. Jerry, reaching Davos in a run of a half a dozen long strides, saw the whole scene picked out by that momentary light. Davos's fingers still clutched, or tried to clutch, the well-filled wallet Jerry had last seen at the Casino. His tan topcoat was now dark with rain. His heels scraped on the pavement, for he had been stabbed through the back of the neck with a heavy knife whose polished-metal handle projected four inches. Then the wallet slipped out of his fingers, and splashed into a puddle, for the man died.

Jerry Winton looked, and did not believe his own eyes. Mechanically he reached down and picked up the wallet out of the puddle, shaking it. He backed away as he heard running footfalls pound into the cul-de-sac, and he saw the flying waterproof of a policeman.

"Halt there!" the law shouted in

French. The policeman, a dim shape under the waterproof, pulled up short and stared. After seeing what was on the pavement, he made a noise like a man hit in the stomach.

Jerry pulled his wits together and conned over his French for the proper phrases. "His—this wallet," said Jerry, extending it.

"So I see."

"He is dead."

"That would appear obvious," agreed the other, with a kind of snort. "Well! Give it to me. Quick, quick! His wallet."

The policeman extended his hand, snapping the fingers. He added, "No stupidities, please! I am prepared for you."

"But I didn't kill him."

"That remains to be seen."

"Man, you don't think—?" He broke off. The trouble was that it had happened too rapidly. Jerry's feeling was that of one who meets a super-salesman and under whirlwind tactics is persuaded to buy some huge and useless article before he realizes what the talk is all about.

For here was a minor miracle. He had seen the man Davos stabbed under his eyes. Davos had been stabbed by a straight blow from behind, the heavy knife entering in a straight line sloping a little upward, as though the blow had been struck from the direction of the pavement. Yet at the same time Davos had been alone in a cul-de-

sac as bare as an empty biscuit box.

"It is not my business to think," said the policeman curtly. "I make my notes and I report to my commissaire. Now!" He withdrew into the shelter of the dimlit doorway, his wary eye fixed on Jerry, and whipped out his notebook. "Let us have no nonsense. You killed this man and attempted to rob him. I saw you."

"No!"

"You were alone with him in this court. I saw as much myself."

"Yes, that is true."

"Good; he admits it! You saw no one else in the court?"

"No."

"*Justement.* Could any assassin have approached without being seen?"

Jerry, even as he saw the bleak eye grow bleaker, had to admit that this was impossible. On two sides were blank brick walls; on the third side was a house whose door or windows, he could swear, had not opened a crack. In the second's space of time while he looked away, no murderer could have approached, stabbed Davos, and got back to cover again. There was no cover. This was so apparent that Jerry could not even think of a reasonable lie. He merely stuttered.

"I do not know what happened," he insisted. "One minute he was there and then he fell. I saw nobody." Then a light opened in his mind. "Wait! That knife there—it must have been thrown at him."

Rich and sardonic humor stared at him from the doorway. "Thrown, you say? Thrown from where?"

"I don't know," admitted Jerry.

The light went out. Again he stared at blank brick walls, and at the house from whose sealed front no knife could have been thrown.

"Consider," pursued his companion, in an agony of logic, "the position of the knife. This gentleman was walking with his back to you?"

"Yes."

"Good; we progress." He pointed. "The knife enters the back of his neck in a straight line. It enters from the direction where you were standing. Could it have been thrown past you from the entrance to the court?"

"No. Impossible."

"No. That is evident," blared his companion. "I cannot listen to any more stupidities. I indulge you because you are English and we have orders to indulge the English. But this goes beyond reason! You will go with me to the Hotel de Ville. Look at the note-case in his hand. Does he offer it to you and say, 'Monsieur, honor me by accepting my note-case?'"

"No. He had it in his own hand."

"He had it in his own hand, say you. Why?"

"I don't know."

Jerry broke off, both because the story of his losses at the Casino

must now come out with deadly significance, and because they heard the rattle of a door being unlocked. The door of the doctor's house opened; and out stepped the fair-haired girl whom Jerry had last seen at the Casino.

Beside the door the brass nameplate read *Dr. Edouard Hébert*, with consulting hours inscribed underneath, and an aggressive, "Speaks English." Behind the girl, craning his neck, stood a bristly, middle-aged man of immense dignity. His truculent eyeglasses had a broad black ribbon which seemed to form a kind of electrical circuit with the ends of his brushed-up mustache.

But Jerry Winton was not looking at Dr. Hébert. He was looking at the girl. In addition to a light fur coat, she now wore a cream-colored scarf drawn over her hair; she had in one hand a tiny box, wrapped in white paper. Her smooth, worried face, her long, pale-blue eyes, seemed to reflect the expression of the dead man staring back at her from the pavement. She jerked back, bumping into the policeman. She put her hand on Dr. Hébert's arm. With her other hand she pointed sharply to Davos.

"That's the man!" she cried.

Monsieur Goron, prefect of Police, was a comfortable man, a round, cat-like amiable sort of man, famous for his manners. Crime, rare in La Bandelette, distressed

him. But he was also an able man. At one o'clock in the morning he sat in his office at the Town Hall examining his fingernails and creaking back and forth in a squeaky swivel chair whose noise had begun to get on Jerry Winton's nerves.

The girl, who for the tenth time had given her name as Eleanor Hood, was insistent, "Monsieur Goron!"

"Mademoiselle?" said the prefect politely, and seemed to wake out of a dream.

Eleanor Hood turned round and gave Jerry Winton a despairing look.

"I only wish to know," she urged, in excellent French, "why we are here, Dr. Hébert and I. And Mr. Winton too, if it comes to that." This time the look she gave Jerry was one of smiling companionship—a human sort of look, which warmed that miscreant. "But as for us—why? It is not as though we were witnesses. I have told you why I was at Dr. Hébert's house."

"Mademoiselle's father," murmured Monsieur Goron.

"Yes. He is ill. Dr. Hébert has been treating him for several days, and he had another attack at the Casino tonight. Mr. Winton will confirm that."

Jerry nodded. The old boy at the table, he reflected, had certainly looked ill.

"I took my father back to our hotel, the Brittany, at half-past

eleven," the girl went on, speaking with great intensity. "I tried to communicate with Dr. Hébert by telephone. I could not reach him. So I went to his house; it is only a short distance from the hotel. On the way I kept seeing that man—the man you call Davos. I thought he was following me. He seemed to be looking at me from behind every tree. That is why I said, 'That's the man,' when I saw him lying on the pavement with his eyes open. His eyes did not even blink when the rain struck them. It was a horrible sight. I was upset. Do you blame me?"

Monsieur Goron made a sympathetic noise.

"I reached Dr. Hébert's house at perhaps twenty minutes to twelve. Dr. Hébert had retired, but he consented to go with me. I waited while he dressed. We went out, and on the doorstep we found—what you know. Please believe that is all I know about it."

She had a singularly expressive voice and personality. She was either all anxiety or all persuasiveness, fashioning the clipped syllables. When she turned her wrist, you saw Davos lying in the rain and the searchlight wheeling overhead.

Then she added abruptly in English, looking at Jerry, "He was a nasty little beast; but I don't for a moment believe you killed him."

"Thanks. But why?"

"I don't know," said Eleanor

simply. "You just couldn't have."

"Now there is logic!" cried Monsieur Goron, giving his desk an admiring whack.

Monsieur Goron's swivel chair creaked with pleasure. There were many lights in his office, which smelt of creosote. On the desk in front of him lay Davos's sodden wallet and (curiously) the tiny round box, wrapped in a spill of paper, which Eleanor Hood had been carrying. Monsieur Goron never spoke to Jerry, never looked at him; ignored him as completely and blandly as though he were not there.

"But," he continued, growing very sober again, "You will forgive me mademoiselle, if I pursue this matter further. You say that Dr. Hébert has been treating your father?"

"Yes."

Monsieur Goron pointed to the small box on the table. "With pills, perhaps?"

"Ah, my God!" said Hébert, and slapped his forehead tragically.

For several minutes Jerry had been afraid that the good doctor would have an apoplectic stroke. Dr. Hébert had indicated his distinguished position in the community. He had pointed out that physicians do not go out in the middle of the night on errands of mercy, and then get dragged off to police stations; it is bad for business. His truculent eyeglasses and mustache bristling, he left off his stiff pacing

of the room only to go and look the prefect in the eye.

"I *will* speak," he said coldly, from deep in his throat.

"As monsieur pleases."

"Well, it is as this lady says! Why are we here? Why? We are not witnesses." He broke off, and slapped at the shoulders of his coat as though to rid himself of insects. "This young man here tells us a story which may or may not be true. If it is true, I do not see why the man Davos should have given him *my* address. I do not see why Davos should have been knifed on my doorstep. I did not know the man Davos, except as a patient of mine."

"Ah!" said the prefect. "You gave him pills, perhaps?"

Dr. Hébert sat down. "Are you mad on the subject of pills?" he inquired, with restraint. "Because this young man"—again he looked with disfavor at Jerry—"tells you that Davos made some drunken mention of 'pills' at the Casino tonight, is that why you pursue the subject?"

"It is possible."

"It is ridiculous," said Dr. Hébert. "Do you even question my pills on the desk there? They are for Miss Hood's father. They are ordinary tablets, with digitalin for the heart. Do you think they contain poison? If so, why not test them?"

"It is an idea," conceded Monsieur Goron.

He picked up the box and removed the paper. The box contained half a dozen sugar-coated pellets. With great seriousness Monsieur Goron put one of the tablets into his mouth, tasted it, bit it, and finally appeared to swallow it.

"No poison?" asked the doctor.

"No poison," agreed Monsieur Goron. The telephone on his desk rang. He picked it up, listened for a moment with a dreamy smile, and replaced it. "Now this is really excellent!" he beamed, rubbing his hands. "My good friend Colonel March, of the English police, has been making investigations. He was sent here when a certain form of activity in La Bandelette became intolerable both to the French and English authorities. You perhaps noticed him at the Casino tonight, all of you?"

"I remember," said Jerry suddenly. "Very large bloke, quiet as sin."

"An apt description," said the prefect.

"But—" began Dr. Hébert.

"I said 'all of you,' Dr. Hébert," repeated the prefect. "One small question is permitted? I thank you. When mademoiselle telephoned to your house at eleven thirty tonight, you were not there. You were at the Casino, perhaps?"

Dr. Hébert stared at him. "It is possible. But—"

"You saw Monsieur Davos there, perhaps?"

"It is possible." Still Dr. Hébert stared at him with hideous perplex-

ity. "But, Monsieur Goron, will you have the goodness to explain this? You surely do not suspect either mademoiselle or myself of having any concern with this business? You do not think that either mademoiselle or I left the house at the time of the murder?"

"I am certain you did not."

"You do not think either mademoiselle or myself went near a door or a window to get at this accursed Davos?"

"I am certain you did not," beamed the prefect.

"Well, then?"

"But there, you see," argued Monsieur Goron, lifting one finger for emphasis, "we encounter a difficulty. We are among thorns. For this would mean that Monsieur Winton must have committed the murder. And that," he added, looking at Jerry, "is absurd. We never for a moment believed that Monsieur Winton had anything to do with this; and my friend Colonel March will tell you why."

Jerry sat back and studied the face of the prefect, wondering if he had heard aright. He felt like an emotional punching bag. But with great gravity he returned the prefect's nod as a sergeant de ville opened the door of the office.

"We will spik English," announced Monsieur Goron, bouncing up. "This is my friend Colonel March."

"Evening," said the colonel. His large, speckled face was as bland as

Monsieur Goron's; his fists were on his hips. He looked first at Eleanor, then at Jerry, then at Dr. Hébert. "Sorry you were put to this inconvenience, Miss Hood. But I've seen your father, and it will be all right. As for you, Mr. Winton, I hope they have put you out of your misery?"

"Misery?"

"Told you you're not headed for Devil's Island, or anything of the sort? We had three very good reasons for believing you had nothing to do with this. Here is the first reason."

Reaching into the pocket of his dinner jacket, he produced an article which he held out to them. It was a black leather wallet, exactly like the one already on Monsieur Goron's desk. But whereas the first was stuffed with *mille* notes, this one had only a few hundred francs in it.

"We found this second wallet in Davos's pocket," said Colonel March.

He seemed to wait for a comment, but none came.

"Well, what about it?" Jerry demanded, after a pause.

"Oh, come! Two wallets! Why was Davos carrying two wallets? Why should any man carry two wallets? That is my first reason. Here is my second."

From the inside pocket of his coat, with the air of a conjurer, he drew out the knife with which Davos had been stabbed.

A suggestive sight. Now cleansed of blood, it was a long, thin, heavy blade with a light metal handle and cross-piece. As Colonel March turned it around, glittering in the light, Jerry Winton felt that its glitter struck a chord of familiarity in his mind: that a scene from the past had almost come back to him: that, for a swift and tantalizing second, he had almost grasped the meaning of the whole problem.

"And now we come to my third reason," said Colonel March. "The third reason is Ferdie Davos. Ferdie was a hotel thief. A great deal too clever for us poor policemen. Eh, Goron? Though I always told him he was a bad judge of men. At the height of the summer season, at hotels like the Brittany and the Donjon, he had rich pickings. He specialized in necklaces, particularly in pearl necklaces. Kindly note that."

A growing look of comprehension had come into Eleanor Hood's face. She opened her mouth to speak, and then checked herself.

"His problem," pursued Colonel March, "was how to smuggle the stolen stuff over to England, where he had a market for it. He couldn't carry it himself. In a little place like La Bandelette, Goron would have had him turned inside out if he had as much as taken a step toward Boulogne. So he had to have accomplices. I mean accomplices picked from among the hordes of unattached young men who come



here every season. Find some young fool who's just dropped more than he can afford at the tables; and he may grab at the chance to earn a few thousand francs by a little harmless customs bilking. You follow me, Mr. Winton?"

"You mean that I was chosen—?"

"Yes."

"But, good lord, how? I couldn't smuggle a pearl necklace through the customs if my life depended on it."

"You could if you needed a tonic," Colonel March pointed out. "Davos told you so. The necklace would first be taken apart. Each pearl would be given a thick sugar coating, forming a neat medicinal pill. They would then be poured into a neat bottle or box under the prescription of a well-known doctor. At the height of the tourist rush, the customs can't curry-comb everybody. They would be looking for a pearl smuggler: not for an obviously respectable young tourist with stomach trouble."

Eleanor Hood, with sudden realization in her face, looked at the box of pills on Monsieur Goron's desk.

"So *that* is why you tasted my pills!" she said to the prefect of police, who made deprecating noises. "And kept me here for so long. And—"

"Mademoiselle, I assure you!" said Monsieur Goron. "We were sure there was nothing wrong with those pills!" He somewhat spoiled

the gallant effect of this by adding, "There are not enough of them, for one thing. But, since you received them from Dr. Hébert after office hours, you had to be investigated. The trick is neat, *hein?* I fear the firm of Hébert and Davos have been working it for some time."

They all turned to look at Dr. Hébert.

He was sitting bolt upright, his chin drawn into his collar as though he were going to sing. On his face was a look of what can only be called frightened skepticism. Even his mouth was half open with this effect, or with unuttered sounds of ridicule.

"We were also obliged to delay you all," pursued Monsieur Goron, "until my men found Madame Fley's pearls, which were stolen a week ago, hidden in Dr. Hébert's surgery. I repeat, it was a neat trick. We might never have seen it if Davos had not incautiously hinted at it to Monsieur Winton. But then Davos was getting a bit above himself." He added, "That, Colonel March thinks, is why Dr. Hébert decided to kill him."

Still Dr. Hébert said nothing.

It was, in fact, Jerry Winton who spoke. "Sir, I don't hold any brief for this fellow. But how could he have killed Davos? He couldn't have!"

"You are forgetting," said Colonel March, as cheerfully as though the emotional temperature of the room had not gone up several de-

grees, "you are forgetting the two wallets. Why was Davos carrying two wallets?"

"Well?"

"He wasn't," said Colonel March, with his eye on Hébert. "Our good doctor here was, of course, the brains of the partnership. He supplied the resources for Ferdie's noble front. When Ferdie played baccarat at the Casino, he was playing with Dr. Hébert's money. And, when Dr. Hébert saw Ferdie at the Casino tonight, he very prudently took away the large sum you saw in Ferdie's wallet at the tables. When Ferdie came to the doctor's house at midnight, he had only his few hundred francs commission in his own wallet, which was in his pocket.

"You see, Dr. Hébert needed that large sum of money in his plan to kill Ferdie. He knew what time Ferdie would call at his house. He knew Mr. Winton would be close behind Ferdie. Mr. Winton would, in fact, walk into the murder and get the blame. All Dr. Hébert had to do was take that packet of *mille* notes, stuff them into another wallet just like Ferdie Davos's, and use it as a trap."

"A trap?" repeated Eleanor. "Did you say—a trap?"

"A trap," said Colonel March. "Your presence, Miss Hood," he went on, "gave the doctor an unexpected alibi. He left you downstairs in his house. He went upstairs to 'get dressed.' A few minutes before

Davos was due to arrive, he went quietly up to the roof of his house—a flat roof, like most of those in La Bandelette. He looked down over the parapet into that cul-de-sac, forty feet below. He saw his own doorstep with the lamp burning over it. He dropped the wallet over the parapet, so that it landed on the pavement before his own doorstep.

"Well?" continued Colonel March. "What would Davos do? What would *you* do, if you walked along a pavement and saw a wallet bulging with thousand-franc notes lying just in front of you?"

Again Jerry Winton saw that dim cul-de-sac. He heard the rain splashing; he saw it moving and gleaming past the door lamp, and past the beam of the lighthouse overhead. He saw the jaunty figure of Davos stop short as though to look at something—

"I imagine," Jerry Winton said, "that I'd bend over and pick up the wallet."

"Yes," said Colonel March. "That's the whole sad story. You would bend over so that your body was parallel with the ground. The back of your neck would be a plain target to anybody standing forty feet up above you, with a needle-sharp knife whose blade is much heavier than the handle. The murderer has merely to drop the knife—stretch out his fingers and drop the knife. Then gravity will do the rest.

"My friend, you looked straight at that murder—and you never saw it! You never saw it because a shifting, gleaming wall of rain, a kind of silver curtain, fell across the door lamp and the beam of the light-house. It hid the fall of a thin, long blade made of bright metal. Behind that curtain moved invisibly our ingenious friend Dr. Hébert, who, if

he can be persuaded to speak—"

Dr. Hébert could not be persuaded to speak, even when they took him away. But Eleanor Hood and Jerry Winton walked home through the summer dawn, under a sky colored with a less evil silver; and they had discovered any number of mutual acquaintances by the time they reached the hotel.



# Ellery Queen

## Bride in Danger

**Detective: ELLERY QUEEN**

THE MACKENZIE-FARNHAM NUP-tials—according to no less an authority than Violetta Billcox, Society Editor of the *Wrightsville Record*—were to be The Event of the summer social season. Molly Mackenzie was marrying Dr. Conklin Farnham, and nothing more important than that could be expected to happen for the rest of the year.

The bride-to-be was the daughter of the Donald Mackenzies (Wrightsville Personal Finance Corp., Country Club, Art Museum Committee, etc., etc.), and young Conk Farnham was *the* up-and-coming surgeon of Wrightsville—son of the celebrated New England internist, Dr. Farnham Farnham, who was President of the County Medical Association and Chairman of the Board of Wrightsville General Hospital. It was strictly a Sky-top Road romance, for the Mackenzies' Virginia Colonial (built in 1948) was only two houses down the road from the Farnhams' red-wood-and-glass Ranch Type Modern; their back lawns embraced behind the skimpy acre of the Hal-lam-Lucks' intervening estate.

It was to be a June wedding, of course, with the knot tied by the

Bishop himself. The noted churchman was coming up from Boston especially for the ceremony, to the secret disappointment of Rev. Ernest Highmount, who had counted on the Mackenzies' patronizing the local talent; in fact, Dr. Highmount had had Donald Mackenzie's half-promise to that effect. But Bea Mackenzie was as stubborn as the granite of the Mahoganies. Molly was her only child, and Bea had schemed and hoped for far too long to be deprived in her triumph of its full rewards. The Bishop it was going to be, with a lawn reception afterwards for one hundred and fifty-six rigidly screened guests, and catering by Del Monica's of Connhaven.

"Connhaven! But I'm in business in Wrightsville, Bea," protested Donald Mackenzie. "What's the matter with Liz Jones? Lizzie has catered every important shindig in this town for the last thirty-five years."

"Exactly," said Bea, patting her husband's paw. "How common can you get? Now you run along, Donald. All you have to do is pay the bills—I'll worry about every thing else."

It was Bea who solved the social "problems." Conk was an absolute darling, but he *had* left rather a trail. There was Millie Burnett's Sandra, for instance—a large, panting girl with the disposition and intelligence of a healthy cow. Sandra was the outdoors type, and Conk had seen a great deal of her when he was wearing turtle-neck sweaters—so much so that Sandra had grown stars in her eyes and Millie had bought her an outsized hope chest. Conk swore that he had never uttered a serious word to Sandra, but to this day Millie Burnett spoke of him coldly.

There was also Flo Pettigrew, J. C.'s younger daughter, who had succeeded Sandra when Conk Farnham graduated from skiing parties on Bald Mountain to poetry sessions in the pines around Quetonokis Lake. Flo was pale and intense, wore her hair like the early pictures of Edna St. Vincent Milay, and was the *Record's* chief source of supply for love poetry; and when Conk broke their engagement she drooped like a bruised lily and wrote passionate verses to Death. Yet the Burnetts and the Pettigrews had to be invited to Molly's wedding; what was worse, Sandra and Flo were probably Molly's closest friends.

Bea solved the problem heroically; she convinced Molly that the course of wisdom was to pretend the past had never happened. Molly, who had inherited her mother's

brains along with her father's good looks, had secret doubts; but she asked Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew to be her bridesmaids anyway. When they accepted, Sandra with whoops and Flo very quietly, everyone but Conk Farnham was relieved.

Then Bea faced the question of what to do about Jen. Ordinarily a visiting relative from England would have given a fillip to a Wrightsville function; but Jennifer Reynolds, who was Bea's cousin and therefore her personal cross, drifted about the Mackenzie premises under such a pall of sorrow that she was bound to darken even so brilliant an occasion as Molly's wedding.

Bea gave a lot of thought to the problem of Jen. Finally she announced, "What poor Jen needs in this crisis is a *man*."

"Oh, Mother," said Molly. "I've thrown whole he-harems at her. Jen won't *encourage* an eligible male."

"Who?" sniffed her mother. "Dr. Flacker? Henry Granjon? All Walt Flacker knows about women is what he sees in the Maternity Pavilion. And Henry's idea of a nice time is an evening of Canasta with his mother." Bea's snub nose wrinkled with cleverness. "The Lord knows, with Jen's mind she won't find a challenge in any man *Wrightsville* has to offer. . . ."

"Who's the victim?" giggled Molly.

"Well," said her mother, not un-defensively, "I *have* been trying to think up a formula for inviting Ellery Queen up from New York for the wedding. . . ."

The last time Ellery had seen the principals, Molly had been a shy little bud at Wrightsville High and young Conklin Farnham a dedicated medical student apparently under the spell of one of the grimmer soap operas. Ellery found a full-grown radiant blossom and a hard-headed surgeon, and little opportunity to improve his acquaintanceship. For the Mackenzie house bustled with strange ladies with pins in their mouths, clanged with telephones and doorbells announcing the arrival of endless packages and cartons, and buzzed with mysterious conferences behind banged doors. Over all rose the conspiratorial laughter of Molly, Sandra Burnett, and Flo Pettigrew, occupied with whatever occupies the energies of a bride-to-be and her maids of honor at such epic times. Occasionally Conk Farnham flicked into the house in an aura of antiseptic, like a flung scalpel, kissed his bride in a dark corner, and flicked out again. Donald Mackenzie hardly showed his face; when he did, he was shooed off on some errand or other. As for Ellery's hostess, he met her only at mealtimes.

"We're neglecting you shamefully, Mr. Queen," Bea mourned, "but

it's a comfort knowing we have Jennifer to entertain you. She's so much like you—quiet and deep and interested in the arts and things. You'll find so much in common." And off she whisked, not neglecting to shut the door on them in her departure.

Jennifer Reynolds was a slight blonde woman of thirty-four with a face whose charm looked as if it were regularly washed out in a strong bleach. It was chronically puckered, as if she were bothered by some mystery that defied solution.

There was a fragility about Mrs. Mackenzie's English cousin that made Ellery uneasy; and he was not surprised to learn that she was under the professional care of Conk Farnham's colleague, Dr. Walter Flacker, with whom young Farnham shared offices. But her fragility was more than physical. She was like a fine fabric worn to the nap and ready to fall to pieces at a touch. . . .

One afternoon when the bedlam was surpassing itself, Ellery drove Jennifer Reynolds up to the lake; and there, under the influence of the sun and the pines and the water peacefully lapping their drifting canoe, it all came out.

They were talking of Molly and Conk, and Ellery was saying what an ecstatically happy couple they seemed, and how sad it was that such bliss should be doomed to the usual corruption.

I suppose he'd been saving up for quite a while to lose this dough at the carnival. I didn't see why I shouldn't have most of it. He handed me a buck, and I told him to go ahead and play.

Of course, this time he didn't knock down the pin. Any high school kid who knows anything about physics would know it was impossible if it was on the level. You hold that ball on one side of the pin and swing it and it'll miss by just as much on the other side coming back. It couldn't possibly knock the pin down unless there was a way to move the pin. And of course there was a way to do it.

After he'd lost his buck I offered him another free try. "Just to get the hang of it," I told him.

This time he knocked it down.

"You may think there's something not strictly on the up and up about this," I told him. "I want to show you that there's no way I can move the pin." I picked it up and showed him there was a hole in the bottom of the pin, and that this hole fitted over a peg in the counter. "You see," I told him, "there's no way I can possibly move the pin. It's a game of pure skill."

What I didn't tell him was that there was a way to move the peg, which I could do with my knee under the counter. I could make him win or lose at will.

He invested another buck, without any luck, then started to turn away. There was a crowd around

us now, and a little dark guy pushed forward.

"I'd like to try this game," he said, "only I'd like our friend here to swing the ball for me. He's the only one I've seen knock the pin down."

The yokel acted shy, but the little dark guy persuaded him to swing the ball. This time he knocked the pin down. I handed over a handsome suitcase to the little dark guy, who thanked the yokel and left.

"I hate to see you lose your money when you're just getting the hang of it," I told the yokel.

He slowly produced another buck. It never occurred to him that the little dark guy was a shill, working for me. That this little dark guy, whose name was Joe Tamarak, would walk down the midway till he was out of sight, duck in behind the concessions, and bring that suitcase back to the tent behind my layout.

So the sucker, chewing on the inside of his mouth in an attempt to concentrate, tried the game four more times without any luck.

"I'll git this yet," he said determinedly, and reached for another buck. He was just handing it over to me when I heard the gunshots. There were four of them, and they came from directly behind me in the tent.

They didn't cause too much excitement because they sounded a lot like the backfiring of the motor-

cycles in the big tank. But I knew the difference.

I left the sucker holding his dollar bill out toward me and beat it back into the tent.

Joe Tamarak, the shill, was lying face down on the trampled turf, his fingers clawing at the grass. There'd been soft-nosed bullets in the gun, and they'd made four apple-sized holes in his back. I couldn't turn him over.

"Jeff!" he said weakly, and there were red bubbles on his lips.

"Who did it?" I asked him.

He just groaned.

"Did you see who it was?"

"Jeff, you got to listen to me—"

"You keep still," I said, "I'll get a doctor and the cops."

"No!" He tried to move, and blood welled up out of the corners of his mouth. "Listen," he said thickly.

You didn't have to be an M.D. to know there wasn't anything that could be done for him. "What is it, Joe?" I said.

"Card game," he said. "New York. Big-time stuff. I—I had a sucker—cattleman from the Argentine. I—steered him into a game and I was to get a cut. They—they let him win the first night—eight thousand smackers. The next night they—were going to take him. But he didn't show. He—he took it over the fence with the dough."

Joe started to choke and cough. I took a handkerchief out of my pocket and wiped his lips.

"They told me—get the guy back or get the dough up or—or—"

"Or else," I said.

He blinked his eyes. "I had to lam out—you understand, Jeff? I couldn't—raise the money or find the Argentine. That's—that's how I happened to be with the carnival."

"You figure it was someone in the game caught up with you?" I asked.

"Must have been, Jeff. I thought I'd given them the slip, but—"

"Who ran the game?"

"Lloyd—" he said, and started choking again.

"Lloyd who?" I asked.

"The—The Mountain," he said.

And then Joe Tamarak died.

The local state's attorney in that little New York State town was not overflowing with the spirit of good will. He didn't like carnivals, and he wanted to clear up the murder quick and, if possible, hang it on somebody in the show.

He was a thin, bald little guy named Wilson with an aggressive manner.

"Your name?" he asked me. We were sitting in his office, with a stenographer taking down what I said.

"Jeff Larigan."

"Your address?"

"Santa Barbara, California—when I'm home."

"Your age?"

"Fifty-eight."

"Your profession?"



"Doomed? Corruption?" The Englishwoman looked up from her preoccupation with the ripples, startled.

"You know what I mean, Miss Reynolds. Marriages may be made in heaven, but how do they turn out?"

"Bachelor." She laughed, and lay back in the canoe. But then she sat up again, restlessly. "How wrong you are. They're very lucky, Molly and her Conklin. Do you believe in luck, Mr. Queen?"

"To a limited extent only."

"It's everything." Jennifer hugged her knees, and at the same moment a cloud slid before the sun and the air rapidly chilled. "Some of us are born lucky, and some of us are not. What happens to us in life has nothing to do with what we are, or how we're brought up, or what we try to make of our lives."

"The whole body of modern thought disagrees with you," Ellery smiled.

"Does it?" She stared at the riffling water. "I was working at a loom by the time I was fourteen. I never had the proper things, or enough to eat, or the means to make myself attractive. I didn't grouse; I tried very hard. I educated myself under great difficulties. I suppose Beatrice has told you that I write—criticism chiefly, and chiefly in the fine arts. . . . During the war I fell in love. He was a Navy man. His ship was torpedoed in the North Sea and went down

with all hands. We were to have been married on his next leave. . . . I picked up the pieces of my life and carried on. I had my work, and I had my family, a very poor family, Mr. Queen, with an ailing father and mother and a great many younger sisters and brothers . . . all of us terribly devoted to one another. And then last February my entire family was wiped out in the floods that devastated the southeast coast of England. I was the only survivor; I was in London at the time. So you see, I had bad luck even in that."

The bleached face puckered, and Ellery looked away and said, "Well!" and picked up his paddle. "Rain clouds. Let's get this relic of Hiawatha in, shall we, Miss Reynolds?"

Ellery had to admit that Jennifer Reynolds had a case.

But there was less to be said for Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew. As the week jangled on, the sound of their laughter echoing Molly's took on the shrill pitch of hysteria. And on the very night of the day Miss Reynolds confided in him, Ellery found out why.

Bea and Donald Mackenzie had gone down to High Village for a session with Avdo Birobatyan at the Wrightsville Florist Shop, where a gardenia crisis had arisen. Conk and Molly had driven off somewhere to be alone, Jennifer had retired early, Essie Hunker had washed the dishes and gone to

bed; and Ellery shut himself up in his room with some work he had brought up from New York.

The house was quiet at last, and he became absorbed in what he was doing. So when he heard the noise and glanced at his watch, he was surprised to find that an hour had passed.

The noise came from somewhere on the bedroom floor, and Ellery opened his door and looked up the hall. Molly's door was open and her light was on.

"Back so soon, Molly?" He paused in her doorway, smiling. She was standing in her wedding gown before the full-length mirror in her dressing room, adjusting the bridal veil. "Can't wait, I see."

And then she turned around and he saw that she wasn't Molly Mackenzie at all, but Sandra Burnett.

"I beg your pardon," said Ellery.

Sandra's cheeks were gray under her tan. "I—I just stopped by," she said. "I thought nobody was home. I mean—" And suddenly the big girl slumped down onto Molly's vanity bench and burst into tears.

"And not finding Molly here, you couldn't resist trying on her wedding dress?"

"I'm so awfully ashamed," the girl sobbed. "But I always thought Conk and I would . . . Oh, you don't understand!" The gown was too small for her, and Ellery viewed its straining seams with alarm. "I'll never marry anyone else—never, never . . ."

"Of course you will," said Ellery, "after you've found the right man, who obviously isn't Conk. And we won't say anything about this, Sandra, either of us. Now don't you think you'd better take that off—before Molly gets back?"

He heard the big girl leave ten minutes later. The Burnetts lived only a short distance away; Sandra's flat heels pounded off down the road, as if she were running.

That was the first unusual incident of the evening. The second came much later, well after midnight. Bea and Donald Mackenzie had returned from the florist's in triumph and had gone to bed. It was a warm night, and Ellery went downstairs through the dark house and the open front door to the piazza, moving quietly. He sat down in one of the basket chairs, propped his feet on the porch railing, and soaked up the coolness.

He was still sitting there when Conk Farnham's convertible swung into the driveway and pulled up near the piazza. Ellery was about to announce himself when the motor died and the lights dimmed. He heard Molly's stifled laugh and Conk's manly, "Come here, you!" and decided that the immediate silence called for self-effacement. After a long moment Molly gasped, "No, darling, that's *all* for tonight—it's *late*," and Ellery heard her jump out of the car and run up the driveway to the side door.

And the moment the side door clicked shut on Molly, before Conk could turn on his ignition, there was a rustle of foliage from the rhododendron bushes on the far side of the driveway, and a woman's voice called softly, "Conk! Wait."

The young surgeon's surprised voice said, "Yes? Who's that?"

"Me."

"Flo! What are you doing here this time of night?"

"I've got to talk to you. I've been waiting behind that bush for hours. Let me get in, Conk. Drive me somewhere."

There was a pause. Then Conk said slowly, "No, Flo, I'd rather not. I've got to get home. I'm operating at eight in the morning."

"You've been avoiding me." Flo Pettigrew's voice sounded gurgly. "You're avoiding me now—"

"We have nothing to discuss," Ellery heard Conk say. "I broke our engagement because I realized we'd made a mistake. Would you rather I'd gone through with it, Flo, feeling the way I did? Anyway, that was kid stuff. Why revive it now? What can possibly be the point?"

"Because I still love you." Her voice was strangled.

"Flo, that's enough. This isn't fair to Molly." His voice was considerably sharper. "If you don't mind—"

"Oh, Conk, you never gave us a chance! We had so much together

. . . those firefly nights at the lake, our music, the poetry. . . . Remember the Millay poem I told you was my own? 'I only know that summer sang in me/A little while, that in me sings no more.' Oh, it was prophetic! I hate you!"

"Flo, you'll wake the house. Please take your hand off my car. I've got to get some sleep."

"You fool, you fool! Do you really believe that anyone as *childish* as Molly—" The rest was smothered by the roar of the engine. The convertible backed rapidly out of the drive; in the glare of the headlights Ellery caught a glimpse of the thin pale face of Flo Pettigrew. Then the lights were gone, and Ellery clumped noisily into the house, rather hoping that the girl in the driveway could hear him.

The day before the wedding Molly had Sandra and Flo and five other girls in for brunch—"My last yak-party," Molly laughed. The yakking was vigorous—her father, home for lunch with Ellery on the side terrace, remarked that it sounded more like old man Hunker's barnyard at feeding time.

Molly insisted on dragging her friends out to the terrace to meet the author from New York, and Ellery spent a busy five minutes fending off the lion hunters and trying at the same time to read the faces of Flo Pettigrew and Sandra Burnett. But the poetess and the outdoors girl were quite unreadable.

ble. Both girls were a little pinched looking about the mouth, that was all. If anyone was nervous, it was the bride-to-be. Molly seemed tense and distracted in her vivacity. Ellery wondered if she had overheard the painful talk in the driveway the night before. And then he recalled that Molly had been nervous all the previous afternoon, too.

"Look at the time!" Molly cried. "Girls, you'll simply have to excuse us now. We're to meet Conk at the church—Dr. Highmount's running us through the rehearsal for the Bishop. Sandra, Flo, do the honors for me, will you, dears? Then come up and talk to me while I change.—And, Daddy, don't forget, you're *not* to go back to the office, Mother said!"

Molly fled.

Sandra and Flo saw the girls to their cars while Ellery and his host finished their lunch. Essie Hunker was just serving the coffee when it happened.

Jennifer Reynolds appeared in the terrace doorway, pale as the tablecloth. "Donald, Molly's just had hysterics upstairs. I'm afraid she's fainted, too. You'd better come quickly."

"Molly?"

Molly's father ran, and Jennifer ran after him.

Ellery caught Molly's bridesmaids on the piazza, waving to the last departing car. He seized Sandra's arm. "Phone Conk Farnham

—he's just up the road, isn't he? He must be home now, dressing for the rehearsal. Tell him to come right over. Something's wrong with Molly."

"Wrong!"

He caught one flash in Flo Pettigrew's eye, and then he ran back into the house and bounded upstairs. He heard Sandra excitedly jiggling the phone in the foyer as he reached Molly's bedroom.

Molly was lying in a heap on her dressing-room floor, her eyes closed, her cheeks chalky. Bea and Donald Mackenzie were on their knees trying to revive her. Bea was chafing the girl's left hand.

"Rub her other hand, Donald! Don't just squat there like a toad!"

"I can't get her fist opened," groaned Molly's father. He began to massage Molly's right wrist. "Molly, baby—"

"Wake up, Molly!" Bea wailed. "Oh, dear, it's all this excitement today. I told her not to have those silly girls in—"

"Where's the doctor? Call the doctor!" Donald said.

Jennifer hurried in from the bathroom with a glass of water.

"He's already called," said Ellery cheerfully. "Here, let me get her onto the bed. You two parental idiots get out of the way. Mrs. Mackenzie, throw those windows wide open. Never mind the water, Miss Reynolds—she'd strangle. You hold her head way back while I lift. That's it."

Ellery was still working unsuccessfully over Molly when Conk Farnham rushed in, his tie hanging unmade and lather still clinging to his cheeks.

"Out," he said hoarsely. "Everybody."

"But darling, *you?*" moaned Bea. "Conk, you *mustn't*—not the day before your *wedding*—"

He shut the door in her face.

Ten minutes later, Conk came out of the room. "No, no, Bea, she's all right. She's had some sort of shock—I can't get a word out of her. What the deuce happened?"

"I don't know! Let me see my baby!" Bea said.

"Come in, but for heaven's sake don't excite her."

Molly was lying flat on her back in bed, covered to the chin and staring up at the ceiling. A little color had come into her cheeks, but her brown eyes were glassy with fear.

"Darling, what happened? What happened to my baby?"

"Nothing, Mother. Excitement, I suppose . . ."

Bea crooned over her.

"Donald," Conk said, "do you have a sedative in the house?"

"Well, there's some sleeping pills in my medicine chest. Walt Flacker gave them to me a couple weeks ago."

"Even better. Warm a little milk and dissolve two tablets in it." Donald Mackenzie hurried out, and

Conk went over to the bed and stroked Molly's bright hair. "I'm going to give you a soporific, young lady, and you're going to take it and like it."

"Oh, Conk, no," Molly whispered. "The rehearsal . . ."

"Hang the rehearsal. If you don't get some rest right now, there won't even be a wedding. Don't you want to be pronounced Mrs. Conklin Farnham tomorrow?"

"*Don't say that!*" Molly turned her face away, sobbing.

Conk looked down at her, a crease between his eyes. Then he said pleasantly, "Bea, I think the caterer's people are downstairs waiting for you—I passed them on my way up. I'll stay with my patient till Donald brings up the milk. The rest of you—d'ye mind?"

Ellery was pacing the foyer when Donald Mackenzie came heavily downstairs again, followed by Jen Reynolds.

"How is she?"

"She drank the milk . . . I don't get it." Molly's father sank into the tapestried chair beside the foyer table.

"She still hasn't given an explanation?"

"No. There's something wrong, Mr. Queen—awfully wrong. But why won't Molly tell us?"

"There's nothing wrong, Donald," said the Englishwoman nervously. "Don't say things like that."

Ellery went to the front door and looked out. Bea Mackenzie was on

the lawn talking to the caterer's decorators and glancing anxiously up at Molly's windows. Flo Pettigrew and Sandra Burnett were on the piazza, twisting their hands in their laps. He came back and said, "I disagree, Miss Reynolds. I think Mr. Mackenzie is right. Something caused that shock, and it wasn't just excitement."

"But Molly's one of the lucky ones!" cried Jennifer, as if Ellery had betrayed a sacred principle of hers.

Molly's father said between his teeth, "Something happened between the time she left the girls down here and the time she got to her room. You were upstairs, Jen. Did you hear or see anything?"

"All I know about it, Donald, is that I was in my room when I heard Molly laughing and crying in a most peculiar way. I ran out and met Beatrice in the hall—she'd heard it, too. We ran in together and found Molly in her dressing room. She was having hysterics. Then her eyes rolled up and she fainted."

Donald Mackenzie looked at Ellery. "I don't like this at all," he said slowly. "Maybe I'm looking for trouble, but do you suppose, Mr. Queen, you could find out what's behind this?"

"You are sure," asked Ellery gravely, "you want me to?"

"Yes," said Molly's father; and his jaw set.

Ellery turned to Jennifer Reyn-

olds. "There was no one else in the room when you and Mrs. Mackenzie found Molly?"

"No, Mr. Queen."

"Nothing out of place? Nothing lying on the floor?"

"I don't recall anything."

"Could she have had a phone call?"

"I heard no ring, Mr. Queen."

"I had one a few minutes ago," said Mackenzie. "But it's the only one I know of."

"Maybe a message of some kind. Did Molly get any mail this morning? A letter that perhaps she didn't open till she got upstairs?"

"Yes," said Molly's father suddenly. "When I got home for lunch I saw an envelope addressed to Molly lying in the tray here."

Ellery glanced at the salver on the foyer table. There was nothing on it. "Picked it up on her way upstairs. That may have been it, Mr. Mackenzie. Do you remember whom the letter was from?"

"I didn't look."

Mackenzie seemed puzzled.

"What's this about a letter?"

Conk Farnham came down the stairs, fixing his tie.

Mackenzie told him. Conk shook his head. "I don't see how it can have been anything like that."

"How's Molly?" asked Jennifer.

"Out like a light." Conk went to the door and stared out at the two girls.

"I think," said Ellery, "we'd better look for that letter."

He found the envelope in the wastebasket in Molly's dressing room. It was lying on top of the heap, not even crumpled. And it was empty.

Ellery examined the envelope carefully, and his lean face lengthened.

"Well?" Donald Mackenzie licked his lips.

"All the earmarks of an anonymous letter," murmured Ellery. "Penciled address in block printing, dime-store envelope, and no return address. Postmarked yesterday. But where's the letter that came in it?"

Mackenzie watched dumbly as Ellery dumped out the contents of Molly's wastebasket and set to work. Halfway through, Ellery suddenly rose. "I just remembered. When we found Molly, one of her hands was so tightly closed you couldn't open it. I wonder if . . ."

"I'll bet that's it!"

Mackenzie opened Molly's bedroom door softly. Conk had drawn the shades. They tiptoed over to the bed and peered down at the sleeping girl. Her right hand was still a fist.

"We mustn't wake her up," Mackenzie whispered.

Ellery stooped over Molly, his ear to her chest. He felt her forehead, touched her eyelids. Then he ran to the door of the dressing room. "Conk!" he yelled. "Conk, come back quick!"

"But what's the matter now?" faltered Mackenzie.

Ellery brushed by him, returning swiftly to the girl's bedside. Footsteps rattled in the hall, then Conk Farnham burst in, followed by the girls and Bea.

"What is it?" Conk asked wildly.

"There's something wrong with her breathing . . ." Ellery said.

After a frantic examination Conk glared at his prospective father-in-law. "What the devil did you put in that milk?"

"Only—only two of the sleeping pills," stammered Molly's father.

"*She's had a heavy overdose of the drug!* Bea, Jen—I'll need both of you for a while. The rest of you get out!"

"But I only did what you told me," Donald Mackenzie moaned.

Ellery had to remove him forcibly.

"Listen to me, Mr. Mackenzie!" In the hall Ellery backed the bewildered man against the wall. "You're in for a shock—the same shock that made Molly faint." He produced a small wrinkled sheet of cheap white paper. "I took this out of Molly's fist."

The Wrightsville businessman stared at the writing on the paper. Nine words, in the same penciled block printing of the envelope:

*"You ignored my warning, so you will die today."*

If not for Jen, as Bea said afterward, they would all have gone to

pieces right there and then. Jen was a tower of strength, managing to be everywhere at once—soothing Bea, assisting Conk, slapping Sandra when the big girl seemed on the verge of hysteria, getting Flo's ill-timed storm of tears under control, and coming down hard on Essie Hunker, who sat in the kitchen with her apron over her head shrieking like a banshee.

"I was born to trouble," said Jen with a sort of pride; and she carried on.

Ellery asked questions and prowled. It was he who brought down word from Conk that Molly was conscious and out of danger; she was sick and still dazed, but she would be all right. Conk forbade anyone to come upstairs until he called.

They sat huddled in the living room, and from the lawns came the cheery sounds of the caterer's people stringing Japanese lanterns, sparkly mobiles, and ropes of evergreens.

"As long as we have to wait," remarked Ellery, "we may as well employ the time gainfully. Let's see if we have the facts straight. . . . When Conk told you to prepare the sleeping draught, Mr. Mackenzie, you took the bottle of pills down to the kitchen and set some milk to heat on the range. You opened the bottle and were about to take two tablets out when Essie called you to the phone. The minister was asking about the rehearsal. You took the

call in your library, leaving everything in the kitchen as it was. Essie, who was cleaning up the dining room and terrace, was out of the kitchen all the time you were telling Dr. Highmount about Molly's fainting spell. Then you came back, turned off the range, dropped two tablets into the milk, dissolved them, poured the contents into a glass, and took the glass upstairs. You stood there while Conk put the glass to Molly's lips and she drank the milk. And within a short time, Molly was drugged.

"It's obvious, then," said Ellery in the silence, "that someone who had planned it perhaps a different way saw a better opportunity when you left the kitchen to answer the phone, and took advantage of your absence to slip into the kitchen and dose the milk heavily from the bottle on the table. When you returned, you merely added two more pills."

"My fault," said Molly's father dully. "I didn't notice that the bottle, which had been almost full, was half empty when I got back. I was so upset about Molly—"

Bea pressed her husband's hand. But her eyes remained on Sandra Burnett and Flo Pettigrew, and there was a lethal glitter in them.

"The point is," said Ellery, "someone here tried to murder Molly, and it could have been anyone in the house."

There was another silence.

"Are you looking at me?"



screamed Flo Pettigrew. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

"Yes," said Bea Mackenzie.

"Beatrice," said Jennifer gently.

Flo sank back, trembling. And Sandra Burnett sat there with a witless look on her face, as if she could not understand any of this.

"I still can't believe it," muttered Mackenzie. "That one of Molly's girl friends. . . ."

"Murder is always hard to believe, Mr. Mackenzie."

"The police—the wedding . . . It's all spoiled now."

"Not necessarily. There's no reason to call Chief Dakin yet. By the way, I've made another discovery, Mr. Mackenzie."

"What now?" It brought all their heads up.

"The letter indicated a *previous* warning. People embarking on a spree of crime usually establish a pattern of behavior. So I looked for another anonymous note, and I found it in one of Molly's coats—the coat she was wearing the day before yesterday."

"Give—me—that!" grated Donald Mackenzie.

The sheet of paper was identical with the one they had found in Molly's hand. There was no envelope. The message was block printed, in pencil. Mackenzie read it aloud slowly.

*"Call off your wedding to your fine Mr. Farnham, or you'll be very sorry. Remember Browning's Laboratory."*

"That's why she was nervous yesterday," exclaimed Jen. "The poor, poor dear."

"Browning's Laboratory!" Molly's father looked up at Ellery, frowning. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me."

"Browning's Laboratory . . ." He turned to his wife. "Do we know anybody named Browning?"

"No, Donald." Bea was scarcely listening; her eyes were still on Molly's bridesmaids, and they still glittered.

"How about Molly?" asked Ellery. "Perhaps a high school teacher—chemistry lab, that sort of thing. Do you girls know?" he said suddenly, turning to Sandra and Flo.

They shrank. "No," said Sandra. "No!"

Flo Pettigrew shook her head violently. She was very pale.

"I don't think there's a single family in Wrightsville by that name," rasped Mackenzie. "There's a Brownell Dental Laboratory in Limpscot, but that can't . . ."

"All right now!" Conk Farnham's voice from upstairs rang through the house like a jubilee gong.

The rush left Ellery alone in the living room. He sank into a chair, staring at the note. He sat there for a long time. Then he got up and went into the Mackenzies' library.

"Well, we're *not* going to call off

our wedding," Conk Farnham was announcing when Ellery walked into Molly's bedroom. "Are we, honey?"

Molly smiled faintly up at him. "Not a chance." Her voice was low but clear. "I'm not scared any more."

"We'll be married tomorrow on schedule, and no murder attempts are going to stop us." Conk glared at the two girls cowering near the windows.

"May I—may we go home now?" Flo sounded far away.

"P-please . . ." blubbered Sandra.

"No!" roared Conk. "Because now we've—Oh, Ellery. What do you make of this 'Browning's Laboratory' business? Seems to me there's an important clue there."

"Definitely," smiled Ellery. "Well, well, Molly. You look human again."

"Thanks, Mr. Queen," whispered Molly, "for catching me in time . . ."

"Rescuing brides is my specialty. Oh, by the way." Ellery held up a fat green book he was carrying. "Here's the answer to that cryptic reference."

Bea Mackenzie stared. "That's my volume of Robert Browning's poetry—why, all of us got copies when we joined the Robert Browning Society. Did it mean *my* Browning?"

"Your Browning," nodded Ellery. "*The Laboratory* is the title of one of Browning's poems. Since the writer of the note wanted Molly to

'remember' this particular poem, let me tell you what it's about." He looked around evenly. "It's about a woman who, discovering that the man she loves is in love with another woman, procures some poison with which to kill her successful rival. That's the plot line . . . those notes were a warning, all right—a warning from a woman who thinks she's in love with Conk, Molly, and who's tried to kill you to prevent your marrying him. Sheer envy, grown to homicidal proportions. Shall I tell you," said Ellery, "which woman it was?"

"Wait!" Molly bounced upright. "Wait, Mr. Queen, please! Were you—were you going to give me a wedding present?"

Ellery laughed and took Molly's cold little hand in both of his. "I admit some such thought had entered my mind. Why, Molly?"

"Because there's only one present you can give me," cried Molly. "*Don't tell who it was.* Please?"

Ellery looked down at her for a long time. Then he squeezed her hand.

"You're the doctor's wife," he said.

It was very late. The moon had set, and the lawns were black behind the night breeze. There were no lights in the Mackenzie windows; everyone was asleep, exhausted by the events of the day. Up the road the Farnham house was dark, too.

"I think you know what I have to

say," Ellery was murmuring to the silent figure in the other lawn chair, "but I'm going to say it anyway. You won't get another opportunity to harm Molly—I'll see to that. And since Molly wants this kept quiet, I suggest you'd better find an excuse for leaving Wrightsville immediately after the wedding tomorrow. In fact, we can arrange to go together. How would you like that?"

There was no sound from the other chair.

"People who do what you did are ill. Suppose I send you to someone in New York who's very good at straightening out sick minds. You'll have your chance, and I strongly advise you to take it."

The figure rustled, and a wraith of a voice drifted over through the darkness. "How did you know?" it said.

"Well, it goes back quite a way," said Ellery. "To the Middle Ages. Even earlier, in fact, to the Fifth Century A.D. and the barbers of Rome."

"Barbers?" said the voice, bewildered.

"Yes. Because barbers were the

only people until relatively recent times who practised surgery. It wasn't till shortly before the American Revolution that the barbers and surgeons of London, for instance, were split into two separate groups, and in France, Germany, and other European countries the practise of surgery by barbers wasn't forbidden by law until much later.

"So to be a surgeon, you see, was for centuries considered a lowly pursuit. So lowly, in fact, that surgeons weren't dignified by titles. And the prejudice has carried over into modern times in some countries. To this day the most eminent surgeons of the finest British hospitals are not addressed as 'Doctor,' like other medical practitioners, but as 'Mister.'

"And so," said Ellery, "when I thought over the note that referred to Dr. Conklin Farnham, a surgeon, as '*your fine Mr. Farnham*,' I realized that only one person in the house—in all of Wrightsville, for that matter—could have written it, and that was the visiting gentlewoman from England. You, Miss Reynolds."



## Hugh Pentecost

### The Girl Who Lived Dangerously

*It started with the tawdry murder of a mysterious shill in a cheap carnival—and it ended with a fabulous poker game in which the stakes were more than money . . . Another of Hugh Pentecost's solid, suspenseful, and thoroughly entertaining short novels. Mr. Pentecost is one of our most professional "pros"—a wily tactician and technician who unfailingly excels in playing the "grandest game in the world" . . .*

**Detectives: JEFF LARIGAN and ALAN QUIST**

HEY, BUD! YOU GOT A MATCH?" As soon as the sucker turned around I knew I had him hooked. He'd been standing about ten feet away, looking down the carnival midway inhaling the smell of fried onions and hamburgers and listening to the wheezy music of the merry-go-round calliope.

He came over to my counter, pulling a couple of wooden kitchen matches out of his pants pocket. He handed the matches to me, at the same time looking at my layout.

"Ever play this game?" I asked him.

He shook his head. He was tall, with big, trusting eyes and the scrubbed look the yokels manage to acquire when they're out on a spree.

"It's called Skill-O," I said. "Let me show you how it works. You see this bowling pin in the center of the counter?"

He nodded again.

"Now, this ball, hanging by this chain from the ceiling, is what you play with. You hold the ball alongside the pin like this—then you swing it out. If it knocks down the pin on the backswing, you get one of those beautiful pigskin traveling bags. And I don't mind telling you they're worth at least twenty-five bucks, wholesale."

He looked doubtful, so I held the ball to one side of the pin and swung it out. It knocked the pin down coming back.

"Go ahead," I said. "Try it for free. It's good for business to have someone playing the game."

He took hold of the ball, hesitantly, and swung it out. It knocked down the pin coming back. He looked at me, his eyes lit up.

"Four chances for a dollar," I told him.

He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a modest roll of bills.

"Show business," I said.

That was only a half-truth. Working in the carnival wasn't my regular routine. I've been a hustler ever since I can remember, but big time, you understand. I used to be one of the best card mechanics and dicemen in the business. I've played the cruise boats, the big gambling houses, the railroad trains, and thousands of private set-ups. Then, about two years ago, I was taking a bunch of suckers to the cleaners on a cruise boat, when I fumbled in the middle of a deal. The suckers were too green to realize what had happened. But I knew. My fingers weren't as agile as they used to be and it was time for me to quit.

I bought a gas station out on the coast near Santa Barbara and settled down to sampling honesty and respectability. Out there I ran into an ex-G.I. named Alan Quist, who was trying to locate some hustler who'd knocked off a friend of his. To locate this guy, Quist had to learn something about the trade. So I taught him, and later came East with him. When that job was done, I ran into a friend of mine who was running this carnival, and decided it would be fun to spend the summer touring the provinces.

Wilson brought me back to earth. "Was the deceased working for you?"

"If that means Joe Tamarak, the answer is yes."

"Never mind the wisecracks,"

Wilson said. "What did Tamarak do for you?"

That was one I wouldn't answer. "Helped me with my stuff—packing and unpacking, running errands, cleaning up."

Wilson looked straight at me with his unfriendly eyes. "He was a shill for that Skill-O game, wasn't he?"

I looked innocent. "Shill?" I said. "Skip it," Wilson said. "How long has he worked for you?"

"Since we took to the road this spring."

"Did you know him before that?"

"No."

In the back of my mind I was trying to think what I *did* know about Joe. The first day I was on the lot with the carnival he came up and asked if I didn't need someone to shill for me. He was a quiet little guy you wouldn't notice particularly, a good type for a confidence racket or a come-on routine, because you'd never suspect him. He never talked about himself to me, and I didn't ask questions. I did notice his nerves were a little shaky, but it wasn't any of my business, I thought.

"Where did he come from?" Wilson asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"About tonight. You were working your Skill-O game when the shots were fired?"

"Yes," I said. "And lucky for me

there were several witnesses to that."

"Damn' lucky!" Wilson growled.

I grinned at him. It would have been a lot simpler for him if he could have tagged me with it. Fight between boss and employee.

"Who was he feuding with in the carnival?" Wilson asked.

"Everybody liked him," I said. "He was a quiet little guy who didn't nose into anybody else's business."

"Okay." Wilson sighed. "You got to him first and he died before anyone else got there. What did he tell you?"

"We've already been over that," I said. "I told you what he said."

"What did he mean by 'the mountain'?"

"Mr. Wilson, you've got me," I said. "Maybe he was delirious."

But I didn't think so, really. You see, I had a pretty good idea what Joe meant.

That was that as far as Wilson was concerned. Nobody knew where Joe Tamarak hailed from, and the carnival crew took up a collection to have him buried there in the town. The show was supposed to have played there another day, but Wilson closed us down. That meant there was a two-day gap before we opened at the next stop. If it hadn't been for that I might have stayed out of trouble.

Joe Tamarak didn't mean anything to me. He was a nice little

guy, but he didn't mean anything to me. All the same, if he was telling the truth, he'd got a pretty rough deal. It wasn't his fault the Argentine fall guy turned out to be no fall guy at all.

I know the rules, you understand. I know you don't welch on bets. I know a crooked game like that would hold the steerer responsible. But four slugs in the back is pretty rough treatment. I was curious about a mob that would act that way. You'd have thought they'd have been more interested in getting back the eight Gs. Maybe Joe had lied to me. Maybe he and the Argentine guy had planned to take the gamblers. Maybe they'd split the take between them. But then, I asked myself, why would Joe lie when he knew he was dying?

So I had two days on my hands, and instead of being sensible and lying around in the sun in the country, I took a train for New York.

I figured maybe if I went to The Mountain I might find some of the answers to Joe Tamarak's story. I was just curious and I had the time. Those could have come under the head of "famous last words."

The Mountain is a man. His real name is Teliski and he is a bookie. He is called The Mountain because he's the fattest guy you ever saw and because it's smart nowadays to give people nicknames like that.

The Mountain is a character. He has his office in the back booth of a Broadway bar and grill. He just sits

there with a pad and pencil and writes down bets as people come in to place them. He tears off the little pieces of paper and stuffs them in his pockets. When he reaches in his pockets for a cigarette, or a sharp pencil, he pulls out half a dozen of these little slips and they float down to the floor. Then he has to get someone to pick them up for him, because he can't bend over without risking apoplexy.

When I got to New York I went to this bar and grill. I hadn't seen The Mountain for five or six years, but it might have been yesterday for all the reaction I got from him when I sat down opposite him in the booth. His eyes are small and dark; sunk in his fat face, they look like raisins in a rice pudding, and with about as much expression.

"Hello, Jeff," he said. When he speaks he wheezes like an old-fashioned tire pump.

"Long time no see," I said. Evidently it was too much of an effort for him to comment on that, so he just waited for me to go on. I went straight to the heart of it. "Did you ever know a guy named Joe Tamarak?"

"Could be," he said.

"He's dead," I told him. "Shot in the back four times. It happened upstate yesterday. Probably didn't make the local papers."

"It didn't," The Mountain said.

"I was with him when he died," I said. "The last thing he did was mention your name."

"I should feel good about this?" The Mountain asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe you were his friend."

"Maybe."

Getting anything out of him was like bobbing for apples in a glue vat. I tried again. "He said he got involved in a big-time card game. He took in a sucker. The sucker took it over the fence with eight Gs. Joe couldn't find the sucker and he couldn't raise the eight Gs, so he got out of town. He was hiding out in a carnival, but they found him. When he was dying he mentioned your name. He also mentioned the name of the guy who runs the game."

"Oh," The Mountain said.

"Do you know a Lloyd Someone who runs a big card game?" I asked.

"No," The Mountain said.

"Why do you suppose Tamarak mentioned your name?" I asked.

"I don't like guessing games," The Mountain said.

I wasn't getting anywhere fast. "I think Joe figured you might know who killed him."

"I don't," The Mountain said. Then he really extended himself. "Why are you interested, Jeff?"

"Joe was a nice little guy," I said. "If he was telling the truth he got a bad deal. I'd kind of like to check his story."

"And if it's on the level?"

"I don't know," I said. "You can't tell what you'll do in a situa-

tion till you know what the situation is."

The Mountain didn't say anything for a long time. Then he reached forward and wrote something on his pad. He tore off the slip of paper, folded it, and slid it across the table toward me. "I don't know anyone by the first name of Lloyd," he said.

I unfolded the paper. This is what he had written on it: *George Lloyd, proprietor and owner of The Circus Club.*

"Thanks," I said.

"Maybe I'm not doing you a favor," The Mountain remarked, and closed his eyes. He looked like he was asleep.

Yes, I was just curious and I had the time. There are people who will see an accident along the highway and say to themselves, "That's none of my business," and drive on. There are also people who will stop. I'm one of those. There was something about Joe Tamarak's story and his getting killed that didn't check. I had to stop to see what it was.

Professional gamblers and card players aren't usually killers. They'd be sore about losing that \$8,000 and they'd try to get it back. But why kill Joe? A murder only meant possible trouble for the gamblers. So why? I kept asking myself.

I spent the rest of the day trying

to run down a few old friends who might know something. That was pretty much a dead end street. None of them had ever heard of Joe Tamarak. I also asked questions about a big Argentine cattleman who might have looked like white meat to some of the sharp hustlers around town. Here my luck was a shade better, but only a shade. They had heard some under-the-table talk about such a guy, but nobody had ever seen him.

Of course I had another question. "Who is George Lloyd?" I asked everyone.

On this count I got plenty. It added up to this: George Lloyd was a very high-class card mechanic. As a front he ran a night spot called The Circus Club. He was a popular character in what is known as Café Society. The visiting movie stars and the local playboys thought of him as a big-time gambler, a sort of glorified Rothstein or Gates. The smart boys knew he was just a mechanic. He won because he knew how to deal cards and how to make dice work for him.

It still didn't add up. Eight thousand bucks wouldn't be much of a gouging for a guy working on Lloyd's level. Why risk a killing? Maybe the gambler's code calls for killing the welcher, but the mechanic, who isn't a gambler at all, is mainly concerned with keeping his skin whole and his racket going.

You couldn't get away from



those four holes in Joe Tamarak's back, though. The guy who'd plugged him hadn't been taking a little quiet target practice. He'd meant it.

So it wasn't any of my business and I should have let it lie there. But me, I couldn't pass the accident without stopping. I had the time!

It was about eleven o'clock at night when I walked into The Circus Club. I didn't have any particular plans. I just thought I'd see what I could see and improvise.

The headwaiter gave me a table in a back corner of the room. The place was decorated with circus murals, to go with the name. The waiters wore clown suits and false noses. It was all terribly, terribly cute.

The place was full of people, but they didn't mean anything to me, and they didn't look like they'd get me any of the answers I was looking for. I decided to force my hand a little.

I signaled the headwaiter. "Is Mr. Lloyd around?" I asked.

"You wish to see him, sir?"

"That's the general idea."

"May I have your name, sir?"

"Lloyd doesn't know me," I said, "but it's quite important for me to have a chat with him."

"I'll see if he's in," the headwaiter said.

"Take a good look," I said, and slid a five-spot across the table. He smiled, and I figured his eyesight was already improved.

You understand, I just wanted to have a look at Lloyd. He was responsible for the accident, if Joe had been correct, and I wanted to size him up. In my business you learn to read character better than all the palmists, numerologists, and assorted fortunetellers rolled into one. I wanted to card-index Mr. George Lloyd and file him away in the back of my head for future reference. As to what we'd talk about—well, I'm a professional mechanic myself, and I could prove it. I'd use the line that I was looking for a place for myself. I could mention a few names that would do for references.

The majordomo came back after a spell. "This way, sir," he said.

He led me out past the washrooms to a hallway and pointed to a door at the end of it. "Mr. Lloyd's back there in his office," he said. "You can go right in."

I walked along the hall. There was a fire exit about halfway down on the left. When you've been in my racket you notice things like that. You never know when they may be valuable. I reached the door to the office, opened it, and went in.

It was a good-sized room. There was a thick green rug on the floor, white leather chairs, a big, flat-topped desk, a little bar on wheels alongside it, a modern safe, and hundreds of pictures of theatrical people, movie stars, and sports celebrities on the walls.

There was a guy standing be-

hind the desk, pouring himself a drink out of a glass decanter. He was a short, dark guy with close-set black eyes and black hair that shimmered in the light from the desk lamp. I knew right away this wasn't George Lloyd. Lloyd had been described to me as a tall, blond type.

I knew something else about this guy. I'd seen him before. I have a photographic memory for faces, and I knew this guy and just where I'd seen him. It had been the night before, a hundred miles from here, on the carnival midway.

"What happened?" he said. "Did Tamarak talk before he died?"

It seemed this guy knew me, too.

It wasn't so odd when you came to think of it. This guy—and I had no doubts he was the one who'd killed Joe—had had to hang around the midway till he got the opportunity for killing with the best chance of a getaway. He'd stood in front of the Skill-O game and taken in the whole set-up. He remembered me as I remembered him.

Sometimes it's smart to act dumb, and sometimes it's a waste of time. I kept coming till I was standing directly across the desk from him. He put down the decanter and put the stopper back in the long, narrow neck. He lifted his glass.

"Well?" he said. "Did Tamarak talk?"

"With those four holes in him?"

The guy swallowed, then put the

glass down. "You didn't get here by accident," he said.

"That's right." I was feeling my way.

"I could have taken a powder when the waiter pointed you out to me," he said. "But I figured if you'd got this far you'd keep on hanging around. I work here, you know. I couldn't stay under cover forever. I figured we might as well get it over with."

"Get what over with?"

"Don't act stupid," he said.

I've learned to watch hands and eyes. This guy's eyes were angry and his hands were relaxed—the kind of relaxation that you see just before action.

"How easy is it to get rid of a corpse in this city?" I asked.

"Easy," he said. "Don't count on that."

"We can't make a deal?"

"How?" he asked.

It wasn't easy to figure. He knew that I knew he was a murderer. I could point him out to the cops. There'd probably be others who'd remember seeing him, once he was on the spot. He had the odds figured, and they were too long.

"You see how it is," he said, and reached for the gun in his shoulder holster.

You don't want to get the idea from Western movies that when a man draws a gun it's so fast the gun just materializes in his hand. Especially when he draws it from inside a double-breasted suit.

Moving fast has been my livelihood for fifty years. While he was tugging for that gun my hand closed over the neck of the heavy glass decanter. I hit him with it right between the eyes.

He staggered back against the wall. He had the gun out, but he moved it around toward me like a slow-motion picture. I stepped past the desk and made a pass at the gun with my left hand. I missed, and he raised it up, straight at me. There wasn't anything I could do but hit him with the decanter again, hard. The gun dropped out of his fingers and landed soundlessly on the rug. He slid slowly down the wall and then rolled over on his face. I saw what the decanter had done to the side of his head and I felt a little sick.

For the first time in my life my reflexes didn't work. You see, I'd never killed a guy before. I knew he was dead, without feeling for any pulse. It's funny what you think about in a moment like that. I thought, "I don't even know what his name is!"

I remember I reached out and put the decanter down on the desk, fumblingly, so that I knocked over the glass with the rest of his drink in it. I looked down at my right hand, opening and closing the fingers, as if I wanted to make sure it was my hand, attached to my arm.

Words kept going round and round in my head. "He's killed Joe . . . He had it coming to him

. . . Anyway, it was self-defense . . . It was him or me."

I was still staring at the body on the floor when I realized I wasn't alone.

If I'd seen a football team of waiters blocking my way, I wouldn't have been surprised. If it had been Lloyd, I wouldn't have done a take. If it had been anyone but the girl who stood with her back against the door, a bright red cape falling partway off her bare shoulders, and a tiny gun leveled straight at me, I wouldn't have felt the sense of shock I did.

She had dark hair that hung loosely down to her shoulders. The dress under that cape was one of those strapless things that have always been a mystery to me how they stay up. She wore expensive jewelry—a bracelet, earrings, and something set in diamonds that hung on a chain around her neck.

I noticed these things, but they weren't what held me. It was her eyes, wide-set, a kind of deep, burning blue. They weren't angry. They weren't frightened. I don't know any other way to describe them except to say that they literally sparkled with excitement.

"Is he dead?" she asked. Her voice was husky, breathless, as though my answer was the most important thing in the world to her.

I didn't like the way the situation felt. There was the threat of some-

thing explosive about that pent-up excitement.

"I don't think there's much doubt of it," I said.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

"If you'll move around the desk you'll see the gun he was going to use on me."

She didn't move. "Why was he going to shoot you?"

"Look," I said, "could I ask a question?"

"What?"

"Who is he?"

I wished I hadn't asked it. You could almost feel the wave of excitement sweep over her. "You don't know who he is?"

"No," I said. "Look, you've got three things you can do, miss. You can shoot me, if this guy meant something to you and that's the way you feel—"

"Go on."

"You can call for help and let someone else handle the situation. Or you can let me go."

She didn't say anything for a moment. The tip of her tongue moistened her scarlet lips. "If you didn't know him," she said finally, "then why did he want to shoot you?"

"Maybe it was just a whim."

An unexpectedly hard light came into her eyes. "I want a straight answer," she said. "Were you trying to rob the place?"

"No," I said.

"Then what happened?"

Perhaps I don't have to draw a blueprint of why I wasn't going to

tell her the truth just then. I didn't know what she was doing in Lloyd's office, but it suggested she had the run of the place. That meant she was a friend of the management. She probably knew the dead man quite well, since he'd said he worked here. I wasn't going to tell her he'd intended to kill me because I knew he was a murderer. She might want me out of the way, too.

"I think," I said slowly, "he made a mistake. I think he thought I was someone else. There wasn't any time to argue with him. He started to draw the gun and I hit him with that decanter. I didn't mean to kill him. I was just trying to save myself, that's all."

She reached up with her free hand and pulled the cape around her shoulders. Then she moved away from the door. "I think you'd better put up your hands," she said. "Up high! You're a little too quick for comfort. Now!"

I lifted my hands up over my head. She reached out and opened the door.

"All right," she said. "Quickly. Down the hall—and keep your hands up."

The pressure of her finger on the trigger was too tight for me to disobey. I went out into the hall.

"Hurry," the girl said, behind me. I started walking. Then, to my surprise, she said, "Out that door to the right."

The door to the right was the fire

exit. I was suddenly out in the cool darkness of an alley. The heavy fire door closed, and the girl spoke again.

"I don't think anyone saw us," she said. "You can put your hands down, but keep walking."

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "If anyone had seen us I didn't want it to look as though I was helping you."

I kept walking toward the street. "Are you helping me?"

"I don't know yet," she said. "Listen carefully. We're coming out at the rear of the building. There's a blue convertible parked across the way. Can you drive?"

"Yes."

"Good. You get in behind the wheel. I'll sit beside you and I'm going to have this gun right against your ribs, so do exactly as I tell you."

"Yes, *ma'am!*" I said.

The car was a custom-built job that must have set her, or somebody, back about nine thousand clams. I got in behind the wheel, and she sat down beside me. For the first time I got a whiff of the perfume she was using. It would have been heady stuff for me twenty years ago—What am I saying? It was heady stuff right then.

"Make for Central Park," she said.

She didn't say anything more until we turned into the park at Fifty-

ninth Street. "What's your name?" she asked me.

"Joe Sucker," I said. "Believe it or not, I was just waiting for a street car, minding my own business—"

"I want your real name," she said, with a touch of that hardness I'd noticed before.

"Jeff Larigan," I said. I'd done some figuring, and I'd decided to take that one gamble—for a reason. The dead guy had recognized me as the operator of the Skill-O game in the carnival. But it was ten to one he hadn't made any inquiries about me. No reason why he should. I figured he'd just recognized me, the way I'd recognized him.

Anyway, I had to risk giving my right name, because I'd decided what my story was going to be. I was going to stick to my original idea—that I'd gone to see Lloyd in the hope that he could find work for me as a professional card- and diceman. I'd give my right name because they'd have ways of checking, and they'd discover that I was what I said I was. There weren't five people who knew I'd been working in the carnival, and they were the kind of friends who didn't talk for the pleasure of hearing their own voices. I had to have a legitimate explanation for being at The Circus Club and asking for Lloyd. This seemed the best one, and if this girl was connected with Lloyd, it was the best one for her.

"Jeff Larigan," she said, trying to remember if she'd ever heard the

name before. "What were you doing at The Circus Club, Jeff?"

"This sounds so improbable," I said, "you won't believe it. I went there to see George Lloyd, the proprietor. The headwaiter told me he was in his office and that it was all right for me to go in. I did. Instead of Lloyd I found this other guy. He pulled a gun on me and I hit him with the decanter."

"Fill in the gap," she said.

"What gap?"

"Didn't Buddy say anything to you?"

"Who's Buddy?"

"Buddy Lamar, the man you killed. Are you trying to tell me he just pulled a gun on you without a word?"

"That's the way it was," I said. So the guy's name was Lamar. I'd never heard it before.

"Why did you want to see Mr. Lloyd?" the girl asked.

"Lady, that gun gives you the right to ask an awful lot of questions," I hedged.

"I've given you a chance, haven't I?" she said. "I'm entitled to know about you so I can decide what to do next."

That, I thought, wasn't unreasonable. "All right, I'll let you have it straight," I said. "Incidentally, it would be handy if I could call you something."

"My name is Judith Hagan."

That didn't mean anything to me, either. "Well, Judith, this is the

way it is." I told her my story about looking for work.

"And you never saw Buddy Lamar before?"

"No," I said.

"Turn out of the park at the next exit," she said.

I felt my muscles tighten. "What's on the program?"

"We're going to my apartment, where we can talk quietly," she said. "Who were the friends who recommended Lloyd to you?"

"You wouldn't know them," I said.

"Try me."

"Ever hear of The Mountain?"

She burst out laughing. It was a charming sound. "That fat swindler!" she said.

"You know him?"

"Know him! He's been averaging plenty a week on me."

"Horses?" I asked.

"That's what it says in the racing form," she said. "Turn here, Jeff, and then east on Seventy-sixth."

I drove out of the park, turned north on Fifth Avenue, then east on Seventy-sixth. A few doors in she indicated an apartment building with a canopy out over the sidewalk. The pressure of the gun relaxed.

Maybe you'll think I should have made a break then, but there was a doorman, a big guy, who was all smiles for Judith Hagan. Besides, I was curious, and there were a lot of things I wanted to know about

Lloyd and Lamar that maybe Judith could fill in for me.

The doorman took charge of the blue buggy, and I went upstairs with Judith. The apartment wasn't a surprise, nor the maid in the white apron and cap who appeared as soon as Judith had let us in with a latchkey. The car, the jewels, the talk about losing to The Mountain spelled dough, and in freightcar loads.

The elevator opened into a private foyer. Judith spoke to the maid in French, and then took me down a hall to a room which turned out to be a sort of private pub.

There was a complete bar, tables and chairs, couches along the oak-paneled walls, some sort of glass trophy case at one end, and almost as many pictures as there'd been in Lloyd's office. The only difference was that these were all pictures of Judith, or had Judith in them.

She took off her gloves and went around behind the bar. "What'll you have, Jeff?"

"I don't drink," I said. "A little sparkling water, maybe."

"You don't drink?" She sounded surprised.

"Or smoke," I said. "In my business you need all your senses sharp."

She poured me some soda and a liqueur glass of brandy for herself and came out front to join me. I'd moved over to the wall.

"Quite a collection of pictures," I said. They were. Judith on skis;

Judith at the wheel of a speedboat; Judith in a racing car; Judith at the controls of a Piper Cub; Judith in the uniform of an Air Force Ferry pilot; Judith taking a horse over a murderous water jump. "You don't seem to have left out any ways for breaking your neck," I said.

"It's still unbroken," she said. Then I noticed the one picture in which Judith wasn't doing anything dangerous. It was a picture of a man in old pants and a sloppy hat holding up a swordfish that was bigger than he was. Beside him was a little girl in pigtails whom I recognized as Judith. I kept staring at the picture because the man was familiar, but I couldn't place him.

"Who's the man with the fish?" I asked Judith.

She didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "My father."

"Oh," I said. Hagan. It didn't click. I couldn't place him.

"Don't you think, Jeff, you'd better start doing some thinking?" Judith said. "By now it's likely the whole city police force is looking for you. What are you going to do?"

We sat down at one of the tables. The crimson cape slid back off her shoulders. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. That almost crazy excitement had faded out of her eyes.

"How did you happen to turn up in Lloyd's office when you did?" I asked her.

"I wanted George to cash a check for me," she said.

"Do you always carry a gun?"

"Oh, yes," she said, quite casually. "I have a permit for it, if that's what's bothering you." She held out her hand, and the bracelet and a couple of rings glittered in the dim light. "These are real, Jeff. I get pleasure from wearing them. And I go about a great deal by myself. They seem worth protecting."

She leaned forward. "You've just killed a man. The police will be looking for you. Maybe some of Buddy's friends will be looking for you. What are you going to do?"

"Well, up to now I haven't had any say in the matter. What do you know about Lamar?"

She shrugged. "He was a sort of handyman for George Lloyd," she said. "Bodyguard, errand boy—he just sort of hangs around. Or did."

"Do you know Lloyd well?" I asked.

"In a sort of way. I've played a lot of cards with him."

I raised my eyebrows. "That's not very smart, is it? You know he's a mechanic?"

She laughed. "Haven't you guessed by now what my weakness is, Jeff? It's running risks. Anything that has an element of risk in it is my dish. I know about Lloyd, and he knows that I know. But I like to sit in on the games because—well, there's always a chance there'll be an explosion."

I opened my mouth to ask her a

question, and then shut it tight. I'd been about to ask her if she'd happened to sit in on a game with a certain Argentine cattleman. I wasn't sure enough of her for that yet.

She glanced at her jeweled wrist watch. "There's a news broadcast on the hour," she said. "Maybe the story's broken."

She went over and turned on a radio back of the bar. There were three minutes of news, but nothing about The Circus Club or Buddy Lamar. She clicked off the radio and came back to the table.

"Perhaps you'd better go to the police," she said. "If you didn't know Buddy—if there's nothing between you two that they can dig up—" It was really another feeler she was putting out.

"I tell you I didn't know him. I never had any dealings with him," I said. Which was true.

Just then a telephone bell rang. Judith went behind the bar and answered it.

"George!" she said. She put her hand over the mouthpiece, and her eyes were round and bright again. "George Lloyd!" she whispered to me. Then she went on in her normal voice, "Yes—yes, I'm quite all right, George . . . No! But, George, how terrible! . . . But why?"

I could hear the scratching sound of Lloyd's voice through the receiver, but not what he was saying.

Then Judith spoke again. "Carlo must be wrong, George. There was-



n't anyone in the office when I went there. It must have been *before* . . . Of course I'm sure. I'd have seen him, wouldn't I? . . . It's a terrible thing for you. Will it hurt the club? . . . I see. Well, I'm terribly grateful to you for calling . . . No, when you weren't in the office I just went out through the alley to my car and came home . . . Yes. Good night, George. And let me know what happens."

She put down the receiver slowly. She looked at me, and her eyes had that dark, excited look in them.

"They've found Lamar," I said.

"Yes. They found him and called the police. And Carlo, the head-waiter, described you. They're looking for you. The police, that is."

"Of course. That was inevitable," I said.

"Jeff, there wasn't any gun."

"What do you mean?"

"They say Buddy was unarmed."

"Nuts," I said. "There was a gun right where he dropped it on the rug. And he was wearing a shoulder harness."

"Not when they found him, Jeff. They think you were going to rob the office. They think Buddy caught you at it and you killed him. They say he wasn't armed, so the self-defense story won't hold up."

"But you saw the gun yourself!" I said.

She shook her head slowly. Then I remembered she hadn't moved around the desk to look at it when I'd asked her to.

"I believed you," she said, "because Buddy usually did carry a gun."

I knew I had to do some pretty rapid thinking. There'd be a detailed description of me and a city-wide alarm on the tape. Somebody had taken that shoulder holster off Lamar and taken the gun before the cops got there. I thought I knew why.

I looked at Judith. I saw doubt in her eyes.

"I killed Lamar in self-defense," I said. "He had a gun and he pulled it on me, and I hit him with that decanter. I went back to that office to see Lloyd, just as I told you. This Carlo character can testify that I asked for Lloyd. I didn't sneak back there. The reason Carlo can give the cops a detailed description of me is because I was quite open about it. I don't know who took the gun and Lamar's holster. There might be half a dozen reasons *why* it was taken."

"For instance?" Judith asked.

"A man who carries a gun usually has a use for it," I said. "Maybe Lamar killed somebody with it. Maybe the ballistic boys could prove it. Maybe Lloyd wouldn't like that because Lamar did the job for him, so he needed a fall guy. Me."

"You know how to use your head, Jeff, don't you?"

"After tonight I wouldn't go on record."

"It sounds reasonable," she said,

"and I think I believe you. What do you want to do?"

"I want to get out of here," I said. "I want to find myself a little elbow room and figure the angles."

"You'd be safe here," she said.

"After that doorman seeing me? And the maid? Listen, Judith, I've got to decide whether I go to the cops and take a chance on their believing my story or wait till I can prove it. Proving it isn't going to be done hiding out somewhere."

"You're going to need help, Jeff."

"I think I know where I can get it," I said.

"Do you want some money?"

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, but I'm heeled. I just want to go, Judith. I want to start things moving."

She came toward me. "Will you keep in touch with me, Jeff? Will you let me know what happens?"

"I've got an unpleasant hunch you'll be able to read that in the papers," I said. "But I'll call you—because I'm grateful to you."

"Good luck," she said.

I didn't feel safe until I'd walked out through the foyer and past the doorman. Women have been known to change their minds before this.

I walked across town to an all-night drug store on Lexington Avenue. I got myself a couple of bucks' worth of change, went into the phone booth, and called Alan Quist in Vermont. He was one guy I could trust up to the hilt, and, boy!

that was something I needed right then.

I sat in the booth, imagining him swearing to himself as he stumbled out of bed in that little cottage of his near the college campus and fumbled for the phone in the hall. Presently I heard his voice.

"Jeff!" he said. "Don't tell me you've taken to drink? Do you realize it's two thirty in the morning?"

"Alan, I'm in a bad jam," I said.

He was instantly serious. "What is it, Jeff?"

"I—I killed a guy tonight, Alan."

His voice was as steady as though I'd told him I had caught a bad head cold. "Have you been arrested?"

"Not yet. It was self-defense, Alan."

"You don't have to tell me that," he said.

"There's an alarm out for me. I'd give myself up, but there is a slight touch of frame-up involved. I've got to figure it just right, and I need help."

"I can leave here in half an hour," Alan said. "It'll take me about six hours to drive to New York. That'll be about nine o'clock. Where can I find you?"

"Lower level information booth at the Grand Central Station," I said.

"I'll be there, Jeff," he said cheerfully. "And keep your shirt on."

Six and a half hours to wait.

If you are being hunted, the best place to hide is in a crowd. But there are no crowds at three in the morning. On the streets are a few cruising taxis, maybe a police car, a few half-empty buses. You might think of riding the subways. But the man who sits opposite you staring into space may be a plainclothes detective on his way home, or a newspaperman. After staring at you a long time, the description he's just got on the police ticker may click in his mind. You can't escape him on a moving train.

If you go to a hotel, without luggage, at three in the morning, the night clerk looks you over carefully and is bound to remember you. There's nothing outstanding about my appearance. It's part of my stock in trade to avoid anything that would be characteristic in the way of dressing. I'm about five feet eight inches tall and I never did run to weight. My hair was a light brown when I was younger, and it's still a sort of neutral brownish-gray. My features are regular. My eyes are a sort of hazel color. In a crowd I would look like a hundred other guys you might see around, but alone, with a police alarm out for me, I had a definite problem.

I didn't want to go to the station until the last minute. The places most likely to be carefully watched during the first hours by the police were stations, bus terminals, and airports. I walked out of the drug store, hailed a taxi, and gave the ad-

dress of a hotel on lower Lexington Avenue. That would at least get me out of the neighborhood.

I was of two minds about Judith Hagan. Either she was just a screwball on the hunt for excitement, or she had some real connection with Lloyd. I was inclined to believe the first idea, but if the second happened to be true it was possible I'd been followed from her apartment house. I wanted to be sure to shake any tail. But on the trip downtown in the taxi, I convinced myself we weren't being followed. She was a strange girl, that Hagan.

At the hotel I went in, pretended to make a phone call from a booth in the lobby, and then went out on the street again. I walked back up Lexington and then turned east toward Third. In a deserted block I discovered an old brownstone house that had been converted into apartments. There was a little foyer with a brass mailbox and name plates, dimly lit by an overhanging bulb. The windows of the house were all unlit. The chances that everyone was home and in bed were pretty good. I went into the foyer, reached up and unscrewed the light bulb, and stood there in the darkness, hunched in one corner. If anyone should come home at this hour I would walk out, as if I were leaving from a late call. If no one came, I would be safe there until daylight.

Three and a half hours later, aching and stiff from standing in one position so long. I walked out into

the summer morning. I went uptown to Grand Central and to a barber shop. A shave and a series of hot and cold towels made me feel a little more human. When I left the barber shop I decided to have a cup of coffee while I was waiting for Alan. So I headed for the lunch counter near the entrance to the Lexington Avenue subway. On the way I picked up a newspaper at a stand. It was a tabloid, and splashed all over the front page was *NIGHT CLUB KILLING BAF-FLES COPS*.

I sat down on a stool in the lunchroom, ordered coffee, black, and started to read the piece:

"Shortly after midnight last night Buddy Lamar, assistant manager of a night spot known as The Circus Club, was found brutally murdered in the club's private office. His head had been beaten in with a heavy, glass whiskey decanter.

"Lamar, chief assistant of the well-known Broadway figure, George Lloyd, proprietor of The Circus Club, West 52nd Street night spot, was found lying on the office floor by Lloyd, who promptly notified the police.

"Carlo Ferrari, headwaiter at The Circus Club, provided the police with the description of a man believed to be the killer. This man, Ferrari said, arrived at the club a little after eleven o'clock. He was alone, and after sitting at a corner table for a while he beckoned Fer-

rari and told him that he wanted to see Lamar."

I read that over again. They were giving out that I'd asked for Lamar, not Lloyd. I thought I understood that. They were trying to tie me directly to the killing, to hint at a motive.

"The suspected killer gave Ferrari a five-dollar tip," the story went on, "to tell him where he could find Lamar. Ferrari had no reason to be suspicious and told the man he would find Lamar in the private office. The man went back to the office, and was not seen again by Ferrari or any other club employee.

"Lamar, though he had a pistol permit, was unarmed. Evidently the attack was totally unexpected, since there was no evidence of any real struggle between Lamar and his killer. So far there is no clear-cut motive evident for the killing. No connection between Lamar and the killer has been discovered. If robbery of the office safe was the motive, the murderer was evidently frightened away before he could do anything about it.

"Ferrari's description of the missing killer follows: about five feet five inches tall; abnormally broad shoulders; black curly hair and black eyes; a small, jagged scar on the left cheek—"

I set down my cup so hard I spilled half the coffee on the counter. "Five feet five—black hair and eyes—scar."

I lowered the paper and looked

at myself in the mirror behind the counter. In spite of that unbelievable description I was still me!

I get a little soft in the head when I talk about Alan Quist, I've said it before and I say it again—if I'd ever had a son and he grew up to be like Alan, I'd have said "Thank you!" to Whoever's responsible for those things.

Alan has class sticking out all over him. He is dark and slender and very quiet in his manner. Just a nice modest kid who looks a little like Dana Andrews, the movie actor. But I know, from my association with him, that underneath that easy going exterior he is hard as a cutting diamond when the going gets rugged. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have in my corner, and when I saw him coming toward me across the station I began to feel warm inside.

When he saw me, a look of concern in his blue eyes relaxed. "Jeff, you're all right, then!" He gripped my hand hard. "Where can we talk?"

"Had any breakfast?"

"No, but—"

"We can go next door to the Commodore," I said.

One thing I like about Alan, when you've got something to tell him he doesn't crawl all over you with questions before you've started. He waits for you to tell it in your own way and in your own time.

We got a corner table in the dining room and ordered breakfast. It wasn't until the waiter had gone away that I began to tell him the story. He leaned back in his chair, took a flat silver case out of his pocket, picked a cigarette out of it and lit it. He listened, and you couldn't tell what his reactions were from anything that showed on his face or in his eyes.

He interrupted me three times in the telling. He asked me if I believed Joe Tamarak's story. I said I did.

He asked me if I'd noticed Lamar particularly when I saw him in the midway before the shooting. I told him no.

He asked me if I remembered now who the man was in the picture with Judith and the swordfish. I said I didn't.

"I have the feeling," I told him, "that I never really saw the guy before, only another picture of him. It isn't a memory I seem to associate with anything in my life. You think it's important?"

"It's just unexplained," Alan said. "The Hagan girl is apparently extremely rich. Her father must have been prominent in some field. Perhaps you did see his picture somewhere."

I got right down to the end, about leaving Judith's and calling him. Then I showed him the tabloid which I had folded up in my pocket. When he came to the end of the

story his lips puckered in a soundless whistle.

"So that's why you felt it was safe to move about so openly!" He signaled for the waiter to bring us a fresh pot of coffee. "Mr. Lloyd doesn't seem to want the police to catch you, Jeff. Why do you suppose he feels that way?"

"I have the unpleasant notion that he may want to polish me off himself," I said.

Alan didn't comment on that. He lit a fresh cigarette and sat there, scowling at that phony description in the paper. "It doesn't fit, Jeff."

"What doesn't fit?"

"Lloyd has a racket that depends on his staying out of trouble—clipping the rich suckers in New York and Hollywood. The last thing in the world he wants to risk is getting mixed up in a murder. That eight thousand dollars Tamarak took him for is chicken feed. Why have him killed and risk being connected with it?"

"I don't know the answer to that, Alan, but he did have him killed."

"Let's keep our thinking as straight as we can," Alan said. "Lamar killed Tamarak. Lamar was Lloyd's boy. But we don't *know* that Lloyd ordered the killing."

"But Lamar wouldn't act without—"

"We don't know what he'd do, Jeff. We do know that you killed Lamar, and that Lloyd had a perfect description of you from Carlo, the headwaiter, but that he gave the po-

lice a phony description instead. Why? It's almost like a public invitation to you to show your hand."

Alan stared at me for a moment, and then brought his hand down on the table so that the coffee cups jiggled. "I think I've got it, Jeff. Lloyd wasn't in the club last night when you asked for him. It was Lamar's job to front for Lloyd at the club. Lloyd's a big shot, in his own way. He wouldn't see every character in the place who asked for him. Half of them would want to cash checks, or get permission to sign a tab—ordinary business routine."

"That's right," I said.

"This Carlo, the headwaiter, didn't know you. You asked for Lloyd. He went out back and told Lamar. He probably pointed you out to him. Lamar instantly recognized you as the operator of the Skill-O game at the carnival. He got the wind up. He told Carlo to send you into the office. Now, here's the crux of it, Jeff: he wouldn't tell Carlo why, would he? Unless Carlo is part of Lloyd's inner circle."

"No, he wouldn't."

"So Lamar doesn't tell anyone about you, Jeff. He sends for you, with the intention of getting rid of you. You were too quick for him, and he died—he died *without ever telling anyone about you.*"

"Where does that get us?"

"Lloyd doesn't know why you killed Lamar, Jeff," Alan said. "That must give him the willies. He doesn't know if you had a pri-

vate feud with Lamar, or if it had something to do with his own affairs. You see, Jeff? Lloyd doesn't know if you've got something on him or not. And he doesn't want you to talk to the police before he knows the answers."

"Say, that could be!" I said.

"He's leaving the way open to make a deal with you, in case you do have something on him."

"What kind of deal?"

"He's waiting for you to show your hand," Alan said.

"Yes, but what is my hand?" I said. "I was really nosing around to find out who killed Tamarak and why. I found out! That leaves me holding the bag two ways. If I tell Lloyd that, he may decide he's better off with me permanently silent. If I go to the cops—"

"Let's add that up," Alan said. "You go to the police and tell them exactly what happened. What then?"

"There isn't any gun, so my story of cracking him with the decanter in self-defense won't hold up. You have to remember one thing, Alan—I'm a hustler. That's two strikes against me before I start talking. Unless I can get my hands on Lamar's gun, unless I can find some other witness from the carnival who saw Lamar there, the police aren't going to go for my story."

"There might be another out," Alan said slowly. "It's a little cockeyed, but it might work."

As he told me his idea I decided

"cockeyed" was a wild understatement. I was to get in touch with Lloyd, perhaps directly, perhaps through Judith—who seemed to be on pretty good terms with him—and tell him the same story I had told her: That I didn't know Lamar; that I didn't know why he pulled the gun on me; that I acted in self-defense. If Lloyd went for that we were in.

"Up to our necks," I said sourly.

"That's where we are if we don't do anything," Alan said. "What have we got to lose?"

I had to admit we didn't have much. If I could arrange to meet Lloyd on my ground, it might work. But then what?

Alan had an answer for that, and what an answer!

"You tell Lloyd the real reason you wanted to see him," he said.

"I do? What was it?"

"You tell him you have a sucker, a big-time oil man from the West. You tell him this sucker is in New York, and that he's a crazy gambler. You tell him it was your idea to get him in a game, let him be taken by Lloyd. That in return for producing him you want a cut of the take."

"That's what Joe Tamarak did."

"Precisely."

"And there isn't any oil man from Oklahoma."

"But there is," Alan grinned. "Me."

"Okay, get me the paper dolls and the scissors," I said.

Alan laughed outright. "Listen," he said. "Your only chance of getting out of this mess is to prove that Lamar killed Tamarak, and that he was armed and prepared to kill you when you slugged him with that decanter. Lloyd's got you on the hip right now. His trade is to his advantage, not yours. You keep quiet about Tamarak's murder and he'll keep quiet about you. But that leaves you under his thumb, and always running the risk of being picked up by the police and being given a one-way ticket to the chair on circumstantial evidence."

"Merry Christmas," I said.

"But if you held the trumps *you* could make a trade, and get the evidence you need to prove self-defense. That's where the Oklahoma oil man comes in. If we can whet Lloyd's appetite and get him into a game with this supposed sucker, and then catch him cold at his manipulations with the cards . . ."

The idea began to take shape for me. Lloyd had a cushy racket. If his foot slipped and there was a public exposure, he'd be done for keeps. He'd go a long way to prevent that.

"If you and I, knowing all we do about cards, can't catch Lloyd red-handed," Alan said, "then we deserve whatever happens to us. But it's got to be in a real game, and there's got to be at least one disinterested witness in it." Alan leaned back, watching me for a reaction.

"How do we get Lloyd to reverse

himself about Lamar being armed?"

"Let him sweat that out," Alan said. "He'll find a way if his racket is at stake."

"How do we make the oil man stand up?"

"Duck soup," Alan said. "Grant Simon, who writes a Broadway column in the *Globe*, was in my squadron overseas. I think I could get him to print a couple of items in his paper about Alan Quist, the oil tycoon from Oklahoma."

"Newspapermen don't print phony items in their columns just to be chummy," I said.

"Not to break a murder case, and perhaps unearth a story of how dozens of celebrities have been swindled out of hundreds of thousands of dollars?"

I sighed. "How good is your Oklahoma drawl?" I asked Alan.

Did you ever cross a brook by stepping on a series of wobbly stones, not knowing which one may turn over and land you in the drink? That's a little bit the way I felt about Alan's plan. The first step out into uncertainty involved getting in touch with Lloyd. Would he go for the story or was he just waiting to do a private job on me? But if that held up, what about Judith? Could we trust her or not? If we could, she would be no end of help, but if we guessed wrong we were licked before we started. Third step, could we make the Oklahoma oil man stand up? If



Lloyd discovered in the middle of things that Alan was a fake and that we were setting a trap for him we couldn't expect any quarter. Finally, suppose we couldn't catch him out in his manipulations with the cards. Why, then we'd owe him a bunch of money we couldn't pay, and welchers aren't popular in the gambling world.

Judith, we felt, was the key to this thing. If we could get to Lloyd through her, our chances were better. From what I knew of her character I figured she'd go for anything that involved danger, unless she was all the way on Lloyd's team. Then we'd just be playing into her hands if we told her the whole pitch.

Without seeing her, Alan was against this. "Tell her the story we've invented for Lloyd," he said. "Let her think I *am* being trimmed."

We mapped the plan out very carefully. Alan was to get in touch with his friend Grant Simon and plant something about the oil tycoon in the paper. He was also to get himself a suite at one of the expensive hotels, to make the background look legitimate.

Judith was to be my dish.

It was about noon when I called her from a phone booth in the station.

"Jeff, darling!" she cried. "Where are you?"

"Pay phone," I told her. "Did you see the morning papers?"

"Jeff, they're incredible! That description!"

"Could I see you?" I asked her.

"But of course, Jeff. When, where?"

I wasn't for walking into any carefully prepared traps. "Grand Central information booth," I suggested. "Upper level."

"In twenty minutes," she said.

Alan and I took some simple precautions. At twenty minutes past twelve I sauntered up to the information booth. Alan took up a position over by the ticket windows. If Judith came alone, fine. If she was playing Lloyd's side of the street and she brought someone along with her, I wouldn't be facing it by myself.

I saw her long before she saw me. She came down the steps at the Vanderbilt Avenue end of the station. She had on a white sharkskin suit with a raspberry-colored blouse and a tiny hat of the same color on the side of her dark head. She went for jewelry in the daytime, too. She was loaded down with hammered silver bracelets with little doodads hanging from them, and on her left hand was a ring with a huge blood-red stone in it. Every guy she passed between the bottom of the stairs and me turned to look at her.

I had my own eyes peeled for anyone trailing along in her wake. If she had anybody with her it was impossible to pick him out in the crowd.

She came straight up to me with

both hands held out in greeting. Her eyes were brimming with excitement. "Jeff!"

"Hi," I said.

"Where can we talk?" she asked, and looked around her like a lady spy in a movie.

"You got any ideas?" I asked her.

"Pomeroy's," she said promptly.

"It's a restaurant just up the street on Lexington."

I wasn't going to any place she chose, just in case. "Too fancy," I said. "We should be able to find a quiet little dive over on Third Avenue somewhere."

"All right, Jeff. Let's go." If she meant Pomeroy's as a plant she certainly gave in easily.

We walked within three feet of Alan, but he had his back turned to us and he didn't give me any kind of a sign. We went out of the station and over to Third. I picked out a saloon that had a row of booths at the back. Judith created quite a sensation with the barflies as we walked past them to the rear. A waiter in a dirty apron took our order—a Martini for Judith and a cup of coffee for me.

"You know Lloyd," I said, when we were alone. "Why do you suppose he kept the police off me?"

"Jeff, I've been thinking and thinking all morning," she said earnestly, "and I just can't figure it."

"It's like he was inviting me to make the next move," I said.

"You haven't been to the police?"

"Would I be here if I had? Ju-

dith, I want to see Lloyd. Do you suppose you could fix it?"

"But, Jeff, isn't that dangerous? Maybe that's just what he wants."

"I want to meet him without his knowing it's going to happen," I said. "Suppose you asked him over to your house for a drink. He'd come, wouldn't he?"

She smiled at me. "It's possible," she said.

"Well, suppose you ask him over. Have you told him what really happened last night?"

"Good Lord, no!" she said.

"All right. I'll be there when he arrives. We'll tell him exactly what happened and see what his hand is. Are you game?"

"You're running the risk, Jeff, not me," she said.

"He might not like it that you helped me last night."

"But if I produce you for him now . . . When do you want to set it up for?"

"The sooner the better."

She looked around her. "There's a phone booth over there. I'll call him now."

She didn't object when I walked over to the booth with her. She dialed a number and got Lloyd directly. I made a note of that number in my head. She was all sweetness over the phone. She made the date for four o'clock, and from what I could hear of Lloyd's voice he was a very happy guy.

It wasn't my idea to give her the chance to tip him off if I could help

it. I invited her to lunch. She seemed delighted. She even suggested that after lunch we could go back to her place and set the stage for the meeting with Lloyd. I began to stop worrying about her. I asked her where she'd like to have lunch, and she suggested three or four places over in the Park Avenue area. I picked one out of the hat and we walked across town.

The restaurant was one of those little Italian places—which look simple and unpretentious and where lunch costs you about the equivalent of three weeks' pay for a high-salaried executive. The proprietor knew Judith and made a great fuss over her.

"Could we have that corner booth, Mario?" she asked him.

"Anything you like, Mrs. Hagan. The place is yours."

She ordered another Martini, and Mario went off to make it "with his own hands."

"What's the Mrs. Hagan racket?" I asked. "His way of making an honest woman of you?"

Her face clouded for just an instant. "I am Mrs. Hagan, Jeff."

That was something of a surprise. "And Mr. Hagan?" I asked her.

"He was killed," she said.

"Oh," I said. "The war?"

"No." She let it lie there for a minute, then she looked at me very directly. "You can easily find out the story, Jeff, if you're interested. My husband shot himself. In the

second week of our honeymoon."

"Oh," I said. "That's a tough break."

I found myself fumbling around with small talk after that jolly little revelation. It was Judith, however, who straightened things away. After she'd taken half of her Martini at a gulp she seemed to pull herself together. She started talking about the coming meeting with Lloyd. But she didn't get very far, because we were interrupted.

"Jeff!" a familiar voice said.

I hadn't seen Alan come in, but he was standing by our booth, smiling down at me.

"I've been trying to get hold of you all day," Alan said, and his eyes turned appreciatively to Judith.

I introduced them, wondering what Alan's play was, feeling my way cautiously. Judith suggested he join us for a drink, and he sat down beside me, never taking his eyes off her.

"I was about to bawl you out, Jeff, for not producing a little excitement," he said, "but now I take it all back."

Mario came over and took his order for a Calvert and soda.

"Jeff's been promising to find me a big-time poker game," Alan said to Judith. I breathed easier because I knew now how he wanted it played. "He promised me three days ago, and then he just disappeared."

"You like to play cards?" Judith asked.

Alan grinned. "Not socially," he said. "But when it's for blood it's about as much fun as anything I know."

"You've found a partner in crime," I said. "I understand Judith plays in your league."

"Really?" Alan said eagerly.

Judith laughed. "I usually supply the blood," she said. "How do you earn the money to lose at poker, Mr. Quist?"

"I don't always lose," he said. "I'm in the oil business, Mrs. Hagan. Oklahoma. I've got a pipe line running right from my wells to the bank." He sounded very boyish, very real.

"Have you known Jeff a long time?" she asked.

"About six months, isn't it, Jeff? We met out in the oil fields last winter. Jeff promised when I came to New York he had connections that would get me into a really big game. I'm spoiling for trouble, Mrs. Hagan. Maybe you'd take over?"

"Not me," Judith said. "I'd watch you take your beating, Mr. Quist, but I wouldn't arrange it, even if I could."

"The lady doesn't have much confidence in me, Jeff."

"She doesn't know you," I said.

Judith gave me an odd look over the rim of her cocktail glass. "Maybe she knows you better than you think," she said to Alan.

Of course, Alan had lunch with

us. He drew Judith out skillfully about her interest in dangerous sports. As a pilot overseas in the war he'd seen a lot of places in Europe where she'd been. You got a pretty clear picture of her endless and restless search for dangerous ways to work off her energy. I could see she was taken with him, and he certainly gave off the impression that he thought she was about the most fascinating girl he'd ever met.

At last Judith suggested to me that we'd better get moving.

Alan protested. "I'm not going to let you go now," he said.

"I wish we didn't have to go, Alan," she said. They'd got down to first names. "But Jeff and I have an appointment."

"How about later?" he urged. "Dinner? The three of us. And then we'll do the town."

She smiled at him. "All right," she said. "Suppose you and Jeff meet me at my place about seven. We'll have a drink there and then you can take the wheel."

"Wonderful," Alan said. "At seven!" Then he turned to me. "That doesn't mean I'm not holding you to your promise, Jeff. Find me that poker game."

"You're the doctor," I said.

Judith and I went out and hailed a taxi. She didn't say anything for several blocks, and then she looked at me, frowning.

"Jeff, I don't think I like you as much as I did," she said.

"What have I done?"

"I don't think you told me the whole truth last night."

"What are you talking about?" I said, really puzzled.

"You told me you went to see Lloyd last night in the hope he might have work for you. I think you had something else in mind. You were going to offer Alan Quist for a killing, cutting yourself in on the take."

I had to fight hard to keep from laughing. She'd fallen for it just the way we'd hoped.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "The kid's lousy with money. It won't hurt him to lose some of it. It might even do him good. Teach him to be a little more cautious."

"You know he can't win in a game with Lloyd," she said.

I tried to sound tough, fighting back the urge to laugh all the time. "Look, the guy's money bubbles up out of the ground," I said. "If we take him for all he's got, there'll be more tomorrow. He can't really lose in the long run." It seemed a pity to string her along, but it was better she shouldn't know the truth or she might tip our hand if we did get in a game with Lloyd.

"Jeff I've got half a mind to tell Alan what you're up to," she said.

"Say, you really took a header for him, didn't you?"

She turned away from me again. "Once things were different," she said. "Once I used to get pleasure

out of people that aren't heels—like you and me, Jeff."

At five minutes to four I noticed that the palms of my hands were damp. Judith and I were sitting in the little private bar in her apartment, waiting for Lloyd. This was the big hurdle, and I knew it. There was the unpleasant possibility that I wasn't going to be able to talk fast enough to see it through.

At four on the dot the French maid announced, "Mr. Lloyd."

I don't quite know what I expected. Judith went over to greet him, and I had a moment to look him over before I actually came to grips with him.

He was tall and blond and tanned a golden brown. His features were regular and might have been chiseled by one of those old-time Greek boys. The blue gabardine suit he was wearing must have set him back a couple of hundred clams, estimating low. He had on blue suede sport shoes and a pair of yellow chamois gloves that matched the color of his hair. He was theatrical-looking, but it came out cold, if you know what I mean. No extra gestures, no gushing.

He saw me at once. When he turned his eyes to me they turned out to be the palest blue I had ever seen, with that curious hooded look gamblers get from working under bright lights. He had started to peel off one of the yellow gloves, but suddenly his hands were still.

"George, this is Jeff Larigan," Judith said.

"You sent for me to meet him?" Lloyd said, without looking away from me.

"Yes, George."

"You could have told me."

"There were reasons, George."

"Yes?" He dropped his hands to his sides without removing the gloves.

Judith slipped her arm through his and started to lead him over to the table where I was standing. He gently disengaged her arm, but he came over to the table with her.

"We might as well start honest," I said. "I killed Buddy Lamar last night."

Not a muscle in his face moved, not even a flicker of the eyelids. "I wondered if it was you," he said.

"I have to make a confession, too," Judith said. "I helped Jeff get away last night. He was here when you phoned me. By then I'd come to believe his story, so—"

If she expected him to say something she was disappointed.

"When I read the description you gave out to the cops," I said, "I figured we ought to get together. Judith agreed to arrange it."

Still he didn't speak.

"George, if you'll just listen to Jeff's story—" Judith began.

He spoke in that flat voice, "You asked for me at The Circus Club last night. What did you want?"

"I—I had a proposition for you."

"Yes?"

"I've been a hustler all my life, Lloyd. I picked up a sucker out West about six months ago. It was too big a job for me to swing alone. It was my idea to deliver him to you—for a piece of the profit."

"Why me?" Lloyd said.

"You were recommended to me as a smart operator."

"By whom?"

I had to pull that one out of the hat fast. "The Mountain," I said, and it was partly true.

"Where is the sucker now?"

"Here, in New York. He's screaming for a chance to be taken. Judith can vouch for that. She met him today."

"It's true, George," Judith said.

I thought I could look anyone straight in the eye, but those unblinking pale blue gimlets were too much for me.

"Why didn't you go to the police?" Lloyd asked.

"After you took Lamar's gun from the place I had no chance to cop a plea of self-defense."

"Why do you think I took the gun?"

I swallowed hard. "You wanted it to look like a stick-up. You didn't want it connected with you."

"Why do you think I gave the police a false description of you?"

"Because you wanted them out of your hair. In your business you can't afford it. If you described me they might have found me, and then been back in your hair with questions. This way, they'll be look-

ing for the next five years for somebody who doesn't exist."

He was silent for a moment. "Why do you think I'll let you get away with killing one of my men?"

"The guy was trigger-happy," I said. "I never saw him before in my life, but he pulled a gun on me. Maybe you're better off with him out of the way."

"Why did he pull the gun?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said, "and I could invent a better answer than that, but I want to play this on the level with you. I've still got that sucker."

"There has to be an explanation."

"Look," I said, and I knew everything might hang on my answer. "I've worked boats and gambling houses all over the world. Maybe Lamar was in one of those games. Could I remember every face I ever saw around a crap table? Maybe he figured I took him some time. Maybe I did. It was my business. But I don't remember ever seeing him. The only way I can figure it is that way—and that he was a hothead who wanted to pay me off."

I could hear the faint buzz of the little electric clock behind the bar in the long silence that followed.

At last Lloyd spoke again, "When does this sucker of yours want to play?"

My knees nearly buckled under me, and I could feel my shirt sticking damply to my back. It looked like I'd made it.

That wasn't all there was to it,

but I was over the hump. Lloyd asked me questions about Alan and about me. Then he told me that he would arrange a game for the following night, provided his personal checking on the situation was satisfactory. The game would be held in a private suite at the Hotel Kendall. We would arrive there at ten o'clock to begin play. My share, for producing Alan, was to be thirty per cent.

He asked Judith if she'd like to sit in, and she said, rather reluctantly I thought, that she would. Finally, he left us.

I sat down kind of hard at the table and pulled out my handkerchief. I went through the motions of mopping my forehead. It was an act to cover up the fact that Mr. George Lloyd had really had me going. If he was half as good at concealing what he did with cards as he was at concealing his emotions, he was going to be a tough nut to crack.

Judith went off to dress for dinner, leaving me to amuse myself till Alan got there. He showed a proper eagerness by arriving at a quarter to seven. We were alone in the bar, but we didn't do any private talking. No telling who might be listening. I told him, as though he really was the sucker from Oklahoma, that I'd managed to arrange a game for the next evening. He indicated enthusiasm.

He was looking at Judith's picture gallery when she came in. She

was wearing a filmy evening dress the color of green chartreuse. I figure she must have a million bucks' worth of jewelry, because she was loaded down again with bracelets and rings—a whole new set, including an egg-sized emerald.

She made drinks for Alan and herself, and then he demanded a Cook's tour of the pictures.

"Who's the man in the picture with the fish?" he asked finally.

"My father," she said.

"Who was he? He's distinguished-looking," Alan said.

"His name," she said slowly, "was Max Barretto."

It's just possible that didn't mean anything to Alan. He acted as though it didn't. But Max Barretto! Anybody who knew anything about professional gambling back in the twenties knew Max Barretto. He'd been as big as Rothstein. And he wound up behind the eight ball like Rothstein, too. They said he was framed, but in any case he went to the penitentiary in Atlanta, where he died. They said he cracked up and that he was in a strait jacket in the mental ward at the end.

I looked at Judith and saw the faint quiver of her lips. Poor kid. She'd got it from all angles. First her father and then her husband. No wonder she followed the pattern she did. Max Barretto explained one other thing. They'd said of him that he'd made a terrific killing in the business. Even the

finer the Government had slapped on him for income tax evasion had left Judith well heeled.

We put in quite an evening. Dinner at a famous French restaurant; down to the Village to hear Eddie Condon's hot music; and then a series of joints till nearly four in the morning. After dinner I might just as well have been part of the fixtures for all the attention I got from either of them. They talked together; they danced together. They made one hell of a handsome couple, I kept thinking. Underneath, Alan had the same craving for excitement and adventure that she had, only he had decided on the direction his life was going. She was just bouncing around like dice in a box, going nowhere.

Around four, we hit a small joint on the East Side where the proprietor knew Alan. It seemed Alan had phoned him we were coming and tipped him off to the "oil" story. Before long I discovered this guy had been a member of the ground crew at the field where Alan had been stationed in England. It was old home week. They locked up the place, and there was nobody but us and Alan's pal. There was a small piano in back, and Alan sat down and began to play some old army songs. He and his pal sang. I joined in on some of them I knew. Finally the proprietor left to attend to closing-up.

Alan plays the piano really well when he wants to, and he sat at



the piano now, playing some of the classical stuff he loved, soft and easy. Judith pulled up a chair close to him.

After the night before I was just about done in. I must have dozed off, because when I opened my eyes again the music had stopped. I could hear the soft murmuring of their voices. Judith was the first one to come clear to me.

"Please, *please*, Alan, don't play in that game tomorrow night," she was saying.

"Don't be foolish, darling," he said, laughing. "I can take care of myself."

"You don't understand, Alan."

"What don't I understand?"

"Jeff isn't on the level with you," she said. "You're being set up for a killing, Alan. You haven't got a chance."

Alan was still laughing. "Maybe Jeff isn't as smart as he thinks he is. If he and Lloyd are good enough to trim me, Judith, I deserve it."

"Oh, Alan" Her voice broke and it sounded as though she was crying.

"What is it, Judith? Judith!" He sounded startled.

"I know it sounds crazy," she said. "We've only known each other a day! But don't leave me, Alan. It's been so long since anyone—anyone could possibly mean anything to me. Please, *please!*"

I turned my head just in time to see her wind her arms around his neck and plant her lips against his.

She clung to him as though he were her last hope in the world.

It was daylight when we dropped her at her apartment and went back to Alan's hotel suite.

Alan wasn't happy. "I felt like a heel," he said, "not telling her what was up. But it might not have been safe for her to know. She might tip it, somehow."

"This Lloyd is big-league," I said. "You played it smart. She's running enough risk as it is."

"She's been badly hurt," Alan said. "She told me about her father. Did you know?"

"Sure, as soon as she mentioned his name. Of course I'd seen pictures of him years ago, at his trial. That's why I remembered, but I didn't place it in that setting."

"Her husband, too."

"Yeah. Tough," I said.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. "I wish—"

"What?"

"Skip it," he said.

When I hit the hay I really slept. Just before I passed out, Alan told me Judith had asked him to her apartment for dinner the following night. Just the two of them. I was to pick them up there about nine thirty, and we'd go on from there to the Kendall and the card game.

It was nearly six o'clock in the evening when I woke up. There was a note for me on the bedside table from Alan, saying he'd see me

at Judith's at nine thirty. Pinned to the *noon* was a newspaper clipping. It was from Grant Simon's column in the *Globe*:

"Headwaiters at the local niteries are actually smiling the last couple of evenings. It may have something to do with the presence in town of Alan Quist, young oil tycoon, who is said to pass out hundred-dollar tips as casually as though they were Confederate money."

That was smart. Not too detailed. Just enough to make Alan seem real to George Lloyd over his breakfast coffee. I certainly hoped it had.

I soaked in a hot bath, shaved, and went out to find myself some dinner. I was just walking down the front steps of the hotel when a dirty-faced kid approached me.

"You Mr. Larigan?" he asked.

"That's right," I said, startled.

He reached out a grimy paw and pushed a piece of paper into my hand. He went racing off before I could ask him anything. I looked at the paper. It had been torn off a pad. There were three words scrawled on it: *See me. Urgent.*

There wasn't any signature, but it didn't need any. I'd picked up dozens of slips like this off the floor for The Mountain. He had stooges planted on the staffs of most of the good hotels—runners to bring him bets—which was probably how he'd located me.

I took a taxi over to the bar and

grill where he hangs out. He wasn't there. The bartender told me he'd left word he'd be back about nine if anyone asked for him. I figured I might as well eat there, so I went back to one of the booths and ordered a steak.

At three minutes past nine he came wheezing into the place, walked right past me to the rear booth, and sat down. I got up and went over to join him. He stared at me dully.

"I got your message," I said.

His pudgy hands rested against the edge of the table as if he wanted to push it away from his huge stomach. "I don't know who killed Buddy Lamar," he said.

"Neither do the cops," I said.

"I don't know who Alan Quist is," he said.

"But evidently you know about him."

He leaned forward. "Jeff, get out of town," he said. "Now. Tonight. Take your friend with you."

"What friend?"

"Quist," he said. "I know you, Jeff. You don't pick suckers for someone else to clean. You're planning to frame Lloyd."

I sat there frowning at him. I didn't like his knowing.

"It won't work," The Mountain said. "Don't go to the game. Don't let your friend go. Get out of town. Tamarak's dead. Lamar's dead. Let it lie."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked him.

"You've been a square guy in your league," he said. "If I'd figured this play, I'd never have steered you to Lloyd. I did you a bad turn. I'm trying to make up for it."

I glanced at my watch. It was twelve minutes past nine. I stood up. "Thanks," I said.

His buried-looking eyes floated up to mine. "You're 'way out over your head, Jeff. Deeper than you know."

I left him. I was lucky to get a cab right outside the joint. I gave him Judith's address, and we headed uptown. I have to explain one thing: if anyone else had told me I was over my head I'd have told him to go chase. The Mountain was another proposition. I never knew him to make a mistake on the odds. I didn't know his angle, but I figured maybe we better recheck things.

At Judith's I took the elevator up without announcing myself. I'd figured what we could do. We could phone Lloyd that Alan had got himself plastered and wasn't in any shape to play. The game would have to be put off. That would give us time to plan ahead, maybe even get The Mountain to talk.

The French maid opened the door for me.

"Madame and Monsieur Quist have left," she told me.

"Left! But I was to meet them here."

"*Oui*, Monsieur. They change

their mind and

They try to telep

have left your i

you to meet them at the Hotel Kendall at ten o'clock."

I turned back to the elevator. That was that.

Any last hope I'd had of getting to talk to Alan in the clear disappeared when I was taken up to the fourteenth floor of the Kendall, to a suite which Lloyd had taken for the evening. Alan, Judith, and Lloyd were already there. There was another guy who looked familiar to me; he was introduced as Roger Borden, one of the more popular young leading men in Hollywood.

Mr. Borden, it seemed, had been very solidly cleaned by Lloyd on his last trip to New York and he was hoping to get some of it back.

"The motif is strictly revenge," he told me. "But strictly. I was lucky enough to run into Mrs. Hagan and Mr. Quist at dinner and discovered there was a game on—so here I am."

That told me one thing I wanted to know. He had been produced by Alan and Judith, not Lloyd.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" young Mr. Borden asked.

We weren't waiting for anything, it seemed. The room was an ordinary hotel sitting-room. A round poker table with a drop light hanging over the center of its green baize top had been set up, and there

hips on it. Off to  
etcher table load-  
nceivable kind of  
liquor, plus , soda, and glasses.

Lloyd hadn't said a word since we came in. He had simply stood by the table, waiting for the small talk to end. For the first time I could see, ungloved, his slender, carefully manicured fingers which were going to be put to the business of giving us the works—unless we were smart.

Judith wasn't her usual bubbling self. She kept looking at Alan in a sort of speculative way. I had the unpleasant feeling that she was crazy enough to blow the whole thing and put us all in a bad hole. She was wearing a black dinner dress and her usual collection of bracelets and bangles and rings.

Well, we sat down at the table. I managed to grab a chair next to Lloyd. Judith was on the other side of him, with Borden next to her, and Alan on my right. The chips were valued at fifty, twenty, and ten dollars each—this was going to be murder right from the start.

Naturally, I was interested in Lloyd to the exclusion of everything else. The problem was to spot his particular method and then figure the right moment to expose him. I didn't expect anything so crude as marked cards, and I was right. After a couple of rounds I satisfied myself that both decks of cards in use were legitimate. Of course, Lloyd might switch some-

thing fancy into the game later. I had to watch for that.

I did get a laugh out of Judith. What women can get away with at a card table is fantastic. She had her handbag on the table. She'd keep opening it, fiddling with her compact or lipstick or handkerchief. Those doodads on her bracelets jingled like a toy music box. If any man made all the extra gestures and motions with his hands that she did, the game would have been off.

Lloyd was something else. The first time he dealt I saw him grip the cards in his left hand with that old mechanic's grip that's a dead giveaway to anyone who knows: thumb on top, almost touching the upper outer corner of the deck; index finger curled around the upper end; the other three fingers widely separated down the side of the pack. He dealt the cards with machinegun rapidity. If he could second-deal or bottom-deal at the same tempo, he was going to be a tough monkey to catch.

Mind you, I didn't expect him to go right into his act. The game would be honest for a while. If Alan won a little bit, fine. If he didn't, Lloyd would probably see to it that he did. Then, after he was ahead a little, the roof would fall in. Lloyd was no greenhorn. We were set here for several hours and he wouldn't be greedy; his build-up would be artistic.

The game followed the script, all

right. Alan won right from the start; relatively small pots, but he won. Young Mr. Borden was the chief loser, and unhappy! Judith and I dropped a little. Lloyd stayed about even. After about an hour of this the tide began to turn, slowly. I could feel a tingling sensation in my scalp. The time had come.

I have been in this business over forty years. I've seen all the best mechanics do their stuff. I have been a top-notch myself, and I know all there is to know. As Alan began to lose I kept my eyes riveted on those slender white hands of Lloyd's. His body seemed to be motionless from the wrists up, but those hands flipped out the cards with lightning speed. I had never seen anyone as good as that. I began to feel panicky inside.

Alan's losses began to snowball. He was already several thousand dollars behind, and the total was mounting. I knew there was no possible way he could pay. When the happy moment came for settling we were going to be really cornered—unless we could see what it was Lloyd was doing.

When you're trying to spot a mechanic you have your eyes and you also have your ears. Your ears will often detect the sound of a bottom-deal or a second-deal. All I could hear when Lloyd dealt those cards was the clocking of a tiny machine gun, rhythmic, regular.

I looked up at him after Alan had dropped another eight hun-

dred bucks on one hand. Those pale blue eyes were expressionless, unblinking. But one corner of his mouth twitched in the ghost of a smile as his eyes met mine. It said everything was going very nicely.

On the next hand I had nothing and tossed in my cards. I pushed back my chair and went over to the side table to pour myself a glass of water. I wanted to get rid of the cottony taste of fear in my mouth. The Mountain had been right. Lloyd was too much for me. I was out over my head.

And then, just as I was lifting my glass to drink, with my back to the table, I heard it—the unmistakable swish of a slick bottom-deal!

I had to fight to keep from spinning around. I turned very slowly, glass in hand. As I watched Judith, fascinated, I caught the flash of the middle knuckle of the left hand as she dealt from the bottom of the deck. She was good, very good, but she was human. No one can hide the flash of that knuckle as he slides the bottom card out. That was why some old-time hustlers used to amputate that joint—so it wouldn't show.

My heart was pounding against my ribs as I started back for my chair. It was hard to adjust to the idea, but I thought I had it, and it restored my confidence. Lloyd wasn't a miracle man! I hadn't been able to catch him—*because he wasn't doing anything!* Judith was the dealer—Judith who had completely

disarmed us—Judith who took advantage of her sex to cover her dealing with those jangling bracelets and fluttery feminine motions.

She had just finished her deal as I reached my chair. She looked up at me with a charming innocent smile. I smiled back, but it felt kind of frozen. I should have spotted her long before this.

Just as I pulled out my chair there was a knock on the door.

"Keep your cards down, please," Lloyd said. He got up and went to the door. There was a bellboy standing outside. He handed Lloyd a message on a silver plate. Lloyd took it and started to close the door.

"There's a messenger downstairs waiting for an answer," the boy said.

Lloyd turned away, ripped open the message. Then he crumpled it up and dropped it into his pocket. "Tell him the answer is that I'm sorry, I can't. I'm engaged."

The boy closed the door. Lloyd sat back to the table and sat down. I looked at Alan, trying to get his attention. I noticed he'd taken the opportunity in the pause to produce his cigarette case and light a cigarette. He left the case lying beside him on the table.

"Sorry for the interruption," Lloyd said, and picked up his hand.

I knew what to expect now. Alan dropped a cool twelve hundred clams on that next hand. Well, at least I knew what we were up against. I wanted to watch Judith

on the next deal, and then, the time after that I intended to call her.

Nothing much happened on the next four deals. Why should it? Then once more, after Lloyd's cut, the bracelets jingled and that knuckle flashed its telltale story. I couldn't get Alan's attention. He was fiddling with his cigarette case.

As she finished dealing, Judith spoke to him. "Would you mind putting that cigarette case away, Alan? The light reflects against it."

"It's too late," Alan said.

She looked puzzled. "Too late?"

"It's a camera, Judith," he said.

"A miniature camera."

The room was suddenly so still I had the feeling it might drop away into space. I glanced at Lloyd. He was a motionless statue, the tips of his fingers resting on the edge of the table. I saw young Mr. Borden's face glistening with sweat. I pushed my chair back an inch or two and planted my feet squarely, ready to move quickly.

"Camera?" Judith said. Her eyes were two globes of fire.

"I had to have evidence that would stand up in court didn't I, darling?" Alan said. He said the word "darling" as if it tasted bitter. "Hundreds of pictures of your very expert bottom-dealing, Judith."

I was proud of him for spotting her. I was dumfounded by this camera talk. The case looked like one I'd given him a year ago, but evidently he'd had it duplicated with a camera mechanism inside, one of

those tiny jobs they used in the war. The raised enamel crest probably concealed the lens.

Judith's hand crawled along the edge of the table toward her bag.

"You deliberately framed this, Alan," she said.

"Very deliberately," Alan said. "You had *me* fooled, too, Judith. 'Never leave me. You could mean so much to me!'"

Lloyd's flat voice broke in. He still sat motionless, his hands in plain view. "You're not cops," he said. "What's the deal?"

"We want Lamar's gun," Alan said. "We want conclusive proof, or a statement from you declaring Lamar guilty of Joe Tamarak's murder. Jeff needs that to prove he killed Lamar in self-defense."

"And what happens to us if we give you that?" Lloyd asked.

"We take that camera, Alan," Judith said.

I turned back to her and saw that she had that little cannon of hers pointed straight at Alan's eyes.

His face was a study. He reached out his hand for the case. At the same moment the door to the room burst open. There were two men there, one of them with a regular press photographer's camera. A flashlight blinded me. Then I heard Judith scream.

Alan had taken that moment, which distracted her attention, to lunge across the table at her. His right hand twisted her wrist pain-

fully, so that the little gun dropped on the green baize table-top. At the same moment Judith lowered her head and her teeth tore at the flesh of his hand. He brought his left hand across her face in a stinging slap that sent her staggering.

"Did you get what you wanted, Grant?" Alan asked.

The *Globe* columnist grinned. "Chapter and verse," he said. I noticed that the photographer had already ducked away down the hall. "And there are two plain-clothes men waiting outside for your lady-friend and her accomplice."

"Better be careful of that camera, Alan," I said. "That's important evidence."

Alan laughed. "Camera? You know darn' well I don't own one, Jeff. But I had to get the lady to tip her hand somehow."

"Damn you, Alan! Damn you!" Once more Judith launched herself at him, her fingernails clawing.

It took all the strength young Mr. Borden and I had to pull her away from him.

There were a lot of answers I needed to know. It turned out that while I'd slept that day Alan had set up a scheme with Grant Simon. At a certain moment a seemingly innocent message would be sent to Lloyd, that some friends wanted him to join them at a party. The idea was to give the bellboy a chance, while Lloyd read the message, to fix the catch on the door so

it could be opened from the outside. If this was successful, Alan was to make his play at once.

They'd expected the play to be against Lloyd, but Alan, like me, had finally spotted Judith. They figured the gag about the camera would drive Lloyd—as it turned out, Judith—to give himself away in an effort to get the supposed incriminating pictures. Simon and his photographer were outside the door, with two cops, ready to act the minute the explosion took place.

"I'd expected to have a chance to explain the whole thing to you over the phone," Alan told me, as we waited at police headquarters to make a statement. "But we missed connections. You see, Mr. Borden, the movie star, was part of the plant."

He smiled bitterly. "I wanted another witness besides Judith. She really fooled me, Jeff—I trusted her. But I was afraid her past connection with Lloyd would make her testimony weak. Simon knew that Borden had been taken by this mob and would be eager to help catch them. That had to look natural, so I persuaded Judith to go out to dinner instead of having it at her apartment, and arranged with Borden to bump into us 'by chance.' I still hoped to reach you, but it didn't pan out."

It was George Lloyd, in a long statement to the police, who told us other things that filled in the picture, and, incidentally, helped to

put me in the clear on Lamar's death. Lloyd was eager to talk, in the hope of beating a murder rap.

He and Judith had worked together for a long time. It was a perfect tie-up. He posed as the big-time gambler, she as the innocent excitement seeker. He'd been suspected from time to time, but nobody got anything on him because he was clean. It was Judith who was the mechanic and, until tonight, unsuspected. It was Judith who really bossed the show.

"There's one thing Jeff and I don't understand," Alan said to him. "Why was Tamarak killed? Why run that kind of risk when your loss was relatively small?"

Lloyd was silent for a moment, those pale, hooded eyes looking away into space. "Judith is—I suppose you'd call it 'psychotic,'" he said. "You see, her father was Max Barretto. He was a hustler, too, on a magnificent scale. He and Judith were like that!" Lloyd crossed two of his slender fingers. "It was a real father-and-daughter thing. Then Judith fell in love with a young man named Kelly Hagan. They were engaged to be married at the time that Max Barretto was framed and sent to Atlanta. What most people don't know is that Hagan was in on that frame-up. Oh, he fell in love with Judith, all right, crazy in love. He didn't think she'd ever find out about his involvement with her father. But Max Barretto knew, and he told her!"



"And she went ahead with the marriage?" Alan asked incredulously.

"She went ahead with it," Lloyd said, "for just one reason. To get Hagan. I don't know what happened the night he supposedly shot himself. Nobody does. I could guess, but I won't. The suicide story held up with the police.

"I see," Alan said.

Lloyd shrugged. "Then Judith tried every known way to kill herself—ski jumping, auto racing, mountain climbing in Switzerland. She never got worse than a broken collarbone. During the war she was a ferry pilot. Then, after that, she turned to her father's old profession. He'd taught her everything he knew. She was good."

"Damn' good." I said.

"There was just one quirk in her character, gentlemen. If she thought someone was trying to frame her—as her father had been framed—she insisted on paying off. So help me, it was a kind of blood lust! I begged her to leave Tamarak and that Argentine alone. She wouldn't listen. She'd hired this Buddy Lamar, a trigger-happy lunatic, as a sort of bodyguard. The harbor police may come up with what the fish haven't eaten of the Argentine's body some day. Tamarak got his, as you know. If she'd guessed what you two were up to, she'd have killed you too."

Alan looked down at his hands.

"What I don't understand," I

said, "is why she helped me get away from The Circus Club after I'd killed Lamar? Why didn't she blow my head off, then and there?"

Lloyd shifted those pale eyes of his my way. "I think you'll never be in greater danger again—and live," he said. "I think she meant to kill you. But she had one weakness."

"What's that?"

Lloyd's mouth twitched in a faint smile. "Hustlers," he said. "You and she belonged to the same union. Somehow you made her believe your story. And, actually, she had nothing to fear, with Lamar dead. That must have occurred to her when she cooled off." Then he laughed, and it was a strange sound coming out of those thin lips. "If it hadn't been for me, none of this would have happened. She didn't want to play this game tonight. She wanted to call it off. But I pressured her to go through with it because I fell for your story, too—the oil well story! We needed money."

"Why did she want to call it off?" I asked.

"Forget it, Jeff," Alan interrupted sharply.

"That's right, Mr. Quist," Lloyd said. "She'd fallen for you. You see, there was one thing Judith wanted just about as badly as she wanted excitement. A man she could trust and love."

Alan stood up, and a little muscle rippled along his jaw. "Let's get out of here, Jeff," he said.

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