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ELLERY QUEEN'S 1963 ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 4

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3

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NOVELS

3

NOVELETS

13

SHORT
STORIES

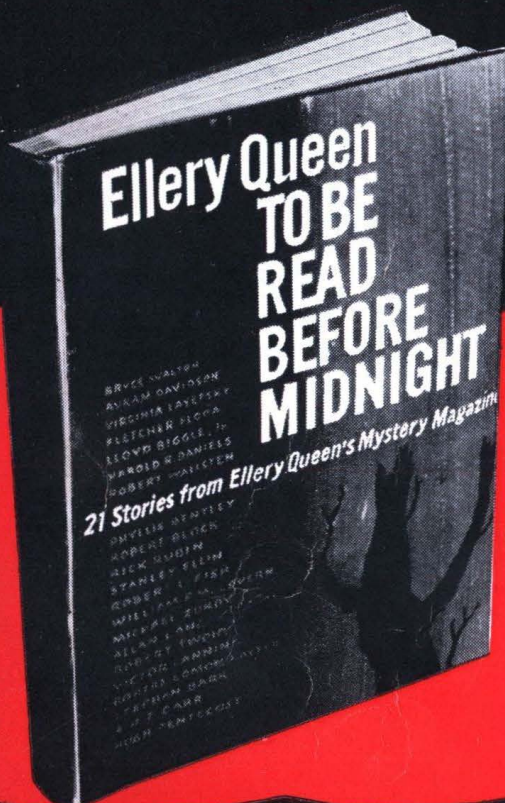
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Editors' Note

Dear Reader:

The reception by readers and critics of the first three annuals in this series indicated clearly that gore (and gumshoeing) *est omnis divisa in partes tres*—that is to say, fans and aficionados, devotees and serious students of the genre, all agree there are three favorite types of mystery fiction.

These three groups can be designated as stories about famous mystery characters (detectives and criminals), stories by famous mystery writers (other than those about "series" characters), and stories of crime and detection by famous literary figures.

Since we firmly believe in giving readers what they want, we planned this fourth annual to offer you, "good measure . . . and running over":

FAMOUS MYSTERY CHARACTERS

Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe (and Archie)
John Dickson Carr's Dr. Gideon Fell
George Harmon Coxe's Dr. Paul Standish
Leslie Charteris' The Saint
Stuart Palmer's Hildegarde Withers
Patrick Quentin's Peter and Iris Duluth
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FAMOUS LITERARY FIGURES

F. Scott Fitzgerald
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Thus, you will find ageless and infinite variety in story as in storytelling—in tales that range from pure detection to psychological studies of crime to tours de force of suspense—with dramatic action on every page. You will also find unwithering and fresh variety in the very length of the stories—short novels for long evenings, novelettes for short evenings, short stories for betweentimes—and all to be read before midnight, or after . . .

In partes tres—the best of the best, the best by the best, and in the best forms . . .

Shake well after reading!

ELLERY QUEEN

P.S.: Once again, as in the three earlier annuals, we remain faithful to our two basic editorial policies: (1) every story must meet the twin standards which *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* has upheld for 22 years—high quality or high professionalism of writing, and superior craftsmanship or superior originality of plotting—or to put it differently, every story must have style and substance; and (2) not a single story in this book has ever appeared in any anthology previously edited by Ellery Queen.



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SIMON AND SCHUSTER

Rex Stout

Help Wanted, Male

One of Rex Stout's best short novels about orchid-growing, beer-drinking Nero Wolfe and his "paint-fresh assistant," Archie Goodwin, who, some people think, is the outstanding example of "a Watson who steals the play from his Holmes."

HE PAID US A VISIT THE DAY HE stopped the bullet.

Ben Jensen was a publisher, a politician, and, in my opinion, a dope. I had had a sneaking idea that he would have gone ahead and bought the inside Army dope that Captain Root had offered to sell him if he had been able to figure out a way of using it without any risk of losing a hunk of hide. But he had played it safe and had cooperated with Nero Wolfe like a good little boy. That had been a couple of months before.

Now, early on a Tuesday morning, he phoned to say he wanted to see Wolfe. When I told him that Wolfe would be occupied with the orchids, as usual, until eleven o'clock, he fussed a little and made a date for eleven sharp. He arrived five minutes ahead of time, and I escorted him into the office and invited him to deposit his big, bony frame in the red leather chair.

After he sat down he asked me, "Don't I remember you? Aren't you Major Goodwin?"

"Yep."

"You're not in uniform."

"I was just noticing," I said, "that you need a haircut. At your age, with your gray hair, it looks better trimmed. More distinguished. Shall we continue with the personal remarks?"

There was the clang of Wolfe's personal elevator out in the hall, and a moment later Wolfe entered, exchanged greetings with the caller and got himself, all of his two hundred and sixty-some pounds, lowered into his personal chair behind his desk.

Ben Jensen said, "Something I wanted to show you—got it in the mail this morning," and took an envelope from his pocket and stood up to hand it across. Wolfe glanced at the envelope, removed a piece of paper from it and glanced at that, and passed them along to me. The envelope was addressed to Ben Jensen, neatly handprinted in ink. The piece of paper had been clipped from something, all four edges, with scissors or a sharp

knife, and it had printed on it, not by hand, in large, black type:

YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE—
AND I WILL WATCH YOU DIE!

Wolfe murmured, "Well, sir?"

"I can tell you," I put in, "free for nothing, where this came from."

Jensen snapped at me, "You mean who sent it?"

"Oh, no. For that I would charge. It was clipped from an ad for a movie called *Meeting at Dawn*. The movie of the century. I saw the ad last week in *The American Magazine*. I suppose it's in all the magazines. If you could find—"

Wolfe made a noise at me and murmured again at the fidgeting Jensen, "Well, sir?"

"What am I going to do?" Jensen demanded.

"I'm sure I don't know. Have you any notion who sent it?"

"No. None at all." Jensen sounded grieved. "Damn it, I don't like it. It's not just the usual junk from an anonymous crank. Look at it! It's direct and to the point. I think someone's going to try to kill me, and I don't know who or why or when or how. I suppose tracing it is out of the question, but I want some protection. I want to buy it from you."

I put up a hand to cover a yawn. I knew there would be nothing doing—no case, no fee, no ex-

citement. In the years I had been living in Nero Wolfe's house on West 35th Street, acting as goad, prod, lever, irritant, and chief assistant in the detective business, I had heard him tell at least fifty scared people, of all conditions and ages, that if someone had determined to kill them and was going to be stubborn about it he would probably succeed.

On occasion, when the bank balance was doing a dive, he had furnished Cather or Durkin or Panzer or Keems as a bodyguard at a 100 per cent mark-up, but now they were all very busy fighting Japs, and anyhow we had just deposited a five-figure check from a certain client.

Jensen got sore, naturally, but Wolfe only murmured at him that he might succeed in interesting the police, or that we would be glad to give him a list of reliable detective agencies which would provide companions for his movements as long as he remained alive—at sixty bucks for twenty-four hours. Jensen said that wasn't it, he wanted to hire Wolfe's brains. Wolfe merely made a face and shook his head. Then Jensen wanted to know what about Goodwin? Wolfe said that Major Goodwin was an officer in the United States Army.

"He's not in uniform," Jensen growled.

Wolfe was patient. "Officers in Military Intelligence on special as-

signments," he explained, "have freedoms. Major Goodwin's special assignment is to assist me in various projects entrusted to me by the Army. For which I am not paid. I have little time now for my private business. I think, Mr. Jensen, you should move and act with reasonable precaution for a while. For example, in licking the flaps of envelopes—such things as that. Examine the strip of mucilage. Nothing is easier than to remove mucilage from an envelope flap and replace it with a mixture containing a deadly poison. Any door you open, anywhere, stand to one side and fling the door wide with a push or a pull before crossing the sill. Things like that."

"Good God," Jensen muttered.

Wolfe nodded. "That's how it is. But keep in mind that this fellow has severely restricted himself, if he's not a liar. He says he will watch you die. That greatly limits him in method and technique. He or she has to be there when it happens. So I advise prudence and a decent vigilance. Use your brains, but give up the idea of renting mine. No panic is called for. . . . Archie, how many people have threatened to take my life in the past ten years?"

I pursed my lips. "Oh, maybe twenty-two."

"Pfui." He scowled at me. "At least a hundred. And I am not dead yet, Mr. Jensen."

Jensen pocketed his clipping and

envelope and departed, no better off than when he came except for the valuable advice about licking envelopes and opening doors. I felt kind of sorry for him and took the trouble to wish him good luck as I escorted him to the front door and let him out to the street, and even used some breath to tell him that if he decided to try an agency, Cornwall & Mayer had the best men.

Then I went back to the office and stood in front of Wolfe's desk, facing him, and pulled my shoulders back and expanded my chest. I took that attitude because I had some news to break to him and thought it might help to look as much like an army officer as possible.

"I have an appointment," I said, "at nine o'clock Thursday morning, in Washington, with General Carpenter."

Wolfe's brows went up a millimeter. "Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. At my request. I wish to take an ocean trip. I want to get a look at a Jap. I would like to catch one, if it can be done without much risk, and pinch him and make some remarks to him. I have thought up a crushing remark to make to a Jap and would like to use it."

"Nonsense." Wolfe was placid. "Your three requests to be sent overseas have been denied."

"Yeah, I know." I kept my chest out. "But that was just colonels

and old Fife. Carpenter will see my point. I admit you're a great detective, the best orchid-grower in New York, a champion eater and beer-drinker, and a genius. But I've been working for you a hundred years—anyhow, a lot of years—and this is a hell of a way to spend a war. I'm going to see General Carpenter and lay it out. Of course he'll phone you. I appeal to your love of country, your vanity, your finer instincts, what there is of them, and your dislike of Japs. If you tell Carpenter it would be impossible for you to get along without me, I'll put pieces of gristle in your crabmeat and sugar in your beer."

Wolfe opened his eyes and glared at me. The mere suggestion of sugar in his beer made him speechless.

That was Tuesday. The next morning, Wednesday, the papers headlined the murder of Ben Jensen on the front page. Eating breakfast in the kitchen with Fritz, as usual, I was only halfway through the report in the *Times* when the doorbell rang, and when I answered it I found on the stoop our old friend, Inspector Cramer, of the homicide squad.

Nero Wolfe said, "Not interested, not involved, and not curious."

He was a sight, as he always was when propped up in bed with his breakfast tray. The custom was for Fritz, his chef, to deliver

the tray to his room on the second floor at eight o'clock. It was now 8:15, and already down the gullet were the peaches and cream, most of the bacon, and two thirds of the eggs, not to mention coffee and the green tomato jam. The black silk coverlet was folded back, and you had to look to tell where the yellow percale sheet ended and the yellow pajamas began. Few people except Fritz and me ever got to see him like that, but he had stretched a point for Inspector Cramer, who knew that from nine to eleven he would be up in the plant-rooms with the orchids, and unavailable.

"In the past dozen years," Cramer said in his ordinary growl, without any particular feeling, "you have told me, I suppose, in round figures, ten million lies."

The commas were chews on his unlighted cigar. He looked the way he always did when he had been working all night—peevish and put upon but under control, all except his hair, which had forgotten where the part went.

Wolfe, who was hard to rile at breakfast, swallowed toast and jam and then coffee, ignoring the insult.

Cramer said, "He came to see you yesterday morning, twelve hours before he was killed. You don't deny that."

"And I have told you what for," Wolfe said politely. "He had received that threat and said he

wanted to hire my brains. I declined to work for him and he went away. That was all."

"Why did you decline to work for him? What had he done to you?"

"Nothing." Wolfe poured coffee. "I don't do that kind of work. A man whose life is threatened anonymously is either in no danger at all, or his danger is so acute and so ubiquitous that his position is hopeless. My only previous association with Mr. Jensen was in connection with an attempt by an army captain named Root to sell him inside army information for political purposes. Together we got the necessary evidence, and Captain Root was court-martialed. Mr. Jensen was impressed, so he said, by my handling of that case. I suppose that was why he came to me when he decided that he wanted help."

"Did he think the threat came from someone connected with Captain Root?"

"No. Root wasn't mentioned. He said he had no idea who intended to kill him."

Cramer humphed. "That's what he told Tim Cornwall, too. Cornwall thinks you passed because you knew or suspected it was too hot to handle. Naturally, Cornwall is bitter. He has lost his best man."

"Indeed," Wolfe said mildly. "If that was his best man . . ."

"So Cornwall says," Cramer insisted, "and he's dead. Name of

Doyle; been in the game twenty years, with a good record. The picture as we've got it doesn't necessarily condemn him. Jensen went to Cornwall & Mayer yesterday about noon, and Cornwall assigned Doyle as a guard.

"We've traced all their movements—nothing special. In the evening Doyle went along to a meeting at a midtown club. They left the club at eleven-twenty, and apparently went straight home, on the subway or bus, to the apartment house where Jensen lived on Seventy-third Street near Madison. It was eleven-forty-five when they were found dead on the sidewalk at the entrance to the apartment house. Both shot in the heart with a thirty-eight, Doyle from behind and Jensen from the front. We have the bullets. No powder marks. No nothing."

Wolfe murmured sarcastically, "Mr. Cornwall's best man."

"Nuts," Cramer objected to the sarcasm. "He was shot in the back. There's a narrow passage ten paces away where the guy could have hid. Or the shots could have come from a passing car, or from across the street. We haven't found anybody who heard the shots. The doorman was in the basement stoking the water heater, the excuse for that being that they're short of men like everybody else. The elevator man was on his way to the tenth floor with a passenger, a tenant. The bodies were discov-

ered by two women on their way home from a movie. It must have happened not more than a minute before they came by, but they had just got off a Madison Avenue bus at the corner."

Wolfe got out of bed, which was an operation deserving an audience. He glanced at the clock on the bed table. It was 8:35.

"I know, I know," Cramer growled. "You've got to get dressed and get upstairs to your horticulture. . . . The tenant going up in the elevator was a prominent doctor who barely knew Jensen by sight. The two women who found the bodies are Seventh Avenue models who never heard of Jensen. The elevator man has worked there over twenty years without displaying a grudge, and Jensen was a generous tipper and popular with the bunch. The doorman is a fat nitwit who was hired two weeks ago only because of the manpower situation and doesn't know the tenants by name.

"Beyond those, all we have is the population of New York City and the guests who arrive and depart daily and nightly. That's why I came to you, and for the Lord's sake give me what you've got. You can see that I need it."

"Mr. Cramer." The mountain of yellow pajamas moved. "I repeat. I am not interested, not involved, and not curious." Wolfe headed for the bathroom.

Exit Cramer—mad.

Back in the office there was the morning mail. I was getting toward the bottom of the stack without encountering anything startling or promising when I slit another envelope, and then there it was.

I stared at it. I picked up the envelope and stared at that. I don't often talk to myself, but I said, loud enough for me to hear, "My goodness." Then I left the rest of the mail for later and went and mounted the three flights to the plant-rooms on the roof. Proceeding through the first three departments, past everything from rows of generating flasks to *Cattleya* hybrids covered with blooms, I found Wolfe in the potting-room, with Theodore Horstmann, the orchid nurse, examining a crate of sphagnum that had just arrived.

"Well?" he demanded, with no sign of friendliness. The general idea was that when he was up there I interrupted him only at my peril.

"I suppose," I said carelessly, "that I shouldn't have bothered you, but I ran across something in the mail that I thought you'd find amusing," and I put them on the bench before him, side by side: the envelope with his name and address printed on it by hand, in ink, and the piece of paper that had been clipped from something with scissors or a sharp knife, reading in large, black type, printed, but not by hand:

YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE—
AND I WILL WATCH YOU DIE!

"It sure is a coincidence," I remarked, grinning at him.

Wolfe said without any perceptible quiver, "I'll look over the mail at eleven o'clock as usual."

It was the grand manner, all right. Seeing he was impervious, I retrieved the exhibits without a word, and returned to the office.

It was eleven on the dot when he came down, and began the routine. Not until Fritz had brought the beer and he had irrigated his interior did he lean back in his chair, let his eyes go half shut, and observe, "You will, of course, postpone your trip to Washington."

I let my frank, open countenance betray surprise. "I can't. I have an appointment with a Lieutenant General. Anyhow, why?" I indicated the envelope and clipping on his desk. "That tomfoolery? No panic is called for. I doubt the urgency of your peril. A man planning a murder doesn't spend his energy clipping pieces out of ad-
ver—"

"You are going to Washington?"

"Yes, sir. I have a date. Of course, I could phone Carpenter and tell him your nerves are a little shaky on account of an anony—"

"When do you leave?"

"I have a seat on the six o'clock train."

"Very well. Then we have the day. Your notebook."

Wolfe leaned forward to pour beer and drink, and then leaned back again. "I offer a comment on your jocosity. When Mr. Jensen called here yesterday and showed us that thing, we had no inkling of the character of the person who had sent it. It might have been merely the attempt of a coward to upset his digestion.

"However, we no longer enjoy that ignorance. This person not only promptly killed Mr. Jensen, with wit equal to his determination, but also killed Mr. Doyle, a stranger, whose presence could not have been foreseen. We now know that this person is cold-blooded, ruthless, quick to decide and to act, and an egomaniac."

"Yes, sir. I agree. If you go to bed and stay there until I get back from Washington, letting no one but Fritz enter the room, I may not be able to control my tongue when with you, but actually I will understand and I won't tell anybody. You need a rest, anyway. And don't lick any envelopes."

"Bah." Wolfe wiggled a finger at me. "That thing was not sent to you. Presumably you are not on the agenda."

"Yes, sir."

"And this person is dangerous and requires attention."

"I agree."

Wolfe shut his eyes. "Very well. Take notes as needed. . . . It may be assumed, if this person means business with me as he did with

Mr. Jensen, that this is connected with the case of Captain Root. I had no other association with Mr. Jensen. . . . Learn the whereabouts of Captain Root."

"The court-martial gave him three years in the cooler."

"I know it. Is he there? Also, what about that young woman, his fiancée, who raised such a ruction about it? Her name is Jane Geer." Wolfe's eyes half opened for an instant. "You have a habit of knowing how to locate personable young women without delay. Have you seen that one recently?"

"Oh," I said offhand, "I sort of struck up an acquaintance with her. I guess I can get in touch with her. But I doubt—"

"Do so. I want to see her. . . . Excuse me for interrupting, but you have a train to catch. . . . Also, inform Inspector Cramer of this development and suggest that he investigate Captain Root's background, his relatives and intimates, anyone besides Miss Geer who might thirst for vengeance at his disgrace. I'll do that. If Captain Root is in prison, arrange with General Fife to bring him here. I want to have a talk with him. . . . Where is the clipping received yesterday by Mr. Jensen? Ask Mr. Cornwall and Mr. Cramer. There is the possibility that this is not another one like it, but the same one."

I shook my head. "No, sir. This

one is clipped closer to the printing at the upper right."

"I noticed that, but ask, anyway. Inspect the chain bolts on the doors and test the night gong in your room. Fritz will sleep in your room tonight. I shall speak to Fritz and Theodore. All of this can easily be attended to by telephone except Miss Geer, and that is your problem. When will you return from Washington?"

"I should be able to catch a noon train back—my appointment's at nine. Getting here around five." I added earnestly, "If I can clear it with Carpenter to cross the ocean, I will, of course, arrange not to leave until this ad-clipper has been attended to."

"Don't hurry back on my account. Or alter your plans. You receive a salary from the Government." Wolfe's tone was dry, sharp, and icy. He went on with it: "Please get General Fife on the phone. We'll begin by learning about Captain Root."

The program went smoothly, all except the Jane Geer number. If it hadn't been for her I'd have been able to make the six o'clock train with hours to spare. Fife reported back on Root in thirty minutes, to the effect that Root was in the clink on government property down in Maryland, and would be transported to New York without delay for an interview with Wolfe.

Cornwall said he had turned the clipping and envelope Jensen

had received over to Inspector Cramer, and Cramer verified it and said he had it. When I had explained the situation, Cramer emitted a hoarse chuckle, and said offensively, "So Wolfe is not interested, involved, or curious." I knew Wolfe would have a visit from him. Not pleasant.

On Jane Geer the luck was low. When, before noon, I phoned the advertising agency she worked for, I was told that she was somewhere on Long Island admiring some client's product for which she was to produce copy. When I finally did get her after four o'clock, she went willful on me, presumably because she regarded my phoning five times in one day as evidence that my primal impulses had been aroused and I was beginning to pant. She would not come to Nero Wolfe's place unless I bought her a cocktail first. So I met her a little after five at the Stork Club.

She had put in a full day's work, but, looking at her, you might have thought she had come straight from an afternoon nap.

She darted her brown eyes at me. "Let me," she said, "see your right forefinger."

I poked it at her. She rubbed its tip gently with the tip of her own. "I wondered if it had a callus. After dialing my number five times in less than five hours."

She sipped her Tom Collins, bending her head to get her lips to the straw. A strand of her hair

slipped forward over an eye and a cheek, and I reached across and used the same finger to put it back in place.

"I took that liberty," I told her, "because I wish to have an unobstructed view of your lovely phiz. I want to see if you turn pale."

"Overwhelmed by you so near?"

"No, I know that reaction—I correct for it. Anyhow, I doubt if I'm magnetic right now, because I'm sore at you for making me miss a train."

"I didn't phone you this time. You phoned me."

"Okay." I drank. "You said on the phone that you still don't like Nero Wolfe and you wouldn't go to see him unless you knew what for, and maybe not even then. So this is what for: He wants to ask you whether you intend to kill him yourself or hire the same gang that you got to kill Jensen and Doyle."

"Mercy." She looked my face over. "You'd better put your humor on a diet. It's taking on weight."

I shook my head. "Ordinarily, I would enjoy playing catch with you, as you are aware, but I can't miss all the trains. Because Wolfe's life has been threatened in the same manner as Jensen's was, the supposition is that Jensen was murdered for revenge, for what he did to Captain Root. Because of the cutting remarks you made when Root was trapped, and your general attitude, there is a tendency to

want to know what you have been doing lately."

"Nero Wolfe seriously thinks I—did that? Or had it done?"

"I didn't say so. He wants to discuss it."

Her eyes flashed. Her tone took on an edge: "It is also extremely corny. And the police. Have you kindly arranged that when Wolfe finishes with me I proceed to headquarters?"

"Listen, Tiger-eyes." She let me cut her off, which was a pleasant surprise. "Have you noticed me sneaking up on you from behind? If so, draw it for me. I have explained a situation. Your name has not been mentioned to the police, though they have consulted us. But since the police are onto the Root angle they are apt to get a steer in your direction without us, and it wouldn't hurt if Wolfe had already satisfied himself that you wouldn't kill a fly."

"By what process?" She was scornful. "I suppose he asks me if I ever committed murder, and I smile and say no, and he apologizes and gives me an orchid."

"Not quite. He's a genius. He asks you questions like do you bait your own hook when you go fishing, and you reveal yourself without knowing it."

"It sounds fascinating." Her eyes suddenly changed. "I wonder," she said.

"What is it?—and we'll both wonder."

"Sure." Her eyes had changed more. "This wouldn't by any chance be a climax you've been working up to? You, with a thousand girls and women, so that you have to issue ration books so many minutes to a coupon, and yet finding so much time for me? Leading up to this idiotic frame—"

"Turn that one off," I broke in, "or I'll begin to get suspicious, myself. You know darned well why I have found time for you, having a mirror as you do. I have been experimenting to test my emotional reaction to form, color, touch, and various perfumes, and I have been deeply grateful for your cooperation. I thank you—but that is all."

"Ha, ha." She stood up, her eyes not softening nor her tone melting. "I am going to see Nero Wolfe. I welcome an opportunity to reveal myself to Nero Wolfe. Do I go or are you taking me?"

I took her. I paid the check and we went out and got a taxi.

But she didn't get to see Wolfe.

Since chain-bolt orders were in effect, my key wouldn't let us in and I had to ring the doorbell for Fritz. I had just pushed the button, when who should appear, mounting the steps to join us on the stoop, but the army officer that they use for a model when they want to do a picture conveying the impression that masculine comeliness will win the war. I admit he was handsome; I admitted

it to myself right then, when I first saw him. He looked preoccupied and concentrated, but, even so, he found time for a glance at Jane.

At that moment the door swung open and I spoke to Fritz: "Okay, thanks. Is Mr. Wolfe in the office?"

"No, he's up in his room."

"All right; I'll take it." Fritz departed, and I maneuvered into position to dominate the scene, on the doorsill facing out. I spoke to the masculine model: "Yes, Major? This is Nero Wolfe's place."

"I know it is." He had a baritone voice that suited him to a T. "I want to see him. My name is Emil Jensen. I am the son of Ben Jensen, who was killed last night."

"Oh." There wasn't much resemblance, but that's nature's lookout. I have enough to do. "Mr. Wolfe has an appointment. It would be handy if I could tell him what you want."

"I want to—consult him. If you don't mind, I'd rather tell him." He smiled to take the sting off. Probably Psychological Warfare Branch.

"I'll see. Come on in."

I made room for Jane, and he followed her. After attending to the bolt I escorted them to the office, invited them to sit, and went to the phone on my desk and buzzed Wolfe's room.

"Yes?" Wolfe's voice came.

"Archie. Miss Geer is here. Also, Major Emil Jensen just arrived.

He is the son of Ben Jensen and prefers to tell you what he wants to consult you about."

"Give them both my regrets. I am engaged and can see no one."

"Engaged for how long?"

"Indefinitely. I can make no appointments for this week."

"But you may remember—"

"Archie! Tell them that please." The line died.

So I told them that. They were not pleased. The Lord knows what kind of performance Jane would have put on if she hadn't been restrained by the presence of a stranger; as it was, she didn't have to fumble around for pointed remarks. Jensen wasn't indignant, but he sure was stubborn. During an extended conversation that got nowhere, I noticed a gradual increase in their inclination to cast sympathetic glances at each other.

I thought it might help matters along, meaning that they might clear out sooner if I changed the subject, so I said emphatically, "Miss Geer, this is Major Jensen."

He got to his feet, bowed to her like a man who knows how to bow, and told her, "How do you do? It looks as if it's hopeless, at least for this evening, for both of us. I'll have to hunt a taxi, and it would be a pleasure if you'll let me drop you."

So they left together. Going down the stoop, which I admit was moderately steep, he indicated not obtrusively that he had an arm

there, and she rested her fingers in the bend of it to steady herself. That alone showed astonishing progress in almost no time at all, for she was by no means a born climber.

Oh, well, I was a major too. I shrugged indifferently as I shut the door. Then I sought Wolfe's room, knocked, and was invited in.

Standing in the doorway to his bathroom, facing me, his old-fashioned razor in his hand, all lathered up, he demanded brusquely, "What time is it?"

"Six-thirty."

"When is the next train?"

"Seven o'clock. But what the hell, apparently there is going to be work to do. I can put it off to next week."

"No. It's on your mind. Get that train."

I tried one more stab. "My motive is selfish. If, while I am sitting talking to Carpenter in the morning, word comes that you have been killed, or even temporarily disabled, he'll blame me and I won't stand a chance. So for purely selfish reasons—"

"Confound it!" he barked. "You'll miss that train! I have no intention of getting killed. Get out of here!"

I faded. . . .

After the war I intend to run for Congress and put through laws about generals. I have a theory that generals should be rubbed liberally with neat's-foot oil before be-

ing taken out and shot. Though I doubt if I would have bothered with the oil in the case of General Carpenter that morning if I had had a free hand.

I was a major. So I sat and said yessir yessir yessir, while he told me that he had given me the appointment only because he thought I wanted to discuss something of importance, and that I would stay where I was put, and shut my trap about it. When it was all over, he observed that since I was in Washington I might as well confer with the staff on various cases, finished and unfinished, and I would report immediately to Colonel Dick-ey.

I doubt if I made a good impression, considering my state of mind. They kept me around, conferring, all day Thursday and most of Friday. I phoned Wolfe that I was detained. By explaining the situation on 35th Street I could have got permission to beat it back to New York, but I wasn't going to give that collection of brass head-gear an excuse to giggle around that Nero Wolfe didn't have brains enough to keep on breathing, in his own house, without me there to look after him. Wolfe would have had my scalp.

But I was tempted to hop a plane when, late Thursday evening, I saw the ad in the *Star*. I had been too busy all day to take more than a glance at the New York papers I'd been following

for news of the Jensen case. I was alone in my hotel room when it caught my eye, bordered and spaced to make a spot:

WANTED, A MAN

weighing about 260-270, around 5 ft. 11; 45-55 years old, medium in coloring, waist not over 48, capable of easy and normal movement. Temporary. Hazardous. \$100 a day. Send photo with letter. Box 292 Star.

I read it through four times, stared at it disapprovingly for an additional two minutes, and then reached for the phone and put in a New York call. I got Fritz Brenner on the phone, and he assured me Wolfe was all right.

Getting ready for bed, I tried to figure out in what manner, if I were making preparations to kill Nero Wolfe, I could make use of an assistant, hired on a temporary basis at a hundred bucks a day, who was a physical counterpart of Wolfe. The two schemes I devised weren't very satisfactory, and the one I hit on after I got my head on the pillow was even worse, so I flipped the switch on the nervous system and let the tired muscles quit. . . .

In the morning I finished conferring and made tracks for New York.

Arriving at Wolfe's house on 35th Street a little before eleven,

I gave the button three short pushes as usual, and in a moment there were footsteps, and the curtain was pulled aside and Fritz was peering at me through the glass panel. Satisfied, he let me in.

I saw Wolfe was in the office, since the door to it was open and the light shining through, so I breezed down the hall and on in.

"I am a fug—" I began, and stopped. Wolfe's chair behind his desk, his own chair and no one else's under any circumstances, was occupied by the appropriate mass of matter in comparatively human shape—in other words, by a big, fat man—but it wasn't Nero Wolfe. I had never seen him before.

Fritz, who had stayed to bolt the door, came at me from behind, talking. The occupant of the chair neither moved nor spoke, but merely leered at me. Fritz was telling me that Mr. Wolfe was up in his room.

The specimen in the chair said in a husky croak, "I suppose you're Goodwin. Archie. Have a good trip?"

I stared at him. In a way I wished I was back at the Pentagon, and in another way I wished I had come sooner.

He said, "Fritz, bring me another highball."

Fritz said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "Have a good trip, Archie?"

That was enough of that. I marched out to the hall and up a

flight, went to Wolfe's door and tapped on it, and called, "Archie!" Wolfe's voice told me to come in.

He was seated in his number two chair, under the light, reading a book. He was fully dressed, and there was nothing in his appearance to indicate that he had lost his mind.

I did not intend to give him the satisfaction of sitting there smirking and enjoying fireworks. "Well," I said casually, "I got back. If you're sleepy we can wait till morning for conversation."

"I'm not sleepy." He closed the book, with a finger inserted at his page. "Are you going overseas?"

"You know damn well I'm not." I sat down. "We can discuss that at some future date when I'm out of the Army. It's a relief to find you all alive and well around here. It's very interesting down in Washington. Everybody on their toes."

"No doubt. Did you stop in the office downstairs?"

"I did. So you put that ad in the *Star* yourself. How do you pay him—cash every day? Did you figure out the deductions for income tax and social security? I sat down at my desk and began to report to him. I thought it was you. Until he ordered Fritz to bring him a highball, and I know you hate highballs. Deduction. It reminds me of the time your daughter from Yugoslavia showed up—"

"Archie. Shut up."

Wolfe put the book down and

shifted in his chair, with the routine grunts. When the new equilibrium was established he said, "You will find details about him on a slip of paper in the drawer of your desk. He is a retired architect named H. H. Hackett, out of funds, and an unsurpassed nincompoop with the manners of a wart hog. I chose him, from those answering the advertisement, because his appearance and build were the most suitable and he is sufficiently an ass to be willing to risk his life for a hundred dollars a day."

"If he keeps on calling me 'Archie' the risk will become—"

"If you please." Wolfe wiggled a finger at me. "Do you think the idea of him sitting there in my chair is agreeable to me? He may be dead tomorrow or the next day. I told him that. This afternoon he went to Mr. Ditson's place in a taxicab to look at orchids, and came back ostentatiously carrying two plants. Tomorrow afternoon you will drive him somewhere and bring him back, and again in the evening. Dressed for the street, wearing my hat and lightweight coat, carrying my stick, he would deceive anyone except you."

"Yes, sir. But why couldn't you just stay in the house? You do, anyway. And be careful who gets in. Until . . ."

"Until what,"

"Until the bird that killed Jensen is caught."

"Bah!" He glared at me. "By whom? By Mr. Cramer? What do you suppose he is doing now? Pfuil! Major Jensen, Mr. Jensen's son, arriving home on leave from Europe five days ago, learned that during his absence his father had sued his mother for divorce. The father and son quarreled, which was not unique. But Mr. Cramer has a hundred men trying to collect evidence that will convict Major Jensen of killing his father! Utterly intolerable asininity. For what motive could Major Jensen have for killing me?"

"Well, now." My eyebrows were up. "I wouldn't just toss it in the wastebasket. What if the major figured that sending you the same kind of message he sent his father would make everybody react the way you are doing?"

Wolfe shook his head. "He didn't. Unless he's a born fool. He would have known that merely sending me that thing would be inadequate, that he would have to follow it up by making good on the threat; and he hasn't killed me, and I doubt if he intends to. General Fife has looked up his record for me. Mr. Cramer is wasting his time, his men's energy, and the money of the people of New York. I am handicapped. The men I have used and can trust have gone to war. You bounce around thinking only of yourself, deserting me. I am confined to this room, left to my own devices, with a vindic-

tive, bloodthirsty maniac waiting an opportunity to kill me."

He sure was piling it on. But I knew better than to contribute a note of skepticism when he was in one of his romantic moods, having been fired for that once; and, besides, I wouldn't have signed an affidavit that he was exaggerating the situation. So I only asked him, "What about Captain Root? Did they bring him?"

"Yes. He was here today and I talked with him. He has been in that prison for over a month and asserts that this cannot possibly be connected with him or his. He says Miss Geer has not communicated with him for six weeks or more. His mother is teaching school at Danforth, Ohio; that has been verified by Mr. Cramer; she is there. His father, who formerly ran a filling station at Danforth, abandoned wife and son ten years ago, and is said to be working in a war plant in Oklahoma. Wife and son prefer not to discuss him. No brother or sister. According to Captain Root, there is no one on earth who would conceivably undertake a ride on the subway, let alone multiple murder, to avenge him."

"He might just possibly be right."

"Nonsense. There was no other slightest connection between Mr. Jensen and me. I've asked General Fife to keep Root in New York and to request the prison authori-

ties to look over his effects there if he has any."

"When you get an idea in your head—"

"I never do. As you mean it. I react to stimuli. In this instance I am reacting in the only way open to me. The person who shot Mr. Jensen and Mr. Doyle is bold to the point of rashness. He can probably be tempted to proceed with his program . . ."

I went up to my room.

The gong was a dingus under my bed. The custom was that when I retired at night I turned a switch, and if anyone put his foot down in the hall within ten feet of Wolfe's door the gong gonged. It had been installed on account of a certain occurrence some years previously, when Wolfe had got a knife stuck in him. The thing had never gone off except when we tested it, and in my opinion never would, but I never failed to switch it on, because if Wolfe had stepped into the hall some night and the gong hadn't sounded it would have caused discussion.

This night, with a stranger in the house, I was glad it was there.

In the morning breakfast was all over the place. Afterward I spent an hour up in the plant-rooms with Wolfe.

We got to details. Jane Geer was making a nuisance of herself. I understood now, of course, why Wolfe had refused to see her

Wednesday evening. After sending me to get her he had conceived the strategy of hiring a double, and he didn't want her to get a look at the real Nero Wolfe, because if she did she would be less likely to be deceived by the counterfeit and go to work on him.

She had phoned several times, insisting on seeing him, and had come to the house Friday morning and argued for five minutes with Fritz through the three-inch crack which the chain bolt permitted the door to open to. Now Wolfe had an idea for one of his elaborate charades. I was to phone her to come to see Wolfe at six o'clock that afternoon. When she came I was to take her in to Hackett. Wolfe would coach Hackett for the interview.

I looked skeptical.

Wolfe said, "It will give her a chance to kill Mr. Hackett."

I snorted. "With me right there to tell her when to cease firing."

"I admit it is unlikely, but it will give me an opportunity to see her and hear her. I shall be at the hole."

So that was really the idea. He would be in the passage, a sort of alcove, at the kitchen end of the downstairs hall, looking through into the office by means of the square hole in the wall. The hole was camouflaged on the office side by a picture that was transparent one way. He loved to have an excuse to use it.

Major Jensen had phoned once and been told that Wolfe was engaged; apparently he wasn't as persistent as Jane.

When I got down to the office Hackett was there in Wolfe's chair, eating cookies and getting crumbs on the desk.

From the phone on my desk I got Jane Geer at her office. "Archie," I told her.

She snapped, "Archie who?"

"Oh, come, come. We haven't sicked the police onto you, have we? Nero Wolfe wants to see you."

"He does? Ha, ha. He doesn't act like it."

"He has reformed. I showed him a lock of your hair. I showed him a picture of Elsa Maxwell and told him it was you. This time he won't let me come after you."

"Neither will I."

"Okay. Be here at six o'clock and you will be received. Six o'clock today P.M. Will you?"

She admitted that she would.

I made a couple of other calls and did some miscellaneous chores. But I found that my jaw was getting clamped tighter and tighter on account of an irritating noise. Finally I spoke to the occupant of Wolfe's chair: "What kind of cookies are those?"

"Gingersnaps." Evidently the husky croak was his normal voice.

"I didn't know we had any."

"We didn't. I asked Fritz. He doesn't seem to know about gin-

gersnaps, so I walked over to Ninth Avenue and got some."

"When? This morning?"

"Just a little while ago."

I turned to my phone, buzzed the plant-rooms, got Wolfe, and told him, "Mr. Hackett is sitting in your chair eating gingersnaps. Just a little while ago he walked to Ninth Avenue and bought them. If he pops in and out of the house whenever he sees fit, what are we getting for our hundred bucks?"

Wolfe spoke to the point. I hung up and turned to Hackett and spoke to the point. He was not to leave the house except as instructed by Wolfe or me. He seemed unimpressed.

"All right," he said; "if that's the bargain I'll keep it. But there's two sides to a bargain. I was to be paid daily in advance, and I haven't been paid for today. A hundred dollars net."

I took five twenties from the expense wallet and forked it over.

"I must say," he commented, folding the bills neatly and stuffing them in his waistband pocket, "this is a large return for a small effort. I am aware that I may earn it—ah, suddenly and unexpectedly." He leaned toward me. "Though I may tell you confidentially, Archie, that I expect nothing to happen. I am sanguine by nature."

"Yeah," I told him, "me too."

I opened the drawer of my desk, the middle one on the right, where I kept armament, got out the shoul-

der holster and put it on, and selected the gun that was my property—the other two belonged to Wolfe. There were only three cartridges in it, so I pulled the drawer open farther to get to the ammunition compartment, and filled the cylinder.

As I shoved the gun into the holster I happened to glance at Hackett, and saw that he had a new face. The line of his lips was tight, and his eyes looked startled, wary.

"It hadn't occurred to me before," he said, and his voice had changed, too. "This Mr. Wolfe is quite an article, and you're his man. I am doing this with the understanding that someone may mistake me for Mr. Wolfe and try to kill me, but I have only his word for it that that is actually the situation. If it's more complicated than that, and the intention is for you to shoot me yourself, I want to say emphatically that that would not be fair."

I grinned at him sympathetically, trying to make up for my blunder, realizing that I should not have dressed for the occasion in his presence. The sight of the gun, a real gun and real cartridges, had scared him stiff.

"Listen," I told him earnestly; "you said a minute ago that you expect nothing to happen. You may be right. I'm inclined to agree with you. But in case somebody does undertake to perform, I am

wearing this little number"—I patted under my arm where the gun was—"for two purposes: first, to keep you from getting hurt; and, second, if you do get hurt, to hurt him worse."

It seemed to satisfy him, for his eyes got less concentrated, but he didn't resume with the gingersnaps. At least, I had accomplished that much.

To tell the truth, by the time the afternoon was over and I had him back in the house again, a little after five-thirty, I had to maintain a firm hold on such details as gingersnaps and his calling me "Archie" to keep from admiring him. During that extended expedition we made stops at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Botanical Gardens, and three or four stores. He occupied the rear seat, of course, because Wolfe always did, and the mirror showed me that he sat back comfortably, taking in the sights, a lot more imperturbable than Wolfe, himself, ever was in a car.

When we made one of our stops and Hackett got out to cross the sidewalk, he was okay. He didn't hurry or dodge or jerk or weave, but just walked. In Wolfe's hat and coat and stick, he might even have fooled me. I had to hand it to him, in spite of the fact that the whole show struck me as the biggest bust Wolfe had ever concocted.

Back in the house, I left Hackett in the office and went to the kitch-

en, where Wolfe was sitting at the big table drinking beer.

I reported: "They tried to get him from the top of the Palisades with a howitzer, but missed him. He was a little bruised on his left elbow from the revolving door at Rusterman's, but otherwise unhurt."

Wolfe grunted. "How did he behave?"

"Okay."

Wolfe grunted again. "After dark we may more reasonably expect results. I repeat what I told you at noon; you will take an active part in the interview with Miss Geer, but you will restrain yourself. If you permit yourself to get fanciful, there is no telling what the effect may be on Mr. Hackett. As you know, his instructions are precise, but his discipline is questionable. See that she speaks up, so I can hear her. Seat her at the corner of my desk farthest from you, so I will have a good view of her face."

"Yes, sir."

But, as it turned out, I wasn't able to obey orders. It was then nearly six o'clock. When the doorbell rang, a few minutes later, and I went to answer it, glancing in at the office on my way down the hall to make sure that Hackett didn't have his feet up on the desk, I opened the door, to find that Miss Geer hadn't ventured alone on the streets of the great city, after all. Major Emil Jensen was there.

"Well," I said brightly, "two on one hook?"

Jensen said hello. Jane volunteered, "Major Jensen decided to come on the spur of the moment. We were having cocktails." She looked me up and down; it was true that I was blocking the way. "May we come in?"

Certainly I could have told Jensen we had only one extra chair so he had better go for a walk, but if there was going to be anything accomplished by having either of those two get the idea that Hackett was Nero Wolfe, I would have picked him for the experiment rather than her. On the other hand, with Hackett primed only for her, it would have been crowding our luck to confront him with both of them, and, anyway, I couldn't take such a chance on my own hook. I needed advice from headquarters. So I decided to herd them into the front room, ask them to wait, and go consult Wolfe.

"Sure," I said hospitably; "enter." I had got them seated, and was headed for the hall before noticing an unfortunate fact: The door from the front room to the office was standing open. That was careless of me, but I hadn't expected complications. If they moved across, as they naturally would, Hackett, sitting in the office, would be in plain sight. But what the hell, that was what he was there for. So I kept going, down the hall to the turn into the alcove at the far

end, found Wolfe there ready to take position at the peephole, and muttered to him:

"She brought an outrider along. Major Jensen. I put them in the front room. The door into the office is open. Well?"

He scowled at me. He whispered, "Confound it. Return to the front room by way of the office, closing that door as you go. Tell Major Jensen to wait, that I wish to speak with Miss Geer privately. Take her to the office by way of the hall, and when you—"

Somebody fired a gun.

At least, that's what it sounded like, and the sound didn't come from outdoors. The walls and the air vibrated. Judging by the noise, I might have fired it myself, but I hadn't. I moved. In three jumps I was at the door to the office. Hackett was sitting there, looking startled and speechless. I dashed through to the front room. Jensen and Jane were there, on their feet, she off to the right and he to the left, both also startled and speechless, staring at each other. Their hands were empty, except for Jane's bag. I might have been inclined to let it go for Hackett biting a gingersnap if it hadn't been for the smell. I knew that smell.

I snapped at Jensen, "Well?"

"Well yourself." He had transferred the stare to me. "What the hell was it?"

"Did you fire a gun?"

"No. Did you?"

I pivoted to Jane. "Did you?"

"You—you idiot," she stammered, trying not to tremble. "Why would I fire a gun?"

"Let me see the one in your hand," Jensen demanded.

I looked at my hand and was surprised to see a gun in it. I must have snatched it from the holster automatically enroute. "Not it," I said. I poked the muzzle to within an inch of Jensen's nose. "Was it?"

He sniffed. "No."

I said, "But a gun was fired inside here. Do you smell it?"

"Certainly I smell it."

"Okay. Let's join Mr. Wolfe and discuss it. Through there." I indicated the door to the office with a flourish of the gun.

Jane started jabbering about a put-up job, but I followed Jensen into the other room.

"This is Mr. Nero Wolfe," I said. "Sit down." I was using my best judgment, and figured I was playing it right, because Wolfe was nowhere in sight. I had to decide what to do with them while I found the gun and maybe the bullet.

Jane was still trying to jabber, but she stopped when Jensen blurted, "Wolfe has blood on his head!"

I glanced at Hackett. He was standing up behind the desk, leaning forward with his hand on the desk, staring wildly at the three of us. Blood dribbled down the side of his neck.

I took in breath and yelled, "Fritz!"

He appeared instantly, probably having been standing by in the hall, and when he came I handed him my gun. "If anybody reaches for a handkerchief, shoot."

"Those instructions," Jensen said sharply, "are dangerous if he—"

"He's all right."

"I would like you to search me." Jensen stuck his hands toward the ceiling.

"That," I said, "is more like it," and crossed to him and explored him from neck to ankles, invited him to relax in a chair, and turned to Jane. She darted me a look of lofty disgust.

I remarked, "If you refuse to stand inspection and then you happen to make a gesture and Fritz shoots you in the tummy, don't blame me."

She darted more looks, but took it. I felt her over not quite as comprehensively as I had Jensen, took her bag and glanced in it, and returned it to her, and then stepped around Wolfe's desk to examine Hackett. After Jensen had announced the blood he had put his hand up to feel, and was staring at the red on his fingers, with his big jaw hanging open.

"My head?" he croaked. "Is it my head?"

The exhibition he was making of himself was no help to Nero Wolfe's reputation for intrepidity.

After a brief look I told him dis-

tinctly, "No, sir. Nothing but a nick in the upper outside corner of your car."

"I am not—hurt?"

I could have murdered him. Instead, I told Fritz, standing there with my gun, that unnecessary movements were still forbidden, and took Hackett to the bathroom in the far corner and shut the door behind us. While I showed him the ear in the mirror and dabbed on some iodine and taped on a bandage, I told him to stay in there until his nerves calmed down and then rejoin us, act detached and superior, and let me do the talking.

As I reappeared in the office, Jane shot at me, "Did you search *him*?"

I ignored her and circled around Wolfe's desk for a look at the back of the chair. The head-rest was upholstered with brown leather; and about eight inches from the top and a foot from the side edge, a spot that would naturally have been on a line behind Hackett's left ear as he sat, there was a hole in the leather. I looked behind, and there was another hole on the rear side. I looked at the wall back of the chair and found still another hole, torn into the plaster.

From the bottom drawer of my desk I got a screwdriver and hammer, and started chiseling, ran against a stud, and went to work with the point of my knife. When I finally turned around I held a

small object between my thumb and finger. As I did so, Hackett emerged from the bathroom.

"Bullet," I said informatively. "Thirty-eight. Passed through Mr. Wolfe's ear and the back of his chair, and ruined the wall."

Jane sputtered. Jensen sat and gazed at me with narrowed eyes. Hackett shuddered.

"It could be," Jensen said coldly, "that Wolfe fired that bullet himself."

"Yeah?" I returned his gaze. "Mr. Wolfe would be glad to let you inspect his face for powder marks."

"He washed them off in the bathroom," Jane snapped.

"They don't wash off." . . . I continued to Jensen, "I'll lend you a magnifying glass. You can examine the chair, too."

By gum, he took me up. He nodded and arose, and I got the glass from Wolfe's desk, the big one. First he went over the chair, the portion in the neighborhood of the bullet hole, and then crossed to Hackett and gave his face and ear a look. Hackett stood still with his lips compressed and his eyes straight ahead. Jensen gave me back the glass and returned to his seat.

I asked him, "Did Mr. Wolfe shoot himself in the ear?"

"No," he admitted. "Not unless he had the gun wrapped."

"Sure." My tone cut slices off of him. "He tied a pillow around it,

held it at arm's length, pointing it at his ear, and pulled the trigger. How would you like to try demonstrating it? Keeping the bullet within an inch of your frontal lobe?"

He never stopped gazing at me. "I am," he declared, "being completely objective. With some difficulty."

"If I understand what happened—" Hackett began, but I cut him off.

"Excuse me, sir. The bullet helps, but the gun would help still more. Let's be objective, too. We might possibly find the object in the front room." I moved, touching his elbow to take him along. "Fritz, see that they stay put."

"I," said Jensen, getting up, "would like to be present—"

"The hell you would." I wheeled on him. My voice may have gone up a notch. "Sit down, brother. I am trying not to fly off the handle. Whose house is this, anyway, with bullets zipping around?"

He had another remark to contribute, and so did Jane, but I disregarded them and wangled Hackett ahead of me into the front room and shut the soundproof door.

"It seems incredible to me," Hackett said, choosing his words carefully, "that one of them could have shot at me from in here, through the open door, without me seeing anything."

"You said that before, in the

bathroom. You also said you didn't remember whether your eyes were open or shut, or where you were looking, when you heard the shot."

I moved my face to within fourteen inches of his. "See here. If you are suspecting that I shot at you, or that Wolfe did, you have got fleas or other insects playing tag in your brain and should have it attended to. One thing alone: The way the bullet went, straight past your ear and into the chair-back, it had to come from in front, the general direction of that door and this room. It couldn't have come from the door in the hall or anywhere else, because we haven't got a gun that shoots a curve. Now, you will sit down and keep still."

He grumbled, but obeyed. I surveyed the field. On the assumption that the gun had been fired in that room, I adopted the theory that either it was still there or it had been transported or propelled without. As for transportation, I had got there not more than five seconds after the shot and found them there staring at each other. As for propulsion, the windows were closed and the Venetian blinds down. I preferred the first alternative.

I began to search, but I had the curious feeling that I probably wouldn't find the gun, no matter how thoroughly I looked; I have never understood why.

If it was a hunch, it was a bad day

for hunches, because when I came to the big vase on the table between the windows and peeked into it and saw something white, and stuck my hand in, I felt the gun. Getting it by the trigger guard, I lifted it out. Judging by smell, it had been fired recently, but of course it had had time to cool off. It was an old Granville thirty-eight, next door to rusty. The white object I had seen was an ordinary cotton handkerchief, man's size, with a tear in it through which the butt of the gun protruded. With proper care about touching, I opened the cylinder and found there were five loaded cartridges and one shell.

Hackett was there beside me, trying to say things. I got brusque with him:

"Yes, it's a gun, recently fired, and not mine or Wolfe's. Is it yours? No? Good. Okay, keep your shirt on. We're going back in there, and there will be sufficient employment for my brain without interference from you. Do not try to help me. If this ends as it ought to, you'll get an extra hundred. Agreed?"

I'll be damned if he didn't say, "Two hundred. I was shot at. I came within an inch of getting killed."

I told him he'd have to talk the second hundred out of Wolfe, and opened the door to the office and followed him through. He detoured around Jane Geer and went and sat in the chair he had just es-

caped being a corpse in. I swiveled my own chair to face it out.

Jensen demanded sharply, "What have you got there?"

"This," I said cheerfully, "is a veteran revolver, a Granville thirty-eight, which has been fired not too long ago," I lowered it onto my desk. "Fritz, give me back my gun."

He brought it. I kept it in my hand.

"Thank you. I found this other affair in the vase on the table in there, dressed in a handkerchief. Five unused cartridges and one used. It's a stranger here. Never saw it before. It appears to put the finishing touch on a critical situation."

Jane exploded. She called me an unspeakable rat. She said she wanted a lawyer and intended to go to one immediately. She called Hackett three or four things. She said it was the dirtiest frame-up in history. "Now," she told Hackett, "I know damned well you framed Captain Root! I let that skunk Goodwin talk me out of it! But you won't get away with it this time!"

Hackett was trying to talk back to her, making his voice louder and louder, and when she stopped for breath he could be heard:

". . . will not tolerate it! You come here and try to kill me! You nearly do kill me! Then you abuse me about a Captain Root, and I have never heard of Captain Root!" He was putting real feeling into it;

apparently he had either forgotten that he was supposed to be Nero Wolfe, or had got the notion, in all the excitement, that he really was Nero Wolfe. He was proceeding, "Young lady, listen to me! I will not—"

She turned and made for the door. I was immediately on my feet and after her, but halfway across the room I put on the brake, because the doorway had suddenly filled up with a self-propelled massive substance and she couldn't get through. She stopped, goggle-eyed, and then fell back a couple of paces.

The massive substance advanced, halted, and used its mouth: "How do you do? I am Nero Wolfe."

He did it well, at top form, and it was quite an effect. Nobody made a chirp. He moved forward, and Jane retreated again.

Wolfe stopped at the corner of his desk and wiggled a finger at Hackett. "Take another chair, sir, if you please?"

Hackett sidled out, without a word, and went to the red leather chair. Wolfe leaned over to peer at the hole in the back of his own chair, and then at the hole in the plaster, grunted, and got himself seated.

"This," Jensen said, "makes it a farce."

Jane snapped, "I'm going," and headed for the door, but I had been expecting that, and with only two steps had her by the arm with a good grip and was prepared to give

her the twist if she went thorny on me. Jensen sprang to his feet with both of his hands fists. Evidently in the brief space of forty-eight hours it had developed to the point where the sight of another man laying hands on his Jane started his adrenalin spurting in torrents.

"Stop it!" Wolfe's voice was a whip. It turned us into a group of statuary. "Miss Geer, you may leave shortly, if you still want to, after I have said something. Mr. Jensen, sit down. Archie, go to your desk, but be ready to use the gun. One of them is a murderer."

"That's a lie!" Jensen was visibly breathing. "And who the hell are you?"

"I introduced myself, sir. That gentleman is my temporary employee. When my life was threatened I hired him to impersonate me."

Jane spat at him, "You fat coward!"

He shook his head. "No, Miss Geer. It is no great distinction not to be a coward, but I can claim it. Not cowardice. Conceit convinced me that only I could catch the person daring and witty enough to kill me. I wished to be alive to do so."

He turned abruptly to me: "Archie, get Inspector Cramer on the phone."

Jane and Jensen both started talking at once, with vehemence.

Wolfe cut them off: "If you please! In a moment I shall offer you an alternative: the police or me. Meanwhile, Mr. Cramer can help."

He glanced at Hackett. "If you want to get away from this uproar, there is your room upstairs . . ."

"I think I'll stay here," Hackett declared. "I'm a little interested in this myself, since I nearly got killed."

"Cramer on," I told Wolfe.

He lifted his phone from the cradle. "How do you do, sir? . . . No. . . . No, I have a request to make. If you'll send a man here right away, I'll give him a revolver and a bullet. First, examine the revolver for fingerprints and send me copies. Second, trace the revolver if possible. Third, fire a bullet from it and compare it both with the bullet I am sending you and with the bullets that killed Mr. Jensen and Mr. Doyle. Let me know the results. That's all. . . . No. . . . Confound it, no! If you come yourself you will be handed the package at the door and not admitted. I'm busy."

As he hung up I said, "Does Cramer get the handkerchief, too?"

"Let me see it."

I handed the gun to him, with its butt still protruding through the tear in the handkerchief. Wolfe frowned as he saw that the handkerchief had no laundry mark or any other mark and was of a species that could be bought in almost any dry-goods store.

"We'll keep the handkerchief," Wolfe said.

Jensen demanded, "What the devil was it doing there?"

Wolfe's eyes went shut. He was,

of course, testing Jensen's expression, tone of voice, and mental longitude and latitude, to try to decide whether innocent curiosity was indicated or a camouflage for guilt. He always shut his eyes when he tasted. In a moment they opened again halfway.

"If a man has recently shot a gun," he said, "and has had no opportunity to wash, an examination of his hand will furnish incontestable proof. You probably know that. One of you, the one who fired that shot, certainly does. The handkerchief protected the hand. Under a microscope it would be found to contain many minute particles of explosive and other residue. The fact that it is a man's handkerchief doesn't help. Major Jensen would naturally possess a man's handkerchief. Miss Geer could buy or borrow one."

"You asked me to stay while you said something," Jane snapped. She and Jensen were back in their chairs. "You haven't said anything yet. Where were you when the shot was fired?"

"Pfui." Wolfe sighed. "Fritz, pack the gun and bullet in a carton, carefully with tissue paper, and give it to the man when he comes. First, bring me beer. Do any of you want beer?"

Evidently no one did.

"Very well, Miss Geer. To assume, or pretend to assume, some elaborate hocus-pocus by the inmates of this house is inane. At the

moment the shot was fired I was standing near the kitchen talking with Mr. Goodwin. Since then I have been at a spot from which part of this room can be seen and voices heard."

His eyes went to Jensen and back to Jane. "One of you two people is apt to make a mistake, and I want to prevent it if possible. I have not yet asked you where you were and what you were doing at the instant the shot was fired. Before I do so I want to say this, that even with the information at hand it is demonstrable that the shot came from the direction of that door to the front room, which was standing open. Mr. Hackett could not have fired it; you, Mr. Jensen, satisfied yourself of that. Mr. Brenner was in the kitchen. Mr. Goodwin and I were together. I warn you—one of you—that this is sufficiently provable to satisfy a jury in a murder trial.

"Now, what if you both assert that at the instant you heard the shot you were together, close together perhaps, looking at each other? For the one who fired the gun that would be a blessing, indeed. For the other it might be disastrous in the end, for when the truth is disclosed, as it will be, the question of complicity will arise. . . . How long have you two known each other?"

Jane's teeth were holding her lower lip. She removed them. "I met him day before yesterday. Here."

"Indeed. Is that correct, Mr. Jensen?"

"Yes."

Wolfe's brows were up. "Hardly long enough to form an attachment to warrant any of the more costly forms of sacrifice. Unless the spark was exceptionally hot, not long enough to weld you into collusion for murder. I hope you understand, Miss Geer, that all that is wanted here is the truth. Where were you and what were you doing when you heard that shot?"

"I was standing by the piano. I had put my bag on the piano and was opening it."

"Which way were you facing?"

"Toward the window."

"Were you looking at Mr. Jensen?"

"Not at the moment, no."

"Thank you." Wolfe's eyes moved. "Mr. Jensen?"

"I was in the doorway to the hall, looking down the hall and wondering where Goodwin had gone to. For no particular reason. I was not at that moment looking at Miss Geer."

Wolfe poured beer, which Fritz had brought. "Now we are ready to decide something." He took them both in. "Miss Geer, you said you wanted to go to a lawyer, heaven protect you. But it would not be sensible to permit either of you to walk out of here, to move and act at your own will and discretion. Since that bullet was intended for me, I reject the notion utterly. On

the other hand, we can't proceed intelligently until I get a report from Mr. Cramer. There is time to be passed."

Wolfe heaved a sigh. "Archie, take them to the front room and stay there till I send for you. Fritz will answer the bell."

Two hours of stony silence grow tiresome.

I appreciated the break in the monotony when, a little before nine, I heard the doorbell, and Fritz came in. He said, "Archie, Mr. Wolfe wants you in the office. Inspector Cramer is there with Sergeant Stebbins. I am to stay here."

If the situation in the front room had been unjovial, the one in the office was absolutely grim. One glance at Wolfe was enough to see that he was in a state of uncontrollable fury, because his forefinger was making the same circle, over and over, on the surface of his desk. Hackett was not in the room, but Sergeant Purley Stebbins was standing by the wall, looking official. Inspector Cramer was in the red leather chair, with his face about the color of the chair.

Wolfe tapped a piece of paper on his desk. "Look at this, Archie."

I went and looked. It was a search warrant.

Wowie! I was surprised that Cramer was still alive, or Wolfe, either.

Cramer growled, holding himself in, "I'll try to forget what you just said, Wolfe. It was totally un-

called for. Damn it, you have given me a runaround too many times. There I was, with that gun. A bullet fired from it matched the bullet you sent me and also the two that killed Jensen and Doyle. That's the gun, and you sent it to me. All right; then you've got a client, and when you've got a client you keep him right in your pocket. I would have been a fool to come here and start begging you. I've begged you before."

He started to get up. "We're going to search this house."

"If you do you'll never catch the murderer of Mr. Jensen and Mr. Doyle."

Cramer dropped back in the chair. "I won't?"

"No, sir."

"You'll prevent me?"

"Bah!" Wolfe was disgusted. "Next you'll be warning me formally that obstruction of justice is a crime. I didn't say that the murderer wouldn't be caught, I said you wouldn't catch him. Because I already have."

Cramer said, "The hell you have."

"Yes, sir. Your report on the gun and bullets settles it. But I confess the matter is a little complicated, and I do give you a formal warning: You are not equipped to handle it. I am." Wolfe shoved the warrant across the desk. "Tear that thing up."

Cramer shook his head. "You see, Wolfe, I know you. Lord, don't

I know you! But I'm willing to have a talk before I execute it."

"No, sir." Wolfe was murmuring again: "I will not submit to duress. I would even prefer to deal with District Attorney Skinner. Tear it up, or proceed to execute it."

That was a dirty threat. Cramer's opinion of Skinner was one of the defects of our democratic system of government. Cramer looked at the warrant, at Wolfe, at me, and back at the warrant. Then he picked it up and tore.

"Can the gun be traced?" Wolfe said.

"No. The number's gone. It dates from about nineteen-ten. And there are no prints on it that are worth anything. Nothing but smudges."

Wolfe nodded. "Naturally. A much simpler technique than wiping it clean or going around in gloves. . . . The murderer is in this house."

"I suspected he was. Is he your client?"

"The main complication," Wolfe said, in his purring tone, "is this: There are a man and woman in that front room. Granting that one of them is the murderer, which one?"

Cramer frowned at him. "You didn't say anything about granting. You said that you have caught the murderer."

"So I have. He or she is in there, under guard. I suppose I'll have to tell you what happened, if I expect

you to start your army of men digging, and it looks as though that's the only way to go about it. I have no army. To begin with, when I received that threat, I hired a man who resembles me—"

Purley Stebbins nearly bit the end of his tongue off, trying to get it all in his notebook.

Wolfe finished. Cramer sat scowling. Wolfe purred, "Well, sir, there's the problem. I doubt if it can be solved with what we have, or what is available on the premises. You'll have to get your men started."

"I wish," Cramer growled, "I knew how much dressing you put on that."

"Not any. I have only one concern in this. I have no client. I withheld nothing and added nothing."

"Maybe." Cramer straightened up like a man of action. "Okay, we'll proceed on that basis and find out. First of all I want to ask them some questions."

"I suppose you do." Wolfe detested sitting and listening to someone else ask questions. "You are handicapped, of course, by your official status. Which one do you want first?"

Cramer stood up. "I've got to see that room before I talk to either of them. I want to see where things are. Especially that vase."

Jane was seated on the piano bench. Jensen was on the sofa, but arose as we entered. Fritz was standing by a window.

Wolfe said. "This is Inspector Cramer, Miss Geer."

She didn't make a sound or move a muscle.

Wolfe said, "I believe you've met the inspector, Mr. Jensen."

"Yes, I have." Jensen's voice had gone unused so long it squeaked, and he cleared his throat. "So the agreement not to call in the police was a farce, too." He was bitter.

"There was no such agreement. I said that Mr. Cramer couldn't be kept out of it indefinitely. The bullet that was fired at me—at Mr. Hackett—came from the gun that was found in that vase."—Wolfe pointed at it—"and so did those that killed your father and Mr. Doyle. So the field has become—ah restricted."

"I insist," Jane put in, in a voice with no resemblance to any I had ever heard her use before, "on my right to consult a lawyer."

"Just a minute, now," Cramer told her in the tone he thought was soothing. "We're going to talk this over, but wait till I look around a little."

He proceeded to inspect things, and so did Sergeant Stebbins. They considered distances, and the positions of various objects. Then there was this detail: From what segment of that room could a gun send a bullet through the open door to the office and on through the hole in Wolfe's chair and the one in the wall? They were working on that together when Wolfe turned to

Fritz and asked him, "What happened to the other cushion?"

Fritz was taken aback. "Other cushion?"

"There were six velvet cushions on that sofa. Now there are only five. Did you remove it?"

"No, sir." Fritz gazed at the sofa and counted. "That's right. They've been rearranged to take up the space. I don't understand it. They were all here yesterday."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, sir. Positive."

"Look for it. Archie, help him."

It seemed like an odd moment to send out a general alarm for a sofa cushion, but since I had nothing else to do at the moment I obliged.

"Not here," I said.

He muttered at me, "I see it isn't."

I stared at him. There was an expression on his face that I knew well. It wasn't exactly excitement, though it always stirred excitement in me. His neck was rigid, as if to prevent any movement of the head, so as not to disturb the brain, his eyes were half shut and not seeing anything, and his lips were moving.

Suddenly he turned and spoke: "Mr. Cramer! Please leave Mr. Stebbins in here with Miss Geer and Mr. Jensen. You can stay here, too, or come with me, as you prefer. Fritz and Archie, come." He headed for the office.

Cramer, knowing Wolfe's tones of voice almost as well as I did, came with us.

Wolfe waited until he was in his

chair before he spoke: "I want to know if that cushion is on the premises. Search the house from the cellar up—except the south room; Mr. Hackett is in there lying down. Start in here."

Cramer barked, "What the hell is all this about?"

"I'll give you an explanation." Wolfe told him, "when I have one."

He leaned back and closed his eyes, and his lips started moving. Cramer slid farther back in his chair, crossed his legs, and got out a cigar and sank his teeth in it.

Half an hour had passed while I searched the office, when I heard Wolfe let out a grunt. I nearly toppled off the stepladder turning to look at him. He was in motion. He picked up his wastebasket, which was kept at the far corner of his desk, inspected it, shook his head, put it down again, and began opening the drawers of his desk. The first two, the one at the top and the one in the middle, apparently didn't get him anything, but when he yanked out the double-depth one at the bottom, as far as it would go, he looked in, bent over closer to see better, then closed the drawer and said, "I've found it."

In those three little words there was at least two tons of self-satisfaction and smirk.

We all goggled at him.

He looked at me: "Archie. Get down off that thing, and don't fall. Look in your desk and see if one of my guns has been fired."

I stepped down and went and opened the armament drawer. The first one I picked up was innocent. I tried the second with a sniff and a look, and reported, "Yes, sir. There were six cartridges, and now there are five. Same as the cushions. The shell is here."

"Tchah! The confounded ass! . . . Tell Miss Geer and Mr. Jensen that they may come in here if they care to hear what happened, or they may go home or anywhere else. We don't need them. Take Mr. Stebbins with you upstairs and bring Mr. Hackett down here. Use caution, and search him with great care. He is a dangerous man."

Naturally, Jane and Jensen voted for joining the throng in the office, and their pose during the balloting was significant. They stood facing each other, with Jensen's right hand on Jane's left shoulder, and Jane's right hand, or perhaps just the fingers, on Jensen's left forearm. I left it to them to find the way to the office alone, told Purley Stebbins what our job was, and took him upstairs with me.

It was approximately ten minutes later that we delivered our cargo in the office. Even though Mr. Hackett staged one of the most convincing demonstrations of unwillingness to cooperate that I have ever encountered.

We got him to the office in one piece, nothing really wrong with any of us that surgical gauze wouldn't fix. We sat on him.

I said, "He was reluctant."

I'll say one thing for Wolfe—I've never seen him gloat over a guy about to get it. He was contemplating Hackett more as an extraordinary object that deserved study.

I said, "Purley thinks he knows him."

Purley, as was proper, spoke to his superior: "I swear, Inspector, I'm sure I've seen him somewhere, but I can't remember."

Wolfe nodded. "A uniform." "Uniform?" Purley scowled. "Army?"

Wolfe shook his head. "Mr. Cramer told me Wednesday morning that the doorman on duty at the apartment house at the time Mr. Jensen and Mr. Doyle were killed was a fat nitwit who had been hired two weeks ago and didn't know the tenants by name, and also that he claimed to have been in the basement stoking the water heater at the moment the murders were committed. A phone call would tell us whether he is still working there."

"He isn't," Cramer growled. "He left Wednesday afternoon because he didn't like a place where people were murdered. I never saw him. Some of my men did."

"Yeah," Purley said, gazing at Hackett's face. "By God, it's him."

"He is," Wolfe declared, "a remarkable combination of fool and genius. He came to New York determined to kill Mr. Jensen and me. By the way, Mr. Hackett, you look

a little dazed. Can you hear what I'm saying?"

Hackett made no sound.

"I guess you can," Wolfe went on. "This will interest you. I requested Military Intelligence to have an examination made of the effects of Captain Root at the prison in Maryland. A few minutes ago I phoned for a report, and got it. Captain Root was lying when he stated that he was not in communication with his father and had not been for years. There are several letters from his father among his belongings, dated in the past two months, and they make it evident that his father, whose name is Thomas Root, regards him as a scion to be proud of. To the point of mania."

Wolfe wiggled a finger at Hackett. "I offer the conjecture that you are in a position to know whether that is correct or not. Is it?"

"One more day," Hackett said in his husky croak. His hands were twitching.

Wolfe nodded. "I know. One more day and you would have killed me, with the suspicion centered on Miss Geer or Mr. Jensen, or both, on account of your flummery here this afternoon. And you would have disappeared."

Jensen popped up. "You haven't explained the flummery."

"I shall, Mr. Jensen." Wolfe got more comfortable in his chair. "But first that performance Tuesday evening."

He was keeping his eyes on Hackett. "That was a masterpiece. You decided to kill Mr. Jensen first, which was lucky for me, and, since all apartment house service staffs are shorthanded, got a job there as doorman with no difficulty. All you had to do was await an opportunity, with no passers-by or other onlookers. It came the day after you mailed the threat, an ideal situation in every respect except the presence of the man he had hired to guard him.

"Arriving at the entrance to the apartment house, naturally they would have no suspicion of the doorman in uniform. Mr. Jensen probably nodded and spoke to you. With no one else in sight, and the elevator man ascending with a passenger, it was too good an opportunity to lose. Muffling the revolver with some piece of cloth, you shot Mr. Doyle in the back, and when Mr. Jensen whirled at the sound you shot him in the front, and skeddaddled for the stairs to the basement and started stoking the water heater. I imagine the first thing you fed it was the cloth with which you had muffled the gun."

Wolfe moved his eyes. "Does that rattle anywhere, Mr. Cramer?"

"It sounds tight from here," Cramer said.

"That's good. Because it is for those murders that Mr. Hackett—or Mr. Root, I suppose I should say—must be convicted. He can't be electrocuted for hacking a little

gash in his own ear." Wolfe's eyes moved again, to me. "Archie, did you find any tools in his pockets?"

"Only a boy scout's dream," I told him. "One of those knives with scissors, awl, nail file . . ."

"Let the police have it to look for traces of blood. Just the sort of thing Mr. Cramer does best."

"The comedy can wait," Cramer growled. "I'll take it as is for Tuesday night and go on from there."

Wolfe heaved a sigh. "You're rushing past the most interesting point of all: Mr. Hackett's answering my advertisement for a man. Was he sufficiently acute to realize that its specifications were roughly a description of me, suspect that I was the advertiser, and proceed to take advantage of it to approach me? Or was it merely that he was short of funds and attracted by the money offered?"

"Actually, I am sure that he saw it as precisely the kind of opportunity I meant it to be—an opportunity to kill Nero Wolfe. Nor was my insertion of the advertisement a mere shot in the dark. I was very sure we were dealing with a dangerous killer.

"Accordingly, Archie, when, after you had left to meet Miss Geer, I looked out the window and saw this fellow pass by, and saw him again three times in the next three hours in the vicinity of the house, it occurred to me that a lion is much safer in a cage even if you have to be in the cage with him. I

thought the advertisement should provide proper enticement for a character who had shown complete disregard for danger in his previous attempt at murder. . . .

"In any event, having answered the advertisement and received a message from me, he was, of course, delighted, and doubly delighted when he was hired.

"Now, from the moment he got in here, Mr. Root was concocting schemes, rejecting, considering, revising; and no doubt relishing the situation enormously. The device of the handkerchief to protect a hand firing a gun was no doubt a part of one of those schemes.

"This morning he learned that Miss Geer was to call on me at six o'clock, and he was to impersonate me. After lunch, in here alone, he got a cushion from the sofa in there, wrapped his revolver in it, and fired a bullet through the back of his chair into the wall.

"He stuffed the cushion into the rear compartment of the bottom right-hand drawer of this desk, then put the gun in his pocket."

"If the hole had been seen, the bullet would have been found," Cramer muttered.

"I have already pronounced him," Wolfe said testily, "an unsurpassable fool. Even so, he knew that Archie would be out with him the rest of the afternoon, and I would be in my room. I had made a remark which informed him that I would not sit in that chair again

until he was permanently out of it. At six o'clock Miss Geer arrived, unexpectedly accompanied by Mr. Jensen. They were shown into the front room, and that door was open. Mr. Root's brain moved swiftly, and so did the rest of him. He got one of my guns from Archie's desk, returned to this chair, opened the drawer where he had put the cushion, fired a shot into the cushion, dropped the gun in, and shut the drawer."

Wolfe sighed again. "Archie came dashing in, cast a glance at Mr. Root seated here, and went on to the front room. Mr. Root grasped the opportunity to do two things: return my gun to the drawer of Archie's desk, and use a blade of his knife, I would guess the awl, to tear a gash in the corner of his ear. That, of course, improved the situation for him. What improved it vastly more was the chance that came soon after, when Archie took him to the bathroom and left him there. He might have found another chance, but that was perfect. He entered the front room from the bathroom, put his own gun, handkerchief attached, in the vase, and returned to the bathroom, and later rejoined the others here.

"It was by no means utterly preposterous if I had not noticed the absence of that cushion. Since this desk sits flush with the floor, no sign of the bullet fired into the bottom drawer would be visible unless the drawer was opened, and why

should it be. It was unlikely that Archie would have occasion to find that one of my guns in his desk had been fired, and what if he did? Mr. Root knows how to handle a gun without leaving fingerprints, which is simple."

Cramer slowly nodded. "I'm not objecting. I'll buy it. But you must admit you've described quite a few things you can't prove."

"I don't have to. Neither do you. As I said before, Mr. Root will be put on trial for the murder of Mr. Jensen and Mr. Doyle, not for his antics here in my house."

Cramer stood up. "Let's go, Mr. Root."

Back in the office, Wolfe, in his own chair with only one bullet hole that could easily be repaired, and with three bottles of beer on a tray in front of him, was leaning back, the picture of a man at peace with the world.

He murmured at me, "Archie, remind me in the morning to telephone Mr. Viscardi about that taragon."

"Yes, sir." I sat down. "And if I may, sir, I would like to offer a suggestion. Let's advertise for a man-eating tiger weighing around two hundred and sixty pounds capable of easy and normal movement. We could station him behind the big cabinet, and when you enter he could leap on you from the rear."

It didn't faze him. He was enjoying the feel of his chair and I doubt if he heard me.

John Dickson Carr

The Locked Room

The perfect title for any John Dickson Carr story about Dr. Gideon Fell . . . the miracle problem, murder as if by magic, the impossible crime—baffling, ingenious, and in the end, no miracle, no magic, and all completely possible.

YOU MAY HAVE READ THE FACTS. Francis Seton was found lying on the floor behind his desk, near death from a fractured skull. He had been struck three times across the back of the head with a piece of lead-loaded broomhandle. His safe had been robbed. His body was found by his secretary-typist, Iris Lane, and his librarian, Harold Mills, who were, in the polite newspaper phrase, "being questioned."

So far, it seems commonplace. Nothing in that account shows why Superintendent Hadley of the C.I.D. nearly went mad, or why ten o'clock of a fine June morning found him punching at the doorbell of Dr. Gideon Fell's house in Chelsea.

Summer touched the old houses with grace. There was a smoky sparkle on the river, and on the flower-veined green of the Embankment gardens. Upstairs, in the library, with its long windows, Superintendent Hadley found the learned doctor smoking a cigar and reading a magazine.

Dr. Fell's bulk overflowed from a chair nearly large enough to accommodate him. A chuckle animated his several chins, and ran down over the ridges of his waistcoat. He peered up at Hadley over his eyeglasses; his cheeks shone, pinkly transparent, with warmth of welcome. But at Hadley's first words a disconsolate expression drew down the corners of his moustache.

"Seton's conscious," said Hadley. "I've just been talking to him."

Dr. Fell grunted. Reluctantly he put aside the magazine.

"Ah," he said. "And Seton denies the story told by the secretary and the librarian?"

"No. He confirms it."

"In every detail?"

"In every detail."

Dr. Fell puffed out his cheeks. He also took several violent puffs at the cigar, staring at it in a somewhat cross-eyed fashion. His big voice was subdued.

"Do you know, Hadley," he muttered, "I rather expected that."

"I didn't," snapped Hadley. "I

didn't; and I don't. But that's why I'm here. You must have some theory about this impossible burglar who nearly bashed a man's head off and then disappeared like smoke. My forthright theory is that Iris Lane and Harold Mills are lying. If . . . hullo!"

Standing by the window, he broke off and glanced down into the street. His gesture was so urgent that Dr. Fell, with much labour, hoisted himself up wheezily from the chair and lumbered over to the window.

Clear in the strong sunshine, a girl, in a white frock was standing on the opposite pavement, by the railings, and peering up at the window. As Dr. Fell threw back the curtains, she looked straight into their eyes.

She was what is called an outdoor girl, with a sturdy and well-shaped body, and a square but very attractive face. Her dark brown hair hung in a long bob. She had light hazel eyes in a tanned, earnest face. Her mouth might have been too broad, but she showed fine teeth when she laughed. If she was not exactly pretty, health and vigour gave her a strong attractiveness which was better than that.

"Iris Lane," said Hadley ventriloquially.

Dr. Fell, in an absent-minded way, was startled. He would have expected Francis Seton's typist to be either prim or mousy.

When she saw the two men at

the window, Iris Lane's expressive face showed many things. Disappointment, surprise, even fear. Her knee moved as though she were about to stamp angrily on the pavement. For a second they thought she would turn and hurry away. Then she seemed to come to a decision. She almost ran across the street towards the house.

"Now what do you suppose—?" Hadley was speculating when the doctor cut him short.

"She wants to see me, confound you," he roared. "Or she did want to see me, until you nearly scared her off."

And the girl herself confirmed it a moment later. She was making an attempt to be calm and even jaunty, but her eyes always moved back to Hadley.

"It seems," she said, after a quick look round the room, "that I'm always trailing the superintendent. Or he's always trailing me. I don't know which."

Hadley nodded. He was non-committal.

"It does seem like that, Miss Lane. Anything in particular on your mind now?"

"Yes. I—I wanted to talk to Dr. Fell. Alone."

"Oh? Why?"

"Because it's my last hope," answered the girl, raising her head. "Because they say nobody, not even a stray dog, is ever turned away from here."

"Nonsense!" said Dr. Fell, huge-

ly delighted nevertheless. He covered this with deprecating noises which shook the chandelier, and an offer of refreshment. Hadley saw that the old man was half hooked already, and Hadley despaired.

Yet it seemed impossible to doubt this girl's sincerity. She sat bolt upright in the chair, opening and shutting the catch of a white hand-bag.

"It's quite simple," she explained, and hunched her shoulders. "Harold Mills and I were alone in the house with Mr. Seton. There was nearly three thousand pounds in the safe in his study."

Dr. Fell frowned.

"So? As much money as that?"

"Mr. Seton was leaving," said Iris Lane, with an effort. "He was going abroad, to spend a year in California. He always made his decisions suddenly—just like that." She snapped her fingers. "We didn't know anything about it, Harold and I, until he broke the news that morning. The man from the bank brought the money round; Mr. Seton put it into the safe, and told us why he had sent for it. That meant we were out of our jobs."

And she began to tell the story.

Of course (Iris admitted to herself), her nerves had been on edge that night. It was caused partly by losing a good job at a moment's notice, partly by the thick and thunderous weather round the old house in Kensington, and partly by the

personality of Francis Seton himself.

Francis Seton was a book-collector. When Iris had first answered his advertisement for a secretary-typist, she had expected to find someone thin and ancient, with double-lensed spectacles. Instead she found a thickset bull of a man, with sandy hair and a blue guileless eye. His energy was prodigious. He animated the old house like a humming-top. He had the genuine collector's passion; he was generous, and considerate when it did not inconvenience him.

But he whirled off at a new tangent that morning, a hot overcast day, when he called Iris Lane and Harold Mills into his study. They had been working in the long library on the first floor. The study, which opened out of it, was a large room with two windows overlooking a tangled back garden.

Seton stood by the big flat-topped desk in the middle of the study. Out of a canvas bag he was emptying thick packets of banknotes, one of which fell into the waste-paper basket.

"Look here," he said, with the confiding candour of a child. "I'm off to America. For a year at least."

(He seemed pleased at the way his hearers jumped.)

"But, sir—" began Harold Mills.

"Crisis!" said Seton, pointing to a newspaper. "Crisis!" he added, pointing to another. "I'm sick of crises. California's the place for me.

Orange groves and sea breezes: at least, that's what the booklets say. Besides, I want to make old Isaacson sick with my 1593 *Venus and Adonis* and the 1623 folio."

His forehead grew lowering and embarrassed.

"I've got to let you both go," he growled. "I'd like to take you both with me. Can't afford it. Sorry; but there it is. I'll give you a month's salary in place of notice. Damn it, I'll give you *two* months' salary in place of notice. How's that?"

Beaming with relief now that this was off his chest, he dismissed the subject briskly. He gathered up the packets of banknotes, fishing the dropped one out of the wastepaper basket. It made his face crimson to bend over, since Dr. Woodall had warned him about high blood-pressure; but he was all energy again.

A little iron safe stood against one wall. Seton opened it with his key, poured the money into a tin box, closed the safe, and locked it. In a vague way Iris noted the denominations on the paper bands round the packets of notes: £1, £5, £10, £20. A little treasure-trove. Almost a little fortune.

Perhaps because of the heat of the day, there was perspiration on Harold Mills's forehead.

"And when do you want to leave, sir?" he asked.

"Leave? Oh, ah." Seton considered. "Day after tomorrow," he decided.

"Day after tomorrow!"

"Saturday," Seton explained. "Always a good ship leaving. Yes, make it Saturday."

"But your passport—" protested Iris.

"That's completely in order," said Seton coolly.

The word which flashed through Iris Lane's mind just then was "robbed." She could not help it. There are times with everyone when the sight of so much money, all in a lump, makes the fingers itch and brings fantastic dreams of what might be.

She didn't mean it—as she was later to explain to the police. But there was a tantalizing quality in what had happened. Only yesterday she had been safe. Only a week ago she had returned from a holiday in Cornwall, where there had been little to do except lie on lemon-coloured sands in a lemon-coloured bathingsuit; or feel the contrast between sun on baking shoulders and salt water foaming and slipping past her body, in the cold invigoration of the sea. The future would take care of itself.

And more. There was a pleasant-looking man, just on the right side of middle age, who came to do sketches at the beach. They were such intolerably bad sketches that Iris was relieved to discover he was a doctor from London.

By coincidence, a breeze blew one of the sketches past her, and she retrieved it. So they fell into

conversation. By coincidence, it developed that the man's name was Charles Woodhall; and that he was Francis Seton's doctor. It astounded Iris, who saw in this a good omen of summer magic. She liked Dr. Woodhall. He was as good a talker as Seton himself, without Seton's untiring bounce. And he knew when to be comfortably silent.

Dr. Woodhall would sit on a campstool, attired in ancient flannels, tennis-shoes, and shirt, and draw endless sketches of Iris. A cigarette would hang from the corner of his mouth. He would blink as smoke got into one eye, and amusement-wrinkles deepened from the corners of his eyes almost back to temples that were slightly grey. Meantime, he talked. He talked happily of all things in earth and sky and sea. He also offered a profound apology for the bad sketches. But Iris, though she secretly agreed with him, kept them all; and so passed the fortnight.

They would meet again in London.

And she had a good job to go back to there.

All the future looked pleasant—until Francis Seton exploded everything that morning.

The thunderstorm, which had been imminent all day, broke late in the afternoon.

It brought little relief to Iris. She and Harold Mills went on with

their work and were still working long after dinner, in the library under the shaded lamps and the rows of books behind their wire cages. It was a rich room, deep-carpeted like every other room in the house; but it was tainted with damp. Iris's head ached. She had sent off two dozen letters, and arranged every detail of Seton's trip: all he had to do now was pack his bag. Seton himself was in the study, with the door closed between, cleaning out the litter in his desk.

Harold Mills put down his pen. "Iris," he said softly.

"Yes?"

Mills glanced towards the closed door of the study, and spoke still more softly.

"I want to ask you something."

"Of course."

She was surprised at his tone. He was sitting at his own writing-table, some distance away from her, with a table-lamp burning at his left. The light of the lamp shone on his flat fair hair, brushed with great precision round his head, on his waxy-coloured face, and on his pince-nez. Since he was very young, it was only this pince-nez which gave him the sedate and donnish appearance; this, or the occasional slight fidgeting of his hands.

He almost blurted out the next words.

"What I mean is: are you all right? Financially, I mean?"

"Oh, yes."

She didn't know. She was not

even thinking of this now. Dr. Woodhall had promised to drop in that evening, to see Seton. It was nearly eleven now. Seton, who always swore that his immense vitality was due to the regularity of his habits, was as regular as that clock over the mantelpiece. At eleven o'clock he would smoke the last of the ten cigarettes allowed him a day, drink his one whisky-and-soda, and be in bed by eleven-thirty sharp. If Dr. Woodhall didn't hurry . . .

Iris's head ached still more. Mills kept on talking, but she did not hear him. She awoke to this with a start.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I didn't catch—?"

"I said," repeated the other, somewhat jerkily, "that I'm sorry for more reasons than one that we're leaving."

"So am I, Harold."

"You don't understand. Mine is rather a specialized job. I'll not get another in a hurry." Colour came up under his pince-nez. "No, no, that isn't what I mean. I'm not complaining. It's very decent of Seton to provide two months' salary. But I'd hoped that this job would be more or less permanent. If it turned out to be that, there was something I wanted to do."

"What was that?"

"I wanted to ask you to marry me," said Mills.

There was a silence.

She stared back at him. She had

never thought of him as awkward or tongue-tied, or anything like the man who now sat and cracked the joints of his knuckles as though he could not sit still. In fact, she had hardly ever thought of him at all. And his face showed that he knew it. "Please don't say anything." He got to his feet. "I don't want you to feel you've got to say anything." He began to pace the room with little short steps. "I haven't been exactly—attentive."

"You never even . . ."

He gestured.

"Yes, I know. I'm not like that. I can't be. I wish I could." He stopped his pacing. "This fellow Woodhall, now."

"What about Dr. Woodhall?"

He never got the opportunity to say. This was the point at which they heard, very distinctly, the noise from the next room.

When they tried to describe it afterwards, neither could be sure whether it was a yell, or a groan, or the beginning of incoherent words. It might have been a combination of all three. Then there were several soft little thuds, like the sound of a butcher's cleaver across meat on the chopping-block. Then silence, except for the distant whisper of the rain . . .

That was the story which Iris Lane began to tell at Dr. Fell's flat. Both Dr. Fell and Superintendent Hadley listened with the closest attention, though they had heard it several times before.

"We didn't know what had happened," said Iris, moving her shoulders. "We called out to Mr. Seton, but he didn't answer. We tried the door, but it wouldn't open."

"Was it locked?"

"No; it was warped. The damp from the rain had swollen and warped the wood. Harold tried to get it open, but it wouldn't work until he finally took a run and jumped at it."

"There was nobody in the study except Mr. Seton," she went on. "I know, because I was afraid we should see someone. The place was brilliantly lighted. There's a big bronze chandelier, with electric candles, hanging over the flat-topped desk in the middle. And there was even a light burning in the cloakroom—it's hardly more than a cupboard for a wash-basin, really—which opens out of the study. You could see everything at a glance. And there wasn't anybody hiding in the room."

She paused, visualizing the scene.

Francis Seton lay on the far side of the desk, between the desk and the windows. He was unconscious, with blood coming out of his nostrils.

His cigarette, put down on the edge of the desk, was now scorching the mahogany with an acrid smell. The desk-chair and a little table had been overturned. There was a stain on the thick grey carpet where his glass had been upset, together with a stoppered decanter

which had not spilt, and a siphon enclosed in metal cross-bands. Seton was moaning. When they turned him over on his side, they found the weapon.

"It was that hollow wooden thing with lead inside," said Iris. She saw it as vividly as though it lay on the carpet now. "Only six or seven inches long, but it weighed nearly a pound. Harold, who'd started to study medicine once, put his fingers down and felt round the back of Mr. Seton's head. Then he said I'd better hurry and 'phone for a proper doctor.

"I had backed away against the windows—I remember that. The curtains weren't quite drawn. I could hear the rain hitting the window behind me. I looked round, because I was afraid there might be somebody hiding in the curtains. We pulled the curtains back on both windows. Then we saw the edge of the ladder. It had been propped up against the right-hand window, from the garden below. And I noticed something else that I'll swear to, and swear to, and go on swearing to until you believe me. But never mind what it was, for a minute.

"I ran out to 'phone for Dr. Woodhall, but it wasn't necessary. I met him coming up the stairs in the front hall."

There were several things she did not tell here.

She did not say how heartening it was to see Dr. Woodhall's

shrewd, humorous face looking at her from under the brim of a sodden hat. He wore a dripping mackintosh with the collar turned up, and carried his medicine-case.

"I don't know how he got in," Iris went on. "Mr. Seton had dismissed the servants after dinner. The front door must have been unlocked. Anyway, he said, 'Hullo; is anything wrong?' I think I said, 'Come up quickly; something terrible has happened.' He didn't make any comment. But when he had examined Mr. Seton he said it was concussion of the brain all right, from several powerful blows. I asked whether I should 'phone for an ambulance. He said Mr. Seton wasn't in shape to be moved, and that we should have to get him to bed in the house.

"When we were carrying him in to his bedroom, things started to fall out of his pockets. The key to the safe wasn't there: it had been torn loose from the other end of his watchchain.

"You know the rest. The safe had been robbed, not only of the money, but of two valuable folios. Apparently it was all plain sailing. There was the ladder propped against the window-sill outside. There were scuffed footprints in a flower-bed below. It was a burglar. It must have been a burglar. Only—" She paused, clearing her throat. "Only," she went on, "*both those windows were locked on the inside.*"

Dr. Fell grunted.

Something in this recital had interested him very much. He drew in several of his chins, and exchanged a glance with Superintendent Hadley.

"Both the windows," he rumbled, "were locked on the inside. You're quite sure of that? Hey?"

"I'm absolutely positive."

"You couldn't have been mistaken?"

"I only wish I could have," said Iris helplessly. "And you know what they think, don't you? They think Harold and I caught him and beat his head in.

"It's so awfully easy to think that. Harold and I were alone in the house. We were sitting outside the only door to the study. There was no intruder anywhere. Both the study windows were locked on the inside. It—well, it just couldn't have been anybody else but us. Only it wasn't. That's all I can tell."

Dr. Fell opened his eyes.

"But, my dear young lady," he protested, blowing sparks from his cigar like the Spirit of the Volcano, "whatever else they think about you, I presume they don't think you are raving mad? Suppose you had faked this burglary? Suppose you had planted the ladder against the window? Would you and Mills then go about swearing the windows were locked in order to prove that your story couldn't be true?"

"Just a moment," said Superintendent Hadley sharply.

Hadley was beaten, and he knew it. But he was fair.

"I'll be frank with you, Miss Lane," he went on. "Before you came in, I was telling Dr. Fell that Mr. Seton is conscious. He's talked to me. And—"

"And?"

"Mr. Seton," said Hadley, "confirms your story in every detail. He clears you and Mills of any complicity in the crime."

Iris said nothing. All the same, they saw her face grow white under its tan.

"He says," pursued Hadley, in the midst of a vast silence, "that he was sitting at his desk, facing the door to the library. He swears he could hear you and Mills talking in the library. His back, of course, was towards the windows. He agrees that the windows were locked, since he had just locked them himself. At a few minutes past eleven, he heard a footstep behind him. A 'shuffling' footstep. Just as he started to get up, something smashed him across the head, and that's all he remembers. So it seems you were telling the truth."

"H'mf," said Dr. Fell.

Iris stared at Hadley. "Then I'm not—you're not going to arrest me?"

"Frankly," snapped the superintendent, "no. I'm sorry to say I don't see how we can arrest anybody. The windows were locked. The door was watched. There was nobody hidden in the room. Yet

someone, by the victim's own testimony, did get in and cosh Seton. We've got a blooming miracle, that's what we've got; and, if you don't believe me, come along and talk to Seton for yourself."

Francis Seton lived, and nearly died, in the grand manner. His bedroom was furnished in the heavy, dark, and florid style of the Second French Empire, with a four-poster bed. He lay propped up with his neck above the pillows, glowering out of a helmet of bandages.

"Time's nearly up," warned Dr. Charles Woodhall, who stood at one side of the bed. His fingers were on Seton's wrist, but Seton snatched the wrist away.

Hadley was patient.

"What I'm trying to get at, Mr. Seton, is this. When did you lock those two windows?"

"Told you that already," said Seton. "About ten minutes before that fellow sneaked up and hit me."

"But you didn't catch a glimpse of the person who hit you?"

"No, worse luck. Or I'd have—"

"Yes. But *why* did you lock the windows?"

"Because I'd noticed the ladder outside. Couldn't have burglars getting in, could I?"

"You didn't try to find out who put the ladder there?"

"No. I couldn't be bothered."

"At the same time, you were a little nervous?"

For some time Iris Lane had the impression that Seton, if it were not for his injury, would have rolled over on his side, buried his face in the pillows, and groaned with impatience. But the last question stung him to wrath.

"Who says I was nervous? Nervous! I'm the last man in the world to be nervous. I haven't got a nerve in my body." He appealed to Dr. Woodhall and to Harold Mills. "Have I?"

"You've got an exceptionally strong constitution," replied Dr. Woodhall blandly.

Seton appeared to scent evasion here. His bloodshot eyes rolled, without a turn of his neck, from Woodhall to Mills; but they came back to Hadley.

"Well? Anything else you want to know?"

"Just one more question, Mr. Seton. Are you sure there was nobody hidden in the study or the cloak-room before you were attacked?"

"Dead certain."

Hadley shut up his notebook.

"Then that's all, sir. Nobody hidden, before or after. Windows locked, before and after. I don't believe in ghosts, and so the thing's impossible." He spoke quietly. "Excuse me, Mr. Seton, but are you sure you were attacked after all?"

"And excuse *me*," interrupted a new voice, thunderous but apologetic.

Dr. Fell, whose presence was somewhat less conspicuous than a

captive balloon, had not removed his disreputable slouch hat: a breach of good manners which ordinarily he would have deplored. But his manner had a vast eagerness, like Old King Cole in a hurry. Iris Lane could not remember having seen him for some minutes. He lumbered in at the doorway, with one hand holding an object wrapped in newspaper and the other supporting himself on his crutch-handled stick.

"Sir," he intoned, addressing Seton, "I should regret it very much if my friend Hadley gave you an apoplectic stroke. It is therefore only fair to tell you that you were attacked, and very thoroughly battered about the head, by one of the persons in this room. I am also glad the police have kept your study locked up since then."

There was a silence as sudden as that which follows a loud noise.

From the newspaper Dr. Fell took out a soda-water siphon, and put it down with a thump on the centre table. It was a large siphon, bound round with metal bands.

And Dr. Fell reared up.

"Dash it, Hadley," he complained, "why couldn't you have told me about the siphon? Ten days in a spiritual abyss; and all because you couldn't tell me about the siphon! It took the young lady to do that."

"But I did tell you about a siphon," said Hadley. "I've told you about it a dozen times!"

"No, no, no," insisted Dr. Fell dismally. "You said 'a' siphon. Presumably an ordinary siphon, the unending white bulwark of the English pub. You didn't say it was this particular kind of siphon."

"But what the devil has the siphon got to do with it anyway?" demanded Hadley. "Mr. Seton wasn't knocked out with a siphon."

"Oh, yes, he was," said Dr. Fell.

It was so quiet that they could hear a fly buzzing against one half-open window.

"You see," continued Dr. Fell, fiery with earnestness, "the ordinary siphon is of plain glass. It doesn't have these criss-cross metal-bands, or that nicked cap at the other side of the nozzle. In short, this is a 'Fountain-fill' siphon; the sort which you fill yourself with plain water, and turn into soda-water by means of compressed-air capsules."

Enlightenment came to Superintendent Hadley.

"Ah!" chortled Dr. Fell. "Got it, have you? The police, as a matter of ordinary routine, would closely examine the dregs of a whisky-glass or any decanter found at the scene of a crime. But they would never think twice about a siphon, because the ordinary soda-water siphon can't possibly be tampered with. And yet, by thunder, *this* one could be tampered with!"

Dr. Fell sniffed. He lumbered over to the bedside table, and picked up a tumbler. Returning

with it to the centre table, he squirted some of the soda into the glass. He touched his tongue to it.

"I think, Mr. Harold Mills," he said, "you had better give yourself up for theft and attempted murder."

Dr. Fell chuckled as he sat again in his own library at Chelsea.

"And you still don't see it?" he demanded.

"Yes," said Dr. Woodhall.

"No," cried Iris Lane.

"The whole trick," their host went on, "turns on the fact that the 'Mickey Finn' variety of knockout-drops produces on the victim exactly the same sensation as being struck over the head: the sudden bursting explosion of pain, the roaring in the ears, and almost instant unconsciousness.

"Mills had a dozen opportunities that day to load the 'Fountain-fill' siphon with the drug. He knew, as you all knew, exactly when Francis Seton would drink his one whiskey-and-soda of the day. Mills had already removed what he wanted from the safe. Finally, he had propped up a ladder outside the study window to make the crime seem the work of a burglar. All he had to do then was to wait for eleven o'clock.

"At eleven o'clock Seton drank the hocused mixture, cried out, and fell, knocking over a number of objects on the carpet. Since the whole effect of this drug depends

● on a violent cerebral rush of blood, a man already suffering from high blood-pressure would be likely and even certain to bleed from the nostrils. It provided the last realistic touch."

Dr. Fell growled to himself, no longer seeming quite so cherubic. Then he looked at Iris.

"Mills," he went on, "deliberately fiddled with the door, pretending it was stuck: which it was not. He wanted to allow time for the imaginary burglar to loot the safe. Then he ran in with you. When he turned Seton over, he took that piece of lead-filled broom-handle out of his sleeve, slipped it under the body, and dramatically called your attention to it."

"Next, you remember, he felt at the base of Seton's skull in pretended horror, and told you to go out and 'phone for a doctor. As a result of this, you also recall, he was for several minutes completely alone in the study."

Iris was looking at the past, examining each move she herself had made.

"You mean," she muttered, "that was when he—?" She brought up her arm in the gesture of one using a life-preserver.

"Yes," said Dr. Fell. "That was when he deliberately struck several blows on the head of an unconscious man to complete his plan."

"He removed the key to the safe from Seton's watch-chain. In case the police should be suspicious of

any drinks found at the scene of a crime, he rinsed out the spilled whiskey-glass in that convenient cloakroom, and poured into the glass a few drops of harmless whiskey from the decanter. He had no time to refill and recharge the siphon before you and Dr. Woodhall returned to the study; so he left it alone. A handkerchief round his hand prevented any fingerprints. Unfortunately, mischance tripped him up with a resounding wallop."

Dr. Woodhall nodded.

"You mean," he said, "that Seton noticed the ladder, and locked the windows?"

"Yes. And the unfortunate Mr. Mills never discovered the locked windows until it was too late. Miss Lane, as you have probably discovered, is a very positive young lady. She looked at the windows. She knew they were locked. She was prepared to swear it in any court. So Mills, floundering and drifting and never very determined except where it came to appropriating someone else's property, had to keep quiet. He could not even get at that betraying siphon afterwards, because the police kept the room locked up."

"He had one bit of luck, though. Francis Seton, of course, never heard any footsteps behind him just before the attack. Anybody who takes one look at the thick carpet of the study cannot fail to be con-

vinced of that. I wondered whether the good Mr. Seton might be deliberately lying. But a little talk with Seton will show you the real reason. The man's boasted vitality is killing him: it has got him into such a state of nerves that he really does need a year in California. Once he saw that ladder outside the window, once he began to think of burglars, he was ready to imagine anything."

Iris was glancing sideways at Dr. Woodhall. Woodhall, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, was glancing sideways at her.

"I—er—I don't like to bring it "Mills's proposal?" inquired Dr. Fell affably.

"Well, yes."

"My dear young lady," intoned Dr. Fell, with all the gallantry of a load of bricks falling through a up," said Iris. "But—" skylight, "there you mention the one point at which Mills really showed good taste. Discernment. *Raffinement*. It also probably occurred to him that a criminal who proposes marriage places the lady in a blind-eyed and sympathetic mood if the criminal should happen to make a slip in his game afterwards. But can you honestly say you are sorry it was Mills they took away in the Black Maria?"

Iris and Dr. Woodhall were not even listening.



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DUTTON

F. Scott Fitzgerald

The Dance

Who would have believed that so wonderfully gifted a writer as F. Scott Fitzgerald—author of THIS SIDE OF PARADISE and THE GREAT GATSBY—would have written a straightforward detective story? Yes, it always comes as a surprise, if not a shock, to learn that the most celebrated figures of literature are practitioners in the noble art of mystery writing, and in the even nobler art of detective-story writing. Recall, if you will, the great names who have been contributors to EQMM, including 8 Nobel Prize winners and 28 Pulitzer Prize winners—Sinclair Lewis, Pearl S. Buck, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, John Galsworthy, T. S. Eliot—such famous authors as W. Somerset Maugham, John Steinbeck, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Robert Louis Stevenson, Balzac, Dumas, Longfellow—and, yes, Walt Whitman—and even Abraham Lincoln—and so many others who have written tales of crime and detection, without feeling they have “stooped to conquer” . . .

ALL MY LIFE I HAVE HAD A RATHER curious horror of small towns: not suburbs; they are quite a different matter—but the little lost cities of New Hampshire and Georgia and Kansas, and upper New York. I was born in New York City, and even as a little girl I never had any fear of the streets or the strange foreign faces—but on the occasions when I've been in the sort of place I'm referring to, I've been oppressed with the consciousness that there was a whole hidden life, a whole series of

secret implications, significances and terrors, just below the surface, of which I knew nothing. In the cities everything good or bad eventually comes out, comes out of people's hearts, I mean. Life moves about, moves on, vanishes. In the small towns—those of between 5 and 25,000 people—old hatreds, old and unforgotten affairs, ghostly scandals and tragedies, seem unable to die, but live on all tangled up with the natural ebb and flow of outward life.

Nowhere has this sensation come over me more insistently than in the South. Once out of Atlanta and Birmingham and New Orleans, I often have the feeling that I can no longer communicate with the people around me. The men and the girls speak a language wherein courtesy is combined with violence, fanatic morality with corn-drinking recklessness, in a fashion which I can't understand. In *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain described some of those towns perched along the Mississippi River, with their fierce feuds and their equally fierce revivals—and some of them haven't fundamentally changed beneath their new surface of flivvers and radios. They are deeply uncivilized to this day.

I speak of the South because it was in a small Southern city of this type that I once saw the surface crack for a minute and something savage, uncanny and frightening rear its head. Then the surface closed again—and when I have gone back there since, I've been surprised to find myself as charmed as ever by the magnolia trees and the singing Negroes in the street and the sensuous warm nights. I have been charmed, too, by the bountiful hospitality and the languorous easy-going outdoor life and the almost universal good manners. But all too frequently I am the prey of a vivid nightmare that recalls what I experienced in that town five years ago.

Davis—that is not its real name—has a population of about 20,000 people, one-third of them colored. It is a cotton-mill town, and the workers of that trade, several thousand gaunt and ignorant "poor whites," live together in an ill-reputed section known as "Cotton Hollow." The population of Davis has varied in its 75 years. Once it was under consideration for the capital of the State, and so the older families and their kin form a proud little aristocracy, even when individually they have sunk to destitution.

That winter I'd made the usual round in New York until about April, when I decided I never wanted to see another invitation again. I was tired and I wanted to go to Europe for a rest; but the baby panic of 1921 hit father's business, and so it was suggested that I go South and visit Aunt Musidora Hale instead.

Vaguely I imagined that I was going to the country, but on the day I arrived the *Davis Courier* published a hilarious old picture of me on its society page, and I found I was in for another season. On a small scale, of course; there were Saturday-night dances at the little country-club with its nine-hole golf-course, and some informal dinner parties and several attractive and attentive boys. I didn't have a dull time at all, and when after three weeks I wanted to go home, it wasn't because I was bored. On the con-

trary I wanted to go home because I'd allowed myself to get rather interested in a good-looking young man named Charley Kincaid, without realizing that he was engaged to another girl.

We'd been drawn together from the first because he was almost the only boy in town who'd gone North to college, and I was still young enough to think that America revolved around Harvard and Princeton and Yale. He liked me too—I could see that; but when I heard that his engagement to a girl named Marie Bannerman had been announced six months before, there was nothing for me except to go away. The town was too small to avoid people, and though so far there hadn't been any talk, I was sure that—well, that if we kept meeting, the emotion we were beginning to feel would somehow get into words.

Marie Bannerman was almost a beauty. Perhaps she would have been a beauty if she'd had any clothes, and if she hadn't used bright pink rouge in two high spots on her cheeks and powdered her nose and chin to a funereal white. Her hair was shining black; her features were lovely; and an affliction of one eye kept it always half-closed and gave an air of humorous mischief to her face.

I was leaving on a Monday, and on Saturday night a crowd of us dined at the country-club as usual before the dance. There was Joe

Cable, the son of a former governor, a handsome, dissipated and yet somehow charming young man; Catherine Jones, a pretty, sharp-eyed girl with an exquisite figure, who under her rouge might have been any age from eighteen to twenty-five; Marie Bannerman; Charley Kincaid; myself and two or three others.

I loved to listen to the genial flow of bizarre neighborhood anecdote at this kind of party. For instance, one of the girls, together with her entire family, had that afternoon been evicted from her house for nonpayment of rent. She told the story wholly without self-consciousness, merely as something troublesome but amusing. And I loved the banter which presumed every girl to be infinitely beautiful and attractive, and every man to have been secretly and hopelessly in love with every girl present from their respective cradles.

"We liked to die laughin'" . . .
"--said he was fixin' to shoot him without he stayed away." The girls "clared to heaven"; the men "took oath" on inconsequential statements. "How come you nearly about forgot to come by for me—" and the incessant Honey, Honey, Honey, Honey, until the word seemed to roll like a genial liquid from heart to heart.

Outside, the May night was hot, a still night, velvet, soft-pawed, splattered thick with stars. It drifted heavy and sweet into the large room

where we sat and where we would later dance, with no sound in it except the occasional long crunch of an arriving car on the drive. Just at that moment I hated to leave Davis as I never had hated to leave a town before—I felt that I wanted to spend my life in this town, drifting and dancing forever through these long, hot, romantic nights.

Yet horror was already hanging over that little party, was waiting tensely among us, an uninvited guest, and telling off the hours until it could show its pale and blinding face. Beneath the chatter and laughter something was going on, something secret and obscure that I didn't know.

Presently the colored orchestra arrived, followed by the first trickle of the dance crowd. An enormous red-faced man in muddy knee boots and with a revolver strapped around his waist, clumped in and paused for a moment at our table before going upstairs to the locker-room. It was Bill Abercrombie, the sheriff, the son of Congressman Abercrombie. Some of the boys asked him half-whispered questions, and he replied in an attempt at an undertone.

"Yes. . . . He's in the swamp all right; farmer saw him near the crossroads store. . . . Like to have a shot at him myself."

I asked the boy next to me what was the matter.

"Trouble," he said, "over in Kisco, about two miles from here. He's hiding in the swamp, and they're

going in after him tomorrow."

"What'll they do to him?"

"Hang him, I guess."

The notion of the forlorn Negro crouching dismally in a desolate bog waiting for dawn and death depressed me for a moment. Then the feeling passed and was forgotten.

After dinner Charley Kincaid and I walked out on the veranda—he had just heard that I was going away. I kept as close to the others as I could, answering his words but not his eyes—something inside me was protesting against leaving him on such a casual note. The temptation was strong to let something flicker up between us here at the end. I wanted him to kiss me—my heart promised that if he kissed me, just once, it would accept with equanimity the idea of never seeing him any more; but my mind knew it wasn't so.

The other girls began to drift inside and upstairs to the dressing-room to improve their complexions, and with Charley still beside me, I followed. Just at that moment I wanted to cry—perhaps my eyes already blurred, or perhaps it was my haste lest they should be, but I opened the door of a small card-room by mistake and with my error the tragic machinery of the night began to function. In the card-room, not five feet from us, stood Marie Bannerman, Charley's fiancée, and Joe Cable. They were in each other's arms, absorbed in a passionate and oblivious kiss.

I closed the door quickly, and without glancing at Charley opened the right door and ran upstairs.

A few minutes later Marie Bannerman entered the crowded dressing-room. She saw me and came over, smiling in a sort of mock despair, but she breathed quickly, and the smile trembled a little on her mouth.

"You won't say a word, honey, will you?" she whispered.

"Of course not." I wondered how that could matter, now that Charley Kincaid knew.

"Who else was it that saw us?"

"Only Charley Kincaid and I."

"Oh!" She looked a little puzzled; then she added: "He didn't wait to say anything, honey. When we came out, he was just going out the door. I thought he was going to wait and romp all over Joe."

"How about his romping all over you?" I couldn't help asking.

"Oh, he'll do that." She laughed wryly. "But, honey, I know how to handle him. It's just when he's first mad that I'm scared of him—he's got an awful temper." She whistled reminiscently. "I know, because this happened once before."

I wanted to slap her. Turning my back, I walked away on the pretext of borrowing a pin from Katie, the Negro maid. Catherine Jones was claiming the latter's attention with a short gingham garment which needed repair.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Dancing-dress," she answered shortly, her mouth full of pins. When she took them out, she added: "It's all come to pieces—I've used it so much."

"Are you going to dance here to-night?"

"Going to try."

Somebody had told me that she wanted to be a dancer—that she had taken lessons in New York.

"Can I help you fix anything?"

"No, thanks—unless—can you sew? Katie gets so excited Saturday night that she's no good for anything except fetching pins. I'd be everlasting grateful to you, honey."

I had reasons for not wanting to go downstairs just yet, and so I sat down and worked on her dress for half an hour. I wondered if Charley had gone home, if I would ever see him again—I scarcely dared to wonder if what he had seen would set him free, ethically. When I went down finally he was not in sight.

The room was now crowded; the tables had been removed and dancing was general. At that time, just after the war, all Southern boys had a way of agitating their heels from side to side, pivoting on the ball of the foot as they danced, and to acquiring this accomplishment I had devoted many hours. There were plenty of stags, almost all of them cheerful with corn-liquor; I refused on an average at least two drinks a dance. Even when it is mixed with soft drink, as is the custom, rather than gulped from the neck of a

warm bottle, it is a formidable proposition. Only a few girls like Catherine Jones took an occasional sip from some boy's flask down at the dark end of the veranda.

I liked Catherine Jones—she seemed to have more energy than these other girls, though Aunt Musedora sniffed rather contemptuously whenever Catherine stopped for me in her car to go to the movies, remarking that she guessed "the bottom rail had gotten to be the top rail now." Her family were "new and common," but it seemed to me that perhaps her very commonness was an asset. Almost every girl in Davis confided in me at one time or another that her ambition was to "get away and come to New York," but only Catherine Jones had actually taken the step of studying stage dancing with that end in view.

She was often asked to dance at these Saturday night affairs, something "classic" or perhaps an acrobatic clog—on one memorable occasion she had annoyed the governing board by a "shimee" (then the scape-grace of jazz), and the novel and somewhat startling excuse made for her was that she was "so tight she didn't know what she was doing, anyhow." She impressed me as a curious personality, and I was eager to see what she would produce tonight.

At 12 o'clock the music always ceased, as dancing was forbidden on Sunday morning. So at 11:30 a vast

fanfaronade of drum and cornet beckoned the dancers and the couples on the verandas, and the ones in the cars outside, and the stragglers from the bar, into the ballroom. Chairs were brought in and galloped up en masse and with a great racket to the slightly raised platform. The orchestra had evacuated this and taken a place beside. Then, as the rearward lights were lowered, they began to play a tune accompanied by a curious drum-beat that I had never heard before, and simultaneously Catherine Jones appeared upon the platform. She wore the short, country girl's dress upon which I had lately labored, and a wide sunbonnet under which her face, stained yellow with powder, looked out at us with rolling eyes and a vacant leer.

She began to dance.

I had never seen anything like it before, and until five years later, I wasn't to see it again. It was the Charleston—it must have been the Charleston. I remember the double drum-beat like a shouted "Hey! Hey!" and the unfamiliar swing of the arms and the odd knock-kneed effect. She had picked it up, heaven knows where.

Her audience, familiar with Negro rhythms, leaned forward eagerly—even to them it was something new, but it is stamped on my mind as clearly and indelibly as though I had seen it yesterday. The figure on the platform swinging and stamping, the excited orchestra, the wait-

ers grinning in the doorway of the bar, and all around, through many windows, the soft languorous Southern night seeping in from swamp and cottonfield and lush foliage and brown, warm streams. At what point a feeling of tense uneasiness began to steal over me I don't know. The dance could scarcely have taken ten minutes; perhaps the first beats of the barbaric music disquieted me—long before it was over, I was sitting rigid in my seat, and my eyes were wandering here and there around the hall, passing along the rows of shadowy faces as if seeking some security that was no longer there.

I'm not a nervous type; nor am I given to panic; but for a moment I was afraid that if the music and the dance didn't stop, I'd be hysterical. Something was happening all about me. I knew it as well as if I could see into these unknown souls. Things were happening, but one thing especially was leaning over so close that it almost touched us, that it did touch us. . . . I almost screamed as a hand brushed accidentally against my back.

The music stopped. There was applause and protracted cries of encore, but Catherine Jones shook her head definitely at the orchestra leader and made as though to leave the platform. The appeals for more continued—again she shook her head, and it seemed to me that her expression was rather angry. Then a

strange incident occurred. At the protracted pleading of some one in the front row, the colored orchestra leader began the vamp of the tune, as if to lure Catherine Jones into changing her mind. Instead she turned toward him, snapped out, "Didn't you hear me say no?" and then, surprisingly, slapped his face. The music stopped, and an amused murmur terminated abruptly as a muffled but clearly audible shot rang out.

Immediately we were on our feet, for the sound indicated that it had been fired within or near the house. One of the chaperons gave a little scream, but when some wag called out, "Caesar's in that henhouse again," the momentary alarm dissolved into laughter. The club manager, followed by several couples, went out to have a look about, but the rest were already moving around the floor to the strains of "Good Night, Ladies," which traditionally ended the dance.

I was glad it was over. The man with whom I had come went to get his car, and calling a waiter, I sent him for my golf-clubs, which were in the stack upstairs. I strolled out on the porch and waited, wondering again if Charley Kincaid had gone home.

Suddenly I was aware, in that curious way in which you become aware of something that has been going on for several minutes, that there was a tumult inside. Women were shrieking; there was a cry of

"Oh, my God!" then the sounds of a stampede on the inside stairs, and footsteps running back and forth across the ballroom. A girl appeared from somewhere and pitched forward in a dead faint—almost immediately another girl did the same, and I heard a frantic male voice shouting into a telephone. Then, hatless and pale, a young man rushed out on the porch, and with hands cold as ice, seized my arm.

"What is it?" I cried. "A fire? What's happened?"

"Marie Bannerman's dead upstairs in the women's dressing-room. Shot through the throat!"

The rest of that night is a series of visions that seem to have no connection with one another, that follow each other with the sharp instantaneous transitions of scenes in the movies. There was a group who stood arguing on the porch, in voices now raised, now hushed, about what should be done and how every waiter in the club, "even old Moses," ought to be given the third degree tonight. That a Negro had shot and killed Marie Bannerman was the instant and unquestioned assumption—in the first unreasoning instant, anyone who doubted it would have been under suspicion. The guilty one was said to be Katie Golstien, the colored maid, who had discovered the body and fainted. It was said to be "that Negro they were looking for over

near Kisco." It was any Negro at all.

Within half an hour people began to drift out, each with his little contribution of new discoveries. The crime had been committed with Sheriff Abercrombie's gun—he had hung it, belt and all, in full view on the wall before coming down to dance. It was missing—they were hunting for it now. Instantly killed, the doctor said—bullet had been fired from only a few feet away.

Then a few minutes later another young man came out and made the announcement in a loud, grave voice:

"They've arrested Charley Kincaid."

My head reeled. Upon the group gathered on the veranda fell an awed, stricken silence.

"Arrested Charley Kincaid!"

"Charley Kincaid!"

Why, he was one of the best, one of themselves.

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard of!"

The young man nodded, shocked like the rest, but self-important with his information.

"He wasn't downstairs, when Catherine Jones was dancing—he says he was in the men's locker-room. And Marie Bannerman told a lot of girls that they'd had a row, and she was scared of what he'd do."

Again an awed silence.

"That's the craziest thing I ever heard!" some one said again.

"Charley Kincaid!"

The narrator waited a moment. Then he added:

"He caught her kissing Joe Cable—"

I couldn't keep silence a minute longer.

"What about it?" I cried out. "I was with him at the time. He wasn't—he wasn't angry at all."

They looked at me, their faces startled, confused, unhappy. Suddenly the footsteps of several men sounded loud through the ballroom, and a moment later Charley Kincaid, his face dead white, came out the front door between the Sheriff and another man. Crossing the porch quickly, they descended the steps and disappeared in the darkness. A moment later there was the sound of a starting car.

When an instant later far away down the road I heard the eerie scream of an ambulance, I got up desperately and called to my escort, part of the whispering group.

"I've got to go," I said. "I can't stand this. Either take me home or I'll find a place in another car." Reluctantly he shouldered my clubs—the sight of them made me realize that I now couldn't leave on Monday after all—and followed me down the steps just as the black body of the ambulance curved in at the gate—a ghastly shadow on the bright, starry night.

The situation, after the first wild surmises, the first burst of unrea-

soning loyalty to Charley Kincaid, had died away, was outlined by the *Davis Courier* and by most of the State newspapers in this fashion: Marie Bannerman died in the women's dressing-room of the Davis Country Club from the effects of a shot fired at close quarters from a revolver just after 11:45 o'clock on Saturday night. Many persons had heard the shot; moreover it had undoubtedly been fired from the revolver of Sheriff Abercrombie, which had been hanging in full sight on the wall of the next room. Abercrombie himself was down in the ballroom when the murder took place, as many witnesses could testify. The revolver was not found.

So far as was known, the only man who had been upstairs at the time the shot was fired was Charles Kincaid. He was engaged to Miss Bannerman, but according to several witnesses they had quarreled seriously that evening. Miss Bannerman herself had mentioned the quarrel, adding that she was afraid and wanted to keep away from him until he cooled off.

Charles Kincaid asserted that at the time the shot was fired he was in the men's locker-room—where, indeed, he was found, immediately after the discovery of Miss Bannerman's body. He denied having had any words with Miss Bannerman at all. He had heard the shot but it had had no significance for him—if he thought anything of it, he

thought that "some one was potting cats outdoors."

Why had he chosen to remain in the locker-room during the dance?

No reason at all. He was tired. He was waiting until Miss Bannerman wanted to go home.

The body was discovered by Katie Golstien, the colored maid, who herself was found in a faint when the crowd of girls surged upstairs for their coats. Returning from the kitchen, where she had been getting a bite to eat, Katie had found Miss Bannerman, her dress wet with blood, already dead on the floor.

Both the police and the newspapers attached importance to the geography of the country-club's second story. It consisted of a row of three rooms—the women's dressing-room and the men's locker-room at either end, and in the middle a room which was used as a cloak-room and for the storage of golf-clubs. The women's and men's rooms had no outlet except into this chamber, which was connected by one stairs with the ballroom below, and by another with the kitchen. According to the testimony of three Negro cooks and the white caddy-master, no one but Katie Golstien had gone up the kitchen stairs that night.

As I remember it after five years, the foregoing is a pretty accurate summary of the situation when Charley Kincaid was accused of first-degree murder and committed

for trial. Other people, chiefly Negroes, were suspected (at the loyal instigation of Charley Kincaid's friends), and several arrests were made, but nothing ever came of them, and upon what grounds they were based I have long forgotten. One group, in spite of the disappearance of the pistol, claimed persistently that it was a suicide and suggested some ingenious reasons to account for the absence of the weapon.

Now when it is known Marie Bannerman happened to die so savagely and so violently, it would be easy for me, of all people, to say that I believed in Charley Kincaid all the time. But I didn't. I thought that he had killed her, and at the same time I knew that I loved him with all my heart. That it was I who first happened upon the evidence which set him free was due not to any faith in his innocence but to a strange vividness with which, in moods of excitement, certain scenes stamp themselves on my memory, so that I can remember every detail and how that detail struck me at the time.

It was one afternoon early in July, when the case against Charley Kincaid seemed to be at its strongest, that the horror of the actual murder slipped away from me for a moment and I began to think about other incidents of that same haunted night. Something Marie Bannerman had said to me in the dressing-room persistently eluded

me, bothered me—not because I believed it to be important, but simply because I couldn't remember. It was gone from me, as if it had been a part of the fantastic undercurrent of small-town life which I had felt so strongly that evening, the sense that things were in the air, old secrets, old loves and feuds, and unresolved situations, that I, an outsider, could never fully understand. Just for a minute it seemed to me that Marie Bannerman had pushed aside the curtain; then it had dropped into place again—the house into which I might have looked was dark now forever.

Another incident, perhaps less important, also haunted me. The tragic events of a few minutes after had driven it from everyone's mind, but I had a strong impression that for a brief space of time I wasn't the only one to be surprised. When the audience had demanded an encore from Catherine Jones, her unwillingness to dance again had been so acute that she had been driven to the point of slapping the orchestra leader's face. The discrepancy between his offense and the venom of the rebuff recurred to me again and again. It wasn't natural—or, more important, it hadn't seemed natural. In view of the fact that Catherine Jones had been drinking, it was explicable, but it worried me now as it had worried me then. Rather to lay its ghost than to do any investigating,

I pressed an obliging young man into service and called on the leader of the band.

His name was Thomas, a very dark, very simple-hearted virtuoso of the traps, and it took less than ten minutes to find out that Catherine Jones' gesture had surprised him as much as it had me. He had known her a long time, seen her at dances since she was a little girl—why, the very dance she did that night was one she had rehearsed with his orchestra a week before. And a few days later she had come to him and said she was sorry.

"I knew she would," he concluded. "She's a right good-hearted girl. My sister Katie was her nurse from when she was born up to the time she went to school."

"Your sister?"

"Katie. She's the maid out at the country-club. Katie Golstien. You been reading 'bout her in the papers in 'at Charley Kincaid case. She's the maid. Katie Golstien. She's the maid at the country-club what found the body of Miss Bannerman."

"So Katie was Miss Catherine Jones' nurse?"

"Yes ma'am."

Going home, stimulated but unsatisfied, I asked my companion a quick question.

"Were Catherine and Marie good friends?"

"Oh, yes," he answered without hesitation. "All the girls are good friends here, except when two of

them are tryin' to get hold of the same man. Then they warm each other up a little."

"Why do you suppose Catherine hasn't married? Hasn't she got lots of beaux?"

"Off and on. She only likes people for a day or so at a time. That is—all except Joe Cable."

Now a scene burst upon me, broke over me like a dissolving wave. And suddenly, my mind shivering from the impact, I remembered what Marie Bannerman had said to me in the dressing-room: "Who else was it that saw?" She had caught a glimpse of someone else, a figure passing so quickly that she could not identify it, out of the corner of her eye.

And suddenly, simultaneously, I seemed to see that figure, as if I too had been vaguely conscious of it at the time, just as one is aware of a familiar gait or outline on the street long before there is any flicker of recognition. On the corner of my own eye was stamped a hurrying figure—that might have been Catherine Jones.

But when the shot was fired, Catherine Jones was in full view of over 50 people. Was it credible that Katie Golstien, a woman of 50, who as a nurse had been known and trusted by three generations of Davis people, would shoot down a young girl in cold blood at Catherine Jones' command?

"But when the shot was fired,

Catherine Jones was in full view of over 50 people."

That sentence beat in my head all night, taking on fantastic variations, dividing itself into phrases, segments, individual words.

"But when the shot was fired—Catherine Jones was in full view—of over 50 people."

When the shot was fired! What shot? The shot we heard. When the shot was fired. . . . When the shot was fired. . . .

The next morning at 9 o'clock, with the pallor of sleeplessness buried under a quantity of paint such as I had never worn before or have since, I walked up a rickety flight of stairs to the Sheriff's office.

Abercrombie, engrossed in his morning's mail, looked up curiously as I came in the door.

"Catherine Jones did it," I cried, struggling to keep the hysteria out of my voice. "She killed Marie Bannerman with a shot we didn't hear because the orchestra was playing and everybody was pushing up the chairs. The shot we heard was when Katie fired the pistol out the window after the music was stopped. To give Catherine an alibi!"

I was right—as everyone now knows, but for a week, until Katie Golstien broke down under a fierce and ruthless inquisition, nobody believed me. Even Charley Kincaid, as he afterward confessed, didn't dare to think it could be true.

What had been the relations be-

tween Catherine and Joe Cable no one ever knew, but evidently she had determined that his clandestine affair with Marie Bannerman had gone too far.

Then Marie chanced to come into the women's room while Catherine was dressing for her dance—and there again there is a certain obscurity, for Catherine always claimed that Marie got the revolver, threatened her with it and that in the ensuing struggle the trigger was pulled. In spite of everything I always rather liked Catherine Jones, but in justice it must be said that only a simple-minded and very exceptional jury would have let her off with a mere five years.

And in just about five years from her commitment my husband and I are going to make a round of the New York musical shows and look hard at all the members of the chorus from the very front row of the orchestra.

After the shooting she must have thought quickly. Katie was told to wait until the music stopped, fire

the revolver out the window and then hide it—Catherine Jones neglected to specify where. Katie, on the verge of collapse, obeyed instructions, but she was never able to specify where she had hid the revolver. And no one ever knew until a year later, when Charley and I were on our honeymoon and Sheriff Abercrombie's ugly weapon dropped out of my golf-bag onto a Hot Springs golf-links. The bag must have been standing just outside the dressing-room door; Katie's trembling hand had dropped the revolver into the very first aperture she could see.

We live in New York. Small towns make us both uncomfortable. Every day we read about the crime-waves in the big cities, but at least a wave is something tangible that you can provide against. What I dread above all things is the unknown depths, the incalculable ebb and flow, the secret shapes of things that drift through opaque darkness under the surface of the sea.



George Harmon Coxe

Death Certificate

George Harmon Coxe can be terse and hard when he wants to be; he can also temper his toughness with warmth and humanity—as in the series he has woven around the character of the metropolitan medical examiner, Dr. Paul Standish . . .

IN THE TWO YEARS THAT DR. PAUL Standish had acted as the city's medical examiner he had become acquainted with death in nearly all its violent forms, but not until the night Dr. Cheney was found dead had it ever occurred to him that the performance of his duty might some day become a personal matter.

The call from the telegraph bureau awakened him shortly after two thirty that morning. By the time he had dressed, a police car was waiting at the curb, and he rode along deserted pavements to the north side of town near the river. Here, in a street of grimy loft buildings and tenements, another police car had been backed around so that its headlights focused into an alleyway.

One of the officers gathered there spoke to Standish and he answered automatically, having no preparation for what came next, yet knowing in his first glance that the man who lay sprawled on the dusty cobblestones had been murdered. The back of the head was broken and

bloody, and because he had become accustomed to approach each case as a diagnostician and view it with a clinical eye, he noticed the nondescript character of the worn suit and topcoat, and found them in keeping with the telegraph bureau's announcement. An unidentified man, the bureau had said, and that was what Paul Standish had expected until he turned the body over and realized that this man had once been his friend.

Recognition was swift and left him shaken and sick inside. The night air was suddenly cool and though he heard one of the officers speak, it was some seconds before he could recover from the shock and think reasonably.

"We went through his pockets as well as we could without moving him," the officer said. "Looks like he's clean. We figure some muggers slugged him on the walk and dragged him in here out of sight."

Standish forced himself to concentrate. He made sure about the pockets as he made his preliminary tests for *rigor mortis*. He knew

then that there was nothing more to be done here; he knew that insofar as his job was concerned, his work, which was to determine the cause of death, was finished. Yet now, as his thoughts went back to the Dr. Cheney he had known ten years before when he was a young interne at City Hospital, he knew that it was not enough to write a report which said that this same Dr. Cheney had been murdered by a blunt instrument, and he turned to ask whose beat this was.

"Mine, sir," said a uniformed husky. "My flashlight picked him up when I turned it in here at two fifteen on my way down the street."

"Did you turn it in here on your previous round? At what time?"

"One fifteen, sir. And there was no sign of him."

Standish straightened, a moderately tall man with good shoulders and a well-boned face that looked lean and angular in the glare of the headlights. For another moment he stared beyond the body, his eyes obscured and his normally easy mouth a tight grim line; then, speaking quietly, he asked if anyone was here from homicide.

"I am," a voice said. "Sergeant Wargo."

Standish recognized the man as an assistant of Lieutenant Ballard's. He had hoped Ballard would be here; he needed him now but he did not ask about the lieutenant who was his friend. He merely nodded as he heard the ambulance

draw to a stop in the street, and asked the sergeant to wait.

Five minutes later, when the body had been removed, they stood on the sidewalk and Wargo, a young man of intelligence and ability who had not yet asked a question nor offered an opinion, said:

"We're pretty sure he was dragged into the alley, Doctor."

"Yes," Standish said. "But he wasn't killed on the sidewalk. He'd been dead at least three hours when I examined him."

Wargo whistled softly. Then, as though held by something in the doctor's manner that he did not understand, he said, "Do you know him?"

Standish nodded and took time to marshal his thoughts, knowing now that he would not be going back to bed and knowing also that he would need help. "Ballard's not on call?"

"Not tonight," Wargo said. "The captain told him to get some rest because he's been going steadily ever since yesterday morning when Frankie Montanari jumped his bail. So has everybody in the department." Wargo grunted softly. "Even homicide, because I guess they figure when they find Frankie, it'll be a homicide job."

Dr. Standish had no interest in Montanari who had been about to be sentenced for bribery in a gambling case when he disappeared. The newspapers had intimated that

the length of the sentence would depend on whether or not Montanari disclosed the real boss of the gambling syndicate that employed him, but Standish felt only annoyance that such a case should rob him of Lieutenant Ballard's help.

"I'm going to the morgue," he said, and then, standing beside the police car, he told Sergeant Wargo what he wanted him to do.

Dr. Cheney had as his office and living quarters the lower floor of a two-family house which stood on the east side of town in a neighborhood no more than a cut or two above the slums. There was a police car out front when Standish arrived and Sergeant Wargo was sitting on the steps waiting for him.

"The guy upstairs owns the place," Wargo said. "I got the key from him. This coupe"—he indicated a battered car in front of the police sedan—"is Doc Cheney's. There's no doctor's bag in it and I didn't find any in the office. You can have a look if you want."

Standish went into a poorly-furnished waiting room overlooking the porch. He inspected the adjoining private office and the living quarters beyond, finding no signs of prosperity and knowing finally that the bag, without which Cheney would never have made a professional call, was not here. Then, because he did not understand this any more than he understood the

dead man's empty pockets, he examined the appointment book on the desk.

"He made his last call at five."

"The guy upstairs saw him come in around six," Wargo said. "He thinks he went out around nine."

"What makes him think so?"

"He heard the doorbell ring, heard the doc answer it. He thinks he went out."

It was nearly six o'clock when Paul Standish reached his apartment and though he undressed, he did not go to bed but sat by the window and tried to find some reason for a murder that on the face of it seemed utterly senseless. That it was not his job to do so, did not occur to him at all until Lieutenant Ballard put it into words at eight thirty that morning in his office at police headquarters, when Standish showed up there.

They had worked together often, these two, though it was generally Ballard who yelled for help and Dr. Standish who maintained it was not his job to do detective work. This time the shoe was on the other foot and though the lieutenant heard him out, he offered no encouragement, nor even agreement with the doctor's theory.

"Sergeant Wargo thinks it was a hold-up job," he said. "And I've got to go along. A couple of young punks jumped Cheney and maybe he gave them an argument and they sapped him—too hard."

"Three hours before he was found?"

"So what? Maybe it happened in their neighborhood and they got scared and went back and moved him. Hell, I can think of a dozen answers to that one."

Standish tried to be patient. "Someone called for Cheney at nine o'clock, otherwise he would have taken his car. He took his bag with him because it wasn't in his office. He's not found until three hours after he's killed and there's no bag, no identification on him. If I hadn't known him, he might have lain in the morgue for days before we knew who he was, and I say that doesn't shape up as a mugging job."

Ballard ran his fingers through his sandy hair and his shrewd gray eyes were troubled. He recognized sound reasoning when he heard it but he was a harried man just now, conscious of pressure from above that demanded he and every man on the force find a missing gambler named Frankie Montanari, an assignment which was a little out of his line.

"Look, Paul," he said. "Right now I can't agree with you. I think a couple of thugs did the job and you know how we catch guys like that. We add some men to the district and keep our eyes open and the punks keep trying the same racket until we catch up with them. Before we get through, we'll know what jobs they've pulled. This Che-

ney thing will turn out to be one of 'em." He took a breath and said, "But even if I'm wrong, what do you want me to do?"

Paul Standish started to speak, then checked his reply when he realized it was inadequate. He took a moment to think, aware that if Ballard was right there was nothing more to be done. But if Ballard was wrong, there could only be one answer: that Cheney had been killed deliberately and for a definite and clear-cut reason.

He wanted to know what that reason was. Like any good diagnostician, he wanted to know why. Yet when he spoke of this, it sounded silly, even to him.

"I want to know why."

Ballard sighed heavily and threw up his hands. "Find Montanari and I'll put twenty men on it. Maybe they can answer you. I can't." He paused, gray eyes half-closed. "Who was this Cheney, a brother of yours or something?"

Mary Hayward asked Paul Standish a similar question at eleven thirty, after the last of his office patients had been taken care of. Mary, his nurse, secretary and Girl Friday, had medium-blond hair and green eyes and a nicely-modeled figure. She was jealous of Standish's time and quite possibly of his affections. She believed he was wasting his talent as medical examiner, arguing that he would be much further ahead if he put

this time into his own practice. And because she was young and forthright she spoke not too kindly about Dr. Cheney.

"I can't understand why you bother," she said. "I've heard you speak of him. I thought he was a bum."

Standish eyed her somberly, but because he was used to her ways and understood in some measure what was behind them, he took no offense at her words.

"He was no bum, Mary. He was resident physician at City Hospital when I was interning. He was a very nice guy."

"Ten years ago."

"He was a nice guy today. Weak, maybe. That's the worst you could say about him. You could call him a failure—a lot of people did—but he was a good doctor and I don't believe he ever consciously did a dishonest or unethical thing in his life."

He hesitated, no longer seeing Mary as his mind turned back. Speaking more to himself than to her, he told how Dr. Cheney had left the hospital to give all his time to his own practice and how, the following winter, a truck had skidded out of control and killed his wife and the two-year-old son she had been carrying across the street.

"Some people can take a thing like that and others can't. Cheney couldn't. It took the heart out of him and he closed his office. I don't

know what was in his mind or what he wanted to do; I do know that it was the best thing that ever happened to those people in his neighborhood when he turned his back on the society he knew and opened that east side office. He collected enough to live on and if you wanted medical treatment you got it no matter who you were."

The quiet sincerity of the young doctor's words impressed the girl and her eyes were soft and concerned. She said she was sorry, that she hadn't understood, and she remained that way until Standish glanced at his watch and stood up. When he said he was going to the morgue, and from there to the district attorney's office, Mary said:

"Don't forget your two o'clock appointment with Mr. Lane."

Standish frowned. "Cancel it. Call him up and—"

Mary interrupted him, her voice horrified and then indignant. She said that Mr. Lane was rich and that the thorough physical check-up that Standish was to give him would bring more of that kind of business to the office.

Standish was adamant. He said tomorrow or the next day would do just as well, that Mr. Lane would understand if Mary told him the doctor had been called out on an urgent matter.

"Urgent?" Mary was still indignant. She would have argued further if Standish had not opened the door and walked out.

One of the duties of the medical examiner's office was to see that a copy of all autopsy reports was sent to the district attorney and in the case of Dr. Cheney, Paul Standish delivered this report in person.

John Quinn, the district attorney, was in conference when Standish arrived and he had to wait a half-hour in the anteroom before the door finally opened and a thick-bodied, hard-jawed man with small, deep-set eyes and not much hair came out. His name was Mike Darrow and he was still talking.

"I'm getting a little fed up with this," he said to Quinn, who stood in the doorway. "If you want to see me again, you'd better subpoena me. . . Hi, Doc. How's it going?"

Standish stood up, making no reply, and started towards the private office. Quinn followed him in, his face flushed and his eyes angry behind the shell-rimmed glasses. He swore softly a moment before he glanced at the report Standish handed him, finally put his mind on it as the doctor told his story.

Standish knew the news was bad even before he finished. He could see it in Quinn's face and he had to listen while the other spoke of a budget that always kept him short.

"What exactly did you have in mind?" he said.

"I don't think Cheney was mugged," Standish said. "And if I'm right there has to be a reason. I thought you might have some things I don't know, that you

might think of some good reason."

Quinn said he was sorry. He could think of no reason for any deliberate attempt on Dr. Cheney, but maybe Standish could help him. "Where," he said, "would be a good place to hide a body?"

"Montanari's? How do you know he didn't run out on you?"

"I'll tell you," Quinn said, and he did, starting with Mike Darrow and going back to prohibition days when Darrow had been a strong-arm man and hijacker. He enumerated a record of arrests that ranged from extortion to murder, commented profanely on the lack of convictions, and brought the record up to date by explaining the ramifications of Darrow's gambling syndicate, which had branched out into sporting events and made a mistake in trying to bribe certain college basketball players.

"When those kids told their story," Quinn said, "we dug back and found a couple of boxers who sang the same song. Montanari is the lad who offered the bribe and Darrow is his boss, though we can't prove it. And Montanari knew what the score was. I had his wife down. I told her he'd get only two years if he cooperated and gave us the goods on Darrow, and I promised to put in a word when he came up for parole. I told her he'd go away for ten long years if he refused to tell the truth. And then I got a break."

Quinn leaned across his desk. "His wife is going to have a baby in about six months. She hadn't told Frankie, but she did tell him after I talked to her, because yesterday when he turned up missing she came down here to see me. She said Frankie had promised her he would sing and I think he made the mistake of telling Darrow so." Quinn sat back and said, "That's why we're looking for a body. It's the sort of thing Darrow would do because he knows that Montanari's testimony would put him away for a long, long time."

Quinn stood up and shrugged. "I'm sorry, Doc. I don't know how I can help you. Until we find Frankie I won't even be able to think about anything else."

It was nearly five when Paul Standish returned to his office and Mary Hayward, who was checking records at her desk, took one look at his face and wisely made no comment when he went into his own office and closed the door.

It was, Standish realized as he shed his hat and coat, a mistake to have wasted any time on Quinn. And because he felt tired and beaten, it seemed now that it had been a mistake to concern himself with the Cheney death at all. He had spent hours accomplishing nothing and now he was through; in the future he would confine his efforts to those covered by the statutes governing his office.

At least, that is what he told himself. That is what he thought for a few minutes as he straightened his desk and busied himself with other matters. The trouble was he was a stubborn man when confronted by a problem, medical or otherwise, and his mind kept going back, probing, testing, weighing the bits of information at hand. And finally, not realizing it, he was thinking of Old Doc Lathrop who had given him the job of assistant medical examiner at a time when Standish needed the work to pay his office rent.

It was Lathrop who had told him that through the experience gained by such work he would add to his knowledge as a diagnostician, and as he remembered some of the advice the grand old man had given him, one oft-repeated remark kept coming back. *The truth always rings true.* That was what Lathrop liked to say when faced with a difficult problem, and though it had sounded corny at times, Standish realized that this was all he needed now: The truth.

If Cheney had died at the hands of ordinary thugs, as Ballard maintained, he could be satisfied; if not, he had to know why—he had to know the truth.

He stood up, dark hair tousled and fatigue lining the angles of his eyes. He walked round the desk and sat down again, lighting a cigarette and then playing absently with his lighter. Just what made

him think of Dr. Cheney's missing bag, he did not know but suddenly the idea was there and he reached for his own bag, wondering with new hope if the murder could be traced to something that Cheney had carried.

With his own bag open, he pawed through its familiar contents. He removed the stethoscope and saw the hypodermic kit, and though this gave way to further speculation he continued his search, taking out his pad of prescription blanks and then another, larger pad, his glance inspecting the printed form and then narrowing into a hot bright stare.

For another minute he sat quite motionless, his mind racing; then, not daring to hope that he had an answer, but desperately, like a man grabbing at straws when all else has failed, he sat erect and reached for the telephone.

He got his number without delay, spoke briefly in quick, urgent accents. When he hung up there was new brightness in his eyes and that gleam was still there ten minutes later when he strode down a corridor in the City Hall and opened a door marked Department of Health.

The assistant he had spoken to was waiting behind a counter and as Standish thanked him for keeping the office open, he pushed a slip of paper across the counter which was a duplicate of the form Standish had seen in his bag. Across the top of the form were printed the words:

Death Certificate. And this one had been filled out and signed by Dr. Edward Cheney.

"Is there anything wrong?" the assistant asked, held by the intentness of the doctor's inspection.

Standish said no, but he had a pencil out now as his glance took in the details and he wrote down the cause of death as stated by Dr. Cheney. Chronic gastric ulcer, hemorrhage into gastro-intestinal tract, spontaneous, is what Cheney had written, and Standish saw now that the deceased was one Charles Judson and that the certificate was dated the day before yesterday.

He had other questions to ask before he left and then he went out to his car and drove swiftly crosstown to Dr. Cheney's flat, the excitement riding him now in spite of his efforts to hold his hopes in check.

The two-family house looked even more depressing by daylight but Standish found the office unlocked, and the middle-aged woman who had been Cheney's secretary answered his question about Charles Judson and let him inspect Cheney's records. When he saw there was no card for Judson and was sure the secretary had no knowledge of the name, he again turned to the telephone, this time calling Lieutenant Ballard at police headquarters.

"I have a lead on the Cheney murder," he said. "I want to call on a fellow named Earle Jennings." He mentioned an address and said,

"Can you meet me there in ten minutes?"

"No."

"Why not?" Standish said, surprised and a little annoyed at Ballard's curt reply.

"Because I'm up to my ears in this Montanari thing and I've got to go into a meeting with the captain and the commissioner and I don't know how long I'll be. Call me back in an hour."

"An hour?" Standish said, outraged. "An hour?"

And then all the tension and the lack of sleep and the fatigue that he had been battling became too much for him and his normally even disposition dissolved abruptly, leaving his voice irascible and hard. He said he had been working on a murder that was really none of his business since two thirty that morning, and he finally had a lead, and if Ballard didn't want to know about it, it was all right with him. He had no intention of waiting an hour, or even fifteen minutes, and what did Ballard think of *that*.

Ballard finally interrupted him. He said wait a minute and take it easy. "What makes this Jennings guy important?" he said. "Who is he, anyway?"

"He's an undertaker," Standish said, and hung up.

By the time he had parked his car and walked along the street to the colored, opaque window bearing the inscription, *Earle Jennings—*

Funeral Director, Paul Standish was ashamed of his outburst and no longer so sure that his hunch was right. He stood for a moment looking at the narrow-front shop, sandwiched in between a stationery store and a bakery, aware that this was a run-down neighborhood, and tempted to go on by; that he did not was due not only to pride and native stubbornness but also to a well-entrenched and ever-present desire to know the truth.

Having come this far, he could not quit, and so he opened the door and stepped into a long, narrow room with somber walls, wicker furniture, and a threadbare rug. At the far end, near a curtained doorway, was a desk, but there was no one in the room so he walked on, past the desk, parting the curtains and finding himself in a short hall leading to a room in the back. As he stepped into this room, the man working over the casket heard him and wheeled.

A somberly-dressed, shifty-eyed man, as tall as Standish but thinner, he had a heavy screw-driver in his hand.

"What's the idea?" he said.

"Are you Earle Jennings?"

"Yeah, why?"

"The Department of Health issued you a burial permit for a man named Charles Judson."

"Sure." There was defiance in the voice now but the eyes remained shifty. "We buried him this afternoon."

"Did you?" Standish glanced about, aware that the room was a sort of display room and noting the open doorway leading to the preparation room beyond. He moved slowly then, up to the table supporting the casket, then reaching for a handle and testing its weight. "I doubt it," he said. "Open this up and let's see."

Jennings swore viciously. He demanded to know who Standish was and when he found out, there was fear in his glance. He tried to bluster and when Standish started for him, he backed away, his manner changing.

"All right, Doc," he said. "You're off the beam but if you want to look, okay." He stepped up to the casket, unfastened the catches, and lifted the lid. As he moved aside, Standish took a quick look, then stopped to stare.

For there was a dead man inside the cheap, shallow box—a thin, almost undersized man. His name was Frankie Montanari and as Standish leaned forward he saw the bullet hole in the side of the head just above the hairline.

But even as he noticed this, he knew he had made a mistake. Sheer surprise had already robbed him of a vital second or two, and then it was too late. He tried to duck, sensing rather than hearing the sudden movement behind him, but even as he moved something smashed solidly in back of his head and pain exploded inside his brain.

The floor heaved and the room spun about him. He went down slowly, dizzily. He was on his knees. Then Jennings was tugging at him and he was helpless to resist the pressure that dragged him from a great distance, he heard a door slam and blackness engulfed him.

Never quite losing consciousness, it took Paul Standish a while to find the strength to stand. By that time he knew he had been locked in some closet, and though he hurled himself at the door he had little room and could not get enough momentum in his charge.

Realizing finally that he could not break out alone, he began to think, and presently the pattern of Dr. Cheney's murder became clear. He knew now what had happened, and why. He also knew about what to expect and was ready for it when the door opened a few minutes later and he stepped out to find Mike Darrow standing there, a gun in his hand, Jennings beside him.

Darrow's blocky face was grim and uncompromising. "You had to stick your nose in, huh?" he said flatly.

Standish glanced about, weighing his chances and not liking the odds, knowing now that the district attorney's guess had been right when he said Montanari had made the mistake of going to Darrow.

"Frankie came to see you," Standish said. "To tell you he was going to talk."

"With a gun in his pocket," Darrow said. "This gun." He gestured with the automatic in his hand and laughed abruptly, an unpleasant sound. "I took it away from him."

"And after you'd shot him, you were stuck. It was a murder you hadn't planned. You had no alibi, and a body to get rid of, and you thought of a way." Standish hesitated, his bitterness at Darrow's cleverness erasing any immediate fear for himself. "You needed a death certificate and that meant a doctor, preferably a poor one, without a family. Someone crooked if possible—like Cheney."

He took a breath and said, "But Cheney was no crook. You found that out and you knew, once you'd tipped your hand, that you'd have to kill him. But that didn't matter to you because you'd already killed once and had no further penalty to pay. I guess Cheney knew, too."

He paused again, his bitterness festering as he realized what must have happened to the man who had once been his friend. Cheney had to sign or be killed, and even if he signed he must have known that his chance of survival was slim. But he had taken that chance because it was all he had, and in doing so had left behind one clue for whoever might be curious enough to make a search for it.

"The first certificate he made out," Darrow said, "he put down some funny words as the cause of death. I was afraid he was trying to

tip off the health department. I made him write out another with words I could understand. What put you wise?"

"What difference does it make?"

"None." Darrow batted his lips and his little eyes were implacable. "Tomorrow morning Frankie gets buried as Charles Judson and nobody's ever going to know what happened to him. Only now we need a deeper casket, Doc. To hold you too."

He spoke over his shoulder to Jennings but Standish did not hear him. His lean face was shiny with perspiration and his hands were damp. As he tried to think of some way out, he saw Jennings leave the room and come back lugging two saw-horses; then Darrow was prodding him with the gun, directing him through the preparation room to the storeroom in the back, forcing him to lift one end of a deeper casket while Jennings took the other.

Standish did not notice the weight of this burden; he was thinking about Ballard. He knew Darrow would not get away with his plan, since Ballard knew that Standish had come to see Jennings. When Standish turned up missing, Ballard would move in and eventually find out what had happened; but he could not expect Darrow to believe it.

Nevertheless, he tried. As they trudged back into the second room, he had his say and Darrow laughed

at him, and now he knew that no matter what happened, he had to put up a fight, and quickly, before time ran out on him. Having nothing further to lose, the problem became simply a question of method, and he wasted no time feeling sorry for himself.

For they were putting the casket on the saw-horses now, he and Jennings, and Darrow was on the other side, and suddenly Standish's nerves were quiet and he knew what to do.

Feeling poised and ready now, not watching Darrow, he wedged his thigh under the edge of the casket as Jennings tried to adjust it and then, in one continuous movement, heaved mightily, tipping it towards Darrow.

What happened then took no more than a brief second, but to Standish each detail was clear-cut and exact. He heard Jennings yell as the casket teetered and started to fall. He saw the gun flash and heard it hammer twice as Darrow fired wildly in his belated effort to jump clear; then the casket crashed and the floor shook, and above it all came Darrow's scream as his leg snapped under the casket.

After that, things were a little hazy for Paul Standish. He remembered seeing the automatic spin from Darrow's hand; he saw Jennings dive for it. He scrambled over the casket, aware that Jennings would reach it first but hoping he could get close. He watched the

man scoop it up and straighten, knowing as it leveled that he would not be in time.

He saw the scared white face behind it and, still moving, watched the trigger finger tighten. Then the gun thundered and only when he saw Jennings's torso jerk did he realize that it was not this gun that had fired.

He stopped short then, hearing Darrow's moans, and he grabbed the gun from limp fingers as Jennings started to sag. Then he turned, unbelieving, and found Sergeant Wargo in the doorway to the hall, a short-barreled service revolver in his hand.

Jennings crumpled a joint at a time and fell over on his face. Darrow stopped groaning and the room was suddenly still. Wargo moved up, lowering his gun. He walked past Standish to glance at Darrow, who had fainted, and then at Montanari's casket.

Standish realized he was holding his breath and let it out, a little surprised that he could still move. He started to speak and had to clear his throat before any words came out. When he started to hand Wargo the automatic, he saw that his hands were trembling, and an odd weakness crept up the back of his legs as reaction hit him.

"Where," he said finally, "did you come from?"

"I was outside." Wargo motioned Standish to help him lift the casket from Darrow's leg. "This guy's go-

ing to the chair with one leg shorter than the other," he said and then, continuing with his answer, he added, "Ballard said the way you talked to him over the phone anything might happen and I'd better come out here and keep an eye on you. When I saw Mike come in, I thought I'd better have a look."

Lieutenant Ballard got the rest of the story a half-hour later, after Mike Darrow had been shipped to the hospital and Jennings had been removed. And because he was still shocked by what might have happened to his friend, his remarks were pointed and profane until he thought of something else; then he shrugged.

"What the hell," he said. "What am I crabbing about? We got Montanari and Darrow, and we know you were right about Doc Cheney. You got a good scare, and it served you right for not telling me the truth over the phone."

"I didn't know then," Standish said. "I didn't know I was going to find Montanari in the casket. All I knew was that Cheney would never have signed that death certificate of his own free will."

Ballard frowned, not understanding. He wanted to know why not. "Don't people die from ulcers and hemorrhages?"

"Certainly. There was nothing wrong with the wording."

"Then what tipped you off?"

Standish took his time because he

wanted to make things clear. "Look," he said. "The law says that when a man dies suddenly, the death certificate must be signed by the medical examiner—unless there is a doctor in attendance who is familiar with the case. The law reads something like this: *Attending physicians will certify only to such deaths as those of persons to whom they have given bedside care during the last illness, etcetera.*"

"I still don't get it," Ballard said.

"The death certificate said the hemorrhage was spontaneous. And due to chronic gastric ulcers. A physician *who had just been called in* could not know of that condition; he would have to be familiar with a case to make any such diagnosis."

"So—"

"So when I read that, I went to Doc Cheney's place and examined the records. He never had a patient named Judson, never called on one. If he *had* been called in and if there *had* been a man named Judson, and Cheney *had* found him dying, he would not have signed a death certificate. It would have been unethical and illegal."

Standish tipped one hand, let it fall. "And so I knew that the only way anyone could make Cheney sign such a certificate was by force. Because he was that kind of man. I don't believe he ever did a dishonest thing in his life, and he always did the best he could to make the truth ring true."

Spine-tinglers!

THE NOSE ON MY FACE

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MACMILLAN

Ballard looked at Paul Standish and deep down in his eyes there was respect and approval. He seemed about to say something, checked himself. He took the doctor's arm.

"When you have faith in a guy," he said, under his breath, "you go all the way, don't you?"

Standish heard only part of Ballard's words and he was too tired to pay much attention to those. He wanted mostly a drink and something to eat. "What?" he said.

"Nothing," Ballard said. "Let's go see that good-looking secretary of yours that's always bawling you out. I've got an idea she's going to be sort of proud of you. Are you buying the drinks or am I?"

Standish said it did not matter. He said either way was all right so long as they drank first to Dr. Cheney.

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Collared

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I KNEW SOMETHING WAS UP, BECAUSE he came in nervous instead of just plain lit. He'd had his usual liquid transfusion, but his cooling system must have jammed; it wasn't taking.

He didn't bother looking at me. Me—last year's moll, left-over around the place. I was just a part of the furniture. That was his mistake. Chairs don't stand around waiting to get even on you.

The first six months or so I'd tried to run out on him, but I always got brought back feet first, and I usually had to have a new porcelain cap put on a tooth or two right afterwards. Since then things had changed. Now he was sick of me, but he couldn't get rid of me for love nor money. I was staying until I could get something on him.

He started dialing a number the minute he came in the door, before he even took his hat off. When he wanted a number that fast and that early—five in the morning—it couldn't be anyone's but his

mouth's. So that meant he was in a jam.

I couldn't read the slots as he spun them, because he was out in the hall and I was inside at the mirror fiddling with my nails, but I could tell by the length of time the dial took slipping back each time about which ones they were. The first three were short turns—the exchange and its subdivision. The next two were long hauls—the end slot. His mouth's private number began with two zeros; that was it all right. Then he changed his mind, hung up instead of going ahead. So that meant he wasn't sure whether he was in a jam or not; he'd just done something that worried him and was afraid he might be.

He came in instead, stiff-armed me by the shoulder, twisted me around his way so I nearly broke in two, and blew a lot of expensive Cutty Sark in my face for an atomizer. "Listen, Last Year," he said. "I been here with you from about

three on, get that? I been here with you from the time I left the club."

"You been here from three on," I repeated. I had more porcelain caps than I could carry now. He was bending over me and I couldn't help seeing his collar.

"She's got the damndest aim," I remarked. "Why don't you hold still when you're leaving her, so you get it on the kisser and not the Clutt Peabody?"

He yanked the collar off so hard and fast his whole tie stayed on around his neck. He looked at it kind of scared, and blew out a little breath, as though he were relieved I'd spotted it for him in time. He went into the bathroom. I heard a match scratch and I saw flame reflected against the tiles. I got a whiff of scorched linen, and then a lot of water ran down. He'd burned it.

That gave me a hint about what the jam was. He'd done something to her, whoever she was. Because he certainly hadn't got rid of it on my account. He'd brought those same lipstick trademarks back with him before, and it hadn't bothered him whether I saw them or not. They wouldn't come out in the wash, I'd found that out; it was waterproof rouge and they just went a little lighter.

And if it bothered him, that meant he hadn't meant to do it, whatever *it* was. Because what was a little kill to him? If he'd cut notches in a stick he'd have had a buzz-saw by now. But he always

had it done by remote control, and this was one time he'd been very much all there, judging by his collar; that made a difference. That alone was positive proof to me that it was unintentional.

The way I figured it, one of two things had happened. Either he'd found out something, lost his head for a minute, and couldn't control his trigger-finger in time, and now he regretted it; or it had been altogether an accident. Maybe she was one of those dumb twists that just had to fool with his gun to kill time between huddles, and had playfully pulled the trigger.

Either way it looked like my long-delayed payoff was coming up. So I just sat where I was and rubbed cold cream into my map as an excuse for staying up, to get all the dope I could. He came out again, collar gone now, and massaged the back of his neck. That meant he was trying to figure out whether to let the jam ride and take a chance on getting away with it, or do something to straighten it out.

He took off his coat and vest, and took a .32 out of one of the pockets. He took a sniff at the bore, and then tapped it against the palm of his hand a couple of times, worried. That wasn't his gun; he would have used a caliber like that to pick his teeth with.

Finally he went out to the phone again, and dialed a different number, without any zeros. "Louie," he said in a low voice. "I want you to

come over here and do something for me."

Louie made it fast. But that's all he was geared for anyway, just one of his stooges. He brought him into the room with him. I was working on my neck now.

Louie said, "H'lo, Mae," just to stay in good with Buck, not knowing for sure if I'd been scratched yet.

"Never mind her," Buck said, letting him know I had. He gave me a traffic signal toward the bathroom with his thumb. "G'wan, get inside there and swaller some iodine or something until I tell you to come out again. And keep that door closed."

I missed some of it that way, but not for lack of pushing my ear hard enough against the door seam. His voice rose irritably every once in a while, which was a habit of his whenever he was talking to his stooges, and that helped some.

"Naw, no one heard it and no one saw it, or I woulda gotten Mendes on the wire right off," was the first thing I got, after a minute or two of static. Mendes was his mouthpiece.

More poor reception, and then: "Why didn't I leave it there? Suppose it *was* hers! Don't you think they're gonna know someone was up there, you dumb lug? Her wrist was weaker than I thought it would be; I pushed it all the way back over her shoulder, and it hit something, turned aside, and the

bullet went into her from the back!"

More interference, and then: "I wouldn't wanna pass it off like that even if I could. I didn't want to lose the kid, even after what I found out. I was just gonna slap her around a few times. I got somebody lined up for it. No one takes anything away from me without paying for it!"

A name was coming up. I shifted down to the keyhole, where the reception was better.

"The boy friend's name is Frank Rogers; I got that much out of her before it happened. He came on here to take her back to her home town, when they'd heard she was getting in wrong. He's at the Hallerton House, one of these men's hotels. You know how to work it. Put a little vaseline on the gun, but see that you've got on gloves yourself. You be looking it over just as he comes along—in the hall outside his room, for instance. You drop the gun and it lands on one of your pet corns. You grab your foot with both hands and hop around, so you've got an excuse for not picking it up yourself. He'll bend down and hand it back to you without thinking twice—any guy would. Then just keep it well wrapped up after that, so it don't catch cold."

Some low-pitched beefing I couldn't catch came in from Louie at this point. Then Buck overrode him: "What you worrying about? You don't have to go in there with

her, you yellow belly. The body's safe until ten; the woman that does her cleaning don't come around before then. Just see that you leave the gun around inside the building some place where the cops can't miss it, like he threw it away on the lam. Now get over there fast. He'll be getting up early; he was figuring on taking her back with him on the early-morning bus. The six o'clock one. So hurry."

I heard the outside door slam, I counted ten, and then I drifted out. "We're kind of low on iodine in there," I said meekly. "Should I have used a razor?"

He fired his shoe at me. It missed my head but busted the mirror. "Have a little bad luck on me," he wished fervently.

There were still enough pieces left in the mirror's frame to do piecework by, so I sat down at it again, for a stall to stay awake longer than him. He put on a pair of pajamas with zebra stripes. The last thing he said was, "You may as well quit that; it's not gonna get you anything—even in the dark." His yap dropped open and he started to breathe heavy.

I took another halfturn on the cold cream, to make sure he was asleep. I kept thinking, "I gotta find out who she is. Was, I mean. This is what I been waiting for for six months. This is my chance to fix him good, and if I pass it up it'll never come again, he's too cagey. I've got the fall guy's name. Frank

Rogers. But I gotta find out hers, and especially where she's lying dead right now." Then a short cut occurred to me. "What the hell, this Rogers can tell me who and where she is."

I had to work fast, but I had to work carefully too. One wrong move and I knew what my finish would be. And it wouldn't be just another busted tooth this time either. He or some one of his gang would kill me. That was why there was no question of just anonymously ratting on Buck to the cops. I had to stay out of it altogether. They had to trace it back to him themselves. I had to find some way of making sure they did—and leave me in the clear, on the sidelines, when they did. Even with him in the death house, my life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if there was a leak afterwards.

I wouldn't call it a frame. There was once a guy named Gordon, may his good soul rest in peace. . . . Never mind that now.

I didn't have much time. Those stooges of Buck's moved fast when they were on his shift. That Louie must be practically at Rogers' hotel by now. Here goes, I thought, and I tiptoed out to the phone, keeping my face turned his way so I could do a quick right-about-face if his eyes opened.

The dial made an awful clack. I tried to bury it against my chest, but it wouldn't go around then. Finally I muffled it all I could by

keeping my finger in the slot on the return trip each time, but I expected to feel a slug in the back of my neck any minute.

"Get me Mr. Frank Rogers and get him fast," I said to the hotel clerk under my breath. They got him fast but not fast enough to suit me. He sounded sleepy too, must have just got up. Which was another bad break; it would have been bad enough talking to someone wide-awake.

I began: "I haven't time to repeat what I'm going to say a second time, so don't ask me to, get it the first. I've got a message for you from your girl friend."

"Alma?" he said, surprised.

That was only one-third of what I needed. "To make sure I've got the right party, kick back with her full name and address. There may be another Frank Rogers in the same building."

He fell for it. "Alma Kitteredge, 832 East Seventy-second. What's the message?"

"Just put on your pants and pull out of town fast. She's not coming with you, you'll find out why when you get back home. Buy a two-cent paper and shut up about this call."

I was going to warn him not to touch anything, not to pick up any guns for any strangers, but before I had time I had to hang up. Buck had just changed sides in the hay. "What are you doing out there?"

"Just bringing in the morning paper, dee-yur."

It hadn't come yet, but he was asleep again by then anyway.

I made a quick round-trip to the closet, grabbed up whatever was handiest, and got dressed out there in the foyer on the installment plan, stopping between each layer to see if I was still in the clear. I put on my checker-board swagger-coat. Black and white plaid; you could see it a mile away even with low visibility, but it had been on the end hanger. I wasn't heading for an Easter parade, anyway.

The last thing I took was a clean collar of his, rolled it up small, and put it in my handbag. Then I edged over and fished his key holder out of his vest-pocket. He had an awful lot of them, but only three Yales. I stepped outside and found out which was the one to our place, and that left only two. One probably to his office at the gambling club, and the other one to her place. I detached both of them and took them with me.

I eased the door closed after me, and then I hot-footed it down to the street, scared up a cab, and gave Alma's address. I hadn't been out this early in the morning since I was a good girl in love with an honest guy.

I had the driver let me off on the corner instead of right outside the door. It wasn't such a hot place. None of the trimmings. No doorman, nothing. I could tell Buck hadn't picked it for her. Still, he already had the key. She'd been

afraid to refuse it to him, I guess. Just like I'd been before Gordon had his "accident."

The door key opened the street door too. The mail slot said 3-A. I walked up a couple of flights of stairs and found the door, a little to the left. I didn't knock. I knew there was no one in there to hear me any more. The key I'd taken from Buck worked the door without any trouble, and I closed it quietly after me with a back-hand motion. The lights had been left on.

She had it nice inside. But she was spoiling the looks of it, even though she was a pretty little thing, lying slobbered all over the floor like that.

I looked down at her. "Cheer up, kid," I said softly. "He'll get it hung on him, don't worry."

I went in to her dressing table, rummaged, and got out her lipstick. It was waterproof rouge. I took it back to where she was, bent down by her, lifted her head, and reddened up her mouth plenty. When I'd put it on so thick that it was practically caked on her, I picked up her hand and closed her fingers tight around the lipstick holder.

"Just so the dicks'll know what you were trying to tell them," I murmured to her. "If they don't think it funny that a girl dying from a slug takes time out to rouge her lips, they oughta be out shoving street cleaners' tea wagons around. Now spread yourself on this." I

unrolled his clean collar, held it out straight by both ends, and pressed it hard against her smeared mouth. The print came out perfect, a complete cupid's bow.

"They'll check the rouge, they'll check the shape of your mouth. Oh, they'll know," I promised her softly. I rolled the collar up carefully again, put a little tissue paper around it so it wouldn't blur, put it back in my handbag.

"Now just so they'll know what to look for it on. . . ." I said. I went over to the table and picked up a big glossy magazine lying there. I thumbed through the ads until I came to a full-page men's collar ad, with a handsome he-model illustrating it. "Here you go," I said. I held that against her mouth, so that the print came out on the collar in the photograph just about where it had on Buck's. Then I dropped the mag on the floor near her, open at that particular page.

"Now if the cops are any good at all, that oughta bring them around where I live sooner or later—without me having to be filled full of buckshot for it either." I looked back at her from the door, saluted her sadly. "Take it easy, Toots. And the next time you live, marry your Frank Rogers fast and don't fool around with dynamite."

I had my hand on the door knob ready to leave when I heard someone outside in the hall. A sort of tiptoe tread, the kind you notice all the quicker just because it's try-

ing not to be heard. I knew it was Louie, with his little gun all neatly fingerprinted now by Rogers. Louie must have come up through the basement, because I had Buck's key. I got good and scared. I didn't stop to think what a wonderful break I'd just had; if I'd left a minute sooner I'd have run into him head-on on the stairs. Or if he'd shown up a minute later. I was all right where I was. He was too yellow to come in here, and he didn't have the key anyway.

The sound of his tiptoeing went down the hall to the back. There was a muffled clunk from a tin bucket, then his steps came back again, passed the door where I was holding my breath, and faded out down the stairs.

I gave him all the time he needed to get out of the building. Then I let myself out, closed her door, and went up there to the end of the hall. There was a fire-axe clamped to the wall, and there was a red fire-bucket on the floor under it. The gun was lying at the bottom of it.

I'd seen Buck clean his often enough. He always used a piece of chamois or kidskin. Of course this was different; this was to get prints off, but I figured the same thing would work. I took one of my own gloves, from my handbag, to it. That, and my breath, and—what a lady spits with. I worked until there couldn't have been anything left on it. Then I laid it down again inside the pail.

I took a couple of swabs at the outside door knob too, just for luck, before I left. Not that I was particularly worried about myself, but just not to cloud the issue. The whole job must have taken about five, six minutes. Then I went downstairs and out of the building, and stood there for a half-minute outside the street door—like a fool, but the way anyone's apt to do. Sort of taking a deep breath after finishing something. It was still early but it was good and light by now.

You know how you can feel it when anyone's looking at you hard, even from a distance? Something pulled my head around in the opposite direction, and there was a figure in a light gray suit down at the next corner, on the other side of the street, sizing me up for all he was worth. It was Louie, same suit he'd just had on up at our place; he'd just come out of a cigar store that he'd gone into either to buy smokes or to report his success back to Buck over the wire.

My first thought was, "Take it easy. He can't tell who you are from that far off." Then I looked down at myself and I saw those checker-board black and white squares all over me. "Oh, Lord!" I gasped, and I stepped down from the doorway fast and went up the other way.

The steady way he'd been staring told me he already had a hunch it was me. And I knew what the next step would be. He'd phone back to

Buck fast to see if I was there or not.

I jumped into the first cab I saw and I almost shook the driver by the shoulders to get some speed out of him. "Fast!" I kept whimpering. "Fast! I've got to beat a phone call."

"I don't see how it can be done," he said.

I didn't either, but it had to be. If Louie had only wasted time tailing me around to where I'd hopped the cab. . . . If he'd only run out of nickels. . . .

But if he'd already phoned Buck the first time and woken him up, then what was the use of all this? I was already finished. I threw something at the driver, I think it was a fin for a six-bit ride, and I never got up to a third floor so fast before or after.

It was ringing away, I could hear it right through the door while I was trying to get it open. And of course I would drop the key on the floor in my hurry and have to dredge for it. I don't know how I did it but finally I was in and had the damned thing at my mouth and ear, just as Buck came up for air in the other room and growled, "Are you gonna get a move on and shut that damn thing up or d'ya want a ride on the end of my foot?"

It was Louie, all right. "Who's that—*Mae*?" he said. He acted surprised I was there. So was I.

"Sure, who else?" I couldn't say much, I was too winded.

"I got three wrong numbers in a

row, can y' imagine?" I thanked God and the Telephone Company.

"I coulda sworn I seen you down on Seventy-second Street just now."

"Whaddya think I do, walk in my sleep?"

"Well, this dame beat it away fast."

"She probably got a look at your face. Listen, get through, will you? You just busted a dream Charles Boyer was in with me."

"Just tell Buck: Okay." He hung up. I got undressed right where I was standing, on the zipper plan; just dropped everything off together and stepped out of them. But he was asleep again, he didn't ask who it was.

I got her door key and the other one back into his pocket. I hung that blasted checker-board coat as far back inside the closet as it would go, and made a mental note to sell it to the first old-clothes man that came around. The collar with her death kiss on it I rolled up at the bottom of the laundry bag.

The rest was up to the dicks.

They didn't show up for three days. Three days that were like three years. It was in the papers the first day, just a little squib. Not a word about the lipstick in her hand or the smear on the magazine. That gave me a bad jolt. Had they muffed it? There was always the possibility that Louie had gone back inside, after he'd thought he'd seen me leave there that day, and

rearranged my carefully planted setup. But if he had, I'd have been dead two days already.

What looked good about it was that, although the papers spoke of their sending upstate to have a Frank Rogers held and questioned, there was no follow-up. It stopped at that. The next editions didn't say a word about his being brought back under arrest. His alibi must have held up. It should have, it was the straight goods.

The bureau drawer gave a crash at this point that was enough to split it in two, so I quickly dropped the paper. This was Thursday night, the second night after, around eight, Buck's usual time for getting caked up to go down to the club. He was standing there across the room in suspenders, holster, and stiff shirt, but with a bare neck. "Well?" he growled. "What do I use for a collar? They've run out on me."

My heart started hitting it up. "Ur-um-uff," I said.

A shoe horn went past my left ear and a lit cigar butt sailed by my right. He didn't wait to see if he'd hit me or not; he headed straight over for that laundry bag behind the bath door. "Now I'll hafta use the same one twice!"

I managed to stay on my feet, but I was dying all over by inches as I saw his arm go down into it, scuffing things out. "Wait, hon," I moaned. "Getcha nice fresh one at the haberdasher downstairs. Won't

take a minute, they're still open." I got the door open.

It worked. He quit burrowing, with his fingertips just an inch away from it by that time. "Well, get some life into your bustle, I gotta get down there."

It was right in our same building, but you had to go out the street door and around to get into it. I was too frightened even to remember his size. I bought one of every half-size they carried, from fourteen up to seventeen, to make sure of hitting the right one, and charged them. It was only when I ducked back into the house door again and saw people stopping and staring, that I realized I had on bell-bottomed pajamas and a brassiere. It was better than a shroud, at that.

He let me off easy, just pushed me back over the arm of a chair. It stayed up, so I did too. He hadn't fished up what lay curled at the bottom of the laundry bag and that was all that mattered.

That was Thursday.

Friday lasted 96 hours, but it finally ended. I kept worrying Rogers had spilled it that an anonymous woman had tipped him to get out of town. If that leaked, and it got back to Buck!

Friday night I got a sudden phone call from Buck, from the club, at two in the morning. He never did that any more; he would have been only too glad if I'd tried to cheat on him those days, so he

could've tied the can to me.

I knew what it was, before he even said anything. They were on the trail at last. They must have just been over there to talk to him, for the first time. He was phoning to warn me ahead.

"Anyone been around?" he asked mysteriously.

"No."

"In case anyone does, remember what I told you Tuesday night?"

"That was the night you came home early from the club, at three."

I didn't get any thanks for it. "Now listen, Last Year, if anything gets gummed, if there's any slip-up, I'm going to know just who's to blame for it. You better wish you'd never been born."

He was right; I was probably his only alibi, from the moment he had left the club that night. That may sound as if it was bad for him, but I was the one it was bad for. He could always get out of it in the end, he'd got out of worse ones, and in this case there was the printed gun (so he thought!) and no witnesses. But if there was the least hitch, if he was questioned once too often or half an hour too long, he'd know the answer. That was curtains for me; there was no one else I could pass the buck to.

He'd hardly rung off than there was a knock on the door. I knew who it was. I knew I was going to have to handle the interview just as though Buck was present, or listening in the next room. That did-

n't have me stopped. If they had any brains at all, maybe they could get it from what I didn't say, instead of what I did.

But when I'd opened the door, it was only one guy. "Headquarters," he said, and he tipped his hat and showed his badge. Only strangers tipped their hats to me any more, not the guys I associated with. "Are you Buck Colby's wife?"

"Common law." Buck didn't even refer to me as that.

"Come in and talk to you?"

"Why, sure," I said hospitably. "Help yourself."

He looked around him casually. Suddenly he said, "About what time does Colby get back here at nights as a rule?" It was out and waiting to be answered before I'd even heard it coming. I was supposed to think he wanted to see Buck right now and wondered how long he'd have to wait for him.

"Never much before three. He's kept busy at the cl—"

He cut it short with his hand. "How about after?"

"Seldom after, either."

"Take Tuesday, for instance." They were coming faster now.

"Tuesday was one of his early nights. He was here at three to the dot."

"References?"

"You picked an easy one for me to remember." I thumbed the busted mirror. "I was still sitting up there when he came in. If it had

been any later than three I would have been in bed. And as a matter of fact, I remember asking him, 'What brings you home so early?' He said the take had been rather thin."

"Where does that mirror come in it?"

"He was taking off his shoe, and he pulled too hard, and it flew out of his hand and landed over here." I coughed deprecatingly.

He'd shut up all of a sudden. He kept looking at me as if he found me kind of interesting, all at once. The next time he spoke, it wasn't a police question any more, it was more personal. "Been—married to him long?"

I slid my mouth around toward my left ear. "I've been with Mr. Colby two years now." It sounded strangely sweet, coming out of such a bitter-shaped thing.

He was getting more and more interested in me personally, seemed to forget all about what had brought him up here. Seemed to. "Worked in one of his clubs, I guess, in the beginning?"

"No. Mr. Colby *did* urge me to when he first met me. But I was intending getting married at the time, so I didn't feel free to accept. However, the party I—uh, had figured on marrying had an accident, and that left me much freer to accept, so I did."

He looked at me. "Had an accident," he said without any question mark.

"Yes. A rather large beer truck ran wild down a hill near where I was living and crushed him against a cement wall as he was on his way up to see me. I suppose even the first time would have killed him, but every time the frightened driver tried to reverse and extricate his vehicle, it would only back up a little and then go smashing in again. It happened three or four times. Like a sort of battering ram.

"The funny part of it was he never fell down. He stayed sort of stuck to the wall—partly. And partly to the fender and radiator. He even got all over the engine too, I understand. They had to white-wash the wall and scour the sidewalk with creosote.

"The driver felt very bad about it. It preyed on his mind, until a few months later he took his own life by tying his hands to his feet and jumping into the river. I don't believe anyone remembered who he was by that time any more. I happened to, of course, but that was all. No one was to blame, you understand. How could they be?" I chewed the lining of my cheek and made my eyes hard as marbles. "*No one was to blame.*"

He just looked at me. After a while he said quietly, "Thought a lot of him, didn't you?"

I let my eyes drift. "There was never any very great—feeling between us, compared to what there is between Mr. Colby and myself now." I took my lower jaw and

shifted it tenderly back and forth, as if to see whether it had been fractured or not lately.

He shook his head half pityingly and looked down at the floor. Finally he said, as if winding up the interview: "Then he was here from three o'clock on, Tuesday night?"

"From three on. *I stake my life on that.*"

He shuttered his eyes at me understandingly, as if to say, "I guess you do." He got up. "I'm going to ask you to let me take a look in your laundry bag before I go."

I shifted my eyes over to the bath door, then back to him again. "That's a very strange request," I said primly. "I can't imagine what possible—"

He went over to it while I was still talking, stuck his arm down into it, and pulled the bottom up through the top without anything falling out. "Empty," he said.

"I take it out on Mondays as a rule, but this week, for *some* reason—" I looked at him hard—"I put it off until just yesterday. Just yesterday Mr. Colby noticed it was rather full, and reminded me I hadn't taken it out." I rubbed my shoulder as though it still ached. "I can't imagine what made me so absent-minded. If he hadn't called my attention to it, it would have been still here." Our eyes met.

He'd sat down again. I said, in my best tea-table manner, "Will you excuse me while I get a cigarette?" He held out a leather case from his

pocket. I ignored it. He raised the lid of a box standing there right beside me, full. I didn't seem to see him do it. I got my handbag and brought it back and dug out a crumpled pack. A little vivid green tab of paper came up with it "accidentally" and slipped to the floor. It had two ink-brush ideographs on it, and a couple of words of English—the laundry's name and location.

He picked it up for me, looked at it, and handed it back. I put it back in my bag and put my bag back where I'd got it. The cigarette wouldn't draw, was split from being battered around so much; it didn't matter, I seemed to have got over wanting a smoke.

He hitched his chair closer, dropped his voice until you could hardly hear it. Nine parts lip motion to one part of vocal sound. "Temple's my name. Why don't you come down and see me, if you're leery about talking up here? We'll give you protection."

I clasped my hands in hasty, agonized entreaty, separated them again. "I beg your pardon?" I said in a clear, ringing voice. "Did you say something just then?"

"Take a walk, buddy!" Buck was standing there in the open doorway, Louie looking over his shoulder. I put on a great big relieved expression, like I was sure glad they'd finally shown up. Buck came on in, with his lower jaw leading the way by two inches.

"Now listen, you questioned me at my club oilier tonight, and I took it good-natured. I soitainly never expected to find you here half an hour later. How long does this keep up?"

"What does he want, hon?" I said with wide-eyed innocence. I could have saved myself the trouble, he didn't even give me a tumble.

"Now if ya think ya got anything on me, out with it, and I'll go anywheres you say and face it! If ya haven't, there's the way out and don't lemme see ya around here again."

This Temple dick took it meeker than I thought he would. He got up and went toward the door. He went slow, but he went.

"Nothing to get sore about," he drawled mildly. "I'm just doing my job. No one said anything about having anything on you."

"You bet no one did!" Buck blared, and slammed the door on him.

None of us said anything for a few minutes. Then Louie looked out to make sure he'd gone, and Buck opened up.

"Y'did better than I expected, at that," he said to me. "It's a good thing for you y'did." He tapped his side meaningfully. "I heard the whole thing from outside the door. We been out there for the past ten minutes. There's only one thing I don't like about it. What did he want with that laundry bag?" He poured himself a shot, wiped the

dew away on his sleeve. "I don't get it. I burned—" He didn't finish it. "How did he know? How did he get onto that?"

He came over at me and his finger shot out like a knife. "Hey, you!" I nearly died in the split-second before he came out with the rest of it. "Did you take any collars over with the rest of that stuff yesterday?"

"I don't think there were any," I mumbled vaguely.

"Yes or no?"

My next answer came from the other side of the room, where he'd kited me. "No," I groaned through a constellation of stars. "They were frayed so I—"

"Just the same you get over there the minute that place opens up in the morning and get that stuff back here, hear me? If they want it, then I want it twice as bad."

"Sure, Buck," I said, wiping the blood off my lip. "I'll bring it back."

"Why you so worried about collars?" Louie asked him, puzzled.

Buck explained in an undertone, "She's been kissing me on the neck and I been finding lip-rouge on 'em when I got home. That's the only thing I can figure he's looking for. I burned one but there may be others."

"Yeah, but how would they know?" said Louie with unanswerable logic. "You brought the marks back with you, they didn't stay down there with *her*."

His face had a look like something was within an inch of clicking behind it, and I knew what that something was: A loud checked coat leaving a dead girl's doorway only a few minutes after he had the other day. If it's possible to shrink inside your own skin and take up lots less room than before, I shrank. That fool Temple, I thought, he may have killed me by making that pass at the laundry bag.

But before the chain of thought Louie was working on could click, Buck saved me by cutting across it and distracting his attention. "There's something ain't working right. I don't know why they haven't jumped you-know-who by now. They went up and questioned him all right, but I notice there ain't been a word printed about their bringing him back with them. He musta sprung an alibi that held up. Put your ear down to the ground and find out what's up, for me, Louie. You got ways. If it don't move, looks like we'll have to put a flea in their ear about—" He pressed his fingertips down hard on the table to show him what he meant.

He was standing over me shaking me at seven-thirty the next morning. And when Buck shook you, you shook. "G'wan, get over there like I told you and get that wash back. I don't care if it ain't ironed or ain't even washed yet,

don't come back here without it!"

The owner's name was Lee. It was just about a block away, down in a basement. They were up already, three of the little fellows, ironing away a mile a minute; they must have lived in the back of the place. I tottered down from the street level, put the bright green wash ticket down on the counter.

I thought he looked at me kind of funny. He got it down from the shelf, done up flat in brown paper. "Two dolla' fi' cents," he said. He kept looking at me funny even after I paid him. The other two had quit pounding their flat-irons, were acting funny too. Not looking at me, but sort of waiting for something to happen. I had an idea they were dying to tell me something, but didn't have the nerve.

I started to pick up the flat package to walk out with it, and it wouldn't move, stayed on the counter. A hand was holding it down. The string popped, the brown paper rattled open. I didn't bother turning my head. Like the three monkeys: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. I kept watching the sidewalk level outside the shop, murmuring "Thank God!" over and over.

Behind me, a voice said quietly, "Tie the lady's bundle up again, John."

I breathed, "Don't take too long, will you?" I didn't mean it for the laundryman, I hoped he knew that.

Temple knew everything. "Want

to stay out?" he said softly. "I'll cover you."

"You'll cover me with a rubber bib at the morgue. Sure I want to stay out—out of it."

"I've got a look-out posted."

"Can he beat a slug's time into my girlish waist?" I wanted to know.

"If you need help before the lab checks this collar, lower one of the window shades."

"That'd be about right. Lower one of the window shades, like when there's been a death in the house."

Somebody wedged the retied bundle under my arm, the laundryman I guess, and I walked on out and up the steps. Ostrich-like, I hadn't seen Temple from first to last. I could be beaten to death, but I couldn't truthfully say I'd seen him.

It gave me a funny feeling when I got back outside our place again. There should have been a sign over the door, "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

That had been my last chance to lam, when I was sent out for that laundry. But I knew enough not to. It would have been a dead giveaway, and meant certain death. When they want to get you, not all the protection of all the dicks in town is any good to you. The only way for me to play it was this: They mustn't find out anything that would make them want to get me. So in I went.

He was pacing up and down the room a mile a minute. He turned on me and grabbed the package and slapped me back away from it. "What took you so long?" he griped.

"I hadda wait for them to show up and lemme in."

He busted it wide open, rummaged through it, scattering it all over the place. Not a collar turned up. "Whew!" he said, and slid his finger across his forehead and flicked it off in the air. Then he thought it over. "But just the same he was after *something* in here. Let's see if it coulda been anything else."

He turned the wrapping paper over and before my glazing eyes yanked a bright green price list out from under it. You get one back with every package, a check list of what they're charging you for. I'd seen too many of them before, I knew just what was going to be on it: 1 collar—5¢. With no collar present to match it. We'd both overlooked that, me and that voice back at the laundry.

"Eight shirts," he mumbled, "all here. Six shorts."

I could feel my cheeks puffing in and out like bellows. I reached down and hung onto the nearest piece of furniture, to brace myself for it when it came. He'd hit it in about a second more.

The phone rang. He dropped the laundry bill and went out to get it. I kind of swayed where I was. I

couldn't move fast, my knees were all watery. But luckily the party seemed to have a lot to say, held him out there long enough for me to pull myself together.

I got over to where his coat was hanging, across the back of a chair, and unclasped a pencil with a rubber on it. Then I staggered to where the laundry slip was, and rubbed out the pencilled "1" in front of the printed word collars and the pencilled "5¢" after it. Then I floundered into a chair, and finally got my stomach down where it belonged again.

He came in and finished up what he'd been doing. The list was badly wrinkled and that had covered the erasure. "Everything accounted for," he said. "He overcharged me five cents, but the hell with that." He wasn't a tightwad. Just a killer. "Whatever that dirty name was after, he didn't get."

He hauled a cowhide valise out into the middle of the room. He thumbed it, and then me. "Start packing," he said. "We're getting out of here. I don't like the way that dope sounded just now."

So that had been Louie who'd called just now. Well, I didn't like it either, any more than he did, but not for the same reasons. The lab would never kick back with its report on that collar in time to keep them from hauling me off out of reach with them. Temple would never be able to get to me once they took me out of here with them.

And it was no good trying to stall either.

"Come on, yuh paralyzed?" he said, and gave me a shove. "Get a move on."

Damn it, if I'd only emptied the closet first, while we were still alone in the place, and the bureau drawers later! But he kept cracking the whip over my head and I didn't have time to think straight. I emptied out the drawers first, and before I'd got around to the clothes closet, Louie was already in the place. Even then, I was so busy listening to the two of them while I hauled things back and forth that I forgot for a minute what was in that closet. Didn't realize what I was going to be in for, in just one more round trip.

"What'd you mean just now, it's gone sour?" Buck was demanding.

"The gun turned up clean."

Pokkk!

"Don't sock me!" Louie shrielled. "I done my part! Rogers wrapped his mitts around it right under my own eyes! Picked it up and handed it back to me. Somebody musta tampered with it after I planted it."

I unslung a half-dozen dresses from the rack, and suddenly black and white checks were glaring malevolently at me from the depths of the closet! A chair creaked, and Louie had slumped down in one right on a line with the closet door, rubbing the side of his face where Buck had caught him. I knew I'd never be able to get it out of there

without him seeing it, not even if I tried to cover it over with the dresses. It was such a big bulky thing.

"It's got to stay in there where it is," I heaved terrifiedly to myself. "That's my only chance."

I sidled out with the dresses, and gave the closet door a little nudge behind me with the point of my elbow, to close it more than it was so he couldn't see in. I didn't bend over the bags, I toppled over them from fright and weakness when I got to them.

I should have got away with it, the way they were barking at each other.

"You blundering fool! No wonder they never brought Rogers back! Mendes'll have to go to bat for me now!"

"*She ratted on you herself!*" Louie protested. For a minute I thought he meant me and a drop of twenty degrees ran down my spine. "I heard she left some kind of a high-sign, but I couldn't find out what it was; they're keeping it to themselves. They found her with something in her hand. They put the kibosh on it, wouldn't let the papers tell it. One story I heard was they're out after some guy that poses for ads in magazines, but I think it's just a bum steer they threw out on purpose. Anyway, one thing's sure, she didn't die right away like you thought."

"She was dead when I left her!" Buck growled ferociously. "I

oughta know, I tried hard enough to bring her back! Somebody's framed me! C'mon, let's get out of here fast. Hurry up, you, y'got everything?"

Louie's face was working like he was trying to connect something up. "Y'know, I forgot to tell you," he started to say, "Tuesday morning early, when you sent me over there—"

"Come on, I've got everything!" I interrupted frantically. "What're we waiting for?" I picked up both valises, heavy as they were, just to break Louie's chain of thought.

"Make sure you don't leave nothing behind," Buck said. He widened the closet door to take a last look in. His voice sounded hollow, coming from inside it. "Hey, you dope, what's the matter with this coat?"

Clump went the two valises to the floor. I just stood there between them. Dead already, for all practical purposes, just waiting to fall down. I didn't even turn to look, just waited for it to come.

Buck came out holding it up by one hand, and the room was suddenly full of loud checks. Louie gave a jolt out of his chair, like a tack had run up through it.

"*That's the coat!*" he yelled. "I'd know it anywhere! That's the coat I seen come out of the Kitteredge babe's house five minutes after I left there Tuesday morning! So you wanna know who ratted on you! So you wanna know who!

Ask *her* what she was doing down there. Ask *her* how the gun turned up clean. Ask *her* how the stiff come to give a high sign when you left her dead."

"Did I answer at this end when you called up right afterwards—did I or didn't I? Tell him that!"

"Sure—so out of breath you couldn't hardly talk at all," Louie said.

"Don't let him put a knife in me, Buck. What's he trying to tell you?" But I could tell by Buck's eyes I'd lost the bout already. They would have cut window glass, they were so hard.

"He wouldn't make up a thing like that," he said. "Know why? He hasn't got imagination enough. And there's not another coat like yours in town; they told you that fifty times over when you bought it."

Buck unbuttoned his topcoat, spaded his hand under his jacket, heaved once, brought out his gun, leveled it, squinted at my stomach. Gee, it was awful watching him do it, he seemed to do it so slow. He crooked his left index finger at me, kept wiggling it back and forth, and *smiling*. You had to see that smile to know how awful a smile can be.

"C'm over here and get it," he said. "You're not worth moving a step out of the way for. Come on, this way. The nearer you are, the less you feel it. This is where you came in, baby."

I picked up one foot and put it down on the outside of the valise and stayed that way, straddling it. I noticed a funny thing; I wasn't as scared any more. I wasn't as scared as I had been just before they'd found the coat. I kept thinking, "It won't take long, I won't feel it. I'll be with Gordon now, anyway."

"Not here," Louie said nervously. "What'd we go to all that trouble about the first one for if you're only gonna pull a kill, big as life, where they can't miss it?"

It was hard for Buck to put on his brakes, his blood was so hot for a kill. But Louie was talking sense, and he knew it. He put his gun away slow, even slower than he'd brought it out.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, you're right. And she's not worth taking a rap for. We'll go up to the place in the sticks. I'll get in touch with my mouth as soon as we get up there. He can handle the Kitteredge thing easy; he's handled worse ones than that for me.

"Let's see, now; she start with us, but she won't get up there with us though. You and me, Louie, will have to hike it the last lap of the way in. We're going to have an accident with the car before we get there. You know that hairpin turn, where the road twists around that bluff high over the river? It always makes me nervous every time I pass that stretch of road, especially the way you drive, kind of close to the edge."

He gave another of those smiles of his, and Louie grinned back at him in answer. "That ain't far from the place," he said. "I don't mind hoofing it from there in." He thumped himself over the belt buckle. "Matter of fact, I don't get enough exercise."

"I like accidents," Buck said. He kept on smiling. "You take the bags, Louie, I'll take the body."

He linked his arm through mine, like a guy often walks with a woman. Only the hand on the end of it stayed in his coat pocket, and the coat pocket stuck into my side, hard and heavy.

"Now if you're in a hurry," he said, "if you want it fast, right away instead of later, just sing out between here and the car. It don't make any difference to me if you take the ride with us dead or alive. You're just short-changing yourself out of about forty minutes of life, that's all."

The shade, I kept thinking, the window shade. My signal to Temple. It was as out of reach as if it had been on the window of a house across the street. "If I've got to go, I've got to go," I said dreamily. "But won't you let me take just one last look at the town from the window? You see, I won't be seeing it again. You can keep the gun at my back; you can make sure I don't try nothing."

"Aw, let her take one last look," Louie said. "It'll hurt that much more, don't you get it? Here, I'll

hold her hands behind her back, so she can't signal with them in any way, and you keep the gun on her."

They shoved me up in front of the window, keeping back out of sight behind the curtains. "Okay, Mae, say good-by," Buck laughed.

The cord was hanging in a loop in front of me but Louie had both my wrists in a vise behind me. I had a lot of clothes to wear. I could have had on almost anything that day—anything that wouldn't have done any good. But he'd hustled me out so fast to get that laundry I hadn't had time to doll up. I'd shoved into a skirt and a blouse. A blouse with a couple of big flat buttons on each side of it.

I don't know how I did it. I bet I couldn't do it over again now if I tried. The cord was hanging in a loop that rested against my chest. "Gee, it's pretty," I said, and turned a little to look up one way. "It's tough to leave it," I said, and turned again to look down the other way. I couldn't get a full loop into it, but I got it snagged around the button, which was the size of a silver dollar. He did the rest.

"C'mon, that's enough," Buck said, and he jerked me back and started to swing me around on my way to the door. The button took the cord with it and pulled it tight over my shoulder. *Whirr!* and the shade came all the way down to the bottom, so fast and hard it tore partly off the roller, creased, and wouldn't go up again.

It looked so much like an accident they didn't even tumble. He just gave me a clip on the head, and freed the cord by wrenching the button off. Then we went on out of the place and down to the street, him and me first and Louie behind us with the two bags.

If I had expected the shade stunt to get me anything, I was out of luck. The street was dead, there wasn't a soul in sight up or down the whole length of it. Buck's car was standing a few yards down from the door, where there were a couple of big fat leafy trees. He had a habit of parking it under them, to keep the sun from heating up the inside of it too much.

We went down to it and he shoved me into the back seat, climbed in next to me and pinned me into the corner with his shoulder. Louie dumped the bags in the trunk, got in and took the wheel. "So he had a look-out posted, did he?" I thought bitterly. "Where—over in the next county?"

We started off with kind of a thud, that didn't come from the engine. "What was that?" asked Buck.

Louie looked out and behind us. "One of the branches of that tree musta grazed the roof. I see it kind of wobbling up and down."

We rounded the corner and started out for the express highway that later on turned into the upstate road we wanted. Buck had his gun on me the whole time, through the

pocket, of course. I just sat there in the corner resignedly. It was too late for anyone to horn in now. Temple's look-out had muffed it. Must have gone off to phone in the alarm just as we came out of the building.

There was more life on the avenue we were on now than on the street we lived on. Louie said suddenly, "Everybody walking along the sidewalk turns and rubbernecks after us. What's she doing?"

"Nothing," Buck told him. "I got her covered. You're just jittery, that's all." Then he glanced back through the rear insert. "Yeah, their heads are all turned staring after us!"

His face worked savagely and he brought the gun out into the open, then reburied it in my side without any pocket over it. "I don't know what ya been doin', but you're through doin' it now! Step it up," he told Louie, "and let your exhaust out, I'm going to give it to her right here in the car, ahead of the accident. She'll never come up from the river bottom again anyway, so it don't make no difference if she's got a slug in her."

He crowded me back into the corner of the seat, sort of leaned over me, to muffle it between our two bodies. My eyes got big, but I didn't let out a sound.

Over his shoulder I saw something that I knew I couldn't be seeing. A pair of legs swung down off the car roof, then a man's waist and

shoulders and face came down after them, and he was hanging to the roof with both arms. He hung there like that for a minute, jockeying to find the running-board with his feet. Then he let go, went down almost out of sight, came up again, hanging onto the door handle with one hand, drawing a gun with the other.

Buck had his back turned to that side, didn't see him in time. But the man had darkened the inside of the car a little by being there like that, and Buck pulled his gun out of my side and started turning. He never had time to fire.

The guy fired once, straight into his face, and then Louie swerved, and the car threw the guy who'd shot off the running-board and he lay there behind us in the street.

Buck's head fell back into my lap, and it never moved again, just got a little blood on me. I saw Louie reaching with one hand, so I freed the gun that was still in Buck's hand, pointed it at the back of his neck, and said:

"Pull over!"

The jolting of the car to a stop threw Buck's dead head off my lap to the floor where it belonged.

I was holding Louie there like that, hands up in the clear off the wheel, when Temple's look-out came limping after us. He was pretty badly banged up by his fall but not out of commission. He took over.

"They ought to be here any minute," he said. "I tipped off Temple as soon as I caught the shade signal, but I figured he wouldn't make it in time. That tree was a natural, for stowing myself away on the roof."

Temple and the rest caught up with us five or ten minutes later, in a screaming police car. On the way back in it with him, safely out of earshot of the handcuffed Louie, I said: "Well, what luck did you have with that collar?"

"The lab just sent in its report before I came away. It checks all right. It's just as well we got him this way, though, because we couldn't have used it anyway. Frank Rogers' testimony on the way he was tricked into handling that gun can take care of Louie as an accessory, and we'll sweat the rest of it out of Louie himself, so you can still stay out of it like you wanted to all along." He chuckled. "Pretty neat, the way you worked it. Our fellows have waded through more dirty wash since Tuesday morning. . . ."

"But wait a minute," I said, puzzled. "How'd you know I was the one worked it? How'd you know that the collar was planted?"

He winked at me good-naturedly. "You held it to her mouth upside down. The cleft of the upper lip was at the bottom." He chuckled. "What was he supposed to be doing while she was kissing him—standing on his head?"

Leslie Charteris

The Green Goods Man

The Saint—that bright buccaneer, that happy highwayman—is the most ingratiating Robin Hood character of our time. Swash-buckling, exuberant, and audacious, he is in the grand tradition of Arsène Lupin and A. J. Raffles . . .

THE SECRET OF CONTENTMENT," said Simon Templar oracularly, "is to take things as they come. As is the daily office-work of the City hog in his top hat to the moments when he signs his supreme mergers, so are the bread-and-butter exploits of a pirate to his great adventures. After all, one can't always be ploughing through thrilling escapes and captures with guns popping in all directions; but there are always people who'll give you money. You don't even have to look for them. You just put on a monocle and the right expression of half-wittedness, and they come up and tip their purses into your lap."

He offered this pearl of thought for the approval of his usual audience; and it is a regrettable fact that neither of them disputed his philosophy. Patricia Holm knew him too well; and even Peter Quentin had by that time walked in the ways of Saintly lawlessness long enough to know that such pronouncements inevitably heralded another of the bread-and-

butter exploits referred to. It wasn't, of course, strictly true that Simon Templar was in need of bread and butter; but he liked jam with it, and a generous world had always provided him with both.

Benny Lucek came over from New York on a falling market to try his luck in the Old World. He had half-a-dozen natty suits which fitted him so well that he always looked as if he would have burst open from his wrists to his hips if his blood-pressure had risen two degrees; he had a selection of mauve and pink silk shirts in his wardrobe trunk, pointed and beautifully polished shoes for his feet, a pearl pin for his tie, and no less than three rings for his fingers. His features radiated honesty, candour, and good humour; and as a stock-in-trade those gifts alone were worth several figures of solid cash to him in any state of the market. Also he still had a good deal of capital, without which no Green Goods man can even begin to operate.

Benny Lucek was one of the last great exponents of that gentle graft; and although they had been telling him in New York that the game was played out, he had rosetate hopes of finding virgin soil for a new crop of successes among the benighted bourgeoisie of Europe. So far as he knew, the Green Goods ground had scarcely been touched on the eastern side of the Atlantic, and Benny had come across to look it over. He installed himself in a comfortable suite on the third floor of the Park Lane Hotel, changed his capital into English bank-notes, and sent out his feelers into space.

In the most popular Personal Columns appeared temptingly-worded advertisements of which the one that Simon Templar saw was a fair specimen.

ANY LADY or GENTLEMAN in reduced circumstances, who would be interested in an enterprise showing GREAT PROFITS for a NEGLIGIBLE RISK, should write in STRICT CONFIDENCE, giving some personal information, to Box No.—

Benny Lucek knew everything there was to know about letters. He was a practical graphologist of great astuteness, and a deductive psychologist of vast experience. Given a two-page letter which on the surface conveyed the vaguest particulars about the writer, he could build up in his mind a char-

acter study with a complete background filled in that fitted his subject without a wrinkle ninety-nine times out of a hundred; and if the mental picture he formed of a certain Mr. Tombs, whose reply to that advertisement was included among several scores of others, was one of those hundredth times, it might not have been entirely Benny's fault. Simon Templar was also a specialist in letters, although his art was creative instead of critical.

Patricia came in one morning and found him performing another creative feat at which he was no less adept.

"What on earth are you doing in those clothes?" she asked, when she had looked at him.

Simon glanced over himself in the mirror. His dark blue suit was neat but unassuming, and had a well-worn air as if it were the only one he possessed and had been cared for with desperate pride. His shoes were old and strenuously polished; his socks dark grey and woolen, carefully darned. He wore a cheap pin-striped poplin shirt, and a stiff white collar without one saving grace of line. His tie was dark blue, like his suit, and rather stringy. Across his waistcoat hung an old-fashioned silver watch-chain. Anything less like the Simon Templar of normal times, who always somehow infused into the suits of Savile Row a flamboyant personality of his own, and whose

shirts and socks and ties were the envy of the young men who drank with him in the few clubs which he belonged to, it would have been almost impossible to imagine.

"I am a hard-working clerk in an insurance office, earning three hundred a year with the dim prospect of rising to three hundred and fifty in another fifteen years, age about forty, with an anaemic wife and seven children and a semi-detached house at Streatham." He was fingering his face speculatively, staring at it in the glass. "A little too beautiful for the part at present, I think; but we'll soon put that right."

He set to work on his face with the quick unhesitating touches of which he was such an amazing master. His eyebrows, brushed in towards his nose, turned grey and bushy; his hair also turned grey, and was plastered down to his skull so skilfully that it seemed inevitable that any barber he went to would remark that he was running a little thin on top. Under the movements of his swift fingers, cunning shadows appeared at the sides of his forehead, under his eyes, and around his chin—shadows so faint that even at a yard's range their artificiality could not have been detected, and yet so cleverly placed that they seemed to change the whole shape and expression of his face. And while he worked he talked.

"If you have ever read a story-

book, Pat, in which anyone disguises himself as someone else so perfectly that the impersonated bloke's own friends and secretaries and servants are taken in, you'll know there's an author who's cheating on you. On the stage it might be done up to a point; but in real life, where everything you put on has got to get by in broad daylight and close-ups, it's impossible. I," said the Saint unblushingly, "am the greatest character actor that never went on the stage, and I know. But when it comes to inventing a new character of your own that mustn't be recognised again—then you can do things."

He turned round suddenly, and she gasped. He was perfect. His shoulders were rounded and stooping; his head was bent slightly forward, as if set in that position by years of poring over ledgers. And he gazed at her with the dumb passionless expression of his part—an under-nourished, under-exercised, middle-aged man without hopes or ambitions, permanently worried, crushed out of pleasure by the wanton taxation which goes to see that the paladins of Whitehall are never deprived of an afternoon's golf, utterly resigned to the sombre purposelessness of his existence, scraping and pinching through fifty weeks in the year in order to let himself be stodgily swindled at the seaside for a fortnight in August, solemnly discussing the antics of politicians as if

they really mattered and honestly believing that their cow-like utterances might do something to alleviate his burdens, holding a crumbling country together with his own dour stoicism and the stoicism of millions of his very own kind. . . .

"Will I do?" he asked.

From Benny Lucek's point of view he could scarcely have done better. Benny's keen eyes absorbed the whole atmosphere of him in one calculating glance that took in every detail from the grey hair that was running a little thin on top down to the strenuously polished shoes.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Tombs. Come along and have a cocktail—I expect you could do with one."

He led his guest into the sumptuous lounge, and Mr. Tombs sat down gingerly on the edge of a chair. It is impossible to refer to that man of the Saint's creation as anything but "Mr. Tombs"—the Simon Templar whom Patricia knew might never have existed inside that stoical stoop-shouldered frame.

"Er—a glass of sherry, perhaps," he said.

Benny ordered Amontillado, and knew that the only sherry Mr. Tombs had ever tasted before came from the nearest grocer. But he was an expert at putting strangers at their ease, and the Simon Templar who stood invisibly behind

Mr. Tombs's chair had to admire his technique. He chattered away with a disarming lack of condescension that presently had Mr. Tombs leaning back and chuckling with him, and ordering a return round of Amontillados with the feeling that he had at last met a successful man who really understood and appreciated him. They went in to lunch with Benny roaring with infectious laughter over a vintage Stock Exchange story which Mr. Tombs had dug out of his memory.

"Smoked salmon, Mr. Tombs? Or a spot of caviare? . . . Then we might have *oeufs en cocotte Rossini*—done in cream with *foie gras* and truffles. And roast pigeons with mushrooms and red currant jelly. I like a light meal in the middle of the day—it doesn't make you sleepy all the afternoon. And a bottle of Liebfraumilch off the ice to go with it?"

He ran through menu and wine list with an engaging expertness which somehow made Mr. Tombs an equal partner in the exercise of gastronomic virtuosity. And Mr. Tombs, whose imagination had rarely soared above roast beef and Yorkshire pudding and a bottle of Australian burgundy, thawed still further and recalled another story that had provoked howls of laughter in Threadneedle Street when he was in his twenties.

Benny did his work so well that the sordid business aspect of their

meeting never had a chance to obtrude itself during the meal; and yet he managed to find out everything he wanted to know about his guest's private life and opinions. Liquefying helplessly in the genial warmth of Benny's hospitality, Mr. Tombs became almost human. And Benny drew him on with unhurried mastery.

"I've always thought that insurance must be an interesting profession, Mr. Tombs. You've got to be pretty wide awake for it too—I expect you always have clients who expect to take more out of you than they put in?"

Mr. Tombs, who had never found his job interesting, and who would never have detected an attempted fraud unless another department had pointed it out to him, smiled noncommittally.

"That kind of mixed morality has always interested me," said Benny, as if the point had only just occurred to him. "A man who wouldn't steal a sixpence from a man he met in the street hasn't any objection to stealing half-crowns from the Government by cutting down his income-tax return or smuggling home a bottle of brandy when he comes across from France. If he's looking for a partner in business he wouldn't dream of putting a false value on his assets; but if his house is burgled he doesn't mind what value he puts on his things when he's making out his insurance claim."

Mr. Tombs shrugged.

"I suppose Governments and wealthy public companies are considered fair game," he hazarded.

"Well, probably there's a certain amount of lawlessness in the best of us," admitted Benny. "I've often wondered what I should do myself in certain circumstances. Suppose, for instance, you were going home in a taxi one night, and you found a wallet on the seat with a thousand pounds in it. Small notes that you could easily change. No name inside to show who the owner was. Wouldn't one be tempted to keep it?"

Mr. Tombs twiddled a fork, hesitating only for a second or two. But the Simon Templar who stood behind his chair knew that that was the question on which Benny Lucek's future hung—the point that had been so casually and skilfully led up to, which would finally settle whether "Mr. Tombs" was the kind of man Benny wanted to meet. And yet there was no trace of anxiety or watchfulness in Benny's frank open face. Benny tilted the last of the Liebfraumilch into Mr. Tombs's glass, and Mr. Tombs looked up.

"I suppose I should. It sounds dishonest, but I was trying to put myself in the position of being faced with the temptation, instead of theorising about it. Face to face with a thousand pounds in cash, and needing money to take my wife abroad, I might easily—er—suc-

cumb. Not that I mean to imply—”

“My dear fellow, I’m not going to blame you,” said Benny heartily. “I’d do the same thing myself. I’d reason it out that a man who carried a thousand pounds in cash about with him had plenty more in the bank. It’s the old story of fair game. We may be governed by plenty of laws, but our consciences are still very primitive when we’ve no fear of being caught.”

There was a silence after that, in which Mr. Tombs finished his last angel on horseback, mopped the plate furtively with the last scrap of toast, and accepted a cigarette from Benny’s platinum case. The pause gave him his first chance to remember that he was meeting the sympathetic Mr. Lucek in order to hear about a business proposition—as Benny intended that it should. As a waiter approached with the bill, Mr. Tombs said tentatively: “About your—um—advertisement —”

Benny scrawled his signature across the account, and pushed back his chair.

“Come up to my sitting-room and we’ll talk about it.”

They went up in the lift, with Benny unconcernedly puffing Turkish cigarette-smoke, and down an expensively carpeted corridor. Benny had an instinctive sense of dramatic values. Without saying anything, and yet at the same time without giving the impression that he was being inten-

tionally reticent, he opened the door of his suite and ushered Mr. Tombs in.

The sitting-room was small but cosily furnished. A large carelessly-opened brown-paper parcel littered the table in the centre, and there was a similar amount of litter in one of the chairs. Benny picked up an armful of it and dumped it on the floor in the corner.

“Know what these things are?” he asked off-handedly.

He took up a handful of the litter that remained on the chair and thrust it under Mr. Tombs’s nose. It was generally green in colour; as Mr. Tombs blinked at it, words and patterns took shape on it, and he blinked still harder.

“Pound Notes,” said Benny. He pointed to the pile he had dumped in the corner. “More of ‘em.” He flattened the brown paper around the carelessly-opened parcel on the table, revealing neat stacks of treasure packed in thick uniform bundles. “Any amount of it. Help yourself.”

Mr. Tombs’s blue eyes went wider and wider, with the lids blinking over them rapidly as if to dispel a hallucination.

“Are they—are they really all pound notes?”

“Every one of ‘em.”

“All yours?”

“I guess so. I made ‘em, anyway.”

“There must be thousands.”

Benny flung himself into the cleared armchair.

"I'm about the richest man in the world, Mr. Tombs," he said. "I guess I must be *the* richest, because I can make money as fast as I can turn a handle. I meant exactly what I said to you just now. I *made* those notes!"

Mr. Tombs touched the pile with his fingertips, as if he half expected them to bite him. His eyes were rounder and wider than ever.

"You don't mean—*forges*?" he whispered.

"I don't," said Benny. "Take those notes round to the nearest bank—tell the cashier you have your doubts about them—and ask him to look them over. Take 'em to the Bank of England. There isn't a forgery in the whole lot—but I made 'em! Sit down and I'll tell you."

Mr. Tombs sat down, stiffly. His eyes kept straying back to the heaps of wealth on the floor and the table, as though at each glance he would have been relieved rather than surprised if they had vanished.

"It's like this, Mr. Tombs. I'm taking you into my confidence because I've known you a couple of hours and I've made up my mind about you. I like you. Those notes, Mr. Tombs, were printed from a proof plate that was stolen out of the Bank of England itself by a fellow who worked there. He was in the engraving department, and when they were making the plates they made one more than they

needed. It was given to him to destroy—and he didn't destroy it. He was like the man we were talking about—the man in the taxi. He had a genuine plate that would print genuine pound notes, and he could keep it for himself if he wanted to. All he had to do was to make an imitation plate that no one was going to examine closely—you can't tell a lot from a plate, just looking at it—and cut a couple of lines across it to cancel it. Then that would be locked up in the vaults and probably never looked at again, and he'd have the real one. He didn't even know quite what he'd do with the plate when he had it, but he kept it. And then he got scared about it being found out, and he ran away. He went over to New York, where I come from.

"He stopped in the place I lived at, over in Brooklyn. I got to know him a bit, though he was always very quiet and seemed to have something on his mind. I didn't ask what it was, and I didn't care. Then he got pneumonia.

"Nobody else had ever paid any attention to him, so it seemed to be up to me. I did what I could for him—it didn't amount to much, but he appreciated it. I paid some of the rent he owed. The doctor found he was half starved—he'd landed in New York with just a few pounds, and when those were gone he'd lived on the leavings he could beg from chop houses. He was starving himself to death with

a million pounds in his grip! But I didn't know that then. He got worse and worse; and then they had to give him oxygen one night, but the doctor said he wouldn't see the morning anyhow. He'd starved himself till he was too weak to get well again.

"He came round just before the end, and I was with him. He just looked at me and said: 'Thanks, Benny.' And then he told me all about himself and what he'd done. 'You keep the plate,' he said. 'It may be some good to you.'

"Well, he died in the morning, and the landlady told me to hurry up and get his things out of the way as there was another lodger coming in. I took 'em off to my own room. There wasn't much; but I found the plate.

"Maybe you can imagine what it meant to me, after I'd got it all figured out. I was just an odd-job man in a garage then, earning a few dollars a week. I was the man in the taxi again. But I had a few dollars saved up: I'd have to find the right paper, and get the notes printed—I didn't know anything about the technical side of it. It'd cost money; but if it went through all right that poor fellow's legacy would make me a millionaire. He'd starved to death because he was too scared to try it; had I got the guts?"

Benny Lucek closed his eyes momentarily, as if he were reliving the struggle with his conscience.

"You can see for yourself which way I decided," he said. "It took time and patience, but it was still the quickest way of making a million I'd ever heard of. That was six years ago. I don't know how much money I've got in the bank now, but I know it's more than I can ever spend. And it was like that all of three years ago.

"And then I started thinking about the other people who needed money, and I began to square my conscience by helping them. I was working over in the States then, of course, changing this English money in small packets at banks all over the continent. And I started giving it away—charities, down-and-outs, any good thing I could think of. That was all right so far as it went. But then I started thinking, that fellow who gave me the plate was English, and some of the money ought to go back to people in England who needed it. That's why I came across. Did I tell you that fellow left a wife behind when he ran away? It took me two months to find her, with the best agents I could buy; but I located her at last serving in a tea-shop, and now I've set her on her feet for life, though she thinks it was an uncle she never had who died and left her the money. But if I can find any other fellow whose wife needs some money he can't earn for her," said Benny nobly, "I want to help him too."

Mr. Tombs swallowed. Benny

Lucek was a master of elocution among his other talents, and the manner of his recital was calculated to bring a lump into the throat of an impressionable listener.

"Would you like some money, Mr. Tombs?" he inquired.

Mr. Tombs coughed.

"I—er—well—I can't quite get over the story you've told me."

He picked up a handful of the notes, peered at them minutely, screwed them in his fingers, and put them down again rather abruptly and experimentally, as if he were trying to discover whether putting temptation from him would bring a glow of conscious virtue that would compensate for the worldly loss. Apparently the experiment was not very satisfactory. His mouth puckered.

"You've told me all about yourself," said Benny, "and about your wife being delicate and needing to go away for a long sea voyage. I expect there's trouble about getting your children a proper education that you haven't mentioned at all. You're welcome to put all that right. You can buy just as many of those notes as you like, and twenty pounds per hundred is the price to you. That's exactly what they cost me in getting the special paper and inks and having them printed—the man I found to print 'em for me gets a big rake-off, of course. Four shillings each is the cost price, and you can make yourself a millionaire if you want to."

Mr. Tombs gulped audibly.

"You're—you're not pulling my leg, are you?" he stammered pathetically.

"Of course I'm not. I'm glad to do it." Benny stood up and placed one hand affectionately on Mr. Tombs's shoulders. "Look here, I know all this must have been a shock to you. Why don't you go away and think it over? Come and have lunch with me again tomorrow, if you want some of these notes, and bring the money with you to pay for them. Call me at seven o'clock and let me know if I'm to expect you." He picked up a small handful of money and stuffed it into Mr. Tombs's pocket. "Here—take some samples with you and try them on a bank, just in case you still can't believe it."

Mr. Tombs nodded, blinking.

"I'm the man in the taxi again," he said with a weak smile. "When you really do find the wallet—"

"Who loses by it?" asked Benny, "The Bank of England, eventually. I never learnt any economics, but I suppose they'll have to meet the bill. But are they going to be any the worse off for the few thousands you'll take out of them? Why, it won't mean any more to them than a penny does to you now. Think it over."

"I will," said Mr. Tombs, with a last lingering stare at the littered table.

"There's just one other thing," said Benny. "Not a word of what

I've told you to any living soul—not even to your wife. I'm trusting you to treat it as confidentially as you'd treat anything in your insurance business. You can see why, can' you? A story like I've told you would spread like wildfire, and once it got to the Bank of England there'd be no more money in it. They'd change the design of their notes and call in all the old ones as quick as I can say it."

"I understand, Mr. Lucek," said Mr. Tombs.

He understood perfectly—so well that the rapturous tale he told to Patricia Holm when he returned was almost incoherent. He told her while he was removing his make-up and changing back into his ordinary clothes; and when he had finished he was as immaculate and debonair as she had ever seen him. And finally he smoothed out the notes that Benny had given him at parting, and stowed them carefully in his wallet. He looked at his watch.

"Let's go and look at a non-stop show, darling," he said, "and then we'll buy a pailful of caviare between us and swill it down with a gallon of Cordon Rouge. Brother Benjamin will pay!"

"But are you sure these notes are perfect?" she asked; and the Saint laughed.

"My sweetheart, every one of those notes was printed by the Bank of England itself. The Green Goods game is nothing like that;

though I've often wondered why it hasn't been worked before in this—*Gott in Himmel!*"

Simon Templar suddenly leapt into the air with a yell; and the startled girl stared at him.

"What in the name of—"

"Just an idea," explained the Saint. "They sometimes take me in the seat of the pants like that. This is rather a beauty."

He swept her off boisterously to the promised celebrations without telling her what the idea was that had made him spring like a young ram with loud foreign oaths; but at seven o'clock punctually he found time to telephone the Park Lane Hotel.

"I'm going to do what the man in the taxi would do, Mr. Lucek," he said.

"Well, Mr. Tombs, that's splendid news," responded Benny. "I'll expect you at one. By the way, how much will you be taking?"

"I'm afraid I can only manage to—um—raise three hundred pounds. That will buy fifteen hundred pounds' worth, won't it?"

"I'll make it two thousand pounds' worth to you, Mr. Tombs," said Benny generously. "I'll have it all ready for you when you come."

Mr. Tombs presented himself at five minutes to one, and although he wore the same suit of clothes as he had worn the previous day, there was a festive air about him to which a brand-new pair of white kid gloves and a carnation in his

buttonhole colourfully contributed.

"I handed in my resignation at the office this morning," he said, "And I hope I never see the place again."

Benny was congratulatory but apologetic.

"I'm afraid we shall have to postpone our lunch," he said. "I've been investigating a lady who also answered my advertisement—a poor old widow living up in Derbyshire. Her husband deserted her twenty years ago; and her only son, who's been keeping her ever since, was killed in a motor accident yesterday. It seems as if she needs a fairy godfather quickly, and I'm going to dash up to Derbyshire in a special train and see what I can do."

Mr. Tombs suppressed a perfunctory tear, and accompanied Benny to his suite. A couple of well-worn suitcases and a wardrobe trunk the size of a suburban villa, all ready stacked up and labelled, confirmed Benny's avowed intentions. Only one of the parcels of currency was visible, pushed untidily to one end of the table.

"Did you bring the money, Mr. Tombs?"

Mr. Tombs took out his battered wallet and drew forth a sheaf of crisp new fivers with slightly unsteady hands. Benny took them, glanced over them casually, and dropped them on to the table with the carelessness befitting a millionaire. He waved Mr. Tombs into an

armchair with his back to the window, and himself sat down in a chair drawn up to the opposite side of the table.

"Two thousand one-pound notes are quite a lot to put in your pocket," he remarked. "I'll make them up into a parcel for you."

Under Mr. Tombs's yearning eyes he flipped off the four top bundles from the pile and tossed them one by one into his guest's lap. Mr. Tombs grabbed them and examined them hungrily, spraying the edges of each pack off his thumb so that pound notes whirred before his vision.

"You can count them if you like—there ought to be five hundred in each pack," said Benny; but Mr. Tombs shook his head.

"I'll take your word for it, Mr. Lucek. I can see they're all one-pound notes, and there must be a lot of them."

Benny smiled and held out his hand with a businesslike air. Mr. Tombs passed the bundles back to him, and Benny sat down again and arranged them in a neat cube on top of a sheet of brown paper. He turned the paper over the top and creased it down at the open ends with a rapid efficiency that would have done credit to any professional shop assistant; and Mr. Tombs's covetous eyes watched every movement with the intentness of a dumb but earnest audience trying to spot how a conjuring trick is done.

"Don't you think it would be a ghastly tragedy for a poor widow who put all her savings into these notes and then found that she had been—um—deceived?" said Mr. Tombs morbidly; and Benny's dark eyes switched up to his face in sudden startlement.

"Eh?" said Benny. "What's that?"

But Mr. Tombs's careworn face had the innocence of a patient sheep's.

"Just something I was thinking, Mr. Lucek," he said.

Benny grinned his expansive display of pearly teeth, and continued with his packing. Mr. Tombs's gaze continued to concentrate on him with an almost mesmeric effect; but Benny was not disturbed. He had spent nearly an hour that morning making and testing his preparations. The upper sashcords of the window behind Mr. Tombs's chair had been cut through all but the last thread, and the weight of the sash was carried on a small steel peg driven into the frame. From the steel peg a thin but very strong dark-coloured string ran down to the floor, pulleyed round a nail driven into the base of the wainscoting, and disappeared under the carpet; it pulleyed round another nail driven into the floor under the table, and came up through a hole in the carpet alongside one leg to loop conveniently over the handle of the drawer.

Benny completed the knots

around his parcel, and searched around for something to trim off the loose ends.

"There you are, Mr. Tombs," he said; and then, in his fumbling, he caught the convenient loop of string and tugged at it. The window fell with a crash.

And Mr. Tombs did not look round.

It was the most flabbergasting thing that had ever happened in Benny Lucek's experience. It was supernatural—incredible. It was a phenomenon so astounding that Benny's mouth fell open involuntarily while a balloon of incredulous stupefaction bulged up in the pit of his stomach and cramped his lungs. There came over him the feeling of preposterous injury that would have assailed a practised bus-jumper who, preparing to board a moving bus as it came by, saw it evade him by rising vertically into the air and soaring away over the house-tops. It was simply one of the things that did not happen.

And on this fantastic occasion it had happened. In the half-opened drawer that pressed against Benny's tummy, just below the level of the table and out of range of Mr. Tombs's glassy stare, was another brown-paper parcel exactly similar in every respect to the one which Benny was finishing off. Outwardly, that is. Inside, there was a difference; for whereas inside the parcel which Benny had prepared before

Mr. Tombs's eyes there were undoubtedly two thousand authentic one-pound notes, inside the second parcel there was only a collection of old newspapers and magazines cut to precisely the same size. And never before in Benny's career, once the fish had taken the hook, had those two parcels failed to be successfully exchanged. That was what the providentially falling window was arranged for, and it constituted the whole simple secret of the Green Goods game. The victim, when he got home and opened the parcel and discovered how he had been swindled, could not make a complaint to the police without admitting that he himself had been ready to aid and abet a fraud; and forty-nine times out of fifty he would decide that it was better to stand his loss and keep quiet about it. Elementary, but effective. And yet the whole structure could be scuppered by the unbelievable apathy of a victim who failed to react to the stimulus of a loud bang as any normal human being should have reacted.

"The—the window seems to have fallen down," Benny pointed out hoarsely; and felt like a hero of a melodrama who has just shot the villain in the appointed place at the end of the third act, and sees him smilingly declining to fall down and die according to the rehearsed script.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Tombs cordially. "I heard it."

"The—the sash cords must have broken."

"Probably that's what it was."

"Funny thing to happen so—so suddenly, wasn't it?"

"Very funny," assented Mr. Tombs, keeping up the conversation politely.

Benny began to sweat. The substitute parcel was within six inches of his hovering hands; given only two seconds with the rapt stare of those unblinking eyes diverted from him, he could have rung the changes as easily as unbuttoning his shirt; but the chance was not given. It was an impasse that he had never even dreamed of, and the necessity of thinking up something to cope with it on the spur of the moment stampeded him to the borders of panic.

"Have you got a knife?" asked Benny, with perspiring heartiness. "Something to cut off this end of string?"

"Let me break it for you," said Mr. Tombs.

He stood up and moved towards the table; and Benny shied like a horse.

"Don't bother, please, Mr. Tombs," he gulped. "I'll—I'll—"

"No trouble at all," said Mr. Tombs.

Benny grabbed the parcel, and dropped it. He was a very fine strategist and dramatic reciter, but he was not a man of violence—otherwise he might have been tempted to act differently. That

grab and drop was the last artifice he could think of to save the day.

He pushed his chair back and bent down, groping for the fallen parcel with one hand and the substitute parcel with the other. In raising the fallen packet past the table the exchange might be made.

His left hand found the parcel on the floor. His right hand went on groping. It ran up and down the drawer, sensitively at first, then frantically. It plunged backwards and forwards. His fingernails scabbled on the wood. . . . He became aware he couldn't stay in that position indefinitely, and began to straighten up slowly, with a cold sensation closing on his heart. And as his eyes came up to the level of the drawer he saw that the dummy parcel had somehow got pushed right away to the back: for all the use it would have been to him there it might have been in the middle of the Arizona desert.

Mr. Tombs was smiling blandly.

"It's quite easy, really," he said.

He took the parcel from Benny's nerveless hand, put it on the table, twisted the loose end of string round his forefinger, and jerked. It snapped off clean and short.

"A little trick of mine," said Mr. Tombs chattily. He picked up the parcel and held out his hand. "Well, Mr. Lucek, you must know how grateful I am. You mustn't let me keep you any longer from your—um—widow. Good-by, Mr. Lucek."

He wrung Benny Lucek's limp fingers effusively, and retired towards the door. There was something almost sprightly in his gait, a twinkle in his blue eyes that had certainly not been there before, a seraphic benevolence about his smile that made Benny go hot and cold. It didn't belong to Mr. Tombs of the insurance office. . . .

"Hey—just a minute!" gasped Benny; but the door had closed. Benny jumped up. "Hey, you—"

He flung open the door, and looked into the cherubic pink full-moon face of a very large gentleman in a superfluous overcoat and a bowler hat who stood on the threshold.

"Morning, Mr. Lucek," said the large gentleman sedately. "May I come in?"

He took the permission for granted, and advanced into the sitting-room. The parcel on the table attracted his attention first, and he took up a couple of bundles from the stack and looked them over. Only the top notes in each bundle were genuine pound notes, as the four whole bundles which departed with Mr. Tombs had been: the rest of the thickness was made up with sheets of paper cut to the same size.

"Very interesting," remarked the large gentleman.

"Who the devil are you?" blustered Benny; and the round rosy face turned to him with a very sudden and authoritative directness.

"I am Chief Inspector Teal, of Scotland Yard, and I have information that you are in possession of quantities of forged banknotes."

Benny drew breath again hesitantly.

"That's absurd, Mr. Teal. You won't find any phony stuff here," he said; and then the detective's

cherubic gaze fell on the sheaf of five-pound notes that Mr. Tombs had left behind in payment.

He picked them up and examined them carefully, one by one.

"H'm—and not very good forgeries, either," he said, and called to the sergeant who was waiting in the corridor outside.

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Anthony Boucher

A Matter of Scholarship

Anthony Boucher, mystery critic of "The New York Times" and "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine," has experimented successfully with nearly every type of writing, and surely with every length. He has written the full-length novel, the novella or novellette, the short story, and the so-called short-short. Then one day Mr. Boucher happened to hear us say: We wonder what kind of crime story could be written in about 500 words . . . and Mr. Boucher promptly accepted the challenge. Here it is, surprisingly full-bodied—what might be called the short short-short—and surprisingly subtle too.

No scholar can pretend to absolute completeness, but every scholarly work must be as nearly complete as possible; any omission of available data because of carelessness, inadequate research, or (most damning of all) personal motives—such as the support of a theory which the data might contradict—is the blackest sin again scholarship itself . . .

Such were my thoughts as I sat working on my definitive MURDEROUS TENDENCIES IN THE ABNORMALLY GIFTED: A STUDY OF THE HOMICIDES COMMITTED BY ARTISTS AND SCHOLARS. The date was October 21, 1951. The place was my office in Wortley Hall on the campus of the University.

My conclusions seemed unassailable: Murder had been committed by eminent scholars (one need only allude to Professor Webster of

Harvard) and by admirable artists (François Villon leaps first to the mind). But in no case had the motivation been connected with the abnormal gift; my study of the relationship between homicidal tendencies and unusual endowments established, in the best scholarly tradition, that no such relationship existed.

It was then that Stuart Danvers entered my office. "Professor Jordan?" he asked. His speech was blurred and he swayed slightly. "I read your piece in the *Atlantic* on Villon [it sounded like *villain*] and I said to myself, 'There's the guy to help you.'" And before I could speak he had placed a large type-written manuscript on my desk. "Understand," he went on, "I'm no novice at this. I'm a pro. I've sold fact-crime pieces to all the top editors." He hiccuped. "Only now it

strikes me it's time for a little hard-cover prestige."

I stared at the title page, which read *GENIUS IN GORE*, and then began flipping through the book. The theme was my own. The style was lurid, the documentation inadequate. He had taken seriously the pretensions to learning of such frauds as Aram and Rulloff; he had omitted such a key figure as the composer Gesualdo da Venosa. But I had read enough in the field to know that his abominable work was what is called "commercial." He would have no trouble in finding a publisher immediately; and my own book was scheduled by the University Press for, at best, "some time" in 1953.

"Little nip?" he suggested, and as I shook my head he drank from his flask. "Like it? Thought maybe you could help—well, sort of goose it with a couple of literary footnotes . . . you know."

I looked at this drunken, unscholarly lout. I saw myself eclipsed in his shadow, the merest epigone to his attack upon my chosen Thebes. And then he said, "Of course that's

just a rough first draft, you understand."

"Do you keep a carbon of first drafts?" I asked idly. And when he shook his addled skull, I split that skull's forehead with my heavy paperweight. He stumbled back against the wall, lurched forward, and then collapsed. His head struck the desk. I tucked his obscene manuscript away, wrapped the paperweight in a handkerchief, carried it down the hall, washed it, flushed the handkerchief down the toilet, returned to my room, and called the police. A stranger had wandered into my office drunk, stumbled, and cracked his head against my desk.

The crime, if such it can be considered, was as nearly perfect as any of which I have knowledge. It is also unique in being the only instance of a crime committed by an eminent scholar which was *motivated* by his scholarship . . .

[*Excerpt from MURDEROUS TENDENCIES IN THE ABNORMALLY GIFTED (University Press, 1953), State's Exhibit A in the trial for murder of the late Professor Rodney Jordan.*]



Charlotte Armstrong

The Hedge Between

How teenage Meredith Lee solved a seven-year-old murder in just four days—her own, her very own, mystery since she was almost an eyewitness . . . a fascinating novelette . . .

THE MAN NAMED RUSSELL, WHO happened to be a lawyer, sat full in the light of a solitary lamp. It shone upon the brown-covered composition book in his hands. A man named John Selby, a merchant in the small city, was seated in a low chair. He hung his head; his face was hidden; the light washed only his trembling head and the nervous struggle of his fingers. The Chief of Police, Barker, was seated in half shadow. And Doctor Coles loomed against the wall beside a white door that was ajar. It was 1:00 o'clock in the morning.

Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief

“Well?” the Chief challenged. “Okay, Russell. You’re smart, as Selby says you are. You come running when you’re called, listen to five minutes’ talk about this kid, and you predict there’s got to be some such notebook around. Well? Now you’ve found it, why don’t you see what it says?”

“I’m waiting for a direction,” said the lawyer mildly. “It’s not for me to turn this cover. Look at the big black letters. *Meredith Lee.*

Personal and Private. It’s not up to me to violate her privacy. But Selby’s her kin. Coles is her doctor. And you are law and order in this town.”

The doctor turned his head suddenly to the crack of the door.

“Any change?” the Chief asked eagerly.

“No. She’s still unconscious. Go ahead, Russell. Don’t be squeamish. She’s a child, after all.”

“See if there’s anything helpful in there,” the chief of police said. “See if that notebook can explain . . .”

“Explains,” the lawyer mused, “how a fifteen-year-old girl solved a seven-year-old murder mystery in four days . . .”

“She didn’t solve it all the way,” said the Chief impatiently.

Russell ignored him. “What do you say, Selby? She’s your niece. Shall we read her private notebook?”

Selby’s hands came palms up, briefly. The policeman spoke again, “Read it. I intend to, if you don’t. I’ve got to get the straight of it. My prisoner won’t talk.”

The doctor said, "After all, it may be best for the girl."

Russell said dryly, "I'm just as curious as the rest of you." He opened the book and began to read aloud.

Meredith Lee. New Notes and Jottings.

July 23rd.

Here I am at Uncle John's. The family has dumped me for two weeks while they go to New York. I don't complain. It is impossible for me to get bored, since I can always study human nature.

Uncle John looks much the same. Gray hairs show. He's thirty-seven. Why didn't he marry? Mama says he's practicing to stuff a shirt. He was very Uncle-ish and hearty when I got dumped last night, but he actually has no idea what to do with me, except tell the servants to keep me clean and fed. It's a good thing I've got resources.

Russell looked up. The Chief was chewing his lip. The doctor was frankly smiling. John Selby said, painfully, "She's right about that. Fool that I was . . . I *didn't* know what to do with her." His head rolled in his hands.

"Go on," the Chief prodded.

Russell continued reading.

Went to the neighborhood drug store, first thing. Snooped

down the street. I'd forgotten it, but my goodness, it's typical. Very settled. Not swank. Not poor, either. Very middle. No logic to that phrase. A thing can't be *very* middle, but it says what I feel. On the way home, a Discovery! There's a whopping big hedge between Uncle John's house and the house next door. The neighbor woman was out messing in her flower beds. Description: petite. Dark hair, with silver. Skillfully made up. Effect quite young. (N.B. Ooooh, what a bad paragraph! Choppy!)

So, filled with curiosity, I leaned over her gate and introduced myself. She's a Discovery! She's a Wicked Widow and she's *forbidden!* I didn't know that.

(N.B. Practice remembering dialogue accurately.)

Wicked Widow: Mr. Selby's niece, of course. I remember you, my dear. You were here as a little girl, weren't you? Wasn't the last time about seven years ago?

Meredith Lee: Yes, it was. But I don't remember you.

W.W.: Don't you? I am Josephine Corcoran. How old were you then, Meredith?

M.L.: Only eight.

W.W.: Only eight?

We came to a stop. I wasn't going to repeat. That's a horrible speech habit. You can waste hours trying to communicate. So I looked around and remembered something.

M.L.: I see my tree house has disintegrated.

W.W.: Your tree house? (N.B. She repeated everything I said, and with a question mark. Careless habit? Or just pace?) Oh, yes, of course. In that big maple, wasn't it?

M.L.: Mr. Jewell—you know, Uncle John's gardener?—he built it for me. I had a cot up there and a play ice-box and a million cushions. I wouldn't come down.

W.W.: Wouldn't come down? Yes, I remember. Eight years old and your Uncle used to let you spend the night—(N.B. She looked scared. Why? If I'd fallen out and killed myself seven years ago, I wouldn't be talking to her. Elders worry retroactively.)

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John had nothing to do with it. Mama's rational. She knew it was safe. Railings. And I always pulled up my rope ladder. Nobody could get up, or get me down without a lot of trouble. I was a tomboy in those days.

W.W.: Tomboy? Yes, seven years is a long time. (N.B. No snicker. She looked serious and thoughtful, just standing with the trowel in her hand, not even smiling. That's when I got the feeling I could really communicate and it's very unusual. She must be thirty. I get that feeling with really old people or people about eighteen, sometimes. But people in between, and especially

thirty, usually act like Uncle John.)

Now I forget . . . her dialogue wasn't so sparkling, I guess, but she was understanding. Did I know any young people? I said No, and she politely hoped I wouldn't be lonely. I explained that I hoped to be a Writer, so I would probably always be lonely. And she said she supposed that was true. I liked that. It's not so often somebody listens. And while she may have looked surprised at a new thought, she didn't look *amused*. My object in life is not to *amuse*, and I get tired of those smiles. So I liked her.

But then, at dinner time, just as soon as I'd said I'd met her, she got forbidden.

Uncle John: (clearing his throat) Meredith, I don't think you had better . . . (He stuck. He sticks a lot.)

M.L.: Better what?

Uncle John: Er . . . (N.B. *English* spelling. Americans say uh. I am an American.) Uh . . . Mrs. Corcoran and I are not . . . uh . . . especially friendly and I'd rather you didn't . . . (Stuck again)

M.L.: Why not? Are you feuding?

Uncle John: No, no. I merely . . .

M.L.: Merely what? I think she's very nice.

Uncle John: Uh . . . (very

stuffy) . . . You are hardly in a position to know anything about it. I'm afraid she is not the kind of woman your mother would

• • •

M.L.: What kind is she? (You have to really pry at Uncle John.)

Uncle John: (finally) Not socially acceptable.

M.L.: What! Oh, for heaven's sakes, Uncle John! That's the stuffiest thing I *ever* heard! Why?

Uncle John: It's not stuffy, Meredith, and it's not easy to explain why. (Looks at me as if he wonders whether I understand English.) Maybe, if you knew that there was a strange business, years ago . . . Her husband was . . . uh . . . shot in rather mysterious circum. . . .

M.L.: Shot! Do you mean killed? Do you mean *murdered*? Really? Oh, boy! How? When? Who did it? What happened?

Now, why did Uncle John act so surprised? Did he think I'd be scared? Don't people who are thirty ever remember how they didn't used to be *scared* by interesting things? But he *was* surprised and also very sticky and stuffy for a while. But I kept prying.

And I think it's just pitiful. I don't know why Uncle John can't see how pitiful it is. Poor Mrs. Corcoran. Her husband came home late one night and as he was standing at his own front door, somebody shot him from

behind. They found the gun but nothing else. He wasn't robbed. It's just a mystery. So, just because it is a mystery and nobody knows, they've treated her as if she were a murderess! I can just see how it's been and I'm ashamed of Uncle John. He sure is practicing to stuff a shirt. He lets the hedge grow, and he goes along with the stupid town. It sounds as if nobody has accepted her socially ever since. Fine thing! She is supposed to be a wicked widow, just because her husband got murdered by person or persons unknown. Probably the town thinks such a thing couldn't happen to a respectable person. But it *could*. I'm very sorry for her.

The thing I'm saving for the bottom of this page is—it's my murder! I got that out of Uncle John. What do you know! What do you know! *I* was in my tree house that very night!

I'm just faintly remembering how I got whisked out of here so fast, that time. I never did know why. Holy cats! Eight years old. I'm asleep in a tree and a murder takes place right under me! And I never even knew it! They didn't tell me! They didn't even ask me a single question! A fine thing! A real murder in my own life, and I can't remember even one thing about it!

The lawyer paused. The doctor

stirred, looked through the door. Three raised heads queried him. He said, "Nothing. It may be a good while yet before she is conscious. Don't . . . worry."

Selby turned to stare blindly at the lamp. "My sister should never—should never have left her with me. I had no business—no business to tell her a word about it."

"You thought she'd be scared away from the widow?"

"I suppose so."

The Chief said, "Now, wait a minute. The girl puts down in there that she *couldn't remember even one thing* about the killing? But that makes no sense at all."

"That's the July twenty-third entry," said Russell. "Here is July twenty-fifth. Let's see."

I couldn't stand it—I just can't think about anything else but my murder. I had to find out more. This afternoon I had tea with the widow. I don't think she's wicked at all. She's very sad, actually. She was in the garden again. I just know she was conscious of me, on Uncle John's side of the hedge, all day yesterday. Today, finally, she spoke to me. So I went around and leeches onto her.

(N.B. Practice getting the "sais" in)

Nervously, she said, "I hope your Uncle won't be angry."

I said, pretending to blurt, "Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, Uncle John

told me about the awful thing that happened to your husband. And to think I was right up in my tree house. I can't stop thinking about it."

"Don't think about it," she said, looking pretty tense. "It was long ago, and there is no need. I'm sorry he spoke of it."

"Oh, I made him," said I. "And now when I think that for all I know, I might have seen and heard exactly what happened, and the only trouble is, I was so little, I can't *remember*—it just about makes me wild!"

She looked at me in a funny way. I thought she was going to blurt, "Oh, if only you could remember . . ." But actually, she said, "If you would like more cake please help yourself."

"It's too bad it's a mystery," I said (cried). "Why couldn't they solve it? Don't you wish they could solve it? Maybe it's not too late."

She looked startled. (N.B. What happens to eyes, anyhow, to make the whites show more? Observe.)

"I wish you would tell me the details," I said. "Couldn't they find out *anything*?"

"No, no. My dear, I don't think we had better talk about it at all. It's not the sort of thing a sweet child ought to be brooding about," she said.

I was desperate. "Mrs. Corcoran, the other day I thought bet-

ter of you. Because you didn't laugh, for instance, when I mentioned that I used to be a tomboy, years ago. Most older people would have laughed. I'll never understand why. Obviously, I'm quite different and seven years has made a big change, and why it's so *funny* if I *know* that, I cannot see." She was leaning back and feeling surprised, I judged. "So don't disappoint me, now, and think of me as an eight-year-old child," I said, "when I may have the freshest eye and be the open-mindedest person around."

She nibbled her lips. She wasn't offended. I think she's very intelligent and responding.

"I'm *going* to brood and you can't stop that," I told her. "I just wish I could help. I've been thinking that maybe if I tried I *could* remember."

"Oh, no. No, my dear. Thank you," she said. "I know you would like to help. But you were only eight at that time. I don't suppose, then or now, anyone would believe you."

"And now I'm *only* fifteen," I said crossly, "and nobody will *tell* me."

She said sweetly, "You're rather an extraordinary fifteen, my dear. If I tell you about it, Meredith, and you see how hopeless it is, do you think perhaps then you can let it rest?"

I said I thought so (What a lie!)

"Harry, my husband, was often late getting home, so that night," she said, "I wasn't at all worried. I simply went to bed, as usual, and to sleep. Something woke me. I don't know what. My window was open. It was very warm, full summer. I lay in my bed, listening. There used to be a big elm out there beside my walk. It got the disease all the elms are getting, and it had to be cut down and taken away. But that night I could see its leaf patterns on the wall, that the moon always used to make at night, and the leaves moving gently. There was a full moon, I remember. A lovely quiet summer night." (N.B. She's pretty good with a mood.)

"I had been awakened, yet I could hear nothing, until I heard the shot. It paralyzed me. I lay back stiff and scared. Harry didn't . . . cry out. I heard nothing more for a while. Then I thought I heard shrubs rustling. When I finally pulled myself to the window, your Uncle John was there." She stopped and I had to poke her up to go on.

"Your Uncle was forcing his way through the hedge, which was low, then. And I saw Harry lying on our little stoop. I ran to my bedroom door and my maid was standing in the hall, quite frightened, and we ran down. Your Uncle told me that Harry was . . . not alive. (N.B. Pretty

delicate diction.) He was calling the doctor and the police from my phone. I sat down trembling on a chair in the hall. I remember, now, that as your Uncle started out of the house again, he seemed to recall where you were and went running to his garage for a ladder to get you down."

"Darn it," I said.

She knew what I meant, because she said right away, "You couldn't remember—you must have been sleepy. Perhaps you didn't really wake up."

"I suppose so," said I disgustedly. "Go on."

"Well, the police came very quickly—Chief Barker himself. And of course, Doctor Coles. They did find the gun, caught in the hedge. They never traced it. There weren't any fingerprints anywhere. And no footprints in that dry weather. So they never found out . . ." She pulled herself together. "And that, my dear, is all." She started drinking her tea, looking very severe with herself.

I said, "There never was a trial?"

"There was never anyone to try."

"Not you, Mrs. Corcoran?"

"No one accused me," she said, smiling faintly. But her eyes were so sad.

"They did, though," I said, kind of mad. "They sentenced you, too."

"Dear girl," she said very seriously, "You mustn't make a heroine of me. Chief Barker and Doctor Coles . . . and your Uncle John, too, I'm sure . . . tried as helpfully as they could to clear it all up, but they never could find out who, or even why. You see? So . . ." She was getting flustered.

"So the wind begins to blow against you," I said, mad as the dickens. "Or how come the hedge? Why does Uncle John tell me not to come here? What makes him think you're so wicked?"

"Does he?" she said, "I am not wicked, Meredith. Neither am I a saint. I'm human."

I always thought that was a corny saying. But it's effective. It makes you feel for whoever says it, as if they had admitted something just awful that you wouldn't admit, either—unless, of course, you were *trapped*.

"Harry and I were not always harmonious," she said. "Few couples are. He drank a good bit. Many men do. I suppose the neighbors noticed. Some of them, in fact, used to feel quite sorry for me. I . . ." Her face was real bitter, but she has a quick hunching way of pulling herself together. ". . . shouldn't be saying these things to you. Why do I forget you are so young? I shouldn't. Forgive me, and don't be upset."

"Not me," I told her. "I'm pretty detached. And don't for-

get my eye is fresh. I can see the trouble. There isn't anybody else to suspect. You need . . ."

"No, no. No more. I had no right to talk to you. And you'd better not come again. It is not I, my dear. I like you very much. I would love to see you often. But—"

I said, "I think Uncle John is a stuffy old stinker. To bend the way the wind blows. But *I* don't have to!"

"Yes, you do," she said, kind of fixing me with her eye. "It's not nice, Meredith, to be this side of the hedge. Now, please, never question your Uncle John's behavior." She was getting very upset. "You must . . . truly, you must . . . believe me . . . when I say . . . I think he meant . . . to be very kind . . . at that time." She spaced it like that, taking breaths in between.

"But that mean old hedge, for the whole town to see. It makes me mad!" I said.

She fixed me, again. She said very fast almost like whispering, "Perhaps it was I, Meredith, who let the hedge grow."

Naturally, my mouth opened, but before I got anything out she said, loudly, "It was best. There, now . . ."

(N.B. Yep. I was really disappointed. How I hate it when people say, "There, now." Implying that they know a million things more than me. And I better be

comforted. I'm *not*. I'm irritated. It means they want to stop talking to me, and that's all.)

"It's all so old," she continued in that phony petting-the-kitty kind of way. "And nothing will change it. Let it rest. Thank you for coming and thank you for being openminded. But go away now, Meredith, and promise me not to think about it any more."

I fixed her with *my* eye. I said, "Thank you very much for the lovely cake."

But I'm not angry. I feel too sorry for her. Besides, she let out hints enough and I should have caught on. Well, I didn't, then. But after the session I had with Uncle John . . . *Are they ever dumb!*

We had finished dinner when I decided to see what more I could pry out of *him*. I said, "If Harry Corcoran was a drinking man he was probably drunk the night he got shot."

Uncle John nearly knocked his coffee over. "How do you know he was a drinking man?" roared he. "Have you been gossiping with Mrs. Jewell?" (Mrs. Jewell is the housekeeper. Vocabulary about one hundred words.)

"Oh, no, I haven't. Was he?"

"Who?"

"Harry Corcoran?"

"What?"

"Drunk?"

"So they say," bites Uncle John, cracking his teeth together,

"Now, Meredith—"

"Where were you at the time of the murder?" chirped I.

(N.B. Nope. Got to learn to use the "saids." They're neutraller.)

"Meredith, I wish you—"

"I know what you wish, but I wish you'd tell me. Aw, come on, Uncle John. My own murder! Maybe if I had all the facts, I'd stop thinking so much about it. Don't you see that?"

(N.B. False. The more you know about anything the more interesting it gets. But he didn't notice.)

"I told you the facts," he said (muttered?), "and I wish I had kept my big mouth shut. Your mother will skin me alive. How the devil did I get into this?"

(N.B. I thought this was an improvement. He's usually so darned stuffy when he talks to me.)

"You didn't tell me any details. Please, Uncle John . . ." I really nagged him. I don't think he's had much practice defending himself, because finally, stuffy as anything, he talked.

"Very well. I'll tell you the details as far as I know them. Then I shall expect to hear no more about it."

"I know," said I. True. I knew what he *expected*. I didn't really promise anything. But he's not very analytical. "Okay. Pretend you're on the witness stand.

Where were you at the time?"

"I was, as it happened . . . (N.B. Stuffy! Phrase adds nothing. Of course it happened.) . . . in the library that night working late on some accounts. It was nearly 1:00 in the morning, I believe . . . (N.B. Of course he believes, or he wouldn't say so) . . . when I heard Harry Corcoran whistling as he walked by in the street."

"What tune?"

"What?" (I started to repeat but he didn't need it. Lots of people make you repeat a question they heard quite well just so they can take a minute to figure out the answer.) "Oh, that Danny Boy song. Favorite of his. That's how I knew who it was. He was coming along from the end of town, past this house—"

"Was that usual?"

"It was neither usual nor unusual," said Uncle John crossly, "It's merely a detail."

"Okay. Go on."

"The next thing I noticed was the shot."

"You were paralyzed?"

"What?" He just about glared at me. "Yes, momentarily. Then I ran out my side door and pushed through the hedge and found him on his own doorstep . . . uh . . ."

"Not living," I said delicately.

He gave me another nasty look. "Now, that's all there was to it."

"That's not all! What did you do then? Didn't you even look for the murderer?"

"I saw nobody around. I realized there might be somebody concealed, of course. So I picked up his key from where it had fallen on the stoop—"

"The Corcorans' door was locked?"

"It was locked and I unlocked it and went inside to the phone. As I was phoning, Mrs. Corcoran and her maid came downstairs. I called Chief Barker and Doctor Coles."

"Yes, I know. And then you ran to get the ladder and pulled me down out of my tree. Okay. But you're leaving things out, Uncle John. You are deliberately being barren. You don't give any atmosphere at all. What was Mrs. Corcoran's emotional state?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Uncle John with his nose in a sniffing position, "and if I had, it would not be a fact."

I pounced. "You think she did it?"

He pulled his chin practically to the back of his neck. "I wish you would not say that. I have little right to speculate and none to make a judgement. There was no evidence."

"But you did pass judgment. You told me she was a certain kind of—"

"Meredith, I know only one fact. Your mother would not like

this at all. In any case, I will not discuss Mrs. Corcoran's character with you. I must insist you take my word for it. There is no way. . . ." He kind of held his forehead.

"Uncle John, who let the hedge grow?"

"What? The hedge belongs to me."

"That ain't the way I heered it," said stupid I.

So *he* pounced. "Where have you been hearing things? Who told you Harry Corcoran was a drinking man? Where have you been, Meredith?"

So I confessed. No use writing down the blasting I got. It was the usual. Bunch of stuff about my elders wanting no harm to come to me, things not understood in my philosophy, mysterious evils that I wot not of, and all that sort of stuff. Why doesn't he tell me plain out that it's none of my business?

Well, I don't think it's evil. I think it's foolishness. I think that Uncle John's too sticky and stuffy to tell me . . . (Probably thinks I never heard of s-blank-x) . . . is that he used to be romantic about the pretty lady next door. Probably Uncle John saw a lot of Harry's drunken comings-home and heard plenty of the disharmonizing. Probably he is one neighbor who felt sorry for her. Wonder if they were in love and said so. I doubt it. Probably they

just cast glances at each other over the hedge and said nothing. That would be just like Uncle John.

Anyhow, when somebody shoots Harry Corcoran in the back, the widow gets it into her head that Uncle John did it. After all, she heard things—rustling bushes—looked out, and there he was. But gosh, even if she felt romantic about him too, she'd draw the line at murder! But of course, Uncle John didn't do it. He thinks *she* did. He knows she was unhappy with Harry. But he draws the line at murder, too. So, these dopes, what do they do? They have no "right" to pass "judgment" or "accuse" anybody. They pull themselves in, with the hedge between. All these years, with their very own suspicions proving that neither one could have done it . . . Probably if they'd had sense enough to speak out and have a big argument, they could have got married and been happy long ago.

Oh, how ridiculous! How pitiful! And oh, that I was born to put it right! (N.B. Who said that?)

The lawyer put the book down. John Selby groaned. "I had no idea . . . no idea what she had in her head. I knew she was bright . . ."

"Bright, yes," said Doctor Coles, "but that kid's so insufferably condescending!"

"You wouldn't like it even if she guessed right," said Russell thoughtfully. "The girl's got a hard way to go. She'll be lonely."

"Thought *she* was smart, all right," growled Barker. "Wasn't as smart as she thought she was. She was wrong, I take it?"

Selby didn't answer. His gaze was fixed on the lawyer's face.

"You shouldn't blame her for being wrong," Russell murmured. "She's not yet equipped to understand a lot of things. But she is compelled to try. There's her intelligent curiosity fighting a way past some clichés. but the phrase 'feel romantic' is flat, for her, and without shading."

"I still can't see what happened," Barker broke in to complain. "Never mind the shading. Go ahead—if there's more of it."

"Yes, there's more. We come to July twenty-sixth—yesterday." Russell began to read once more.

I've figured. I know exactly how to do it. I'll say *I can remember!* I'll tell them that when I was up in my tree that night the shot or something woke me, and I saw a stranger running away

. . .

"So she made it up! Told a story!" Chief Barker slapped his thigh. "But . . . now wait a minute . . . you believed her, Selby?"

"I believed her," her uncle sighed.

"Go on. Go on," the doctor said.

I know how to make them believe me, too. This will be neat! I'll tell Uncle John first, and I'll mix into the story I tell him all the little bits I got from her that he doesn't know I've been told. So, since *they'll* be true, he'll be fooled, and think I really remember. Then I'll go to her, but in the story I tell her, all I have to do is mix in the bits I got from Uncle John that she doesn't know I've been told. It'll work! Ha, they'll never catch on to the trick of it. They'll believe me! Then they can get together, if they still want to. I'm not worried about telling a kind of lie about it. If anybody official starts asking questions I can always shudder, and be too young and tender, and clam up. Get it exactly right. Make lists.

Russell looked up. "Meredith's good at math, I suppose?"
 "A plus," her uncle groaned.
 "She scares me."

Russell nodded and began to read again.

List No. 1. For Uncle John. Things she told me.

1. Warm night. Full moon.
2. The elm tree that used to be there.
3. The gun was found *in the hedge*.
4. Harry didn't yell.

Now, put all these points in. Future dialogue.
 By Meredith Lee.

M.L.: Oh, Uncle John, I do remember now!

Uncle John: What?

(Whoops! Since this is in the future, I better not write *his* dialogue. It might confuse me.)

M.L.: I was up in my room, thinking, and I began to hum that tune. That Danny Boy. It made the whole thing come back to me like a dream. Now I remember waking up on my cot and hearing that whistling. I peeked out between my railings. The moon was very bright that night. It was warm, too, real summer. I could see the elm tree by the Corcoran's walk. (Pause. Bewildered.) Which elm tree, Uncle John? There's none there now. *Was* there an elm tree, seven years ago?

(Ha, ha, that'll *do* it!)

I saw a man come up their walk. I must have heard the shot. I thought somebody had a firecracker left over from Fourth of July. I saw the man fall down but he didn't make any noise, so I didn't think he was hurt. I thought he fell asleep.

(What a touch! Whee!)

Then I saw there was another man, down there, and he threw something into the hedge. The hedge crackled where it landed. Then this man jumped through their gate and ran, and then you came out of this house

...

(By this time the stuffing

should be coming out of Uncle John.)

I'll say I don't know who the stranger was. "But it wasn't you, Uncle John," I'll say, "and the widow Corcoran's been thinking so for seven years and I'm going to tell her . . ."

Then I'll run out of the house as fast as I can.

He'll follow—he'll absolutely have to!

Russell looked up. "Was it anything like that?"

"It was almost exactly like that," said John Selby, lifting his tired, anxious face. "And I did follow. She was right about that. I absolutely had to."

"Smart," said Chief Barker, smacking his lips, "the way she worked that out."

"Too smart," the doctor said, and then, "Nurse? Yes?" He went quickly through the door.

"My sister will skin me alive," said John Selby, rousing himself. "Kid's had me jumping through hoops. Who am I to deal with the likes of her? Looks at me with those big brown eyes. Can't tell whether you're talking to a baby or a woman. Everything I did was a mistake. I never had the least idea what she was thinking. You're smart people, Russell—that's why I need you. I feel as if I'd been through a wind-tunnel. Help me with Meredith. I feel terrible about the whole thing, and if she's seri-

ously hurt and I'm responsible . . ."

"You say you don't understand young people," began Russell, "but even if you did, this young person . . ."

"You take it too hard, John," said Chief Barker impatiently. "Doc doesn't think she's hurt too seriously. And she got herself into it, after all. Listen, go on. What did she say to the widow? That's what I need to know. Is it in there?"

"It must be," said Russell. "She made another list."

List No. 2. For the widow. Things Uncle John told me.

1. Harry was whistling Danny Boy.
2. He came in the direction that passed this house.
3. He was drunk.
4. He dropped his key.

Not so good. Yes it is, too. What woke her? She doesn't know, but I do! Future dialogue:

M.L.: Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, I think I'm beginning to remember! I really think so! Listen, I think I heard a man whistling. And it was that song about Danny Boy. And he was walking from the east, past our house. Would it have been your husband?

(Ha! She's going to *have* to say Yes!)

And he . . . it seems to me that he didn't walk right. He wobbled. He wobbled up your walk and he dropped something.

Maybe a key. It must have been a key because I saw him bending over to hunt for it but . . .

(Artistic pause here? I think so.)

Oh, now I remember! He straightened up. He couldn't have found it because he called out something. It was a name! It must have been . . . Oh, Mrs. Corcoran, could it have been your name, being called in the night, that woke you up?

(Betcha! Betcha!)

Well, the rest of hers goes on the same. Stranger, throws gun, runs away, just as Uncle John comes out. "So it wasn't you," I'll say, "and I can prove it! But poor Uncle John has been afraid it *was*."

Then what? I guess maybe I'd better start to bawl.

Yep. I think that will do it. I think that's pretty good. They're bound to believe me. Of course, the two stories are not identical, but they can't be. *They'll* never notice the trick of it. They'll just have to be convinced that it wasn't either one of them who shot Harry Corcoran. I can't wait to see what will happen. What will they *do*? What will they *say*? Oh-ho-ho, is this ever research! I better cry soft enough so I can hear and memorize.

When shall I try it? I can't wait! Now is a good time. Uncle John is in the library and she's home. I can see a light upstairs in her

house. Here goes, then.

(N.B. Would I rather be an actress? Consider this. M.L.)

The lawyer closed the book. "That's all." He put his hand to his eyes but his mouth was curving tenderly.

"Some scheme," said Barker in awe. "Went to a lot of trouble to work up all that plot . . ."

"She had a powerful motive," Russell murmured.

"My romance," said Selby bitterly.

"Oh, no. Research for her," the lawyer grinned.

"Whatever the motive, this remarkable kid went and faked those stories and she had it wrong," growled Barker. "But she must have got something right. Do you realize that?" He leaned into the light. "Selby, as far as you were concerned, you believed that rigmarole of hers. You thought she *did* remember the night of the killing and she *had* seen a stranger?"

"I did," John Selby said, sounding calmer. "I was considerably shaken. I had always suspected Josephine Corcoran, for reasons of my own."

"Lots of us suspected," the Chief said dryly, "for various reasons. But never could figure how she managed, with you rushing out to the scene so fast and the maid in the upstairs hall."

"What were your reasons, John?" Russell asked.

"In particular, there was a certain oblique conversation that took place in the course of a flirtation that appalls me, now. It seemed to me, one evening, that she was thinking that the death of her husband might be desirable—and might be arranged. I can't quote her exactly, you understand, but the hint was there. She thought him stupid and cruel and intolerable, and the hint was that if he were dead and gone she'd be *clean*. *The shallow, callous, self-righteous . . . the idea!* As if her life should rightfully be cleared of him with no more compunction than if he'd been . . . well, a wart on her hand." He held his head again. "Now, how is a man going to explain to his fifteen-year-old niece just what makes him to think a woman is wicked? The feeling you get, that emanates from the brain and body?" He groaned. "That little talk pulled me out of my folly, believe me. That's when I shied off and began to let the hedge grow. When you realize that not long after that he *did* die, you'll see how I've lived with the memory of that conversation for seven years. Wondering. Was I right about what she had in mind and did I perhaps not recoil enough? Had I not sufficiently discouraged the . . . the idea? There was no evidence. There was nothing. But I've had a burden close to guilt and I've stayed on my side of the hedge, believe me, and begun to study to stuff a shirt." He

groaned again and shifted in the chair. "When I thought the child had really seen a stranger with that gun, I was stunned. As soon as I realized where Meredith had gone . . ."

"You followed. You saw them through the widow's front door?" The Chief was reassembling this testimony.

"Yes. I could see them. At the top of the stairs. Mrs. Corcoran standing by the newel post and Meredith talking earnestly to her."

"You couldn't hear?"

"No, unfortunately. But if Meredith had rehearsed it, if she stuck to her script, then we must have it here."

"If it's there, I don't get it." Chief Barker passed his hand over his face. "Now, suddenly, you say—in the middle of the girl's story—the widow yelled something that you *could* hear?"

"She yelled, '*I told you to keep out of this, you nosy brat!*' And then she pushed Meredith violently enough to send her rolling down the stairs." Selby began to breathe heavily.

"And you got through the door . . ."

"By the time I got through the door, she was on the girl like a wildcat. She was frantic. She *meant* to hurt her." John Selby glared.

"So you plucked the widow off her prey and called us for help? Did Mrs. Corcoran try to explain at all?" Russell inquired.

"She put out hysterical cries. 'Poor dear! Poor darling!' But she meant to hurt Meredith. I heard. I saw. I know. And she knows that I know."

"Yes, the widow gave herself away," said Russell. "She was wicked, all right."

"So we've got her," the Chief growled, "for the assault on Meredith. Also, we know darned well she shot her husband seven years ago. But she won't talk. What I need," the Chief was anxious, "is to figure out what it was that set her off. What did the kid say that made her nerve crack? I can't see it. I just don't get it."

The doctor had been standing quietly in the door. Now he said, "Maybe Meredith can tell us. She's all right. Almost as good as new, I'd say."

John Selby was on his feet. So was Chief Barker. "Selby, you go first," the doctor advised. "No questions for the first minute or two."

The Chief turned and sighed. "Beats me."

Russell said, "One thing, Harry Corcoran never called out his wife's name in the night. Selby, who heard a whistle, would have heard such a cry."

"Do I see what you're getting at?" said Barker shrewdly. "It shows the kid didn't get *that far* in the story or the widow would have known she was story-telling."

"She certainly didn't get as far as any guilty stranger, or the widow

would have been delighted. Let's see."

"There was something. . . ."

"Was it the tune? No, that's been known. Selby told that long ago. Was it Harry's drunkenness? No, because medical evidence exists. Couldn't be that."

"For the Lord's sakes, let's *ask* her," the Chief said.

They went through the door. The nurse had effaced herself watchfully. Four men stood around the bed. Doctor, Lawyer, Merchant, Chief . . .

Young Meredith Lee looked very small, lying against the pillow with her brown hair pressed back by the bandages, her freckles sharpened by the pallor of her face, her big brown eyes round and shocked.

"How do you feel, honey?" rumbled the Chief.

"She pushed me down." Meredith's voice was a childish whimper.

Her Uncle John patted the bed and said compulsively, "There, Meredith. There now . . ."

"Don't say that," the Chief put in with a chuckle. "It just annoys her."

The girl saw her notebook in Russell's hands. She winced and for a flash her eyes narrowed and something behind the child face was busy reassessing the situation.

"Miss Lee," said the lawyer pleasantly, "My name is Russell. I'm a friend of your Uncle John's. I'm the one who ferreted out your notes. I hope you'll forgive us for reading

them. Thanks to you, now we know how wicked the widow was seven years ago."

"I only pretended," said Meredith in a thin treble. "I was only eight. I don't really remember anything at all." She shrank in the bed, very young and tender.

Her uncle said, "We know how you pretended. I . . . I had no idea you were so smart."

"That was some stunt," the doctor said.

"Very clever," the lawyer said, "the two stories as you worked them out."

"You're quite a story-teller, honey," chimed in Chief Barker.

On the little girl's face something struggled and lost. Meredith gave them one wild indignant look of pure outraged intelligence before her face crumpled completely. "I am not either!" she bawled. "I'm not any good! I got it all wrong! Didn't get the plot right. Didn't get the characters right. I guess I don't know *anything!* I guess I might as well give up . . ." She flung herself over and sobbed bitterly.

Chief Barker said, "She's okay, isn't she? She's not in pain?"

The nurse rustled, muttering "shock." The doctor said stiffly, "Come now, Meredith. This isn't a bit good for you."

But Selby said, to the rest of them, "See? That's the way it goes. She's eight and she's eighty. She can cook up a complex stunt like that and then bawl like a baby. I

give up! I don't know what you should do with her. I've wired my sister. She'll skin us both, no doubt. Meredith, *please*. . ."

Meredith continued to howl.

The lawyer said sharply, "That's right, Meredith. You may as well give up trying to be a writer if you are going to cry over your first mistakes instead of trying to learn from them. Will you be grown-up for a minute and listen? We seriously want your help to convict a murderer."

"You do not," wailed Meredith. "I'm too stupid!"

"Don't be a hypocrite," snapped the lawyer. "You are not stupid. As a matter of fact, you are extremely stuffy—as this book proves to us."

Meredith choked on a sob. Then slowly she opened one brown eye. "The average young person," hammered the lawyer, "has little or no respect for an elder's experience and nothing can make him see its value until he gets some himself. But even a *beginning* writer should have a less conventional point of view."

"Now wait a minute," bristled John Selby. "Don't scold her. She's had an awful time. Listen, she meant well . . ."

Meredith sat up and mopped her cheek with the sheet. The brown eyes withered him. "Pul-lease, Uncle John," said Meredith Lee.

So John Selby raised his head and settled his shoulders. "Okay." He forced a grin. "Maybe I'm not

too old to learn. You want me to lay it on the line? All right, you *didn't* mean well. You were perfectly vain and selfish. You were going to fix up my life and Josephine Corcoran's life as a little exercise for your superior wisdom." His stern voice faltered. "Is that better?"

Meredith said, tartly, "At least, it's rational." She looked around and her voice was not a baby's. "You are all positive the widow is a murderess," she said flatly.

Chief Barker said, "Well, honey, we always did kind of think so."

"Don't talk down to her," snapped John Selby, "or she'll talk down to you. I . . . I get that much."

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Meredith of the Chief.

He told her. "And I am here to get to the bottom of a crime. Now, young lady," the Chief was no longer speaking with any jovial look at all, "You jumped to a wrong conclusion, you know. She *was* guilty."

"I don't see *why* you've always thought so," said Meredith rebelliously.

"I guess you don't," said Barker. "Because it's a matter of experience. Of a lot of things. In the first place, I know what my routine investigation can or cannot turn up. When it turns up *no* sign of any stranger whatsoever, I tend to believe that there wasn't one."

The Chief's jaw was thrust for-

ward. The little girl did not wince. She listened gravely.

"In the second place, as you noticed yourself, there's nobody else around here to suspect. In the third place, nine times out of ten, only a wife is close enough to a man to have a strong enough motive."

"Nine times out of ten," said Meredith scornfully.

"That's experience," said Barker, "and you scoff at the nine times because you think we forget that there can be a tenth time. You are wrong, young lady. Now, somebody shot Harry Corcoran . . ."

"Why don't you suspect Uncle John?" flashed Meredith.

"No motive," snapped Barker.

"Meredith," began her Uncle, "I'm afraid you . . ."

"Speak up," said Russell.

"Yes. Right." Selby straightened again. "Well, then, listen. I'd no more murder a man as a favor to a neighbor than I'd jump over the moon. Your whole idea—that Josephine Corcoran would *think* I had—is ridiculous. Whatever she is, she's too mature for that. Furthermore, I never did want to marry her. And your mother may skin me for this but so help me you'd better know, men sometimes don't and women know it." Meredith blinked. "Also, even if I had," roared her Uncle John, "Barker knows it might occur to me that there is such a thing as divorce. Just as good a way to get rid of a husband, and a lot safer than murder."

Meredith's tongue came out and licked her lip.

"Now, as to her motive, she hated Harry Corcoran bitterly . . . bitterly. She's . . . well, she's wicked. To know that is . . . is a matter of experience. You spot it. Some cold and selfish, yet hot and reckless thing. That's the best I can do."

"It's not bad," said Meredith humbly, "I mean, thank you, Uncle John. Where is she now?"

"In the hospital," said Chief Barker, "with my men keeping their eye on her."

"Was she hurt?"

The doctor cleared his throat. "She's being hysterical. That is, you see, she was startled into making a terrible mistake when she pushed you, my dear. Now, all she can think to do is fake a physical or psychic collapse. But it's strictly a phony. I can't tell you exactly how I know that . . ."

"I suppose it's experience," said Meredith solemnly. She seemed to retreat deeper into the pillow. "I was all wrong about her. The town was *right!*" She looked as if she might cry, having been forced to this concession.

Russell said briskly, "That's not enough. No good simply saying you were wrong. You need to understand what happened to you, just how you were led."

"Led?" said Meredith distastefully.

"The widow was guilty," Russell said. "Begin with that. Now look

back at the time you first hung over her gate. You couldn't know she was guilty or even suspect it, because you hadn't so much as heard about the murder yet. How could you guess the fright she got, remembering that little girl in the tree? You thought it was retroactive worry—that you might have fallen. Because that is a kind of fear in your experience. Do you see, now, when you turned up, so full of vigor and intelligence, that she never felt less like smiling in her life. *Of course* she took you seriously. And you were charmed."

"Naturally," said Meredith bravely.

"I can see, and now you should be able to see, how she tried to use your impulsive sympathy. Maybe she hoped that when you tried—as you were bound to try—to remember that night, long ago, that your imagination would be biased in her favor."

"I guess it was," said Meredith bleakly.

"Probably, she tried to put suspicion of your Uncle John into your head, not from innocence, but to supply a missing suspect to the keen and much too brainy curiosity that had her terrified. Now, don't be downcast," the lawyer added, his warm smile breaking. "I'd have been fooled, too. After all, this is hindsight."

"Probably you wouldn't have been fooled," said Meredith stolidly, "Experience, huh?"

"I've met a few murderers before," said Russell gently.

"Well, I've met a murderess now," said Meredith gravely. "Boy, was I ever dumb!" She sighed.

The Chief said, "All clear? Okay. Now, what do you say we find out where you were *smart*? What *did* it? Can't we get to that?"

"Smart?" said Meredith.

"This is our question to you, young lady. What cracked Mrs. Corcoran's nerve. Where were you in that story when she flew at you and pushed you down the stairs?"

The girl was motionless.

"You see, dear," began the doctor.

"She sees," said her Uncle John ferociously.

Meredith gave him a grateful lick of the eye. "Well, I was just past the key . . ." she said. She frowned. "And *then* she yelled and pushed me." The brown eyes turned, bewildered.

"What were the exact words?" said Barker briskly, "Russell, read that part again."

But Russell repeated, lingeringly, "Just past the key . . .?"

"I don't get it," Barker said. "Do you?"

"I just thought she'd be glad," said Meredith in a small groan. "But she pushed me and hurt me. I got it *wrong*." She seemed to cower. She was watching Russell.

"You got it right," said he. "Listen. And follow me. Harry Corcoran was shot in the back."

"That's right," the Chief said.

"The key was on the doorstep." The lawyer was talking to the girl.

"I picked it up," said Selby.

"All this time we've been assuming that he dropped the key *because he was shot*. But that isn't what you said, Meredith. *You* said that he dropped the key *because he was drunk*. Now, all this time we have assumed that he was shot from behind, from somewhere near the hedge. But if you got it right, when he bent over to pick up the key . . . and was shot in the back. . . ." Russell waited. He didn't have to wait long.

"*She* shot him from above," said Meredith, quick as a rabbit. "*She* was upstairs."

"From *above*," said Barker, sagging. "And the widow's been waiting for seven years for some bright brain around here to think of that. Yep. Shot from a screenless window. Threw the gun out, closed the window, opened her door, faced her maid. Pretty cool. Pretty lucky. Pretty smart. And there is nothing you could call evidence, even yet." But the Chief was not discouraged or dismayed. He patted the bed covers. "Don't you worry, honey. You got her, all right. And I've made out with less. By golly, I got her method, now, and that's going to be leverage. And, by golly, one thing she's going to have to tell me, and that is *why* she pushed you down the stairs."

"She needn't have," said Mere-

dith, in the same thin, woeful voice. "I didn't know . . . I didn't understand." Then her face changed and something was clicking in her little head. "But she still *thinks* I saw him drop the key. Couldn't I go where she is? Couldn't I . . . break her down? I could *act*." The voice trailed off. They weren't going to let her go, the four grown men.

"I'm going," said Selby grimly. "I'll break her down."

"Stay in bed," said the doctor, at the same time. "Nurse will be here. I may be needed with the widow."

"And I," said Russell. But still he didn't move. "Miss Lee," he said to the little girl, "may I make a prophecy? You'll go on studying the whole world, you'll get experience, and acquire insight, and you will not give up until you become a writer." He saw the brown eyes clear; the misting threat dried away. He laid the notebook on the covers. "You won't need to be there," he said gently, "because you can imagine." He held out a pencil. "Maybe you'd like to be working on an ending?" She was biting her left thumb but her right hand twitched as she took the pencil.

"Meredith," said her Uncle John, "here's one thing you can put in. You sure took the stuffing out of me. And I don't care what your mother's going to say . . ."

Meredith said, as if she were in a trance, "When is Mama coming?"

"In the morning. I wish I hadn't

wired—I wish I hadn't alarmed her . . . We're going to be in for it."

"Oh, I don't know, Uncle John," said Meredith. The face was elfin now, for a mocking second of time. Then it was sober. She put the pencil into her mouth and stared at the wall. The nurse moved closer. The four men cleared their throats. Nothing happened. Meredith was gone, imagining. Soon the four grown men tiptoed away.

Meredith Lee. New notes and Jottings. July 27th.

Early to bed. Supposed to be worn out. False, but convenient.

Everybody helped manage Mama. Doctor Coles put a small pink bandage on me. Chief Barker and Mr. Russell met her train and said gloating things about the widow confessing.

But, of course, Mama had to blast us some. She was just starting to rend Uncle John when I said, "Don't be so cross with him, Mama. He is the Hero. Saved my life." That took her aback. She was about to start on me, but Uncle John jumped in. "Meredith's the Heroine, sis. She broke the case."

Well, Mama got distracted. She forgot to be mad at us any more. "What's going on with you two?" she wanted to know. Well, I guess she could see that the stuffing was out of both of us.

(N.B. Men are interesting. M.L.)

Thomas Walsh

The Night Calhoun Was Off Duty

Is there anyone in the mystery field who writes the emotional, human-interest cop story better than Thomas Walsh? . . . The story of a cop whose wife is having a baby. Sure, it happens every day—but it's different when it happens to you . . .

THEY COULDN'T HAVE BEEN IN bed more than an hour when Calhoun grew vaguely conscious that Ellen was shaking his arm. Although he heard her words and the labored way her breath was coming he woke slowly, as he always did, with the old odd feeling in his mind that it was scattered in many pieces and that he'd have to reach out for it bit by bit and put it together again before it would work for him. After he had mumbled the cab company's number into the phone and told them where to come he yawned and rolled his big red head between his hands. Then Ellen gasped again behind him and he sprang up, swearing in an incandescent flare of anger.

He was a fool, Calhoun muttered savagely. He closed the windows, switched on the bureau lamp, and pattered out on bare feet to light the oven of the kitchen stove, so that she'd have something warm to dress by. Then he ran back to the bedroom and picked Ellen up as if she were no weight at all, cradling her in his arms.

"How is it?" he asked huskily. "Will I call Dr. Cotter? Will I get him over here?"

Ellen pressed her head against his shoulder. There was a pause in which he felt her body harden like a bar.

"Bring my clothes," she said at last, rather low. "Don't call him yet, John. They'll do that from the hospital. It's all right. It's—I'm glad it's started. I think it will be over soon."

"Sure," Calhoun chattered. "Sure it will." The kitchen light stung his eyes; he saw by the clock over the refrigerator that it was only four minutes past 11 and he stuttered trying to help her, trying to tell her that it wouldn't be bad. They had all kinds of stuff nowadays to give her. She'd probably never know anything about it until it was over.

"Yes," Ellen whispered. "Don't get so excited, John. My bag's in the hall closet, all packed. Put it by the door so that we can't forget it as we go out. And go and get dressed—I'll manage fine. We'll have to hur-

ry to be downstairs when the cab comes for us."

Calhoun hurried; he seemed to get his clothes on in a flash. Still, Ellen was ready when he came out—all he had to do was help her on with her coat. "All right," he said breathlessly. "Let's go." The shapeless old ulster that he liked better than his other coat because it was big and burly, because he could wear his revolver under it or even carry it in one of the pockets without its being noticed at all, was on a chair and he snatched it up. His gun and shield were on the bureau but he did not go inside for them. Calhoun wouldn't be on police duty tonight.

Ellen made him turn back to shut off the kitchen lights and she wouldn't let him carry her down the steps. In the vestibule he glanced at her and saw the desperate trembling fixity of her smile, the way small beads of perspiration kept appearing around the corners of her mouth. He could feel his heart throb like a rubber hammer swung up and down inside his ribs.

Presently the cab came and he had her out on the steps before the driver had a chance to honk. Then they were inside and starting off, but to Calhoun it was even worse than before, for now there was nothing to do until they got there, and her face, white and stiff under the dark rims about her eyes, made his words dry in his mouth.

"Is it bad?" he whispered.

She shook her head as if she didn't want him to talk and then in a moment she seemed fine again.

"Who's having this baby?" she asked smiling at him. "Now I don't want you hanging around the hospital all night. Go home and get some sleep. They'll call you if anything happens. If you're there you'll only worry me."

"I'll wait a little while," Calhoun muttered. It was intolerable that she should think of him even now, when there was nothing he could do to help her. And suddenly he had a frightful thought: that that might be the last time he would ride with her. Women died sometimes.

Not Ellen, he thought after a moment, above the persistent whisper that ran on in his mind. Why not, that whisper said. Why couldn't she? She just couldn't, Calhoun thought. He wouldn't let her. But he knew he could do nothing and confused remembrances of the first time he'd ever seen her, the first time they'd gone out together, rose up in him with a chill of terror.

They'd always been happy, Calhoun thought. Then this—it went on for months but somehow as if it weren't happening to them, as if it concerned someone else. And now late one night—Calhoun swallowed. He thought they must have been crazy. Crazy! All the things in his mind, so ceaseless and so vivid there, seemed to push him with a kind of agony into the future, into a day to come, so that he was—

n't really here in the cab holding her hand; he was there, next week, next month, and he was thinking that he'd known then, in the cab. It was the last time they'd ever—

At the hospital a dark little nurse took his name and had them sit down a moment while she saw about the room.

Calhoun put his hat on the floor and tried to be excessively cheerful.

"If it's a girl," he said, "we'll make a policewoman out of her. I'll bet you'd love that."

But that funny look was on Ellen's face again and she didn't answer him. Where was the nurse? It seemed ages before she returned.

"Maternity's on the sixth floor," she said, "and I think we'd better bring Mrs. Calhoun up right away. No, I'll take the bag; you'll have to stay here. There's a waiting-room down the hall."

Ellen kissed his cheek and he touched her shoulder, then stood watching as she followed the nurse to the elevator. Just as she stepped through he had a glimpse of her eyes and he wasn't sure whether she was crying or if it was only a reflection of light. Even if she felt bad she wouldn't let him see it. Ellen was like that. For a while he stood in the hall trying to think of something, of anything he could do to help her; finally he slapped his hat against his side and went into the waiting-room. But he couldn't sit still; he went back to the hall.

A small but very erect young

man in an intern's suit was sitting on one corner of Miss Biddle's desk. Once or twice in the last few months Calhoun had met him—the last time in a dingy room where a young girl's body lay quietly on a bed. Young Dr. Minacorn—Windy Minnie to the hospital staff—had a sharp intellectual face and blond hair growing in a spike on his forehead. He greeted Calhoun with a smile.

"Well, well," he said, "a baby! And I didn't even know you were married."

"Cut the cracks," Calhoun said, looking at him levelly from under his brows. "It isn't anything to be wise about."

"Oh, don't take it that way," Dr. Minacorn said. "No offense."

Calhoun went back to the waiting-room without answering him. If only there were something he could do . . .

A fat man in the chair under the lamp was sleeping comfortably and he did not wake until a husky nurse in a white apron came to the door and called his name.

"Your wife's had a girl," she said, "and they're both fine. In half an hour you can go up to see them."

Yawning, the fat man sat up and thanked her. "But gosh," he told Calhoun conversationally after she'd gone, "I got to get some sleep. Time enough to see them tomorrow. After the first one there's not much difference anyway."

There was, Calhoun thought, no

way to describe some guys. He cracked his knuckles and walked over to the window, then back to his chair, then over to the window again. He thought of Ellen again and wondered what was happening. Now, when he might lose her, he knew how much he loved her, he knew there was nobody else he could ever love. Three times in half an hour he went out to see Miss Biddle.

"I'm sorry," she always said, "but they haven't called down yet. They will, you know, when they take her to the delivery room."

"Okay," Calhoun said, rubbing a hand worriedly through his hair. "Maybe I'm a nuisance to you and I've laughed at stuff like this in the movies myself. Only it isn't so funny when it happens to you."

Dr. Minacorn, coming in from the yard after a cigarette, noticed him as he turned into the waiting-room. "How's our policeman holding out?" he asked Miss Biddle. "Any call for a sedative yet?"

"I wish you would give him something," Miss Biddle sighed. "Say a nice strong hypo to keep him quiet the rest of the night. He's out here every five minutes, asking."

"Quite understandable. Something like this," he went on, settling himself comfortably on the desk before her, "rather puzzles our friend. What can he do about it? To a man like Calhoun merely sitting about and waiting is an intolerable state of affairs."

Windy Minnie, Miss Biddle thought, was off again. She said only, "Uh huh," not to encourage him, and bent over her papers.

But Dr. Minacorn set his glasses more firmly on his nose and went on. Some day S. Kevin Minacorn, M.D., would be lecturing; meanwhile, practice was never out of place even with an audience of one.

"Calhoun, you see, is a man of action—not of thought. Keep his physical being occupied and he will not be overly concerned with the more sensitive side of things. Just now, of course, he is utterly at a loss. I daresay," Dr. Minacorn admitted thoughtfully, "he loves his wife. He appears to be extremely worried about her. But there's nothing at all he can do for her now and that preys on his mind. A man like Calhoun, particularly a policeman, is accustomed to action in its crudest manifestations. And if you think of it, the place of the policeman in the modern world is extremely interesting."

This time Miss Biddle made no remark. The hall was empty; there was no relief in sight. She wrote on.

"Extremely interesting," Dr. Minacorn continued, fascinated by his pursuit of an idea. "Take their social background alone and you are struck at the start by a somewhat startling fact—that our criminals and thugs and our—well, protectors, are all from the same social level. Your police today are actually legalized gangsters."

"Legalized gangsters," Dr. Minacorn repeated. "Why do you think Calhoun is a policeman? First, naturally, because he's unimaginative and a plodder; and second, because it's a remarkably easy living, with a little authority and no need for the unpleasant job of thinking. Like the rest of his fellows he'll do as little of what he's supposed to do as he can get away with. The problems of society as a whole are meaningless to him."

Miss Biddle knew it was now or never, when he paused for breath. Once Windy Minnie got really started—

"Who," she asked, "are you going to take to the alumni dance?"

In the waiting-room Calhoun's mouth felt as dry and harsh as an oven. There wasn't a sound in the hospital nor in the streets. Calhoun thought vaguely of all the people in the world, of life and death and what they meant. He remembered how happy they had been and suddenly the recollection of that happiness frightened him, because things always struck at the happy ones. Perhaps if he didn't love her so much—and he didn't, really he didn't—nothing would happen to her. Nothing, God, Calhoun whispered. Because she was his wife and he loved her and if she died he'd be dead too. Panic struck at him again.

In the hall Miss Biddle muttered something when she saw him come out of the waiting-room and Dr.

Minacorn, appearing from the emergency ward in overcoat and hat, stopped by her desk to wait for him.

"Here," he said, struck by a sudden inspiration—the man of action could be given something to do. "How about a ride with me, Calhoun? I've got a call to make."

Calhoun looked at him as if he weren't quite sure who he was, and then down at Miss Biddle.

"Don't be worrying about your wife," Dr. Minacorn said cheerfully. "She's all right but the first one's always long in coming. Any further word, Miss Biddle?"

Miss Biddle shook her head. "Nothing since the last."

"Then you've got all night," Dr. Minacorn said, gripping his arm. "And we won't be gone ten minutes. Come on, man. It will do you good."

Calhoun knew he couldn't go back to that room and just wait. He'd do something crazy if he had to sit there again. So after a moment he put on his hat dully and followed Minacorn out to the yard where an ambulance was waiting. "Okay," Dr. Minacorn said, getting in. "Let's roll, Eddie."

In the front seat of the car, crowded against Minacorn, it all began again in Calhoun's mind. Suppose now, this very moment, they send word downstairs and he was not there. Suppose Ellen wanted to see him and they had to tell her that he'd gone, that—The four-

block ride seemed endless; he was out first, anxious to be through quickly, as soon as Eddie pulled in to the pavement.

"Thirty-three," Minacorn said, looking up at the row of cheap tenements before them. "That's the one over there with the ashcans at the curb. They say what was wrong, Eddie?"

"Not that I heard," the driver said. "I just got the address."

It was a somber street, fretful with shadows. Calhoun followed them around the ashcans, through a dirty hallway and up a flight of wooden stairs. At the first landing Dr. Minacorn peered about.

"Any apartment number, Eddie? These people never seem to—"

A boy leaned over the railing above them.

"It's up here," he said. "One more flight, Mister."

Minacorn bounced up that on his quick legs. "Now what's the matter?" he asked. "Who's sick?"

"Pietro," the boy said, staring at them with drawn dark eyes. "He boards with my mother. He's in there."

A gray-haired woman with a shawl around her shoulders spoke to him in rapid Italian. The boy looked up at them, again wetting his lips.

"She says she don't want him here no more. She's afraid. You'll have to take him away."

"First we'll have to look at him," Minacorn started for the door on the

right of the landing. "In here, is he?"

"Watch out," the boy said. The woman spoke too in a flow of words that was shrilly urgent. Minacorn said sharply: "Keep quiet, please. We're not going to hurt him you know," and opened the door.

Over his shoulder Calhoun saw a man facing them from the lighted kitchen—a thin tall man with wild black hair and glittering black eyes that had no sanity or balance in them. There was a rifle in his hands.

"What in hell—" Eddie breathed. He jumped aside and slammed the door just before the man fired. Dr. Minacorn had no chance to get out. He could only jump sideways away from the hole that the bullet had made in the glass upper-half of the door, not an inch from his head. Calhoun saw his shadow blur across the light an instant before it was extinguished.

Flattened out against the wall, Eddie stared wide-eyed at Calhoun, across the boy and his mother standing between them. The voice of the black-haired man screamed insanely at them from the darkened kitchen.

"He's crazy," the boy whispered. "He's been acting funny all week, showing me marks on the stoop where he said that the bullets people fired at him hit. Tonight when he took his gun out Mamma got scared. She made me call you."

Behind the door Dr. Minacorn said something but his voice was so

low and shaky that Calhoun couldn't understand the words. Immediately the other man bore him down with harsh Italian.

"Now he says he's gonna kill him," the boy breathed holding Calhoun's hand. His young face was white as paper. Calhoun stared down at it for a moment and then looked at the driver. "Somebody's got to go in there," he said.

"Not me." Eddie went backward two steps down the stairs. "Not me. You got a riot squad to handle stuff like this. I saw his gun."

Calhoun rubbed his mouth slowly and looked back along the hall. People were out on the stairs now from the other floors, huddling together in small groups. Inside the kitchen the madman still shouted.

"What's he saying now?" Calhoun asked.

The boy listened, shivering against his mother. "He says he knows who he is and he's going to kill him. He's telling him to get on his knees."

At the end of the hall there was another door. Calhoun saw it would lead into the parlor—there were two apartments on a floor, right and left of the landing, each running through from front to back—and he was moving back toward it before any plan of action cleared in his mind.

"Stay here," he told Eddie. "Make all the noise you can. I'll have to force this door."

Eddie nodded dumbly and, as

Calhoun reached the front door, tramped up and down the stairs, shouted and then banged his body into the wall. In the middle of his yell Calhoun cracked his shoulder against the door in a lunge that burst the flimsy lock like the snapping of a rubber band.

He found himself in a small room with one window opening on the street and a lamp set on a table in the center of the floor, opposite a doorway just right of him that led back into the first bedroom. Calhoun saw that the lamp was going to be a danger—going back through the doorways from room to room he'd be silhouetted clearly against it. He could click it off, of course, but that was something this madman couldn't miss seeing, no matter how dimly it showed in the kitchen. Doing that, he might as well knock on the door and ask if he could come in. No, he couldn't touch it; he'd have to leave it on if he wanted to get out there before this crazy Pietro knew he was coming.

Bent low, he stepped through the doorway, across the line of light that for a prickly instant traced him clearly against itself. But there was no shot; the madman probably was facing Minacorn and the kitchen door. He wouldn't look back. Now, Calhoun thought, if he kept to the darkness left of the doorways, his only points of danger would be the openings themselves—the split seconds when he'd have to slip through

them to reach each succeeding room. Even now he could make out nothing of the kitchen but a vague bluish shadow, thinned slightly where the light from the hall filtered through the glass upper-half of the door; there was no way of telling where the crazy man was standing. Just before he reached the second doorway he paused again to listen. Where was his voice coming from?

If you had asked Calhoun then why he was trying to reach that kitchen, the chances are that he wouldn't have been able to tell you. Someone, he might have said, had to get in there. And who was going to try if he didn't? That Eddie? Calhoun knew it was up to him, no one else. He was trying to get into that kitchen just as Dr. Minacorn might have grasped a patient's wrist to feel his pulse. Not entirely because he was a cop, not at all because it was Minacorn who was out there—Calhoun would have gone in if the man had been a stranger. The only thing worrying him now was whether or not this crazy Pietro was playing possum to get him closer. And the one way to answer that was to keep on going.

Calhoun kept on going.

He was in the second doorway now and he slipped through it safely. Across the one intervening room he began to distinguish objects in the kitchen: a chair, a table, someone that by the bag in one hand and the white trousers showing under

the coat was obviously Dr. Minacorn. From the way his head was set Calhoun got a hint of where the madman was standing—some-where left of the last doorway, probably against the far wall. There'd be six or seven feet to cover and not much time to get across it; still Calhoun thought he could do it. Even Minacorn hadn't noticed him yet; he was standing before the table as stiffly as if he'd been turned to stone.

"Now listen," he was saying in a voice he couldn't steady down. "I've come here to help you. I'm a doctor. Try to understand that, won't you? I'm not your enemy. I don't want to harm you. If you'll just try to see—"

Against those blazing eyes his words beat feebly, without effect. Dr. Minacorn saw that and he was badly frightened; in the shadow his pale cheeks seemed to gleam whiter than the speck of light reflected from his glasses. He had seen death many times before and it had never seemed important or particularly dreadful. If old men whose names he scarcely knew died now and again in a ward, Dr. Minacorn was sorry for them, of course. But what did it have to do with S. Kevin Minacorn, M.D., young and healthy Minacorn, immortal Minacorn? In some far-distant future, of course, he would come to it inevitably, even he. And so what, young Dr. Minacorn had thought, with that comfortable future before him, as solid as eternity. So what?

Just now, when the future was

not so distant, it made a lot of difference. Across the dark kitchen he could see the face of the lunatic glaring at him—he could see the shape of it, long and pale, the eyes that glittered even in the blackness. But clearest of all, sharpest of all, he could see the gun.

And young Dr. Minacorn didn't want to die like this—foolishly, stupidly, without any sense to it; there were so many things he had to do first. Sometime, of course, it would have to come. But not now, not now! Trying to speak, thinking desperately that he must make his voice unalarmed, very soothing, he could not seem to hear his own words. But he was this man's friend; he wanted to help him. Now listen—

He dared not move, not even his arms; he knew if he did the madman would shoot him. In a few seconds now he might be dead. No one would help him—not Eddie, nor Calhoun, nor anyone. Why should they? If he were out there, he wouldn't come in. But damn them—oh, damn them, he thought illogically. He had been the fool; he had walked in first and been trapped.

From the last room Calhoun could see him standing there, moving his lips in a confused mumble. What was he trying to say? Calhoun couldn't make it out. Steadying himself for that last rush, Calhoun didn't think of this as something he was paid to do; he readied himself quite slowly and cautiously because

of something in him that had been there before he was a cop, something that—it is possible—might have made him become a cop.

Yet something stopped him. It said: Why couldn't he stay here where he was until the riot squad came, or the cop on the beat, or someone to give him a hand? Why couldn't he let Minacorn take his chance? What business was it of his? He didn't even like the guy. But the thought never grew serious in his mind. Wasting time was stupid; he had to get back to the hospital. Maybe Ellen had had the kid now—his kid. That seemed odd. Calhoun couldn't understand it as he wet his lips and inched closer to the door. His kid!

Maybe that was the thing that stopped him, but only for a moment. All the time, really, he knew what he had to do. There was a crazy man in there who might kill another man. Calhoun had to stop him.

So he sprang through the doorway and hesitated there for the tiniest breath of time to locate this crazy Pietro exactly. Then Minacorn saw him, and Pietro too. The rifle swung around to Calhoun as he ran for it low, his arms outspread like a football player about to make a tackle. But the madman had to move the gun only slightly; he pressed the trigger twice as it swung across his belt.

Then Minacorn was on him, knocking him down with a wild

swing of his bag, yanking the rifle from him and battering it against his head. "Eddie!" he yelled in a voice as shrill as a woman's, after the other man was still. "Eddie!"

After a long while Eddie came through the kitchen door carefully. Dr. Minacorn was sitting in a chair, the muscles in his legs jumping and quivering as if they were alive—as if they would never be steady enough to hold him up.

Calhoun lay on the floor, his fine big body still, touched by a last quiet magic that showed no mark in his face, yet that somehow, very deftly, had taken from him reason and emotion, all curiosity.

"Is he—" Eddie asked huskily.

"Gone," Dr. Minacorn said. His voice came out strong now and he knew he'd be all right in a minute. Because it wasn't now, but sometime in the far-distant future, sometime so remote that it would be another Minacorn who would meet it—an old Minacorn, philosophical and tired.

He sat in his chair and stared at Calhoun. Minacorn was so glad to be alive that he couldn't move. Death was remote again, imperson-

al. Tomorrow he would never have been afraid. Even now he was thinking that this way wasn't so bad. Calhoun could never have felt a thing. Just—

After the husky nurse saw that the waiting-room was deserted she continued down the hall to Miss Biddle's desk.

"Where's the big fellow?" she asked. "Calhoun?"

Miss Biddle stood up and stretched. It was proving a long night.

"You mean the cop—the legalized gangster? He went out with Windy Minnie."

"So he is a cop," the husky nurse said. "You know he really looks like one."

"Big and dumb," Miss Biddle yawned, "but kind of nice though. You should have heard the lecture Minnie gave me about them. I can't remember half of it."

"Who ever could?" the husky nurse said. "Any time after three you can send this Calhoun up. His wife's had a boy. I guess he'll want to see it."

"I guess he will," Miss Biddle said.



Jack London

The Master of Mystery

An off-trail but pure detective story by the famous author of THE CALL OF THE WILD, THE SEA WOLF, THE IRON HEEL, and MARTIN EDEN—a tale of witchcraft, devils, and ancient sorceries, of how a shaman-sleuth solved the mystery of the stolen Eskimo blankets in primitive Thlinket Land. . .

THERE WAS COMPLAINT IN THE village. The women chattered together with shrill, high-pitched voices. The men were glum and doubtful of aspect, and the very dogs wandered dubiously about, alarmed in vague ways by the unrest of the camp and ready to take to the woods on the first outbreak of trouble. The air was filled with suspicion. No man was sure of his neighbor, and each was conscious that he stood in like unsureness with his fellows. Even the children were oppressed and solemn, and little Di Ya, the cause of it all, had been soundly thrashed, first by Hooniah, his mother, and then by his father, Bawn, and was now whimpering and looking pessimistically out upon the world from the shelter of the big overturned canoe on the beach.

And to make the matter worse Scundoo, the shaman, was in disgrace and his known magic could not be called upon to seek out the evildoer. Forsooth, a month gone,

he had promised a fair south wind so that the tribe might journey to the *potlatch* at Tonkin, where Taku Jim was giving away the savings of twenty years; and when the day came, lo, a grievous north wind blew, and of the first three canoes to venture forth, one was swamped in the big seas, and two were pounded to pieces on the rocks, and a child was drowned. He had pulled the string of the wrong bag, he explained—a mistake. But the people refused to listen; the offerings of meat and fish and fur ceased to come to his door; and he sulked within—so they thought—fasting in bitter penance; in reality, eating generously from his well-stored cache and meditating upon the fickleness of the mob.

The blankets of Hooniah were missing. They were good blankets, of most marvelous thickness and warmth, and her pride in them was greatened in that they had been come by so cheaply. Ty-Kwan, of the next village but one, was a

fool to have so easily parted with them. But then, she did not know they were the blankets of the murdered Englishman, because of whose take-off the United States cutter nosed along the coast for a time, while its launches puffed and snorted among the secret inlets. And not knowing that Ty-Kwan had disposed of them in haste so that his own people might not have to render account to the Government, Hooniah's pride was unshaken. And because the women envied her, her pride was without end and boundless, till it filled the village and spilled over along the Alaskan shore from Dutch Harbor to St. Mary's. Her totem had become justly celebrated, and her name known on the lips of men wherever men fished and feasted, what of the blankets and their marvelous thickness and warmth. It was a most mysterious happening, the manner of their going.

"I but stretched them up in the sun by the sidewall of the house," Hooniah disclaimed for the thousandth time to her Thlinket sisters. "I but stretched them up and turned my back; for Di Ya, dough-thief and eater of raw flour that he is, with head into the big iron pot, overturned and stuck there, his legs waving like the branches of a forest tree in the wind. And I did but drag him out and twice knock his head against the door for riper understanding, and behold, the blankets were not!"

"The blankets were not" the women repeated in awed whispers.

"A great loss," one added. A second, "Never were there such blankets." And a third, "We be sorry, Hooniah, for thy loss." Yet each woman was glad in her heart that the odious, dissension-breeding blankets were gone.

"I but stretched them up in the sun," Hooniah began again.

"Yea, yea," Bawn spoke up, wearied. "But there were no gossips in the village from other places. Wherefore it be plain that some of our own tribespeople have laid unlawful hand upon the blankets."

"How can that be, O Bawn?" the women chorused indignantly. "Who should there be?"

"Then has there been witchcraft," Bawn continued stolidly enough, though he stole a sly glance at their faces.

"*Witchcraft!*" And at the dread word their voices hushed and they looked fearfully at each other.

"Ay," Hooniah affirmed, the latent malignancy of her nature flashing into a moment's exultation. "And word has been sent to Klok-No-Ton, and strong paddles. Truly shall he be here with the afternoon tide."

The little groups broke up and fear descended upon the village. Of all misfortune, witchcraft was the most appalling. With the intangible and unseen things only the shamans could cope, and neither man, woman, nor child could know un-

til the moment of ordeal whether devils possessed their souls or not. And of all shamans Klok-No-Ton, who dwelt in the next village, was the most terrible. None found more evil spirits than he, none visited his victims with more frightful tortures. Even had he found, once, a devil residing within the body of a three-months babe—a most obstinate devil which could only be driven out when the babe had lain for a week on thorns and briars. The body was thrown into the sea after that, but the waves tossed it back again and again as a curse upon the village, nor did it finally go away till two strong men were staked out at low tide and drowned.

And Hooniah had sent for this Klok-No-Ton. Better had it been if Scundoo, their own shaman, were undisgraced. For he had ever a gentler way, and he had been known to drive forth two devils from a man who afterward begat seven healthy children. But Klok-No-Ton! They shuddered with dire foreboding at thought of him, and each one felt himself the centre of accusing eyes, and looked accusingly upon his fellows—each one and all, save Sime, and Sime was a scoffer whose evil end was destined with a certitude his successes could not shake.

“Hoh! Hoh!” he laughed. “Devils and Klok-No-Ton!—than whom no greater devil can be found in Thlinket Land.”

“Thou fool! Even now he com-

eth with witcheries and sorceries; so beware thy tongue, lest evil befall thee and thy days be short in the land!”

So spoke La-lah, otherwise the Cheater, and Sime laughed scornfully.

“I am Sime, unused to fear, unafraid of the dark. I am a strong man, as my father before me, and my head is clear. Nor you nor I have seen with our eyes the unseen evil things—.”

“But Scundoo hath,” La-lah made answer. “And likewise Klok-No-Ton. This we know.”

“How dost thou know, son of a fool?” Sime thundered, the choleric blood darkening his thick bull neck.

“By the word of their mouths—even so.”

Sime snorted. “A shaman is only a man. May not his words be crooked, even as thine and mine? Bah! Bah! And once more, bah! And this for thy shamans and thy shamans’ devils! and this! and this!”

And Sime snapped his fingers to right and left.

When Klok-No-Ton arrived on the afternoon tide, Sime’s defiant laugh was unabated; nor did he forbear to make a joke when the shaman tripped on the sand in the landing. Klok-No-Ton looked at him sourly, and without greeting stalked straight through their midst to the house of Scundoo.

Of the meeting with Scundoo none of the tribespeople might know, for they clustered reverently in the distance and spoke in whispers while the masters of mystery were together.

"Greeting, O Scundoo!" Klok-No-Ton rumbled, wavering perceptibly from doubt of his reception.

He was a giant in stature and towered massively above little Scundoo, whose thin voice floated upward like the faint far rasping of a cricket.

"Greeting, Klok-No-Ton," Scundoo returned. "The day is fair with thy coming."

"Yet it would seem . . ." Klok-No-Ton hesitated.

"Yea, yea," the little shaman put in impatiently, "that I have fallen on ill days, else would I not stand in gratitude to you in that you do my work."

"It grieves me, friend Scundoo . . ."

"Nay, I am made glad, Klok-No-Ton."

"But will I give thee half of that which be given me."

"Not so, good Klok-No-Ton," murmured Scundoo, with a deprecatory wave of the hand. "It is I who am thy slave, and my days shall be filled with desire to befriend thee."

"As I—"

"As thou now befriendest me."

"That being so, it is then a bad business, these blankets of the woman Hooniah?"

The big shaman blundered tentatively in his quest, and Scundoo smiled a wan, gray smile, for he was used to reading men, and all men seemed very small to him.

"Ever hast thou dealt in strong medicine," he said. "Doubtless the evildoer will be briefly known to thee."

"Ay, briefly known when I set eyes upon him." Again Klok-No-Ton hesitated. "Have there been gossips from other places?" he asked.

Scundoo shook his head. "Behold! Is this not a most excellent mucluc?"

He held up the foot-covering of sealskin and walrus hide, and his visitor examined it with interest.

"It did come to me by a close-driven bargain."

Klok-No-Ton nodded attentively.

"I got it from the man La-lah. He is a remarkable man, and often have I thought . . ."

"So?" Klok-No-Ton ventured impatiently.

"Often have I thought," Scundoo concluded, his voice falling as he came to a full pause. "It is a fair day, and thy medicine be strong, Klok-No-Ton."

Klok-No-Ton's face brightened. "Thou art a great man, Scundoo, a shaman of shamans. I go now. I shall remember thee always. And the man La-lah, as you say, is remarkable."

Scundoo smiled yet more wan

and gray, closed the door on the heels of his departing visitor, and barred and double-barred it.

Sime was mending his canoe when Klok-No-Ton came down the beach, and he broke off from his work only long enough to load his rifle ostentatiously and place it near him.

The shaman noted the action and called out: "Let all the people come together on this spot! It is the word of Klok-No-Ton, devil-seeker and driver of devils!"

He had been minded to assemble them at Hooniah's house, but it was necessary that all should be present, and he was doubtful of Sime's obedience and did not wish trouble. Sime was a good man to let alone, his judgment ran, and a bad one for the health of any shaman.

"Let the woman Hooniah be brought," Klok-No-Ton commanded, glaring ferociously about the circle and sending chills up and down the spines of those he looked upon.

Hooniah waddled forward, head bent and gaze averted.

"Where be thy blankets?"

"I but stretched them up in the sun, and behold, they were not!" she whined.

"So?"

"It was because of Di Ya."

"So?"

"Him have I beaten sore, and he shall yet be beaten, for that he brought trouble upon us who be poor people."

"The blankets!" Klok-No-Ton bellowed hoarsely, foreseeing her desire to lower the price to be paid. "The blankets, woman! Thy wealth is known."

"I but stretched them up in the sun," she sniffed, "and we be poor people and have nothing."

He stiffened suddenly, with a hideous distortion of the face, and Hooniah shrank back. But so swiftly did he spring forward, with inturned eyeballs and loosened jaw, that she stumbled and fell groveling at his feet. He waved his arms about, wildly flagellating the air, his body writhing and twisting in torment. An epilepsy seemed to come upon him. A white froth flecked his lips, and his body was convulsed with shiverings and tremblings.

The women broke into a wailing chant, swaying backward and forward in abandonment, while one by one the men succumbed to the excitement. Only Sime remained. He, perched upon his canoe, looked on in mockery; yet the ancestors whose seed he bore pressed heavily upon him, and he swore his strongest oaths that his courage might be cheered. Klok-No-Ton was horrible to behold. He had cast off his blanket and torn his clothes from him, so that he was quite naked, save for a girdle of eagle claws about his thighs. Shrieking and yelling, his long black hair flying like a blot of night, he leaped frantically about the circle. A certain

rude rhythm characterized his frenzy, and when all were under its sway, swinging their bodies in accord with his and venting their cries in unison, he sat bolt upright, with arm outstretched and long, talon-like finger extended. A low moaning, as of the dead, greeted this and the people cowered with shaking knees as the dread finger passed them slowly by. For death went with it, and life remained with those who watched it go.

Finally, with a tremendous cry, the fateful finger rested upon Lalah. He shook like an aspen, seeing himself already dead, his household goods divided, and his widow married to his brother. He strove to speak, to deny, but his tongue clove to his mouth and his throat was sanded with an intolerable thirst. Klok-No-Ton seemed half to swoon away, now that his work was done; but he waited with closed eyes, listening for the great blood-cry to go up—the great blood-cry, familiar to his ear from a thousand conjurations, when the tribespeople flung themselves like wolves upon the trembling victim. But there was only silence, then a low tittering from nowhere in particular which spread and spread until a vast laughter welled up.

“Wherefore?” he cried.

“Na! Na!” the people laughed. “Thy medicine be ill, O Klok-No-Ton!”

“It be known to all,” Lalah stutered. “For eight weary months

have I been gone afar with the Siwash sealers, and but this day am I come back to find the blankets of Hooniah gone ere I came!”

“It be true!” they cried with one accord. “The blankets of Hooniah were gone ere he came!”

“And thou shalt be paid nothing for thy medicine which is of no avail,” announced Hooniah, on her feet once more and smarting from a sense of ridiculousness.

But Klok-No-Ton saw only the face of Scundoo and its wan, gray smile, heard only the faint far cricket’s rasping.

He brushed by Hooniah, and the circle instinctively gave way for him to pass. Sime flung a jeer from the top of the canoe, the women snickered in his face, cries of derision rose in his wake, but he took no notice, pressing onward to the house of Scundoo. He hammered on the door, beat it with his fists, and howled vile imprecations. Yet there was no response, save that in the lulls Scundoo’s voice rose eerily in incantation. Klok-No-Ton raged about like a madman, but when he attempted to break in the door with a huge stone, murmurs arose from the men and women. And he, Klok-No-Ton, knew that he stood shorn of his strength and authority before an alien people. He saw a man stoop for a stone, and a second, and a bodily fear ran through him.

“Harm not Scundoo, who is a master!” a woman cried out.

"Better you return to your own village," a man advised.

Klok-No-Ton turned on his heel and went down among them to the beach, a bitter rage at his heart, and in his head a just apprehension for his defenseless back. But no stones were cast. The children swarmed mockingly about his feet, and the air was wild with laughter and derision, but that was all. Yet he did not breathe freely until his canoe was well out upon the water, when he rose up and laid a futile curse upon the village and its people, not forgetting to specify Scundoo who had made a mock of him.

Ashore there was a clamor for Scundoo and the whole population crowded his door, entreating and imploring in confused babel till he came forth and raised his hand.

"In that ye are my children I pardon freely," he said. "But never again. For the last time thy foolishness goes unpunished. That which ye wish shall be granted, and it be already known to me. This night, when the moon has gone behind the world to look upon the mighty dead, let all the people gather in the blackness before the house of Hooniah. Then shall the evildoer stand forth and take his merited reward. I have spoken."

"It shall be death!" Bawn vociferated, "for that it hath brought worry upon us, and shame."

"So be it," Scundoo replied, and shut his door.

"Now shall all be made clear and

plain, and content rest upon us once again," La-lah declaimed.

"Because of Scundoo, the little man," Sime sneered.

"Because of the medicine of Scundoo, the little man," La-lah corrected.

"Children of foolishness, these Thlinket people!" Sime smote his thigh a resounding blow. "It passeth understanding that grown women and strong men should get down in the dirt to dream-things and wonder tales."

"I am a traveled man," La-lah answered. "I have journeyed on the deep seas and seen signs and wonders, and I know that these things be so. I am La-lah—"

"The Cheater—"

"So called, but the Far-Journeyer right-named."

"I am not so great a traveler—"

"Then hold thy tongue," Bawn cut in, and they separated in anger.

When the last silver moonlight had vanished beyond the world, Scundoo came among the people huddled about the house of Hooniah. He walked with a quick, alert step, and those who saw him in the light of Hooniah's slush-lamp noticed that he came empty-handed, without rattles, masks, or shaman's paraphernalia.

"Is there wood gathered for a fire, so that all may see when the work be done?" he demanded.

"Yea," Bawn answered. "There be wood in plenty."

"Then let all listen, for my words be few. With me have I brought Jelchs, the Raven, diviner of mystery and seer of things. Him, in his blackness, shall I place under the big black pot of Hooniah, in the blackest corner of her house. The slush-lamp shall cease to burn, and all remain in outer darkness. It is very simple. One by one shall ye go into the house, lay hand upon the pot for the space of one long intake of the breath, and withdraw again. Doubtless Jelchs will make outcry when the hand of the evil-doer is nigh him. Or who knows but otherwise he may manifest his wisdom. Are ye ready?"

"We be ready," came the multi-voiced response.

"Then will I call the name aloud, each in his turn and hers, till all are called."

La-lah was first chosen, and he passed in at once. Every ear strained, and through the silence they could hear his footsteps creaking across the rickety floor. But that was all. Jelchs made no outcry, gave no sign. Bawn was next chosen, for it well might be that a man should steal his own blankets with intent to cast shame upon his neighbors. Hooniah followed, and other women and children, but without result.

"Sime!" Scundoo called out.

"Simel!" he repeated.

But Sime did not stir.

"Art thou afraid of the dark?" La-lah, his own integrity being proved, demanded fiercely.

Sime chuckled. "I laugh at it all, for it is a great foolishness. Yet will I go in, not in belief in wonders, but in token that I am unafraid."

And he passed in boldly, and came out still mocking.

"Some day shalt thou die with great suddenness," La-lah whispered, righteously indignant.

"I doubt not," the scoffer answered airily. "Few men of us die in our beds, what of the shamans and the deep sea."

When half the villagers had safely undergone the ordeal, the excitement, because of its repression, became painfully intense. When two-thirds had gone through, a young woman, close on her first child-bed, broke down, and in nervous shrieks and laughter gave form to her terror.

Finally the turn came for the last of all to go in—and nothing had yet happened. And Di Ya was the last of all. It must surely be he. Hooniah let out a lament to the stars, while the rest drew back from the luckless lad. He was half dead from fright, and his legs gave under him so that he staggered on the threshold and nearly fell. Scundoo shoved him inside and closed the door. A long time went by, during which could be heard only the boy's weeping. Then, very slowly, came the creak of his steps to the far corner, a pause, and the creaking of his return. The door opened and he came forth. Nothing had happened, and he was the last.

"Let the fire be lighted," Scundoo commanded.

"Surely the thing has failed," Hooniah whispered hoarsely.

"Yea," Bawn answered complacently. "Scundoo groweth old, and we stand in need of a new shaman."

Sime threw his chest out arrogantly and strutted up to the little shaman. "Hoh! Hoh! As I said, nothing has come of it!"

"So it would seem, so it would seem," Scundoo answered meekly. "And it would seem strange to those unskilled in the affairs of mystery."

"As thou?" Sime queried.

"Mayhap even as I." Scundoo spoke quite softly his eyelids drooping, slowly drooping, down, down, till his eyes were all but hidden. "So I am minded of another test. *Let every man, woman, and child, now and at once, hold their hands up above their heads!*"

So unexpected was the order, and so imperatively was it given, that it was obeyed without question. Every hand was in the air.

"Let each look on the other's hands, and let all look," Scundoo commanded, "so that—"

But a noise of laughter, which was more of wrath, drowned his voice. All eyes had come to rest upon Sime. Every hand but his was black with soot, and his was guiltless of the smirch of Hooniah's pot.

A stone hurtled through the air and struck him on the cheek.

"It is a lie!" he yelled. "A lie! I know naught of Hooniah's blankets!"

A second stone gashed his brow, a third whistled past his head, the great blood-cry went up, and everywhere were people groping for missiles.

"Where hast thou hidden them?" Scundoo's shrill, sharp voice cut through the tumult like a knife.

"In the large skin-bale in my house, the one slung by the ridge-pole," came the answer. "But it was a joke—"

Scundoo nodded his head, and the air went thick with flying stones. Sime's wife was crying, but his little boy, with shrieks and laughter, was flinging stones with the rest.

Hooniah came waddling back with the precious blankets. Scundoo stopped her.

"We be poor people and have little," she whimpered. "So be not hard upon us, O Scundoo."

The people ceased from the quivering stone pile they had builded, and looked on.

"Nay, it was never my way, good Hooniah," Scundoo made answer, reaching for the blankets. "In token that I am not hard, these only shall I take. Am I not wise, my children?"

"Thou art indeed wise, O Scundoo!" they cried in one voice.

And Scundoo, the Master of Mystery, went away into the darkness, the blankets around him and Jelchs nodding sleepily under his arm.

Stuart Palmer

The Riddle of the Double Negative

Welcome to that famous she-sleuth—the spinster-schoolteacher, the super-snooper Hildegard Withers . . . Join the homicide-hunting Hildy in one of her most fetching escapades, aided and abetted by the long-suffering Inspector Oscar Piper.

TWO MINUTES AHEAD OF TIME, Miss Hildegard Withers sailed into the Inspector's office at Centre Street, and found that grizzled little leprechaun of a man stuffing cigars into his vest pockets. "Oscar," said she, "this may come as a disappointment, but we have tickets for Carnegie Hall, not a burlesque show. They don't allow smoking."

Oscar Piper grinned. "The disappointment is all yours. Carnegie is off for tonight. I gotta pay a call—on one of the slickest murderers yet unhung."

"Unhanged, Oscar," corrected the schoolma'am automatically. Then she brightened. "Who, Oscar?"

"The name won't mean anything to you, since you were out of town last summer when it happened. It's Jeda Harrigan, of café society and the theatah. Come on, I'll fill you in on the case over a plate of spaghetti." It turned out to be *spaghetti con aliche*, mixed salad and easy on the garlic, and a bottle of Chianti, as they faced each other across the

wine-stained table-cloth of a dark, aromatic little restaurant in the Village.

As soon as the food had arrived, the Inspector began, gesturing with a bread-stick. "I'll give it to you quick. If you'd been here at the time you'd probably have horned in on it. This Harrigan woman shot and killed her sweetie, who had backed her in a couple of Broadway turkeys. He was a Texas oil man, name of Kirby."

"I remember! 'Popsicle' Kirby—it was in all the papers."

"That's right. But not much got into the papers. The way we cased it, Kirby got tired and decided not to put up any more of his good dough on flop shows. We know he had booked a seat—one seat—on the Fort Worth plane for the next day, July eighth. He was packing his stuff in the big suite he had at the Larchmorris when somebody walked in and let him have a couple through the kisser. Maid found him next morning."

"No clues?"

"Nope. Nobody heard the shots, but the radio was on loud and she probably used one of those little pearl-handled jobs. The medical examiner found two .25 slugs in his brain, and decided he died around midnight, half an hour one way or the other. Nobody saw her come, nobody saw her go. Nothing to tie her to Kirby's death except that he had no other enemies—she was the only woman he ran around with."

"It's an odd thing," Miss Withers said with a wry smile. "Whenever a man and a woman are linked, either by romance or marriage, and when one of them is murdered, the police always seize upon the survivor. Sometimes that thought makes me more content with my lot as a lonely spinster."

"Uh huh. Anyway, we got nowhere questioning the girl."

"Her fatal charm wound your men around her finger?"

"Not exactly. We all came to the same conclusion, that Jedda was guilty as hell. Ain't no other answer—"

"Any other answer, Oscar. Two negatives make a positive."

"Okay, okay. Anyway, we had to let her go, with an apology for holding her. Because she had an alibi that we couldn't even start to crack. She held off for awhile and then let down her hair and admitted that she had spent the night of July seventh, from dinner time until daybreak of the eighth, in the

apartment of Bruce Tisdale, the actor who had played opposite her in the show that closed. Said she hadn't wanted to come right out and say it because Tisdale was married and his wife was off on a tour. Jedda also claimed that they were only playing gin-rummy."

"Unlikely, but possible. Go on."

"We kept Jedda in my office while one of the boys went out and quizzed Tisdale. He denied everything at first, and then when he heard that Jedda was down at Headquarters on a murder rap he broke down and made a clean breast of it. Yes, she'd been there all night. He only asked that it be kept as quiet as possible. So—"

"So Jedda must be a real siren, if a man would perjure himself and risk wrecking his marriage just to help her out."

"Never underestimate the power of a woman, as the ads say. She's got plenty of what it takes. All the same, suspecting and proving are two different prepositions. . . ."

"Propositions, Oscar."

"Okay, okay. Anyway a jury will always believe a witness who testifies under pressure to something which reflects unfavorable on himself. If Tisdale had volunteered his story, trying to clear her, that would have been something else. But it had to be dragged out of him. So we turned her loose and started over again. One theory was that Kirby had been killed by a hotel prowler he surprised in his room,

but those sneaks don't kill as a rule and if they do they don't use a pea-shooter. So there you are. Of course we keep an eye on the Harrigan dame; we also let her know it."

"Oscar, is the Homicide Squad using psychological methods?"

"Something like that. Maybe it's time. You've said yourself that murderers are always under constant strain, trying to act innocent. It isn't easy to keep on playing a part."

"Unless one is an actress."

"According to the critics, Jedda Harrigan is the worst actress on the American stage. But judge for yourself. She phoned to ask that I drop in tonight, and if you like you can come along and play stenographer."

"I like," said Miss Withers firmly. "Things have been so dull lately that I welcome any case, even a warmed-over one from last summer. Only if you ask my candid opinion, Jedda didn't ask you over to hear her confess."

It was a sound guess. Jedda Harrigan received them in her small but beautifully appointed apartment on lower Park, and almost at once went into the role of injured innocence. She was wearing a filmy tea-gown, of an off-Dubonnet shade, which was a striking contrast to her dark brown eyes and straight ash-blond hair, cut page-boy style. Her age might have been

anywhere between twenty-two and thirty, Miss Withers decided. But of course the room was illuminated with amber lamps as flatteringly soft as candlelight. "Even I could pass for forty tonight," the school-teacher told herself. "In the dark, with the light behind me."

Jedda flung herself down on the over-size divan, facing the Inspector, and leaving Miss Withers to find a hard mahogany chair. "I'd crack out the drinks," she began, "but I know you wouldn't take one, Inspector. They say that the police never accept anything, not even a cigarette, from anyone they suspect. What I want to know is this, Inspector: how long is it going on?"

Piper opened his mouth, but Jedda was quicker. "Don't say you don't know what I mean, because you do. How long am I to be persecuted?"

"Now, now, Miss Harrigan. The Department doesn't—"

"I'm just sick and tired of those beefy detectives you have following me just to make me miserable. Where do they come from, Central Casting? They all could double for Ed Gargan or Bill Bendix, and I don't think one of them could pour water out of an overshoe with directions printed on the heel."

Miss Withers, bent over her notebook, choked for a moment, and the Inspector glared at her.

"I'm asking for a showdown because this is important to me," Jed-

da went on. "I didn't shoot Mr. Kirby. Why should I shoot the goose that wrote the golden checks? If you do think I killed him, and want to try and prove it, then arrest me and let me stand trial. I'll promise you that I'll make you and the D.A. look like Keystone cops. And if you don't think I killed him, then call off your bloodhounds. You see, I happen to have a very important decision to make this week. You probably know that after Mr. Kirby's death they found that I was one of his insurance beneficiaries. He wanted me to be taken care of—"

"Looks like he needn't have worried," said Piper dryly, with a glance around the apartment. "So Kirby expected something to happen to him?"

"Not at all. He was the jolly type, with no enemies. But he did fly a lot, and accidents do happen. Lots of people buy insurance as an investment. The amount is only twenty-five thousand, and my legal adviser, who also happens to be a personal friend . . ."

"Just a minute," cut in Miss Withers. "Didn't catch the name."

Something wary and defensive flashed in the dark brown eyes, and the smooth forehead was etched with tiny, wondering wrinkles. Then Jedda smiled coolly. "I didn't mention it. But it's Malcolm Browne, with an *e*. Browne, Hollis and Browne, Empire State Building. Anyway, Mal wants me to

bring suit against the insurance company. It seems that when there is any question about a death they always hold up the payment pending suit. But while I'm under police suspicion for killing poor Popsicle, I mean Mr. Kirby, then I'm not going to sue. Would you?"

She edged closer to the Inspector, so that he almost sneezed at the reek of something expensive in perfumes. "As I said, this has got to be a showdown, Inspector Piper. I want you to announce publicly that I'm completely in the clear on the Kirby death, or else—"

"Or else what?" The Inspector's tone had rocks in it.

"Or else I'll go to the Commissioner and the Mayor and the newspapers. Hounding an innocent girl just because you can't find any other suspect!"

Piper shook his head. "Nothing like that. But we're keeping the Kirby case in the Open file until it's broken, sister."

"I don't care where you keep it. But I want the heat taken off me by Monday morning. If you don't, I—I'll hire the Pinkerton people to solve your murder for you, and you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

The Inspector removed his cigar from his mouth and stared at it. Then he nodded to Miss Withers, and arose. "I see your point of view, Miss Harrigan. We'll see what we can do."

"Never heard you so quiet," Pi-

per said to Miss Withers as they rode down in the elevator.

"I wanted to listen, and watch her. It occurs to me that many times in my life I've been talking when I should have been listening. Oscar, that girl is either innocent or she's a better actress in person than on the stage. Of course, she could commit a murder. She belongs to the Cat People—"

"The *what* people?"

"It's a hobby of mine, classifying people according to the animal they most resemble in temperament. You, Oscar, are a terrier. I, in spite of the wisecracks that some people make about my appearance, am not of the Horse People, I'm more of the Magpie type, inquisitive and alert."

The Inspector restrained himself with visible effort. "What's this got to do with the case at hand? Come on, Hildegard—I'm really in a spot. If she does what she threatens—"

"I think she will. She has the daring, the poise and selfish cruelty of her type. She caught you off base by putting her cards on the table—which is a little mixed, but you know what I mean. Of course, there is always a chance that she isn't guilty."

"I'll bet my badge that she is."

"In spite of Tisdale's alibi?"

"It's only in the movies that the most unlikely person is guilty. Jedda had motive—two motives, hurt pride and money. She had opportu-

nity—he would have admitted her to his suite, maybe she even had a key. It's as plain as the nose on your face—"

"Which is very plain, indeed, eh? Oscar, have you ever thought of working on this Tisdale person?"

"To bust the alibi?"

"Possibly, though that wasn't quite what I meant. If Tisdale loved Jedda enough to lie for her, why mightn't he have been the one to kill his rival? And it was Jedda who was making a false alibi for him—"

"You're just trying it the hard way. No, Hildegard—" and here the Inspector flung his cigar at a plate-glass window, where it hung for a moment still smoking—"there ain't no use."

"Any use."

The Inspector ignored her. "Tisdale told a straight story, and while I don't believe him, any jury would. I've been waiting for Jedda to make a mistake, but she's too clever."

"Murderers are usually too clever. And there's still time for her to make a mistake, given a little help. Well, good night, Oscar." With a wave of her glove, the schoolteacher descended into the bowels of the Seventh Avenue subway.

"I was going to see you home," the Inspector called after her. But Miss Withers had no intention whatever of going home. Twenty minutes later she was ringing a doorbell in the lobby of the 57th Street studio building where Bruce

Tisdale lived. The latch clicked and she went up the stairs wondering just what she would say to the chivalrous actor under these somewhat delicate circumstances.

But her worry was wasted. The door of the apartment was opened by a slight, elderly Chinese, his face as wrinkled as a cold-storage apple in May. He was wearing a suit of pinstripe worsted, which in spite of the neat darn on one elbow still smacked of Savile Row. "Very sorry but Mist Tisdale away out of town somewhere I don't know," he announced in a soft tenor sing-song.

Miss Withers hesitated. "Are you a friend of his?"

The wrinkled face lighted up with a broad toothless grin. "I'm Fong, Mist Tisdale's boy. You make mistake, because I not wearing white jacket, I wearing boss's old suit like always when I have night off. Just leaving."

"I see," said Miss Withers, producing a five dollar bill. "Have you any idea where I can locate Mr. Tisdale? Any out-of-town relatives he might be visiting?"

The "boy" chuckled again. "He has aunt Mis Allen in Ga'den City Lon Giland. Plenty old aunt, about like you. But I don't think he visit her when he goes away for weekend, not Mist Tisdale."

"He has a good many lady friends, then?"

The wrinkled face settled into an impassive Oriental mask. Miss

Withers saw that it was time to try a different approach. "Confidentially, Mr. Fong, I am an investigator."

"You mean a detective, like Charlie Chan?"

"Er—yes, somewhat. Were you working for Mr. Tisdale last summer, at the time when—well, around July seventh?"

The apple-face bobbed twice.

"There was a murder committed that night. And a lady called on Mr. Tisdale, a Miss Harrigan. Do you remember what time she arrived—it must have been very late."

The apple-face moved sidewise. "Sorry. When Mist Tisdale expecting company he give me night off for play fan-tan."

"But was she—I mean, did you serve breakfast for two next morning?"

"Police ask me that too. But nobody here when I come home. But I tell you one thing, I know when Mist Tisdale entertain lady, he leave ashtrays dirty and plenty champagne bottles in kitchen. And I have to clean lipstick off his beautiful white silk dressing gown, much trouble."

"And you had that kind of trouble next morning, the eighth of July?"

He nodded. "Sure Mike."

"And you told the police?"

"Police don't ask. Why tell?"

Miss Withers thanked him and went down the stairs, somewhat

disappointed. She had counted on breaking this impasse through what was presumably its weakest link. Or did impasses have links? She wasn't sure. She wasn't sure of anything except that she might as well go home and sleep on it.

"It isn't right," she observed to her tank of tropical fish as she turned out the light over their green wonderland and prepared for bed by giving her hair a hundred strokes. "Fate ought to take a hand."

By four o'clock next afternoon it appeared that Fate had done exactly that. As the Inspector was running through some routine reports on his desk he suddenly let out a whoop. "Look at that!" he cried, shoving a piece of paper before the surprised round face of the lieutenant in his outer office.

"What's so funny about another Missing Person, sir?"

"Nothing—except that this Missing Person is Bruce Tisdale, the pint-sized ham actor who went Jedda Harrigan's alibi."

"Oh, I get it. Say, Inspector, there was something else on him, just came in. Let's see—yeah, here it is. 'Positive identification body of Bruce Tisdale, age 34, listed Missing Person this date, made Bellevue Morgue by nearest relative, Mrs. John Allen, Lenox Apartments, Garden City . . .'"

"There goes Jedda's alibi," Piper said thoughtfully. "Okay, give it to the newspaper boys."

When the Inspector dropped in on Miss Withers a little later that evening, interrupting her in the middle of her dinner dishes, he found that she had already heard the news over the radio. "Very unfortunate, isn't it Oscar?"

"Unfortunate? For Tisdale, I guess. Nobody enjoys getting run over by a ten-ton truck. Funny angle, Tisdale being over on the East Side in ragged clothes. Looks like he was hiding out."

"Mmmm," said Miss Withers. "I meant that it was unfortunate in regard to the Harrigan affair. Now the fake alibi that Tisdale gave her can never be broken. . . ."

"That's where you're wrong. Tisdale never had to *swear* to that alibi, either in police court or anywhere else. He didn't even sign a statement, as it turned out. Thought I told you. So the thing is just hearsay—and to have a detective in court say that Tisdale said Jedda spent the night with him isn't a tenth as strong as to have Tisdale there to say it before the jury. Jedda's position is mighty, mighty shaky—"

Just then the telephone shrilled, and Miss Withers put down the dishcloth to answer. "Oh, it's for you, Oscar," she said. "Sounds like your office."

The Inspector barked his name into the instrument, and then listened. "Okay, be right down." He hung up and turned to Miss Withers. "St. Patrick's Day-in-the-morn-

in', but listen to this! Jemma Harri- gan is down at my office with her lawyer, *wantin' to make a confes- sion!*"

"Beware of the Greeks . . ." said Miss Withers. "But let us go, Oscar. This is one confession I didn't expect."

It was even more unexpected than that. They found Jemma sitting in the outer office at Centre Street, her gloved hand crooked in the elbow of a broad-shouldered giant of a man in rough tweeds. Malcolm Browne, of Browne, Hollis and Browne, carried a neat black-leather brief-case as a badge of his profession, but otherwise he looked as if he would be more at home in the Racquet Club than in the Court of General Sessions.

"Come on inside," said the Inspector shortly. "I'll get a police stenographer to take this down, and she can sign it later."

Mr. Browne agreed, in clipped Harvard accents. "Of course, this is a very regrettable situation, but I'm sure that when you understand you'll be sympathetic—"

"We're terribly sympathetic down here when anybody confesses to a murder," the Inspector told him.

Jemma cried: "Murder? Who said anything about murder?"

"All right, what is it? Did you park in front of a fire-plug?"

Jemma's hand slid softly into the palm of the handsome attorney. "I'll tell him, Mal. You see, Mister Inspector, I'm confessing that I told

you a little white lie when I gave you my alibi for the time Kirby was killed. I said I spent the whole night in Bruce Tisdale's apartment. I spent the night there, but it wasn't with Bruce."

"It was I," put in Malcolm Browne gallantly and grammatically. Miss Withers nodded approvingly.

The Inspector sank wearily down behind his desk, looked at a fresh cigar, and then put it down unlighted. "Go on," he said. "We believe anything."

Jemma went on. "You see, Inspector, Mal and I have been in love a long time. We had to keep it a secret, because I was hoping that Mr. Kirby would back me in another show. You know how that is."

"And another reason for secrecy," put in the lawyer, "was that I was being taken into the firm of Browne, Hollis and Browne. My uncles would have thrown me out at the least breath of scandal. So since it was Bruce's apartment that we borrowed that night, Jemma begged him to say that he was the man. Being in show business, he lived by a much more lax code of morals, and he didn't seem to care much for his wife anyway. I think he'd have been happy to have her divorce him. And he'd been pals with Jemma for a long time. . . ."

"Such pals that after two weeks together in a flop show he was fond enough of her to give her an alibi? That doesn't hold water."

"It will hold in court," Browne said definitely. "Jedda and I will tell our story now—there's no reason for secrecy since Tisdale is dead. The publicity will be bad, but we can face it together. . . ."

"We have a license," Jedda cut in. "I guess if we're married, that will cinch it for the jury."

Malcolm Browne looked at his watch. "I guess if you're ready to take our statements, Inspector—"

The Inspector looked at Miss Withers, but she was merely smiling benignly at the happy couple. He shook his head. "Okay. Lieutenant Swarthout will take you down the hall and attend to that. I have had just about all I want to hear from you two." He leaned over his desk, resting his head on his hand.

The door closed behind the young couple, and Miss Withers came closer, sitting down on the hard chair beside his desk. "Don't be discouraged, Oscar. I believe that I have an extra ace up my sleeve. . . ."

The Inspector spat eloquently into his waste basket.

"And moreover, Oscar, I think there is somebody in your outer office. Just a moment." She crossed the room and opened the door, to admit a small, thin, very dapper man with over-long sideburns.

"It would make me very happy to learn just why I am supposed to be dead!" was his opening remark.

"Huh?" said the Inspector.

"I want to know why the Police Department released information to the newspapers and the radio, saying that I had been killed in a traffic accident on First Avenue this forenoon."

"Oscar, I do believe this is Mr. Bruce Tisdale," Miss Withers put in. "I think I recognize him from his stage appearances. . . ."

Tisdale made a short bow, and appeared a little mollified. The Inspector shook hands. "Funny thing Tisdale, but your family had reported you missing. And your aunt came to the morgue, identified a body—"

Tisdale snorted. "My one and only aunt broke her back in an adagio act fifteen years ago, and hasn't been out of a wheel-chair since. Believe me, I'm going to see that somebody loses his job over this mistake." The actor was working himself up into a big scene. "I am going to take steps."

"Before Mr. Tisdale takes too many steps, he ought to know that he is under arrest, hadn't he?" Miss Withers smiled pleasantly at them both.

"That's right!" The Inspector seized upon the straw. "You're under arrest on charges of perjury, giving false information, or accessory to murder. Anyway, you gave a phony alibi to Jedda Harrigan for the night of the murder."

Tisdale shook his head. "I'll stick to that story, Inspector."

"You're stuck with it. It'll get you ten years. Hold out your hands."

Bruce Tisdale took one look at the bracelets which appeared suddenly from the Inspector's desk drawer, and then drew a deep breath as if about to make a speech. Instead, however, he fainted.

"One down," said Miss Withers happily. "And two to go."

But she helped get Tisdale into a chair, made sure that his heart still beat, and carried a lily-cup of water with which to bathe his forehead.

"When he comes to, he'll talk," the schoolteacher said.

"And right now, you'd better talk. What are you trying—" Piper broke off as there was the sound of a bright, feminine voice in the outer office. Miss Withers grabbed the Inspector's wrist, and they both turned toward the door. Jedda Harrigan appeared all of a sudden, Browne and the lieutenant in the rear.

"Oh, Inspector!" she cried. "You and your friend here have been so kind and understanding that we thought you might be willing to act as witnesses at our wedding across the street. Because Mal and I know a judge—"

Her voice went higher and higher and suddenly cracked thin and harsh as she took in the figure of Tisdale, stretched out in the chair with his legs akimbo. "What—what's that thing doing here?" Be-

side her, Malcolm Browne caught her arm warningly, but she went on. "Why did you bring that dead body here—did you think it would make me break down—"

Nobody said anything. Then the man on the chair moved feebly and opened his eyes. Jedda backed away in blank horror.

"You see?" said Miss Withers cheerily. "Mr. Tisdale will be all right. It was all a mistake."

The actor shook his head groggily. Then his eyes cleared. "Take it easy, Jedda," he said through thickened lips. "I won't let you down."

"You're sticking to your story then?" Piper pressed. "About the alibi?"

Tisdale nodded.

"Even though we have a signed statement from Miss Harrigan saying that you were not with her that night of the murder, but that she spent the night in your apartment with Malcolm Browne?"

Tisdale looked up at Jedda in shocked wonder. But he turned toward the lawyer, who quickly said "My advice to you, as your attorney—"

"You're nobody's attorney," Piper cut in. "You're mixed up in this up to your ears—"

Miss Withers joggled his elbow. "Just a minute, Oscar. Could I see you for a moment in the other office?"

"Not now, Hildegard—"

"Please, Oscar. And while we're

gone, Mr. Tisdale can think of the position he's in. Because if Mr. Browne and Miss Harrigan were together in his apartment that night, that clears both of them—and it leaves him unaccounted for."

The silence in the room was thick as thunder.

"I'm not for a moment suggesting that Mr. Tisdale would kill Mr. Kirby in order to split his insurance with Jedda, while she arranged an alibi with Mr. Browne. . . ."

On that speech Miss Withers shoved the Inspector through the door, and closed it behind them. He caught her arm and for a moment she thought that she was going to be shaken thoroughly. "You'd better keep on pulling rabbits out of that funny hat of yours," he growled. "Because you've stirred up a nest of trouble. . . ."

She nodded happily. "Purposely, Oscar."

"And why leave them in there to agree on a story? That slick lawyer will coach them, and—"

"I'm hoping he will. Or coach Jedda. He loves her, I think, and therefore he isn't going to warm up to Tisdale very much. Oscar, don't you see? The case is all solved. Jedda can't escape the fact that she has sworn to two separate alibis—she didn't commit the murder because she was with Tisdale and she didn't commit the murder because she was with Browne. That's contradictory—"

There was the sound of a short sharp cry in the inner office, and a muffled thud.

The Inspector shoved Miss Withers out of the way, and flung open the door. Bruce Tisdale was out cold on the floor, and Browne, smiling a little, was massaging his knuckles.

"There's your murderer, Inspector," he said, pointing. "He tried to get away, so I clipped him."

"Oh, he did?" The Inspector looked at the barred window, at the locked door into the hall.

"I should have suspected him from the first," Jedda cried. "You see, he was so eager to give me an alibi—I didn't realize that he was giving himself one, in reverse. . . ."

The Inspector whirled on Miss Withers. "Now look what you've done! Instead of straightening this thing out—"

But the schoolteacher was beaming. "I've just solved your murder, Oscar—or rather, let your killer incriminate herself." There was the sharp gasp from Jedda, but Miss Withers went on. "Miss Harrigan swore to two separate alibis, which cancel each other. Two negatives make a positive, remember? I'm not saying that she didn't spend the night at Tisdale's apartment, *after* she killed Kirby. The lipstick on the white silk dressing gown proves she was there. . . ."

"She was there with *me*. You can't prove differently!" Browne cut in.

"That's right, Hildegarde. This won't hold in court. . . ."

"Won't it, though? Listen to me, Oscar Piper. I can prove that it was Tisdale who was the man Jedda spent the night with—prove it by the Chinese servant who had to take lipstick off his master's white silk dressing gown." She whirled on Malcolm Browne. "And don't you try to tell me, young man, that you borrowed the dressing gown just to be comfortable—*because no six-foot-two husky like you could wear a dressing gown that fitted a little shrimp like Tisdale!*"

Jedda jerked away from her fiancé, and the snarl on her face made Piper think that there might be something in the Cat People theory after all. "You fool!" she cried, and moved toward Tisdale.

"When he comes to, Tisdale will be a willing witness. He'll be delighted to tell us all about how you arrived at his apartment late that night and begged him for an alibi.

Probably you said you'd found Kirby murdered—and was afraid you'd be suspected. . . ."

"I'll say it now—they can't frame me," grunted the man on the floor. "I hope she goes to the Chair. . . ."

"There's a good chance of it," Piper told him. "And both of you men will draw about ten to fifteen years for perjury and accessories after the fact. That'll be all—"

There was a little more, however, as Jedda flung herself toward Miss Withers, with long fingernails, but eventually the prisoners were taken away, and the Inspector and Miss Withers were alone.

"I believe I'd like a glass of water," she said weakly.

"And I believe I'd like an explanation of how Tisdale's aunt from Long Island climbed out of her wheel-chair to identify a body at Bellevue. . . ."

Miss Withers sighed. "All right, Oscar. Just what is the penalty for impersonating an aunt?"



Hugh Pentecost

Murder Plays Through

Another of Hugh Pentecost's fine short novels revealing his particular specialty—the unusual background. This time you will follow the winter tournament trail of the golf pros, one of the toughest and most cut-throat competitions in the world of sports—and detection.

THEY CAME ALONG THE BUMPY tractor road, ten, twelve cars, headlights boring into the dark summer evening. As they got close to the eighth green at the far end of the golf course they broke out of single file—fanned out and approached the green in an irregular semicircle. People spilled out of the cars; men in white dinner jackets, women in evening clothes. They converged on the sand trap to the right of the green, voices excited. Then the voices died down, as if controlled by some invisible orchestra leader.

The picture might have been planned by a Hollywood director. A dozen sets of headlights focused on the sand trap; a figure in the trap, spreadeagled in the sand. The figure was dressed in blue slacks, a coral-pink shirt, and black-and-white golf shoes. Beside the figure lay a golf club—a sand wedge. The rustproof club head was spattered with blood.

Two men had been crouching near the edge of the trap before the cars arrived. One of them was an old, gray-haired man dressed in a shabby, nondescript tweed suit. He stared steadily at the figure in the trap, and tears ran down from his pale blue eyes and streaked his leathery cheeks. The other man was young, dressed in flannel slacks and a sports jacket. His face was white, muscles knotted along the line of his square jaw. He was swearing softly but audibly. He seemed unaware of the arrival of the cars, or that he could be heard by the people who were suddenly grouped behind him.

One of the dinner-jacketed men stepped forward and put his hand on the old man's shoulder. "There's nothing you can do here, Bob," he said.

The old man didn't move a muscle. "He was like my son," he said in a dull voice.

The younger man stood up and

faced the group. "Have you got to stand there gaping like a bunch of ghouls?" he shouted.

The man in the dinner jacket turned. "Easy, Johnny," he said.

"Can't you see he's been killed? Why haven't you called the cops?"

"We've called them, Johnny. You and Bob didn't touch anything, did you?"

"Do you have to be a doctor to see it wouldn't be any use?"

A girl detached herself from the crowd. She was small and delicately made. She had a pert, upturned nose with freckles across its bridge. She wore a strapless evening gown, and a short velvet jacket had been hastily draped over her shoulders. She reached out toward the boy called Johnny.

"Come away, Johnny," she said.

He shouted at her, "Let me alone!" Then he stumbled into the darkness, out of the wide circle of light thrown by the cars. He'd only taken half a dozen steps when they could all hear the sobbing that suddenly wracked him.

The girl hesitated, and then started after him. Someone in the crowd called to her: "Midge!"

She paid no attention.

"Your name is Johnny Yale?"

The young man stared across the table at the D.A.'s men with red-rimmed eyes. "Why aren't you out there doing something instead of grilling us? We didn't kill him!"

The old man sat beside him. Not

a muscle of his face moved, but every once in a while a tear ran out of the corners of his eyes, wetting the gray stubble on his cheeks and chin.

"You two found him. It's my job to get your story."

"We went to find him," Johnny Yale said. "They wanted him for the Calcutta pool. He was practicing—"

"In the dark?"

"His car was there. The headlights—"

"Why would he be practicing after dark?"

The old man answered, "He flubbed a shot there this afternoon. It was like him. He'd play it over a hundred times till he had it licked."

"He was one of the topnotchers, wasn't he?"

Johnny Yale looked at the D.A.'s men as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard. "You're asking me?"

"Well, wasn't he?"

Johnny drew a deep breath. "Duke Merritt was the greatest—the greatest golfer and the greatest guy—You want to know about Duke Merritt?"

"It's my job."

He shook his head slowly. "Where have you been all your life, mister?"

Johnny Yale's statement to the D.A.'s men was factual and bare. He was a golf professional. He had met Duke Merritt about six months ago in Tucson, Arizona. He was

on the winter tournament trail with the traveling pros, playing for the rich purses set up by the local chambers of commerce and businessmen's groups through the Southwest, Florida, and up the East Coast. Duke Merritt had befriended him, an unknown and inexperienced competitor. They had arrived at Mountain Grove, a new stop in the pro circuit, to play in the special tournament set up by the owner of the new resort. At 9:30 that night—

Factual and bare. It wasn't really the story at all. The real story was about a lonely, defeated kid, looking to make a living out of the only thing he knew how to do moderately well, and failing miserably because the competition was too hot, too cut-throat, too experienced.

Johnny knew now that his head had been in the clouds when he set out from California in a 1946 jalopy with less than \$200 in his pocket, half a dozen clean shirts, and a set of golf clubs, to pit himself against the topnotchers, against professionals like Duke Merritt and Hal Hamner. These men had resources; connections with sporting-goods manufacturers, clothing manufacturers, salaries from golf clubs who paid them as playing pros, exhibition dates between tournaments that brought them money.

If they didn't collect any of the tournament money one week, they could still eat, still move on to the

next town, still have their names in the sports pages of the nation's newspapers. Nobody had ever heard of Johnny Yale, ex-caddie, jobless pro. Nobody had ever heard of him, and they cared less what happened to him.

The winter trek was scarcely under way—had only reached Tucson—when Johnny knew that his hope of paying his way by competing with the big shots was about to go up in smoke. The car needed repairs. He was sleeping in it at night to avoid motel bills. The tires were wearing thin. He didn't even have the cash left to buy new golf balls. He was finished, unless he could take some part of the prize money being offered in Tucson. And at this critical moment his game had gone sour.

That morning in Tucson, standing on a tee in the practice lot, trying to discover why his drives had lost distance and were constantly fading off to the right, Johnny knew the meaning of despair.

He had hit a dozen balls off the tee, all with the disastrous fade. He stood, his eyes focused on the ground, trying to check with himself. Slow back—straight left arm—wrists cocked at the tip of the swing—start the club down with the left hand, wrists still cocked—at hip level, get the right hand into it and hit through and out.

Johnny turned. The figure standing there, smiling at him, was familiar and unforgettable. Duke

Merritt was one of the top-shots, a brilliant golfer, but perhaps more famous for his showmanship than anything else. The Duke had connections with a big national clothing manufacturer. Part of his racket was to wear clothes—gaudy and eye-catching. That morning he had on bright orange slacks, a green sports shirt, and a green plaid cap. He stood out like a Roman candle against the night sky. He had a winning, humorous smile.

"You're fighting that slice by trying to get your wrist action in too fast," he said to Johnny. "Result is you're closing the club face too soon and cutting across the ball. Try keeping the club face open. Go ahead."

Johnny teed up a ball and hit it. It went straight as a string down the center of the practice lot. Johnny turned to the Duke, beads of relieved perspiration on his forehead.

"I've been trying to figure that out for the last three days," Johnny said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't thank me," the Duke said. "It was Bob, here, who spotted it."

For the first time Johnny took his dazzled eyes off the resplendent Duke to look at the old, gray-haired man who carried the Duke's heavy golf bag.

"Bob's forgotten more about this game than most of us'll ever learn," the Duke said. "You swing the club like an ex-caddie." Johnny

nodded. "That's where I started," the Duke said. "Bob Christie, here, was the pro at that club, and taught me what little I know. Now he's my boy—travels with me all over the country. You're Johnny Yale, aren't you?"

"Yes." Johnny was flattered that the Duke knew his name.

"Good luck," the Duke said. "Got to work a few kinks out of my long irons." And he and the old man moved on down to the other end of the practice lot.

Johnny's driving that day was improved, but the pressure on him, the need to do well if he was to eat, was too great. Putts that should have dropped didn't. Good shots wound up in bad lies. At the end of the first day he was so far out of the money that he knew he was through at Tucson, through with the tournament trail. He had failed, so there was no reason to stay.

He was in the parking lot at the club, packing his few belongings in the jalopy, when old Bob Christie came around from the trunk of Duke Merritt's custom-built car with the silver body.

"How did it go, laddie?"

"Bad," Johnny said, trying to smile. "This was it. The boat sank. I'm swimming for shore. I was crazy to think I could play in this league."

"You've got a good, solid game, laddie," old Bob said. "The trouble is in your head. Tournament jitters."

"And what isn't in my pocket," Johnny said.

"Nobody wins at first," Bob said.

"I should have known that," Johnny said, "and waited till I had more to go on."

"How about a cup of coffee at the refreshment stand?"

"I've got to go," Johnny said.

"There's no virtue in being over-proud, laddie." A gnarled old hand closed on Johnny's arm. "And don't ever say you never heard of a Scot buying!"

They wandered across toward a tent that had been set up near the clubhouse to serve coffee, sandwiches, and other food. The old man talked casually about earlier days, about Walter Hagen, and the immortal Bob Jones, and Gene Sarazen, and his fellow Scots like MacDonald Smith and Long Jim Barnes. "They all had it rough to start with, laddie. Why, I can even remember when we weren't allowed to walk in the front door of a clubhouse. Stick it out a bit longer, laddie. It's a grand game. Don't let it beat you."

"Broke is broke," Johnny said.

They went toward the counter in the tent for coffee. Old Bob led the way, and it happened to be past a table where Duke Merritt sat with a man Johnny recognized as a sports writer.

The Duke saw him and waved pleasantly. "How did it go?"

Johnny turned a thumb down in a gesture of defeat.

"The boy's thinking of leaving us," Bob said.

"Broke?" the Duke asked.

"Yes."

"Something might be done about it," the Duke said, his eyes faintly narrowed.

"I might have my head examined for thinking I could make it in the first place," Johnny said.

"This is the kid I told you about—sleeping in the back of his car," the Duke said to the sports writer. "The Horatio Alger kid. You better stick around, Johnny. We can handle the slack for you for a while. The lucky ones should take care of the unlucky." He smiled at the writer. "Never know when you'll need it to come your way."

"It's a nice idea," Johnny said, "but of course it doesn't make sense."

"No back talk," the Duke said. "Take care of him, Bob."

That was how it happened. Bob Christie insisted on his taking the loan of a few bucks. The next day the Tucson paper carried a story about the "Horatio Alger kid" who was Duke Merritt's protégé. It was a story about the Duke, really, and the kind of guy he was, but people began to know who Johnny was. Johnny became part of the Duke's entourage. He didn't start to win anything at once, but the pressure eased a little. The Duke wouldn't talk money. Old Bob kept a careful account and some day Johnny could pay it back.

There was nothing Johnny wouldn't do for the Duke and old Bob. There was the day when old Bob, who always looked a little seedy, sidled up to him with an anxious frown on his face.

"I don't like to go out on the clubhouse lawn, Johnny, looking the way I do. Would you tell the Duke I need to see him about something important? He's over there talking to Mrs. Hamner."

Sue Hamner was one of the glamor items on the winter trail. It was no secret she'd been a beauty-contest winner some years back and got herself a Hollywood contract. She'd made two or three pictures, and then, to everyone's surprise, she'd married Hal Hamner and given up her career. Sue was bright and vivacious. Hal was a tall, dark, handsome fellow with huge hands and wrists. He could hit a golf ball farther than any man alive. He was a silent, dogged competitor. The surprise about the marriage lay in the fact that Hal was an uneducated boy out of the Tennessee hills. He had no conversational talents and strictly no sense of humor. Sue must have fallen for his tall good looks. Beyond that he was without charm, as far as anyone could see—sullen, with a smoldering temper.

So Johnny walked over to the bright-colored beach umbrella under which Sue Hamner and the Duke were sitting. They were talking earnestly, so Johnny hesitated

until Sue looked up and saw him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Johnny said.

"Scram," the Duke said, grinning as usual.

"It's Bob Christie," Johnny said. "He says it's important to talk to you, Duke."

The Duke looked at Johnny with narrowed eyes. "Did Bob really send you?"

Johnny felt himself flushing. "Of course he sent me," he said stiffly.

The Duke stood up. "If this is some kind of a gag—" He walked away.

Johnny couldn't make a graceful exit. "I'm awfully sorry to have interrupted," he said to Sue.

"Don't be silly." She reached up and pushed her golden hair back from her cheek with bright lacquered fingers. "You're Johnny Yale, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Going pretty rough?"

Johnny gave her a crooked grin. "It isn't all ice cream and cake. At least, it isn't for the guys in my class."

"Hal says you have a good, sound game."

"Say, from him that's something."

"Keep plugging," she said.

"Thanks," Johnny said, and turned away.

"Johnny?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You need some leather patches on the sleeves of that sports coat."

Johnny flushed. "I know."

"If you'll give it to me some day when you're out playing I'll be glad to fix it for you. I've got some old leather I bought for Hal."

A shadow fell across Sue Hamner's face. Johnny looked up, and saw her husband standing there.

"You want something, Yale?" Hal asked, in his soft, sullen voice.

"We were just chatting, Hal," Sue said quickly.

Hal Hamner turned his head slowly as if he was looking for someone else. "Okay, Yale. Run along. I want to talk to my wife."

When he had a chance Johnny spoke to Bob about it. "You sent me out there to get the Duke because you knew Hamner was going to show up, didn't you?" he said.

The old man smiled faintly. "So you saw through it, did you, laddie?"

"The way the Duke acted—"

The old man took his pipe out of his pocket and began scraping at the bowl with his penknife. "This is a strange life, lad. We never settle anywhere very long. The Duke is an attractive man, laddie, and a fine man. But he likes the ladies—likes them and leaves them. Like a sailor, he has them in every port."

"But Mrs. Hamner is different."

Bob nodded. "She's having a bad time with that man of hers. He's crazy jealous of her. He's rough with her."

Johnny remembered thinking he'd noticed a bruise on Sue Hamner's cheek one day.

"The Duke feels sorry for her," Bob said. "That's why he pays attention to her. But it could make it worse for her. I've tried to tell him. There can be trouble there if Hamner starts something with him."

Johnny was beginning to pick up a dollar here and there. His game had steadied. He was still worried about the amount that was piling up in old Bob's little black notebook, but neither Bob nor the Duke would discuss it.

"One good win, laddie, and you'll pay it back in a lump," Bob said.

It was when they reached Pinehurst, on the way north, that Midge Roper appeared on the scene. Johnny had never known a girl quite like her. She was always laughing, always gay—but somehow her gaiety seemed a little forced to him.

Old Bob explained it in part: "Sorrow can make people live in extremes, laddie. The girl is trying to forget her brother."

Ed Roper, Midge's brother, had been headline news a year ago. A great basketball star on the West Coast, Roper had been disclosed as having accepted a bribe to throw a championship game. Just before the District Attorney was ready to arrest the boy, Ed Roper had jumped from the window of his hotel room. Midge was living it down, head proud and high.

Almost at once it became apparent that she'd taken a terrific header for Duke Merritt. He seemed to go for her, too. They laughed at the same jokes, saw things in the same humorous way. She was nice to Johnny the way she might have been nice to the boy next door.

But she was mad for the Duke. Johnny tried to keep his eyes, his heart, and his mind shut. Midge Roper was the kind of girl he could have dreamed about.

Johnny had a feeling Midge could be hurt if she fell too hard for the Duke. He was glad they'd be moving on from Pinehurst in a few days. That would end it. But when the time came to head north again, Midge changed her vacation plans and followed them in her own car to the next tournament. After that they saw her at most of the tournaments. She finally came to Mountain Grove with them.

This tournament was a big one, and it offered Johnny a real chance. A man named Victor Sayles was promoting and managing a new resort which had everything: magnificent golf, swimming, horses, winter sports in season. For the grand opening Sayles had put up a \$15,000 purse for the traveling pros, with a slight difference. All the winter tournaments were medal-play events—you played against the field, your total score counting. The tournament at Mountain Grove was to be a match-play event—man to man. There would be six-

teen qualifiers, each qualifier to collect \$500. The remaining \$7,000 would be divided, 50 per cent to the winner, 30 per cent to the runner-up, and 10 per cent to each of the losing semi-finalists. Johnny figured he had a good chance to qualify. The \$500 would at least get him off the hook with the Duke, and at match play he'd have a fair chance against any of the boys. You could have a bad hole at match play and it only cost you the one hole; at medal, it would ruin your whole round.

Johnny got his first glimpse of Victor Sayles the afternoon they arrived. He was in his early forties, hair beginning to gray at the temples, expensively dressed, and with a pleasant manner. Johnny had helped carry the Duke's collection of luggage into the lobby. He had put down the bags at the front door, and he noticed Sue Hamner crossing the lobby towards the desk.

Sayles saw her and made a quick move in her direction. 'Sue!' he said.

To Johnny's surprise, Sue made an abrupt silencing gesture. Then Hamner came across the lobby. He introduced himself to Sayles and then turned to Sue: "And this is my wife, Mr. Sayles."

Sayles's face was deadpan. He bowed.

"How do you do?" Sue said, as though she'd never seen him before in her life.

Johnny wondered about it, but there was too much else on his mind for him to give it much thought at the time. It was just one of those things. He didn't even get to mention it to Bob.

This tournament was do or die for Johnny, and his first practice round on the course gave him hope. It was a long layout, with narrow fairways. If you sprayed your drives here you were in real trouble. Johnny wasn't as long off the tee as Hamner, or Ted McGrath or the Duke or a dozen others. But he was straight and true. The big boys were going to find trouble here with their long hits off the tee.

It was during that practice round that Sue Hamner finally kept her promise to sew the leather patches on Johnny's sports jacket. He gave it to her just before he was starting off the first tee. He was sitting on the bench at the tee waiting for his turn, and found himself next to Ted McGrath.

"You looking to get your ears pinned back?" McGrath asked.

"I don't get it," Johnny said.

"Hal eats little boys like you alive," McGrath said.

"Why should he want to?"

"Take a gander," McGrath said, nodding toward the clubhouse porch.

Hamner was there, talking to Sue, and even at a distance Johnny could see Hal was burned about something.

"I should have thought," McGrath said, "that after traveling with this circus for a while you'd have got the gist of that soap opera, and done your own sewing!"

Johnny was disturbed about it, but he pushed it to the back of his mind during the practice round. This was his one chance to learn the course before tomorrow's qualifying.

It was about four hours later, when he had finished his round and taken his shower, that Johnny went around to the clubhouse porch to get his jacket. Sue Hamner was sitting there, looking small and tired. Hal was in the chair next to her, staring out at the green hills. Johnny's coat rested on a little side table between them.

Johnny hesitated. Then Sue saw him. She seemed to close her eyes for a moment, and then she looked at him again. He couldn't tell if she was trying to give him any sort of signal or not. He had to have his jacket. It was the only one he owned. Uncertainly he went to them. He stood in front of them waiting for Sue to speak. She didn't. He thought of just snatching the jacket and getting out.

Then Hal Hamner turned his head. "My wife has fixed your coat," he said.

"I'm terribly grateful," Johnny said.

"You know what happens where I come from to a fellow who messes around with another man's

wife?" Hamner asked. His voice wasn't raised, but it had a carrying quality.

Johnny, suddenly scarlet, realized that other people on the porch had turned to look and listen. "I haven't been messing around with anyone," Johnny said. "Mrs. Hamner kindly offered to—"

"Mrs. Hamner seems to be a pushover for the Merritt clan," Hamner said, just a little louder.

"Hal, please!" Sue whispered.

"Mrs. Hamner is mad for anything connected with Merritt," Hamner said, even louder.

Johnny's mouth was dry inside. He felt a hot, throbbing anger, but he didn't know how to manage things without making them worse for Sue.

"I'll just say thanks and take my coat," Johnny said.

"You'll just stand there and listen," Hamner said. "Unfortunately, my wife does not know how to say 'no' to the Merritt clan, so I'll have to say it for her. Get this straight, Yale: If I ever see or hear of you so much as—"

"Something wrong here?" a quiet voice asked behind Johnny. It was Duke Merritt.

Hamner was out of his chair, as if he'd been jet-propelled. Johnny was scared, more by the suddenness of it than by any conscious fear of what was coming.

"I warned you, Merritt—" Hamner said.

"And I'm warning you," the

Duke said, undisturbed. "Nobody has any control over your private life, Hal, but we can control what you do about it in public."

Hamner lunged forward, but he never got to Duke Merritt. By that time half a dozen guys were close enough to interfere. But Johnny Yale was closest to Hammer, and he had never seen such fury.

Johnny wanted to tell Sue Hamner how sorry he was he'd gotten her in trouble, but there was no way to do it without making things worse.

The next day was the big day. There were about a hundred entries for the qualifying round, and Johnny knew he had to be one of the low sixteen if he was to get out of his long winter's trouble. It was a clear, warm day, with little or no wind. It was ideal for scoring—ideal for everybody.

Johnny found himself in a qualifying threesome with two local pros he didn't know. That was a help, in a way. He could lock himself up in his own concentration. It was going to be a long, 36-hole grind, with Johnny's dream at stake at the end of the day.

He played steadily through the morning round, and at the luncheon break found himself, including ties, among the first 35 scores on the board. Some of them would get better in the afternoon, some worse. At best, he knew he was flirting with the very outside kind of chance.

He was a late starter in the afternoon, and knew he'd be one of the last finishers. That was a disadvantage, because when he came to the last three or four holes news was bound to come out onto the course as to just exactly what score would be needed to get in. That was the way it happened. As he walked off the seventeenth green someone approached his caddie, and a moment later the caddie reported to him.

"It'll take 140 to get in, Mr. Yale," he said. "There are a lot of ties at 141 and you'd have to play off."

The mathematics of it were simple. Johnny had scored a one over par 71 in the morning. He stood on the eighteenth tee now with a par 4 for 69. But that eighteenth was one of the strongest finishing holes Johnny had ever seen. The fairway stretched straight away, narrow, heavily trapped at about the distance a good drive would carry, the rough on either side made up of heavy wire-grass. If you stayed straight you still had the second shot to play. The green was elevated, partially blind. You could see the red flag on the top of the pin, but you couldn't see the green itself—only the hummocks marking the deep traps on either side.

Johnny tried to clear his mind of anything but a picture of the smooth, unhurried swing necessary to get off the all-important drive. They had to wait, a torturing five minutes, for the threesome ahead

to get out of range. Johnny swung his driver a couple of times and finally stepped up to the ball. Slowly he drew the club head back, wrists cocked at the top of the swing. Slowly he started it down and then lashed out at the ball. He was so intent on keeping his head down that he didn't look up after his shot until he heard his caddie speak:

"A beaut, Mr. Yale. Perfect."

Far down the center on the green turf he saw the small white ball glistening in the sun. As he walked slowly out toward it he wished for old Bob's advice. Bold or careful was the problem on the next shot. On either side of the green were the white, sandy graves of a thousand hopes. In back of the green was a long, shallow trap. Too bold, and you were in it. Too careful, and you had a downhill pitch over a glass-smooth green, with only one putt left to make par.

Johnny took his two iron out of the bag, hesitated, and then exchanged it for the three. He hit the shot, firmly and crisply. It seemed to split the pin as it rose up over the hill.

He looked at his caddie. The boy moistened his lips.

"It could be just a little short, Mr. Yale."

It was just a little short—about fifteen yards. The pin was near the front edge of the green. If he pitched short, the heavy fringe of grass around the edge would stop

his ball. If he played it boldly, he might slide dangerously far past the flag. He had to be on the putting surface. He had to play it boldly.

His hands were frighteningly unsteady as he clipped at the grass tops with his eight iron. This was it. He steadied over the ball and played the pitch. It lit just on the green. For a second he thought it would bite and hold, but it began to roll over the slippery surface—roll, and roll until it was a good twenty feet past the cup.

So finally he was faced with a twenty-foot, uphill putt. He had to make it to be sure of his money. If he missed and went down on the next one he'd still have a chance on a play-off. Common caution might have suggested making sure of the play-off and not going too boldly for the twenty-footer and sliding too far past again.

A crowd circled the green, watching him. Everyone knew he had to make this putt to be certain of a place in the main event. For a moment Johnny's concentration was almost fatally broken. He looked up, and saw Midge Roper in the front rank of the crowd. She was sitting on a portable stool, and her hands were clenched tightly at her sides.

Johnny knelt down behind his ball to study the line of the putt. The green broke slightly to the right, he thought. But he couldn't play it to drift in.

He got up and moved away—and there was old Bob Christie, his face impassive, standing on the fringe of the crowd.

"Straight at the back of the cup!" That's what the Duke would have said, out loud, to the gallery, Johnny thought. He would have broken his own tension and he'd have played for the works.

Johnny took one more look at the line and then faced his ball. The putter blade went smoothly back, smoothly through. Clunk! And a roar from the crowd! He'd made it.

Johnny thought his legs wouldn't carry him off the last green after he'd holed that decisive putt. Before he could get very far, arms were around his neck and Midge Roper planted a kiss squarely on his lips.

"That was the bravest darn' putt I ever saw, Johnny," she said. "I'm proud of you. The Duke'll be proud of you."

The bulk of the crowd had moved toward the forward edge of the green to watch the next threesome coming up. Only Bob remained where he'd been standing. Johnny and Midge went over to him.

The old man gave Johnny a dour look. "Why didn't you play for the sure tie?"

"Because I'd never have won in a play-off," Johnny said. "I'm so bushed I don't have one more golf shot left in my system."

"So long as you figured it," old Bob said. His face relaxed. "It was a real good putt, laddie. The boy becomes a man."

"How about the Duke?" Johnny asked.

"He made it," Bob said grimly.

Midge filled him in: The Duke had gotten into trouble in the big trap by the eighth green. He'd wasted two shots there and had to play his head off the rest of the way in to qualify.

The locker room was a mixture of gaiety and despair. Men sat in front of some of the lockers, weary and silent. Others were grouped at the round tables at the end of the room, laughing and talking.

The Duke was there, a glass in his hand. He'd had his shower and was freshly and magnificently dressed in pale-blue slacks and a coral-pink shirt. He saw Johnny and waved. Johnny could tell by his face he didn't want to ask.

"I made it," Johnny said. "By one stroke."

"Nice going," the Duke said. "You should have seen me. I plunked one in that trap by the eighth, and I had a near unplayable lie after that. You should have seen Bob's face. So I—"

Johnny was too tired to listen. He went to his locker and slowly got out of his clothes. He went to the shower room, pausing at the water cooler for a drink. In a mirror beside the cooler he glanced at

his reflection. There were weary shadows under his eyes and lines of near exhaustion at the corners of his mouth. Also, there was a small red smear there. Midge! He felt a faint tingling sensation along his spine as he stepped under the steaming hot shower. She hadn't meant anything by it. But all the same, it had happened.

If Johnny'd had any choice he'd have gone off somewhere by himself for the evening. He couldn't afford the ten dollars for the magnificent buffet supper and unlimited drinks Victor Sayles was providing for players and guests at Mountain Grove. But all the qualifiers had been asked to stick around for the Calcutta Pool that was to be held after dinner.

A Calcutta Pool is a gambling device for those who had the real money. Each of the sixteen qualifiers would be auctioned off to the highest bidder, the money lumped in one big pool. Then the person who had bought in the eventual winner would collect half the pool, the one owning the runner-up 30 per cent, and those owning the losing semi-finalists 10 per cent each. Players like Hal Hamner and the Duke and Ted McGrath might eventually sell for as much as four or five thousand dollars. They said the total amount in the pool might amount to forty or fifty thousand.

Johnny got himself a sandwich in town and then came back to the

hotel. Several hundred people were gathered in the ballroom, dancing to a small three-piece combination. Almost everyone had dressed for the occasion.

Johnny sat on the terrace by himself, outside the open French windows. He felt unaccountably sad, considering this had been a day of triumph for him—sad like a distant train whistle in the middle of the night; like a hot horn played in a deserted night spot in a strange city. Once he caught a glimpse through the open doors of Midge dancing with a handsome young guy in a white dinner jacket. It made his loneliness more acute.

Finally the moment he had dreaded came. There was a long roll on the drums and then a jovial voice took command:

"This is the moment you've all been waiting for, ladies and gentlemen. We'll now begin the auctioning for the Calcutta Pool. If you'll just gather around the platform here and unloosen the zippers on your change purses." Voices became quieter, feet shuffled on the dance floor. "We're going to do this in reverse," the auctioneer said. "We'll save the real plums till the last. So, we'll begin with the sixteenth qualifier, Johnny Yale. Johnny, where are you?"

Slowly Johnny got up and walked to one of the open doors. He felt shabby in his old slacks and his sports jacket with the patched leather sleeves. Somebody spotted

him and pointed him out to the auctioneer, a fat man wearing a white dinner jacket with a red cummerbund around his middle and a red tie.

"Come on up here, Johnny, so the girls can have a look at you."

Johnny edged his way along the side of the room and forced himself to mount the steps to the platform.

"Hey, not bad, eh, girls?"

There was a small amount of laughter and a ripple of applause.

"Being a Princeton man myself I'd be inclined to sell a Yale short," the auctioneer said. "A joke, fellows. Meant to be a joke." More laughter, while Johnny shuffled his feet and waited. "You'd be a sucker to sell Johnny Yale short, though. He's one of the real dark horses of this event. They tell me he had a twenty-foot putt on the last green to win his place. He could have gone for a tie, but he didn't. He banged it in. That kind of a guy is going to be bad medicine in match play. . . . Well, what am I offered?"

No one made any sort of bid. Johnny felt the color mounting in his cheeks.

"Let's not stall around, ladies and gentlemen. What am I bid for Johnny Yale? Maybe Johnny won't mind my saying that he's a little hungrier than some of the big shots in this field. Look out for a hungry competitor, I always say. He's apt to eat you alive. All right, all right, let's get started. What am I bid?"

It seemed to Johnny the silence was deafening, and then a clear, small voice he'd have known anywhere broke in.

"One hundred dollars," Midge Roper said.

What a girl! She had seen his embarrassment and stepped into the breach.

"One fifty," a man's voice called out.

"—seventy-five," Midge said.

"Two hundred."

"—and fifty," Midge said sturdily.

"Three—"

The bidding between Midge and the man was brisk.

"Three fifty," Midge said.

"Four hundred."

The drawings for the next day were posted. These people knew what they were doing, Johnny realized. He was paired against Hal Hamner in the first round. The man bidding against Midge was a fellow Johnny knew would be bidding for Hal. Johnny would be a kind of insurance in case, by some miracle, he should eliminate Hal.

"Four fifty," Midge said.

Johnny wanted to tell her there was no need to go on. It had been sweet of her to bid him up to a respectable price.

"Five—"

"Five fifty," Midge said.

The man looked over at Midge. "You want him that bad, Midge honey?"

"I know his golf game."

"Six hundred," the man said.

"Six fifty," Midge countered.

The auctioneer grinned. "I'm just standing here waiting for a street car, fellows and girls. Keep playing that sweet music."

Hal Hamner's supporter, however, seemed to have cooled off.

"Do I hear seven?" the auctioneer asked. "Seven? Do I hear seven? This is a steal, ladies and gentlemen. Six hundred and fifty dollars for a qualifier in this fine field. Do I hear seven? Well, I'm mortified to have to do this, but going, for six fifty to Midge Roper—going—going—going—Sold, to Midge Roper for six hundred and fifty dollars. Thanks, Johnny. . . . And now, the next qualifier is—"

Johnny stumbled down off the platform and headed for the open French windows. It didn't take him anywhere near where Midge was standing, but he glanced her way and she waved at him. He wished she hadn't bought him. It would only add to the pressure.

Inside, the auctioneer had started on the next player. Johnny wanted to get away, but he'd taken only a few steps along the terrace when he came face to face with Victor Sayles.

"Haven't seen you to congratulate you, Johnny. You must have played fine golf."

"Thanks, Mr. Sayles."

"Have you seen Duke Merritt anywhere?" Sayles asked. "I've been trying to find him for the auc-

tion and he doesn't seem to be around."

"I haven't seen him," Johnny said, "but Bob might know where he is."

"Would you mind—?"

"I'd be glad to," Johnny said.

He headed for the pro shop, which was several hundred yards from the hotel. If old Bob hadn't turned in he'd be hanging around swapping yarns. Johnny found him, sitting on the grass back of the shop, his stubby black pipe glowing in the dark, regaling some youngsters with tales of the golf titans of another age.

"Got any idea where the Duke is?" Johnny asked. "They want him inside."

Bob took his pipe out of his mouth. "He's out on the course, practicing that trap shot on the eighth hole."

"In the dark?"

"He drove out in his car," Bob said. "Using the headlights, probably."

"Maybe we better go get him," Johnny said. "They've started the auction."

Bob got up, groaning over his old bones. One of the boys touched Johnny's sleeve. It was the youngster who was caddying for him.

"Can I go along with you, Mr. Yale?"

"Why not?" Johnny said. "My jalopy's in the parking lot."

A rough road, made by the trac-

tors and trucks used in the upkeep of the course, wound its way along the edges of the fairways, around greens, over hummocks and mounds, and out to the far end of the course. As Johnny drove his car over a rise of ground they saw the headlights of the Duke's car, focused on the trap by the eighth green.

Bob chuckled. "The Duke is a great kidder, laddie, but golf is his bread and butter and he takes it seriously. He knows what might happen if he hit that trap tomorrow. He'd be remembering what happened today. He might tighten up. So he'll play the shot a couple of hundred times now till it's automatic and he won't remember anything except how easy it is."

"But after dark!" the young caddie marveled.

"I've seen him hit a hundred balls in the dead of night," Bob said. "Never go look for them. He figured out some kind of a hitch in his swing, maybe while he was eating supper, maybe after he'd gone to bed. He wouldn't wait till the next day to see if he was right. That's why he's at the top of the heap."

The jalopy pulled up beside the silver car. Johnny couldn't see any sign of the Duke in the trap. He got out of the car, followed by Bob.

"Hey, Duke!" he called.

No answer.

There would never be any answer, because when they'd gone a

few feet farther they could see down over the rim of the trap. The Duke was there, spreadeagled in the sand, his slacks and shirt spotted with a dark red.

What happened right after that was a little confused in Johnny's mind. Old Bob had started down into the trap, but Johnny had stopped him. The terrible wound in the back of the Duke's head, obviously made by his having been brutally beaten with the sand wedge, made it clear there was nothing anyone could do to help.

Old Bob fought fiercely for a moment, trying to wrench himself free. "He may be alive, laddie, in spite of the way it looks."

In the end Johnny went down. He knew the soft white sand would never hold any footprints that would be useful to the police. He reached out and touched the Duke's arm. It was cold. For a moment Johnny thought he was going to be sick.

He crawled back up out of the sand. Old Bob saw the answer in his face. He dropped down on the edge of the trap and began to rock, gently, back and forth. No words, only the gentle rocking and finally the slow tears rolling down his old cheeks.

"Can you drive that jalopy?" Johnny asked the caddie.

The boy nodded.

"Go back to the hotel and tell Mr. Sayles what's happened. He'll know what to do."

"He—he's dead?" the boy whispered.

"Somebody killed him," Johnny said.

Sayles and the others came from the hotel after that, and Johnny stumbled away into the night. He had known he was going to break, and it was part of his anger. He had shouted at Midge because he didn't want her to see it, but she came after him anyway. Poor Midge. It was bad for her, too. She was in love with the Duke.

Johnny walked diagonally across the fairway to where the twelfth tee was located and sat down on the bench there. Midge sat down beside him. She didn't speak, but she reached out a cold hand to him and locked her fingers in his. Finally Johnny had himself under control.

"My father died when I was seventeen," he said. "He worked so hard he never had a chance to give me much time. Never, in my whole life, till the Duke came along, did anyone care what happened to me."

Midge didn't speak, and he turned to look at her. She was staring, dry-eyed, into the darkness.

"Whoever did it—" Johnny said, grimly. "Whoever did it—"

Her fingers tightened around his.

"I know how you feel," he said. "I wish there was something I could do to make it easier."

"Johnny," she whispered.

"There's only one person I ever

heard say a bad thing about him, or be unfriendly to him: Hal Hamner."

They heard a siren in the distance, and presently the State Police car came bumping out over the tractor road, red light blinking over the center of the windshield.

"You'll have to go back over there," Midge said, in a flat voice. "You found him."

Johnny nodded. "There'll be details. He had nobody but Bob and me—and you." He stood up. "I shouldn't have left Bob. It's just about the end of the world for him."

As Johnny and Midge approached the eighth green again, cars were beginning to pull away and head back for the hotel. Apparently the arrivals in the State Police car didn't want a crowd around while they examined the scene of the crime.

"You better go on back," Johnny said to Midge.

She nodded. "I'll be at the hotel when you come back. There's Paul Talbert over there. I drove out with him." She touched his arm. "Luck, Johnny."

Johnny watched her join the tall young man in the dinner jacket and get into his car. Then he moved slowly toward the green. The lights showed several men down in the sand with the body. Old Bob still sat on the edge of the trap, rocking slowly back and forth.

It was then that Johnny saw a man and a woman standing very close together behind one of the cars, talking earnestly. The woman was Sue Hamner, and for a moment Johnny thought the man was Hal. The headlight of a turning car struck the couple for an instant, and Johnny saw that the man, whose arm was around Sue's shoulder, as if he was supporting her from falling, was Victor Sayles, the manager of Mountain Grove.

The county attorney was a man named George Franks. He was businesslike and unflustered. He stood at the rim of the trap, giving instructions to the two troopers and two men in business suits who were down in the trap. One of them was a photographer. One of them was handling the blood-stained sand wedge gingerly, as though it was a high explosive. He looked up at Franks.

"Not a ghost of a chance of any decent prints," he said.

"Well, we can't have everything," Franks said dryly. "Where's the other fellow who found him?"

"Here, sir," Johnny said, and moved forward.

Franks looked him over, appraisingly, but without antagonism. "You and the old man came out here to look for him?"

"In my car," Johnny said. "There was a caddie with us named Everett. I sent him back for help."

"You're Johnny Yale?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you found him just as he is now?"

"Yes."

"Didn't touch anything?"

"I went down into the trap," Johnny said. "I figured the sand wouldn't hold any prints that would be valuable to you. I—I had to make sure."

"You moved him?"

"No. I just touched his arm. It— it was cold. From the look of the wound—"

"I should think so!" Franks said. He looked at Bob Christie. "He seems to be pretty hard hit."

"It's like losing his own kid," Johnny said. "There's nothing he can tell you, anyway. We rode out here in the car and found him. We sent Everett for help and just waited here till it came."

Franks nodded. "I'm going to ask you to make a formal statement to one of my men. You can take the old man back to the hotel and wait there if you like."

"Thanks," Johnny said. He started to turn away, and then stopped. Duke Merritt's heavy leather bag of golf clubs lay on the ground near where they were standing.

"Mr. Franks!" Johnny's voice was sharp.

"Yes?"

"Those are Duke's clubs. Have you looked them over?"

"Not specially. We're only interested in that wedge in the trap."

"That's what I mean," Johnny

said. "The Duke's wedge is there in his bag."

Franks hesitated. "So he had two wedges."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't know how much you know about tournament golf, Mr. Franks, but we're only allowed to carry fourteen clubs. If you get caught out on the course with more than fourteen you're disqualified."

"So?"

"The Duke had extra clubs, a couple of sets of 'em. But he kept them in separate bags. He'd never carry the extra wedge—if it's his—in this bag, for fear he might forget it when he started out on a round."

"So he'd take it out when he went back to the pro shop."

Johnny shook his head stubbornly. "It was a thing with him. He got caught with an extra club in his bag in a tournament—was disqualified and lost himself a thousand bucks. He made a point of it. Never put an extra club in this regular bag, even if he was just going to carry it across the street. Ask Bob."

Franks spoke to the fingerprint man, who handed up the blood-stained wedge. Franks went over to Bob and held the wedge out in front of him.

"Mr. Christie, is this Duke Merritt's sand wedge?"

Old Bob seemed to pull himself back from a long distance. His pale eyes focused on the club for a minute. "Of course not," he said.

"How can you be sure?"

"A manufacturer makes his clubs for him," Bob said. "Trade name—'Duke Merritt Irons.' Naturally, he used them. That's a Nichol club."

"He wouldn't even have a different make of club among his extras?"

"What kind of business would it be for him to use anything but a 'Duke Merritt Iron'?"

Franks looked at Johnny. "Any way to tell who owns this?"

"Sure," Johnny said. "Find a bag of Nichol clubs in the pro shop. See that number on the back of the club? It's part of a registered set."

"That ought to do it for us," Franks said. "Take the old man back to the hotel and wait for me in Sayles's office."

"I think he'll want to stay until they move the body," Johnny said.

Franks turned his head. "That looks like the ambulance coming across the fairway now."

Johnny moved away. He wanted to think. Nichol irons. He tried to remember who used them. He got a cigarette out of his pocket. As he struck a match someone touched his arm. He turned, and looked down into Sue Hamner's face.

"Could I speak to you alone a minute, Johnny?" she asked, her voice almost inaudible.

He glanced at Franks. The county attorney was busy with his two assistants. They moved a few yards away from the trap.

"I know what you must be thinking," Sue said.

"He was killed in cold blood—beaten to death."

She looked exhausted. "You're thinking of Hal. It's no secret how he felt about Duke Merritt."

He turned to her slowly. "Why did he feel that way?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "He was jealous of him, Johnny. Wrongly—but he was jealous of him."

"Wrongly?" Bitterness welled up in Johnny. "I used to think so. Now I wonder."

"Johnny!"

"You and Sayles," Johnny said. "The day we got here—I saw that you knew him. You hid it from your husband. Maybe he's right to be jealous of you. Maybe you drove him to kill the Duke."

She lifted her hand to her face as if he'd struck her. "Let the police handle it, Johnny," she whispered. "Don't point to Hal. Let them handle it. Please, Johnny!"

Before he could say anything Johnny saw Sayles come up beside Sue Hamner. "Something wrong, Mrs. Hamner?" he asked quietly.

"No—no. I was just telling Johnny how sorry I am. I—"

"It's rough on you, Johnny." Sayles said. He turned to Sue: "May I drive you back to the hotel?"

Sue looked at Johnny, pleading. Then she nodded to Sayles. "Thank you," she said.

Johnny stood there, watching them walk across the grass to Sayles's car.

Old Bob wouldn't budge until the Duke's body had been transferred to the ambulance which was to take it to the local undertaking parlor. Then he allowed Johnny to take him over to the jalopy and drive him back to the parking lot at the hotel. Neither man made any move to get out of the car once they were there. Johnny was still seething with anger as a result of his exchange with Sue Hamner. It was beyond him why she should be so anxious to protect a husband who so obviously gave her a bad time.

A long, shuddering sigh from the old man made Johnny reach out a comforting hand to him. "I don't know what to say to you, Bob."

"It's all right, laddie. We both know how we feel."

Johnny was still thinking about Sue. "There were people who didn't like him, Bob."

"The Duke was the Duke," Bob said. "He was a consistent winner, laddie, and the people who are consistent losers didn't like him. That's human nature. They envied him his ability, his personality, his way with a gallery."

"But to kill him for such a reason!"

"He had a weakness, laddie. You and I know it. The reason could have had to do with a woman."

"I'll never forget the way Hamner looked when he tried to get at the Duke yesterday," Johnny said.

Old Bob didn't answer.

"It didn't just happen by chance," Johnny said. "Duke was out there practicing, and somebody knew it. Somebody went there to see him, carrying that sand wedge. It wasn't an accident. Whoever it was went prepared."

Old Bob didn't comment. He sat there for a moment with his eyes closed. Then he pulled himself up. "We'd better be getting into the office, laddie. There'll be a lot of things to decide before the night's over."

They got out of the car and walked toward the front entrance of the hotel.

Sayles was in his office, cleaning off the top of his desk. "Franks is taking over here," he said. "He wants you to wait here?"

"Yes," Johnny said.

"Glad you got here ahead of him," Sayles said. "He's decided the tournament is to go on. He's got to hold people here till this thing is cleared up, and he thinks it would be better if they were kept busy. Because of the pool the Duke will have to be defaulted. The point is, will you be playing through Johnny?"

Johnny wanted to laugh. Play a golf tournament after this? Face Hal Hamner in the first round? "I couldn't," he said.

"He'll play through," old Bob said.

"Now, look, Bob; I—"

"You're a golfer, laddie," the old man said. "It's your business. You

came of age today as a player. When you're as old as I am you'll have learned that people die—one way or another. You have to go on. The Duke would have said the same thing to you. You know that."

Sayles picked up a last paper from the top of his desk. "You and Hamner are due to tee off at 9:15 in the morning," he said. "You don't have to decide now. We'll leave you penciled in."

"He'll play," Bob said.

Johnny turned and walked over to the window, looking out into the night. The old man walked up behind him and put his hand on his shoulder.

"We're both lost, laddie, without him. I more than you. I brought him up, you might say. It was a good day for me, Johnny, when we found you. Without you, I would have nothing left at all."

"You can decide it later," Sayles said. He started for the door, and hesitated there. "You've known the Duke almost all his life, Mr. Christie."

"Since he was twelve," Bob said.

Sayles took a cigarette from his case and tapped it on the back of his hand. "Did he ever mention me?"

Bob's forehead narrowed in a scowl of concentration. "Not that I remember, Mr. Sayles. Did you know him from somewhere else?"

"Not exactly," Sayles said. "Of course I'd seen him play."

"He'd not be likely to remember you from that."

"I just thought that possibly, in connection with this tournament—"

"I never heard your name until we signed up here yesterday," Bob said.

"I was just wondering," Sayles said. He lit his cigarette. "If there's anything I can do for either of you . . ." He turned and went out.

Johnny stood there, remembering the picture of Sayles and Sue Hamner caught in the headlights of a turning car. If he didn't know the Duke, why should the Duke have mentioned him.

Before he could discuss it with Bob, Frank's assistant arrived and sat them down in two big chairs near the desk. He poised a pencil over a yellow pad. There was something so impersonal about it that Johnny's anger rose to the surface.

"Your name is Johnny Yale?" the man asked.

"Why aren't you out there, doing something, instead of grilling us?" Johnny asked hotly. "We didn't kill him!"

"You two found him," the man said. "It's my job to get your story."

It took about fifteen minutes. Johnny was just signing his name under Bob's when Franks himself appeared. He seemed excited and pleased.

"We found out who owns this wedge," he said, holding up the murder weapon.

"Who?" Johnny asked eagerly.

"It was stupid of all of us not to recognize at the time that it was a

light club—a woman's club," Franks said.

"A woman!"

"Yes," Franks said casually. "A girl they call Midge Roper."

Johnny stood there, still holding the pen with which he'd signed the statement. *Midge!*

"That's crazy," he said. "She was in love with him."

Franks gave him a quizzical look. "I didn't say she did it. I said it was her sand wedge. You know her?"

"Of course I know her. She's been following along with us the last few tournaments. She was all out for the Duke! She wouldn't have harmed him."

"Okay," Franks said. "Take it easy. I just said it was her wedge."

Old Bob spoke up: "There's over two hundred sets of clubs stored in the pro shop, mister," he said. "It happens I put Midge's clubs away for her myself this afternoon. She'd been practicing. She wanted to watch Johnny, here, play up the eighteenth and I took her clubs and put 'em away for her. It's just a mischance the murderer took her club."

"All right, fellows; don't shoot," Franks said. "We're just feeling our way, trying to get some facts to work with."

"I can give you facts," Johnny said. "I can—"

He didn't finish, because just then the office door opened and a State Trooper came in, escorting Midge. She gave Johnny a quick,

half-frightened look, and then confronted Franks. In spite of her heavy sun tan Johnny could see that the color had drained from her face.

"You two can go," Franks said to Johnny. "You'll need some rest if you're going to play in the morning."

"I'd like them to stay," Midge said to Franks, without looking around. "If you have no objections —"

Franks smiled reassuringly. "Sure thing. This is quite informal at the moment, Miss Roper." He picked up the sand wedge. "Recognize this?"

"Is that—is it the one that—?"

"Yes."

"It looks like mine," Midge said slowly. "It's like mine."

"Could you identify it by the registration number?"

"Registration number?"

"It's from a matched set, Miss Roper. It has a registration number, in case you wanted to replace it."

"I never even noticed it," she said.

"Nobody ever does," Johnny broke in. "I've got a registered set, but I haven't got the faintest idea what the number is. It's written on my insurance policy, I guess."

"If I told you it is from your set, Miss Roper?"

"Then I guess it's mine. It's exactly like mine."

Franks leaned against the desk, studying her, waiting.

"What do you want me to say, Mr. Franks?" she asked.

"Johnny tells me that you and Duke Merritt were—shall we say, engaged?"

"That's not true," Midge said, looking straight at him.

"Well, then, you were in love with him?"

"No."

"Just what was your relationship?" Franks asked, a little less friendly.

"Suppose I refuse to answer that?"

Franks smiled again. "Why should you, Miss Roper?"

She never took her eyes from his face. "What's the phrase? On the grounds that it might incriminate me?"

"Midge!" Johnny protested.

"Keep quiet, Johnny," she said, without turning her head.

Franks took a cigarette out of his pocket and tapped it on the back of his hand. "You're not under arrest, Miss Roper. You can do as you please about it—for the moment."

"The script went wrong, you see," Midge said, in a small voice.

"The script?"

"I should have been the—the one out there in the trap," Midge said.

"Go on—if you care to, Miss Roper," Franks said.

"I—I was out to get him," Midge Roper said. "If he had found out—"

"Get him?"

"He was a heel, Mr. Franks," Midge said. "A low-grade, black-mailing heel!"

Johnny felt as though he were in

another world, unable to believe what he heard. Suddenly it came tumbling out of her, and it was as if she was talking about somebody he'd never known. Certainly not the gay, laughing, kind-hearted Duke.

She spoke of her brother, and with the mention of Ed Roper's name the room grew quiet.

"I was with Ed less than an hour before he died," Midge said, in a flat, colorless voice. This, it seemed, was a pain she had learned to control. "He had wired me that he was in trouble, and I'd flown out to the coast. But because he was young and ashamed of himself he had delayed getting in touch with me, and I got there too late to help him. He had lost money—a great deal of money—in a gambling house in Las Vegas. He was being pressed to pay it, and he was at his wit's end.

"Before I got there he was approached by someone who offered him a solution. If he would sign an agreement to play pro basketball after his graduation they would pay him a bonus for signing. Eddie fell for it, and then discovered there was a small catch: His team must not win the championship. He was desperate for money and he agreed, and what he signed would have sent him to jail if he doublecrossed the gamblers."

She took a deep breath. "The man who first approached him—first persuaded him—was Duke Merritt."

"No!" old Bob said softly.

"You want proof? I haven't got it. If I had I'd have gone to the district attorney. Ed had talked to Merritt in some local restaurant. There was no possible way of proving what they'd talked about. I only had Ed's word for it, but I believed him. Ed killed himself rather than betray his teammates. Duke Merritt was responsible. He might just as well have pushed Ed out that window."

The room was silent as she paused.

"I decided I could never have a happy day until I exposed Duke Merritt for what he really was. I arranged to meet him about a month ago as the pros were coming north. I played up to him." Her lips curled downward. "He was so vain he took it as a matter of course that I should fall in love with him. I took his pawing and his air of ownership *because I wanted to get him!* Some day I was sure he'd tip his hand and I'd have the evidence I wanted!"

"I asked you to stay, Johnny, for one reason. I've been friendly with you. I've let you know that I liked you—you and Bob. I never suspected either of you of being part of the Duke's real picture. I want you to know that." She turned back to Franks: "Don't look for your motive, Mr. Franks, in some trivial golfing feud. The man was a leech, a bloodsucker, sadistic and cruel. It isn't for me to tell you where to look, but there are people here at Mountain Grove, people who have

been traveling with Merritt all winter, people in cities and towns all over the country, who are celebrating tonight—in spite of the fear his death may reveal something they wanted to hide." She drew a deep breath. "You may be sure of one thing. He was killed by someone who couldn't stand it any longer."

"I am sure of that, Miss Roper," Franks said. "You see, after I'd identified the sand wedge as yours, I made a few inquiries."

"Oh?" Midge said in a small voice.

"Merritt was with you on the hotel terrace when he decided to go out to the eighth green to practice. He told you he was going, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"It would be useless to deny that, Miss Roper, because he said it in the presence of several people. It would also be useless to deny that you were seen, walking across the course just after dusk. The young man with whom you were to have dinner—his name is Talbert?—was looking for you. He met you as you came in from having been out there—with Merritt."

"Yes," Midge said, very slowly. "I was out there. But not with Duke Merritt."

"No?"

"I went out because he asked me to, and because I was playing the game of pleasing him. But when I got there—"

"Yes, Miss Roper?"

"He was dead," Midge said.

"And you didn't think it a matter worth reporting?"

Midge's head was high and she met Franks's level gaze steadily. "It was quite deliberate," she said. "If the person who killed Duke Merritt needed time to cover his tracks, I was prepared to help him get it!"

"Midge!" the word exploded out of Johnny. "Midge, you're wrong. Your brother must have lied to you. I *knew* the Duke! Bob has known him all his life. It wasn't in him to be the kind of person or do the kind of thing you're talking about."

"You didn't know him," Midge said. She turned. "I know your story, Johnny. But look back over the clippings some day."

"Clippings?"

"The Horatio Alger kid," Midge said. "Go back and read those stories, Johnny. They're all about Duke Merritt and what a fine guy he was. Do you think he'd have loaned you a thin dime, or given you five minutes of his time, if it hadn't been to his advantage?"

"He didn't have to help me!"

"He knew a good thing when he saw it," Midge said. "A good thing for himself. Old Bob was the same sort of good thing. How many stories have you read in the syndicated sports columns about how Duke Merritt didn't forget the old pro who'd taught him the game of golf, when that oldtimer was down on his luck? It's one of the classic sob stories of the sports world!"

"Shut up!" Johnny shouted at her.

"Too many people have shut up for too long, Johnny," Midge said.

Franks, his lips drawn together in a thin line, turned to Johnny. "You and the old man—out!" he said. "This has stopped being informal. It seems Miss Roper is a material witness."

"You're not saying you think she—"

"Out," Franks said.

Johnny felt Bob's hand on his arm, tugging at him gently. He shook it off. "The whole thing is crazy!" he said. "Midge has got it wrong. You don't live and travel with a guy for months without knowing him. That part of it can be straightened out. But you're letting the one guy who had it in for the Duke have time to fix himself up a story."

"Who is that?" Franks asked.

"Hamner! Hal Hamner. He would have killed the Duke yesterday afternoon if there hadn't been people around to stop him. There are witnesses to that!"

"The Duke was careful to choose a moment to play the hero when he was quite safe. Isn't that true, Johnny?" Midge said.

"Midge! You've gotten yourself all confused by some foolish story."

"Would my brother just pick Duke Merritt's name out of the air?" Midge asked.

"He lied to you. He—"

"All right," Franks said sharply. "That's enough."

The trooper who had been standing near the door came toward Johnny. "You'll have to leave now, bud," he said.

"Why not let him stay, Mr. Franks?" Midge said in that strange, flat voice. "He's got to know the truth, sooner or later, about his superman."

"Get Hamner here," Johnny said. "Find out where he was when the Duke was killed, what he was doing. That's all I ask. We can straighten Midge out later. So she was wrong not reporting to you. It wouldn't have saved the Duke's life. If it gave anyone a chance to get away you'll soon know. That would be as good as a confession, wouldn't it?"

Franks hesitated.

"If this story of Midge's gets out we can never call it back. The Duke can't defend himself, but Bob and I can defend him if you'll give us a chance. Find the murderer. That's the thing you want, isn't it? Then we can straighten Midge out later."

"Get Hamner," Franks said.

Johnny felt like a man hanging over a cliff, reaching for a hold he knew would crumble. Anyone but Midge, and he wouldn't have had any doubt at all in the back of his mind. Midge wasn't lying. She was just wrong. Franks seemed to have suspended operations until Hamner was found, and Johnny moved over to where Midge stood.

"Look," he said. "Doesn't it show there was something crazy? If Duke had been involved in any way with your brother, wouldn't he have suspected you? The same name. He'd have stayed shy of you, wouldn't he, if he'd been guilty?"

Midge looked up at him with tired eyes. "He knew who I was. We even talked about Ed. But he took it for granted I didn't suspect him. He took it for granted he was irresistible."

"So maybe he was a little vain about women."

"A little vain!"

"But if he was guilty he'd have been bound to suspect you had a reason for playing up to him."

"The Duke could do no wrong," she said. "He would have laughed if anyone suggested he'd made a mistake anywhere along the way."

Bob Christie had come up behind Johnny, and once more his hand was on Johnny's arm. "There's nothing for you and the lass to quarrel about, Johnny. She believes what she's telling you. You believe what you're telling her. The truth will come out of it in the end."

"Tell her about the Duke, Bob!" Johnny said.

The old man shook his head. "It wouldn't do any good right now, laddie. We need facts to show her."

"But—"

"We'll get them, laddie. Never fear. There's a killer somewhere close by who must be found, and then we'll get the facts."

The office door suddenly opened, before Johnny could say any more, and Sue Hamner stood there, white and breathless. "Mr. Franks?"

"Yes," the prosecutor said.

"I'm Sue Hamner—Mrs. Hal Hamner. I understand you're looking for my husband."

"Yes. Do you know where he is?"

"He's in a gripe session, in the locker room at the club."

"Gripe session?" Franks asked.

Johnny knew what she meant. The pros were meeting to discuss the tournament, make complaints to their traveling committee. They always had gripes. They griped about everything—prize totals, weather, courses, rules, starting times, pairings, exhibition dates on off days, caddies, galleries, turf, greens, fairways, boundary markings, officials, adverse penalties, newcomers who played too well, spectators, and dozens of items that cropped up every day. Hamner was a member of the pros' grievance committee. They were probably discussing now whether the Duke should be defaulted in the match play tomorrow, or whether there should be a play-off for the place made vacant by his death. They would have marked the Duke's death with a few platitudes and then gone straight on with their business.

"I want to tell you something," Sue was saying to Franks, "before you talk to my husband."

"Well, Mrs. Hamner?"

Sue looked at Johnny, almost reproachfully, as if she knew that Hal's being called was his doing. "Hal hated the Duke," she said. "But it was my fault. The Duke paid a great deal of attention to me along the trail this winter. Hal was jealous. It seemed to him he had a right to be. I—I should have been able to get rid of the Duke, and I didn't. Hal had a right to be angry."

"You love your husband, Mrs. Hamner?"

She drew a deep breath. "With all my heart," she said.

Johnny stared at her. He remembered the bruise on her cheek. How could she love a man like Hal?

"Then why didn't you discourage Merritt's attentions?"

"I couldn't," she said.

"You mean he was so persuasive that—?"

"Yes. He was persuasive."

"So you didn't discourage him, and it enraged your husband, and now you're here to tell us it was your fault."

"I *couldn't* discourage him."

"You liked him?"

"I hated him," Sue said, with such uncontrolled violence that it shocked Johnny. "*I hated him!*"

"Then I don't understand," Franks said.

"There were reasons I can't give you," Sue said. "But you've got to understand that Hal can't be blamed. I drove him to it."

"Drove him to what, Mrs. Hamner?"

"His hatred of Duke." She caught in her breath, realizing the full implication of the question. "He hated him, and everybody is going to tell you that. But he didn't kill him."

"How do you know, Mrs. Hamner? Can you account for your husband's time tonight?"

"No," she said slowly. "But I know Hal. He might have beaten him up with his fists. But he would never attack him from behind with a club. He didn't need him dead. He just needed him out of our lives."

"And you couldn't help him," Franks said.

"I couldn't help him," Sue said, so low that Johnny could barely hear her.

The trooper appeared in the doorway then with Hal Hamner. The tall Southerner's dark, brooding eyes blinked for an instant at the sight of his wife, and then were lowered.

Sue took a quick step toward him. "Hal!"

He didn't look up. He didn't respond in any way.

"I think you know why I've sent for you, Hamner," Franks said.

Hamner didn't answer, or lift his head.

"You hated Duke Merritt. You were jealous of him. You had actually attempted a physical attack on him yesterday. We don't have to go into that if you can account for your time tonight—say between 7 and 9:30."

Hamner looked up, and his eyes were dazed. "He wouldn't let Sue alone," he said, "and she wouldn't tell him off."

"Between 7 and 9:30, Mr. Hamner." Franks might just as well not have spoken.

"I went to him," Hamner said. "I asked him to let her alone." The deep voice was harsh, but the eyes had the look of a badly hurt child. "I never was in love before. I never thought someone loved me. I never had someone to hold to me who was all my own."

"Hal!" Sue whispered.

"I told him there were other women—women who weren't needed, the way Sue was needed. I—I guess I was a little crazy. You can't need a woman who doesn't want you. But it seemed like it. It seemed like it to me."

Johnny looked at Sue. Her fingers were twisting at a handkerchief. When Hamner hesitated the only sound in the room was a choked sob from her.

"I went to her," Hamner said, "There was something—I don't know what—she couldn't, I guess. She just couldn't give him up."

"Hal!"

"Then I began to boil up inside. I—I went to him once more. I asked him—nice and quiet. I asked him to let her alone."

Johnny moistened his lips. "He was just trying to be kind to her, Hamner, because you treated her badly."

The dark eyes turned to Johnny and he felt shriveled inside.

"I know," Hamner said. "Like—like the thing I did yesterday, calling her names in public. Accusing her in public. I—well, you're his boy, Yale. It was like she'd done the sewing for *him*. I'd been begging her. Then she did the sewing, and it was like it was for him." The dark eyes burned into Johnny. "You were like a part of him—you and the old man."

The eyes lowered and Johnny felt cold along his spine.

"So—so I begged him to let her alone. And he gave me an answer. He laughed—and he gave me an answer: 'You tell Sue to ask me to leave her alone and I will.' That's what he said. So I asked her." He took a deep, quavering breath. "She cried, and I knew—I knew she couldn't." He shook his head slowly. "That was tonight—after the scene I made yesterday. I went to him and I asked him, and he laughed and he said what he said. He was in the locker room, putting on his golf shoes. He—he was going out to practice."

It seemed to be the end. Franks spoke, matter-of-factly: "What did you do then?"

"I went to Sue, like I said. I—I asked her, and she cried. It was in our room. She was dressing for dinner."

"Then?"

Again the slow shaking of the head. "I don't know. I got out of the

room. I just wandered around. People kept talking to me—congratulating me on the good round I played today. I wanted to get away from them. I—I don't know where I went."

"Out onto the golf course?"

"Just around," Hamner said. "Oh, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying I don't remember—that I might have gone out to talk to him on the course and that I don't remember. It's not that. I was just around—no particular place. Finally I went to the auction. That was before the news came about—about him. I had a crazy plan. I figured to buy myself in the pool—and then win it. I figured there'd be enough money then to get away for a while. Maybe I could get away for a while. Maybe I could get Sue back to me somehow."

"Did you buy yourself, Mr. Hamner?"

Hamner shook his head. "The price ran too high—forty-one hundred dollars. It doesn't matter now. The Duke's boy here," and he glanced at Johnny, "would probably have gotten hot and pinned my ears back. The Duke would always beat me somehow. He's beat me for good now. I figured I might show him up somehow. I figured time might work for me. He might get tired of her, or she of him. But now—well, now he's dead he'll always stay just the way he was to her. You can't beat that, can you? He'll be set up against me all the

rest of my life. He'll always look good and I'll always look bad."

You could have heard a pin drop in the room after that. The silence was broken by Midge. She walked straight up to Hamner and stood in front of him.

"Your wife hated Duke Merritt, Hal," she said. "Maybe if you ask her now she can tell you why she couldn't send him away."

Everyone in the room but Hamner was looking at Sue. She stared back at them with wide, frightened eyes. Then suddenly, she turned and fled.

Hamner spoke without looking at Midge. "Thanks, anyway, Miss Roper," he said.

All Johnny wanted then was to get out of there. For weeks he'd felt nothing but contempt for Hal Hamner. Now he didn't know. Somehow, the way the big man had told his story left you no choice but to believe he'd felt the way he said he had. Johnny had the feeling that when Franks did some careful checking they'd find Hamner had never been out on the course. There was something about his story, something about Sue's behavior, that made him feel sick inside. After all—what about the Duke?

Franks was giving orders to his assistant and the trooper. The business of checking Hamner's movements was to be started at once. Midge had cornered the prosecutor and Johnny could hear her asking permission to go to Sue Hamner.

Franks must have felt that there was a chance Midge might get Sue to talk, because he let Midge go.

"The rest of you don't have to wait in this office," he said. "But stay close at hand where I can find you."

Johnny felt Bob's hand on his sleeve again, and this time he willingly let himself be led out of the room. They walked across the lobby and out onto the deserted terrace. The old man's face had a grim, purposeful look to it. Once they were outside he turned and faced Johnny.

"There are things you've got to get in your head, laddie," he said.

"You bet, Bob." Johnny said. "You knew him. You know those things they said can't be true. Hamner sounded like he was telling the truth, but—"

"There's a murderer very close to us, and he's got to be found," old Bob said. "The rest of it can be cleared up later."

"Finding the murderer is Franks's job," Johnny said. "What we've got to do is—"

"There's nothing we can do the way we're fixed," old Bob said. "We've got no cash, and there are things we could use cash for. The Duke had friends we could reach by phone. We should be getting in touch with his lawyer. All that takes cash. The Duke had plenty on him, but the cops have taken that. I was wondering—"

"I've only got a few bucks till I

get paid my qualifying purse," Johnny said.

"I was thinking that," old Bob said. "There's money due you, and there's money due the Duke. I was thinking maybe Mr. Sayles would advance it to us."

"No harm in asking," Johnny said. "You're right, Bob. The people the Duke was working for—the clothing firm, the sporting-goods people, the club he played out of in California—they'd all want to help us keep his name clear. They've got money invested in that name."

"Yes, laddie, they would. And if we can get the wheels rolling with a few long-distance calls—"

Johnny put his arm around the old man's shoulder. "You're a wonderful old guy, Robert," he said. "I thought you'd caved in completely, but it was me that did the caving. Let's find Sayles."

The desk clerk called Sayles's suite in the hotel and told him Bob and Johnny wanted to see him. Sayles asked to have them sent up. They went up the wide stairway to the second floor and down the hall.

Sayles had taken off his dinner jacket and was wearing a corduroy coat.

"You said if there was anything you could do to help," old Bob said.

"Sure. Come in," Sayles said.

He had a sitting room and bedroom, nicely furnished. As manager of the resort he probably gave private parties here, Johnny thought. The walls were covered with

framed photographs of people in the sports world: golfers, skiers, fighters, hockey stars, football players, promoters, actors.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you two could use a drink," Sayles said, crossing to chromium and red leather bar-on-wheels in the corner of the room.

"I wouldn't mind a wee touch," old Bob said, "but Johnny's got a golf match to play tomorrow."

"Ginger ale, Johnny?"

"No, thanks."

Sayles came over from the bar with two old-fashioned glasses more than half filled with liquor, and handed one to Bob. He raised his own glass. "There's nothing much to drink to, Bob, except to hope we never have another day like this as long as we live."

"Amen," the old man said.

"What is it you wanted of me boys?" Sayles asked.

"It's a matter of cash," Bob said.

"There are phone calls we should make. The Duke's sponsors should be notified. There's his lawyer. Johnny and I are both flat. We thought perhaps you'd advance us Johnny's purse and the Duke's."

"Good heavens!" Sayles said.

"Franks has impounded the Duke's money, hasn't he? I don't see any reason why I shouldn't pay you, Bob—and Johnny, of course. If there's any trouble about it, you can consider it a loan."

"That's really very kind of you, Mr. Sayles," Bob said.

"I've got a small safe over here," Sayles said. He went over to the side wall and moved one of the pictures. Behind it was a wall safe. He turned the dial and opened it. Then he brought a green metal box over to the center table. Old Bob watched as Sayles unlocked the box with a key on the ring in his pocket. It was filled with cash. He began counting it off.

"—six hundred, seven, eight, nine, one thousand." He looked up, smiling pleasantly. "Okay?"

"Five hundred goes to Johnny," Bob said. "But the Duke's share—"

"Five hundred," Sayles said. "Same as Johnny—for qualifying."

Old Bob put his glass down on a table. "Surely that isn't the amount you expected to pay the Duke."

Johnny turned to look at Bob, and was aware of a strange tension. The old man just stood there, smiling at Sayles, a crooked little smile Johnny had never seen before.

Sayles was motionless, the stack of bills still in his hand. The table lamp threw shadows on his face that seemed to change him. "I don't think I understand, Bob," he said quietly.

"We don't have to pretend with each other, do we now, Mr. Sayles?"

Johnny opened his mouth to speak, and closed it.

Sayles's eyes shifted for an instant to Johnny, and then back to the old man. "I think you'd better say, quite clearly, what it is you have in mind, Bob."

"It's a little matter of murder, Mr. Sayles," Bob said.

Sayles laughed. It was short and mirthless. "You're dreaming, Bob. And I'm surprised you'd think of taking money to keep the Duke's murder quiet. Franks has checked me—inside out. I never left the hotel till I got the news from you."

Old Bob nodded. It was horrible, somehow, like the nod of a slightly unbalanced person. Instinctively Johnny moved toward him.

"Bob," he said gently.

The old man waved him away, a sly, almost unpleasant gesture. "You would be careful about such things, Mr. Sayles," he said, "but it so happens I wasn't talking about the Duke's murder. Not yet at any rate."

The lid of the metal box in Sayles's hand closed with a snap. "I think you'd better get him out of here, Johnny," he said. "He's gone off his rocker. That money on the table's for you." He turned and took the box back to the safe.

"Don't put the money away, Mr. Sayles," old Bob said.

"Bob," Johnny whispered, sick at heart. "We'd better be going, old-timer."

"Not yet, laddie. And don't interfere. Mr. Sayles knows what I'm talking about." A cackling laugh seeped out of his twisted mouth. "You don't think the Duke would run the risk of keeping things all to himself, Mr. Sayles, do you? He'd protect himself. You can see

that. He had me to back him up. So you can see—five hundred dollars isn't nearly enough, Mr. Sayles."

Sayles turned around from the safe, and the hair rose on the back of Johnny's neck. Sayles had an ugly-looking automatic in his right hand. "So he told you about the Roper business, eh?" Sayles said.

"Roper!" Johnny said. "Midge Roper?"

He might as well not have been there. Sayles, suave and cool, and old Bob, a caricature of himself, were concerned only with their own talk. Old Bob sidled forward, crab-like, ignoring the gun.

"Aye, Mr. Sayles. Now, you make the amount right, and you and the lady won't have to go to jail. Suppose I just go over to that safe and count out for myself what seems like a reasonable amount. That would be the easiest way, wouldn't it?"

Bob was directly in front of Sayles now, and suddenly he reached for the gun. Sayles's reflexes were much too young, too quick for him. He swung his gun hand across Bob's face, and the old man staggered back, clapping his hands over his eyes. Then, while Johnny stood there, frozen, the gun came up and down twice, in a chopping motion, on the side of Bob's head.

Bob went down, just as Johnny lunged at Sayles. It was an uneven business from the beginning. Slight and wiry, Johnny was twenty

pounds lighter than the older man. Moreover, Sayles seemed to be an old hand at what he was doing. He whipped at Johnny's head with the gun, handling it with the skill a fencer might use with a foil. Johnny never got in one good punch. The butt of the gun thundered against his skull. He felt himself falling, and instinctively he tried to cover old Bob's body.

At the same instant he heard the sound of splintering wood and a loud, angry voice—familiar, but in the fog of his pain, momentarily unidentifiable. The slugging had stopped and he tried to pick himself up. He did get his head turned just in time to see Hal Hamner break Sayles's gun arm over his knee as he might have snapped a piece of kindling wood back in the Tennessee hills.

Johnny struggled up to his feet. "Thank heavens, you showed up," he said. "He'd have killed us both."

Hamner turned on him, straddling the groaning Sayles, who lay on the floor, hugging his broken arm. "You cheap, chiseling little punk," he said. He started for Johnny.

Johnny backed away. "What's the matter with you, Hamner? What —?"

"Hal!" It was a small, clear voice. Midge had come into the room. "Hal, stop it!"

Hamner hesitated, balanced on the balls of his feet, never taking his smoldering eyes off Johnny.

"You owe me something, Hal!" Midge said. "Stop it!" She came on into the room and knelt beside old Bob. "Call a doctor. He's badly hurt. Hurry."

Hamner hesitated, and then slowly turned to the phone on the center table.

"And get Mr. Franks here," Midge said. She looked up at Johnny. "Bring something to cover him with, Johnny. He must be kept warm."

Johnny went into the bedroom, ripped a blanket off the bed, and brought it back to her. Hamner was standing by the phone, staring down at Sayles. Midge wrapped the blanket around old Bob, and then she stood up.

"They were going on with it," Hamner said. "They were trying to collect from Sayles. They were going on with it."

"I don't believe it," Midge said flatly.

"I heard them!" Hamner said. "I heard the old man asking for dough—"

Midge looked at Johnny and he shook his head wearily. "Bob did ask him for money," he said. "I didn't understand it. He—he mentioned you—"

Midge put out her hand and rested it on his arm. "I persuaded Sue Hamner to tell Hal the truth," she said. Her eyes were very bright. "My brother didn't kill himself, Johnny. He was murdered—by Victor Sayles."

Sayles had struggled to his feet. His right arm dangled at a grotesque angle below the elbow. Agonized sweat ran down his face.

Hamner stepped over Bob's body and stood in front of him.

"Sue's turning State's evidence," he said, "whatever it costs her."

Midge was at Hamner's side. "Tell Johnny the truth!" she said to Sayles.

"Please pour me a drink," Sayles said. "This arm is killing me."

"Talk first!" Hamner said.

Sayles gritted his teeth. "I—I had a gambling house in Las Vegas. Young Roper came there. Lost his shirt. He couldn't pay. Fresh college kid—thought I'd teach him a lesson. I had a couple of my boys threaten him good. I gave him a week to pay. If he hadn't—well, I was just trying to scare him."

"Never mind that," Hamner said.

"Then I heard—grapevine talk—he had been bribed to throw the championship game. I had money on that game. Plenty of it. I went to see him. Sue was with me."

"You had to drag her into it!" Hamner said.

"Tell Johnny how that happened," Midge said.

Sayles looked at Johnny. "You see, long ago, before Sue won the beauty contest that took her to Hollywood, she and I had been married."

Hamner made a groaning sound, but he didn't move.

"It didn't work out and we were

divorced," Sayles said. "It was all friendly enough. Then Sue fell in love with Hamner and she came to my gambling place to beg me never to mention our marriage. She was afraid that if Hamner found out that she was a divorcee he wouldn't want to marry her. I told her I would keep quiet about it and I offered to drive her back to Los Angeles. On the way I planned to see Roper. I didn't expect trouble. If I had, I wouldn't have taken Sue with me. We went up to Roper's hotel room. Roper was a little crazy—caught between two fires. Me—and the guys he'd sold out to. He took a swing at me and I let him have it—knocked him down. He hit his head on the corner of a table as he fell."

"All an accident!" Hamner said bitterly.

"He was dead," Sayles said. "I was in a fix. I had a prison record. The police might not go for the accident theory. So I—I picked up his body and heaved it out the window."

Midge turned her face away, and Johnny could feel her fingers gripping his arm.

Sayles went on: "Sue and I ran out of the room—straight into someone standing outside the door. It was semi-dark there. A light bulb had blown. We couldn't see him clearly and I figured he couldn't see us. We barged past him and out of there." He paused. "Please, that whiskey—"

"When you've finished!" Hamner said.

"Sue was scared, naturally. We waited to see what would happen. Roper's death was reported a suicide. Whoever we'd bumped into in the hall hadn't reported it."

"You threatened Sue!" Hamner charged.

"We seemed to be in the clear," Sayles said. "She agreed to keep still about it. She was afraid the scandal would wash her up with you. And I guess I did threaten her."

"You guess!"

"Then Sue married you," Sayles said. "Right after that she met Merritt, and he put the screws on her. He was the man we'd bumped into in the hall. He recognized her at once and wanted to know who the man with her that night was. You weren't big enough pickings for him, Hamner. Sue wouldn't tell him about me. She was afraid to. And she was afraid to tell you—just as she had been afraid to tell you that she'd been married to me. You were so violent about other men." Sayles's lips curled down at one corner. "For some reason she seemed to be in love with you."

"Keep talking!" Hamner said.

"Merritt kept at Sue—and kept at her. Then, when you got here—here I was, and Merritt recognized me! He sent Sue to me, demanding a sum of money."

"So you killed him!"

"No!" Sayles said sharply.

"You killed him, and then these two rats came to you and tried to carry on the blackmail."

"Stop it, Hal!" Midge said.

"No—go on, Mr. Hamner," a voice said from the door. They turned, and saw Franks standing there with his assistant and a trooper. He came into the room. "Go on, Mr. Hamner, because whatever else Sayles may have done, he didn't kill Duke Merritt. His alibi is fool-proof."

"These two were trying to get dough out of Sayles," Hamner said.

Johnny couldn't speak. That was what old Bob had been doing.

"Johnny!" It was a whisper from the old man.

Quickly Johnny knelt beside him. "Take it easy, Bob. The doctor's coming."

"Doesn't matter," the old man said. His voice was so low Johnny could scarcely hear him. "But—Mr. Franks is right. Sayles didn't kill the Duke." The eyelids closed over the pale-blue eyes. "I killed him, lad-die."

After the doctor came they moved Bob onto the bed in Sayles's room. The doctor said he shouldn't talk, but the old man insisted. Johnny sat beside him, numb, unable to believe what he heard. Midge stood behind Johnny, her head on his shoulder. Franks, and the assistant with the yellow pad, stood on the other side of the bed.

"I never knew—never dreamed,"

the old man said. "After we got here—heard him—'So he's here,' he told her—Mrs. Hamner. 'You'll go to him—you'll get the money—or you'll both go to jail for murder.' I heard this—from The Duke—my own Duke!"

He closed his eyes and they thought he wasn't going on, but in a moment or two his lips moved again. "The way he talked—the way she talked—I knew he'd been using his reputation, his name, the game of golf, to cover what he really did. Blackmail. I—I brought him up. I—I thought he was all the things I'd ever dreamed of being, myself. I—I had to have it out with him, and I thought—if it's true—I'll kill him." He moistened his lips.

"I went in the pro shop—half dark. Took a club out of a bag—pure chance it belonged to Midge—pure chance. I went out to him. I—I faced him with it. He laughed at me. He asked me—where I thought all the money had been coming from. He said—I was an old fool. He bent down to put his club back in his bag, and—I killed him."

"Bob," Johnny said. "Bob!"

"Meant to give myself up," the old man said. "Then I realized—there was another murderer around. I didn't know his name. 'He' was all the Duke said to Mrs. Hamner. 'He's here.' Not someone who'd been traveling with us. I had to find out who—and prove it. Then—I saw Mrs. Hamner with Sayles—out there—when the police came. I

wondered. One way to find out." He turned his eyes to Johnny. "I'm sorry I had to let you in for it, lad. I—I had to have a witness. I pretended I knew—asked him for money—and he broke, as I knew he would if he was guilty."

No one spoke. The old man looked at Johnny.

"It's a great game, lad. A game to be proud of. You have it in you to be—all the things I dreamed the Duke had been. A fine player, a fine competitor, a fine gentleman. I—I'd like to think I was a part of it, lad." His lips moved in a faint smile. "That putt out there today was a man's putt. You'll go on. You'll play tomorrow—in spite of all this. Promise me, laddie—you're all there is left to me."

"He's got to rest," the doctor said. "He's got to rest if he's to have any chance."

Chance for what? Johnny asked himself. Chance to die for killing a heel. As they walked into the next

room he heard Hamner talking to Franks:

"What's going to happen to Sue?"

"She'll be the State's witness against Sayles. She was forced into the situation and kept silent against her will. It will be all right."

All right for the Hamners. Johnny's throat ached. Then he felt a hand on his, cool and reassuring.

"You're not alone, Johnny dear," Midge said.

The cool hand lifted and touched his cheek. "The Duke you loved never existed, Johnny, so you've lost nothing. Old Bob is all you ever dreamed of, wrong as he was. And I—well, have you forgotten that I own you?"

He turned to look at her.

"I bought you in the Calcutta," she said, "not because you have a fine golf record. Just that would have been a poor investment. I bought you because you've got the heart to go with it. So—so I guess I'm stuck with you—laddie!"



MacKinlay Kantor

Sparrow Cop

A Nick Glennan story—of the days when Glennan was a park policeman, on his way up . . . one of the excellent cops-and-robbers yarns which the author of ANDERSONVILLE and SPIRIT LAKE once wrote for pulp magazines . . .

OVER ON ACOLA STREET, TWO MEN stood before the door of a cheap, second-floor, rear-hall apartment and rang the bell. Both had guns.

Three blocks away, in a restaurant at the corner of Lead and Bellman Streets, Officer Nick Glennan of the park police walked up to the cigar counter in his satiny shoes and mirror-like putts, and bought a package of chewing gum.

"Grand day," said Nick Glennan to the girl cashier.

"Swell day," she agreed.

"Bccause," said Glennan's gentle voice, "there's a feel of spring on a day like this. It won't be long now." He stowed the chewing gum deep in an inside pocket, and rubbed imaginary wrinkles out of his uniform.

"Twitter, twitter," spoke a voice behind him.

"And what is so rare as a day in March?" said someone else.

Glennan's face turned from maple to mahogany. He knew those voices. Both of them. . . .

He turned and flashed a scornful

eye at the two big men who lounged at a wall table, picking the relics of luscious T-bones.

"How's the Sparrow Cop?" asked the bigger of the two men. He was Nick's brother, Sergeant Dave Glennan of the Detective Bureau. He was fifteen years older than Nick and forty pounds heavier, and he looked like a none too surly baboon.

"The Sparrow Cop," said Nick warmly, "is just as healthy as any dick who wears an oversize double-breasted suit and parks his fanny all day in a Cad. Yeh, and just as handy with his dukes."

Dave chuckled. His companion, Pete McMahan, grinned at the youngster and waved a genial toothpick. "You always take Dave too serious, punk."

"Then he can leave off that noise about Sparrow Cops, and welcome. He used to wear harness himself, you know."

"But not at the Zoo," grunted Dave.

"And what's wrong with the Zoo? Do you think there ain't any

police protection needed in the park?"

"Indeed there is," his brother declared. "For one thing, you can never tell about bears. The bears might get out and bite somebody. And once an old lady fell headfirst into the lagoon. Somebody is liable to steal General Sherman's statue from the front of the aquarium—most any day now. And if some kid comes up to you with a dirty nose, don't you forget to blow it. That's in regulations. It's practically a city ordinance."

Over on Acola Street someone opened the door of that cheap apartment, and one of the men lifted the butt of his gun and brought it down, quickly and very hard.

Nick twisted his shoulders and settled them back regretfully under the sleek serge of his uniform. "Some day, you big noise, I'd like to show you that a park copper is just as hard as your kind."

"Any time," crowed Dave cheerily. He yawned, and patted his round stomach. Nick thought of the ugly masses of pink and white scar tissue which adorned that protuberant abdomen, and he felt somewhat ashamed. Dave was a real guy, no doubt of that. He was a brother for anyone to be fond of. But, somehow, he could never keep from feeling angry when Dave kidded him.

He'd only been on the force six

months. And he wouldn't be a Sparrow Cop all his life. Dave ought to know that. Just because Dave had been a cop for twelve years, and had been shot and promoted and decorated and half-killed and tooted up in the newspapers was no reason for him to get so blamed noisy about it—

"Ready to go, Dave?" McMahon looked at his watch.

They paid their checks and waddled to the door. Nick adjusted his peaked cap, flicked a microscopic atom of dust from his glistening Sam Browne, and followed.

"What time do you go on?" asked McMahon of Nick Glennan.

"In about an hour and a half."

His brother's wide mouth curled in amusement. "Devotion to duty, and how. You're all slicked up and self-inspected, when you could be at home with Alice."

"Alice likes to have me pay attention to my job," said Nick loftily.

"Which means working an hour and a half longer than you're paid for." Dave bit off the end of a cigar, and patted the boy's shoulder. Again Nick flamed at him. "My boy," said Dave, "you're one snappy policeman. Look at them putts, Pete! Like glass!"

The younger Glennan tried to quench his mounting annoyance. "What's on the hook for you two?"

"Suspicious flat to look at. And wait till you're thirty-eight. You won't walk, you'll toll. All the

Glennans gather meat to warm their bones, soon as they get dry behind the ears."

"This one won't," Nick assured him.

The two detectives turned toward Bellman Street, and Nick moved in the opposite direction, where the park showed its bare shrubbery in the midday sunlight, one block distant.

"Tell Alice hello for me. I'll be up to kiss her and drink some soup with you some fine night."

"She wouldn't kiss you," said the Sparrow Cop, "and I hope she puts castor oil in your soup if you do come. S'long, McMahan. And you, fatty."

McMahan warned, "Don't let the seals out."

"And don't get lost in the greenhouse, Sparrow Cop."

Nick Glennan did not dignify these remarks by any acknowledgment. He strode along the street, disgust and injured pride seething within him. Sparrow Cop! Agh, the two fat loafers! He told himself that he despised every fibre in their assorted anatomies, beginning with the huge flat feet and continuing upward to the thin fuzz on their bald, puffy heads.

Just because Dave was a sergeant and wore plainclothes and was mentioned in the newspapers, he didn't have to—*Sparrow Cop*. Dave looked like a mattress with feet and arms, indeed he did.

Nick went on toward the park,

his cap cocked at a slight angle, his arms swaying easily, his steps even and quick on the slushy sidewalk. When he passed cars parked along the curbstone he gave them a careful once-over. You couldn't tell. Might be stolen cars along there somewhere. Mentally he quickly ran down the latest list of hot-car numbers.

Though he was not due for duty until two o'clock in the afternoon, and had an hour and a half of leeway, the enthusiasm for his office had driven him from the tiny apartment where he and Alice were spending their second year of marriage. It did, daily. He liked to be in uniform. He liked to be on the job, even before he had to. The Glennans were like that. There was a red-faced, bewhiskered grandfather who had gone down beneath a horde of rioting anarchists, long ago. The father of Nick and Dave was officially retired now, but something more than necessity kept him in the uniform of a private bank policeman, even though his hair was like curly cotton.

Nick held his chin up. His eyes saw everything, and found it good: the hard blue sky of late winter, and warm sunlight thawing against the bare brick walls, the caravans of children and nurses moving toward the park. His curved fingers brushed the blue-steel revolver against his hip, staunch in its polished holster. . . . Sparrow Cop, huh? He'd like to show—

The man in the brown coat held the woman, twisting her arms cruelly as she struggled. "Tie her up, Jack. Then we'll go over this joint with a fine-tooth comb."

"You might as well kill me," the woman sobbed against the harsh fingers that squeezed over her mouth. "You've killed him . . . might as well kill me—"

Pete McMahan and Dave Glennan reached the intersection of Acola and Bellman Streets and turned to the right.

"What's the number, Dave?"

"Thirty-four nineteen."

"Yeh. The news?"

"Apperson said to look her over. Apartment Twelve. Somebody phoned and said it sounded funny."

"Stool?"

"No. Just some neighbor. Nothing to it, or I'd 'a' brought a squad. Apperson said if I got out north in the next day or two to stop by. Well, this is the next day or two, and we're north."

McMahan spat out a soggy wad of cigar pulp. "Precincts ought to have to look after this stuff."

"Yeh. But since the harness bulls from Eighteen walked through that Hefty Lewis flat and muffed the job, with Hefty hid in a clothes hamper all the time, they've shifted suspicious flats to the Bureau. A whole lot of work for nothing."

"You said it," agreed Pete. "There it is. That crumby-looking joint across the street."

They strolled from behind a parked car and approached the front entrance of Thirty-four nineteen Acola Street. It was a shabby, smelly-looking building not five years old, but already stained and cracked about the corners; colored glass panes in the vestibule door were broken; Dave Glennan was positive that he could smell a mixture of gin, cauliflower, and damp diapers the moment he stepped inside. Half apartment-hotel, half family-flat-building, its garish evil jarred the whole row of sober little buildings where it stood.

"Looks like a pest-house," muttered McMahan.

"Smells like one. Feels like one. It *is* one," grunted Dave.

They pushed their way into the vestibule, nudged aside a filthy baby carriage and a velocipede, and scrutinized the greasy line of mail boxes and bells.

"Apartment Twelve," read Glennan. "Frank R. Johnson."

"Ought to be Jones or Smith," McMahan observed. "Johnsons are getting too common these days."

"Aw," said Dave, "this is probably some out-of-work Swede who beats his wife, or something." His big thumb moved toward the bell, then hesitated. "Neighbors are always butting in when they hear a family row," he philosophized. "Probably that's how come the tip. Just the same, I don't like the looks of this place. Try that vestibule door."

Pete rattled the door. "Locked."

"I'm not gonna ring," said Dave, surprised at his own stubbornness. "Let's go to the rear—"

"Here comes somebody." McMahan stepped back as a middle-aged woman with a market basket opened the door from the inside. His big hand fell forward and stayed the open door as she passed through; the women turned and grunted with surprise. "Police officer," said McMahan.

The woman muttered in Italian, and shook her head. "Go along, lady," grinned Dave. He held open the outer door as she passed through.

"Anything to her?"

"Naw. Somebody's grandma from the wilds of Sicily. It's a cinch *her* name ain't Johnson."

"Well," said Pete, "we got the door open."

Glennan said, "I'll take the back door." Some hard-bitten suspicion was spearing up in his brain; he did not believe in premonitions, knew nothing about them, in fact. But he had been a guardian of the public safety for more than twelve years, and this building did not look good to him. Neither did the name of Frank R. Johnson opposite the bell.

In such circumstances he knew that a beleaguered criminal, surprised by a summons at the front door, usually made for the rear. With natural aptitude he selected the post of danger for himself.

"You rear, me front," recited McMahan. "How long?"

"I've got to find the rear stairway and line up that door," said Dave. "Give me at least five minutes. Seven is better. Make it seven minutes. Then you go ahead and tell 'em hello at the front."

"It looks to me like you're going to a lot of trouble for an out-of-work Swede."

Glennan shrugged and glanced at his watch. "That makes it ten of one. At ten minutes of one you give the front door a buzz."

The woman with the tousled, straw-blond hair was tied bolt upright in a chair, her mouth gagged, her eyes open and staring. When they did move at all, they turned toward that hunched pile inside the front door of the flat. . . .

Jack emptied a bureau drawer in the middle of the rug, pawing quickly through the heap. "Hell," he said. "They got it salted away somewhere, Spando."

The man in the brown overcoat came to the kitchen door; there were ugly, white lines around his mouth. "Then she'll talk. We'll make her talk. I wish I knew where that kid was, anyway."

"I heard the kitchen door shut, just before she come in."

"Hell. That was her. She shut it, when we pushed Al over."

"When you pushed him over, you mean. You didn't have to sock him so hard."

"How'd I know he had a glass head?"

"A ride would of been safer. Now we got a corpse on our hands."

Spando said, "There's gonna be two stiffs here, unless she talks and talks quick—"

Officer Nicholas Glennan strolled down the wide west sidewalk which led into the heart of the park. Strolled is a poor word. Officer Nicholas Glennan paraded; he marched; he was on review, but he was neither too ornate nor useless. He was young and handsome and becomingly stern, and at this moment, as at all moments, he figured that God had been good in letting him be alive and be a policeman. Yes, even a Sparrow Cop.

Dave. The big, fat—bah.

Kids were rioting all about: big kids in droves and dozens—boys on bicycles, perilously tottering through the slushy pools, girls in bright-colored play suits. And babies by the regiment, all swaddled in their cabs. When Nick saw those kids, there was something in his face more than mere good looks and duty and enthusiasm. Something wistful and a little grim.

He and Alice had wanted a kid. More than one. But now they had been married nearly two years, and the kid they wanted hadn't even suggested himself. . . . Alice cried, sometimes. She had wanted a boy baby, and had planned to call him

Nicky—first thing when they were married, she had wanted Nicky. Well, two years wasn't forever. Maybe it would happen, yet.

He comforted himself with this vain hope. For he could not forget that old Dr. Fogarty had told him that he might never be a father. Life was funny. No reason for things like that. . . . And Dave was a bachelor. Maybe there'd never be any more Glennans to be cops.

Headquarters of the park police lay toward the north, but Nick Glennan moved in a southerly direction. He planned to pass through the Zoo, skirt the wide sweep of the lagoon, and arrive at headquarters on the dot.

Of course there was the usual crowd by the bears' dens, along both the upper and lower walks. Nick descended some steps and came into the lower court which was flanked on one side by the cages of wolves and foxes. It smelled like fury down there, and crowds didn't gather.

The small boy was plodding dolefully through the opposite shrubbery when Glennan first saw him. He was a very small boy, in blue coveralls and cheap gray sweater; he had no cap, and evidently the world had been bad to him. He wailed to himself in a monotonous, muted alto.

Glennan's long arms reached in and drew him out of the bushes. "Hi, buddy," he said.

The teary eyes blinked in sudden awe. Nick picked the child up in his arms. "How'd you know my name, policeman?" quivered the little voice.

"Indeed, I didn't. Is that your name? Buddy? It's a fine name—Buddy. Are you lost?"

"I came to the Zoo," said Buddy. He snuffled violently.

"Bet your Mamma didn't know it," grinned Nick.

Buddy nodded seriously. "No. She went away, one time. The men took her in a great big box."

"Oh, yeh?" grunted Glennan. He felt embarrassed. "Well," he said, brightening, "I bet your Dad didn't know it either."

"I haven't got any Dad. I have got a big doll, though. It's named Popeye, that doll."

"Yes," said Nick, "and you've got mighty cold hands, too. Whereabouts do you live, Buster?"

The boy pointed toward the distant gap where Bellman Street abutted on the edge of the park. "I live up there, I guess maybe a hundred miles. And I saw a man hit Uncle Al on the head, so I came to the Zoo."

This bit of information was disturbing to Glennan's equilibrium. He forgot that all lost children were to be taken immediately to park headquarters. He forgot that he wasn't yet on duty—as if that mattered. He even forgot about Buddy's cold hands. "Huh?" crowed Nick. "You saw a man hit

Uncle Al? When? And who's Uncle Al?"

"He's mean," said the child. "He hit me. Here." There was a bruise on the side of the thin little jaw.

"Oh, yeah?" breathed Glennan, gently. "He hit you, huh? When?"

"I guess maybe about six times or maybe ten or four. Aunt Ida cried. I like Aunt Ida. But I don't like that old Uncle Al. I wish Mamma would come back out of the big box."

Glennan muttered, mostly to himself, "And how! I'll bet you do." He cleared his throat, and grinned, and juggled Buddy in his arms. "Look," he said. "Gum!" With some difficulty he managed to extract the package from his pocket, and Buddy seized it in a dirty fist.

"Now, listen, big boy," Nick directed him seriously, "you know, policemen always like to find out about men who hit other men on the head. What about this guy who hit Uncle Al? Who was he, anyway?"

"He was a big man. I don't like him. But I like gum. . . ."

Strolling slowly toward the boulevard with the shivering boy in his arms, Glennan searched out the story. Buddy, it seemed, lived in a great big building, 'way up that way. He was playing with Popeye on the stairs, and he was very quiet, and he watched the two men who rang the bell outside his apartment door. From a vantage point on the shadowy stairs above, it appeared,

he had watched them without being seen. When Uncle Al opened the door, a man hit him and Uncle Al lay down on the floor.

Anyway, Buddy hadn't stayed to see any more, after the door closed. He had come to the Zoo; Aunt Ida had taken him to the Zoo, once before, and he knew the way. It was, he thought, about a hundred miles, or maybe six or ten. And he liked gum.

"Yeh," agreed Officer Glennan, abstractedly, "gum is sure hot stuff." They were standing beside the boulevard now, and when Officer Glennan held up his hand, a taxicab skidded quickly in the slush.

Nick hoisted the child in at the open door.

"Listen, Officer," cried the driver, "I just got a call—"

"You sure did," said Glennan, "and this is it. Turn west on Bellman Street. Drive not too fast—and not too slow." He climbed in and sat down beside his charge.

"This is a damn nice cab," said Buddy.

"Now, you blasphemous midget, no cursing in the park." He lifted the boy to his knee as the cab swung through the gaunt trees. "Let's see, Buddy, if we can find that big building of yours. Did you cross a street car track?"

"Yes," nodded Buddy, "but I was careful. I looked all ways. I looked and looked and looked. I really did."

Glennan directed the driver: "Go on, then. Cross Lead Street."

"It's this way," said Buddy. "You go down here. I know the way to the Zoo, don't I?" The gray eyes regarded the Sparrow Cop seriously. "But if we go home now, we'll go to the Zoo again?"

"I bet you we will. Do you go past this corner, too? And now where does Uncle Al live?"

"Up that way." The soiled finger pointed toward Acola Street. "But I don't like him. I like you better."

Glennan nodded. "Yeh. And gum."

"Yes," said Buddy, champing noisily, "and gum."

Spando stood there and looked at Ida Carrier, alias Irene McCoy, alias Ida Johnson. His mouth twitched scornfully as he turned to survey the body of her consort, Albert Carrier, alias Luther McCoy, alias Frank R. Johnson. He swung back to the woman trussed in her chair.

"He's out like a light," he said. "Dead. Do you understand? We pushed him over. My God, his head musta been an egg-shell. There ain't any graft in it for you to hold out on us. You tell us where you got that roll, and tell us quick. Dirty double-crossers, both of you—"

Jack Novack loosened the gag in Ida's bruised mouth. Her answer came, pained and hating. "I'll see both you rats take a hot squat first," she labored.

"Maybe," grinned Spando. "Take off her shoes, Jack. How'd a nice hot cigarette feel against your tootsies, Ida?" He lit a cigarette and bent forward; there was no bluff about him; his face was the face of a torturer in some medieval dungeon.

The woman sobbed, "Oh, God. It ain't no use. . . ." Her rigid elbow tried to motion grotesquely, "Over there. That radiator. It's a dummy—Al screwed it to the floor. You take out the board behind it, and it's all there, still in the poke."

"All? There was twenty-six grand in that payroll."

"Al kept out two grand. And I took a leaf or two, once when I was hard up. The rest's still there." She began to sob, coarsely and hideously.

Spando chuckled. He went to the kitchen for a screw driver, then came back and began to loosen screws in the floor while Jack heaved at the radiator. It came loose with a jarring thud, and Spando pried at the board behind it.

In the corridor, his hand caressing his big watch, Pete McMahon heard the murmur of voices. He could not hear words, only that uneasy murmur. The minute hand touched the figure Ten, as the radiator crashed loose inside.

Pete replaced his watch and pressed the button beside the door. *Urrr.*

Spando moved quietly across the floor until he stood beside Ida Carrier. Through his brown coat pocket, a hard muzzle pushed against the woman's head. "Ask who it is," he said smoothly.

McMahon's knuckles thudded on the wooden door.

"Who is it?" called a voice that might have been Ida's.

"Police officer," said Pete McMahon.

Spando's little eyes seemed to laugh. "Tell him you'll let him in," he whispered.

"I'll—I'll let you in—"

Jack Novack drew out his automatic and held the muzzle down on Ida, from a safe vantage point out of range. One hand in his pocket, Spando moved calmly to the door, unfastened the safety chain and flung the door open.

McMahon gaped at him. He knew that face, if he'd had time to think. Spando didn't give him much time. He pounded two shots through the side pocket of his overcoat. Pete reeled back against the opposite door of the hallway as Spando's gun kept slamming. Pete was a hard cookie, even if he was fat, and he took a long time about his dying.

His knees began to bend, and red syrup spurted from his mouth and nose, but somehow or other he got his gun up and pulled the trigger once before he smashed forward on his face. His bullet tore through Spando's left hand, and Ida Carrier

was just behind. She did not know what had happened; it was all very sudden, and surprising; her head dropped forward and she gave a little sigh, tender and lamenting.

The door slammed.

Spando swung his stinging hand, and swore wildly. His eyes rolled back until they seemed all white. "He got her," gasped Novack. "He got her when he drilled you—"

"Good," Spando sobbed. "I tell you it's good. She won't ever make no squawk on us now. Grab that dough, you—" He leaned against the table, threw the empty clip from his pistol and snapped a new one into place. There was red all over his coat.

Dave Glennan was battering at the rear door; not until then did they realize it, for the big automatic was still making door-slams in their ears. Dave had a heavy garbage can and he was swinging it like a club against the outer door with his right arm while his left hand had his revolver ready. . . . Dave was a southpaw.

From the kitchen entry Novack fired at him casually and coolly. He had the leather bag of money now, and he was anxious to get this irksome mound of flesh out of the way so he and Spando could descend the rear stairway. There was apt to be a driver or even a whole squad out in front—

Clong. The bullet stung through the garbage can and raked Dave's

side. "All right," he bellowed, "put down those guns or we'll let you —"

Clong. Clong.

Glennan's first shot tore a wad of splinters from the door casing beside Novack's head. Novack fell back; the big detective came on, holding his ineffective shield, flinging another lead messenger ahead of him.

The ruined door caged him for a moment, and that gave Spando his chance. Jack was still shooting, from the entryway, but Spando had slipped into the pantry. There was a tiny window opposite Dave's shoulders, and it was easy to plant a bullet between Glennan's huge shoulders. Dave sprawled across the doorstep, garbage can and all.

"Front," snapped Novack to his wounded companion. "Our car's there. No more bulls down in front or they'd been here by now—"

"Don't I know it?" snarled Spando as he stumbled over Pete's body in the front hall. Downstairs, a woman was screaming and frightened feet stumbled to and fro. "Mrs. Franchetti," a girl was shrieking, "call the *police*. Mrs. Franchetti—"

Novack cried, "Get outa the way." With his fist he knocked a child across the hall. Spando left a line of red splashes behind him; he kept whining in pain as he ran.

They reached the vestibule as Officer Nick Glennan leaped from a yellow taxicab. He had heard those screeches as he turned the corner;

Mrs. Franchetti was at a second-floor window, and she was telling the world, mainly in screeches, what had happened.

Nick was only a Sparrow Cop, of course, and a rookie at that. Things were happening pretty suddenly, but his face had had time to turn hard and gray and his eyes were hard and gray as well. "Keep down," he said to Buddy, and sprang from the open door of the cab. The driver flung both arms over his head and dropped behind his wheel.

Spando and Novack sped from the vestibule door squarely in Nick Glennan's face. They saw the hated khaki serge and the gleaming star, and the Sparrow Cop was just getting his gun out.

"Get the bull," gasped Spando.

Novack began to shoot, but Nick was coming in very fast. Novack aimed low—a habit of his, a very vicious one. Some fluff flew from the skirts of Glennan's blouse; then the Sparrow Cop's left fist had taken Novack across the jaw. As he went down his foot tripped Spando and the bullet intended for Nick Glennan's heart sang against the concrete instead.

The man in the bloody, brown overcoat squawked something between a sob and a curse. He and Nick Glennan stood there six feet apart, their guns jerking in a nasty chorus. Nick thought somebody had come up behind him and struck his left hip with a club;

somebody else had thrown a brick against his left shoulder.

But he was busy putting six pointed pebbles of lead into Spando's body, and he did not topple over until he had done so.

And when he did topple over, he writhed into a sitting position, reloaded his gun with his right hand, and kept the muzzle on Jack Novack's slumbering head until a patrolman yelled in his ear, "Okay. All okay now—"

He felt rather light-headed and he wanted to laugh, and he hoped they wouldn't frighten Alice when they phoned her, and then he was lying on a rug inside the building while a distant ambulance wailed and whined.

They brought in something huge and gross that dripped and grunted and swore. He twisted his head and stared at his brother Dave. "I'll be so-and-so," he cried hoarsely. Then, "Where's Pete?"

"They got him," whispered Sergeant Dave Glennan. "Yeah. He's—dead. . . . Folks said—you got 'em—"

Nick told him, achingly, "I just got one. But I laid the other out, and he'll burn all right. Who were they?"

"Jack Novack was one," gulped his brother. "Guess the other must of been Micky Spando. We always thought they did that American Packing payroll job. . . . Man and woman dead upstairs. I guess this must be the whole mob."

"One of 'em had a bag."

"Maybe it was a doublecross. Maybe they got in a scrap over the dough."

A woman bent over Nick Glennan and whispered, "Mister, that little boy in the cab—it's his aunt and uncle. They're dead, up in Twelve."

"Who's that?" asked Dave.

The surgeons came in and clustered about them. Outside, sirens chanted in a chorus of Valkyries. . . . Nick moved his head, so that he could grin at Dave. "It was a lost kid. He told me a yarn, over in the park, and I came to take a look. I walked into this—"

"Sparrow Cop." Dave's throat gurgled, and he shut his eyes. "Sparrow Cop. Kid lost in the park. My God." Then, "How about it, Doc? Am I gonna—kick over?"

"Hell, no," rumbled the doctor. "It's in your chest, that's all. They'd have to cut out your heart to kill you, Dave."

Some woman held Buddy up, as Dave and Nick moved out on their stretchers.

"Hey, Dave." Nick motioned toward the boy. "That's the kid. Hiya, Buddy."

"I heard the guns," cried Buddy. "They made a great big bang."

The neighbors were weeping and clucking over him. "Gee. Poor kid. Poor little kid—nobody to look out for him."

"You'd be surprised," Officer Nick Glennan told them. "Wait'll I get on my feet again. We'll—go to the Zoo. A lot. Hey, Buddy?"

Dave heard him, and shook his round head feebly. "Zoo," he whispered. "Holy smoke. A Sparrow Cop—"

"And just as hard as you, you upholstered fly-cop," Nick grinned at him. Their hands clutched, a little bridge from stretcher to stretcher.

Then the ambulances went whining away with them.



Patrick Quentin

Puzzle for Poppy

You've heard of those wacky wills that leave huge fortunes to favorite pets. Well, meet the richest canine in the world—an affectionate St. Bernard, no less. Imagine a case in which a beautiful St. Bernard is the heroine in danger of her life!

YES, MISS CRUMP," SNAPPED IRIS into the phone. "No, Miss Crump. Oh, nuts, Miss Crump."

My wife flung down the receiver. "Well?" I asked.

"She won't let us use the patio. It's that dog, that great fat St. Bernard. It mustn't be disturbed."

"Why?"

"It has to be alone with its beautiful thoughts. It's going to become a mother. Peter, it's revolting. There must be something in the lease."

"There isn't," I said.

When I'd rented our half of this La Jolla hacienda for my shore leave, the lease specified that all rights to the enclosed patio belonged to our eccentric co-tenant. It oughtn't to have mattered, but it did because Iris had recently skyrocketed to fame as a movie star and it was impossible for us to appear on the streets without being mobbed. For the last couple of days we had been virtually beleaguered in our apartment. We were crazy about being beleaguered together,

but even Héloïse and Abelard needed a little fresh air once in a while.

That's why the patio was so important.

Iris was staring through the locked French windows at the forbidden delights of the patio. Suddenly she turned.

"Peter, I'll die if I don't get things into my lungs—ozone and things. We'll just have to go to the beach."

"And be torn limb from limb by your public again?"

"I'm sorry, darling. I'm terribly sorry." Iris unzipped herself from her housecoat and scrambled into slacks and a shirt-waist. She tossed me my naval hat. "Come, Lieutenant—to the slaughter."

When we emerged on the street, we collided head on with a man carrying groceries into the house. As we disentangled ourselves from celery stalks, there was a click and a squeal of delight followed by a powerful whistle. I turned to see a small girl who had been lying in

wait with a camera. She was an unsightly little girl with sandy pigtaails and a brace on her teeth.

"Geeth," she announced. "I can get two buckth for thith thnap from Barney Thtone. He'th thappy about you, Mith Duluth."

Other children, materializing in response to her whistle, were galloping toward us. The grocery man came out of the house. Passers-by stopped, stared and closed in—a woman in scarlet slacks, two sailors, a flurry of bobby-soxers, a policeman.

"This," said Iris grimly, "is the end."

She escaped from her fans and marched back to the two front doors of our hacienda. She rang the buzzer on the door that wasn't ours. She rang persistently. At length there was the clatter of a chain sliding into place and the door opened wide enough to reveal the face of Miss Crump. It was a small, faded face with a most uncordial expression.

"Yes?" asked Miss Crump.

"We're the Duluths," said Iris. "I just called you. I know about your dog, but . . ."

"Not *my* dog," corrected Miss Crump. "Mrs. Wilberframe's dog. The late Mrs. Wilberframe of Glendale who has a nephew and a niece-in-law of whom I know a great deal in Ogden Bluffs, Utah. At least, they *ought* to be in Ogden Bluffs."

This unnecessary information

was flung at us like a challenge. Then Miss Crump's face flushed into sudden, dimpled pleasure.

"Duluth! Iris Duluth. You're *the* Iris Duluth of the movies?"

"Yes," said Iris.

"Oh, why didn't you tell me over the phone? My favorite actress! How exciting! Poor thing—mobbed by your fans. Of course you may use the patio. I will give you the key to open your French windows. Any time."

Miraculously the chain was off the door. It opened halfway and then stopped. Miss Crump was staring at me with a return of suspicion.

"You *are* Miss Duluth's husband?"

"Mrs. Duluth's husband," I corrected her. "Lieutenant Duluth."

She still peered. "I mean, you have proof?"

I was beyond being surprised by Miss Crump. I fumbled from my wallet a dog-eared snapshot of Iris and me in full wedding regalia outside the church. Miss Crump studied it carefully and then returned it.

"You must please excuse me. What a sweet bride! It's just that I can't be too careful—for Poppy."

"Poppy?" queried Iris. "The St. Bernard?"

Miss Crump nodded. "It is Poppy's house, you see. Poppy pays the rent."

"The dog," said Iris faintly, "pays the rent?"

"Yes, my dear. Poppy is very

well-to-do. She is hardly more than a puppy, but she is one of the richest dogs, I suppose, in the whole world."

Although we entertained grave doubts as to Miss Crump's sanity, we were soon in swimming suits and stepping through our open French windows into the sunshine of the patio. Miss Crump introduced us to Poppy.

In spite of our former prejudices, Poppy disarmed us immediately. She was just a big, bouncing, natural girl unspoiled by wealth. She greeted us with great thumps of her tail. She leaped up at Iris, dabbing at her cheek with a long, pink tongue. Later, when we had settled on striped mattresses under orange trees, she curled into a big clumsy ball at my side and laid her vast muzzle on my stomach.

"Look, she likes you." Miss Crump was glowing. "Oh, I knew she would!"

Iris, luxuriating in the sunshine, asked the polite question. "Tell us about Poppy. How did she make her money?"

"Oh, she did not make it. She inherited it." Miss Crump sat down on a white iron chair. "Mrs. Wilberframe was a very wealthy woman. She was devoted to Poppy."

"And left her all her money?" I asked.

"Not quite all. There was a little nest egg for me. I was her companion, you see, for many years. But I am to look after Poppy. That is

why I received the nest egg. Poppy pays me a generous salary too." She fingered nondescript beads at her throat. "Mrs. Wilberframe was anxious for Poppy to have only the best and I am sure I try to do the right thing. Poppy has the master bedroom, of course. I take the little one in front. And then, if Poppy has steak for dinner, I have hamburger." She stared intensely. "I would not have an easy moment if I felt that Poppy did not get the best."

Poppy, her head on my stomach, coughed. She banged her tail against the flagstones apologetically.

Iris reached across me to pat her. "Has she been rich for long?"

"Ob, no, Mrs. Wilberframe passed on only a few weeks ago." Miss Crump paused. "And it has been a great responsibility for me." She paused again and then blurted: "You're my friends, aren't you? Oh, I am sure you are. Please, please, won't you help me? I am all alone and I am so frightened."

"Frightened?" I looked up and, sure enough, her little bird face was peaked with fear.

"For Poppy." Miss Crump leaned forward. "Oh, Lieutenant, it is like a nightmare. Because I know. They are trying to murder her!"

"They?" Iris sat up straight.

"Mrs. Wilberframe's nephew and his wife. From Ogden Bluffs, Utah."

"You mentioned them when you opened the door."

"I mention them to everyone who comes to the house. You see, I do not know what they look like and I do not want them to think I am not on my guard."

I watched her. She might have looked like a silly spinster with a bee in her bonnet. She didn't. She looked nice and quite sane, only scared.

"Oh, they are not good people. Not at all. There is nothing they would not stoop to. Back in Glendale, I found pieces of meat in the front yard. Poisoned meat, I know. And on a lonely road, they shot at Poppy. Oh, the police laughed at me. A car backfiring, they said. But I know differently. I know they won't stop till Poppy is dead." She threw her little hands up to her face. "I ran away from them in Glendale. That is why I came to La Jolla. But they have caught up with us. I know. Oh, dear, poor Poppy who is so sweet without a nasty thought in her head."

Poppy, hearing her name mentioned, smiled and panted.

"But this nephew and his wife from Ogden Bluffs, why should they want to murder her?" My wife's eyes were gleaming with a detective enthusiasm I knew of old. "Are they after her money?"

"Of course," said Miss Crump passionately. "It's the will. The nephew is Mrs. Wilberframe's only living relative, but she deliberately cut him off and I am sure I do not blame her. All the money goes to

Poppy and—er—Poppy's little ones."

"Isn't the nephew contesting screwy will like that?" I asked.

"Not yet. To contest a will takes a great deal of money—lawyers fees and things. It would be much much cheaper for him to kill Poppy. You see, one thing is not covered by the will. If Poppy were to die before she became a mother the nephew would inherit the whole estate. Oh, I have done everything in my power. The moment the—er—suitable season arrived, I found a husband for Poppy. In a few weeks now, the—little ones are expected. But the next few weeks . . ."

Miss Crump dabbed at her eye with a small handkerchief. "Oh, the Glendale police were most unsympathetic. They even mentioned the fact that the sentence for shooting or killing a dog in this state is shockingly light—a small fine; most. I called the police here and asked for protection. They said they'd send a man around some time but they were hardly civil. So you see, there is no protection from the law and no redress. There is no one to help me."

"You've got us," said Iris in a burst of sympathy.

"Oh . . . oh . . ." The handkerchief fluttered from Miss Crump's face. "I knew you were my friend. You dear, dear things. Oh, Poppy, they are going to help us."

Poppy, busy licking my stomach

did not reply. Somewhat appalled by Iris' hasty promise but ready to stand by her, I said:

"Sure, we'll help, Miss Crump. First, what's the nephew's name?"

"Henry. Henry Blodgett. But he won't use that name. Oh, no, he will be too clever for that."

"And you don't know what he looks like?"

"Mrs. Wilberframe destroyed his photograph many years ago when he bit her as a small boy. With yellow curls, I understand. That is when the trouble between them started."

"At least you know what age he is?"

"He should be about thirty."

"And the wife?" asked Iris.

"I know nothing about her," said Miss Crump coldly, "except that she is supposed to be a red-headed person, a former actress."

"And what makes you so sure one or both of them have come to La Jolla?"

Miss Crump folded her arms in her lap. "Last night. A telephone call."

"A telephone call?"

"A voice asking if I was Miss Crump, and then—silence." Miss Crump leaned toward me. "Oh, now they know I am here. They know I never let Poppy out. They know every morning I search the patio for meat, traps. They must realize that the only possible way to reach her is to enter the house."

"Break in?"

Miss Crump shook her tight curls. "It is possible. But I believe they will rely on guile rather than violence. It is against that we must be on our guard. You are the only people who have come to the door since that telephone call. Now anyone else that comes to your apartment or mine, whatever their excuse . . ." She lowered her voice. "Anyone may be Henry Blodgett or his wife and we will have to outwit them."

A fly settled on one of Poppy's valuable ears. She did not seem to notice it. Miss Crump watched us earnestly and then gave a self-scolding cluck.

"Dear me, here I have been burdening you with Poppy's problems and you must be hungry. How about a little salad for luncheon? I always feel guilty about eating in the middle of the day when Poppy has her one meal at night. But with guests—yes, and allies—I am sure Mrs. Wilberframe would not have grudged the expense."

With a smile that was half-shy, half-conspiratorial, she fluttered away.

I looked at Iris. "Well," I said, "is she a nut or do we believe her?"

"I rather think," said my wife, "that we believe her."

"Why?"

"Just because." Iris' face wore the entranced expression which had won her so many fans in her last picture. "Oh, Peter, don't you see what fun it will be? A beautiful

St. Bernard in peril. A wicked villain with golden curls who bit his aunt."

"He won't have golden curls any more," I said. "He's a big boy now."

Iris, her body warm from the sun, leaned over me and put both arms around Poppy's massive neck,

"Poor Poppy," she said. "Really, this shouldn't happen to a dog!"

The first thing happened some hours after Miss Crump's little salad luncheon while Iris and I were still sunning ourselves. Miss Crump, who had been preparing Poppy's dinner and her own in her apartment, came running to announce:

"There is a man at the door! He claims he is from the electric light company to read the meter. Oh, dear, if he is legitimate and we do not let him in, there will be trouble with the electric light company and if . . ." She wrung her hands. "Oh, what shall we do?"

I reached for a bathrobe. "You and Iris stay here. And for Mrs. Wilberframe's sake, hang on to Poppy."

I found the man outside the locked front door. He was about thirty with thinning hair and wore an army discharge button. He showed me his credentials. They seemed in perfect order. There was nothing for it but to let him in. I took him into the kitchen where Poppy's luscious steak and Miss

Crump's modest hamburger were lying where Miss Crump had left them on the table. I hovered over the man while he located the meter. I never let him out of my sight until he had departed. In answer to Miss Crump's anxious questioning, I could only say that if the man had been Henry Blodgett he knew how much electricity she'd used in the past month—but that was all.

The next caller showed up a few minutes later. Leaving Iris, indignant at being out of things, to stand by Poppy, Miss Crump and I handled the visitor. This time it was a slim, brash girl with bright auburn hair and a navy-blue slack suit. She was, she said, the sister of the woman who owned the hacienda. She wanted a photograph for the newspapers—a photograph of her Uncle William who had just been promoted to Rear Admiral in the Pacific. The photograph was in a trunk in the attic.

Miss Crump, reacting to the unlikelihood of the request, refused entry. The red-head wasn't the type that wilted. When she started talking darkly of eviction, I overrode Miss Crump and offered to conduct her to the attic. The girl gave me one quick, experienced look and flounced into the hall.

The attic was reached by the back stairs through the kitchen. I conducted the red-head directly to her claimed destination. There were trunks. She searched through them. At length she produced a

photograph of a limp young man in a raccoon coat.

"My Uncle William," she snapped, "as a youth."

"Pretty," I said.

I took her back to the front door. On the threshold she gave me another of her bold, appraising stares.

"You know something?" she said. "I was hoping you'd make a pass at me in the attic."

"Why?" I asked.

"So's I could tear your ears off."

She left. If she had been Mrs. Blodgett, she knew how to take care of herself, she knew how many trunks there were in the attic—and that was all.

Iris and I had dressed and were drinking Daiquiris under a green and white striped umbrella when Miss Crump appeared followed by a young policeman. She was very pleased about the policeman. He had come, she said, in answer to her complaint. She showed him Poppy; she babbled out her story of the Blodgetts. He obviously thought she was a harmless lunatic, but she didn't seem to realize it. After she had let him out, she settled beamingly down with us.

"I suppose," said Iris, "you asked him for his credentials?"

"I . . ." Miss Crump's face clouded. "My dear, you don't think that perhaps he wasn't a real police . . . ?"

"To me," said Iris, "everyone's a Blodgett until proved to the contrary."

"Oh, dear," said Miss Crump.

Nothing else happened. By evening Iris and I were back in our part of the house. Poppy had hated to see us go. We had hated to leave her. A mutual crush had developed between us.

But now we were alone again, the sinister Blodgetts did not seem very substantial. Iris made a creditable *Boeuf Stroganov* from yesterday's leftovers and changed into a lime green *négligée* which would have inflamed the whole Pacific Fleet. I was busy being a sailor on leave with his girl when the phone rang. I reached over Iris for the receiver, said "Hello," and then sat rigid listening.

It was Miss Crump's voice. But something was horribly wrong with it. It came across hoarse and gasping.

"Come," it said. "Oh, come. The French windows. Oh, please . . ."

The voice faded. I heard the clatter of a dropped receiver.

"It must be Poppy," I said to Iris. "Quick."

We ran out into the dark patio. Across it, I could see the lighted French windows to Miss Crump's apartment. They were half open, and as I looked Poppy squirmed through to the patio. She bounded toward us, whining.

"Poppy's all right," said Iris. "Quick!"

We ran to Miss Crump's windows. Poppy barged past us into the living room. We followed. All

the lights were on. Poppy had galloped around a high-backed davenport. We went to it and looked over it.

Poppy was crouching on the carpet, her huge muzzle dropped on her paws. She was howling and staring straight at Miss Crump.

Poppy's paid companion was on the floor too. She lay motionless on her back, her legs twisted under her, her small, grey face distorted, her lips stretched in a dreadful smile.

I knelt down by Poppy. I picked up Miss Crump's thin wrist and felt for the pulse. Poppy was still howling. Iris stood, straight and white.

"Peter, tell me. Is she dead?"

"Not quite. But only just not quite. Poison. It looks like strychnine. . . ."

We called a doctor. We called the police. The doctor came, muttered a shocked diagnosis of strychnine poisoning and rushed Miss Crump to the hospital. I asked if she had a chance. He didn't answer. I knew what that meant. Soon the police came and there was so much to say and do and think that I hadn't time to brood about poor Miss Crump.

We told Inspector Green the Blodgett story. It was obvious to us that somehow Miss Crump had been poisoned by them in mistake for Poppy. Since no one had entered the house that day except the three callers, one of them, we said,

must have been a Blodgett. All the Inspector had to do, we said, was to locate those three people and find out which was a Blodgett.

Inspector Green watched us poker-faced and made no comment. After he'd left, we took the companionless Poppy back to our part of the house. She climbed on the bed and stretched out between us, her tail thumping, her head flopped on the pillows. We didn't have the heart to evict her. It was not one of our better nights.

Early next morning, a policeman took us to Miss Crump's apartment. Inspector Green was waiting in the living room. I didn't like his stare.

"We've analyzed the hamburger she was eating last night," he said. "There was enough strychnine in it to kill an elephant."

"Hamburger!" exclaimed Iris. "Then that proves she was poisoned by the Blodgetts!"

"Why?" asked Inspector Green.

"They didn't know how conscientious Miss Crump was. They didn't know she always bought steak for Poppy and hamburger for herself. They saw the steak and the hamburger and they naturally assumed the hamburger was for Poppy, so they poisoned that."

"That's right," I cut in. "The steak and the hamburger were lying right on the kitchen table when all three of those people came in yesterday."

"I see," said the Inspector.

He nodded to a policeman who

left the room and returned with three people—the balding young man from the electric light company, the red-headed vixen, and the young policeman. None of them looked happy.

"You're willing to swear," the Inspector asked us, "that these were the only three people who entered this house yesterday."

"Yes," said Iris.

"And you think one of them is either Blodgett or his wife?"

"They've got to be."

Inspector Green smiled faintly. "Mr. Burns here has been with the electric light company for five years except for a year when he was in the army. The electric light company is willing to vouch for that. Miss Curtis has been identified as the sister of the lady who owns this house and the niece of Rear Admiral Moss. She has no connection with any Blodgetts and has never been in Utah." He paused. "As for Officer Patterson, he has been a member of the police force here for eight years. I personally sent him around yesterday to follow up Miss Crump's complaint."

The Inspector produced an envelope from his pocket and tossed it to me. "I've had these photographs of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Blodgett flown from the files of the Ogden Bluffs *Tribune*."

I pulled the photographs out of the envelope. We stared at them. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Blodgett looked at all the sort of person you

would like to know. But neither of them bore the slightest resemblance to any of the three suspects in front of us.

"It might also interest you," said the Inspector quietly, "that I've checked with the Ogden Bluffs police. Mr. Blodgett has been sick in bed for over a week and his wife has been nursing him. There is a doctor's certificate to that effect."

Inspector Green gazed down at his hands. They were competent hands. "It looks to me that the whole Blodgett story was built up in Miss Crump's mind—or yours." His grey eyes stared right through us. "If we have to eliminate the Blodgetts and these three people from suspicion, that leaves only two others who had the slightest chance of poisoning the hamburger."

Iris blinked. "Us?"

"You," said Inspector Green almost sadly.

They didn't arrest us, of course. We had no conceivable motive. But Inspector Green questioned us minutely and when he left there was a policeman lounging outside our door.

We spent a harried afternoon racking our brains and getting nowhere. Iris was the one who had the inspiration. Suddenly, just after she had fed Poppy the remains of the *Stroganov*, she exclaimed:

"Good heavens above, of course!"

"Of course, what?"

She spun to me, her eyes shining.

"Barney Thtone," she lisped. "Why didn't we realize? Come on!"

She ran out of the house into the street. She grabbed the lounging policeman by the arm.

"You live here," she said. "Who's Barney Stone?"

"Barney Stone?" The policeman stared. "He's the son of the druggist on the corner."

Iris raced me to the drugstore. She was attracting quite a crowd. The policeman followed, too.

In the drugstore, a thin young man with spectacles stood behind the prescription counter.

"Mr. Stone?" asked Iris.

His mouth dropped open. "Gee, Miss Duluth. I never dreamed . . . Gee, Miss Duluth, what can I do for you? Cigarettes?"

"A little girl," said Iris. "A little girl with sandy pigtailed and a brace on her teeth. What's her name? Where does she live?"

Barney Stone said promptly: "You mean Daisy Kornfeld. Kind of homely. Just down the block. 712. Miss Duluth, I certainly . . ."

"Thanks," cut in Iris and we were off again with our ever growing escort.

Daisy was sitting in the Kornfeld parlor, glumly thumping the piano. Ushered in by an excited, cooing Mrs. Kornfeld, Iris interrupted Daisy's rendition of *The Jolly Farmer*.

"Daisy, that picture you took of me yesterday to sell to Mr. Stone, is it developed yet?"

"Geeth no, Mith Duluth. I ain't got the developing money yet. Theventy-five tenth. Ma don't give me but a nickel an hour for practicing thith gothdarn piano."

"Here." Iris thrust a ten-dollar bill into her hand. "I'll buy the whole roll. Run get the camera. We'll have it developed right away."

"Geeth." The mercenary Daisy stared with blank incredulity at the ten-dollar bill.

I stared just as blankly myself. I wasn't being bright at all.

I wasn't much brighter an hour later. We were back in our apartment, waiting for Inspector Green. Poppy, all for love, was trying to climb into my lap. Iris, who had charmed Barney Stone into developing Daisy's films, clutched the yellow envelope of snaps in her hand. She had sent our policeman away on a secret mission, but an infuriating passion for the dramatic had kept her from telling or showing me anything. I had to wait for Inspector Green.

Eventually Iris' policeman returned and whispered with her in the hall. Then Inspector Green came. He looked cold and hostile. Poppy didn't like him. She growled. Sometimes Poppy was smart.

Inspector Green said: "You've been running all over town. I told you to stay here."

"I know." Iris' voice was meek.

"It's just that I wanted to solve poor Miss Crump's poisoning."

"Solve it?" Inspector Green's query was skeptical.

"Yes. It's awfully simple really. I can't imagine why we didn't think of it from the start."

"You mean you know who poisoned her?"

"Of course." Iris smiled, a maddening smile. "Henry Blodgett."

"But . . ."

"Check with the airlines. I think you'll find that Blodgett flew in from Ogden Bluffs a few days ago and flew back today. As for his being sick in bed under his wife's care, I guess that'll make Mrs. Blodgett an accessory before the fact, won't it?"

Inspector Green was pop-eyed.

"Oh, it's my fault really," continued Iris. "I said no one came to the house yesterday except those three people. There was someone else, but he was so ordinary, so run-of-the-mill, that I forgot him completely."

I was beginning to see then. Inspector Green snapped: "And this run-of-the-mill character?"

"The man," said Iris sweetly, "who had the best chance of all to poison the hamburger, *the man who delivered it*—the man from the Supermarket."

"We don't have to guess. We have proof." Iris fumbled in the yellow envelope. "Yesterday morning as we were going out, we bumped into the man delivering Miss

Crump's groceries. Just at that moment, a sweet little girl took a snap of us. This snap."

She selected a print and handed it to Inspector Green. I moved to look at it over his shoulder.

"I'm afraid Daisy is an impressionistic photographer," murmured Iris. "That hip on the right is me. The buttocks are my husband. But the figure in the middle—quite a masterly likeness of Henry Blodgett, isn't it? Of course, there's the grocery apron, the unshaven chin."

She was right. Daisy had only winged Iris and me but with the grocery man she had scored a direct hit. And the grocery man was unquestionably Henry Blodgett.

Iris nodded to her policeman. "Sergeant Blair took a copy of the snap around the neighborhood groceries. They recognized Blodgett at the Supermarket. They hired him day before yesterday. He made a few deliveries this morning, including Miss Crump's, and took a powder without his pay."

"Well . . ." stammered Inspector Green. "Well . . ."

"Just how many charges can you get him on?" asked my wife hopefully. "Attempted homicide, conspiracy to defraud, illegal possession of poisonous drugs. . . . The rat, I hope you give him the works when you get him."

"We'll get him all right," said Inspector Green.

Iris leaned over and patted Poppy's head affectionately.

"Don't worry, darling. I'm sure Miss Crump will get well and we'll throw a lovely christening party for your little strangers. . . ."

Iris was right about the Blodgetts. Henry got the works. And his wife was held as an accessory. Iris was right about Miss Crump too. She is still in the hospital but

improving steadily and will almost certainly be well enough to attend the christening party.

Meanwhile, at her request, Poppy is staying with us, awaiting maternity with rollicking unconcern.

It's nice having a dog who pays the rent.



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Ben Hecht

Actor's Blood

*Ben Hecht, a graduate of the so-called "Chicago Group" which included Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, and Floyd Dell, is one of the best-known authors in America. He commands a fabulous salary in Hollywood, and he can write a blue streak in nearly every form and genre—short story, novel, nonfiction, drama, screenplay—and always with sharp, shrewd irony, and often with brimstone brilliance . . . a gripping nov-
elette . . .*

THE death of a famous actress is the signal, as a rule, for a great deal of maudlin excitement. The world that knew her rushes up on that last stage where she lies with her eyes sincerely closed and joins, as it were, in her death scene, posturing and poetizing around her bier like a pack of amateur mummies. For a few days everyone who knew her is a road company Mark Antony burying her with bad oratory. The stage is a respectable and important institution, what with its enormous real estate holdings, but we still patronize an actress, particularly a dead one.

Marcia Tillayou's death let loose an unusual amount of "Alas, poor Yorick" poses among the laity because she was found in her apartment one summer morning with three bullets, all of them through her heart. This struck everybody as

almost too rich a scenario to believe, that so glamorous, beautiful and witty a woman should add murder to the excitement of her dying.

We who were her friends were not exactly delighted. But there's no denying the thrill that lay in that dénouement. Even to her intimates the whole business of mystery surrounding that dead and beautiful body seemed more dramatic than real, seemed more a performance than the ending of a life.

As for the Press, it was honestly and naively grateful. It is seldom that an interesting, let alone famous, woman gets murdered. Our murder victims are in the main the dullest and most depressing of stooges. The best that tragedy has to offer the city editors is an occasional chorus girl and more rarely someone sufficiently well dressed to warrant the word Society.

Marcia's exit kept the presses roaring. There was inexhaustible color to the mystery, and there was more bad writing and idiotic sleuthing than had distinguished the news columns for some time—a month at least. A life-sized portrait of Marcia as Pierrette hanging over the "murder bed" had been slashed across the middle. The furniture of the gaudy room had been smashed. Her satin hung dressing table with its glass top and hundred perfume bottles had been demolished. All in all it looked as if Marcia had been done to death by a herd of bison. But the police and the newspapers chose to regard the attendant ravages as the work of a Love Fiend.

Since these matters and all the clues and surmises of that first week came to nothing there's no point in dwelling on them. My story of the Marcia Tillayou mystery is, as a matter of fact, not part of any police record nor is it to be found in the newspaper files.

At the time of Marcia's death there was one who wept more than all the rest, who ranted more, postured more and seemed more humanly objectionable than any of the mourners who carried spears to her funeral. This one was her father, Maurice Tillayou, a Thespian hero of other days, an ancient theatrical windbag with a soul still full of grease paint and obsolete bravado.

Old actors are perhaps the greatest bores in the world, particularly

old actors whose day is past and whose very agents no longer carry their telephone numbers in their records. Tillayou was of this tribe, and so much the actor still that he could never seem the man again on the stage or off.

This rubbery faced son of bombast had had his heyday at the turn of the century. He had strutted his little hour as one of those barrel voiced, fur collared, blue skinned tragedians of whom our fathers, forgetting their names, still mumble with pretended delight.

Unlike many of his generation, old Tillayou had never adjusted himself to the growing realism of the theater, never tried to soothe his grandiloquent antics to fit the more prosaic tempo of the modern stage. As a result, at fifty, he had almost vanished from the boards; at sixty, he had become one of those myths who cling to some dimly lighted corner of a theatrical club drinking bitterly to the death of art and the venality of managers.

He who had played all the Great Rôles—Hamlet, Lear, Romeo, Jekyll, Monte Cristo, Richelieu, Ben Hur, St. Elmo and Quo Vadis among them—sat in the shadows without a part, as if not he alone but all the swaggering, thundering heroes in whose shoes he had paraded shared his exile. He was given, because of this quaint delusion, to rolling his eyes, working his shaggy brows with mystery and wrapping himself in a peculiar sort

of phantom dignity. He spent the day in sonorous complaints against destiny and like all discarded actors was full of an offensive egoism.

There was nonetheless a slightly exciting air about Tillayou, soiled and musty though he was. His wispy gray and yellowish hair rose from his mottled scalp like the whiskers of a cat. He wore an old fashioned standup collar into which he could have retreated turtle fashion had he so desired. His clothes were as ill-fitting as a waiter's or perhaps a philosopher's. His massive face seemed in repose to be folded up and able to open like an accordion. But bore though he was, didactic and misinformed on almost every human topic, his mind as disheveled as his garments, he had about him the charm of authenticity. He seemed more "theater" than a hundred electric signs. He seemed, with his tiresome boasts, his rumbling voice, his pompous mannerisms and over-plastic face like some lost puppet playing truant from those theatrical storage houses in which the thousand and one forgotten kingdoms of the stage are stacked away.

During the years I knew him I saw him in harness but three times. A Restoration drama revival brought him before the public for a few weeks and once, under the wing of a profit sharing actors' enterprise, he blossomed briefly and rather foolishly as Richelieu. For, removed from under its bushel, the

old Thespian's genius, alas, set no rivers afire. Tillayou emerging from the shadows of exile brought with him all his retinue and was never content with the mere acting of the rôle on the program. He sought to dazzle as well with a dozen other remarkable characterizations of which he was equally master.

The third time I witnessed his performance was the occasion of the anecdote I've set out to relate.

Marcia Tillayou became a star when she was twenty-five. This means a great deal in the theater. It is, as a rule, the reward more of personality than of talent. You must be distinctive and have a new pattern of vocables and gestures to offer. You must have a peculiar voice, it may be inaudible as a conspirator's or incoherent as a train announcer's, but this matters very little providing it has any peculiarity at all—barring adenoids. You must have a set of mannerisms to keep you from being submerged in any characterization, and a certain high handed way of playing all your parts alike, whatever the dramatist has written or the director demanded.

Marcia had been playing Marcia Tillayou for some eight years, most of them on Broadway, playing this peculiar young lady consistently and with infatuation, when rather abruptly one evening her persistence was rewarded. She had stumbled upon a part even more Marcia

Tillayouish than herself—a waspish-tongued, brittle spirited creature of disillusion invented by Alfred O'Shea—a woman whose green eyes shone with wit and despair, whose gestures were tense with ennui and who, in the play, loved, jested and died like a glass of champagne going stale.

Through the medium of that particular drama which was called *The Forgotten Lady* audience and critics beheld Marcia Tillayou for the first time as dozens of intimates already knew her, and this enlarged recognition of her personality made her a star. It was a tremendous début and all who witnessed it knew that ever after, whatever fortunes befell, however many bad plays and adverse criticism came her way, her stardom was fixed; she would always be one of that handful of women of the stage who are an Electric Sign in fair weather or foul.

Marcia Tillayou's emergence as a star was not the only dramatic event of that evening. There was also Maurice Tillayou's emergence as a father. This happened shortly after the last curtain fell.

There was a reception in Marcia's dressing room. Nobody in the world, except perhaps nursery dolls, receives such concentrated and overwhelming flattery as does an actress on the night of a Great Success. The theater touches off the facile emotions and its heroes and heroines come in for blasts of adula-

tion which would terrify more realistic souls.

Maurice Tillayou was present at this back stage coronation in Marcia's dressing room. He stood in a corner, a soiled and musty unknown, his eyes glittering at the sight of the makeup boxes, the mirrors, hangings, strewn finery and heaped floral offerings; his ears tingling with the praises showering the head of his daughter. He lurked silently in the corner until the ecstasies had subsided and the last of the bandwagon soloists drifted out of the room. Then he came forward and, for the first time in the memory of either, kissed his daughter. His eyes shone with tears and he added his gift to the triumph of that evening.

"You are a great artist," he said in capitals, "you have taken your place tonight in the great tradition of the stage beside the immortal figures of Rachel, Siddons, Bernhardt and Modjeska. May I have the honor to congratulate you, my child?"

He said this all very glibly and sonorously as was his habit, but in a strange way this pronouncement of her hitherto boring and negligible parent excited Marcia. Regarding the old windbag with her tired but always witty eyes, she felt the deeper meaning of his words. He had come offering her his egoism, that battered, offensive and useless egoism which had sustained and applauded him when all other

palms had grown silent. He too had undergone a transformation this night. He was no longer Maurice Tillayou, the star, albeit in temporary eclipse; but old Tillayou, father of a star newly risen. Holding her hands and kissing her, the old gentleman seemed to Marcia to be letting go forever his treasured career and passing on to her, twenty-five years after her birth, some gaudy, hereditary talisman of genius.

The story of Marcia's nine years of stardom is a tale that wants a longer telling than this. It was the career of a high heart in a higher mind. To those who kept pace with her or contributed to her life she seemed as complicated as music by Stravinsky, as troublesome as a handful of fine but broken glass. She owned an acidulous mind and a school girl's heart. She was ironic and disillusioned, yet ineptly romantic. She was always beautiful. Her hair shone as if a light were concealed in her coiffure. Her green eyes were never without comment—amusement, derision. Her skin was pale, her mouth wide and mobile, with restless lips. And, as in women of personality, her face seemed bolder, more strongly modelled than suited her taut, slender body. Her crisp voice was an instrument for wit rather than sighs, and her beauty, despite her reputation, was a thing of which men seldom thought lightly. There was too much character and epigram

behind it. Clever people have a way of seeming always gay and this was Marcia's manner—to jest at scars, her own or others'. Her sprightliness, however, was disconcerting, not only because of the cruelty it contained but for the fact that in her very laughter lurked always the antonym of weariness.

Throughout the nine years of her stardom Maurice Tillayou hovered in the background of her affluence, intrigues and follies. He lived elsewhere but was to be seen often at her dinner table, drinking his wine with a faraway happy stare at the Maestros, Savants, Journalists and Heroes of the Pen and Stage who graced his daughter's board. He was still a musty old dodo but full of punctilio and reticence.

What there could be in common between this ghost of the theater and the glamorous daughter whom he haunted no one was able to make out, except that she obviously supported him and that he doted on running errands. Marcia's life seemed hardly fit for such continual parental observation, but there he was peering continually from behind his high, stand-up collar at this legendary world of which he had always dreamed. He lingered in the background, saying nothing that anyone heard, through Marcia's hysterical marriage with Alfred O'Shea, author of her first success, *The Forgotten Lady*, and through that scoundrel's subsequent hegira with Reena Kraznoff, the

dancer; and through a dozen liaisons and entanglements all of them full of heartbreak and hysteria. For Marcia was one whose heart clung to illusions that had no place in her bedroom, and who bought her counterfeit pleasures with genuine coin. Like many of the stage she bargained desperately for beauty and took home tinsel.

Old Tillayou was somehow involved in all these unfortunate doings of his daughter. And though Marcia suffered no social blemish from her wanton antics, her father seemed to lose caste, to become a sort of paternal gigolo.

Yet however bedevilled by her wit, reduced by her sins or made the butt of her reminiscences maliciously remembered from childhood, Tillayou remained always charmed by her presence. She treated him as if he were some eccentric toy to which she was playfully attached. Yet this once most touchy of Hamlets seemed immune to her belittlements. He would smile at her sallies and add a bit of trenchant data to her tales and remain, in a way that touched the hearts of those inclined to notice him at all, respectful and idolatrous. He was, in short, a musty old spectator basking in a corner of his daughter's glamor.

The year and a half which preceded her mysterious death had been a troublesome time for Marcia. A reverberating set-to between her-

self and Phil Murry, her producer, had resulted in the closing of the play she was in. There had followed a short-sighted jump to a rival producer, a hasty production under his banner and an equally hasty flop. A second appearance under the management of the gifted Morria Stein had resulted in another failure. And Marcia found herself verging toward that second stage of stardom in which the star, unexpectedly and as if bedevilled by witches, develops play trouble. Still glamorous, still a great box-office draw, she floundered through productions that set critical teeth on edge.

That alchemistic combination which makes for success on Broadway is a tenuous one. Its secret often evaporates, leaving no visible change in the ingredients, except that the gold is gone. And sadly there rises for these stars confronted with empty seats the first bewildering breath of limbo. All this was beginning to happen to Marcia. There was no belittlement of the name Tillayou. It was still an Electric Sign but growing ghostly, slipping, still aglow, into the side streets of fame.

At this time, too, Marcia's finances came in for ill luck. Yet with a falling market and diminishing salary checks, her extravagances continued. Credit took the place of money. To the clamor of friends and lovers on the telephone were added the appeals of trades-

men, dressmakers, landlords and even servants. It was a stormy period and full of those thunders and lightnings with which temperament, thwarted, manages to circle its head as an antidote.

During these months old Tillayou's importance increased. It was he who led the talk in the dressing rooms after each new disastrous first night. He was an encyclopedia of alibis. Where, he wanted to know, had they got such a leading man, so horrible and unpractised a fellow? He had, said Tillayou, ruined the two major scenes. And where, he wanted to know again, had they discovered the Character Woman? How could a play mount with such a bungling amateur hanging on to it? The set, he was quick to point out, had killed the third act completely. And the rain, he was certain, had depressed the audience. The lighting in the love scene had been atrocious; the director had garbled the first act curtain. But Marcia had been and was always wonderful, superb as ever, giving the best performance he had ever seen any woman offer on the stage. Moreover he was quick with that final solace—that it was weak plays such as this which made the best vehicles for great stars, that it was in such as these that they personally triumphed.

Papa Tillayou stood at the pass like some valorous Old Guard. He knew, alas, all the thousand and one excuses for failure, all the

quaint, smug, fantastic box office circumlocutions which in the theater deaden the sting of defeat. And his voice rumbling, his eyes glowing with their best Hamlet fires, he fought these dressing room Thermopylaes, a veteran forsooth.

In the excitement of Marcia Tillayou's murder, Maurice Tillayou lapsed into complete shadowiness. He had been observed at the funeral carrying on like a Comanche, bellowing with grief and collapsing on the wet ground not once but a dozen times. He had ridden back alone to his bailiwick in Washington Square. And here Maurice Tillayou had remained in seclusion while sleuths and journalists played bloodhound through Marcia's life in quest of the villain who had sent three bullets through her heart.

This made fascinating reading and sophisticated dinner table talk.

Although the police were baffled, God knew and so did some hundreds of New Yorkers who are nearly as omniscient, that there had been material enough in Marcia's life for a whole series of murders. Marcia's career had been interwoven with the careers of equally electric names, names which live in a sort of fidgety half public undress and seem always but a jump ahead of the thunderclap of scandal. We waited excitedly for the hand of the law to fall on one of these—for who could have murdered Marcia more logically than one of those who had been part of her life?

First in our suspicion was Alfred O'Shea, who had married her once and who at her death was still legally her husband. This tall, dark, prankish chevalier, Don Juan, playwright, wit, over-charming and malicious, full of grins, *bon mots* and moody withal as a beggar on a rainy day, was a most obvious suspect to us, his friends. His strong Irish-Castilian face held a jester's nose, pointed and a bit awry, held cold, centered eyes and a gaunt muscular mouth and a promise of high deeds—murder among them. We knew his story well enough. Absurdly infatuated with his Reena, a dancer with a lithographic face and an accent full of charm and faraway places, he had abandoned Marcia and set up a clamor for divorce. Marcia had refused, loathing, she said, to hand him over to so belittling a successor, and we remembered hearing of times this over-charming Celt, drunken and vicious, had broken into Marcia's bedroom threatening to have her heart out unless she released him. What bourgeois trait, what subterranean wiliness inspired Marcia to step so out of character and thwart this man whom she had so desperately loved, I could never make out. She had only jests for answers.

But O'Shea was in a goodly company of suspects, those first weeks of the mystery. There was also Phil Murry, the producer—cool, round face, paunchy with a homely chuckle and a little piping voice, all very

deceptive qualities, for Mr. Murry was as treacherous as a cocklebur to wrestle with. He was a maestro as famous for his unscrupulousness with women as for his hits.

Marcia had been his mistress until supplanted by Emily Duane, long considered her closest friend. La Duane, an Electric Sign in her own right and a vest pocket edition of Duse, cello voiced and full of a deceptive ingenue wholesomeness, had jockeyed Marcia completely out of Murry's life—his theater as well as his arms. We remembered poor Marcia's to-do over Murry's faithlessness, her involved campaign of retaliation—a matter of social ragging and continuous public baiting which had driven that paunchy maestro out of his mind on a number of occasions and reduced Emily to a sort of humorous female Judas in our eyes. How these two had hated Marcia and what vengeance they had sworn against her poor, sad wit!

There was also the grayish, PUNCHINELLO-faced Felix Meyer, theatrical lawyer de luxe as he called himself—glib and of the old school as his redundant phrases and ancient cravat testified. This elderly bravo was a species of liaison officer between Broadway and a mysterious world of reality called the Law. But to that world he found it seldom necessary to resort. For, immersed in the thousand and one secrets of the theater, his practice was in the main a species of affable blackmail

and counter-blackmail—his activities as arbiter, backer, judge and Don Juan being only dimly sensed by his intimates, and not at all by his wife.

His affair with Marcia had been an unusually gritty one, based on her inability to pay him an exorbitant legal fee for services rendered. It had lasted several months and left both of them with a horror of each other. Lawyer Felix went about in terror lest Marcia, out of spite, betray him to his wife, to whose name he had with foolhardy caution transferred all his holdings. And Marcia, aware of his craven fidgets, had time and again promised to do just that. How relieved this glib and accomplished fellow must have felt that first moment reading of her death, and how full of disquiet he must have sat while the bloodhounds scurried through Marcia's life sniffing for clues.

There was also Fritz von Klauber, who had painted Marcia as Pierrette, a dapper gentleman of the arts with a mandarin mustache and a monocle to help him intimidate the less fortunately born theatrical producers (a rather numerous set) for whom he devised unusually expensive scenery. Von Klauber's relations with Marcia had ended more unprettily than most. We knew that he had borrowed thousands of dollars from her while her lover and refused to recognize the debt after discovering or pretending to discover her in the arms of

Morrie Stein. Mr. Stein, a purring, monkish man with over-red lips, upturned eyes, a grasshopper's body and a prodigious sneer flying, flag like, from his lips, had been Marcia's last substitute for love. We knew little of this adventure, but our suspicions of Morrie were quickened by an aversion which all his intimates seemingly held for him.

There was, slightly down on the list of suspects but still qualifying for our gossip, Percy Locksley, a Pickwickian fellow minus, however, all hint of simplicity or innocence—a journalist with a facetious but blood curdling cruelty to his style who had figured disturbingly in Marcia's life. He had been rumored as her possible husband, which rumor Marcia had scotched with great public cries of outrage and epigram at Locksley's expense. And though this might seem small motive for murder, to know Locksley was to suspect him of anything, from homicide to genius.

And there was also Emil Wallerstein, the poet, who had hounded Marcia's doorsill for a year, smitten, drunken, vicious, bawling for her favors and threatening to hang himself with her garter (like Gerard de Nerval) if she refused; who had made quite a show of going to the dogs (at his friends' expense) as a result of her coldness; and whom Marcia, for reasons hidden from us, had thoroughly and always cleverly despised.

Also further down the list was Clyde Veering, a charming, faded roué, once a font of learning and now a fat little Silenus in oxford glasses clinging to a perpetual cock-tail. Veering was known amusingly as a connoisseur of decadence. His tasteful bachelor apartment was at the service of his friends of both sexes providing their intentions were sufficiently abnormal or dishonorable. It was a bit difficult to conceive of Veering as a murderer, but like a number of others we held suspect, it was more his possible secret knowledge of the crime than participation in it which excited us.

However, none of these, nor anyone else, came under the hand of the law. There was some surreptitious questioning, a great deal of libel-cautious hints in the news columns, but no arrests. Nothing happened despite the baying of the bloodhounds. A peculiarly gallant reticence seemed to surround Marcia, dead. No letters were found among her effects, no voice from the grave gave direction to the hunt. And the mysterious ending of this charming and famous woman slowly embedded itself behind other local excitements.

It was four weeks after the murder, when its mystery had subsided to an occasional paragraph, that Maurice Tillayou emerged from the shadows and in a spectacular manner.

We who had known Marcia well or too well, received an invitation from the old gentleman. It was strangely worded. It read: "May I have the honor of your company at a dinner Friday evening which I am giving in memory of my daughter, Marcia? I strongly urge you to attend, for matters vital to yourself as well as to the mystery surrounding my daughter's murder are to be revealed in my house. I am asking you in all fairness to be present—or represented."

A few of us were amused and touched by the old actor's melodramatic summons. But there were almost a score of others whom I found to be filled with disquiet. The matter was guardedly discussed over a number of telephones. Efforts to reach old Tillayou in advance for further information availed nothing.

It rained on that Friday night. Thunder rolled in the sky and the streets were full of that picnic-like confusion which storm brings to the city. I rang the bell of the Tillayou roost and waited in the unfamiliar old hallway until the door was opened by an amazingly senile fellow, stooped, cackling and practically mummified. He was obviously the servant and obviously in a state of complete mental paralysis. For behind him in a large studio-like room, buzzing, clattering, laughing, was as browbeating a coterie of celebrities as the theater had to offer. They had arrived, and

this was odd for these chronic dinner wreckers, on time. I noticed that a number were already on their third cocktail and that the babble which greeted me was completely lacking in those overtones of ennui, disdain and bad manners which usually marked their get-togethers.

I looked vainly for a glimpse of Tillayou and learned from several sources that the old windjammer was still lurking in the wings, building up his entrance. It was a familiar enough group, a rather morbid round-up it seemed, of men and women who had loved Marcia Tillayou, cheated her, quarreled with her, lied to her, drunk with her, amused and betrayed her and been part of that strident, characterless treadmill which is the Broadway Parnassus. So reminiscent were they all of Marcia that she seemed almost present, almost certain to appear and join them, as they stood about maliciously guillotining absent comrades and exchanging those tireless reminiscences which Celebrities always have for each other.

I was rather thrilled at the spectacle, for old Tillayou's intention was plain. He had assembled a company of suspects and was obviously going to climax the evening by some formal accusation of guilt. There was a handful, like myself, who could look forward to no such distinction, but who knew what the old actor had got into his addled head. We had all been part of Mar-

cia's world and we might all be presumed to have had some insight into the mystery that had climaxed her life.

This little world Tillayou had summoned out of its orbit into his humble old actor lodgings made a uniform picture. Its members were as alike as the decorations on a Christmas tree. There was about them an identical air, a similarity of inner and outer tailoring as if they had all been finished off on the same loom. Success was in their names and New York, the New York of the roman candle signs, of Ballyhoo and Ego, Merry-go-round Achievement and Overnight Fortune hung like a tag from their words and manners. They were the cream of a certain electric lighted firmament—its satraps and its nobles—and if you liked this world you liked them; if you revered this world, as old Tillayou once had, these were gods for your genuflections. A swift and glittering world it was, a bauble of a planet, out of which were hatched nightly the ephemera of art, the fireflies that masqueraded as beacons for an hour.

I joined Veering, always the source of rich information. He was pouting childishly over his fifth cocktail, cackling that he was much too bored by old Tillayou's banality to talk about it and regretting he had wasted an evening, when so few (virile) ones remained. I moved toward Locksley and fell to

studying the half hundred costume photographs of Tillayou in his hey-day that decorated the wall.

"He played all the parts," I said. "He could illustrate a full edition of the Bard."

"Yes," said Locksley, "he had that talent for bad acting which made him a natural and tireless Shakespearean."

Von Klauber, joining us, remarked, "Marcia always called him that Old Devil Ham."

"We saw him once as Richelieu," O'Shea said coming up to us. "I'll never forget Marcia's delight when he went up in his lines in the third act. She said it saved the play."

Wallerstein, the poet, not yet drunk, stood glowering at von Klauber.

"The destruction of your Pierrette painting of Marcia," he sneered, "was a great blow to the world of art."

"Thank you," said von Klauber, "I didn't know you had ever had the good fortune to see that painting."

Veering chuckled.

"Marcia always loathed it," he said, winking at everybody. He had, mysteriously, a distaste for artists.

"It was painted under handicaps," said von Klauber calmly.

"Miss Tillayou must have been a very difficult subject."

Lawyer Felix had joined us.

"Not difficult to paint," said von Klauber, "but difficult to please."

"And very ungrateful," Locksley chuckled. "She always secretly believed that the portrait had been painted with a cake of laundry soap. Or so she said."

Veering stared morosely toward the door of an adjoining room.

"That," he said, "is presumably the old gentleman's lair. Do you think if we applauded violently, he would come out for a bow, at least? I'm slowly perishing of hunger."

The rain rattled in the windows, the thunder rolled, our babble grew tense and nastier with a growing undercurrent of mutiny, a large contingent beginning to murmur of bolting the entire farcical business, and then Tillayou appeared. He was dressed in a combination of evening clothes and a black velvet jacket and looked surprisingly younger. None of us had ever seen or dreamed of so vibrant a Tillayou, or fancied so dominant a figure would crawl out of that old cocoon.

We stopped talking and listened to Tillayou as if the lights had gone out around us and he alone stood in brightness. He had brought a stranger into the room. He introduced this new guest, identifying each of us unctuously by calling and achievement. The guest was Carl Scheuttler which was a name as striking to us at the moment as Sherlock Holmes. Mr. Scheuttler was from the District Attorney's office. He had led the futile hunt for Marcia's murderer and had promised, in the news columns

from day to day, "important developments before nightfall." His presence in this room surrounded by this roundup promised definite entertainment. Marcia's murderer was among us, or at least so Tillayou thought, and was going to be served us for dessert.

We started for the dining room, all grown very formal. A long, improvised banquet table was set for us. Tillayou ordered us to find our place cards and under no circumstances change them. Mr. Scheutler was eyeing us professionally, at least so it seemed, holding himself aloof from our sallies and making no compromising friendships which might embarrass him when the great moment of accusation and arrest arrived.

As we seated ourselves we noted a number of odd things, which then dropped at least out of my mind because of what happened immediately. Locksley was the first to speak after the chairs had stopped scraping and we were all in our places.

"Who," inquired Locksley feelingly and pointing at the one empty chair at the foot of the table, "who is that miserable miscreant?"

From the other end of the table where old Tillayou and his velvet jacket were presiding came a slow, sonorous answer.

"That is for my guest of honor, sir."

Locksley reached over and examined the place card.

"Well, well," he chuckled, "this

seat has been reserved for one not entirely unknown to all of us."

"Who?" inquired Morrie Stein.

"Marcia Tillayou," said Locksley, "who has gone out for the moment to fetch her harp."

"Serve the dinner, Mr. Harvey," said our host to the old mummy, "we are all here."

Kraznoff, the dancer, who was seated rather near the empty chair, rose nervously.

"Please, I like change my plaze," she announced.

There was laughter.

"Come, come, sit down." Morrie Stein grinned, "Marcia was much too sensible to turn into a ghost."

Locksley was beaming at our host.

"This is marvelous," he said, "Mr. Tillayou, bless his old heart, will turn out the lights and little Marcia will dance for us with a tambourine.

"It's an insult to Marcia," said Emily Duane.

"You're mistaken," von Klauber smiled at her, "the insult is to us. But a very stupid one. So it doesn't matter."

Lawyer Felix, sensing troubled waters, grew oily.

"Perhaps Mr. Tillayou isn't serious," he said. "It may be just a sentimental gesture. You do not really believe she is here, Mr. Tillayou?"

To this Tillayou answered softly.

"There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy."

"Very good," said Locksley.

O'Shea, who had been staring sadly at the empty chair, suddenly leaned across the table and addressed it.

"Hello darling," he said softly. "You look quite stunning tonight. Who gave you those beautiful lilies?"

The thunder rolled outside. Emily Duane gasped. But Locksley, not to be outdone in sallies by thunder or screams, cooed politely.

"Pass the olives, will you, Veering," he said, "before Marcia makes a pig of herself."

There being no olives and since there was no Marcia, this struck us as doubly droll. We laughed. Von Klauber turned his monocle on the "Representative from Scotland Yard."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Mr. Scheuttler?" he asked.

"I'm sure they're out of his jurisdiction," said Veering.

The elderly Mr. Harvey was tottering around the table filling wine glasses. Wallerstein, his dark, angry face intent on the empty chair, announced abruptly.

"Death is not a final word. We do not die so quickly. Marcia was never more alive than she is in this room tonight. Her innermost secrets are at this table. We are a compendium of Marcia."

"That's quite right," said O'Shea moodily. "We all loved her, in our varied fashions."

Tillayou, silent and queerly

aglow, repeated under his breath the words, "loved her," and stared around the table, his eyes flooding with tears.

"Now that's rotten taste," Veering murmured, "calling us here to stage an exhibition of table rapping—and tears."

"A little grief over Marcia's death wouldn't be so amiss," said O'Shea, "particularly among her friends."

The aged Mr. Harvey, who, Locksley had been quick to decide, was the famous Sante Fe provisioner, was bringing in soup plates, sparsely filled and almost cold and clattering them down one at a time in front of the guests. Indignant requests for spoons rising from one end of the table confused him and brought him to a standstill, shivering in his tracks and regarding his master unhappily. Tillayou nodded reassuringly at him, dried his eyes, beamed, pushed his chair from the table and stood up. This unexpected gesture brought quiet. I noticed that Mr. Scheuttler had lowered his head and was frowning severely at the tablecloth.

"I am an old actor," Tillayou began in measured tones, "and with the audience seated and the curtain up, I find it hard to wait."

He favored us with an engaging, almost cringing smile.

"Art is long but time is fleeting," he continued, "and there is one who bids me speak." However, he didn't speak, but fell once more into quotation. It was a poem this time.

"Love, hear thou! How desolate the heart is, ever calling
Ever unanswered, and the
dark rain falling,
Then as now. . . ."

This mystic invocation done with, Tillayou struck a pose that showed the oration itself was about to begin. But how describe such an oration! How bad it was, and how illumined afterwards with a grandeur we never knew was in it. Yet to betray its climax would be somehow to deprive it of the quality belonging to it during its delivery, the bravado with which he spoke it into the sharpened teeth of perhaps the city's most finicky raconteurs, the clownish humors which it achieved unconsciously as it went on, the boredom, the suspense which seemed to promise only the cruel laughter of the audience.

There were, alas, sad lapses of logic in his speech, when the old actor's mind failed to provide the correct transition, ironies which would have seemed far fetched and inexplicable were they not so obviously borrowed from Mark Antony's funeral address; and there would have been more pauses in it even than there were, had Tillayou not helped himself to the language of the Bard. We heard *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* and *Romeo*, in whispers and inflections that sounded to our kind like rather hilarious caricatures. We listened with distaste, sneers, and apprehension for what

might still follow, to Shylock's unctuous tones, and the cries of Spartacus before the Roman populace. Altogether, it was a performance that would have required more than a little indulgence on the part of the politest audience, and one which only O'Shea among us, his head leaning on his hand in one of his idle postures, seemed mysteriously to enjoy.

"You are my guests," it went, "very distinguished guests, and if I offend by what I am going to say, I ask your indulgence as the father of one who was admirable to you. I am the ghost of Banquo come to trouble your feasting.

"These, Mr. Scheuttler, are all very honorable and distinguished citizens who have gone out of their way to gratify the whim of an old actor by supping in his home. They are the great names of that world I have so long served with my humble talents.

"You asked, sirs, if I believed my daughter Marcia was present in this galaxy of her friends. It may be the wandering wits of an old man but I see her there, sitting tragic and beautiful, about her the sound of rain and of sweet bells jangling out of tune. Smiling at those who loved her. Yet she looks with cold eyes at one who sits here, with accusing eyes at one whose heart shouts, 'Avaunt and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!'

"Sweet and fair she was, the brightness of her cheek did shame

the stars as daylight doth the lamp. But I won't bore you by asking you to recall those charms you once admired so, those virtues you once held so highly, almost as highly as myself.

"You have not come here tonight to hear a doting father spread his miseries before you, but for sterner business which from your courtesy and attentiveness I feel sure you have guessed.

"Mr. Scheuttler asked me to tell him this matter privately but I refused. For you were all her friends, her honorable friends, and I wanted you present.

"Who killed my daughter? Who took her life? There's the question. I have the answer. But I'll not merely give a name and cry 'murderer!' No, I have the proofs.

"You all loved her and admired her, helped her through the years of struggle, made life sweet for her with your tenderness and understanding and unselfishness. Yet one of you murdered her. Murdered her!

"He is here. He came to my humble house, fancying himself too clever for detection. He sits now at my table. Mr. Harvey, close the doors! Lock them! So he can't escape. Lock us in! The windows too. Ha—good man, Harvey. He has served me well. He was with me through those years when I too, like my daughter, was a star; not as bright or shining as she. But Maurice Tillayou was a name, sirs, that

belonged to the grand days of the theater. Thank you, Harvey. You may go to bed now and sleep sweetly, and may angels guard thy dreams.

"Where was I, Mr. Scheuttler? Oh, yes, the doors are locked. Is this not like a play? Your faces waiting for the name—the name of Judas. All of you waiting, each edging from his neighbor. I keep my promise, Mr. Scheuttler. I have the proofs, all of them, enough to send that one from this table to the gallows. The man who killed Marcia, who murdered my Marcia, is looking at me. Ah, the terror in his eyes. His name is—"

Thunder had been rolling through the last of his words. Now it crashed outside drowning out his voice. And at the same time the room in which we sat turned black. The entire scene disappeared as in a dream. The lights had gone out. The women screamed. Chairs toppled over. There was a moment of mysterious confusion, consternation, with cries and even laughter in the dark. But we were riveted by a voice calling wildly in the black room. It was Tillayou.

"Let me go! He's killing me! Help! Help! Oh my God! He's killing—killing—"

The voice shut off as if hands were choking its sound. There was a flash of lightning and in the phosphorescent glare that lay in the room for a moment we seemed to see something mad—Tillayou sink-

ing to the floor in a corner, his hands over his heart, and blood flowing over them. The tableau vanished.

An awkward nightmarish and foolishly restrained commotion followed. We seemed to think it was something unreal we were witnessing and we were not a crowd to scream, to throw down chairs or believe in murder at a lightning glance. Reality is a far cry from those forever writing about it. Emily Duane inquired in a polite voice for lights.

O'Shea was the first to hold a cigarette lighter over the old man in the corner. On his knees, gasping, one hand on the floor and trying to crawl somewhere, we made out Tillayou. In the same moment Mr. Scheuttler, who obviously knew his way about in such dilemmas, was on O'Shea with a flashlight and apparently convinced he was the murderer. Now at last there were screams from the women and a rather hysterical calling for lights from the men and over it all the groans and gasps of a dying man whom Mr. Scheuttler was hounding professionally for a dying statement.

In fact we, Mr. Scheuttler and Tillayou seemed to be acting in a play—one of those Broadway melodramas full of darkness, murder, suspects and all the unconvincing trappings of theatricalized mystery. Some of us lit matches, others cigarette lighters, others searched for

lights or joined in hounding the dying man alongside the frantic and barking Mr. Scheuttler. O'Shea provided a minute's extra excitement by kicking in the door and reappearing in the face of Mr. Scheuttler's drawn gun, this official having forbidden anyone to leave the premises, with a candelabra. This he lit and the candelabra illuminated with its mellow beam a scene that seemed as operatic as *Tosca*.

"It's dark," Old Tillayou was moaning, "Marcia, where are you? My little bright haired girl. Marcia, my child."

Now we all leaned over him, urging him, like a mob of earnest sapers, to tell who had killed him, and eyeing each other the while askance. Mr. Scheuttler, in particular, convinced that the old man was about to name his murderer, waited with his gun still drawn.

But the old actor was raving.

"Blood," he said, lifting his hands and staring at them, "my blood." And again asked to speak out, he started crying for Marcia. "Listen," he said, "listen to her. Ever calling . . . ever unanswered." There was more of it, heart-breaking and somehow unreal.

Then there was the awful moment when the old man seemed to search for someone. Now his eyes were calm. He recognized Mr. Scheuttler.

"Let me whisper the name," he murmured eagerly, and so faintly

we could hardly hear, "he—he mustn't escape. Closer, my friends. Lend me your ears . . ."

"Who was it?" someone couldn't help saying desperately.

Mr. Scheuttler roared for quiet, only to repeat the question himself in the next moment.

"Ah," said Tillayou, "it was . . . it was . . ." and lapsed into a silence. There was a babble of questioning as the silence grew prolonged, and then hysterical. Mr. Scheuttler no longer seemed to be watching his suspects. He was looking at the old man who appeared to be quietly crying. Some tears rolled down his cheeks. And then an incredible thing happened. Tillayou died.

There had been some coughing, the rattle that is so unmistakable even to those who have never heard it. But no one somehow had expected death.

An even more melodramatic panderemonium followed Tillayou's passing. Police were called for. We were ordered about. Mr. Scheuttler flourished his gun. Mr. Harvey was sent for from his sleep guarded by angels and, as he stood moaning over his master's body, questioned about the switch for the lights which hadn't worked all this time. O'Shea took a lead in this questioning, despite Mr. Scheuttler's violent orders addressed to one whom he now regarded firmly as a murderer. Mr. Harvey was incapable of any answers but O'Shea suddenly went

down on his hands and knees and began crawling under the table while Mr. Scheuttler, fancying this an effort to escape, threatened loudly he would never get out of the room alive. But suddenly, in the midst of these threats, as O'Shea fumbled under the carpet at the table's edge, the lights went on.

"If you will allow me to be a bit oracular and put that gun away," O'Shea said, poking his head up from under the table, "the mystery is a very simple one. Tillayou turned out the lights himself. The switch was right under his foot. And then he killed himself."

It was dawn when Locksley, O'Shea and I entered O'Shea's rooms. We had spent an active and rather noisy evening as guests of Mr. Scheuttler and two police officials. Mr. Harvey had finally told his story. Tillayou had had the switch under the table installed the day before and this vital clue had been quickly verified from the electricians who had done the work. Mr. Harvey related that Tillayou had ordered him not to cook any food for our banquet, saying it wouldn't be necessary, and had also said that dishes and silverware would not be needed at his dinner. The absence of these items had been one of the odd things we noticed when we had first entered the dining room. Mr. Harvey also identified the dagger removed from Tillayou's body as one that had seen

service in an ancient production of *Macbeth* and one which his master had spent the hours before the arrival of his guests sharpening in his bedroom.

There was no doubt that Tillayou had killed himself. But Mr. Scheuttler and the two police officials remained confused by the manner of his suicide. O'Shea persuaded them, aided by Mr. Harvey's tears and tattle, that the old actor's mind had been unhinged by grief over Marcia's death and that the whole matter could be explained only by the poor man's insanity. We were all allowed finally to go, after assuring the officials we would appear any time they desired us for further questioning.

In O'Shea's rooms, Locksley and I waited patiently while that moody Celt opened bottles and prepared us drinks. After he had accomplished these rites he went to his desk.

"I'll let you read this letter," he said. "It's from Marcia. It was mailed the night she was found dead."

He handed us a scrawled piece of note paper. We read:

"Alfred, I'm bored, tired, hurt, sick, full of nasty things. You were always the nicest. So take care of my father, like a good boy, will you? I'd stay a while longer but death seems easier and simpler than life. What are a few pills more or less to one who has swallowed so much? Goodbye and do you re-

member the first night of *The Forgotten Lady*? For the last time,
"Marcia."

O'Shea smiled at us moodily as we finished.

"That's the truth," he said, "she committed suicide."

"What about the bullets?" I asked.

"Guess," said O'Shea.

"Tillayou," said Locksley.

"Right," said O'Shea. "He found her dead with the poison still in her hand, very likely. And he couldn't bear that.

"He worshipped her," said O'Shea. "She was his star. But stars don't commit suicide. Only failures do that. Only very miserable and defeated people do that. He tried to keep her a star. So he set about slashing the painting and wrecking the place. It was all done very bravely so that the world might never guess that Marcia had died so ingloriously.

"At least," said O'Shea, "that's what I thought it was at first. And I decided to say nothing. What we saw tonight has got me all excited," he smiled and drank again.

"It was terrible," said Locksley.

"It was marvelous," O'Shea grinned at him. His gaunt, muscular mouth trembled with the mood of eloquence. "I read the signs wrong," he said. "Do you know what happened?"

"No," said Locksley, "except that the old boy was madder than a Hatter, poor soul."

"He wasn't mad," said O'Shea, "he was sane. You see, my lads, the old polliwog never thought of Marcia as having killed herself. He found her dead by her own hand. But that didn't mean anything. He saw her as murdered—by all of us. Murdered, gadzooks, by all the lying, cheating, faking rabble of friends that had danced around her including your humble servant, Alfred O'Shea. We'd killed her," he said dourly. "Do you remember what he called us—all honorable and distinguished friends, all full of sweetness and unselfishness toward her? That was cute of the old windbag. Looking at us whom he hated so and rolling those juicy sentences at us. We were a flock of vampires that had fed off her. That's how he saw us, all of us. When he found her dead he thought of her as murdered, by us, by Broadway. It was all our hands that had lifted the poison glass to her mouth. And he went cracked with the curious idea of somehow bringing all these phantom murderers to justice."

We nodded. O'Shea drank again.

"That was a great performance tonight at the table," he said. "And a cold house. But he went over big."

"What made you think of another switch?" I asked.

"I knew that something strange was on the boards," O'Shea grinned. "I wanted to interrupt. But I hated to break up his show, whatever it was going to be. I'm

kind of glad I didn't, aren't you?"

We said we were, but looked blankly at our host for further explanation. O'Shea drank again, grinned, his eyes filling with admiration.

"Do you realize," he said softly, "that the old barnstormer was playing his death scene from the moment he came into the room, with Sherlock Holmes in tow? He had the dagger in his pocket. He'd figured it out, rehearsed it in his bedroom for days, sharpening away at Macbeth's old toad stabber. He had his lines down pat. He'd planned to kill himself with the name of the supposedly guilty party almost on his lips. He was going to go as far as saying who it was that had murdered Marcia and then, out with the lights and the dagger in his heart. Suspicion would be turned on all of us. We'd all of us be clapped into jail and raked over the coals, not for his murder alone, but for Marcia's. That was the main thing. Whoever had killed Marcia had snapped out the lights and done him in, just as he was about to reveal the name. That was the plot. What a grand old boy! I'll never forget his dying."

"Nor I," I agreed.

"Dying and remembering his lines to the last," said O'Shea. "What a memory. That was my favorite poem he kept quoting—*Rain on Rahoun* by Joyce. He heard me recite it once—on my honeymoon. You remember when he lay in the corner with the knife

in him—acting, by God. All that wailing and mumbling about Marcia—do you know what he was doing? Ad libbing, like the good old trouser he was, filling in because death had missed its cue. Lend me your ears—it was the grand manner—grease paint and blood. And do you remember how he gurgled finally in that old ham voice of his—'It was . . . it was . . .' and died exactly at the right moment? What timing!"

"I remember how he said goodbye to Mr. Harvey," said Locksley, "that was—pretty."

We sat silent, overcome by the

memory of old Tillayou's oration, hearing it anew with the mystery out of it.

"None of us will die as gallantly," said O'Shea, "and so much in the full sanctity of love—and art."

Locksley rose. A wry smile came into his Pickwickian face.

"A lovely piece of old-fashioned miming," he said, "but as fruitless a drama as I ever had the misfortune to witness."

"You're right," O'Shea said, "the plot was full of holes. I could have helped him a lot with the construction. But—it was a great Last Night."

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FELICITY OPENED THE DOOR. SHE smiled briefly and held out her hand. Dr. Colin Starr thought her nervous and flushed, though altogether lovely-looking—as her mother (whom Starr had not known) was reputed to have been.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you ever so much for coming."

"I'm glad to, Felicity. How is she?"

"That's it. I think there's nothing wrong with her physically. She came downstairs before luncheon. She hasn't done that for months. She—well, she did *peculiar* things in the kitchen. I think she's frightened, Doctor—frightened stiff."

"Don't worry. We'll see."

"She's upstairs again now. I don't know why I bothered you. I just felt that I had to."

"Very right of you."

Starr placed hat and gloves, a warm overcoat, on a handsome buhl table in the large hall. Tortoise shell and white metal gleamed softly around the coat's gray tweed. The day was extraordinarily chilly for March, and he had thought

there was a feeling of sleet in the bitter air. A fat woman with a pale face and lush blonde hair came from a doorway and toward them. Starr observed her casually, her girth, the excessive plumpness. Glands, he thought.

The woman smiled and looked at him with damp inquisitive eyes, and Felicity said:

"Miss Vernon, Doctor Starr."

Miss Vernon appraised his strong, solid figure, his agreeable face. She held a hand out and let it lie plumply in Starr's.

"A doctor?" Miss Vernon effaced the smile and turned to Felicity. "Mrs. Dieterling? Is she ill?"

"Not really. I just thought it best."

"How wise of you, dear! After all, at her age—"

"It's only seventy."

"Well, dear."

Miss Vernon smiled again at Starr, moved past them and up the stairs, a lethargic *blanc-mange*.

"Is she one of the paying guests?" Starr asked.

"Yes. She's in town for the Home

Bureau. How-to-reupholster-old-furniture sort of thing. It's almost a vice with her, Doctor."

They walked toward the stairs. "Not an unpleasant one."

"You'd find it so if you had her in the house. She examines each sagging chair-bottom and wants to glue up old drawers and things. Her talk begins and ends with webbing."

"Have you many others?"

"No, just two. A Miss Warbright came last week. She is a writer and doing some groundwork on an historical romance about early Ohio. She's rather weird about it, and wants to insist that everyone settled here in burlap Mother Hubbards. She almost takes it as a personal affront when Grandmother describes the gowns and millinery fresh by packet-boat from Paris. I don't mind her, though. Miss Ashland is the real trial."

"Your third?"

"Yes. She's *secretive*."

"You ought to listen in on some of my consultations. What is Miss Ashland secretive about?"

They were going along a broad upper hall, gloomy with dark walls on which hung weighty paintings of the Hudson River School, sullen with thunder-clouds and suggested lightning, and of no financial worth whatever.

"I don't know. It's the way Miss Ashland peers through those thick spectacles of hers. It's furtive. And she never says a thing."

"What does she do?"

"She said something vague about being connected with some labor bureau. She wasn't explicit."

Felicity opened a door, and they went into her grandmother's private sitting-room. Mrs. Dieterling was in a chair placed in a bay window, a slender and distinguished figure in black *faille*, with her white hair silvered against the chill gray panes. She raised slender ivory fingers in a request for silence until the final thin clear note of *Coming Through the Rye* had died out from the music box on a stand beside her chair.

It was a very fine music box which Mrs. Dieterling had fancied during a grand tour of Europe in the 'Nineties, and her late husband Alfonse had bought it for her while they had been stopping at Geneva. It played 36 airs on its single cylinder, and Mrs. Dieterling would be warmed with nostalgia and insist upon a respectful attention while any one of them was being tinkled.

She smiled at Starr cordially.

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. The tune was charming."

They shook hands, and he thought how cold her fingers were. Almost bloodless.

"This is my doing," Felicity said.

"I'm glad, dear. I am not ill, Doctor, but it is fortunate you have come. There is something I would like to ask you."

"I'll leave you," Felicity said. She

turned to Starr. "I'm becoming terribly domestic. Now that lunch is over, dinner looms. Don't ever run a boarding house."

"I don't think I could. I can fry an egg, broil venison, and ruin flapjacks. That ends it."

Felicity left, and Starr drew a chair over and sat down.

He said: "Well, now."

"I am interested, Doctor, in scars."

He regarded her with absorbed fascination. He sensed the pressure on her nerves, which she was trying to subdue. He thought Felicity had been right. He thought it fear.

"Why scars?"

"Because Marcella Dorfrey has come back. She is here in this house."

The name reacted upon Starr with a sense of shock, for it evoked a *cause célèbre* which had furiously agitated the local scene about twenty years ago. It was concerned with a peculiarly miserable murder and the subsequent suicide of Mrs. Dieterling's daughter Anna—Anna Mansard, Felicity's mother. The broad details of the affair were simple to recall.

Anna Mansard was recently widowed at the time and was living with Felicity, then a child of two, in Mrs. Dieterling's home in Laurel Falls. As for Marcella Dorfrey, she was a local girl whom Mrs. Dieterling had engaged as a nurse for Felicity. Anna, who had just passed twenty-four, was exceptionally

pretty in a flowerlike way, and of a temperament which had definitely been accepted as advanced neurotic.

Also at Laurel Falls during this period was a theatrical stock company which was no better and no worse than most stock companies and which changed its bill once a week. Barton Fonslow, the leading man of this troupe, was a typical *matinée* idol with a fine leg and a waistline which skeptics held was only kept within bounds by severe whalebone and elastic pressure. Certainly he was getting on, a fate which undoubtedly caused him to cast his melting eyes on Anna Mansard and the Dieterling money she would eventually inherit.

The reactions of Anna's dangerously neurotic temperament to what amounted to a whirlwind courtship on Barton Fonslow's part swung extravagantly from a fierce sort of happiness to a fiercer revulsion, which was based on a devotional sense of duty to her dead husband's memory. It was during one of those latter swings in which the State of Ohio claimed that she had murdered Barton Fonslow.

The case amounted to this: Barton Fonslow for private reasons lived in a small rented cottage belonging to the Dieterling estate. It was located at approximately a five-minute easy walk from the Dieterling house. A Mabel Wallace who went there every day to do the

cooking and housework found him shot to death in the bedroom of this cottage on the morning of April 12, 1922.

Miss Wallace (who was 63 years old and hence instantly eliminated as a possible suspect) telephoned a palsied alarm to the police. They found the murder gun, which had been dropped near the doorway to Fonslow's bedroom, and shortly identified both the revolver, and the fingerprints on it, as Anna's.

Also in the room, on a small table, was one of Anna's initialed handkerchiefs. It was tightly crumpled and still faintly moistened with, they decided, her tears.

Anna, who protested her innocence whenever she emerged from an hysterical neurosis, had no alibi for the general hour approximated for the murder, beyond the statement that she had walked to her husband's grave in the Laurel Falls Cemetery, had communed there for a while, and then returned home and gone to bed. There had been no corroborative evidence of this whatever, other than her own plain word.

The District Attorney had paraded Anna's neurotic condition at considerable length and had advanced as her motive a fit of remorse (Exhibit B: the tear-sodden handkerchief) during which, in a condition of deranged homicidal mania, she had shot and killed Barton Fonslow. The jury agreed with this, and the judge gave her twenty

years to life for homicide in the second degree. Anna had been in the penitentiary for only three days when she hanged herself with a rope made from strips of her prison dress.

Mrs. Dieterling was so stunned and crushed emotionally by the whole terrible experience that she lived in a state of daze for several weeks after Anna's tragic suicide. It was her grandchild, Felicity, who finally brought her back to reason and a desire to live. It came to Mrs. Dieterling how greatly, how more than ever then, Felicity would need her. It was during this transition period from daze to a returning sanity that Marcella Dorfrey left.

This leaving had had its curious aspects, for Marcella Dorfrey had not so much left as flown. She had been there one morning and was gone in the afternoon, not only from the house but from Laurel Falls. Furthermore, although taking all her clothes and belongings, she had left without a month's pay which was due, and with no explanation other than a scribbled note. This had stated in baldly melodramatic terms that she could no longer stay in a house run by a crazy old woman, nor act as a nurse for a child whose mother had been a murderess.

Nothing later had been heard of Marcella until, Starr realized, Mrs. Dieterling had just made her extraordinary statement to him, that

now she was there in the house. He knew from experience that age had made Mrs. Dieterling both set and devious. It was of no earthly use to plunge to the heart of a thing with her. You followed her lead and eventually got there.

He said: "What do you want to know about scars?"

"Do they vanish? Can they be effaced?"

"Not if there has been a loss of the tissue of the true skin during healing."

"To be specific, Doctor: I refer to a cut on the wrist caused by pieces of broken glass."

"How was it healed?"

"I attended it myself—a bandage, then that favorite blood-clotter of my own childhood days, spider-webs."

"There would surely have been granulations?"

"Yes, because Marcella later became dissatisfied with my treatment. She got hold of some new-fangled thing of the moment. An ichthyol ointment. I remember that she applied it for the first time on the day of the murder."

"Even so, if granulation had set in, the scar would never disappear."

"Not even after twenty years?"

"No matter how many years."

"Ah!"

Mrs. Dieterling, who was a semi-invalid (her joints), tightened pale fingers about the gold head of her cane. This cane was unusual, in

that it sheathed a sword. Alfonse had bought it in Paris, and had always taken a childish delight in whisking out its blade to the startled distress of whatever companion would be with him on a stroll. This was a conceit which Mrs. Dieterling had not inherited, but she did keep the cane constantly with her as an aid to her invalidism, and also through fondness because it had been Alfonse's favorite stick.

"My plan must work," Mrs. Dieterling said. "I cannot understand why she hasn't shown signs before now. Only you shall take it off instead of me, Doctor."

"May I ask what?"

"The passementerie band which she wears around her wrist. My plan was essential, because after all there was the dilemma presented by her \$50 a week, and the fact that I could not bring myself to the point of either snatching the band off nor demanding that she remove it."

Bewildering as this was as a whole, part of it did make sense. The \$50 a week established the woman with the passementerie band as being one of Mrs. Dieterling's three paying guests. Starr knew that the money was of vital importance. He knew that Mrs. Dieterling had been forced only recently to go in for taking these guests after the final attrition of a large income which had had its source in securities that for years had ceased to pay any dividends.

As these securities had also been favorites of Alfonse's, Mrs. Dieterling had continued to cherish them for their sentimental values, and had only parted with them one by one under the pressure of some grim necessity.

"I find myself," Starr said, "confused."

"Naturally, Doctor. And I find it difficult to speak of these things even after the long past years. Some tragedies never die. Anna's did not. The effects live on, and I would not mind it if their sorrow and dangers had simply settled upon me."

"Dangers?"

"Why not? Murder breeds. That is an axiom. It stays dormant under fear of disclosure, ever ready to strike again. You see, there is Felicity."

"No, I don't quite. Felicity is a lovely girl, Mrs. Dieterling. A completely healthy and fine one. I have never found any trace of morbidity about her."

"That is true; but the shadow of Anna's tragedy has reached out at last to cover her. Forrest has asked her to marry him."

Starr knew Forrest Willeth very well, having bounced him through mumps and measles and, more recently, through his physical examination for the draft, which had rated him 1-A. He was a pleasant youngster, and his family was one of the solidest and wealthiest in Laurel Falls.

"Well," Starr said, "why doesn't she?"

"Surely it must be obvious? She loves Forrest as deeply as he loves her. She loves him so greatly, Doctor, that she will not permit him to marry the daughter of a murderess. She is perfectly logical about it. Both Hattie and John have naturally slated Forrest for a diplomatic career. They want him to follow in old Horace Willeth's footsteps—if not to St. James at least to some other embassy that will be left. So there you are."

"Yes, I see."

"Forrest is willing, more than willing, to give up anything for Felicity, but she won't let him. I would lose my love and respect for her if she were to. So it devolves upon me."

"To solve the problem how?"

"By proving that Anna was innocent. By proving that it was Marcella Dorfrey who murdered Barton Fonslow. I shall establish this woman's identity as Marcella, and have her arrested. I shall insist that the case be reopened and that she be tried.

"You only suspect this woman's identity, don't you?"

"I am positive."

"But isn't just wearing a passementerie band somewhat slender to base the belief on? Surely you have other reasons?"

"I have. To begin with, this woman—she now calls herself Miss Warbright and pretends to be an

authoress—is about the age and of the appearance which Marcella would have grown into after twenty years.”

“Then you do find a resemblance?”

“A sufficient one, Doctor. The woman is skinny and has the same sort of dun-colored hair, and the vague undistinguished features which Marcella’s promised to grow into.”

“How old was Marcella when she left here?”

“Eighteen. And apart from everything, Doctor, I harp on the scar which I am certain she conceals with that passementerie band.”

“Was the scar distinctive in pattern?”

“It was shaped like a small Y with a longish tail. Parts of a broken tumbler were in a wastepaper basket, and Marcella had reached in to retrieve a pencil which had fallen from the desk. The scar is on the upper side of the wrist of her left hand, and is scarcely longer than an inch. Certainly the passementerie band would cover it.”

“You will forgive me for becoming direct? Even though you do establish Miss Warbright as being Marcella Dorfrey, how on earth can you prove your daughter’s innocence and Miss Dorfrey’s guilt?”

“My conviction in Anna’s innocence never was nor has been shaken.”

“How do you explain the gun? The handkerchief?”

“Both were unquestionably Anna’s. The gun had belonged to Henry, Anna’s husband. Anna kept it among many of his things, all of which she cherished, in a cedar chest in her bedroom. Naturally she had handled it. If at no other time, she certainly must have held the revolver while placing it in the chest, and so her fingerprints were on it. As for the handkerchief, both the gun and any number of Anna’s handkerchiefs were easily accessible to anyone.”

“The tears on the handkerchief? Marcella Dorfrey’s?”

“Either her tears or else she simply moistened it.”

“Why weren’t these points brought out at the trial?”

“They were. But there was nothing at the time to support any motive other than the one attributed to Anna. It was accepted as a crime of emotion committed by Anna during one of her fits of intense depression. They labeled it some sort of a neurotic revulsion, and managed to hint that Anna’s intention had been to kill herself after she had shot Barton Fonslow. They hinted that she had lacked the nerve to do so when the moment came. Her later suicide clinched this belief in the official mind, of course. They refused to reopen the case.”

“What was your theory, Mrs. Dieterling?”

“It was a crime of passion. It was Marcella who had been having an

affair with Barton Fonslow, and not Anna. It was Marcella who shot him in a jealous rage when she learned of his intention to marry Anna, and it was she who planted the gun and the handkerchief against Anna."

"Have you any proof of this?"

"Yes. It was Marcella's flight that first made me wonder about her. It wasn't as if she had just left my employ; she left the town. She vanished. I knew this, because I attempted to get in touch with her to pay her the wages that were still due. She was a mercenary sort of girl, and it was entirely out of character for her to have gone off without her pay."

"Did you find anything concrete that could be used as evidence?"

"It was odd, Doctor. It was almost like Anna's hand reaching out—Anna, who was dead—"

"Yes?"

"I do not suggest the supernatural; and still, how can we know? How can we say positively that Anna's spirit, that her deep love for her child, did not guide Felicity to the letter?"

"A letter was your proof?"

"Yes. I must tell you that Felicity was over two at the time. She could walk, and had a modest vocabulary which she used at a great rate. This occurred when I was just beginning to be myself again. While I had been almost in a state of daze, Marcella had grown lax. She had left Felicity increasingly to her own

devices. One of the maids told me afterward that Marcella would often leave Felicity in her crib with the side down. You don't know the nursery arrangement?"

"No, Mrs. Dieterling."

"Marcella's own room opened out of it, and Felicity would have the run of both rooms when Marcella was downstairs or out of the house. Felicity had the curiosity of a monkey."

"Most babies have."

"We never knew what would amuse her; what odd object she would covet. I recall clearly the events of the day when Marcella left. She went out for a walk during the morning, leaving Felicity alone in the nursery. Felicity chose that morning to go into Marcella's room, climb up on a chair, and take out everything in Marcella's desk. Then Felicity returned to her crib and went to sleep, which was how Marcella found her later."

"And the desk?"

"Exactly. Marcella believed that it was I and not Felicity who had searched it. She found the letter gone. She undoubtedly believed that I had taken it and would offer it at once to the police. She *must* have believed this, because it is the only sane explanation for her sudden flight."

"This letter—naturally, it was from Barton Fonslow?"

"It was. I found it in Felicity's crib after Marcella had gone. I was changing the clothes, and the letter

had been shoved by Felicity under the blanket. I cannot stop thinking that it was Anna who had guided Felicity's hand to it, and had made Felicity want to keep it."

"Was there anything unusual about the paper that would have caught the interest of a child?"

"There was, and that is of course a saner explanation. Being an exhibitionist, Barton Fonslow had had a shield devised for his personal stationery. It was a flamboyant thing with the masks of comedy and tragedy and his initials beneath. This was printed in scarlet and the pictured masks were what had intrigued Felicity."

"What did the letter say?"

"Barton Fonslow said in it that he was through with Marcella. It was viciously insulting in an assured sort of way. I think I would have killed him myself had I received it."

"Did he mention Anna?"

"Yes. He said that he would permit nothing to stand in the way of his plans for marrying Anna. He told Marcella that he would pay her \$100 to get rid of her."

"What did you do?"

"I went to the district attorney."

"You showed him the letter?"

"In my intense hope, in my excitement, I had not brought it with me. But I told him its contents. He was most courteous, most maddeningly polite. He said that many letters had been found in a trunk in Barton Fonslow's dressing room."

"Mash notes?"

"Some, he said. And some which showed that the man's conquests had been numerous, and that if the case were to be reopened, the town would be blown apart by wholesale scandal."

"But your letter was one which Fonslow had written, not one that had been written to him."

"The district attorney acknowledged that. He said the letter was not unique, that the letters in the trunk showed that many of them were answers to letters which must have been as devastatingly cruel as the one Barton Fonslow wrote to Marcella."

"Surely he must have seen that Marcella alone had had the opportunity for getting Anna's handkerchief and the gun?"

"It was a point I also made. He regarded it indifferently. After all, it was he who had convicted Anna."

"Yes, there would be that."

"There *was* that, Doctor. To be fair about it, I must admit, as I admitted then, that Anna had been neurotic and that there had been moments when she had looked upon Barton Fonslow's suit with favor. I insisted there had been no impropriety, at which the district attorney became his most polite, and smiled."

"So it ended there?"

"He did suggest that I give him the letter and he would include it among the innumerable other let-

ters in the files of the case. Something compelled me to refuse to do this. I think I felt that if I kept the letter it would give me some sort of power, some later control that would redeem the past."

"I think I understand how you felt. Did he permit you?"

"He did, and still with complete indifference. So far as he was concerned, a jury, the judge, and the fact that Anna herself had committed suicide had all closed the case."

Chill wind threw an icy blast against windows, and Mrs. Dieterling said bleakly: "Will you turn the thermostat up a little, Doctor?"

Starr did so. After he had returned to his chair, he said: "I am completely sympathetic, Mrs. Dieterling. You know that. But I cannot feel that the letter itself is of any stronger value as proof than it was twenty years ago."

"The point is that Marcella has considered that letter a deadly threat to her safety ever since the day when she fled. I know it is why she seized the first opportunity which the years have offered for returning to this house. I refer to my recent decision to take in paying guests. So she engaged a room here in the guise of Miss Warbright. It gives her the chance she has desperately longed for, to search for the letter. She believes it is in this room."

"Why?"

"Because she makes a point of

coming in here to talk with me. Her pretense is her interest in my anecdotes of the early days in Ohio for the historical romance she is pretending to write." Mrs. Dieterling leaned forward on her cane. "But her eyes are everywhere, Doctor—searching for the hiding place while she talks—I will admit that this was not enough to make me connect her with Marcella until one of the keys to the cottage was stolen. Then it came to me suddenly like an inspirational flash: her searching eyes—the key to the cottage—and the passementerie band."

Hope (Starr marveled) was a wonderful and an imperishable thing. This tragic woman with her burden of the years, rising now with her remaining strength to do battle, no longer for herself or her dead Anna's memory but for the grandchild whom she loved. Blind against defeat and seizing upon straws.

He said: "What can I do?"

He felt it slipping from her and to him, this strength of hers.

"It was the key to the front door of the cottage which was taken, Doctor. You will find the one to the back door still in a cubicle of that desk."

Starr went to the desk.

"Yes, it is here—labeled *Cottage, Back Door.*"

Whether or not it was a trick of the sleet-filtered daylight, Starr did not know; but Mrs. Dieterling, as he turned and observed her, had a

thinness of edge which gave her an almost wraithlike and spiritual look.

She said: "That cottage has not been entered since the police were through with it twenty years ago. Something remains there to be found. Otherwise Marcella would not have come in here at some moment during the night and have stolen the key to its front door. You must be my eyes, Doctor." Her voice faltered and then took on some inner strength. "You must be Anna's eyes."

The door creaked complainingly and veils of dust grew active before an inrush of cold, gusting wind. The effect of the shuttered room was of dead murk, and Starr closed the door and stood still while the past seemed to filter about him. He discovered a switch, and was happy that the electricity had never been disconnected. Old filament bulbs were soft under dull, artistic shades: an atmosphere which re-created instantly the moodtones Barton Fonslow had considered most devastating for his enterprises.

Starr stepped softly, unwilling to disrupt a sense of antagonistic privacy which had been the cottage's own for twenty years—until the other night when a key had been taken from a cubicle in a desk! But had the key as yet been used? He thought not. The film of dust on the floors was unbroken except for

his own footprints. He observed the bedroom and the bed on which Barton Fonslow had been shot. Nothing compelled his interest—nor in the living-room, from which a door led to a modest kitchen.

Here too he found nothing that struck him as significant until he lifted a lid of the stove. Calcined clinkers lay there dead. He lifted the second lid and the metal support between them, and observed the ashen bed.

On the night of April 11, 1922, he thought, Mabel Wallace had finished serving dinner and had washed and put the things away. By the time Barton Fonslow had returned to the cottage from his evening performance at the theater, the fire which Mabel Wallace had left in the kitchen stove was either dying or out. When Mabel Wallace came on the following morning of the twelfth, she discovered Barton Fonslow's body before she had had time to shake the kitchen fire.

These ashes—Starr thought—were the ashes which had been in the grate on the night when Barton Fonslow was killed.

And so was that wad of gauze.

He removed it and smoothed it out. A bandage—one that had been cut with scissors from a small wrist. A woman's wrist. Marcella's? A dark and hardened stain caked it. Starr thought it easily could be ichthyol ointment, which would be simple either to prove or to dis-

prove. A curious chill ran through him as he determined, faint in the hard dark patch, an indicative pattern of a Y-shaped scar. Yes, ichthyol had a habit of drying and retaining its rich dark brown except where the suppuration of the wound would absorb it and leave its design.

He thought: According to Mrs. Dieterling, Marcella first applied ichthyol ointment as a dressing on the day during the night of which Barton Fonslow was murdered. This bandage would establish her presence here in the cottage on the murder night. This must be true, because the ashes were cold when she threw the bandage into the grate. Otherwise it would have charred. And from the following morning on the cottage was in the control of the police: locked.

Then he thought: Barton Fonslow could logically have been an overfastidious man. It would be in character. Marcella came that night to kill, but first she must have wanted to give him one final chance. Could she have placed her arm about him, some further gesture to reawaken his dead passion for her? Ichthyol has an unpleasantly pungent, an oily, fishy smell. Fonslow could surely have made some derogatory remark about the stained, malodorous bandage, which would be why she had cut it off and thrown it into the kitchen grate.

Dr. Starr put the bandage in his

coat pocket. He turned out lights, and soft shadowed grays enclosed him. He thought of how queer, harried, neurotic Anna would be vindicated at long last, how Mrs. Dieterling would find peace. And Felicity could marry her fine young man.

He walked, still softly, toward the door through the quiet privacy which was settling back within the cottage like a shroud. How could you tell? How could you tell about this?

About Anna. . . .

Mrs. Dieterling met him at the head of the stairs in the heavy grayness of the upper hall. Behind her a large canvas of a morbid child crouching in a rowboat on the Hudson River did little to efface the gloom.

Starr said: "There is hope, Mrs. Dieterling. Great hope."

"Thank God."

"There is enough to warrant our getting in touch with District Attorney Hefferfield. I know him very well. You will find him much more receptive than you found the district attorney of twenty years ago. There remains Miss Warbright and her passementerie band."

Mrs. Dieterling steadied herself against the press of her emotions. She leaned heavily upon her beloved Alfonse's cane.

"Shall we go to Marcella's room, Doctor? By now she will surely be asleep. I took the liberty before luncheon of going downstairs and

putting two of the sedative tablets which you prescribed for me in the glass of vegetable juices she is accustomed to drink.'

"Yes," he said, with a helpless sort of admiration, "she will certainly be asleep."

He accompanied Mrs. Dieterling to the hall's end and through a door into a handsomely large bedroom weighted with heavy mahogany pieces elaborately carved. The woman on the bed had the deep breathing of deepest sleep. She was as Mrs. Dieterling had described her: a skinny woman with dun-colored hair.

Starr turned on a bed-lamp and gently unfastened from her left wrist the passementerie band. He examined the bared skin carefully, and then rubbed it for a moment with the palm of his hand.

He said: "There is no scar."

Mrs. Dieterling turned, and he followed her from the room. He closed the door. They walked in silence along the hall and into Mrs. Dieterling's sitting-room. Miss Vernon, the fat and glandular blonde, was seated beside the music box in the bay window. She stood as they came in.

"Dear Mrs. Dieterling! I wondered how you were."

She came over to them and placed plump hands with gushing affection on Mrs. Dieterling's shoulders. Starr felt a faint shock; and Mrs. Dieterling, who detested being touched, extricated herself

and said coldly: "I am quite well, thank you, Miss Vernon. Have you met Doctor Starr?"

"Oh, yes, when he came. It's why I came. I did knock."

"We were engaged."

"Yes—well—I'll run along now."

"Miss Vernon—" A curious thrill gripped Starr as he unobtrusively blocked her path. "Mrs. Dieterling and I are bothered with a little problem. Can you help us?"

"Why, of course."

Mrs. Dieterling glanced at Starr sharply. A tinge of color returned to her drawn white face.

She said: "Let us sit down."

She took the chair again beside the music box, and Starr drew up two others for Miss Vernon and himself.

"You have just come in, Miss Vernon?" Starr said.

"Yes, just a minute ago."

"You found it cold outdoors?"

"Bitterly so, Doctor. Do tell me what's the problem."

"You are, Miss Vernon."

"Me?"

"When did you first start to put on weight? About ten years ago?"

"Why, really—I don't know what to say—I mean, I don't understand."

Starr said quietly: "This is a little more serious than plain professional curiosity. I suspect that your trouble is glandular. I have known cases where a slim girl of eighteen or twenty, who weighed scarcely more than 95 pounds, put on

weight in later years to about what you must weigh. Your hair is of course colored with a golden rinse."

"I—really—*well!*"

"No—sit still, please. I am further puzzled about you: There is the paradox that as a worker for the Home Bureau you can afford to pay \$50 a week for board and lodging."

"This is the utmost in impertinence. I have money of my own."

"Then why do modestly paid work for the Home Bureau? Unless your guise as being interested in reconditioning old furniture made it possible for you to examine the different pieces in this house for the letter?"

"Guise! Letter?"

Mrs. Dieterling had leaned forward in her chair. She seized Miss Vernon's left wrist and examined it, until Miss Vernon, startled, snatched it from her.

Mrs. Dieterling sighed and closed her eyes.

"You are wrong. There is no scar."

Miss Vernon plunged into thorough anger. She held out her left wrist and examined it herself.

"Scar? Of course I have no scar."

"On the contrary," Starr said.

"Here—look for yourself. I demand a full explanation about this!"

Starr took Miss Vernon's hand and held it in his left. With his right fingers he gently rubbed the

skin of Miss Vernon's left wrist.

"Scars, even though they may be indelible," he said, "may yet become obscured by lapse of time and other conditions. Growing stoutness is an example. The tissue of a scar is dense and white and fibrous, Miss Vernon."

She regarded him with hypnotized fascination as his fingers, in their rubbing of her wrist, pressed harder.

"A scar has no true derma, with vessels or hair-follicles; and that is why, Miss Vernon, cold may bring a seemingly obscured scar into view. The surrounding skin reddens and leaves its pattern white. You have just come in from the bitter cold, and when you placed your hands upon Mrs. Dieterling's shoulders as we joined you, the heat of the house had not had enough time to efface the scar's trace."

"But when I looked—" Mrs. Dieterling said.

"By then, yes, it was gone. But there is this: Rubbing has the same effect as cold. It makes the surrounding skin red while leaving the scar white. Like this, Miss Dorey. You see?"

The woman had gone ashen. She stared down at her left wrist with its Y-shaped scar, quite visible now, quite plain. Her moist eyes had a beaten terror in them, one that had been piling up for twenty years.

Mrs. Dieterling unscrewed the head from Alfonse's cane.



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“I broke the sword off years ago,” she said. “This letter has been in it ever since. The one from Barton Fonslow, Marcella, which he wrote to you.”

Starr returned with Felicity to Mrs. Dieterling’s room an hour later, after Hefferfield had come and had taken Marcella Dorfrey away. Mrs. Dieterling stopped them at the threshold with a gesture of her ivory fingers until the final glissando of *Love’s Old Sweet Song* had died out from the music box.

“I have been playing the air for Anna,” Mrs. Dieterling said. “She loved it very much. She found it remarkably soothing. She would say it brought her peace.”

John D. MacDonald

I Always Get the Cuties

"Murder is something that should not be prettified." This story, we warn you, concerns a particularly gruesome murder, original in conception and artful in execution; and it packs a wallop—in the highest Black Mask tradition . . .

KEEGAN CAME INTO MY APARTMENT, frosted with winter, topcoat open, hat jammed on the back of his hard skull, bringing a noisy smell of the dark city night. He stood in front of my birch fire, his great legs planted, clapping and rubbing hard palms in the heat.

He grinned at me and winked one narrow gray eye. "I'm off duty, Doc. I wrapped up a package. A pretty package."

"Will bourbon do, Keegan?"

"If you haven't got any of that brandy left. This is a brandy night."

When I came back with the bottle and the glasses, he had stripped off his topcoat and tossed it on the couch. The crumpled hat was on the floor, near the discarded coat. Keegan had yanked a chair closer to the fire. He sprawled on the end of his spine, thick ankles crossed, the soles of his shoes steaming.

I poured his brandy and mine, and moved my chair and the long coffee table so we could share either end of it. It was bursting in him. I knew that. I've only had the vaguest

hints about his home life. A house crowded with teen-age daughters, cluttered with their swains. Obviously no place to talk of his dark victories. And Keegan is not the sort of man to regale his co-workers with talk of his prowess. So I am, among other things, his sounding board. He bounces successes off the politeness of my listening, growing big in the echo of them.

"Ever try to haggle with a car dealer, Doc?" he asked.

"In a mild way."

"You are a mild guy. I tried once. Know what he told me? He said, 'Lieutenant, you try to make a car deal maybe once every two years. Me, I make ten a day. So what chance have you got?'"

This was a more oblique approach than Keegan generally used. I became attentive.

"It's the same with the cuties, Doc—the amateurs who think they can bring off one nice clean safe murder. Give me a cutie every time. I eat 'em alive. The pros are trouble. The cuties leave holes you

can drive deisels through. This one was that woman back in October. At that cabin at Bear Paw Lake. What do you remember about it, Doc?"

I am always forced to summarize. It has got me into the habit of reading the crime news. I never used to.

"As I remember, Keegan, they thought she had been killed by a prowler. Her husband returned from a business trip and found the body. She had been dead approximately two weeks. Because it was the off season, the neighboring camps weren't occupied, and the people in the village thought she had gone back to the city. She had been strangled, I believe."

"Okay. So I'll fill you in on it. Then you'll see the problem I had. The name is Grosswalk. Cynthia and Harold. He met her ten years ago when he was in med. school. He was twenty-four and she was thirty. She was loaded. He married her and he never went back to med. school. He didn't do anything for maybe five, six years. Then he gets a job selling medical supplies, surgical instruments, that kind of stuff. Whenever a wife is dead, Doc, the first thing I do is check on how they were getting along. I guess you know that."

"Your standard procedure," I said.

"Sure. So I check. They got a nice house here in the city. Not many friends. But they got neigh-

bors with ears. There are lots of brawls. I get the idea it is about money. The money is hers--was hers, I should say. I put it up to this Grosswalk. He says okay, so they weren't getting along so good, so what? I'm supposed to be finding out who killed her, sort of coordinating with the State Police, not digging into his home life. I tell him he is a nice suspect. He already knows that. He says he didn't kill her. Then he adds one thing too many. He says he couldn't have killed her. That's all he will say. Playing it cute. You understand. I eat those cuties alive."

He waved his empty glass. I went over and refilled it.

"You see what he's doing to me, Doc. He's leaving it up to me to prove how it was he couldn't have killed her. A reverse twist. That isn't too tough. I get in touch with the sales manager of the company. Like I thought, the salesmen have to make reports. He was making a western swing. It would be no big trick to fly back and sneak into the camp and kill her, take some money and junk to make it look good, and then fly back out there and pick up where he left off. She was killed on maybe the tenth of October, the medical examiner says. Then he finds her on the twenty-fourth. But the sales manager tells me something that needs a lot of checking. He says that this Grosswalk took sick out west on the eighth and went into a hospital,

and he was in that hospital from the eighth to the fifteenth, a full seven days. He gave me the name of the hospital. Now you see how the cutie made his mistake. He could have told me that easy enough. No, he has to be cute. I figure that if he's innocent he would have told me. But he's so proud of whatever gimmick he rigged for me that he's got to let me find out the hard way."

"I suppose you went out there," I said.

"It took a lot of talk. They don't like spending money for things like that. They kept telling me I should ask the L. A. cops to check because that's a good force out there. Finally I have to go by bus, or pay the difference. So I go by bus. I found the doctor. Plural—doctors. It is a clinic deal, sort of, that this Grosswalk went to. He gives them his symptoms. They say it looks to them like the edge of a nervous breakdown just beginning to show. With maybe some organic complications. So they run him through the course. Seven days of tests and checks and observations. They tell me he was there, that he didn't leave, that he *couldn't* have left. But naturally I check the hospital. They reserve part of one floor for patients from the clinic. I talked to the head nurse on that floor, and to the nurse that had the most to do with Grosswalk. She showed me the schedule and charts. Every day, every night, they were fooling

around with the guy, giving him injections of this and that. He couldn't have got out. The people at the clinic told me the results. He was okay. The rest had helped him a lot. They told him to slow down. They gave him a prescription for a mild sedative. Nothing organically wrong, even though the symptoms seemed to point that way."

"So the trip was wasted?"

"Not entirely. Because on a hunch I ask if he had visitors. They keep a register. A girl came to see him as often as the rules permitted. They said she was pretty. Her name was Mary MacCarney. The address is there. So I go and see her. She lives with her folks. A real tasty kid. Nineteen. Her folks think this Grosswalk is too old for her. She is tall Irish, all black and white and blue. It was warm and we sat on the porch. I soon find out this Grosswalk has been feeding her a line, telling her that his wife is an incurable invalid not long for this world, that he can't stand hurting her by asking for a divorce, that it is better to wait, and anyway, she says, her parents might approve of a widower, but never a guy who has been divorced. She has heard from Grosswalk that his wife has been murdered by a prowler and he will be out to see her as soon as he can. He has known her for a year. But of course I have told him not to leave town. I tell her not to get her hopes too high because it begins to look

to me like this Grosswalk has knocked off his wife. Things get pretty hysterical, and her old lady gets in on it, and even driving away in the cab I can hear her old lady yelling at her.

"The first thing I do on getting back is check with the doctor who took care of Mrs. Grosswalk, and he says, as I thought he would, that she was as healthy as a horse. So I go back up to that camp and unlock it again. It is a snug place, Doc. Built so you could spend the winter there if you wanted to. Insulated and sealed, with a big fuel-oil furnace, and modern kitchen equipment, and so on. It was aired out a lot better than the first time I was in it. Grosswalk stated that he hadn't touched a thing. He said it was unlocked. He saw her and backed right out and went to report it. And the only thing touched had been the body.

"I poked around. This time I took my time. She was a tidy woman. There are twin beds. One is turned down. There is a very fancy nightgown laid out. That is a thing which bothered me. I looked at her other stuff. She has pajamas which are the right thing for October at the lake. They are made from that flannel stuff. There is only one other fancy nightgown, way in the back of a drawer. I have found out here in the city that she is not the type to fool around. So how come a woman who is alone wants to sleep so pretty? Because the hus-

band is coming back from a trip. But he couldn't have come back from the trip. I find another thing. I find deep ruts off in the brush beside the camp. The first time I went there, her car was parked in back. Now it is gone. If the car was run off where those ruts were, anybody coming to the door wouldn't see it. If the door was locked they wouldn't even knock maybe, knowing she wouldn't be home. That puzzles me. She might do it if she didn't want company. I prowled some more. I look in the deep freeze. It is well stocked. No need to buy stuff for a hell of a while. The refrigerator is the same way. And the electric is still on."

He leaned back and looked at me.

"Is that all you had to go on?" I asked.

"A murder happens here and the murderer is in Los Angeles at the time. I got him because he tried to be a cutie. Want to take a try, Doc?"

I knew I had to make an attempt. "Some sort of device?"

"To strangle a woman? Mechanical hands? You're getting too fancy, Doc."

"Then he hired somebody to do it?"

"There are guys you can hire, but they like guns. Or a piece of pipe in an alley. I don't know where you'd go to hire a strangler. He did it himself, Doc."

"Frankly, Keegan, I don't see how he could have."

"Well, I'll tell you how I went after it. I went to the medical examiner and we had a little talk. Cop logic, Doc. If the geography is wrong, then maybe you got the wrong idea on timing. But the medico checks it out. He says definitely the woman has been dead twelve days to two weeks when he makes the examination. I ask him how he knows. He says because of the extent of decomposition of the body. I ask him if that is a constant. He says no—you use a formula. A sort of rule-of-thumb formula. I ask him the factors. He says cause of death, temperature, humidity, physical characteristics of the body, how it was clothed, whether or not insects could have got to it, and so on.

"By then I had it, Doc. It was cute. I went back to the camp and looked around. It took me some time to find them. You never find a camp without them. Candles. They were in a drawer in the kitchen. Funny looking candles, Doc. Melted down, sort of. A flat side against the bottom of the drawer, and all hardened again. Then I had another idea. I checked the stove burners. I found some pieces of burned flaked metal down under the heating elements.

"Then it was easy. I had this Grosswalk brought in again. I let him sit in a cell for four hours and get nervous before I took the rookie cop in. I'd coached that rookie for an hour, so he did it right. I had

him dressed in a leather jacket and work pants. I make him repeat his story in front of Grosswalk. 'I bought a chain saw last year,' he says, acting sort of confused, 'and I was going around to the camps where there are any people and I was trying to get some work cutting up fireplace wood. So I called on Mrs. Grosswalk. She didn't want any wood, but she was nice about it.' I ask the rookie when that was. He scratches his head and says, 'Sometime around the seventeenth I think it was.' That's where I had to be careful. I couldn't let him be positive about the date. I say she was supposed to be dead a week by then and was he sure it was her. 'She wasn't dead then. I know her. I'd seen her in the village. A kind of heavy-set woman with blonde hair. It was her all right, Lieutenant.' I asked him was he sure of the date and he said yes, around the seventeenth like he said, but he could check his records and find the exact day.

"I told him to take off. I just watched that cutie and saw him come apart. Then he gave it to me. He killed her on the sixteenth, the day he got out of the hospital. He flew into Omaha. By then I've got the stenographer taking it down. Grosswalk talks, staring at the floor, like he was talking to himself. It was going to be a dry run. He wasn't going to do it if she'd been here in the city or into the village in the previous seven days.

But once she got in the camp she seldom went out, and the odds were all against any callers. On his previous trip to Omaha he had bought a jalopy that would run. It would make the fifty miles to the lake all right. He took the car off the lot where he'd left it and drove to the lake. She was surprised to see him back ahead of schedule. He explained the company car was being fixed. He questioned her. Finally she said she hadn't seen or talked to a living soul in ten days. Then he knew he was set to take the risk.

"He grabbed her neck and hung on until she was dead. He had his shoulders hunched right up around his ears when he said that. It was evening when he killed her, nearly bedtime. First he closed every window. Then he turned on the furnace as high as it would go. There was plenty of oil in the tank. He left the oven door open and the oven turned as high as it would go. He even built a fire in the fireplace, knowing it would be burned out by morning and there wouldn't be any smoke. He filled the biggest pans of water he could find and left them on the top of the stove. He took money and some of her jewelry, turned out the lights and locked the doors. He ran her car off in the brush where nobody would be likely to see it. He said by the time he left the house it was like an oven in there.

"He drove the jalopy back to

Omaha, parked it back in the lot, and caught an 11:15 flight to Los Angeles. The next morning he was making calls. And keeping his fingers crossed. He worked his way east. He got to the camp on the twenty-fourth—about 10 in the morning. He said he went in and turned things off and opened up every window, and then went out and was sick. He waited nearly an hour before going back in. It was nearly down to normal temperature. He checked the house. He noticed she had turned down both beds before he killed her. He remade his. The water had boiled out of the pans and the bottoms had burned through. He scaled the pans out into the lake. He said he tried not to look at her, but he couldn't help it. He had enough medical background to know that it had worked, and also to fake his own illness in L. A. He went out and was sick again, and then he got her car back where it belonged. He closed most of the windows. He made another inspection trip and then drove into the village. He's a cutie, Doc, and I ate him alive."

There was a long silence. I knew what was expected of me. But I had my usual curious reluctance to please him. He held the glass cradled in his hand, gazing with a half smile into the dying fire. His face looked like stone.

"That was very intelligent, Keegan," I said.

"The pros give you real trouble, Doc. The cuties always leave holes. I couldn't bust geography, so I had to bust time." He yawned massively and stood up. "Read all about it in the morning paper, Doc."

"I'll certainly do that."

I held his coat for him. He's a big man. I had to reach up to get it properly onto his shoulders. He mashed the hat onto his head as I walked to the door with him. He put his big hand on the knob, turned, and smiled down at me.

"I always get the cuties, Doc. Always."

"You certainly seem to," I said.

"They are my favorite meat."

"So I understand."

He balled one big fist and bumped it lightly against my chin, still grinning at me. "And I'm going to get you too, Doc. You know that. You were cute. You're just taking longer than most. But you know how it's going to come out, don't you?"

I don't answer that any more. There's nothing to say. There hasn't been anything to say for a long time now.

He left, walking hard into the wild night. I sat and looked into my fire. I could hear the wind. I reached for the bottle. The wind raged over the city, as monstrous and inevitable as Keegan. It seemed as though it was looking for food—the way Keegan is always doing.

But I no longer permit myself the luxury of imagination.

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Ellery Queen

The Three Widows

TO THE normal palate the taste of murder is unpleasant. But Ellery is an epicure in these matters and certain of his cases, he deposes, possess a flavor which lingers on the tongue. Among these dangerous delicacies he places high "The Case of the Three Widows."

Two of the widows were sisters: Penelope, to whom money was nothing, and Lyra, to whom it was everything; consequently, each required large amounts of it. Both having buried thriftless husbands at an early age, they returned to the Murray Hill manse of their father with what everyone suspected was relief, for old Theodore Hood was generously provided with the coin of the Republic and he had always been indulgent with his daughters. Shortly after Penelope and Lyra repossessed their maiden beds, however, Theodore Hood took a second wife, a cathedral-like lady of great force of character. Alarmed, the sisters gave battle, which their stepmother grimly joined. Old Theodore, caught in their crossfire, yearned only for peace. Eventually he found it, leaving a household inhabited by widows exclusively.

One evening not long after their father's death, Penelope the plump

and Lyra the lean were summoned by a servant to the drawing room of the Hood pile. They found waiting for them Mr. Strake, the family lawyer.

Mr. Strake's commonest utterance fell like a sentence from the lips of a judge; but tonight, when he pronounced, "Will you be seated, ladies?" his tone was so ominous that the crime was obviously a hanging one. The ladies exchanged glances and declined.

In a few moments the tall doors squealed into the Victorian walls and Sarah Hood came in feebly on the arm of Dr. Benedict, the family physician.

Mrs. Hood surveyed her stepdaughters with a sort of contempt, her head teetering a little. Then she said, "Dr. Benedict and Mr. Strake will speak their pieces, then I'll speak mine."

"Last week," began Dr. Benedict, "your stepmother came to my office for her semi-annual check-up. I gave her the usual thorough examination. Considering her age, I found her in extraordinarily good health. Yet the very next day she came down sick—for the first time, by the way, in eight years. I thought then that she'd picked up an intestinal

virus, but Mrs. Hood made a rather different diagnosis. I considered it fantastic. However, she insisted that I make certain tests. I did, and she was right. She had been poisoned."

The plump cheeks of Penelope went slowly pink, and the lean cheeks of Lyra went slowly pale.

"I feel sure," Dr. Benedict went on, addressing a point precisely midway between the sisters, "that you'll understand why I must warn you that from now on I shall examine your stepmother every day."

"Mr. Strake," smiled old Mrs. Hood.

"Under your father's will," said Mr. Strake abruptly, also addressing the equidistant point, "each of you receives a small allowance from the income of the estate. The bulk of that income goes to your stepmother for as long as she shall live. But at Mrs. Hood's demise, you inherit the principal of some two million dollars, in equal shares. In other words, you two are the only persons in the world who will benefit from your stepmother's death. As I've informed both Mrs. Hood and Dr. Benedict, if there is a single repetition of this ghastly business I shall insist on calling in the police."

"Call them now!" cried Penelope.

Lyra said nothing.

"I could call them now, Penny," said Mrs. Hood with the same faint smile, "but you're both very clever and it might not settle anything. My strongest protection would be to throw the two of you out of this

house: unfortunately, your father's will prevents me. Oh, I understand your impatience to be rid of me. You have luxurious tastes which aren't satisfied by my simple way of living. You'd both like to remarry, and with the money you could buy second husbands." The old lady leaned forward a little. "But I have bad news for you. My mother died at 99, my father at 103. Dr. Benedict tells me I can live another thirty years, and I have every intention of doing so." She struggled to her feet, still smiling. "In fact, I'm taking certain precautions to make sure of it," she said; and then she went out.

Exactly one week later Ellery was seated beside Mrs. Hood's great mahogany four-poster, under the anxious eyes of Dr. Benedict and Mr. Strake.

She had been poisoned again. Fortunately, Dr. Benedict had caught it in time.

Ellery bent over the old lady's face, which looked more like plaster than flesh. "These precautions of yours, Mrs. Hood—"

"I tell you," she whispered, "it was impossible."

"Still," said Ellery, "it was done. So let's resume. You had your bedroom windows barred and a new lock installed on that door, the single key to which you've kept on your person at all times. You've bought your own food. You've done your own cooking in this room and you've eaten here alone. Clearly,

then, the poison could not have been introduced into your food before, during, or after its preparation. Further, you tell me you purchased new dishes, have kept them here, and you and you alone have been handling them. Consequently, the poison couldn't have been put on or in the cooking utensils, china, glassware, or cutlery involved in your meals. How then was the poison administered?"

"That's the problem," cried Dr. Benedict.

"A problem, Mr. Queen," muttered Mr. Strake, "that I thought—and Dr. Benedict agreed—was more your sort of thing than the police's."

"Well, my sort of thing is always simple," replied Ellery, "provided you see it. Mrs. Hood, I'm going to ask you a great many questions. Is it all right, Doctor?"

Dr. Benedict felt the old lady's pulse, and he nodded. Ellery began. She replied in whispers, but with great positiveness. She had bought a new tooth brush and fresh tooth paste for her siege. Her teeth were still her own. She had an aversion to medication and took no drugs or palliatives of any kind. She drank nothing but water. She did not smoke, eat sweets, chew gum, use cosmetics. . . . The questions went on and on. Ellery asked every one he could think of, and then he shook up his brain to think of more.

Finally, he thanked Mrs. Hood, patted her hand, and went out with Dr. Benedict and Mr. Strake.

"What's your diagnosis, Mr. Queen?" asked Dr. Benedict.

"Your verdict," said Mr. Strake.

"Gentlemen," said Ellery, "when I eliminated her drinking water by examining the pipes and faucets in her bathroom and finding they hadn't been tampered with, I'd ruled out the last possibility."

"And yet it's being administered orally," snapped Dr. Benedict. "That's my finding and I've been careful to get medical corroboration."

"If that is a fact, Doctor," said Ellery, "then there is only one remaining explanation."

"What's that?"

"Mrs. Hood is poisoning herself. If I were you I would call in a psychiatrist. Good day!"

Ten days later Ellery was back in Sarah Hood's bedroom. The old lady was dead. She had succumbed to a third poisoning attack.

On being notified, Ellery had promptly said to his father, Inspector Queen, "Suicide."

But it was not suicide. The most painstaking investigation by police experts, utilizing all the resources of criminological science, failed to turn up a trace of the poison, or of a poison container or other possible source, in Mrs. Hood's bedroom or bath. Scoffing, Ellery went over the premises himself. His smile vanished. He found nothing to contradict either the old lady's previous testimony or the findings of the ex-

perts. He grilled the servants. He examined with remorseless efficiency Penelope, who kept weeping, and Lyra, who kept snarling. Finally, he left.

He left, and the mystery left with him.

It was the kind of problem which Ellery's thinking apparatus, against all the protests of his body, cannot let alone. For forty-six hours he lived in his own head, fasting and sleepless, ceaselessly pacing the treadmill of the Queen apartment floor. In the forty-seventh hour Inspector Queen took him by the arm and put him to bed.

"I thought so," said the Inspector, squinting glumly at the evidence. "Over 101. What hurts, son?"

"My whole existence," mumbled Ellery; and he submitted to aspirins, an ice bag, and a rare steak broiled in butter.

In the middle of the steak he howled like a madman and clawed at the telephone.

"Mr. Strake? Ellery Queen! Meet me at the Hood house immediately!—yes, notify Dr. Benedict!—yes, now I know how Mrs. Hood was poisoned!"

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *You now have all the facts. Pause and consider: How was Mrs. Hood poisoned?*

And when they were gathered in the cavern of the Hood drawing-room Ellery peered at plump Penelope and lean Lyra and he croaked: "Which one of you is intending to marry Dr. Benedict?"

And then he said, "Oh, yes, it has to be that. Only Penelope and Lyra benefit from their stepmother's murder, yet the only person who could physically have committed the murder is Dr. Benedict. . . . Did you ask how, Doctor?" asked Ellery. "Why, very simply. Mrs. Hood experienced her first poisoning attack the day after her semi-annual medical check-up—by you, Doctor. And thereafter, you announced, *you would examine Mrs. Hood every day.* There is a classic preliminary to every physician's examination of a patient. I submit, Dr. Benedict," said Ellery with a smile, "that you introduced the poison into Mrs. Hood's mouth on the very thermometer with which you took her temperature."



Roy Vickers

For Men Only

A glamorous and provocative actress celebrates her birthday on a luxury motorboat in the company of five men—her current lover and four ex-lovers . . . Thus begins a short novel, "The Show Girl Murder Case; or, The Clue of the Wedding Ring," another of Mr. Vickers' "photo-crimes" so realistically told that you will think you are reading the facts in a true case . . .

FROM THE OFFICIAL POINT OF view, the murder on the *Astarte* proved to be a unique affair: it simply couldn't have happened more than once. There was no running about of the investigators; not a single motor car was employed on either side; there were not even any telephone calls. The corpse was delivered at the doors of Scotland Yard together with—in the same parcel, as it were—all the witnesses and the very "scene of the crime" itself, complete with fingerprints, footprints, and four red-hot suspects.

This unusual situation was not contrived by anyone. It came about as the result of intelligent, law-abiding persons behaving as sensibly as they could in the circumstances of a murder, in itself an unsophisticated affair, accomplished with a carving knife. The oddity of the situation was due to the disturbing and unbalancing personality of Mabel Rouse.

There have always been women like Mabel, often cropping up in other people's Memoirs. They are those kind-hearted, unreliable women of no importance—not clever and not as physically gorgeous as they make you think they are—who distort the perspective of able men, including policemen. Detective Inspector Kyle, though himself undisturbed by her physical presence, was aware of her pervasive genius constantly impeding his investigation and throwing normal procedure out of gear.

The crime thrust itself upon the police on a very hot afternoon in a very hot summer. On Waterloo Bridge many pedestrians stopped to admire the motorboat, *Astarte*, as it passed under the bridge on its way upstream. When the boat was within hailing distance of Westminster Pier, its horn sounded. A waterman came out of the shed which was the public waiting room and observed the boat, admiring its gen-

eral air of luxury. Upwards of 50 feet on the water line, he guessed; built for river and coastal cruising with more beam than one would expect, and a railed deck on the roof. One-man control, too. In a word—money!

The *Astarte* approached to within six feet of the pier, then held itself against the current. The skipper and owner was a man in his early thirties. He was clad in a pull-over sweater and flannels; his hair was ruffled, his lean face was moist, but a certain elegance persisted. He called out to the pier hand.

"I want you to run across the road to Scotland Yard." He was not shouting; his voice had the pitch and clarity of the trained speaker. He lobbed a cigar box, which the other caught. "Give them the envelope in that box. The ten bob wrapped round the envelope is yours. Please be as quick as you can."

With a glance at the closed door of the saloon—the lounge of the boat—the skipper moved away from the pier, crossed the river and began to potter about, to kill time. It would take the waterman, say, a minute to work his way across the road. At the Yard, a few minutes might be lost before the note was read by an official with authority to act; then another three or four minutes for the machinery to start. Call it ten minutes, all told.

The envelope, marked *Very Ur-*

gent, was addressed to the *Chief Inspector or Deputy*. Within two minutes it was opened by Detective Inspector Kyle.

The note paper was embossed *Astarte*.

A murder has been committed on this launch. I am off Westminster Pier and will put in on signal from you with white handkerchief waved at shoulder level. George Broughby (owner).

Inspector Kyle, an ascetic bachelor, had the appearance of a prosperous businessman with a large family of daughters. He never rushed anything. He blinked at the note, then swiveled in his chair and reached for Lloyd's register. "*Astarte*: owner, George Broughby." Good! Ninety seconds later he had learned that George Broughby was 35, unmarried, chairman of Broughby Tyres, Ltd., a firm founded by Broughby Senior, and that he owned a racing stable. He rang for Sergeant Dobson and gave instructions, with special reference to keeping off sightseers.

Within eleven minutes of reading Broughby's note, Kyle was on the pier. Beside him stood Sergeant Dobson, two plainclothesmen in the rear. There were two uniformed constables on the Embankment and a dozen standing by at the Yard. The team of technical men was due to report on the pier in ten minutes.

The *Astarte* was idling on the Surrey side. Kyle waved a white

handkerchief at shoulder level. The launch crossed the river at half speed. At a nod from Broughby the waterman made fast.

"I am Detective Inspector Kyle."

"My name is Broughby. Come aboard, please."

And with these words the murder investigation began . . .

The *Astarte* had sailed from Chiswick that morning, the intention being to run down the river to Southend regatta. George Broughby was giving a small birthday party—Mabel's birthday, of course. Her twenty-eighth, she said, and like most of her positive statements this was nearly true.

Mabel was "resting." In this phase of her life she was, in a sense, an actress—though perhaps "artiste" would be the safer word. As "Cherry Dane" she played small roles on the stage and bit parts in the films, but most of her engagements were in night clubs. That she could do an acceptable turn, however witless, in a floor show was due to her infectious vitality—an effervescence of contradictory qualities, strangely echoed in her physical appearance.

She had coppery-chestnut hair, bright blue eyes, a slightly tilted nose, and a mouth wide enough to awaken surmise. Her natural color clash was carefully developed in her dress. A green jumper fought with a tartan skirt which owed less to Scotland than to Hollywood; her

stockings maintained neutrality; her black shoes had green buckles—and she absorbed it all into a vivid unit that was herself. Her voice was a veiled contralto which so often lent her banalities the timbre of an intimate confession.

As to her character, she was acquisitive without being mercenary. She would never bestow herself for money, though she contrived to love, with some frequency, where money abounded.

She cheated nobody but herself. Her ex-lovers remained staunch friends, holding her in a kind of family affection. She created her own social atmosphere, which would have been acceptable almost anywhere if she had wished to make it so.

First aboard that morning had been Mabel herself. One boarded the *Astarte* at the wheelhouse, which was a little aft: forward was the saloon, with a companionway to the deck, the floor of the deck being the roof of the saloon. She turned aft and opened a door giving on to a corridor.

On her left—she could never think in terms of port and starboard—was the galley, which she called the kitchenette, fitted with a small electric cooker and a large refrigerator, a waste bin and a basket for unwashed crockery and table utensils. On the right of the corridor were two guest cabins, containing bunks—beyond these, a bathroom-toilet.

Again on her left, next to the galley, was a single cabin nearly as large as the two guest cabins together; and beyond it, opposite the bathroom, were lockers which she called cupboards. From one of the latter she took a full-length overall, a duster, and a chamois cloth.

The double-size cabin was Mabel's, of course. She pushed back the sliding door. The cabin made few concessions to maritime prejudice, having the general appearance of a bedroom in the London flat of a fastidious woman. True, the legs of the bed were screwed to the floor, as were those of the dressing table, and the wardrobe, with a full-length mirror, was built in.

On the bevel of the mirror she was happy to find a little dust overlooked by the staff that serviced the *Astarte* by contract. It justified the duster, which was less an article of equipment than a symbol of the domesticity which she honestly believed she craved. With any luck she would find a job for the chamois. Presently, she went forward, past the wheelhouse, down the companionway to the saloon.

Here again Mabel's influence was instantly discernible in the unusual liberality of floor space. It was possible to walk about without wriggling or even dodging, and a tall man could stand erect, not only under the superstructure that gave a center light but everywhere else. There were two divans and two heavy armchairs, besides easy

chairs of upholstered wicker. An escritoire was flanked by a television console and a cocktail cabinet. There was no center table, but one could be conjured up in a few minutes by means of a system of interlocking occasional tables, the legs fitting into permanent sockets in the floor.

Mabel was putting an extra sheen on the cocktail glasses when George Broughby came aboard.

For a dozen years George Broughby had frustrated match-making mothers, without deeply offending a single one of them. He positively bristled with eligibilities of position and even of person. The inner conflicts of his temperament did not meet the eye. He was too intelligent to interfere with the successful management of Broughby Tyres, and it was not easy to find employment for his talents elsewhere. He had grown tired of the toys still available to a rich man until he had chanced upon Mabel. He had snatched her, to discover, too late, that she was not a toy at all—though she herself believed that she could not be anything else.

When Broughby entered the saloon he stood silent, watching Mabel intently, as if he were trying to reassess her.

"I've nearly finished," she said without looking up. "George, I heard you talking on the 'phone to Harold Crendon. Who is the American he's bringing along?"

"I don't know. Hold everything

for a minute and listen. I have news—important news. That fellow who came to the flat this morning as you left was the Party agent. They've chosen me as candidate for Charbury. I'm to go down on Tuesday and speak."

"How perfectly splendid, George!" She had turned herself into a shimmering figure of delight. "It's what you wanted more than anything." Therefore, for the moment, it was what she herself sincerely wanted more than anything.

"If I get in at the bye-election, it's a beginning, even if it's only the beginning of a flop. The point is, there's a snag. My fault—I was a fool to let 'em have our address. To cut it short, the agent didn't quite say he knew we were not married, but he made it perfectly clear that if I am to represent Charbury in Parliament—"

"I'll have all my things out of the flat by midday tomorrow."

"Don't interrupt so, Mabel! Before I left, I 'phoned the firm's solicitors to get a special license so that we can be married right away."

A small sound escaped from Mabel, which Broughby did not realize was a moan of frustration. Here was the call back to the comfort, security, and respectability which she had thrown away six years ago, but had since learned to value. And the call had to come today!

"That is, if you will," added Broughby. "You will marry me,

won't you?" Then he added quickly: "But of course you will!"

She was not sure that it was more than a passing notion of his.

"All my life, George dear, I shall remember with happiness that you asked me. But—"

"'Angel voices off-stage!'" snorted Broughby. "It's a practical proposition."

Still cautious, she began to look at it from his angle. It was part of her genius that she could say the sort of things his mother would have said to him.

"It isn't practical to marry a woman with a past, as my father politely called it."

"But you have been frank—and that takes the sting out of it. You can make a job of a politician's wife, if you put your mind to it. Your stage experience will come in useful. Self-possession. No blushing and stammering in public. Besides, what am I to do when I come home if you're not there?"

He had worked it all out in a couple of minutes before ringing for the special license. He had faced the drawbacks and made his decision. He had not guessed that *she* might be the one to hesitate.

"George darling! You're giving a birthday party for me. You have asked men only. Because you don't like the only kind of women you could ask to meet me."

"We could ask any kind of women if we were married." He glanced with distaste at the wedding ring

on her finger; he had bought it alone and given it to her in a taxi.

"It would mean such a change for us both," she objected, half-heartedly. "Let's make a tremendous effort to be sensible about each other—and tomorrow we'll say goodbye without regrets on either side."

Regrets? Possibly not. Instead, a gnawing ache in his nervous system—a shabby kind of self-reproach that he had thrown away a bubbling essence of vitality that was beyond good and evil, beyond stupidity and wisdom. Her lovers of the past meant nothing—her imagined lovers of the future were already torturing him with their laughter at the fool who preferred mouthing platitudes from a platform to possessing a woman like her.

"Don't choose for me, Mabel—I know what I'm doing. You're safe with drink. You know when not to make a silly joke or tell an off-color story. And—if you want me to say it—I'd miss you like hell!"

Because he had been a hell of a long time finding her. In some ways she was an awful little vulgarian, but she had given him a kind of friendship which he had glimpsed at Eton, missed at Magdalen, and had given up hope of attaining in London. She nourished his self-confidence, leaving him uncomfortably dependent on her.

"What about it?" he demanded.

Evidently he had thought out the objections and knew his own mind. She must play for time—only a very little time—until her suspicions of Crendon's American were settled one way or the other.

"Please, Georgel My head is full of the party—six of us, all told, unless you've asked anybody else? Give me till tomorrow morning—and let's go on today as if nothing had happened."

"I suppose I'll have to . . . but when the license turns up I'll carry you along and if you don't want to go through with it, you can tell 'em when we get there."

George really wanted to marry her. For a moment—a long moment—that thought filled her universe. Then she shut her mind, saying casually: "Will you take some chairs on deck, George? I can manage the drinks."

He adopted her attitude. "I have to see the boathouse manager. The others will be here at any minute. They'll like to be asked to do a job of work."

She finished the cocktail glasses and checked them. Six—including herself and the unknown American. If he really was unknown! She began to arrange flowers in a copper bowl which clashed with her hair. Her hands were trembling, but she steadied them when she heard a footstep.

Charles Hardelow was the first arrival.

Hardelow was a chartered accountant, a partner in his father's firm in the most exclusive part of Victoria Street. He was a sleek little man who could not help looking rather tailored, even when wearing flannels and a blazer. Kindly, generous, easy-going, one would suspect that he was bullied by his gardener and mothered by his wife. Yet he had dared brilliantly and enjoyed his hour of triumph, on which his imagination would feed for the rest of his life.

"Charlie! How lovely to see you again!" Mabel kissed him on the cheek. "Marriage is good for you, dear—do you know you've actually become chubby?"

"Can't fight heredity!" Even his voice was the voice of a man who will eventually be fat. "And you are as much of a sylph as ever."

"How can you tell, through this overall? Charlie, who is the American Harold Crendon is bringing?"

"First I've heard of him. I haven't brought you a birthday present."

"It doesn't matter. If you're hard up, I can do something for you." She might yet fall between two stools, so she could lose nothing by building up reserves. "I've got hold of a play—an absolutely certain winner!—everybody says so! There's a sure-fire scene where I pluck off my wedding ring—"The symbol of a lie"! I say, and throw it—"

"My sweet, I didn't bring you a birthday present because, four

years ago, your birthday was on November the twentieth."

"I remember—a Saturday! With one of the very worst fogs, and we were both so depressed until we found it was my birthday. And then we had a gorgeous time and very nearly lived happily ever afterwards."

Hardelow winced, as if the words had hurt him.

"You little devil, darling—leave me alone now, won't you?" An intensity had crept into his voice and his round cheeks seemed to lose some of their plumpness. "I'm fond of my wife and I intend to play straight with her."

"Those are the most beautiful words I've ever heard you say, Charlie." The veiled contralto rippled down his spine: from a mist of dark copper the blue eyes adored him for his probity. In that moment he forgave himself for all his failures and saw himself as he wished to be. No one but Mabel could make him feel like that.

"Here comes someone else—I'll tell you about the play later on—I know you'll jump at it. Oh, it's Frank Millard!"

"Broughby sent me on to chaperon you." Frank Millard, a member of the Stock Exchange, suggested a poet rather than a stockbroker—lean and bony, with large, deceptively dreamy eyes and a melodious voice.

"Frank, do you know anything about the American Harold Cren-

don is bringing?" She added one of her innocent little lies that so often caused so much trouble. "He saw me on the floor at the Rialto and wanted to meet me. What's his name? Is he nice?"

"You mean, sweetheart, is he rich? I don't know. If he is, Crendon will have warned him about you—also, if he's poor."

"She wants to tell him about a play," chuckled Hardelow. He went out to the deck and gazed at the river, seeing nothing. That play—she would infect him with the belief that it would be a genuine investment. He would, of course, lose more money on it than he could afford. Worse—the rush and scramble of backing a play would keep him in touch with her—the very thing he didn't want. He had built his life on the premise that, in any meaningful sense, he had forgotten her. He knew now that he had not forgotten her in any sense at all. He had been a fool to accept Broughby's invitation. If only he could think of some excuse for running home!

In the saloon, Mabel had removed the overall. Millard was telling himself that, though her colors did not match, the discords were resolved into an harmonious aura—or if it wasn't harmonious, it was certainly an aura. He produced a small parcel.

"Happy birthday, Mabel!"

She tore away the wrapping and took out a gemmed brooch.

"Emeralds! Oh, Frank—that afternoon in Edinburgh!" She pinned the brooch on her green jumper—another color clash. "How dear of you to remember!"

"I've tried to forget." It was no gallantry but a bitter protest.

"To forget *me*, Frank?"

"I've tried to think of you as a girl I had a gorgeous time with—but it won't work. The girl keeps turning back into you."

"But, dear, we finished and parted, liking each other better than ever."

"*You* finished! But I never pretended to myself that I did."

"It will pass, Frank. Look at Charlie Hardelow. He's happily married. And I like to think he learned a tiny bit from me that helps him to be a good husband."

"I know you think that way—that's what does the damage. I shall never be happily married. Dammit, there is a girl I want to marry! I keep not-asking her, because I daren't think what I would do if you were to ask me to start again."

"I never would do a beastly thing like that!"

"I know. But it doesn't prevent me from imagining that you might—or hoping that you will."

"But, dear boy, I've told you!"

"You've told me that you don't want a repetition. Nor do I. Last time, we were hectic about it—we snatched excitedly at a passing happiness. You're doing it again now, with Broughby. It can't last. You

don't really like this restless, happy-go-lucky existence. There's more genuine freedom in the suburbs than in Bohemia—and we both know it. I could make a marriage settlement—”

From the deck came a whoop from Hardelow, then footsteps on the landing stage. Broughby was returning, accompanied by Crendon and his American friend.

As the American came into her line of vision, Mabel caught her breath. Of all the millions and millions of men in America it had to be this one! But, of course, he had contrived the meeting—might well have come to England for just that purpose.

“Mabel, meet Mr. Stranack—Miss Rouse.”

He had not changed in six years, she thought. He must be nearly 40 now, but he was as springy as ever and his face still looked as if the skin had been stretched over it. He even seemed to have grown; but that was only because he was bigger than Broughby, who was bigger than the others. Alone of the party he was wearing a lounge suit, which fitted him so well that he managed to look as informal as the others.

She was steady as a rock through those first exchanges. He wished to be treated as a stranger—or perhaps he was waiting for her to take the first step. Perhaps he was merely anxious not to spoil the party. She might have guessed that he

would never make a scene. Anyhow, he meant to give her a breathing space, which was something to be thankful for.

Broughby took Stranack off to show him the launch. Millard joined Hardelow on deck, leaving Crendon to pay his respects to Mabel.

Harold Crendon was a barrister. After dawdling for a few years in the criminal courts he had emerged as the best junior counsel for insurance litigation. In his middle thirties, he was already wondering whether it would pay him to take silk. Of middle size, he had broad shoulders and a broad face, with a large nose and a prominent chin. His personality had been attuned by nature to a law court: elsewhere, it gave the impression of being overgrown, as if the man himself could think only in superlatives.

He bore down upon Mabel, took her by the hand, and snapped a diamond bracelet on her wrist.

“I ordered it for you two years ago, but you walked out on me before it was delivered.”

“Harold!” The veiled contralto registered pain. Tears had come into her eyes. Such was her power of concentrating on the emotion of the moment that the whole problem of Broughby and Stranack shrank into the background. “I walked out because I thought you were tiring of me.”

“What utter rot!”

She was looking at the bracelet

as if it had betrayed her. She had been moved by this man as by no other, and was again feeling his magnetism. "This very minute you've made me understand. I didn't know it was rot at the time."

"I have to suggest that you soon consoled yourself?"

"Soon? There was six months of real misery."

His self-assurance was unshaken. To gain time he blustered.

"Will you have the goodness to sit down and give me your whole attention . . ."

"I can't sit down—I've things to do. And there's nothing for either of us to say. I couldn't mope for the rest of my life. So why not George Broughby? He's a dear and I'm fond of him. But I can't go on with it—not now!"

He glowered at her. She dropped onto a divan as if she had been flung there.

"You little fool—it's too late!" he said, with sudden anger. "I've just got engaged to be married."

"Then you have lost nothing. I'm glad!" Then she added, with that curious air of sincerity, "I hope your fiancée knows she's lucky."

He stood over her, pointing at her.

"I really thought you had walked out on me. Why did you deny it?" He went on: "You had no right to tell me the truth. You're selfish, mean, and cruel. So am I, I suppose. You have all my weaknesses and most of my vices, and if I had any

sense I'd be thankful to you for letting go. As it is—"

"*Shh!* Don't get so worked up, darling. You'll be able to forget when you start a new life with her. Thank you ever so much for this lovely bracelet."

"Shut up! It would not be fair to my fiancée to go on with our engagement now. That's easily said, but it settles nothing. We have to find a way out of this mess you've landed us in—and at present I can see no way."

There sounded the whirr of the starter, then the low purr of the engine ticking over.

Broughby came into the cabin.

"I say, Crendon, will you take us out as far as the Pool so that I can help Mabel get things started?" As Crendon nodded and moved to the door, Broughby said, "And thanks for bringing Stranack. He's more than welcome!"

Mabel sensed that Broughby had something on his mind, and remembered uneasily that he had been alone with Stranack.

"Stranack is the right sort," he said, lowering his voice. "But, being American, some of our little ways may seem strange to him—meaning your little ways, darling. So be careful not to give him a wrong impression."

"What's the right impression George?"

"That you and I—"

"But you promised we'd say nothing about us today!"

"That you and I might be considering the idea of getting married. Put that truth over in a form which he will accept. A little unconventionality won't hurt, but—you know exactly what I mean, Mabel!"

He was warning her not to make a *faux pas* in the presence of Arthur Stranack. That was funny, she thought, and she laughed a little, but without enjoyment because she was becoming nervous. The throb of the engines quickened. The launch had put off with its party of six intelligent, law-abiding persons.

Things, thought Mabel, could sometimes take a shape of their own—as if they were trying to warn you, though you couldn't do anything about it. She had the eerie feeling that all the events of the last six years were running up behind her, and that when they reached her they would explode. George asking her to marry him at the very moment almost when Arthur Stranack popped up—it must mean something.

Then, too, Harold Crendon had behaved very strangely, talking about breaking off his engagement. Being a professional talker, he always made everything seem so urgent. The other two didn't matter so much. Charlie Hardclow often got excited about nothing and Frank rather liked having something to be sad about.

The eeriness began to fade while

she was loading the tray. After all, what was she afraid of? That somebody might make a fuss and embarrass the others? Or that five of her friends might suddenly turn into five enemies?

As she approached the companion-way to the deck, she felt stage fright. The tray was very heavy—she doubted whether she could carry it.

"Allow me, Miss Rouse."

"Thank you, Mr. Stranack. It's heavier than I thought."

There was neither threat nor promise in his glance. Why, she wondered, had he contrived this meeting?

At the Tower of London, Broughby took the wheel from Crendon. Mr. Stranack remarked to Miss Rouse that it was a grand old pile, and Miss Rouse made the trite answer. The other men noted that Mabel was behaving nicely, that the American was not englamored—which they thought a very satisfactory circumstance for all concerned.

Crendon, joining the party on deck, managed to corner Mabel.

"I may as well tell you I've got an idea." He spoke as if he were still angry with her. "I haven't worked out the details—but still, it's an idea. I'll tell you about it later."

Crendon, she told herself, might be the flash point for the explosion. But what explosion? Since she could not marry Broughby, she would have to leave him tomor-

row. What harm could there be in Crendon making plans? The eerie feeling came back—but she had often had that sort of feeling without anything dire happening.

Ignoring the growing heat of the day, she flitted restlessly from deck to saloon and back again. While they were passing through the Port of London the men chattered to each other about the shipping—all a little too polite, she thought. Below Tilbury, Hardelow took his turn at the wheel. When Broughby came on deck, Mabel handed him a cocktail.

Mabel was fast losing her head. As usual on these difficult occasions, her thoughts retreated into fantasy. Suppose Arthur Stranack were to fall overboard? Everything would then be so much simpler. What an awful thought! Arthur was the kindest man on earth—and besides, he was a strong swimmer. Then suppose they all had a frightful quarrel, with guns and things! But again that wouldn't be any good unless poor Arthur were killed, which would be horribly unfair. The real trouble-maker was Harold Crendon, but it wouldn't help much if *he*—

She jerked herself back to reality. At least, there was no need to go on wondering what Arthur Stranack meant to do. She caught his eye, held it, then glanced significantly below. Presently he went below. Within a minute, she picked up a tray and followed.

He was lounging in an armchair and did not rise until she had come close.

"Are you happy, Mabel? If the answer is yes, I'll fade out."

All shyness of him left her. She answered with a spontaneity she had not intended.

"I don't know. I suppose I am. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Why didn't you divorce me before I left the States?"

"I told you I would divorce you the moment you asked me, but not before. Why didn't you ask me?"

"I don't know."

"I do, Mabel. And it's all come true. I *have* sought you out. And now I'm going to say it—and mean it. Ready? I'm sorry for my 50 per cent share in wrecking our marriage. In the past six years I've learned how not to make some of those mistakes. I want you to come back to me. Clean slate for both of us."

He certainly was the kindest man on earth—but she had been hoping he would be unkind. It would have been easier that way.

"Now you've made me utterly miserable!" She realized now that she had wasted six years and spoiled herself for him, out of pique. "It wouldn't work, Arthur. All you know about me is that I've been what is commonly called unfaithful to you, and you're willing to forget it. But there are rotten streaks in me you know nothing about. Look—I accept jewelry!"

She flashed Crendon's bracelet beside Millard's brooch. "And money, too, if you must know! In a way, I loot my friends."

"You didn't loot me. You knew I had a hundred thousand dollars in gilt-edged. It's still there. If there's any of it left when we've paid those men back, you can wangle it out of me." He added: "Just now, I'm in the diplomatic service, but I can get a transfer if you don't feel you could manage that sort of life."

"I'm trying to be sensible and you won't let me!" For a few seconds she wavered. "It's no good, Arthur. You're forgiving and kind and gentle and insanely generous—but I couldn't live up to it. You would keep your part of the bargain, but I don't trust myself to keep mine. I'd hurt you all over again—and hate myself for being so mean."

He made no answer, looked as if he were paying no attention.

She went on: "Divorce me and have done with it! But don't involve Broughby—he's going to stand for Parliament. I'll sign a confession. It'll be done in America, of course. And over here no one need know we were ever married. I mean, in effect, we are both free."

When he spoke, he made no reference to her words.

"Think it over, Mabel." His voice was gentle beyond bearing.

To escape from him, she hurried back to the deck. He followed her closely. They were just in time to

see a sailing yacht run across the fairway of the motorboat. The boat rolled as Hardelow brought the wheel over. Stranack caught Mabel and steadied her.

He was still holding her when the bow of the *Astarte* struck the soft mud of the Essex bank. At the impact they swayed, then steadied. As if they were alone together, Mabel stood on tiptoe and pressed her mouth to his.

"God, I wish I hadn't done that!" she gasped. "You see how rotten I am, Arthur—I meant not to!"

Broughby took control. Hardelow, running about in search of a sympathetic audience, fixed on Mabel. As a matter of routine, the dinghy was lowered and Crendon got in it, potted round the bow, and confirmed the obvious. Everybody went aft, for counterpoise, while Broughby tried to pull clear by reversing. But the bow was too firmly wedged. A dozen feet from the bow the mud sloped upwards from the water to the verge of the marshland. When it was certain that the boat was undamaged, Broughby summed up.

"We could signal for a tug, but it might be the devil of a time, to say nothing of the hullabaloo, before we get one." He flourished a tide table. "If we stay put, the incoming tide should float us off in two and a half hours. What does everybody think?"

"Lunch! As soon as I've got over the shock," said Mabel, helping her-

self to a second gin of generous proportions.

The lunch began very well. The mishap to the boat had broken the reserve which had threatened to freeze the party. Everybody did something and everything turned out to be rather amusing, even locking the little tables together to make a big table and unpacking the caterer's basket.

The first hitch came with the cold chicken.

"George! Those wretched people haven't carved the fowls. I can't carve and you aren't really good at it. Harold, you look as if you could carve!"

"I know I do—and it's given me a complex."

"Why not take a chance on me?" offered Stranack. "I wasted two years on a medical course in the belief that I was meant to be a surgeon."

Mabel's joy was exaggerated. "George, give him your chair. Oh, but we haven't a carving knife!"

"I can scare up something that'll do," said Broughby and went out.

"It hurts to hear that you can't carve, Mabel," said Hardelow. "I believed you had all the domestic accomplishments and virtues."

"I might have a dab at the accomplishments," replied Mabel, "but the rest of it sounds much too difficult."

Crendon sniggered. Millard scowled at Hardelow. Mabel never

said that kind of thing unless some lout goaded her to a retort.

Broughby returned and handed Stranack an ugly-looking instrument. It was a short butcher's knife. It had a black wooden handle and a broad-based blade.

"This is better than a fancy carver," said Stranack as he used it with a deftness which inspired Mabel to lyrical enthusiasm—a state from which she did not depart. She became noisy, and the party liked it—joyous nonsense put over with a vitality that evoked willing response.

She was, in fact, too successful too early in the lunch. When spontaneity flagged, she made more intensive efforts. Jollity slipped away and thought crept in. Thought just now was rather more than she could manage. Again and again her eyes rested on Stranack. By that impulsive kiss on deck, she had further confused her values. The eerie feeling was coming back, and she sought refuge in boisterousness.

One of her jokes approached the limit, and one overstepped it. The men, except Broughby, cackled politely, but their faces lengthened. So far, nothing had happened which could not be forgotten, but they had a lively fear that she might cause a moment of acute embarrassment. Each man secretly blamed one of the others for egging her on—then thought uneasily of his own feelings for her.

Stranack was hearing the echo of

her words of an hour ago: "*It wouldn't work, Arthur.*" Millard was glad she had refused his offer to settle down with him in the suburbs. Crendon's eye was caught by the bracelet flashing on her wrist: he wished he had not been so definite about breaking off his engagement—Mabel might think he meant to marry her. Broughby was thinking of his Parliamentary career, thankful that no announcement had been made to the others.

Crendon alone made an attempt to come to her rescue.

"Silence everybody!" he shouted with mock solemnity. "It's Mabel's birthday. I've prepared a nice little speech about her and I intend to deliver it."

"Keep it clean!" chirped Mabel.

"Keep it clean," parried Crendon, "is the slogan which this gallant lady adopted when she decided to become a professional entertainer. As Cherry Dane she wins admiration for her gracefulness and her beauty. She plays for the hearty and wholesome laugh—she does not play for the facile guffaw. On the threshold of her career in the theatre, the one thing she asks—the one thing she is determined to have—is —"

"*Marriage!*" exclaimed Mabel.

The moment of acute embarrassment had come. In the silence, she added: "That is what you meant, wasn't it, Harold?"

The ambiguity of her words, which might have applied to his

own intentions, disconcerted Crendon. Hardelow, the least affected, jumped in.

"He thinks you're proposing to him, my dear. Mind he doesn't say 'yes' and make himself the happiest man on earth."

"Charlie! I'd forgotten my promise to you about that play. Let's tell them about it, now that Harold has finished his speech. And a very nice speech too, only he ought to have stood up."

As she attempted to rise, one leg of her chair fouled a socket in the floor. Frank Millard, unaware of this, took a firm grip, intending only to steady her. But Mabel thought he was trying to hold her down.

"Don't!" she cried. "Surely I can say a few words to the company on my own birthday!" She made a scuffle of it. By ill luck the bracelet Crendon had given her scraped the back of Millard's hand.

"Frank—I'm terribly sorry! Oh, it's bleeding—mind your trousers! Quick, George—the First Aid kit!"

"The patient is expected to recover," said Millard. "It's all right, dear—it'll stop in a minute. My fault entirely!"

Mabel couldn't leave it at that. She elaborated her apology; she crooned over the trifling injury; she skidded into sheer silliness.

Broughby took her by the elbows, marched her across the saloon, and carried her up the companionway. By the wheelhouse he

set her on her feet and opened the door of the corridor.

"George, dear, I'm not drunk, if that's in your mind."

"It's in my mind that you've forgotten what I told you about behaving yourself in front of Stranack."

She laughed loudly. He shuffled her down the corridor and opened the door of her cabin.

"I warned you I wasn't a fit wife for a rising politician."

"And I was fool enough to contradict you."

So she need not bother any more about marrying George Broughby, decided Mabel.

"You weren't a fool, George, dear. I thought it a perfectly charming way of saying goodbye."

Broughby weakened. He was angry and disgusted with her, and only a moment ago he had hoped never to see her after tomorrow. She would not cling, nor wait to be paid off, like some others. She would blow him a kiss and dance out of his life, leaving behind her a fragrance that would linger for years and smother the memory of her witless vulgarities.

In the saloon Stranack was bandaging Millard's hand. HardeLOW affected to be reading a book. Cren-don was sprawling on a divan contemplating his shoes. The party had disintegrated. If the guests had been able to do so, they would have made excuses to leave.

Broughby had brought the crockery basket in with him. When the

others perceived its purpose they were excessively anxious to help. The dining table was reduced to its component parts.

Broughby picked up the crockery basket, carried it back to the galley for the eventual attention of the contractor's staff. The butcher's knife, because it had to be handled gingerly, had been dealt with last—so it remained at the top, ready to the hand of anyone who might glance into the galley on his way down the passage.

In the corridor he hesitated. Perhaps he had been needlessly offensive to Mabel. Might make some kind of apology. Fathead! he warned himself. She is willing to fade out—leave well alone. At best she would only be a handicap.

Intending to go back to the saloon, he nevertheless turned round and knocked on Mabel's door, which was shut.

"Got everything you want?"

"Yes, thanks. I'll be quite rested by tea time."

From her voice he judged that she was standing close to the door. She ought to be lying down, by now. Hell! Concentrate on the bye-election and forget her.

Before returning to the saloon he went on deck to take observations, which revealed nothing new. Going below, he found Stranack hovering by the wheelhouse.

"I've forgotten where to go to wash up."

"Through that door, down the

corridor—last door on the right.”

Stranack entered the corridor, shutting the door behind him. When he had taken a few steps, he had an oblique view of her orange-satin slip—all she was wearing—and a bare arm; Mabel's door was now open.

He would have continued on his way if he had been permitted.

“Arthur!” she called.

As their eyes met, she smiled. She was lying on the coverlet, propped on one arm. And all she was wearing was a slip.

“I ought to have kept the door shut, but it's so hot—I forgot everybody would be going past.” She was flushed and more than a little bedraggled. One shoulder strap had sagged. Her skirt lay on the floor, beside it her jumper, with the brooch still pinned to it. On the bed, out of her line of vision, was a shoe. There was a rip in one of her stockings.

“Do you want me to shut the door?” he asked.

Waiting for her answer, he let his eye travel from her chin to her throat to the shoulders, and come to rest on the diamond bracelet.

“Crendon gave it to me.” She unclipped it and thrust it under the pillows. “I'll give it back to him the very first chance I get—I'll give back all my jewelry.”

“Why?”

His voice was cold and his eyes showed disillusion. Mabel ignored the warning.

“Arthur!” She rolled his name on her tongue. “I talked a lot of nonsense this morning. Your offer took me by surprise and I wanted to run away and think. But on deck—when I felt your arm round me—I knew I must come back. I'll leave Broughby as soon as we get off this boat.”

She plucked the wedding ring from her finger, held it as if to let an audience have a good look at it.

“The symbol of a lie!” She flung it across the cabin. “I have the real one locked away—the one you gave me, Arthur.”

It was characteristic of Mabel that she had to tell the truth that was in her by means of a ham performance, gagged from a bad scene in a poor play, which would have cost Charles Hardelow more than he could afford—if it had ever been put on the stage.

The *Astarte* remained aground for some 40 minutes after Stranack had rejoined the others in the saloon.

At Westminster Pier, the still air magnified the vibrations of Big Ben booming half-past 5. Broughby left the wheelhouse as Inspector Kyle stepped aboard, followed by Sergeant Dobson. The two plain-clothesmen remained on the pier, mounting guard on the *Astarte* so unobtrusively that the passersby on the Embankment were unaware that police were taking action.

"Your note says that murder has been committed on this yacht, Mr. Broughby?" Kyle spoke as if he thought there might have been some mistake.

"That's right." Broughby led them into the corridor, past the galley to the cabin that had been Mabel's.

"Behind that door," he said and pointed to a narrow strip of paper secured at each end with a postage stamp. "That's the best I could do for a seal—the signature is mine."

"Then there are other people on this boat?"

"Four other men. They're in the saloon. I thought you'd want to come here first." He produced a key. "My fingerprints will be on the handle and all over the door. Shall I open it?"

"I'll do that," said Kyle. The Sergeant handed him a folded silk handkerchief.

"Press the lever and slide the door to your left."

On the bed, Kyle saw the body of a woman in an orange-satin slip. Her head, throat, and part of her chest were covered with a green jumper, bloodstained. From the green jumper protruded the black handle of a knife whose blade, by inference, was sunk in her throat.

Court histories and political biographies record that more than one woman like Mabel had met violent death in just such an impromptu manner. That green jumper had been used solely because it hap-

pened to be handy. The emerald brooch, which Millard had given her, dangled on a loosened strand. One shoe was still on the bed. The tartan skirt lay on the floor where Mabel herself had let it fall.

Kyle's eyes traveled to the bare arms above the head, noted that the fingers were ringless; the eyes roamed slowly round the cabin, then returned to the black handle of the knife. It was obviously the kind that could be bought at any ironmonger's.

"Do you know anything about that knife, Mr. Broughby?"

From where Broughby was standing he could not see into the cabin. He did not move. He did not want to see the inside of that cabin ever again.

"The knife is part of the galley equipment, though we used it today in the saloon." He explained that it had been placed in the basket on top of the unwashed crockery. "Anyone who happened to glance into the galley could have seen it."

Kyle noted the answer, but made no comment. Presently he asked: "You know who deceased is, of course?"

"Mabel Rouse — professional name, Cherry Dane." He gave an address and added: "She did floor shows and bit parts. I can tell you a good deal about her when you're ready for it."

Kyle glanced again at the ringless fingers.

"Was she married or single?"

"Single. At least I have strong reason for believing so. If she has ever been married, she must have had a divorce." He added: "She said she was twenty-eight—which was about right. I'd better mention that I was running a flat for her—the address I gave you. I bought her that wedding ring."

Kyle studied the fingers a third time and for the third time observed that they were ringless. Too soon to go into that.

"Can you give me some idea how it happened, Mr. Broughby?"

"Yes, but we must have the others in on that. Will you come and meet them?" He added: "We intended to run down the river to Southend regatta." He reported the mishap.

Kyle turned to Sergeant Dobson.

"Take charge here. The team will be along in a couple of minutes. I shall be in the saloon."

Following Broughby, Kyle stopped by the wheelhouse and beckoned to the nearer of the two plainclothesmen.

"No one is to leave the launch," he instructed.

Broughby opened doors disclosing the companionway leading down to the saloon.

"Here is Detective Inspector Kyle of Scotland Yard."

The four men rose, not as one man but as four highly individualized persons. They had the air of men who had suffered a sudden

bereavement, to which was added the slightly smug expression which commonly settles upon the innocent when they come under police scrutiny.

Broughby introduced them, adding information he deemed of interest to the police.

"Mr. Harold Crendon, barrister-at-law, Western Circuit, chambers in Lincoln's Inn. Mr. Frank Millard, member of the Stock Exchange, Millard and Bush, Copthall Avenue. Mr. Charles Hardelow, chartered accountant, partner in his father's firm in Victoria Street. Mr. Stranack—" Broughby hesitated. "I'm afraid I don't know anything about Mr. Stranack except that he is a friend of Crendon's, and that he's a citizen of the United States."

"He's in the diplomatic service," supplied Crendon. "Quartered at the Embassy."

"As I'm a foreigner, Inspector, you'll want to see my papers." Stranack drew from his breast pocket what looked like an ordinary passport, but was not. Kyle scanned it, checked the photograph with the original, and handed it back.

"Mr. Stranack, I have to detain everybody here for questioning. If you wish to claim diplomatic immunity—"

"I wish to claim nothing, Inspector," said the American. "You may take it that I shall not communicate with the Embassy until you're finished with me."

"Thank you, Mr. Stranack."

There was a pause. Kyle was waiting for Broughby. He glanced round the saloon, becoming aware of its size—it would hold 30 guests without squashing.

“Well, gentlemen, I’m waiting for one of you to tell me what happened and how the killer managed to get away from the five of you.”

Another long silence followed, in which each was waiting for another to speak.

“He hasn’t got away,” said Broughby. “He’s here—one of us in this saloon killed her. We don’t know which one.

“One of us is the murderer,” Broughby repeated. “And theoretically that includes me.”

Inspector Kyle looked from one face to another, learning nothing except that they would be a difficult bunch to handle. Whether it was a put-up job or not, they had taken a considered position and were standing together. Routine provided for this tactic: nail them down in their position before breaking them individually.

Broughby spoke again.

“If you’re ready to hear the circumstances—”

“Before we go into details,” interrupted Kyle, “I’d like to know whether you all agree with what Mr. Broughby has said—that one of you in this room killed that girl?”

He happened to glance at Stranack first.

“I agree that it is an inescapable inference,” said Stranack.

Millard and Hardelow signified agreement.

Crendon made a qualification. “Broughby’s statement is true, but misleading on one point. He intended to convey to you our belief that one of the *four* of us in this room—Broughby, Hardelow, Millard, or myself—killed Mabel Rouse. Not one of the four of us suspects Mr. Stranack.”

There were murmurs of assent.

Crendon went on. “With that amendment, I agree with Broughby’s statement. I can add—in the hope that it will help you—that I personally am convinced that Hardelow can also be eliminated. And I shall be happy to give evidence to that effect at the proper time.”

Kyle was delighted. By inference Crendon accused Broughby and Millard, jointly or individually. If the others would follow suit, there would be hope of the familiar situation in which conspirators fall out and accuse each other—or eliminate all but one.

“I can’t vouch for anybody—except Stranack, of course,” said Broughby.

“I agree with Crendon,” put in Millard. “Stranack is out of it. I eliminate Hardelow as well. He hasn’t been out of my sight long enough.”

There came a moan from Hardelow.

“That puts me in a very humiliating position. I ought to return the

compliment, but I can't—except Stranack, of course."

Kyle was disappointed.

"Can you eliminate anybody, Mr. Stranack?"

"Sorry, Inspector. I didn't keep tab on anybody's movements."

Kyle refused to give up hope. If he could split them at even one point at the start, a mass of detailed work would be bypassed.

"Then we come back to Mr. Broughby's statement. You all agree on eliminating Mr. Stranack. Two of you also eliminate Mr. Harde-
low. That means—letting me off the 'misters,' please—Millard suspects Crendon and Broughby. Crendon suspects Millard and—"

"Pardon *me*, Inspector!" said Crendon. "I suspect no one. I have not a tittle of evidence against anybody. You may reasonably believe or disbelieve my statements. You may draw the inference that either Broughby or Millard must be guilty. But you cannot attribute to me a suspicion of either—or of both."

A lawyer's distinction, thought Kyle, but he could not refute it. In a general way, he disliked lawyers. This one evidently intended to throw his weight about.

"Quite right, Mr. Crendon, and I apologize. The fact is, I have never before handled a case involving gentlemen of your position." He was being spuriously humble about it. "But when we get down to bed-rock, I'm on familiar ground, you

might say. Criminals generally accuse one another—and that puts 'em where we want 'em. You gentlemen have dug your toes in and are telling me that not one of you has so much as a suspicion of the others—which is much the same thing, only—gentlemanly side up, if you understand me."

He paused, confident of his effect.

"Do you realize that it's possible—I only say possible—that you might *all* be charged with murder?"

"Of course we do!" exploded Harde-
low. "That's why we're behaving like this. For God's sake, Inspector, don't get it into your head that we're a bunch of gangsters trying to pull a fast one on the police!"

Kyle, looking at the round, earnest face, suppressed a smile.

"I didn't suspect gangsters."

"If you suspect this is a criminal conspiracy," cut in Millard, "ask yourself why we didn't dump poor Mabel overboard. At worst, it would have been much safer than voluntarily walking into a lion's den like this."

Before Kyle could prevent it, Crendon had seized the initiative.

"There can be no possible charge of conspiracy!"

Kyle sniffed, as if he had received a blow in the face.

"Do you believe, Inspector, that within the confines of this yacht it would be possible to plan and carry out a murder—and agree upon a

course of action to be taken in regard to the police—unless Mr. Stranack were one of the conspirators? Surely you do not!”

Kyle was ready to back down rather than attack Stranack, who could remove himself as a witness if he were offended by simply claiming diplomatic immunity.

“Evidence will be adduced,” continued Crendon, “that I met Mr. Stranack in Washington last year when I was there on Government business. He landed in England for the first time five weeks ago and looked me up yesterday. He mentioned that he had seen Cherry Dane doing her floor show and would like to meet her in person. I telephoned Broughby and fixed it. No one will believe that Mr. Stranack would bring scandal on his Embassy—to say nothing of risking his neck—in order to oblige four men, three of whom he had never met until this morning.”

Another lawyer’s point, noted Kyle. It was common knowledge that when all the conspirators were arrested one of them generally squealed. Who but a lawyer would have spotted that Stranack’s presence could be used to rob the police of a powerful weapon?

“Furthermore,” resumed Crendon, “I ask you to remember that each of us has a career. At the trial—and we devoutly hope that you will be able to bring this case to trial—a single adverse comment by the judge on the conduct of any one of

us would take years to live down. Of the five of us present, four will be desperately anxious to help you find the murderer.”

So far, Kyle admitted to himself, his shock tactics had yielded nothing. It was a novelty to him to be bullied by the suspects in a murder case. Their unusual behavior, however, did not mean that they were unusual men. Broughby, he had looked up. Crendon’s name was often cropping up in the papers as counsel in insurance litigation. The other two were of the same social stratum. No matter! The job would be the same, even if it had to be done with kid gloves.

“I say, everybody!” It was a joyous shout from Hardelow. “Why are we all harping on murder? We told the Inspector it was murder, but we may be wrong. Suppose it was suicide?”

Kyle alone was startled. He had made the recruit’s mistake of accepting the statement of murder without proof. He had let the special circumstances disturb his routine. It was Broughby who unconsciously saved the detective’s face.

“Rot! Mabel would never commit suicide.”

“Presumably,” said Crendon, “we shall now adjourn to Scotland Yard for questioning?”

Kyle had had enough of Crendon for the present.

“We’ll see what we can do on the spot, first,” he said. “You are anxious to coöperate—four of you,

anyhow. I will therefore ask you all to remain in this saloon until I come back—and in the meantime to give my staff any help they may require.”

They would wait long enough, reflected Kyle, to get over their enthusiasm for presenting neat little riddles in law to the police. Cren- don, for instance, was going to be taught that there's quite a lot of law that never crops up in a law court.

Sergeant Dobson met Kyle at the head of the companionway.

“River police launch standing by, sir. I told 'em they'd have to cruise 'emselves off till the doctor and the photographers have finished. Dr. Menton is waiting for you now.”

Kyle closed the doors of the sa- loon.

“There are five men in there, Dobson—one of 'em a lawyer. You heard me—a lawyer—They've promised not to move until I come back.” He grinned. “They don't know how long I'm going to be—the lawyer can work that out for 'em! Send a man in to take their dabs. One of 'em—Millard—has a bloodstain on his trousers, but he's also got a bandage on his hand, so he'll have a tale. We'll have the blood group of that stain right way. They're to be treated very lightly—they're all smiles and we want 'em like that.”

The conference with Dr. Menton took place behind the closed door

of the forward guest cabin. He was an able but gloomy little man. In their work together, Kyle had picked up a little physiology and Menton had picked up a lot of cau- tion.

“I haven't much for you,” said Menton. “She has been dead for about three hours.” He was in- clined to leave it at that.

“Would it be going too far to say that the knife sticking in her throat might have something to do with it?” prompted Kyle.

“We need look no further for the weapon,” pronounced Menton. “Judging by the position of the arms and the limited ejection of blood, I think it's a fairly safe guess that the examination will determine the cause of death as shock follow- ing partial asphyxia.”

“Very interesting,” remarked Kyle politely. “Did she do all that by herself or did somebody help her?”

Kyle had expected a confident as- surance. But the doctor looked gloomier than ever.

“You don't want me to comment on the position of that jumper which, of course, would have left her almost naked. Nor is it my province to dwell upon the psycho- logical absurdity of suicide in such circumstances.”

“Try this one, Doctor. If she did stab herself, could she have wiped the handle of the knife afterwards?”

“No—of course not! That would have been definitely impossible.

"In your opinion, how long could she have lived after the blow had been delivered?"

"In my opinion—based on a cursory examination and subject to correction at the post-mortem examination—only a few seconds."

When the doctor had gone, Kyle stepped across the corridor to the deceased's cabin.

Sergeant Dobson was standing in the doorway.

"I'd like you to look at that skirt, sir."

Kyle knelt and peered at the tartan skirt lying close to the bed.

"Looks like the imprint of a shoe, ball to toe, left side of left shoe—that's what I see."

"So do I, sir. It isn't the doctor's shoe. I warned him, and I watched him until he'd finished." He added. "Simpkins said he doubted whether the photo would be any use—couldn't get a shadow on it as it lay."

"The lab can have a look at that. See to the packing yourself, will you. Ask 'em to make a rush job of it. Collect all the shoes you want off the gentry-an'-aristocracy in the saloon. But leave Stranack out of it. He has diplomatic immunity—he's waiving it at present, but he might change his mind if we push him. Treat him like glass, but you needn't be afraid of that lawyer. Hi, what's that?"

Kyle was looking at a broad white circle chalked on the carpet in a corner of the cabin.

"That's where I found a wedding ring, sir. It's packed now and in the inventory."

Kyle nodded. He remembered that Broughby had spoken as if there had been a wedding ring on the dead girl's finger. While he continued his scrutiny of the cabin, his thoughts played round that wedding ring. Something funny there! Women don't drop wedding rings by accident. Before taking an afternoon nap, a woman decides to put her wedding ring on the floor in a corner of the cabin? Ridiculous!

"The wrong shows the right." That slogan had helped him more than once. No one had "put" the wedding ring on the carpet. If she had taken it off before lying down, she'd have put it on the dressing table; and if it had been brushed off by accident it couldn't have rolled some ten feet along a carpet. Therefore the ring had been *thrown* in the corner.

Assume murder. The murderer removes the ring and flings it into the corner of the cabin. Physically possible—but too darned silly to have happened.

Much more likely that the girl herself flung it there. While she was lying on the bed. In what circumstances does a woman take off her wedding ring and fling it across the room? When she's having a hell of a row with her old man—even if he's only an honorary old man, as you might say.

But Broughby, innocent or

guilty, would not have said it was on her finger if he knew it was on the floor, where the police would be sure to find it.

Therefore she was not having a hammer-and-tongs with Broughby when she threw off the ring. Having hammer-and-tongs with somebody else? Then why did she throw away the wedding ring?

"Shows it's no good guessing without the facts," Kyle muttered, and left the cabin. In the corridor he caught sight of one of his own men apparently looting the wardrobe in the forward guest cabin.

"What the devil are you up to, Bassett?"

Looking for trousers, sir, at owner's request. That bloodstain. Millard said he must be provided with another pair or he wouldn't cooperate."

By the wheelhouse Kyle found Sergeant Dobson arguing with a member of the river police.

"All right, Dobson. They can move the body as soon as you've packed that skirt and finished the inventory. I shall be in my room. Leave one man on board and two on the pier."

The doors of the saloon opened with some violence and Crendon appeared.

"I take it, Inspector, that your investigations will not be impeded if we keep these doors open. It's very hot in the saloon."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Crendon."

Before stepping ashore, Kyle spoke under his breath to Dobson.

"Tough on him. He hoped I'd object, so's he could trot up an Act of Parliament about it."

Bassett passed by, carrying a pair of white flannel trousers.

The white trousers, which were too long for Millard, increased the effect of lopsidedness caused by wearing one shoe. The three others who were also half shoeless became aware that only the American looked as unruffled as when he had come aboard. The company itself was becoming lopsided.

Millard drew back the curtain of a porthole and looked over the pier to the Embankment.

"No reporters in sight. So far, we haven't drawn a crowd."

No one accepted the opening for a little light chatter to ease the burden of silence. Their social instincts were paralyzed. In the mind of the innocent was the knowledge that a man of their own kind, sharing their ethical outlook, had stepped beyond the pale by committing murder. Not yet could four out of the five imagine themselves in danger of the hangman.

In addition they were suffering the emotional confusion of hating the man who had killed Mabel without having anything approaching a reasonable suspicion of which particular man was to be hated.

"I can't stand a lot of this waiting about," complained Hardelow. He wanted to talk and listen to oth-

ers talking. His amiability had already converted the murderer into an abstraction which could be mentioned without embarrassment. "Now that we have reported to the police, I don't see why we have to go on staring in front of us like stuffed sheep."

Stranack answered, with the air of a man rising to a difficult occasion.

"I don't know anything about police procedure in this country, but I guess Crendon's advice not to discuss the case would hold good anywhere. Once you start discussion you might agree on a version. The police drill a hole in it, and there you are."

"And if we don't agree on a version, we shall contradict each other," objected Hardelow. "And anyway, not one of us intends to tell the whole truth about poor Mabel."

"Not one of us knows it," said Millard. "We shall each tell a different truth about her. And we shall all be disbelieved."

"You needn't worry," Crendon assured him. "Discrepancy on small points makes a good impression. Anyway, you're out of it, Hardelow. Millard and I have both given you an alibi."

"But the police don't seem to have accepted it, or they wouldn't have taken my other shoe—though how you can leave a footprint on a boat on a dry day beats me!"

Broughby, who had been holding himself aloof, now unbent.

"What we tell the police can't prove anything, or it would already have proved it to us."

"So unless they find fingerprints and cigarette ash in the right place, they'll never know for certain," said Millard.

"And the imaginary man *knew* they'd never know for certain!" cried Hardelow. "That's what he was building on. Doubt! And they'll have to give him the benefit of the doubt which he created himself."

"He isn't an imaginary man," snapped Crendon. "He's one of us."

"You know what I mean," grumbled Hardelow. "He worked it out that we couldn't all be charged together, himself included, owing to Stranack's presence—oh!—"

Hardelow broke off in pink confusion. Crendon laughed.

"You've just remembered that I brought Stranack to this party—if he'll ever forgive me!"

"I say, Crendon! Look here!" floundered Hardelow. "You don't for one moment think that I think —"

"Of course I don't. And you don't think I think et cetera—when I point out that this murder could not have occurred, in the manner in which it did occur, if you had not run the boat into the mud."

"Take it easy!" shouted Stranack.

Instead of resenting the peremptory order, all four took it in meek

silence. In their eyes the American had become a superior being—in the sense that he stood outside their peril.

Stranack, who had no such view of himself, apologized to his host.

"Sorry, Broughby—but it did strike me that in a minute we should all be accusing each other."

"I quite agree," returned Broughby.

Silence was restored. While they waited for Inspector Kyle, the thoughts of the four innocent men hovered about Mabel Rouse until their hatred of the unknown fifth was fanned to murderous proportions.

In this tidiest of murder hunts, the desk work gave extraordinarily little trouble to anybody. Within a couple of hours of leaving the *Astarte*, Kyle had before him all the real evidence he was likely to gather.

The first report covered the fingerprints. There were none on the handle of the knife, which had been wiped clean. On the door of the deceased's cabin there were only two distinct prints, one made by the deceased and the other by Broughby. Other prints were too blurred for identification. On the wedding ring there were blurred prints which could have been made by the deceased and could not have been made by any of the men.

While the detailed report of the microscopic examination of the tartan skirt was being typed, Kyle had

received a short summary on the house telephone.

"The outline was faint in parts and not continuous. We are satisfied that it could have been made by Specimen Number Three—which is Crendon's shoe—"

"Good," said Kyle. "That fits in nicely."

"I said *could* have been made, Inspector. We cannot assert that it was made by that shoe and none other. It could also have been made by Specimen Number Two—Millard's shoe. Specimens One and Four are excluded by size."

"That's what I call a yes-and-no answer," grumbled Kyle, and added to himself, "unless we can get a dovetail on Crendon."

Sergeant Dobson came in with the inventory.

"Dobson, if one of those men on that boat killed that girl, he did it for one of two reasons—love or jealousy."

"What price blackmail?"

"Yes—or blackmail. He comes in with the knife in his hand to settle her threats once for all—and she throws away her wedding ring."

"What for, sir?"

"Exactly! Or a lover comes in to ask her to leave Broughby and come to him. She says okay, throws off Broughby's ring—and he *doesn't* bump her off. Or she tells him to go to hell—and she doesn't take off the wedding ring." As the other looked blank, Kyle added: "If it were jealousy, you get the same

thing. There's no point at which she throws off the ring and then gets bumped off."

"I'm getting it, sir. She threw the ring at the killer?"

"Anyway, she threw it—and I'm trying to catch it," said Kyle, without conviction. "We won't need those shoes—send 'em back and say I'll be along soon. Now, let's have a look at that inventory. Did you find anything in the bed after they'd moved her?"

"Only the bedclothes. Do I go over with you, sir?"

"No. I'll send word if I want you. I'll take Carfax—his shorthand is the best."

It was nearly 9 when Kyle reached the pier. The loungers on the Embankment had thinned out and the pier was deserted except for the two plainclothesmen.

He was at his most urbane when he stepped aboard the *Astarte* and descended to the saloon—the typical family man late for a typical meeting of the typical parish council.

"I am very sorry to have kept you waiting, gentlemen. This is Constable Carfax, who will take notes for us, if you can fix him up somewhere."

Broughby fixed him up at the escritoire. Kyle seated himself in a wicker armchair under the high light and was provided with one of the small tables for his notebook and papers. Hardelow and Millard sat on a divan, diagonally facing Kyle. Stranack drew a chair to the

side of the divan. Crendon and Broughby took the other divan. There was a short silence.

"I'm ready when you are, gentlemen."

"We haven't appointed a spokesman," said Broughby. "Crendon, would you mind?"

"Certainly, if the Inspector agrees."

Kyle had foreseen this and decided that it would be better to consent.

"Before I attempt to marshal the facts," said Crendon, "I must make it clear that I am not representing this group in any professional sense. I am acting simply as a spokesman—and, of course, as a witness. I shall begin by asking Broughby to give his account of how we came to be together on this boat."

Broughby explained that it had been a birthday party for Mabel Rouse, detailed the invitations, then described the cruise to the point where the boat ran into the mud. Hardelow was asked to deal with the mishap, after which Crendon took over and brought the account up to the first incident over lunch. Soup was served, followed by cold chicken, when it was discovered that there was no carving knife on the table. "Carry on, please, Broughby?"

Crendon worked each witness into the narrative and then patted the evidence into place. He soon reached the point where the party was clearing away the lunch and

Broughby was taking the crockery basket back to the galley.

"The knife, on top of the contents of the crockery basket, would have been visible to anyone passing down the corridor. Who in fact did pass down that corridor at the relevant times? The answer is that all of us in turn passed down that corridor—over a period of approximately half an hour. That fact, I imagine, is no more likely to help you to find the murderer than it has helped us."

No one interrupted him while he reported that the first man to go down the corridor was the American, who returned to the saloon about ten minutes later. The second was Hardelow who was absent for only a couple of minutes.

"I was the third to go aft," said Crendon. "Before returning to the saloon, I went up on deck and looked about. After a few minutes I rejoined the others. Any comments from those others?"

Broughby looked up.

"I didn't hear your footsteps on deck, Crendon," he said, "and I didn't hear you come down the companion from the deck."

"Didn't you? But I did go on deck. No doubt the Inspector will investigate the point later. You were the fourth man to leave the saloon, Broughby. Millard was the fifth and—we can say positively—the last. Millard was absent quite some time—I would say about ten minutes, if you all agree."

"I agree that it must have been at

least ten minutes," said Millard. "But you know why!"

"Just a minute." Crendon turned to the others. "Has anybody anything to add before Millard takes the floor?"

"I have, though I don't suppose it's important," said Broughby. "When I had put the crockery basket back in the galley, I knocked on Mabel's door to ask if she wanted anything, which she didn't. She did not open the door, but I could tell she was not speaking from the bed."

"She must have opened that door a few seconds later," volunteered Stranack. "It was open when I went down the corridor, and she was lying on the bed. At her request, I shut it."

"It was shut when I passed by," said Hardelow.

Millard said the same.

"And it was shut when I passed it," contributed Crendon. "And now, Millard, will you take on from the moment when you left the saloon."

"On my way down the corridor I glanced into the galley. I had no conscious purpose and I saw nothing. But I felt uneasy without knowing why—"

"Pardon me, Millard, but wouldn't it be better to leave out what you felt and tell us what you did?"

"No! My feelings—and nothing else—have saved us from the macabre absurdity of taking poor Mabel to Southend regatta." He paused to pick up his thread. "With

this feeling of unease I went along and had washed up. On the way back, the same unease made me stop at the galley. The carving knife was no longer in the crockery basket—on top of the other things—where I had last seen it. That knife had been at the back of my consciousness ever since lunch.”

“Why?” interrupted Crendon.

“Because I happened to be watching Mabel’s face when Broughby brought it in. She looked frightened and she gave a sort of nod—at the *knife*. You all thought that Mabel was a bit tight. She wasn’t! She had two gins before lunch and barely one glass of champagne at table—much less than half the amount she could carry quite comfortably. She was whipping herself up because she was frightfully upset about something—I don’t know what it was. The whipping up didn’t work; now and again she looked anxious for a half second or so, and towards the end she became rather noisy and silly.”

Prelude to the wedding ring act. Kyle’s spirits soared.

“I was as skeptical about my own feelings as any of you would have been,” continued Millard. “I searched the galley for that knife. I’m not very good at that sort of thing and I made a lot of noise and even broke a plate or two. Broughby heard me and came along. He was not interested—left me in the galley. When I was certain the knife was not there, I made a scene about

it in here. You all acted promptly, as if you shared my dread.”

Crendon resumed his role of spokesman.

“We thumped at Mabel’s door, then tried to open it. Millard, looking through the keyhole, saw only that it contained no key. I took the key from a guest cabin and with it unlocked the door. We saw—what you, Inspector, eventually saw. We did not enter the cabin. We called Broughby.”

“Wasn’t Mr. Broughby with you?”

“He was not. He did not seem to be impressed by the disappearance of the carving knife.” Crendon paused, but Broughby made no comment.

“Broughby shut the door, locked and sealed it with postage stamps. In this saloon we took common counsel, in which Stranack joined. I advised that we should not discuss the case. It was unanimously agreed to make straight for Scotland Yard.”

Kyle was pleased. They had obligingly nailed themselves to their tale.

“Let’s get this corridor business clear, first,” he said. “Broughby spoke to her through a shut door. Within a minute or so of his going away, she opened the door. It was shut again a few minutes later, by Mr. Stranack, at her request. After that, each of you passed down the corridor and found the door shut?”

“That is the evidence of four innocent men,” cut in Crendon. “Ob-

viously, the guilty man opened the door, fulfilled his purpose, locked the door, and then probably threw the key overboard. Here is your problem, Inspector, in a nutshell. You may safely assume that we are all telling the truth, including the murderer. The murderer is telling lies only in respect to his actions between entering that corridor and emerging from it. I offer you the suggestion—with deference—that the murder was unpremeditated. One of us suddenly saw the tremendous opportunity created by Stranack's presence. One of us must be guilty, and the killer believed that the circumstances would make it impossible to prove which one."

Kyle perceived that Crendon was making the mistake, natural to a lawyer, of limiting himself to the facts "before the court." He had allowed no margin for discoveries made by the police but not yet revealed. That wedding ring, for instance—to say nothing of the footprint on the skirt.

The killer was making the same mistake. The crime was theoretically watertight—a neat little problem turning on the "insoluble riddle of the door," as the papers say.

"By your theory, Mr. Crendon, one of you is a maniac, always looking for a safe chance to kill? Or could there be some reasonable motive?"

"There's never a reasonable motive for murder," answered Crendon.

"Oh yes there is!" Hardelow had flared up. "That is, if you think you aren't going to be caught. We can't be cagey, now we're all in this hole. I'm going to blurt out everything about myself and trust to luck. She was going to stick me up to finance a play for her—it must be a darned rotten play or they wouldn't have let her hawk it around."

"And she threatened to make certain disclosures if you refused?" asked Kyle.

"Good lord no! She wouldn't do a dirty little crook's trick like that. She thought the play would be a howling success—she always thought everything was going to be splendid."

"Then how was she sticking you up?"

"I dunno! I just felt that if I put up the money I'd be sort of robbing my wife. And if I didn't, I'd be a mean swine. She was that sort of woman. Why, when we hit that mudbank, it flashed into my mind that perhaps poor Mabel would be drowned, and that would be the end of a lot of misery for all of us—except Stranack, of course."

Kyle made a note that Hardelow admitted motive—then put a question mark beside it. It was too laboriously frank to be convincing. And how they kept harping on the innocence of Stranack!

"As Hardelow has started blurring, we must all follow suit or incur suspicion," said Crendon. "I myself have recently become engaged.

I told my fiancée of my friendship with Mabel—and I had no fear whatever that Mabel would do anything unfriendly. But I frankly admit feeling some relief that I can never see her again.”

Millard piped up next. “I was very fond of her, when I didn’t want to be. I tried to forget her and was angry with myself when I couldn’t. As she is dead, I am glad she was murdered. It would have been a horrible memory to live with if she had committed suicide—she was so fond of life.”

That was a flourish, Kyle told himself. But he remembered that Hardelow, too, had talked mawkishly about the girl.

“I can’t quite toe the confessional line,” said Broughby. “This morning I was informed that I had been chosen as a Parliamentary candidate. I didn’t have to tell Mabel that our ménage wouldn’t fit in. She told me. In all friendliness and without a thought for herself—without a single stipulation or request—she said she would leave me tomorrow and she meant tomorrow. She was no danger to me. I know she would never have done anything that would injure me.”

That would be a reason for taking off the wedding ring tomorrow—not today, in the middle of the party. It was certainly not a reason for flinging it across the cabin. And anyway, the one thing certain about the ring incident was that Broughby was not concerned in it.

Looked at from another angle, Broughby’s story had given the girl another build-up. Possibly this was a technique. The American might be useful here.

“She comes over to me as a very glamorous and fascinating woman,” he said. “Mr. Stranack, from what you saw of her, do you agree with that?”

“I would say she was striking looking, not glamorous,” answered Stranack, weighing his words. “As to fascination, she was not a clever, mysterious sort of woman. But she had the knack of making a man feel there was something fine in her nature which he alone had the power to bring out. To put it the other way round, she could draw the ordinary sort of man out of his ordinariness.”

Kyle was impressed. He was bound to accept that she was not the ordinary high class joy-girl, but a woman of personality who could produce unexpected reactions. Excluding Stranack, they all seemed to have been fond of her and to have admired her character, but nevertheless wished her dead. You certainly couldn’t call that ordinary! Broughby even praised her for consenting to leave him.

“The essential stretch of time,” Crendon was saying, “is something less than forty minutes. It begins when Stranack at Mabel’s request shut her door. The fact that she was then alive renders Broughby’s previous movements unimportant.

Thereafter, Hardelow was absent from the saloon for such a short time that I think Broughby will agree with Millard and with me that he can be eliminated. That leaves Broughby, Millard, and myself as the only legitimate suspects."

Kyle had already eliminated Broughby on the ground that he could not conceivably have taken part in the wedding ring act. He now eliminated Millard. From the murderer's point of view, the wedding ring act, involving conversation, would have taken a dangerous amount of time. The murderer would not have wasted more time pretending to look for the knife in the galley—there would have been no sense in it, since it could not create an alibi.

That left Crendon.

"I'll accept your theory, Mr. Crendon. You offer me three suspects, including yourself. Obviously you eliminate yourself?"

"I do. But that does not mean that I can reasonably suspect an individual—until there is evidence of guilt."

The last words sounded very like a challenge. Kyle circled.

"How do you know someone didn't board the boat without any of you hearing him?"

"We must not exclude that possibility," said Crendon with an air of resolute broadmindedness. "On the land side no one could have approached. On the river side, a skilled waterman, approaching in a

small boat, might have succeeded in coming aboard. But with what purpose? Robbery? Mabel had with her in that cabin an emerald brooch and a diamond bracelet—possibly other valuables. Your papers will no doubt corroborate my statement."

Kyle obediently studied the inventory—a painstaking and reliable document, listing every item found in Mabel's cabin. He studied it at some length and then looked up without comment.

Crendon continued: "If we conclude that this hypothetical intruder was not a thief, we have to postulate a maniac, or a disappointed lover. Neither maniac nor lover could have known beforehand that we would run aground there and that these conditions would prevail."

So Crendon was standing pat. No red herrings, even if the police offered them. No conspiracy. No means of proving anything against any individual man. *Per-haps!* Kyle got up.

"Excuse me a minute."

He left the saloon, spoke to his man on guard by the wheelhouse, then came back, sat down, and pretended to pore over his notes. In the silence everyone in the saloon heard footsteps on deck—footsteps of one who walks slowly and self-consciously, as if under instructions from his inspector.

"When Mr. Crendon strolled, as he informed us, on deck, Mr.

Broughby did not hear him. Did anyone else hear Crendon's footsteps?"

There was no answer. Crendon smiled tolerantly.

"Do you know, Inspector, I saw Broughby look at his watch just now? Yet, every fifteen minutes, Big Ben fills this saloon with its din. Broughby heard Big Ben, but he did not notice Big Ben. I repeat, Inspector, that I walked on deck."

"It's only a check-up, Mr. Crendon," said Kyle indifferently, while his thoughts harked back to the wedding ring. Hardelow and Broughby were out of it. He felt compelled now to exclude Crendon also: if Crendon had taken part in the wedding ring act and knew that it would be found on the floor, he would have worked it into the narrative, with an answer as glib as the stuff about Big Ben.

That left only Millard. But Millard had wasted time in the galley. Considered as the murderer, he would not have had time for the wedding ring act as well.

There then flashed into Kyle's mind a suggestion so dangerous to his own position that he felt he must take another look before he leaped. He did a little more stage business with his notebook.

"Are you all agreed—" He began slowly, hesitated, then went on, "Are you all agreed that the murder must have been committed before Broughby and Millard met in the galley?"

There were murmurs of assent, which Crendon gathered up.

"After the galley incident, no one entered the corridor until the three of us went to call Mabel."

Kyle nodded. The check-up confirmed his own knowledge of what they had said.

"Can any of you give me a leg-up over this?" He looked from one to another. "We have evidence that the deceased talked for several minutes with someone *after* Mr. Broughby had spoken to her through the closed door."

"You have not forgotten, Inspector," put in Crendon, "that a minute or so later the door was open when Mr. Stranack passed, and that he shut it?"

"I was about to say that I had a chat with her, lasting a few minutes." The American, who had been thrust into the role of spectator, roused himself and sat upright in the wicker armchair.

"A few minutes?" echoed Kyle. "How was the deceased dressed while you were talking to her, Mr. Stranack?"

"As she was when she was murdered—in her slip."

Kyle concealed his elation by contriving to look shocked.

"I must say, I understood, from the way you gave me the information, that you shut the door in passing?"

"Sorry, Inspector, it didn't occur to me that I might be misleading you."

"A few minutes!" Kyle mouthed the words. "You meet her today for the first time. You, as well as the others, give her a good character in spite of her—well—broad-mindedness. And there she is holding a conversation with a comparative stranger, with the door closed and she dressed only in a slip!"

Broughby tried to put his oar in. "Lots of respectable girls, nowadays—"

"We're talking about a particular girl," interrupted Kyle. "Mr. Stranack, did the deceased, in your presence, take off her wedding ring and fling it across the room?"

"She did."

That was enough for Kyle. There was just one thing that could now make sense of the wedding ring act.

"Was the deceased your wife, Mr. Stranack?"

"*Damnation!*" bellowed Stranack. "Yes, she was! But as it has nothing whatever to do with your investigation, I hoped to keep it off the record."

"Good God, Stranack!" exploded Crendon. "You pulled my leg about her and you treated her here as if you'd never met her before."

"I hope you will accept my apology, Crendon, and see it as an innocent deception which could hurt nobody. That still holds good. I apologize to you, too, Broughby. My one purpose was to have a word with her in private, to ask her if she wished to come back to

me. I had that word before lunch—and she said she did not want to. So I went on treating her as a stranger.

"When I saw her in the cabin, she told me she had changed her mind, that she was tired of the life she was living and wished to come back to me.

"It was a condition of my offer that she should let me pay back any money she had received from her friends, and that she should return any valuable presents. She referred to this in the cabin. I should explain that she was dramatizing herself a little, though she meant what she said. Right there and then she removed the jewelry she was wearing and put it under the pillow, assuring me that she intended to return all presents she had received from her lovers at the first opportunity. She took off the wedding ring, which Broughby had given her, and flung it from her with an elaborate gesture and high-falutin' words to the effect that it meant nothing to her. That is all. It was then that I shut the door."

Another one of the frank, manly confessions that stopped too soon, thought Kyle.

"I take it, Mr. Stranack, that you entered her cabin—for the purpose of this conversation?"

"No. I remained in the corridor. I had one hand on the door, I think. Probably you've found my prints."

An errant wife accepts an ever-loving husband's offer to take her back, mused Kyle; no kiss—just a palaver, with him standing in the doorway all the time.

Crendon was looking as if the whole thing were a personal insult. Kyle saw a chance to get a bit of his own back.

"Mr. Crendon, I will not report you to your Benchers if you will give me a bit of free legal advice. After what Mr. Stranack has told us, is he still so obviously a disinterested person that I can't run you all in for conspiracy?"

Somewhat to Kyle's dismay, Crendon took it as a genuine consultation.

"His membership of the Embassy is now irrelevant to you as a criminal investigator, since there might be a *prima facie* case against him for felony, namely the murder of his wife—alternatively for shielding the murderer of a hypothetically unwanted wife. It is therefore my opinion that, if you were to arrest us all, no action would lie for wrongful arrest."

Kyle felt as if he had fallen over his own feet.

Crendon went on: "But before you proceed to arrest us—if that be your intention—I ask you to allow me to make an attempt to clear the matter up. I would add that I am sure my attempt will be successful."

Taking consent for granted, he went behind Kyle's chair, so that he faced everyone in the saloon ex-

cept Kyle and the shorthand writer.

"I shall not look at any of you, but I want you all to look at me." He fixed his gaze on the copper bowl of flowers on a bracket above Millard's head. "I assert, without proof, that I did not commit this murder. I assert that one of you did. To him I am now speaking."

His tone was even and matter-of-fact. For the first time, Kyle perceived that the man had dignity behind his bumptiousness.

"On impulse, you—the murderer—killed that dear, delightful, dreadful woman. Why? Because you feared your imagination and your will would never be your own while she was alive. I stand very close to you. When she was mocking my feeling for her by her stupid vulgarity over lunch, I too wanted to kill her. You had the courage of your impulse, which I lacked. You relied for your safety—and equally for that of all of us, your friends—on a legal dilemma; but that legal dilemma no longer exists. You cannot now wish to ruin us socially and professionally by forcing us to stand with you in the dock—if only for a short time in the lower court. You staked, and you have lost. As your friend I remind you that this is the moment to pay up."

Kyle was almost ready to believe that someone would confess. He glanced at the plaster on Millard's hand. Hardelow sneezed. Then the moment passed.

"Thank you, Inspector." Cren-

don dropped wearily into the nearest chair. In the silence that followed his appeal, the lines deepened round his mouth so that he looked like an elderly judge in mufti.

Millard leaned forward.

"Mabel's legacy!" he cried wildly. "We shall never again trust men of our own kind—nor ourselves. The police will now treat us as the bunch of crooks we have become."

"Well, I must say I'm disappointed," said Kyle. "It couldn't have been put better than Mr. Crenndon put it." It occurred to him that the appeal might yet succeed if it were reinforced with a fact or two.

"Before we send for the handcuffs," he grinned, in Millard's direction, "we'll have one more try to get off the ground."

They were mystified when he stood up, after taking from his bag a ruler and a large safety pin.

"Gentlemen, will you all please come with me to the cabin. Mr. Broughby, may I have two cleaning cloths or two pieces of any soft material?"

In order to produce the cleaning cloths, Broughby headed the procession down the passage.

Kyle broke the police seals on the door. The cabin looked much the same. But the bedding had been removed, revealing a spring mattress.

"This plain cloth in my right hand represents the deceased's skirt."

He placed it on the floor, by the

bed, so that it touched the chalk marking at as many points as possible. "This other cloth, let's say, is her jumper—this safety pin stands for the emerald brooch. The position of the jumper is only approximate."

"About 10 per cent of it was flopping across the skirt," said Stranack.

"Thank you." Kyle made the adjustment. "I will now show you all the essential movements of the killer—the movements which we *know* he made."

He came out of the cabin, took a few steps in the direction of the kitchen.

"This ruler represents the knife, which the murderer has just taken from the kitchen. I don't know whether the door of the cabin is open—if it is shut, he opens it. But I do know that the deceased is not asleep. The killer keeps the knife out of her line of vision—like this, perhaps—because if she were to see it she might scream. She does not see it. She receives him in a friendly manner. He comes in. Sooner or later, he sits on the side of the bed, almost exactly where I am sitting now, his foot on her skirt—like this.

"She puts her right arm round him—whether they actually kiss I don't know. At any rate, he lowers his body in her direction until his left hand can reach her jumper on the floor—like this—without his getting off the bed. He swings the

jumper over her head and throat—like this—to protect himself from bloodstains—before he stabs . . . Whether he was aware of the brooch, again I don't know—he might have caught his hand in the pin—we don't know, yet.

"Then he leaves the cabin, shutting and locking the door. We assume, with Mr. Crendon, that he probably threw the key into the river. Then he returned to the saloon. That's all for now. Thank you, gentlemen."

There was a slow procession back to the saloon, Kyle in the rear. He had shot his bolt, and in the next few minutes he would know whether he had hit anything.

"The one among you who is the killer," he said when they were all sitting down, "now knows how much we know."

There should be some sign somewhere, he thought. He glanced at the American who had so readily waived his right to refuse interrogation but was now wearing the traditional poker face.

"Mr. Crendon's very pointed appeal fell flat because the killer still hoped I was bluffing—that I didn't want complications with the Embassy. The Embassy is not my pigeon. I plow on until the higher authorities call me off."

Still the poker face. Come to that, they all had poker faces. His shot seemed to have missed. He himself no longer believed there was a conspiracy. He accepted Crendon's

view that it was a one-man job, with no sympathizers.

"Mr. Millard, the stain on your trousers is of the same blood group as that of deceased."

"Then so is my own blood. It came from the cut on my hand." He added: "As I told you, it was grazed by the diamonds in Mabel's bracelet."

"How soon after you received the cut did the deceased leave the saloon?"

"Broughby brought the plaster. As soon as she had applied it, he grabbed her and took her off. Say a couple of minutes, at the most."

"Still wearing the bracelet?"

"Yes, it hadn't been damaged."

"Then microscopic examination of the bracelet should reveal minute pieces of your skin?"

"I suppose so. Hasn't it?"

"We don't know, yet," answered Kyle. Again he turned to the inventory and studied it. Then he decided to take the risk of inventing a spot of science. "In those tests," he asserted, "a lot depends on the nature of the diamonds. What sort of diamonds were they? Where was the bracelet bought, Mr. Broughby?"

Broughby turned to Crendon, who answered: "I bought it. At Wrenson's. I can assure you they are real diamonds. I gave it to her as a birthday present—with Broughby's consent, of course."

"That being the case, gentlemen," said Kyle, beaming, "a

charge of conspiracy will not be brought. Mr. Crendon, you are under arrest and will be charged with the murder."

Crendon employed his forensic gesture of non-understanding.

"I am a little dazed, Inspector. You propose to charge *me* with the murder—because I bought the bracelet at Wrenson's?"

"Because the bracelet was on her wrist when she left this saloon for the cabin, because it was seen in the cabin by Mr. Stranack, and because it was *not* found in the cabin when we took over. We've never seen that bracelet."

"Therefore the bracelet was taken by the murderer!" said Crendon. "As murderer, I pointlessly took the bracelet and threw it into the river with the key? Or did I keep it? Really, Inspector!"

"The girl told Mr. Stranack that she intended to give back all the presents she had received from men—at the first opportunity! She took off what she was wearing at the time and put it under her pillow."

"Oh, I see!" Crendon's eyes were bright with triumph. "Then, my dear fellow, why on earth didn't you search me before reciting that preposterous formula about charging me with murder?" He stretched out his arms. "Search me now, for heaven's sake! Search me—and recover your own sanity!"

"I'd rather you searched yourself, Mr. Crendon."

Crendon's smile vanished. He

had been utterly certain the Inspector would search him—equally certain that the Inspector would find nothing. He was still certain that nothing would be found—but his cocksureness had been wiped out by the form in which Kyle had put his words.

"That's a damn funny thing for you to say," Crendon muttered. For a moment paralyzing doubt held him, while he groped in memory. Then, with a quick, nervous movement, he thrust his hand into his breast pocket.

"Nothing there!" he cried.

"She couldn't reach that pocket. She had her right arm around you while you were sitting on the bed. Try your right-hand side pocket."

With the same quick, nervous movement, Crendon thrust his hand into his right pocket—and pulled out the diamond bracelet.

He stared at it for several seconds, then laid it on Kyle's table.

"I'm not the only man in this room who was fool enough to think he couldn't live without her. At lunch today she showed me that I couldn't live *with* her—after I had promised to do so." He turned to Stranack, bestowing an elaborate glance of compassion. "It's a pity you didn't let me into the secret, old man." Then he turned to Kyle, dramatizing himself as deliberately as had Mabel. "Congratulations on your brilliant sequence built on that wedding ring. If I had only known!"

(Continued from other side)



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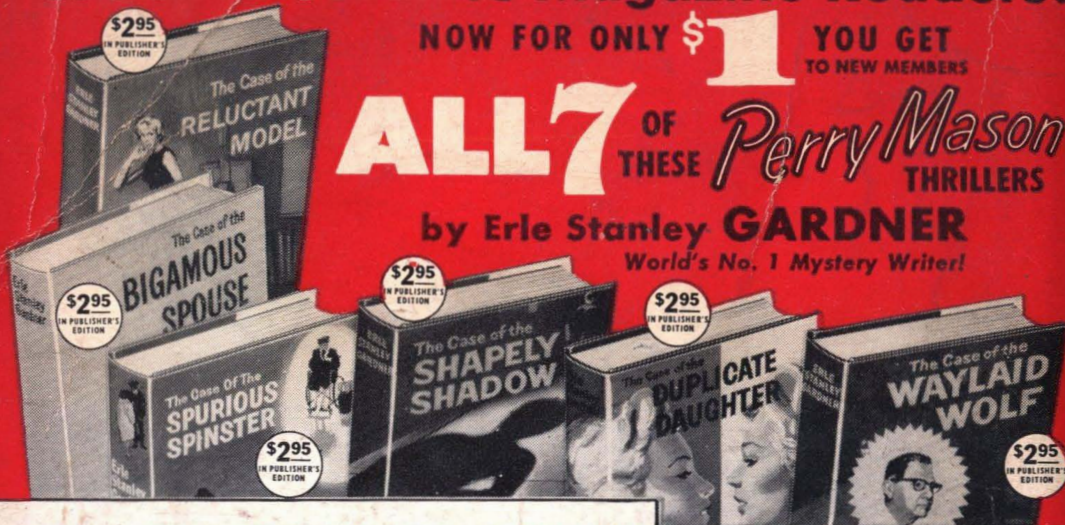
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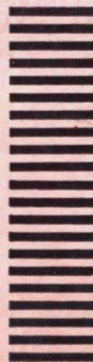
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