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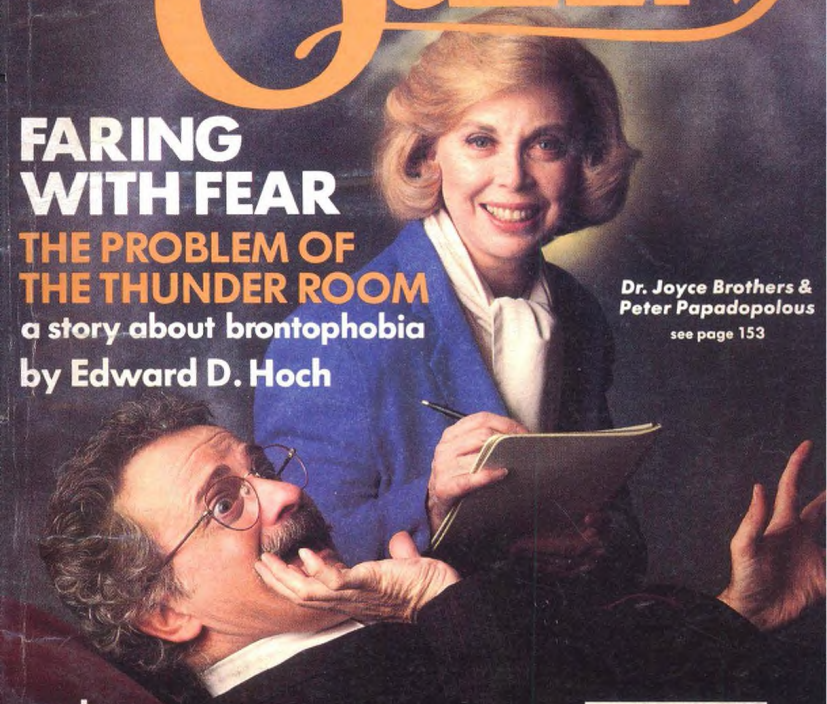
## FARING WITH FEAR

## THE PROBLEM OF THE THUNDER ROOM

a story about brontophobia

by Edward D. Hoch



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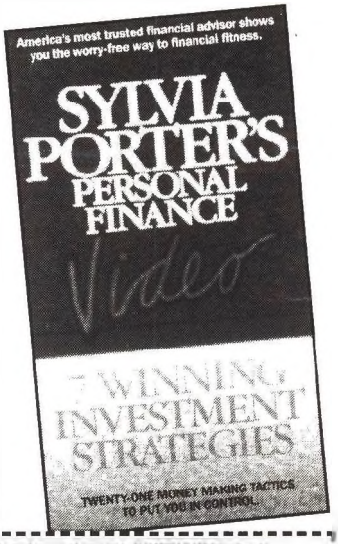


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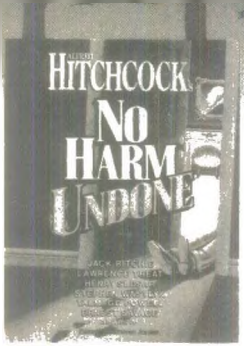


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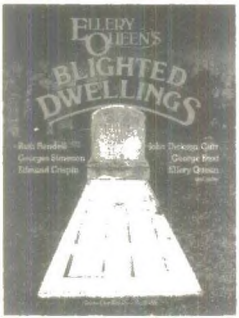


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**a *NEW* Dr. Sam Hawthorne story by**

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*"I heard you was workin' for the Doc here," Rex Stapleton said to May. "Is he a good boss?"*

*"The best." May smiled at April and Dr. Sam.*

*After lunch she excused herself and Dr. Sam had a few moments alone with April. "You know she'll never replace you," he told her, meaning it.*

*"I think she'll work out fine if you give her a chance, Sam."*

*"Anything I should watch out for?"*

*"Not with her work, certainly." April hesitated and then added, "She's scared of thunderstorms, but I suppose that's not that unusual . . ."*

# THE PROBLEM OF THE THUNDER ROOM

***by EDWARD D. HOCH***

"Come in!" old Dr. Sam Hawthorne said, greeting the afternoon visitor with his usual warmth. "Here, you just sit down here while I pour us a small libation. What was I gonna talk about today? Oh, sure—it was when my nurse April left me to get married in the winter of '35 . . ."

April had been my only nurse since I came to Northmont and set up practice back in 1922. When she met this fella up in Maine and decided to marry him, it was a real blow to me. But I couldn't stand in the way of her happiness. (Dr. Sam poured a little more brandy into his glass and continued.) That was in late January. April had agreed to work through February and help train her replacement,

but finding someone qualified in a town like Northmont was easier said than done. Friday, March first, was supposed to be her last day in the office, but I prevailed on her to stay one more week.

"Sam," she said with a sigh, "I want to get back up to Maine and take care of our wedding plans. We're being married right after Easter."

"You've got time, April. You'll have the rest of your life to be Mrs. Andre Mulhone."

"It sounds nice, doesn't it?"

"I've got to say you've seemed happier this past month than I've ever seen you. Just give me another week and I'll try to come up with someone."

Perhaps it was this feeling of a deadline hanging over me that made me so receptive the following Monday morning when Sheriff Lens stopped by the office. "You're still lookin' for a replacement for April, Doc?"

"I certainly am, Sheriff. Do you know of anyone?"

"Well, a funny thing happened yesterday out on the County Line Road. One of my deputies came across a young lady in a fancy yellow Duesenberg car. It had gone off the road on a curve and she was in a ditch. Anyway, she's stayin' at the hotel till the car is fixed and she asked me this mornin' if I knew of anyplace here she could get a job to pay for it."

"Ladies who drive Duesenbergs can usually afford the upkeep," I remarked. "Besides, I'm looking for someone who can last thirteen years like April did. I don't have any temporary jobs available."

"Said she likes Northmont and might stay if she found the right job. She worked for a dentist in Stamford. That's pretty much like working for a doctor, isn't it?"

"There are similarities," I admitted.

"Then there's her name. You know what comes after April. Her name is May."

I had to chuckle at that one. "Okay, Sheriff, I'll talk to her," I said.

By noon that day Sheriff Lens hadn't gotten back to me, and when I went out for lunch I purposely detoured past Rex's Garage. I've loved fancy cars all my life, and if there was a yellow Duesenberg in town I wanted to see it.

Rex himself was working on it when I walked in, hammering the last of the dents out of the front fenders. "Quite a car, eh, Doc?"

"Sure is." I walked around it, marveling at the fine workmanship.

Just as I was lifting the hood to inspect the engine, a young woman

walked in from the street. "What are you doing with my car?" she asked sharply.

"It's all right, Miss," Rex Stapleton assured her, wiping the grease from his hands. "This here's Sam Hawthorne, Northmont's best doctor. He appreciates fine cars like yours."

"I'm May Russo," she said with a ready smile, stepping forward to shake my hand. "The sheriff told me I should contact you." She was fairly short and moved with an energy that set her blonde hair bouncing. She wore a grey sweater and a matching pleated skirt. I guessed her to be in her mid-twenties, a good decade younger than April.

"I was admiring your car. The Duesenberg is a fine machine."

"Thank you. I only hope Mr. Stapleton here has it running again."

"Good as new," Rex assured her, slamming one of the doors to emphasize the point. "I've got the bill right here. It's not too bad."

I watched while she paid with a pair of new twenty-dollar bills. Then I asked, "Do you want to talk about the job?"

"Yes—climb in and I'll give you a ride back to your office."

I didn't have to be asked twice. We rolled out of the garage and turned right on Main Street, and I felt like every eye in town was on us. "What makes you think you might want to stay in Northmont, Miss Russo?"

"I'm escaping."

"Oh?"

"From Boston and fast cars and a fast life. I thought Stamford was the answer but it's too close to New York. I want to slow down."

"Did your parents give you the car?"

She looked away and nodded. "When I started my senior year at Radcliffe. I graduated five years ago. —Mr. Stapleton says you appreciate fine cars. What kind do you have?"

"A red Mercedes 500 K."

"Very nice!"

"You'll see it at my office."

"Am I going the right way?"

"Turn left at the next corner. I'm in the office wing at Pilgrim Memorial Hospital."

"Are you a surgeon?"

"Nothing so glamorous. Just a lowly general practitioner."

She made the turn without hesitation, handling the car with skill. "Is it much farther?"

"No. It's less than a mile from town. The way you drive I can't believe you could end up in a ditch."

"I was distracted," she answered. "I lost some of my clothes in the accident. I have shopping to do."

"Sheriff Lens said you worked for a dentist."

"That's right. I went to Stamford to try life on my own."

"What happened?"

"The dentist had a jealous wife." Almost as an afterthought, she asked, "Are you married?"

I had to laugh. "No, I'm not."

We turned into the hospital driveway and I pointed out a parking space next to my Mercedes. "Did you walk into town from here?" she asked.

"Of course. I walk there and back nearly every day if the weather's good. It's the best exercise I get."

She was impressed by my new Mercedes and I promised her a ride in it. Then I took her inside to meet April. "May, this is April—soon to be April Mulhone."

"Hello, May." April gave her a smile and made the obvious jokes about their names. Then she settled down to describing the office procedure, hopeful that I had found her replacement. I decided to hire May Russo.

As those first days passed, I quickly learned May's strengths and weaknesses. A telephone call to the dentist in Stamford had brought forth a grudging recommendation and I could see at once that she was a bright, hard worker with a cheery word for all the patients. Keeping the records and accounts, scheduling the patients, even devising the best routes for my house calls all came naturally to her. She wasn't a trained nurse as April had been, and there were times when I wished I could call on her to help with more medical procedures, but she was willing to learn and that was the important thing.

Friday was April's final day, and I took both of the women to lunch at a nice little restaurant across the street from Rex Stapleton's garage. Rex ate there regularly and passed our table at one point. "How's the Duesenberg running?" he asked May.

"Running very well, thanks."

"I heard you was workin' for the Doc here. Is he a good boss?"

"The best." May smiled at April and me.

After lunch she excused herself and I had a few moments alone with April. "You know she'll never replace you," I said, meaning it.

"I think she'll work out fine if you give her a chance, Sam."

"Anything I should watch out for?"

"Not with her work, certainly." April hesitated and then added, "She's scared of thunderstorms, but I suppose that's not that unusual."

"Thunderstorms?"

"Remember Wednesday afternoon while you were visiting your hospital patients we had that freak thunderstorm."

"Freak is right. In March!"

"It lasted only a couple of minutes, but it really terrified her. She put her head down on the desk. She said they used to have a thunder room at home and she and her brother would be terribly frightened when their parents dragged them in there during a storm."

I'd known some old New England houses to have thunder rooms, including a few in Northmont. They were inside rooms without windows, where the family could take refuge during severe storms. It always seemed to me they tended to make people even more afraid of thunder and lightning, and May's reaction might bear that out. "Well, we don't have too many bad storms around here," I said.

April reached across the table to take my hand. "I'm going to miss you, Sam. You've been the best boss a woman could hope for."

"I hope you'll be very happy. Have you and Andre set the date yet?"

"I know it'll be soon after Easter. I'm hoping for April twenty-seventh because Easter is so late this year, but we'll let you know for sure. You will come, won't you?"

"Nothing could keep me away."

The rest of the month was generally quiet and May and I settled into a daily routine of seeing patients, making house calls, and sending out statements. Though April had rarely gone on calls with me, I tried to get May out of the office at least twice a week. For one thing, I enjoyed her company. More important, I wanted my patients to know and trust her so she'd be more than just a voice on the telephone when they called in an emergency.

It was toward the end of March that we visited the old Foster place on Berry Road. The unseasonably warm weather that had provoked the early thunderstorm had lingered, off and on, through the month. This day was a sunny spring jewel, and some farmers

could be seen already plowing their fields. Hank Foster wasn't among them because a bad knee injury had laid him up through much of the winter.

His wife Bruna was a tall humorless woman who'd been known to do much of the outside work around the place. She greeted me at the door, nodded briefly to May, and led us into the sitting room. "I hope you'll have him back on his feet soon, Dr. Hawthorne. Otherwise I'll have to ask our son to drive down from Springfield to help with the planting."

I inspected Hank Foster's knee, flexing it a few times. "How does that feel?"

"Better than last time, Doc. I've been gettin' around pretty good."

"This is a lovely old house," May commented to Bruna Foster as I finished my examination.

Mrs. Foster thought about that and suddenly unbent enough to ask, "Would you like to see the rest of it?"

"I'd love to."

I remained downstairs with my patient while they inspected the kitchen and the second floor. I heard them moving above us and then suddenly there was a heavy thump from up there. "What was that?" Hank asked, half out of his chair.

"I'll go see." At the foot of the stairs I called out, "Everything all right up there?"

"No," Bruna called back. "Your new nurse has fainted."

I found May sprawled on the floor at the doorway of a bleak, windowless room. To my relief she was already coming around. A whiff of ammonium carbonate from a bottle in my bag quickly had her sitting up.

"What happened, May?"

"I don't know. I—I think it was that room."

"It's a thunder room," Bruna Foster explained. "Apparently the former owners were frightened of storms and would go there during really bad ones. Hank and I occasionally use it ourselves."

"It reminded me of something from my childhood," May explained. "You'll have to excuse me." She got to her feet a bit unsteadily. I helped her down the stairs.

"A great nurse I make!" she said with a self-deprecating shake of the head.

"It could happen to anyone," I assured her.

The following Monday was April Fools' Day, but it was no joke

to Sheriff Lens. I stopped by the jail as he was doing his monthly cleaning-out of hobos arrested near the railway tracks. There was a burly black man, a short fellow with long blond hair and a beard—a half dozen in all.

"This batch has been in for four weeks," the sheriff told me. "There are no jobs here for 'em. I can't hold them any longer, so I just shoo them out of town, let someone else worry about them. Those birds in Washington better start doin' something about this Depression."

Most of them left quietly, anxious to be free, though the short blond one demanded a suitcase he'd had when he was arrested. Sheriff Lens found it in the property room and sent him on his way. "It seems there should be *something* for them with all the public-works projects around," I said.

"They don't want to work. They just want to bum around lookin' for handouts. That big fella looks like he's got the strength of three people but you don't see him using it." He went back to his desk. "At least I emptied out the cells for the next batch. Now what can I do for you, Doc?"

"I was out to the Foster place a few days ago. On the way back I noticed a couple of junked automobiles in a field at the old Bailey farm. Know anything about it?"

Sheriff Lens pounded the desk with his fist. "Aren't they outa there yet? Rex Stapleton leased that field from the estate a few months back. Maybe they thought he was takin' up farming, but all he wanted was space to store some old wrecks from his garage. He says he might need them for parts, but I told him they're an eyesore and to get them outa there fast. I guess the next thing to do is to give him a summons."

"I just wanted to let you know about it."

"I appreciate that, Doc. —How's the new nurse workin' out?"

"May's fine. It's a funny thing, she'll never replace April, but in some ways I feel closer to her. She's a bit more friendly than April, even if she's not as good a nurse."

"When's April's wedding?"

"Three weeks from Saturday. I'll be going up to Maine for it."

"Give her my best, Doc. I always liked that gal."

I returned to my office and found that the usual rash of early-spring illnesses were upon us. May had calls from two people with the flu and one woman whose child had broken out in spots. It was probably chicken pox since he'd already had measles, but I promised to take a run out there.

"Someday doctors will stay in their offices and everyone will come to them," May remarked as I prepared to leave.

"That would be a sad day for the medical profession," I said. "Some of these people can't even afford cars. How would they get here?"

The thunderstorm came on Thursday of that week, as surprising as the one a month earlier. It was my first opportunity to see the effect it had on May Russo. She'd been unusually edgy all week long, almost as if she somehow sensed the oncoming storm. With the first clap of thunder, she buried her head in her hands. We were alone in the office.

"Come on, May," I said to her. "I'm here with you. Nothing's going to happen."

There was a flash of lightning and then another crash, closer this time. "You don't know," she moaned.

"Don't know what?"

But she didn't answer me. It was almost as if she'd gone into a trance. "Go in here and lie down," I suggested, helping her to her feet and guiding her to the examining table in my inner office. She stretched out there and I left her alone for a while.

By three o'clock, some fifteen minutes later, the storm had passed. What thunder there was could be heard far in the distance, moving away. I found May sitting on the edge of the table. "I'm sorry, Dr. Sam. I always think I'm getting better, but then the thunder comes and it's like a fog settling over my brain."

"Did you go to sleep?"

"I think I did, for a few minutes. I had a dream. It was a terrible thing—about a hammer and people being killed."

"You're all right now," I assured her.

"I hope so." She slid off the table and returned to the outer office. In that moment she seemed more like a frightened child than a confident young woman who drove an expensive yellow Duesenberg.

"Have you ever considered seeing a specialist?" I suggested. "I'm not a believer in Freudian psychology myself, but some doctors can do wonders these days."

"Do you think I'm crazy?" she asked quietly, wanting to know.

"Of course not. Whatever your trouble is, we'll get to the bottom of it," I told her.

My three o'clock patient arrived then, a few minutes late because of the storm. I asked May if she wanted to take the rest of the afternoon off, but she insisted on staying at her desk.

It was more than an hour later when Sheriff Lens arrived at the office. His face was dead serious and I knew something was wrong. May must have seen it, too. "There's been a killing, Doc," he said without preliminaries.

"What? Who?"

"Hank Foster. It happened out at his house about an hour ago. An intruder came in during the thunderstorm and killed him with a hammer."

"My God!" I looked at May, remembering her dream. "What about Bruna? Is she all right?"

"She was hit on the shoulder. Nothing more than a bad bruise. Doc Quinn is with her."

"Doc Quinn? Bruna's *my* patient."

"Under the circumstances, Doc, I thought it was better to call in someone else."

"What circumstances are those?"

Painfully, he glanced from my face to May's. "Bruna swears that the person who entered their house and murdered her husband was May here."

Oddly, my first reaction was one of relief. It was so impossible, so easy to disprove, that I felt no apprehension for May at all. "That's quite fantastic," I assured him. "May was here in the office with me during the entire storm."

"Bruna says she's sure, Doc. She was only inches away from Hank when he was killed."

May's face had gone white, drained of blood. "Where did it happen?" she managed to ask. "In the thunder room?"

"That's right." Sheriff Lens eyed her carefully. "Do you remember what happened now?"

"No, of course not. I wasn't there. I had nothing to do with it."

"Then how'd you know it happened in the thunder room?"

"You said it was during the storm, and I saw the room when I was there. I supposed they'd have been in it to keep away from the thunder and lightning."

"May is very frightened of thunderstorms," I explained. I told the sheriff everything that had happened during the storm, pointing out that it would have been impossible for May to have left the office long enough to have committed the crime.

"But she was outa your sight for fifteen minutes, Doc. You just told me so yourself."

"Fifteen minutes at most, just before three o'clock. What time did the killing take place?"

"Just then, at the height of the storm."

"All right. May was resting in the examining room for fifteen minutes or less. Are you trying to say that in such a short period she could have climbed out the window, driven her car out to the Foster house, killed Hank Foster, driven back, and climbed back in the window? In that storm it would have taken her at least fifteen minutes to drive just one way. And what about her clothing? You can see it's perfectly dry."

"Could she have been there for maybe twenty or twenty-five minutes, Doc?"

"Not a chance! We had a three o'clock patient who arrived just a few minutes later. May was back at her desk by that time."

Sheriff Lens fidgeted. "Well, I never really believed Bruna Foster, but you know I have to check these things out."

"I'd like to speak with her if I could. I'm just as anxious as you to get to the bottom of this."

"She's pretty much in shock right now. Doc Quinn thought—"

"I'm her doctor, Sheriff."

I could see him torn between duty and friendship, perhaps regretting now that he hadn't called me at once. "All right, come along," he said.

As I was leaving, I turned to May. "Don't worry," I reassured her. "No one thinks you were involved."

"Thank you, Doctor Sam."

It developed that Doc Quinn had brought Bruna into Pilgrim Memorial to have her shoulder X-rayed. We found her in the treatment room not a hundred yards from my office. She was huddled in a blanket while Quinn examined the X-ray. "Hello, Sam," he said. "I didn't mean to intrude on your patient like this, but the sheriff phoned me and said—"

"It's all right, I understand." I turned to Bruna. "I'm terribly sorry about Hank."

"It was her—your nurse, May Russo! She killed Hank!"

"Try to calm down." I glanced over Quinn's shoulder at the X-ray. "Anything broken?"

"No. As I suspected, it's just a bad bruise. She tried to protect her husband and got hit with the hammer."

"May was trying to kill me, too," the woman insisted.

I sat down next to her. "Tell me everything that happened, Bruna."

Her face hardened at the memory of it. "The storm started around twenty minutes to three. What time is it now?"

"Nearly five."

"Only two hours! It seems like a day."

When she didn't continue, I prompted, "The storm—"

"Yes. It came up bad, out of the west. Hank and I weren't really afraid, but we went to the thunder room as we often do during storms. There are no windows and with the door closed we can barely hear the thunder. After a few minutes, there was a noise downstairs—Hank said it sounded like the front door slamming."

"Was it locked?"

"Heavens, no! Who locks their doors around here in the daytime?"

"Go on."

"After a minute or two there was a terrible crash of thunder. We could hear it right through the door. Hank thought lightning might have hit the barn and he opened the door to go look. And May Russo was standing just outside the door with a hammer in her hand and a wild look in her eyes! Her hair was straight and wet from the rain and her clothes were drenched. She never said a word."

"What was she wearing?"

"A green dress with a black belt. She had a black jacket over it, but it didn't protect her from the rain."

I turned to Sheriff Lens. "Satisfied, Sheriff? May's wearing a blue sweater and black skirt today. I've never seen her in a green dress. And you saw—her clothes were perfectly dry."

"It was her!" Bruna Foster insisted. "She hit Hank twice on the head with that hammer. When I tried to grab it from her, she hit me. I ducked and she caught my shoulder. It was her!"

"Could it have been someone disguised as May, wearing a wig?"

She thought about it and then shook her head. "As she hit me, I yanked at her hair. It was no wig."

"What happened then?"

"I fell to the floor and I thought she was going to swing at me again—kill me as she had Hank. But the storm was letting up by then and she seemed to just change her mind. She ran out of the room and down the stairs. I heard the front door slam and then I dragged myself to the phone and called the sheriff."

"Did you hear a car?"

"No."

While Doc Quinn continued his examination, I took Sheriff Lens

aside. "What do you think?" he asked. "She certainly sounds like she's telling the truth."

"But she can't be, Sheriff! Either she's mistaken or she's deliberately lying. There's no third possibility."

"How do we find out?"

I considered that for a moment. "We need a sort of lineup, like the city police use. Bruna only met May that one time at her house. She might have her mixed up with someone else. I'll find a couple of blonde nurses and put May in a white coat so they look pretty much alike. Then I'll walk them past this door and see if she recognizes May."

"Sounds okay to me," Sheriff Lens agreed.

I was certain it would put a quick end to the entire business. The nurses were eager to cooperate and donned identical lab coats over the uniforms. Then I got May and told her about it. I walked the nurses past first, one at a time, while Bruna Foster watched. Then I walked May by the door.

"That's her!" Bruna gasped, pointing a shaky finger. "She's the one who killed my Hank!"

That evening, I followed May in my car to the apartment she'd rented over Main Drugs and went up to chat with her for a while. "The woman's lying," I said. "It's as simple as that."

"It's *not* as simple as that! Why would she invent such a story in the first place? If she killed her husband, she could have said the intruder was some unknown prowler. Why say it was me?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"I really black out for a few minutes when I get these spells, Dr. Sam. Maybe I did go there and kill that poor man without knowing it."

"You think you changed your clothes twice, drove both ways, and even dried your hair in those fifteen minutes?"

"I don't know, maybe I *flew* over there! —I told you about my dream of the hammer."

"Yes." I'd been trying to put that out of my mind. I didn't believe in the supernatural, and I didn't believe in people flying through space without an airplane.

"If she's telling the truth, what other explanation is there?"

"I don't know. Do you have a twin sister?"

"No." She gave a faint smile. "I can't imagine two of us, can you?"

She urged me to stay for dinner and I did. She was a good cook,

fixing pork chops to simmer while we both relaxed with cocktails. It wasn't the sort of treatment I'd come to expect in Northmont.

We'd just finished dinner when Sheriff Lens arrived. He seemed distressed to find me there. "Gosh, Doc, I'm real sorry."

I saw the frightened look on May's face.

"About what?" I asked.

"I'm goin' to have to arrest you, May. We've got a confirming witness."

*"What?"*

"Rex Stapleton was out in that field near the Foster place moving those junked cars when the storm hit. He says he saw you come runnin' out of the Foster house just before three o'clock, as the storm was lettin' up. He says you were carryin' a hammer, May."

Her face contorted and she turned her back to us, bracing herself on a table. "It's not true," she said. "I didn't kill him. I didn't."

"Of course you didn't," I told her. "Sheriff—"

"I'm sorry, Doc. You give her a strong alibi, but I've got two other people who swear she was out there. I'll have to hold her, at least overnight."

"I'm going to see Stapleton," I decided.

I found him at the garage, working late. He glanced up from the motor of a late-model Oldsmobile and said, "How are you, Doc? Be with you in a minute."

"Rex, why did you lie about seeing May Russo out at the Foster place today?"

"Huh? It wasn't a lie. She was there." He straightened. "I'm damn sorry about it, Doc, but as soon as I heard what happened I went right to the sheriff."

"She was with me at the time of the killing, she *couldn't* have been out there. Nobody can be in two places at once."

"I don't know about that, Doc. All I know is what I saw. I heard the door slam and I looked over toward the house and seen her come running off the porch. She had something in her hand. I could see it was a hammer."

"Which way did she go?"

"Back across the field toward the creek. She disappeared into the trees. I thought it was pretty strange at the time, but I didn't hear about the killing till I got back to town."

"You couldn't have been mistaken?"

"Hell, it was her, Doc . . ."

I slept restlessly that night, confronted by the impossibility of it. Every possible theory ran through my mind. Toward morning I'd even conjured up a love affair between Rex Stapleton and Bruna, in which he killed her husband and they'd both lied about it. But if that was the case I was faced with the same dilemma—why were they trying to pin the crime on May, a most unlikely killer?

I arrived at the office early and puttered around until nine o'clock. I found myself waiting for May's arrival, then remembered she was in jail.

What if Bruna and Rex weren't lying?

What if May hadn't told me everything?

I put in a call to the registrar's office at Radcliffe College up in Cambridge. When I had the woman on the phone I told her who I was and asked about May Russo. "She would have graduated in 1930," I said.

"Yes, Doctor, I remember May. A charming young woman."

"Did she have a twin sister?"

"No, I'm quite sure she didn't. But she was the only member of her family to attend Radcliffe. Her grades were outstanding."

"Do you have a home address where I might reach her parents? It's very important."

"Her parents? Didn't you know? Her parents were both murdered while she was a senior here."

"What?" I caught the edge of the desk, trying to keep the room from spinning. "What did you say?"

"Her parents were murdered. Someone got into their house and killed them with a hammer. They never found out who did it."

I took a deep breath and asked, "Was there any suspicion of May?"

"Oh, no. She was here in her dorm when it happened."

I thanked the woman for the information and hung up. The next thing was to have Sheriff Lens check on the previous crime and learn the exact circumstances. I didn't really need that, though. I was sure he'd find that May's mother and father had been killed in the thunder room at their house, during a storm.

How could such a thing happen twice in one life? Did May possess some sort of split personality that enabled her to be in two places at once? Whatever the answer, I knew I had to see her. I'd confront her with this new information and force the truth from her.

I drove to the jail and hurried into the sheriff's office. "I have to see May," I told him.

"You're too late, Doc. A lawyer showed up from somewhere first

thing this morning and got her released. I had no choice. She's free till the case goes before a county grand jury."

"A lawyer? Where did she go?"

"Back to her apartment, I suppose. Didn't she call you?"

"Come on, Sheriff. We have to find her."

"What's goin' on?"

"I'll tell you on the way. We'll take my car."

As I drove the Mercedes down Main Street and told the sheriff of my phone call to Radcliffe, I had the feeling of events closing in on me. It wasn't just the glowering sky, which might be hinting at another thunderstorm later in the day, but a terrible urgency that I sensed but couldn't explain. Then, as we came in sight of May's apartment over the drugstore, I saw the familiar yellow Duesenberg round the corner like an animal breaking from cover. May was at the wheel. She gave a startled backward glance at us and floored the accelerator.

"Hang on, Sheriff!" I shouted.

"Where's she goin'?"

"We'll find out."

The Duesenberg streaked down Main Street, gathering speed as it went. I stayed close behind, gradually narrowing the gap between us. Once we hit the county road outside of town I saw my opportunity to pull alongside her, but as I did she turned her head toward me, a wild look in her eyes, and swerved violently to the left.

"She's mad!" Sheriff Lens shouted. "She's trying to ram us!"

She was, and a sudden jolt and scrape of metal told me she'd succeeded. My Mercedes shuddered and almost left the road. I picked up speed, passing her and trying to cut her off. That was a mistake. She slammed the Duesenberg into me broadside, almost tipping us over. With steam coming from the radiator, Sheriff Lens and I jumped out. May backed up about fifty feet and I thought she was going to drive around us. It was the sheriff who first realized her true intent. "Doc, she's tryin' to kill us!"

The Duesenberg came straight at me, picking up speed. I tried to run, but the stalled Mercedes had me penned in. I saw the face of a madwoman bearing down on me and thought it would be the last thing I ever saw.

Then Sheriff Lens fired his revolver and the Duesenberg's windshield shattered under the impact of the bullet.

I heard a terrible scream as the car went out of control, barely

missing me, clipping the rear fender of the Mercedes and smashing head-on into a tree.

Then we were both running toward the car. The sheriff still had his gun out, but it was clear he wouldn't need it. There was blood everywhere, and when I listened for a heartbeat I knew it was already too late.

"There's your murderer, Sheriff," I told him. "But there won't be any trial now."

"It was May Russo, after all! But why, Doc? And how did she manage to do it?"

"Not May Russo," I corrected him. "This is her twin brother, and you had him locked up for the past month without knowing it."

We found May back at her apartment, tied to the bed and gagged. As soon as she was free she asked me, "Where's Martin?"

"Is that your brother?"

She nodded. "I should have told you about him."

We told her what had happened and she cried a little, but not much.

"He killed your parents, didn't he?"

She nodded, wiping her eyes. "I didn't know for sure until Hank Foster was killed. The crimes were too similar to be a coincidence. That's why I was so upset. When he got out of jail, he came to see me and I happened to mention fainting when I saw the Fosters' thunder room because it reminded me of our parents' murder. He went out there during the storm and it was the first crime all over again. That's when I knew."

"He was dressed in your clothes."

"I can't explain it," she said, shaking her head. "I know now that he was terribly sick."

"What's all this about him bein' in my jail?" Sheriff Lens demanded.

May sighed. "I was driving through here with Martin a month ago when we had our accident. He was acting crazy that day, trying to grab the wheel from me, when I went into the ditch—"

"You said you were distracted," I pointed out, "but you never explained it further. You also said you lost some of your clothes in the accident. I wondered how that was possible. There was no fire and little damage to the car. How would you lose clothes under those circumstances unless they were stolen?"

She nodded. "After we went into the ditch, he grabbed one of my

suitcases and ran off into the woods. He had a couple of shirts in there, but they were mostly my things. I suppose he ran away because he thought I'd be angry about the accident. And I was—it was all his fault."

I interrupted to take up the story. "May denied having a twin sister but she never mentioned a brother. I knew she had one because she'd told April about him. During the chase this morning, when I saw how May was handling the car she loved so much, slamming it into mine, I was certain of one thing—this wasn't the May I knew. Either it was a different personality or an entirely different person. A split personality didn't explain how she could be in two places at once, but two different persons explained everything. Both May and the woman I phoned in Cambridge assured me she had no twin sister, but what about that brother? Could he be a twin?

"I thought about the month between her arrival and Hank Foster's murder and tried to remember if I'd seen anyone resembling her. He had to be short, of course, with long blonde hair—because Bruna Foster told us she'd yanked at the hair and it wasn't a wig."

Sheriff Lens snapped his fingers. "That hobo I released the day you were at my office!"

"Exactly. He also had a beard at the time, so I didn't realize he looked like May. You probably arrested him in the first place because of his long hair and beard."

"He looked like a bum to me. He sure didn't belong around here."

"He had a suitcase with him that you had to return when you let him go after four weeks. I don't know too many hobos that lug suitcases around with them."

"He came to see me when you let him go," May said. "I thought he'd been gone for weeks. I asked about the suitcase but he said he'd lost it. You probably noticed how edgy I was all week after seeing him, Dr. Sam. Then when I heard about the Foster killing, it was all clear to me—he'd murdered our parents and now he'd acted out the crime again. But I just couldn't say anything."

"Everything fit," I told her. "Without the beard, he looked like you, and Bruna said the killer never spoke. She wasn't lying—she really thought he was you."

She nodded and waited until she could find her voice again. "He called a lawyer to get me released this morning and he was waiting at my apartment. He was wearing one of my dresses. It was insane. When I tried to reason with him, to tell him he needed medical help, he tied me up and took the car."

"It's a wonder he didn't kill you, too," Sheriff Lens said.

"I don't think so," May told him, the tears spilling over. "It would have been like killing himself."

"I hoped that May's nightmares about her parents' deaths were over for good," Dr. Sam concluded, "but she decided to return to Boston for psychiatric help, anyway. I was sorry to see her go.

"The following Christmas, she wrote me she was feeling well and had met a nice young man. Her Duesenberg was beyond repair, but Rex fixed my Mercedes up as good as new. That still left me without a nurse, but I found another and her name wasn't June. Next time I'll tell you how she helped solve a mystery that really had me stumped."

## DETECTIVERSE

*OUR FAVORITE PHYSICIAN*

*by RICK LOVECCHIO*

Dr. Sam once prescribed medication,
Though these days it's "a little libation"—
He's really quite handy
At pouring the brandy,
Yet his tales never lead to sedation.

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

**ROBERT TWOHY**

*Two months ago the girl had jumped into Dorrity's head and thoughts of the railroad tracks went away. Why did she suddenly get special? Timing, maybe. His gears started slipping, his mind reached out for something to grab, and there she was, lightly bouncing along. All he knew or cared was that he saw her and, zing, went the strings, like the old song said, and* click.

*A new story from the popular Robert Twohy that is unusual, as all his stories are, and sensitive, as all his stories are, and devastating . . .*

# SNAPSHOTS

***by ROBERT TWOHY***

Moping along up Howell, Dorrity spots her across the street—frilly pink shirt, worn jeans, sandals. He squeezes his eyes tight for a split second. *Click*—

She's level with him, past. He doesn't turn, keeps moping along. She or nobody else would guess he's just snapped her.

The pic, printed and sized up to $3 \times 5''$, drops on the stack in his head, various distances and lighting, various Goodwill-type outfits, on various streets around town. When alone on his back porch, he gets them out and goes through them.

Which means he's probably slipping some gears. Which he'll accept as it ties in with another probable—that if not for his pictures, he'd be long gone by now.

A couple of months ago, the idea he kept going over was how one night soon he'd put on dark clothes and walk up to the SP tracks, sit facing south, and wait for the 10:22 southbound freight, which after one horrible moment would put him through reality and out

the other side, into wherever or nowhere—he thought it was time he found out.

Two months ago, she jumped into his head and thoughts of the tracks went away.

If he saw her before two months ago, she was just one of a lot of street girls around town he'd glance at and in two seconds forget. She's pretty, but a lot of them are. She's got round cheeks, wide-apart blue eyes, walks with a little bounce—others are bouncier.

Why'd she get suddenly special? Timing, maybe. His gears started slipping, his mind reached out for something to grab, and there she was, lightly bouncing along.

All he knows or cares is that he sees her and, zing, go the strings, like the old song says, and *click*.

Later that afternoon he's in the camp chair on the deck behind his cruddy little apartment, starting his fourth beer, which after two hits he sets down, knowing he's just where he should be.

Stretching out on the canvas mat with his head on the hunk of sponge rubber, he folds his hands on his stomach and starts sifting pictures, looking for the Special for today.

One day it's one, another another. Some days it's none. He never knows till he gets to it, or doesn't.

He looks at five, six, lays them aside. Now he's holding a rear shot, her in dark slacks and a blue-striped man's shirt, up by the barbershop on Lofton—and comes the tingle he's waiting for.

Her off foot's a little up. It comes down, left leg swings through, she's on the move—turns her head, smiles, puts out her hand. He comes to her and they're not on Lofton, but standing, him holding her, in a black place whirly with stars and bright whippy streaks—whirling slows, settling to deep blue, then light blue, lighter—

Across sloping fields are grazing sheep, cattle. Sun through elm leaves puts shadow patterns on her near cheek. Blue eye up close has flicks of green, brown. She smiles and they talk, and don't talk because there's nothing to say that their eyes and clasped hands aren't saying. Words won't add anything.

After a while they stop, gaze around. The light breeze lifts her clean brown hair. They listen to country sounds, birds, tiny things scratching in the grass at their feet. A cow softly complains about horseflies. Dorrity turns and puts his arms around the girl and his face to hers—

And that's it. He'll risk no more and wants no more of her than that.

Sex was never his game. Like baseball wasn't.

His father wanted him to try out for the high-school team. That was in Montana. His father had had a short whirl in the minors and hoped his son had the bug in his genes.

A few times in practice Dorrity got a hit, or made a half decent throw. Mostly, he waved at or took three, or popped up, and a high fly coming at him was 50-50.

Coach Brunk said, "You're a good kid, but you got no natural talent and you don't get any better."

A little later came young men's urges, but just when a situation seemed to be working into something, it would peter out, or go sour. He'd hear the coach's comment inside his head, or sometimes said out loud, in about the same words, by a girl.

He got older. Nothing changed particularly. He'd follow the urges to the usual windup. Now and then he'd get a fluke hit, but mostly not.

Booze was no help—the opposite—but he stuck with it as it was the quick way out of reality.

Sex became a game that he'd rather shoot 8-Ball, which he got fairly good at, learning to set up and stroke through, not worrying or getting confused or scared, because he knew what he was doing. And after a game, win or lose, came no mean cracks or sneery laughter.

—Which he'll never hear from his love, as hand in hand they walk the lane, the light breeze riffling her fine brown hair.

Some days his mood's low, or he's put down too much beer or too fast, or some bad memory pushes in. The tingle doesn't come and he doesn't leave the porch.

But even those days he can hope that next day will be just right for travel. Some next days aren't, but once in a while one is, and he's in the whirly black place holding her, and then they're walking the lane.

Thoughts of the SP tracks stay away. He can bring them back if he has to, but right now, in his fifty-first summer, he's about as content with his life as he's been since baseball failed him, and he it—and his father.

May becomes June. Sometimes he doesn't see her for a few days, or a week—then he does. And, zing—and if he has a good angle, *click* . . .

He's in Lucky, on Chaplin, and she's next ahead in the checkout line. This is the longest by far he's stood this close. He keeps cool, gazes around his usual half-mast way, in passing getting quick views of light-brown hair on her neck. Today she wears a green T-shirt, ragged grey cutoffs, yellow rubber shoes. Stepping ahead, she turns at the counter and there's not a lot of her up front but just right for her.

His eyes slide up to round cheeks with a few freckles he's not seen close before, tilty nose with same, blue eyes with flicks of other colors, no makeup as always, soft-firm lips, round chin, a flat silver earring with a round dot of green glass—*click*.

He looks down at the counter guy's hands putting her stuff into a plastic sack, which her small hands grab and heft as she turns her trim rear and swings out beyond the counter, moving to a narrow-faced young guy with a skinny dark beard at the magazine rack flipping through a sex magazine. She hands him the sack and they go out together, as the counter guy checks off Dorrity's two six-packs, bread, coffee, smokes, and canned swill.

She's a street girl and maybe in real life shacks with the thin lad, which so what to Dorrity? Not a damn thing. Real life for her is like for him—the place she's glad to step out of, to walk the elmy lane.

He knows that that notion is part of the fantasy, a necessary part, as all its parts are, all working together. If one part goes, it all collapses. Fantasies are fragile. Reality wipes them out when it can.

A week after Lucky, he's at the SP depot waiting for Breedwood and his dim cousin or son or whoever he is. Breedwood is *Breedwood's Janitorial Service* in stupid droopy white letters on the side of his black van. From 9:00 P.M. till dawn or so, they clean up slop and garbage at various offices, bars, and restaurants around town.

Gazing across State Street, Dorrity sees a battered yellow Pinto wagon slide into a space near The Ostrich. From the door his side, she jumps, jeans, yellow sweater, and green bandana. The slim kid lopes around the car and they go into the O.

Dorrity went in there once out of curiosity, but saw they weren't hot for shabby little guys way past thirty—unless dealers, probably. He was never into dope except from a bottle. He drinks at the working-men's dumps with pool tables, though hardly at all the past two months, preferring his drinks on the back deck alone, then stretching out on the mat.

Probably in the O she does dope like the rest there—sometimes getting loud and ugly maybe, which he wants no view of, as one

really disgusting shot could wipe out his whole collection. He'd go through it and overlaying each pic would be the one lousy shot.

He'll never go in the O. Even if not seeing her for a while and longing for a look, he won't look in the O. He might find her like he doesn't want her. Fantasies are fragile.

A week later he's jammed against the van door, Breedwood's and the kid's fat butts giving him about six inches of seat.

Breedwood shortcuts through Grace Street near the freeway and Dorrity sees the beat-up yellow Pinto in the drive of a shabby house like others on the block. Rent's high for any house in the north Peninsula, so the slim dude must have a good job, electrician or like that. Or maybe another couple shares the house with him and the girl.

What's it to Dorrity? Nothing, as long as he never gets a bad shot of her in her real life.

The house makes him think of a house near the lane, trim and neat, warm old furniture, she coming from the kitchen with two mugs of coffee or hot brandy or chocolate, and they're on the couch with rain lashing the windows, fire in the roughstone fireplace crackling and shooting sparks into the screen—

*"Hey, numbnut, come to!"*

He springs from the couch and is jammed in the van with Breedwood's hog face leering around the moron. They're pulled up behind the bowling alley, which is next stop on tonight's round.

Breedwood sneers how Dorrity doped off twice last night, and he don't give a rat's foot how soused he gets on his own time but when it lops into *his* time that's another story, with maybe an unhappy ending—does Dorrity get his drift? The moron giggles.

June gets older. He spots the girl here and there, sometimes alone or with a freak either sex, or combinations—but mostly with the slim lad with the beard, in the Pinto or walking. When she's alone and looking good and he has a clear shot, he snaps her.

She steps from a photo and he takes her hand, and sometimes it's sunlight in the lane, but more often now it's night and storming and they're on the couch in the firelight.

The snug little house he made from a memory or an old picture or imagination, stocking it with good old furniture from the same source or sources. Overhead beams gleam in the glow from the rug-

ged stone fireplace, with old brass fixings also gleaming as the flames dance and the wind sighs and rain slashes the windows.

They sip their hot drinks and she leans against him and he holds her and kisses her occasionally and that's all. Words aren't needed and no more of her than he has does he want.

In an angled space at the Bestbuy Drug lot up Howell is a long, silver-blue Buick with on the passenger side a woman with black wavy hair. The window is down on the warm night. She has silver eyelids and thick black lashes and her skin glows waxy gold in the neon from the building. Her lips are a purple slash and the tinsely greenish blouse is cut low. Slightly showing through curls is a flat silver earring with a dot of green.

She turns to glance at the small seedy guy coming up the walk fronting the line of parked cars, and seeing nothing worth seeing drifts her glance on. The little guy poops past and into Bestbuy.

Just inside, he stops still and grabs his forehead because it's like a chisel suddenly split down behind his eyes.

After a few seconds, the shock passes and he's woozy but not going to go down. He stands rubbing his forehead and realizes he's blinking and watering. A nice-looking woman looking at him says softly, "Are you all right?"

Muttering something, on legs not too steady he moves from her into the liquor corner of the store, where he stands squeezing his nose bridge and blinking around.

A few customers are pondering bottles on shelves or pulling bottles or six-packs from the coolers. A short fat man in a blue-checked jacket and pink-checked slacks is studying the Scotch layout. He's got orange hair and a good layer of tan paint on his face, though his ears stick out white and foolish—he'd forgot them. He's Dorrity's age or more, and wrong if he thinks orange rinse and tan paint will hide that, though maybe that's not the point he's trying to make. Maybe it's that he's still a player in the game of sex, with the money to play.

He's a fat sport in a clown suit who drives a long, silver-blue Buick, in which lolls a sleek young whore, awaiting his pleasure.

Maybe tonight she had a row with the slim guy, him stamping out and piling into the Pinto and off and away. And, muttering that she'd show him, she broke out the makeup and the Liz Taylor wig and the low-cut blouse and a tight skirt to go with, and called a cab to one of the bars where girls go single for aging sex-game players

to buy them drinks and make clear they have the money and the yen. And shortly she tripped out and climbed into the Buick, which pulled into Bestbuy for Scotch to oil their action at one of the sleeker motels.

Or maybe she and the boy *hadn't* fought—maybe this was her regular routine to help meet the steep rent, him aiding and abetting.

Which doesn't matter. What matters is what tonight's view of her, wigged and whored up, will do to his photo collection.

The chisel hits him again, harder. He goes back against the wall.

The slamming shock tones down. He's able to blow a sigh and know he's still on his feet, leaning on the wall and squeezing his head.

He sees a bony-looking, naked white chimney sticking out of a soggy grey heap of rubble, cold rain pounding. Tracks run near. A small shape crouches facing south. From north of the ruined house sounds a far-off whistle.

He can sit with his back to the horrible moment or jump and run to it and take it in his face right now, and find out what's on the other side.

Jumping up, he runs down the tracks toward the whistle, rain pounding.

To his left, a sign says KITCHENWARE and he spots something which he rips from its plastic card and has in his fist.

Tracks turn right and he runs to a gate that opens only toward him—but he runs into it and it gives, and the track runs clear to glass doors. A man's coming his way, but he raises his fist and the man jumps to the side and he's at a glass door, which flies open and he's through it and out.

Sauntering beside the track is an orange-haired man who's nothing to Dorrity, who runs by him. The tracks curve around the nose of a blue car to an open window and he knows the moment is here and now.

The woman doesn't move. Maybe she freezes—maybe her quick glimpse of the little man running at her got tangled in the thick lashes, didn't get beyond. She sits unmoving as his fist swings in, aimed just under the whore's mask, which is a view not yet printed or sized—not yet in with his collection.

He's cool like in 8-Ball—focus on his target and stroke through.

Red—thick, warm red. The moment is red, as should be.

Bottom of his fist lies against red throat. He slides it hard to the side.

Reality falls off the knife, and the mask lies up to him on the seatback. Putting the point on the top right corner, he pulls down and across, then from top left corner down and across.

Shouts sound behind and around him. He puts the point at the far edge of the mask and pulls straight across. Moving up an inch, he strokes back across.

Red is the color, red is the moment. It's over. He's through it and on the other side.

Stepping away, he turns and sees faces twisted and bunched as people shout and cry out. The mood seems to be a mix of rage and fright. Hands make grabbing motions, but nobody runs at him—they stay back, twisting their faces at him and making their sounds.

His legs give out. He's sitting on the cement, looking around with a puzzled smile—small man with a bloody knife, blood all over him.

He's in a white room. A man's on a white chair, Dorrity's in a cot with a white table by it.

The man asks, "Why? You didn't even know her, it seems. And why after cutting her throat did you slash her face?"

It's so obvious he has to smile. The man wants words, a string of them, by which slowly and carefully he can pull Dorrity back.

Dorrity smiles and gives him no words.

After a while, he's alone. He lies back, stretches out, folds his hands, and goes through his photos, coming to the one of her at the checkout stand at Lucky on Chaplin, in profile, closeup shot—scatter of freckles, no makeup as always, silver earring with round dot of green. Comes the tingle.

She turns to him, smiles, steps out beyond the counter, turns and waits, a hand out to him.

A slim young guy with a thin beard has started toward her but stops as Dorrity takes her hand. They walk from the market into the whirling black place with stars and streaks and flashes, steadying and softening to dark blue, turning lighter.

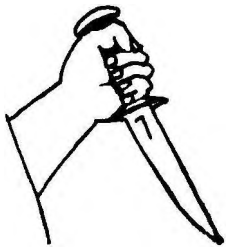
They're on the couch, sipping from their mugs. They don't talk because there's no point when they have all they want together without words.

Somewhere way off sounds a whistle—but no track runs near. So it's a sound from the past, where if he gives them no words they can't pull him back.

The faint sound cuts off. All he hears now is the sigh of the wind

and the beat of rain as she leans to him. He holds her and they watch the flames dance, now and then a spark darting into the screen.

Tomorrow will be clear and sparkly as they walk the lane.



## DETECTIVERSE

*DEATH IMITATES ART*

*by ANDREW J. BURTON*

When writing a verse for *Ellery Queen*
On how to kill your spouse,
I wasn't ready for the scene
It raised around my house.
And so although my little poem
Was written quite in jest,
I found, when all was said and done,
Its method was the best—
And though I quarreled with my wife,
She really did her part,
For in the end she gave her life
To validate my art.

*After reading "Roadhouse Doll," which begins on the opposite page, we wrote the author to ask if the story qualified for our Department of First Stories (that is, would it represent his first professionally published fiction?) and also if he would object to our deleting the geographical reference in paragraph 2 (we didn't want to put down the Ozarks). To which we received such a delightful reply, we want to share it with you.*

*"Unless I misunderstand your Department of Firsts, I'm twenty-four years too late to qualify. In May 1963, a long-since-defunct men's magazine called* Topper *published my first short story, 'My Shower Runneth Over.'*

*"Over the years I've had fiction in a variety of men's magazines, as well as in such small magazines as* Phoebe, Cimarron Review, San Jose Studies, *and* Maelstrom. *About a dozen years ago,* Analog *purchased a s.f. crime story from me—'The Perfect Cop.' And I am one of countless American writers who once wrote a Nick Carter. In my case, it was* The Z Document, *published in the mid-Seventies as #101 in the series when Award still had the titles.*

*"In real life, which occurs before the cocktail hour and my study or between weekends and my study, I'm Associate Dean of Humanistic Studies for Harford Community College in Maryland. This is a fancy way of saying I head up a conglomerate of disciplines and was once a teacher. During my full-time teaching days, I invented and taught a special course in crime and detective fiction. Now I occasionally teach creative writing and write creative memos in search of a bigger budget.*

*"I don't mind the change on page 1 that you propose, but I must rush to say that I never meant to put down the Ozarks. I was born in Joplin, Missouri. Benny's is based on a roadhouse across U.S. 71 and the KCS mainline from a farm on which I once lived south of Anderson and north of Lanagan, Missouri. I spent four years in the Navy and investigated dives halfway around the world. As an old Ozark boy, I reckon our roadhouses were and are the meanest in the world.*

*"Thanks for reading and buying."*

*Thank you, Dean Morris, for writing and sending. And your reference to the Ozarks stays . . .*

# ROADHOUSE DOLL

## *by H. H. MORRIS*

An old song calls women such as Frieda honkytonk angels. In our neck of the woods, we call them roadhouse dolls. And everyone knows that sooner or later the better-looking dolls are going to attract the proprietary interests of roadhouse rats. Frieda made every man who stared at her think of XXX tapes by mail order or a trip to Las Vegas. That made her trouble.

As senior deputy in southwestern Tarbut County—three of us patrol the area—I see my share of roadhouse trouble. I suppose other parts of the nation have roadhouses, but I don't think there's anything quite like an Ozark one. They generally sit on a piece of flat land too rocky to farm and right on a paved road. No matter how big the hall, a smart owner makes sure that his gravel lot would hold cars for twenty percent more patrons than he can cram into the building. He also makes sure the parking lot has some poorly lit areas so the patrons have an area in which to settle personal and philosophical differences with feet and fists. In addition, those areas provide working privacy for enterprising ladies with access to pickup beds.

Benny's Club is typical. It sits at the bottom of a bluff on a piece of rocky land just above the floodplain. Benny, the proprietor, and I have a pleasant understanding. I overlook various minor crimes—fighting, prostitution, underage boozing—and he and his waitresses serve as snitches. It's because Benny is my snitch that I wasn't surprised to see him scared in the middle of a hot, hot summer. For all I knew, he'd snitched on the wrong man.

"Do you know Frieda McGee?" he asked me.

"Yeah. She's a beauty."

"Clyde Franks has laid claim to her."

I said, "That figures. The meanest roadhouse rat in the county should own the prettiest roadhouse doll."

"Uh—you know Clyde."

"Are you trying to file a complaint about him, Benny?"

"Oh, no," he assured me. "I don't want to get burnt out."

A little tingle of warning ran through me. Like most rural areas, Tarbut County has occasional barn burners. Just a couple of years earlier, a farmer had shot one. Four times with a .12 gauge—three in the back, one behind the right ear. I investigated. It looked like a messy suicide to me.

The sheriff said that was the most brilliant piece of detecting he'd seen during his lifetime in office and the D.A. bought me two of the biggest bottles of expensive whiskey he could find. Like I said—or meant to say—we don't think much of people who settle quarrels with matches around here.

But we know who they are. That's the whole point. A barn burner gets his way not so much by burning down a lot of barns as by being known as the kind of man who will settle a dispute with arson. We call guys like Clyde roadhouse rats because there's nothing dirtier in a fight than a cornered rat. Rats also like garbage—and gals such as Frieda are garbage, right down to the diseases they carry. But rats will go a long, long way around to stay away from a fire.

"Spit out what's bothering you, Benny," I said.

"Frieda ain't cheap."

"Depends on how you use that word."

"Yeah," he said, giving me the man-to-man laugh that either leads up to smut or prefaces a remark that, if a woman made it, would be gossip, "that Frieda ain't no better than she oughta be, as my grandmother would have said. And what that really meant—"

"All our grandmothers used them phrases," I told Benny. "Get to the point."

"Clyde can't afford Frieda."

"So is she complaining?"

"Not so long as Clyde can afford her. Which he can."

"Benny," I said, my temper beginning to go, "talk sense."

"Refresh my memory. Is Clyde holler?"

"His whole family comes from Mitchum's Holler."

"Nowadays Clyde has three city friends with lots and lots of money," Benny told me. "That's why Frieda isn't complaining. What does *Clyde* have worth money?"

"You made your point, Benny. And if anyone asks, you didn't tell me a thing I couldn't observe for myself."

The sheriff said no one from Mitchum's Holler had ever contributed a single cent to the Police Welfare Fund or the Candidates' Re-

election Kitty. He also said he'd call the D.E.A. and the highway patrol.

"Why Feds and State?" I asked him.

"You gonna tell me Clyde and the rest of the world don't know Benny and his girls are your snitches? You make this arrest, you finger your people."

"You're right, Sheriff. I know nothing."

When I was a boy, men living back in the hollers sometimes mixed grain and time and other ingredients to make a potent whiskey. Most of those guys are dead—either of lead poisoning from their own stills or diseases caught in Federal prisons. Their sons and grandsons don't work nearly so hard at breaking the law. They let God grow the marijuana. Then they harvest it and sell it to city boys.

If they just sell it to city boys, no one around these parts is likely to object. Except for some preachers. And preachers make their living by objecting. So when Benny found it worth reporting in his roundabout way, what he really meant was that Clyde was as dumb as they come. He was letting some of that happy weed stay in Tarbut County and using Benny's Club to do his dealing. Clyde should have stuck with manual labor and roadhouse-rat crimes.

Then Frieda turned up in my little office and said, "I been raped."

"Careful, lady. No false reports. Failure to meet an illegal contract ain't a crime. It may be a sin, but it isn't actionable, Frieda."

"I don't know what that means. Unless you talked to Clyde."

"What about him?" I asked her.

"He gives me to his friends. That's rape."

"If both of you are getting the money, that's pimping. If you're being forced, it sure could be rape, Frieda. You ready to file the formal complaint?"

"I don't want my name used."

"Don't waste my time," I told her.

The bust went off with no County law present. The deal was to protect Benny and his employees. So the Feds told anyone who'd listen that they thought they'd found a drug supermarket and that there was a law which would let them confiscate Benny's Club. The State boys got into the act by making noises about liquor licenses not going to those of questionable morals and ethics. They weren't just covering Benny because he was my snitch. They owed the sheriff all the work they hadn't had to do, and the sheriff had loyalty toward

people such as Benny, who was very reliable whenever the Police Welfare Fund or the Candidates' Re-election Kitty ran short of funds.

Frieda felt left out. The arresting officers determined quickly that she wasn't a queenpin of the drug business and didn't waste time charging her. That made her come back to me to request protection.

"Those guys know I came to see you," she said.

"Which guys?"

"The city fellers. Clyde's friends. They think I snitched."

"You mean the buyers," I said.

"Those damn rapists."

"You ready to swear out a complaint?"

"They'll kill me," she said.

Frieda tried crying, aiming for my shirt. I moved aside and gave her a box of tissues. They were disposable. The way she was leaking tears I'd have had to change my shirt in the middle of my shift.

"Are all you men like Clyde?" she asked me.

"That depends on what you're talking about."

"Do you think a man has the right to give his woman to his friends as a sex toy?"

"Only if she consents," I said.

"I didn't get no chance to say yes or no. Clyde just told me to go with them and that he'd better not hear no complaints about my being unfriendly or frigid."

"You can file a complaint against Clyde, Frieda."

"You must want me dead," she charged.

Having failed to win sympathy with the waterworks, Frieda turned on the sex appeal. It was a hot day. She hadn't exactly dressed for church. She didn't have much trouble making sure I saw her equipment clearly. And all the time she told me exactly what the three city guys had made her do to please them. I had to admit it was kind of shocking. It was real advanced perversion by local standards.

"And that's when we were all *friends*. There's no telling what they'll do to me now that they think I snitched," she said.

"So don't go back to Clyde."

"I don't have noplace else to go."

"Home?" I asked.

"I ain't welcome there. You can make it right. You can tell Clyde I didn't tell you about the drugs."

"Sure I can. He won't believe me."

"Damn it! I don't want to get killed because someone else snitched

to you and I got seen coming to your office and Clyde and his buddies put two and two together wrong!"

What she really wanted me to do was tell her that Benny had talked. She was even ready to go so far she'd pretend I was a very special boy friend. I refused—and not too politely. Just talking to her made me afraid I'd catch something the doctors couldn't cure.

The city boys got tried elsewhere. Clyde and Frieda just disappeared. The sheriff didn't think it was worth risking men to flush out Mitchum's Holler. Benny said he missed Frieda.

"There's no charge against her," I told him. "She can be a roadhouse doll in your roadhouse any day she chooses."

"Why was she so scared?"

"Did she talk to you?"

"Yeah," he said. "She wanted to know what had gone wrong."

"I don't suppose you told her you turned Clyde and his buddies in."

"I came close. You know Frieda. She's pretty as an angel. She's just a good girl gone bad. I came awful close to telling her because she seemed so scared of Clyde."

I said, "She had the ability to get that fear across."

"Then she did go see you?"

"Twice."

"Why didn't you try to save her?" Benny asked me. "She's such a pretty little angel."

"Benny, Frieda had to save herself. She didn't want to."

"She tried. She came to you."

"And to you," I said. "I don't know if that means the protection took or if it means just the opposite."

"Huh?"

"Benny, I refused to give Frieda the one proof she could offer to Clyde and his friends that she wasn't my snitch. Your name, Benny. She was willing to give me pleasures I can't even spell or pronounce just to get that name for Clyde. Now I wonder why that roadhouse rat wanted your name."

Benny quit calling her an angel—fallen, honky-tonk, or otherwise.

"Q"

**a *NEW* Peckinpaugh story by**

**ERNEST SAVAGE**

*The Coroner's verdict had been death by self-inflicted wound. Peck gazed up at the ceiling, full of doubt, picturing Charley as he'd seen him last, three weeks ago, hale and hearty. "No!" he said . . .*

# THE SUICIDE THEORY

***by ERNEST SAVAGE***

I had just sat down at my desk, fresh in from a sixteen-day vacation and full of zeal, when Phil Benton, coming up from downstairs, entered the squad room and said, "Welcome back, Peck. I see you're in early."

It was 7:20 on a Tuesday morning and I was alone, a bunch of folders to go through. In fact, I'd wanted to be alone for a while. I said, "What's that thing in your hand, Phil?"

"A copy of a letter that came in yesterday afternoon." He set an $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ sheet of paper on top of the folders. "The original's downstairs," he said, "and the guys checked it for prints last night, but found none, not a single one. It was mailed yesterday here in the city, postmarked 10:15 A.M. But, hey, maybe you haven't heard about Charley Haight."

"What about him?"

"Read it," he said.

It was a short typed message, carefully centered on the plain paper, no letterhead. It read: "Charles Haight did *not* commit suicide. He was murdered by a man he put in jail eight or nine years ago who was recently released."

I frowned, shocked and unbelieving. "Is Charley Haight dead?"

Phil nodded. "Last week."

"Suicide?"

"I guess somebody doesn't think so, do they, Peck?"

I leaned back in my chair, the shock taking hold, the high I'd come in with suddenly gone. Charley'd been a friend of mine, a good man, and a damn good D.A.

"Nothing to come back to, is it?" Phil said, and turned to leave.

"No, it isn't."

"I'm sorry, Peck. We all are."

I found the Haight file on Escalera's desk, which abuts and faces mine in the cramped room. Charles Evans Haight, age fifty-eight, had been the Clausen County D.A. for thirteen years. He'd been found last Tuesday morning—almost exactly one week ago—dead in his car in his garage. He'd placed the muzzle of his licensed .38-caliber Smith & Wesson in his mouth and fired a bullet through his brain. All doors and windows in the garage were closed, the motor of his Lincoln Continental still running in neutral, all its windows open. The body had been discovered at 7:45 A.M. by the man who'd come to cut the lawn. There was no suicide note in the car, in the house, or in Haight's office, and testimony as to his mental state just prior to the event was conflicting.

Monday evening he'd attended a lengthy Chamber of Commerce meeting and some said he'd been his normal affable self, while others said he hadn't—the usual thing. But William Fencer, the chief deputy D.A. in charge of the Oasis City office that serves the eastern, desert end of the county, was quoted as follows:

"There was this Oasis City man a couple of months ago who did just what Charley did, put a bullet through his head. But he didn't die, he turned himself into a cabbage instead. Charley said at the time that if he were ever to try suicide—and it makes me wonder now, you can bet—he'd put a gun in his mouth and fire, but he'd do it in his car in a closed garage with the motor on to insure death by carbon-monoxide poisoning in case the bullet didn't do the job."

The Coroner's verdict had been death by self-inflicted wound. And I gazed up at the ceiling, full of doubt, agreeing with the terse note on my desk, picturing Charley as I'd seen him last, three weeks ago, hale and hearty.

I said, "No!" out loud but there was no one there to hear.

The verdict on Thursday afternoon had brought the investigation to a close, but there was more to read in the file. Haight's widow,

Dolores, had been in Las Vegas at the time of her husband's death. She was his second wife, his first having died years ago, and they'd been married just eighteen months. I'd never met or seen her—she was something of a recluse—but had heard she was a former model out of Los Angeles, and read now her age: thirty-two, a full generation younger than Charley. But Escalera's sketchy and incomplete report had made no comment about that.

I sighed, mourning the man, feeling the loss, remembering times spent with him, cases we'd won, games we'd played, his big bluff laugh, his tenacious base-line stands at the tennis court. "Hey! So you're back," Luis said, and I swiveled in my chair.

He was standing in the doorway, his fierce Mestizo face made gentle with a smile. I grinned, feeling suddenly better. "Yeah," I said, "and here I am already hard at work. Example to the force."

"What force? Me, you mean." He shook my hand limply, a habit he couldn't seem to break, but my spirits rose at the touch.

Now he said, the smile gone, "You hear about Charley Haight?"

"Just now. Phil brought this up for us to deal with." I pointed at the note and Luis bent over my desk to read it.

"Oh, boy," he said.

"Oh, boy, what?"

"It *wasn't* suicide. One of Charley's front teeth was busted off, Peck. The guy wouldn't shove the gun in his mouth hard enough to bust a tooth. Would he?"

"What did the Coroner say about that?"

"He said a guy could—but you know McVey. Impulse, he said. Nerves. Haight gets himself all set, garage closed, motor on, gun in his hand, ready to go—you read that part yet?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. McVey says Haight's still undecided, all tensed up. Then he tells himself, 'Let's do her,' whips the gun up to his mouth, and fires before he even knows he busted a tooth."

"Could be, Luis."

"Not likely, though, is it? I never heard of such a thing before—have you?"

"No, but it still could be, particularly in view of what Fencer said about the Oasis City man, the cabbage. But what does Wells say—and where is he, by the way? I've never beaten him in here yet."

"Wells agrees with McVey—but his mind wasn't on his work last

week. He's in the hospital, Peck. Gonna have his gall bladder out this morning, probably under the knife right this minute."

I shook my head. "A man leaves town for a few days and the whole place goes to hell. Gall bladder, huh? He never mentioned that."

"Well, you know him. Anyway, he waited until he knew you'd be back." Luis grinned. "He says you're in charge now."

"In charge of what, Luis—you?"

Lieutenant Wells and Luis had responded to the call last Tuesday morning and found a clear picture of suicide. Except, as Luis had argued at the time, the busted tooth. But Wells, forty-three years a Clausen cop and head of its three-man homicide force, was all arrogant gringo when alone with Luis and hadn't let him press the point.

Too bad you weren't here, Luis said, and maybe he was right. Wells' many biases don't affect me, and I wouldn't have bought the suicide theory in any case. I knew Charley too well. Anyway, McVey, never one to accept the obvious, had questioned Mrs. Haight closely, and she, testifying through tears, seemed bewildered and could offer no reason for the act. So Fencer's testimony won the day.

I sat wondering why I hadn't heard about the cabbage-man case. But Oasis City is fifty miles east of here and full of crazy millionaires, a totally different world. Luis had gone downstairs to get somebody started on the D.A.'s case files and to pick up the envelope the note had come in. The first shock of the message had worn off and the implications were beginning to emerge.

"Insurance," I said to him when he got back.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

"How much did Charley carry and how old is it?"

"I don't know. The point never got raised at the hearing and, like I told you, boss, I got called off the case almost right away." He glanced at the wall clock, which read 8:35. "But I can call Harry Jenkins about now and probably find out. Harry was with the widow at the hearing, like a good lawyer should be."

"In three words, tell me about her."

"Tall. Thin. Bent-shouldered."

"Three more."

"Sad. Throaty-voiced. Beautiful."

"But she didn't push for the suicide theory?"

"*Al contrario, Jefe,* she resisted it."

"Call Harry."

I sighed again—post-vacation triste and mourning for a friend, both. I could phone McVey, who doubled in our undermanned county civil-service corps as both M.E. and Coroner, but didn't. I could call the hospital to find out if Wells had survived the knife, but didn't do that, either, not really worried about him. He would die at that desk of his, visible through the open door of his office. That is where he mostly lived, doing the job that'd kill him. It had taken his hair, most of his teeth, the best part of his stomach, the arches in his feet, and now his gall bladder. Your future, too, Peckinpaugh, he had promised me more than once as crime burgeoned in our formerly small and semi-tranquil town.

Luis hung up the phone. "Two policies," he said. "A twenty-year-old one for fifty thou and a seventeen-month-old one for a quarter million." He grinned, a gold incisor flashing in his leather-toned face. "The new one has a two-year suicide clause."

"Ho ho."

"Jenkins says he's mortified for the widow, but there's nothing he or anyone else can do."

"Except get us to prove it was murder."

"In which case—*cui bono?*" Escalera liked saying stuff like that—when Wells wasn't around. His Spanish was perfect, I presumed, and his English at least as good as mine—again, when Wells wasn't around. And now a touch of Latin.

"The widow benefits," I said. "But can you see her writing that note?"

"Maybe." He studied a copy of it on his desk. "Whom," he said. "Whoever wrote it should've said whom instead of who."

"So they should've, scholar. So who wrote it? Take a guess. You've had the case for a whole week now."

"While you've been lying around in the sun. You've got a nice little tan there, incidentally."

"So have you, amigo, but it didn't cost you fifteen hundred bucks."

"That's a racist remark, gringo."

"By George, you're right, peon. So did the widow write the note or what?"

"We could go ask her, couldn't we?" Luis said.

The Park Plaza section of town is where Clausen's elite meet to sleep, often catch as catch can, and where the late D.A. lived and died. "There," Luis said, pointing at a comfortable-looking older house with a lush and neatly trimmed lawn out front.

"That note," I said, pulling the '73 Fairlane in against the curb, "it could be somebody pursuing simple justice. Like a neighbor here who saw something suspicious that night but doesn't want to get personally involved, so he muddies up the waters with a story about a vengeful ex-con."

"No, I don't think so," Luis said. "One of the few things I had time to do was talk to the neighbors, but nobody on either side of the house or across the street saw or heard a thing. He got home around ten-thirty, which is sort of a normal hour to get home from a long dinner meeting. But I agree, the ex-con thing looks like a herring."

"Was Charley drunk?"

"Point zero eight in the blood. Not drunk, but maybe a little careless. I mean, if somebody was waiting for him in the garage he might've been a little slow to react."

"And you think somebody was waiting for him there."

"What I think is that he didn't kill himself. I don't like that busted-tooth thing. Also, the widow doesn't think he killed himself. She said they argued before she went to Vegas, but that wasn't the reason she went—and what husband and wife don't argue now and then?"

"Especially when there's twenty-six years' difference in their ages. Well, let's go in," I said, "and see what falls out of her tree."

"Be kind, Peck."

"Ain't I always?"

"No."

"We received your note," I said at the door.

"What note?" she answered, the door open only a crack. "Who are you?"

I told her and she reluctantly let us in, doing a slow double-take at Luis, whom she'd seen at the hearing. "What note?" she repeated, in a voice that seemed heavy from lack of use.

"This one." I handed her a copy of the typed message.

At ten-thirty on this sun-bright Tuesday morning, Mrs. Haight was still in a robe, her good-boned face not yet made up. Good-boned faces are the *sine qua non* of the modeling world—that and height. And hers, at five-ten or so, put the top of her head, even bent as she read, somewhere between the top of Luis' and of mine. And my eyes, now adjusting to the almost funereal interior light, were gazing on a female wonder, a classic beauty.

"I'm sorry," she said, handing the letter back to me, "but I didn't write this, Sergeant, I've never seen it before."

She'd read the brief message fast and only once, as though familiar with its terms, but I didn't mention that. It was written in agate type, and somewhere in this house there would probably be a machine to compare the typing to but I didn't ask to see it. What I asked was, "If you didn't write it, who did?"

"I don't know."

"You see why we thought it might be you, don't you? Why it *would* be you—why it almost *had* to be you?"

"Yes." She was forthright, almost curt, big grey eyes not flinching from mine. There was a kind of melancholy anger in her now.

"So if not you," I said, "someone who shares your interest, Mrs. Haight, or supports it. Who does?"

"No one!" she snapped. "There are no children, no brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles, no other heirs!"

"If the allegation in this letter is proven," I said, "you gain a quarter of a million dollars—is that understood, Mrs. Haight?"

"Yes."

"So I wonder why you didn't suggest at once that we go out and find the ex-con mentioned."

"Well, why don't you?"

"Because we don't believe in him and we don't believe that you do, either. Did Mr. Haight ever mention a threat by an ex-con to you?"

"No. But Mr. Haight never discussed his work with me."

"Did you love him?"

"I—of course I did."

"And you believe he was murdered. At least, you don't believe he killed himself, which is the same thing."

"That's correct," she said.

"Who did you go to Las Vegas with last week?"

"I went alone. I go there alone several times a year. And I've answered all these questions more than once, Sergeant."

"I'm sure you have. So where did you stay in Vegas?"

"With a friend."

"Have you answered that question before?"

"I—no. It wasn't asked."

"So what friend? What's her name? Or his?"

"Why must you know that?"

"Why shouldn't we?"

"It has no bearing, does it? And my friend's a woman."

"We think it might have a bearing, Mrs. Haight. How were you advised of your husband's death?"

"We called the Vegas cops," Luis interrupted. "I did. The lady next door knew Mrs. Haight had gone there. They found her at Caesar's Palace. —Sergeant Peckinpaugh," Luis explained to her, "just got back from vacation this morning. He doesn't know all the details yet."

Mr. Nice Guy, Luis. He can't stand my verbal assaults on women. Men, okay, but not women.

I said, "So what's this friend's name?"

"Please, Sergeant—I don't want her involved."

"The more you resist, the more she becomes involved, Mrs. Haight. Besides, we could quickly find out, couldn't we?"

"All right—her name's Eileen Constable."

"See how easy that was? Where did your husband keep his gun?"

"You do bounce around, don't you?" she said, a little more animated.

"Bounce with me. Where?"

"Upstairs in his closet—on the top shelf in a holster."

"So he had to park the car, get out, go up to the bedroom, get the gun, go back down to the car, rearrange himself in the driver's seat, and perhaps start the car again before he put that bullet in his brain."

Her eyes had closed through this delivery. "But you don't believe that, do you?"

"No."

"You believe someone was waiting for him in the garage—someone who knew where he kept his gun, or somehow got hold of it. Maybe someone who even had a key to the house, or access to it. Who would that be, Mrs. Haight?"

She shook her head and said she didn't know.

We had moved, by a kind of social osmosis, from the cramped, dim-lit vestibule into the spacious, sunny living room, and Mrs. Haight had become more aware that she wasn't made up for the day, her long fingers running through uncombed strands of honey-colored hair. Luis suggested she might like to freshen up a bit, drawing a warm smile from her tired, lovely eyes. "Thank you," she said to him.

"Timely," I said when she'd gone upstairs. "Now she can phone

whoever it is she wants to phone and we can listen in on that extension over there."

"That's not what I had in mind, Peck. She looked ragged to me—on the edge. What I had in mind is that we talk, you and me."

"No. You were being a referee, giving her a standing eight-count. But let me tell you something about this remarkable woman, Luis. She would much rather look like your average girl next door—beauty for her is a monkey on the back. You've seen them, the rare ones, trying to walk invisibly through the world while every male within a mile sends out a force-field of lust—or worship. Like you've been doing, Luis. No offense, and I won't tell your wife, but it's inescapable for her, isn't it? Maybe that's why she's a recluse. I think she could drive a man crazy, and possibly vice versa. —Talk about what?"

"I keep wondering why she married Charley, *Jefe*. He wasn't Mr. America. Maybe that's why we got mixed reports about his frame of mind on Monday night—he'd come to know it wasn't a proper marriage, that she might be using him to hide behind. More like a father—the poor guy. I watched her at the inquest, and she was sort of like in armor, sort of hiding out inside herself. What I think is that some guy's got his hooks into her, Peck, and it hurts."

"Who, Luis? What guy?"

"The guy who wrote the note."

"He's a gambler, whoever he is," I said. "Look, Luis, he fakes Charley's suicide and gets away with it, then finds out about the big insurance payoff she won't get and tries to turn it into murder—"

"Which it is, Peck. Murder."

"Pinning it on an ex-con." I paused in wonder. "But if he's as sure of that as he sounds, why not go the whole nine yards and name him?"

"Because he doesn't exist?"

"No," I said, "he's *got* to exist, Luis. Otherwise the scam won't work. Whoever wrote the note is depending on us to identify this ex-con and prove he killed Haight. So there's got to be someone Charley sent up who recently got out—some local guy who fits the bill of particulars, someone who'll fit inside the killer's frame."

Luis was shaking his head. "If he exists, and if we could prove he killed Charley, why didn't whoever wrote the note name him?"

A thought struck me then and caromed away, as thoughts often do. There for an instant, then gone, leaving no discernible trail. I went over to a table near French doors that led to the patio and lifted the phone off its cradle. I listened to a dial tone, then put it

back. She wasn't at that moment calling anyone, but I had a feeling that sooner or later she would, or had—that she knew far more than she'd told us. I put it into words.

"She knows who did it, Luis, and she's scared."

"I think so," Luis said.

"Show me the scene of the crime, okay?"

Haight's house had been built about forty years ago and the attached garage was not quite big enough for two cars, unless they were contemporary toys. The big '80 Lincoln Continental was still there, its windows still down, and I thought I could still smell gas fumes in the air. I asked Luis to tell me his idea of what happened and he did, walking around, making gestures.

Haight drove in, the automatic door closing behind him, and shut the motor off. The killer—known, if not well known, to Haight—showed himself and Haight lowered the window. "What's up, friend?" he said, and got his own gun shoved in his mouth, busting a tooth, and a bullet through his brain. Then the no-doubt-gloved killer arranged the gun in Haight's right hand and started the motor again, to fill the garage with carbon monoxide.

As Luis said that, William Fencer's name went through my mind. Fencer, with that explicit testimony about the Oasis City man. "I wonder if Mrs. Haight knows Bill Fencer," I said.

"We could go ask."

"Fencer sure as hell knew Charley, and knew he was next in line for Charley's job. I wonder if he was also next in line for Charley's wife."

She was unconscious on her bed. In her bathroom, an empty bottle of sleeping pills was on the sink counter. Luis called for an ambulance from her bedside phone as I checked her pulse again—still regular, but weak.

I started blowing air into her lungs.

Lieutenant Wells was in Post-Op and conscious enough to raise a hand when I spoke his name. He had no family I knew of and few if any friends. His job was his life and the legal code his bible. A nurse told me he'd received no flowers, no calls, and no cards. I was saddened, but not surprised. She also told me the operation was routine and he'd be on his feet again in a day or two. I touched his shoulder before I left, but he'd gone back to sleep again. I'd never touched him before except to shake his hand.

In Emergency, they'd pumped Mrs. Haight's stomach and her prognosis was good. Luis had called her lawyer, Jenkins, and he'd seen to it that she was upstairs now in a single room. The emergency-room doctor said that judging by the amount of junk in her belly, it'd been a valid try. He knew about Charley's putative suicide just a week ago and said it could be catching. He asked me to let her rest until this evening.

Some day this had turned into.

"I shouldn't have suggested she go upstairs," Luis said. "We should've kept her with us. She was beginning to feel trapped."

"We couldn't have known, amigo."

It had become three-thirty in the afternoon and we were eating lunch at our desks. Phil Benton had just brought up three files culled from the records—possible ex-cons who fit the note's specifications. I'd expected more, but you take what you get.

Also, we were waiting for a return call from the Vegas cops who were trying to locate Mrs. Haight's friend, Eileen Constable.

"I wonder," I said, biting into an already cold burger, "what this Constable woman does for a living."

"A model, maybe."

"That's a very loose job description, Luis. Anyway, two to one she knows Fencer."

"Even money. From Oasis City you can fly to Vegas in about forty minutes. Everybody does it all the time. The two towns cross-pollinate."

"Not always producing flowers."

"Nor do they go there just to gamble."

"Okay—let's say Fencer met Mrs. Haight in Vegas, maybe through the Constable woman. Let's say he falls for her, since everybody else does. Then let's say she falls for him, maybe all the way."

"What makes you think that?" Luis objected.

"Because, amigo, whoever killed Charley had access to his bedroom, if not his actual bed."

"To get the gun."

"To get the gun. That was essential to his plan, which was at first to make it appear a suicide. Then he hears about the quarter million bucks his intended won't now be heiress to and writes us the note."

"It was postmarked in Clausen, Peck. But he'd be smart enough to drive over, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, and I'm beginning to wonder where he is right this minute, Luis."

"Let's find out," he said, reaching for the phone, and I shoved aside my half eaten burger and opened one of the files Phil had brought up.

It was of a woman who had killed her husband eight years ago, claimed he abused her, and then wounded one of the cops who made the arrest.

Luis hung up the phone. "Fencer left his office at ten-thirty this morning and told his secretary he wouldn't be back until tomorrow. He didn't say where he was going."

"So he could be in town right now. He could be over at the hospital."

"No, Peck—how could he know about her? We didn't get her there until noon, and if he left his office at— You don't think she's in danger, do you?"

"No. But I'm beginning to think one of these two people is," I said, and handed Luis the remaining files. The thought that had eluded me that morning had returned in full flower. "Look," I said, "Fencer knows we'll get his note this morning, knows our first move would be to see Mrs. Haight, but also knows we'd finally take the note as literal truth and do exactly what we're doing now, looking for the alleged killer. All this stuff is in a county computer somewhere and he has as much access to it as we have, maybe more. He probably knows we'll turn up these very people on our desks now—"

"So he's gonna have to make a case that one of them killed Charley. How's he gonna do that?"

"He isn't. He can't. If we're right, this is an act of desperation plus greed and he doesn't have to do more than kill the man and hope to make his case that way—he's got no other choice."

"Jesu Cristo," Luis said, and began at once to read the files I'd given him. Until my phone rang. It was the Las Vegas police, advising me that Mrs. Constable was at her apartment awaiting our call. I checked the number the cop gave me against the one I had and then asked him to tell me about her.

"She's forty-four," he said. "A very good-looking lady in case you want to know that. She's the widow of Pete Constable, who used to promote boxing matches here and maybe dabbled in dope. He died about four years ago."

"What killed him?"

"A heart attack. He lived pretty fast, but left her well heeled. He

was what we call 'connected,' but everybody around here is wired into one thing or another. Constable probably fixed a few fights, but it's hard to prove stuff like that. This town is full of people who won't talk." He laughed almost with pleasure.

I thanked him, hung up, and dialed Eileen Constable's number.

She answered after the second ring, sounding a little breathless.

"I've been trying to get her for hours," she said after I identified myself. "Is she all right?"

"Yes," I told her. "What I'm calling to ask is if you know a man named William Fencer, an Oasis City man."

"Yes—I've known him for years." There had been no hesitation. "My husband knew him."

"Does Fencer know Dolores Haight?"

"Yes—also for years. Three, anyway. I—unfortunately—introduced them."

"Why unfortunately? How long has it been going on, Mrs. Constable?"

"Oh, Gawd—ever since he first met her. I should've known better."

"Was he there with Mrs. Haight last Monday night?"

"You mean that night Charley killed himself? Yes."

"Continuously, without interruption?"

"No. They had dinner together around six, but after that—no."

"No, what?"

"I mean I didn't actually *see* him again until around midnight, maybe even later. At one of the clubs."

"Let's get this clear, Mrs. Constable. Was Mrs. Haight with him during that time?"

"No. She was with me from around eight or so. When we saw him, we turned around and walked out."

"And?"

"Went to my place, where we stayed the rest of the night."

"So neither you nor Mrs. Haight saw him from about eight until after midnight. What was he doing all that time, have you any idea?"

"No."

"Gambling?"

"No—that's for sure. He's all tapped out in this town. I don't know what he was doing, maybe trying to float a loan, but Dolores *is* all right, isn't she?"

"Bingo!" I heard Luis say, and I put my hand over the phone. "A tailor-made case," he said. "Mike Moreno, released three months ago."

"Yes," I said into the phone, "Mrs. Haight is all right."

"Should I come over?"

"I think that would be a good idea, Mrs. Constable," I said. "She's in the hospital, but believe me, she's all right—and thank you very much."

When I hung up, Luis read from the file: "When sentence was pronounced on Mr. Moreno, he made an attempt to assault Mr. Haight, but was restrained by the bailiffs. Then he said he would get Mr. Haight no matter how long it took."

I said, "Has the man got a phone?"

"Number's on the probation report," Luis said and dialed it at once, his dark eyes coming up to squint at mine through more than a dozen rings.

"Maybe," I said, "he's just out for a beer."

"A perfect lineup of purely circumstantial evidence," Luis said in the car, "our case against Fencer. We'll have to—"

"I think he's crazy," I said.

"Maybe, but we'll still have to prove he made a round-trip flight from Vegas at the critical time, and we'll have to—"

"Do all that and more," I agreed. "And Mrs. Haight knew that he did it all along, Luis. That's why she tried to kill herself. Maybe she loved him so much she couldn't betray him. Or maybe it was her idea to start with and she felt too full of guilt to live."

"No." Luis was emphatic. "It was Fencer's idea, Peck—I don't think she knew a thing about it until it was done."

"Or maybe it was Moreno after all—what about that, Luis?"

He shook his head. "That's just nervous talk, Peckinpaugh."

It was 5:15 and he had Moreno's file open on his lap as we made slow progress through going-home traffic. Moreno owned five acres of scrub land in West Clausen near the airport, toward which we were slowly heading in the Fairlane. Moreno was a full-blooded Morongo with, according to his probation report, a wicked temper, but he'd behaved himself so far on parole. Before his arrest, he'd run a small automotive repair shop on the property in which he had dismantled stolen cars for their parts, an activity known as "chopping." Moreno claimed he'd had nothing to do with it, hadn't even known it was going on, that two nephews of his had done the alleged chopping at night while he innocently slept in his nearby home. The trouble was that the nephews had never been found.

"Traffic!" I crabbed as we got hung up trying to make a left turn off Route 60.

"I got a bad feeling," Luis agreed. "I think he's already dead."

We could hear a motor running inside the shabby metal-sided shop, but outside the scattered hulks of stripped and abandoned cars were displayed like a rusting exhibition of op-art. A late-model blue Pontiac Firebird was parked in front of the closed and chained double doors of the shop and across the road a twin-engined Cessna was taking off from the airport runway, making a lot of sudden noise.

Instinctively, Luis and I unholstered our guns and slipped into the building through its open office door, the running car motor the dominant sound again. The car was an old black Plymouth sedan, a hose running from its exhaust pipe into one of its windows. The Fencer touch, I thought. Fencer—it could be no one else—was seated at a table against the far wall of the building, thirty feet away. He rose and turned as he heard us, seeming to smile as he drew a gun from his waistband and fired a shot that whistled past my ear.

"Drop it!" Luis and I yelled together, splitting apart and crouching, the man in our sights. But he didn't. He fired again, high and wide, and Luis put a slug in his right thigh that spun him around and dropped him to a knee, but facing us again and firing.

His shot clipped the right shoulder-pad of Luis' jacket and our return fire hit him in the chest, throwing him on his back, dead. He'd asked for it, he'd wanted it, you could see it in his eyes. Moreno was still alive, his breath thin and rasping in his throat. We hauled him outside and laid him in the gravelly drive. He reeked of beer. "Your turn to do the mouth to mouth," I told Luis and went over to radio for help.

An old Underwood typewriter was on the table at which Fencer had been sitting when we arrived. A yellowing letterhead from Moreno's pre-prison stock was on the roller. Fencer had typed: "Now we're even, Haight. I'll see you in hell." That was all.

"Probably," Luis said, "he didn't plan to forge a signature, just leave it like it is." He shrugged. "It might've worked. There wasn't a mark on the man, did you notice that?"

"None that met the eye, anyway. But they're gonna find a lot of booze in his blood if they try. Beer. You smelled him—and look at all the empties lying around."

"He was a drunk, it's mentioned in his file. Poor bastard."

"Maybe he'd already passed out when Fencer got here—and stuck him in the car and set it up a la Haight."

"But what if he hadn't been drunk? I know—just shoot him in the head and fake the suicide that way. So he was lucky." Luis shrugged again. "I still say it might've worked."

"I doubt it—too many mistakes. I think he really was insane, Luis. You saw his eyes. Look, a doomed love and unredeemable debts—either one can send you off the rails. No, too many mistakes. But if he hadn't gone for the quarter million he might've gotten away with just killing Charley."

"And maybe he'd have gotten away with this, too, if he'd sent the note to arrive later in the week. Out here it could have been days before Moreno got found."

"Luck of the game, Luis," I said.

The death scene had been cleared and all the men had gone. It was nearly dark, and across the road a string of airport lights flashed on, a plane coming in. I said tiredly, getting in the Fairlane, "When was Charley's funeral?"

"Saturday."

"Did Homicide send flowers or anything?"

"The department did, yeah—all of us."

"So I owe you."

"No, you don't." I looked at him. "No, you don't."

I could have hugged him, this matter of pride in him. "Okay," I said, "so tomorrow we send flowers to Wells—just you and me."

"A good idea, Peck. What kind does he like, I wonder?"

"He doesn't know a daisy from a rose. It's just the idea of the thing. And maybe while we're at it," I said, "we could send a card or something to Mrs. Haight. I think Fencer had a lock on her and she'll need support. She's got a fatal beauty, man." I fired the Fairlane's motor, nearly 200,000 miles under that sun-baked hood. It moved smoothly onto the road.

"How about a little something for Moreno?" Luis said.

I laughed. "Well, you kissed him, amigo, I didn't."

"He's got no family, Peck. He's all alone."

Luis Escalera, protector of women, ethnics, and all other underdogs. "Flowers," I said. "We'll send flowers."

"Probably what he'd prefer is a six-pack but, yeah, we'll send flowers."

All things considered, it wasn't bad to be back.

*Lily Murphy used to say she was going to go home to the Soo when she'd made her pile and would never so much as speak to a miner again. But the gold in and around Deer River wasn't the kind that came easy to the pan, and Lily's dreams looked about as far away as those of the poor fools she did her trade with.*

*Andrew J. Burton is a new writer, living in the Canadian north. For the past several years he has been working in remote wilderness areas, which he uses as the setting for much of what he writes . . .*

# DEER RIVER LILY

**by ANDREW J. BURTON**

It stays cold in Deer River sometimes till the end of April. Then one day you'll wake up, there'll be melt water pooling in the streets, and the river will be choked with chunks of floating ice. It gets you goin', weather like that, makes you want to get out and do things. It got to Joe.

Every year, far back as I can remember, Joe's planned a big spring cleanup at the trading post. He'd talk your ear off if you'd let him, 'bout where he was gonna put what, and how high, and how he was gonna clean up the back shed—give it a fresh coat of paint and put it to some use.

Well, we'd heard all this before and knew he'd never get around to that old shed. He never did. So Charlie and me got the idea to shanghai all the regulars who hung out at the post into a cleanup party.

We started to work on a Sunday morning and kept at it all day, hauling out thirty years' worth of junk. Mainly it *was* junk, too—some prospector tents mildewed to rags, stacks of old magazines, some rusted-up rolls of chicken wire, that kind of thing. But

in the back of the shed there was a beat-up-lookin' old steamer trunk full of old clothes. Not ordinary clothes, but all kinds of lacy and velvet stuff.

That evenin' we were all sittin' around the stove inside the post, feelin' pretty impressed with ourselves, and talkin' about the stuff we'd found in the shed. You can bet that trunk was gettin' a lot of attention. We were all raggin' Joe about it but he claimed it was news to him—he claimed the trunk had been there as long as he could remember and he'd never opened it before. So there it was, a mystery.

Now there was only one fella in Deer River might know the story of that old trunk, and that was Alex Simpson. Alex was the oldest resident of these parts. He'd been a hunter and a trapper and a special constable for the Mounties when they needed somebody who spoke Cree. He'd seen and done a lot and he knew every old story goin'.

We were all of us curious to see if he'd know anything about this trunk, so Charlie went to fetch him.

Alex took a long time over that trunk. He poked around in it, lookin' over all the frillies one by one. When he was done, he came over and sat by the stove with the rest of us. He had a kind of grey look on his face as he sat there packin' his pipe.

"That there's Lily Murphy's trunk," he said. And started in to tell one of the strangest stories any of us had ever heard.

It seems Lily Murphy had come to Deer River in the spring of '32. There was somethin' of a boom goin' on here then. Word of Perkin's gold strike had every low life west of Fort William headin' up here lookin' to get rich quick. They came with their picks and their shovels, their rockers and their pans. They came by the hundreds, headin' into the bush with buckets full of dreams and precious little sense. A good many of them never came out again, and them that did mostly came out dead broke.

For those that did find some color, Lily Murphy was waitin'. She'd set herself up with a couple of tents out in back of the trading post and did a good business in those commodities the post didn't handle, if you catch my meanin'.

She used to say she was gonna go home to the Soo when she'd made her pile and would never so much as speak to a miner again. But the gold in these parts wasn't the kind that came easy to the

pan, and Lily's dreams looked about as far away as those of the poor fools she did her trade with. Seein' her hopes gettin' so far off made her desperate—and mean. She started pushin' the men that came her way, gettin' 'em all liquored up, then takin' 'em for their last grain of dust. Them that complained found that there were those lookin' after Lily's interests on a sort of barter system. Many's the one complained of Lily's operation only to find himself goin' for an unexpected swim in the river.

There was one prospector who didn't stop by Lily's, though. That was Jim St. Clair. He was a tough old Metis—hardly spoke a word, but came to the post, picked up his supplies, then headed back into the bush.

Now a place like Deer River didn't have much in the way of amusement back then (besides Lily), so gossip was pretty popular as a pastime. Jim St. Clair was a natural for gossip. The stories started when somebody said they thought he had first gone out with two partners—men who had disappeared like so many others. There were those that said he'd done away with them, killed them for their shares in the gold. Still others claimed they were still alive, kept as slaves to work his claim. And a claim he certainly had. After the first time or two, he started buyin' his supplies with gold. Not dust, but nuggets—bright and shiny as the sun.

It was the nuggets got Lily's attention. Whenever Jim was around, she'd stop by the post, tryin' to get him out to her tent in the back. Nobody ever saw Jim go back there, but after a while Lily started talkin' it up about how chummy she was gettin' with him. And he did smile a fair bit more than usual when she was around. Be hard not to, the way she used to hang all over him.

Then one day, Lily came into the post all smiles and says Jim's gonna take her up to his claim. She bought some foul-weather gear and a few supplies, then packed up her trunk and left it with Angus, who ran the post in those days. The next day her and Jim were gone.

Well, sir, nobody thought nothin' of it till a prospector name of Wilson stopped by the post. He was flush and standin' everybody to drinks, listenin' to the local stories with a big smile on his face. Then he heard somebody talkin' about Jim. He got real serious and started askin' questions—what he looked like, how long he'd been around, that kind of thing. The other fellas in the post started to wonder what was goin' on and asked him what his interest was in Jim.

He told them about some time he'd spent in the Yukon a few years before. Four prospectors had gone into the bush together lookin' for

color and our Jim was one of them. Months went by with no word from them, then Jim came back alone. He was carryin' a big sack of dust and he claimed he hadn't seen the others since just after they'd left. Some people were a little suspicious, but of course they couldn't prove anything. Jim moved on soon after that.

The following summer, a prospector found an abandoned shack way up in the woods. The place was a mess—garbage everywhere—but what shook him up was a pile of bones in a heap in a corner. Human bones. In the pile was three skulls, each with a bullet hole drilled neat in the back. And you could tell by the shape the bones were in that they'd been cut up and cooked.

Wilson's story had sent a cold chill through everybody in the place. There wasn't a soul there that wasn't sure what had happened back in the Yukon, and there wasn't a soul didn't think it was Jim that had done it. And it wasn't long before somebody reminded them all that Lily was out there with a ghoul.

Two days later, Jim showed up at the post alone. The locals asked after Lily, but Jim claimed she had only stayed with him a day or two and left. That sounded too much like the Yukon story to the boys at the post. They laid ahold of Jim while Wilson searched his pack. He fought like a mad thing, but there were too many of them. And when Wilson pulled a blood-stained silk hankie from the bottom of the pack, they started lookin' for a rope.

They hanged Jim St. Clair from the main beam of the trading post, then buried his body out by the garbage dump. They searched the woods for months after that, but no sign was ever found of Lily or of Jim's claim.

Alex finished his story and leaned back, staring at the fire for several minutes. Then he looked around at us, his face kind of grey and scared lookin'.

"There's another piece to this story I've never told before. You see, I was one of those that hanged that man and I really believed we'd done the right thing. But ten years later I was in the Soo and I could have sworn I saw Lily Murphy sittin' in a flash restaurant. I could have sworn, too, that the fella sittin' across from her was a prospector name of Wilson. I could have made sure. I could have gone back to check. But I don't want to know. My God, I don't want to know."

*Of the 43 entries in the Northern California chapter of the Mystery Writers of America's first short-story mystery-writing contest this past year—open to all unpublished writers of the area—"The Cherry on the Cake" was considered the most estimable.*

*"I'm trying to find out who I am," the well dressed woman told Amanda. "There's more, though . . ."*

# THE CHERRY ON THE CAKE

## *by LEA CASH-DOMINGO*

I'm a private eye.

I work for a living. Not everybody does. Some work to keep busy, some to offer a helping hand or a sympathetic ear. I work because I have to work. That fact determines what liberties I take. For those cases paid by the hour I take my time, and for those paid by the job I cut as many corners as possible.

Some cases are more desirable than others. Some I know straight away I'm going to like. With others, I smell trouble from the moment the client says hello.

That's how it was with the Hall woman. She came into my office that afternoon looking like an entertainer without her act. She was about five feet ten, maybe thirty-five, with wavy brown hair and a pink Qiana dress beneath a white knee-length coat. I figured she was either a highly paid professional or married to money. The clothes were worth a good five hundred bucks.

"Can I help you?" I asked. "I'm Amanda Russo."

"I want to see the person in charge of Search Incorporated."

"You're looking at her." It was more embarrassing for her than it was for me. I'm used to it.

She didn't disappear. Instead she sat. "I'm in trouble."

"Most people are when they walk through that door. What's your trouble called?"

"I need to find someone. Do you do that sort of thing?"

"It's what I do best. Are you trying to locate a husband or a boy friend?"

"It isn't that sort of problem." She seemed reluctant to talk.

"Maybe you'd better tell me about it."

"Well," she hesitated, "I'm pretty sure you don't get many requests like mine."

"Let me be the judge."

"I'm trying to find out who I am."

She was right: I didn't get many requests like hers.

"There's more, though. I think I may have killed someone."

She had awakened that morning at The Lodge, a B-rated motel on University Avenue in Berkeley with no idea how she got there or how long she'd been there. She thought her name was Dani Hall because the name sounded familiar and she liked the ring of it.

Inside her purse was a wad of money, which was a good find because it might be a few days before I discovered where she belonged. Besides the money, there was a Revlon lipstick, a pair of black sunglasses with silver sequins on the frames, a red scarf, and a pack of Kleenex. No wallet, credit cards, driver's license, checkbook, keys, or other items usually found in a woman's purse.

She didn't recall having a husband or boy friend, but she was haunted by the idea she had shot a man. She'd had a nightmare in which there was a gun. It was pointed at someone whose features she couldn't see, and the gun fired. The blast still rang inside her head.

When a queer assignment has the bad manners to land in my lap, I begin with what seems obvious. My task was to take what she said at face value. If she thought she had killed someone, chances were pretty good that she had. Or come close.

I called The Lodge and spoke with the manager, who told me a woman by the name of Dani Hall had registered Monday evening and paid a week's tab. Today was Wednesday. Next I called the Berkeley Police Department. I gave the clerk a description of my Jane Doe. The missing persons' file offered no match.

Sergeant Williams in Homicide had deposited a stiff at the morgue three days ago. He had also apprehended the killer. Was he sure he had the right suspect, I asked him. Yes, he was sure—he had an eyewitness.

I was on the phone most of two hours. After dialing Homicide in

eight counties and countless cities, I made room for the near misses and began calling hospital emergency wards. At four o'clock I hit paydirt. Sunday evening, Kaiser emergency in Oakland and Mt. Diablo in Concord had admitted gunshot-wound victims. Monday afternoon John Muir in Walnut Creek admitted a gunshot case.

I didn't need to debate with myself over whether to make the three trips. If the case could be solved in a day, I'd be able to pay the utilities, phone, and janitorial bills with the three hundred dollars Hall had given me.

The gunshot victim at Oakland Kaiser turned out to be a false alarm. A man returning home from a weekend hunting duck had accidentally shot himself while cleaning his rifle. The bullet had bruised his leg and after examination the physician had sent him home with an ice-pack and a prescription for codeine.

I hoped the drive to Walnut Creek would end my search. It didn't. The victim was twenty-two. He'd been shot by his brother-in-law, who accused him of stealing his marijuana plants. His wife, sister, and mother, the physician on duty told me, took turns on bed-watch detail.

At Mt. Diablo, the nurse informed me I'd have to talk to the attending physician, who was scheduled to be on the ward the next morning, and no, I couldn't have his phone number. Nor could I give her my number to pass on to the doctor.

It was after seven when I returned to my office. Before I called it a day, I looked up the Halls in the white pages of the Contra Costa and Alameda County directories. The surname Hall is like Smith. There were columns and columns of them. By eight-thirty, I'd called each number. No Dani Hall.

I phoned my client at The Lodge. She'd awakened from a nap minutes earlier and was eager to talk. In her dream, a painted arrow was wedged in the trunk of a genealogical tree. She wondered if it was significant. I told her I'd sleep on it, which is what I did. In the morning, I found it made as much sense to me as it had to her. I took my vitamins with scrambled eggs and the day's paper, then I drove to Concord to follow up yesterday's lead.

The attending physician at Mt. Diablo, Dr. Lewis, was a reasonable man. He told me he'd patched up the gunshot-wound victim, who had lost a lot of blood, and after observing his progress for fourteen hours had sent him across the street to a psychiatrist named Weinstein.

Dr. Weinstein said he could see me before his ten o'clock patient.

He was a short, stocky man with a bald head and wire-rimmed glasses. "I remember the man, of course," he said. "I saw him Monday morning. I recommended counseling as soon as possible, but he wasn't interested."

I told him about my client.

"Funny thing, amnesia," he said, pulling on a thick rubber band. "You might do well to have her looked at. These dissociative disorders can be tricky to diagnose, and until you've got an accurate diagnosis you can't be sure what you're dealing with."

I shifted uneasily in my chair and he continued, "Let's assume you're right. Let's suppose your client has psychogenic amnesia and her disturbance is simply limited to a sudden inability to recall important personal information. Then you're on the right track."

I didn't want to be mystified for the rest of the day. I wanted answers.

"I'd like to do the right thing," I said. "The immediate problem is that she thinks she may have killed someone. Dr. Lewis seemed to think there might be a connection between my client and the man he referred to you."

He let go of the rubber band and leaned across the desk. "The man's son is in the custody of the county juvenile authorities in Martinez. Nasty piece of business. The boy claims he shot his father to protect his mother. The man, on the other hand, denies the existence of a wife. That doesn't mean he doesn't have one. These rigid types are usually married."

"Can you tell me his name?"

By law he wasn't supposed to, but he did, anyway. "Pierce. Jack Pierce."

My client's image of an arrow piercing a tree came to mind. Maybe I was on the right track.

The traffic moved like cattle on the way to a waterhole. I left behind an entanglement of freeways and high-rises and entered the color-coded zone of condominiums and fast-food chains.

George Bellows worked the day shift. He was a large man with a don't-mess-with-me manner—the kind of counselor overnight psychiatric facilities advertise for in the *Tribune*. When I introduced myself and told him the purpose of my visit, he led me through a locked door to a staff lounge where we could talk privately.

"I can't say if Daniel Pierce is the boy you're looking for," he said. "The boy's in a bad way. He's been inside a few times."

"What's his mother like?"

"I never met the lady, but I can tell you a thing or two about his father. He's the type who comes home after a rough day's work, gets plastered, the beats the daylights out of his sons in the name of discipline."

I had come across men who raised their sons by the back of the belt. They came from all walks: some were cops, some were blue-collar foremen, some were Silicon Valley executives. Their method of discipline didn't cure teenagers of their wildness: it made them wilder.

Bellows lit a cigarette. "Pierce is a kid who grew up too fast. First time he was picked up it was for hot-wiring a car. Next time it was for pawning his old man's diamond-studded watch. Every time he's been brought in, he's had black eyes and bruises. The kid's fourteen and growing. I mean, this boy's big. Hell, I wouldn't wrestle with him if you paid me, but his dad isn't too smart. Anyone who keeps beating his kid has gotta figure that somewhere down the line the kid's going to bust him back. It's the law of nature."

"Did he shoot his father?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. The kid's clammed up about it. When the sheriff brought him in, he said he shot his dad to protect his mother. All I know is that there was a cake. Pierce said there was real fruit on top of the icing. He wanted a piece with a cherry on it. His dad said no. His mom began cutting the cake, and started to give Danny a piece with a cherry on it and the old man went bonkers. He grabbed the knife from her and began waving it like a madman. My hunch is that she's the one who went for the gun."

"That'd be my guess, too," I said.

"Kids're funny when it comes to coughing up the real story. Danny's no exception. The last thing he's about to do, now that the crisis is over, is bad-rap his folks. Don't ask me why: it's what the shrinks call family dynamics."

It's what I call not rocking the boat. The children *don't* talk, but the poison comes out all the same.

"I mean, ain't that too much?" George said, stubbing out his cigarette. "All Dan wanted was a damned cherry on his cake. That's all any of them ever want. I have ten boys on my ward and all want the best their pathetic lives have to offer."

It's sobering to tell a client she shot her husband and her son's willingly taking the rap. I lost a day deciding to tell her. I heard Dr.

Weinstein's voice echoing inside my head, warning me my client might be one step from the brink.

It was Friday morning when I told her who she was.

"Lenore Pierce." She tasted the words. "Where do I live?"

"Pleasant Hill."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Have I lived there long?"

"Long enough. —You had a fight with your husband."

"I'm married." She said it with the awe of one who realizes the fantastic. "Is he all right?"

"He isn't dead."

Relief flooded her face. "I'm so glad, I'm so glad. Oh, thank you."

"But you tried." I was surprised by the harshness in my tone.

"How?" The word caught in her throat.

I felt sorry for her, but not sorry enough to spare her the truth. I told her about the cherry on the cake. "You shot him when he brandished the knife," I ended.

The eyes have a way of telling it all. The amnesia fell away like the useless defense it was. I could tell by the intense way she stared at me that she was reliving the horror of it in her mind.

"Daniel's taking the rap in juvenile hall," I said. And as I did, I knew where her fictitious name had come from.

"Q"

**a *NEW* George Man story by**

**KEITH HELLER**

*The mobs at James Figg's amphitheater grew often swollen with frenzy and drink, and a watchman would be needed to separate inspired bettors or take hold of some dangerous upper arm and move it irresistibly toward the door and the sobering air outside. This was Man's first visit to Figg's arena as a working watchman as well as a friend, but he didn't think any man in the crowd could show him any trouble he hadn't already seen.*

*Where women are concerned, however, that is a different story for George Man . . .*

# MAN'S NOBLE ART OF SELF-DEFENSE

***by KEITH HELLER***

It was a brown and smoking October noon that saw George Man hurrying from his home in Bow Street, up stuffy King Street at the border of Seven Dials, through brief High Street, and into the comparatively brighter openness of the Oxford Road. He was a bit late, and a recent soreness in his left leg made him hobble, complaining, through the streets as if that limb were inches shorter than the other. The day's climate did little to help him: there was in the visible air the kind of metallic chill that often leaves autumn so leaden and always penetrates into the bones and heart to weigh them down. Man thought he could appreciate the weather's mood better than most. He knew it borrowed nothing from either summer's departed swollenness or winter's promised steeling. It was its own natural decaying, and a man had to be well into his own dim October to feel the grim peacefulness of its settling in.

As he strode through the crowds and calls and muffling dust of London's midday, Man tried to figure with his lips and fingers how much money he was to earn this week and if it would be enough. He had never been any good at any kind of casual, walking calculations, but he hopefully guessed he might earn what he needed. It would be his wife's, Sarah's, birthday in only five days, and he was determined to buy her something memorable and rare. Although she would rather die than admit it, he knew she was inwardly unsettled at turning forty-seven. Five years younger than Man himself—she had been born in 1684—she seemed to her husband as light and original and blessed as she had at their beginning together. Yet he could see the buried fragility in her, the common dread of nearing any personal end, and he knew he had to do something to turn her mind aside from thoughts of autumn and aging. He had to remind her of how many Octobers they had left together.

By the time Man reached his destination, he had decided on her gift. Now all that remained was the money. With few opportunities lately to stand or substitute for the loosely banded parish watch and even fewer to safeguard some gentleman or warehouse, Man had been suffering the awful heaviness of empty pockets. The time and situation had thrown him back upon old friends, had moved him even to call in a few lapsed debts; and if he was now stepping hotly westward up the Oxford Road it was because he knew that here lay his best chance to get what he wanted most easily and most quickly.

He turned right off the Oxford Road at the second house east of the Wells Street corner and just beneath a jutting, hanging sign that read THE CITY OF OXFORD. Here, for the past nine years, had lived one of Man's strongest and most useful friends, the city's and country's most heralded swordsman, James Figg. Since the year 1723, Figg had staged numberless prizefights—first at the ancient Boarded House a few hundred yards north into Marrowbone Fields, then at a new arena adjoining the back of his own house, among men armed with small backswords and quarterstaffs, cudgels and falchions, daggers and bilboes. The swordsman, of course, took part in many of the contests himself, as well as teaching his arts to any gentleman who had the will and coin to learn them. He had helped Man with advice or weapons more than once before, and now he was prepared to help him with some short-lived, but wholly respectable, employment.

The mobs at Figg's amphitheater grew often swollen with frenzy

and drink, and a watchman would be needed to separate inspired bettors or take hold of some dangerous upper arm and move it irresistibly toward the door and the sobering air outside. There was something sugary about combat that seemed to infect any who watched it or stood too near—as if every bunched movement in the ring twitched without effort every imitating muscle ranged about the stamping and bleeding men.

This was Man's first visit to Figg's arena as a working watchman as well as a friend, but he didn't think any man in the crowd could show him any trouble he hadn't already seen. Yet the funneling of people out of the Oxford Road, he noticed, seemed even thicker and more breathtaking than usual. And as he joined now the press of elbows and shouted opinions and let himself be borne inward, he wondered if today's announced matches might not be the cause of all this rushing and heat. Today, he knew, there was to be something for everyone.

He had read over the advertisements this morning. The most of them alluded to the customary exhibitions of swordplay and to the expected melee in which the boxer, Buckhorse Smith, would take on seven or eight grinning amateurs in the ring at the same time, allowing the most enduring the privilege of violently punching his head for a small fee. These were among the fare the town had come to look for weekly from James Figg. But there was another speciality of Figg's that Man thought might be drawing as many male spectators as all the other matches combined. The style alone in which this contest had been advertised must have widened more than one face into a leering smirk.

> At Mr. Figg's on the right hand in Oxford Road near Adam and Eve Court, this present day 5th October, will be provided a great boxing battle between the following women:
>
> "I, Martha Chaplin, of Billingsgate, fishwife, who have fought the best fighting women that ever came to that place, having had some hot words with Henrietta Cook, and requiring satisfaction, do invite the same to meet me on the stage and box for five guineas, each woman holding half a crown in each hand, and the first woman that drops her money to lose the battle. She may expect a good thumping."
>
> "Whereas I, Henrietta Cook, Newgate Market basket woman, hearing of the resoluteness of Martha Chaplin, and being myself one that have fought the boldest and best women and have

never yet been conquer'd, will not fail, God willing, to give her more blows than words, desiring only a clear stage, fair fighting, and of her no favor, I do promise to meet this brave and bold inviter at the time and place appointed, no person to be upon the stage but ourselves."

There will be the usual diversion of cudgel playing between scholars of the house before, and the women mount at five precisely.

Man knew that the spectacle of women battling with their fists was one that, for whatever dark reason, spoke deeply to most men and that the crowd would be thick and loud; and he only hoped he would be able to see the evening out without too much bothersome scuffling. Sarah was not the only one feeling older these days.

Entering the filling confusion of James Figg's arena, Man felt in spite of himself the same flush of humid excitement that he had always noticed at the crowing cockpit. The choking emotion was the same: the hoarse betting, the blowing dust, the sour bite of hope and hopelessness. After a rushed and screaming consultation with the swordsman, Figg, Man started his watchful circuit of the jostling arena. As at the cockpit or the fair or any public gathering, his work would be to guard against any tension or desire that might distract the mob from the official violence they had paid so well to see. The inciting oath, the blustering dare, the hand straying too near a sword or a pocket not its own—these would be the isolated troubles that Man must try to soothe or, at the worst, carry outside with the strength of his arm. He would have to be careful not to offend—and even more careful to ignore all the whispered dealings between certain gentlemen and certain ladies that the entertainment had been designed to encourage.

For most of the afternoon, his throat scorched dry with smoke, Man had not much to do. The changing company of performers managed to keep most of the audience's attention and passions where they belonged. There was a steady series of roaring men and grand gestures that made the amphitheater throb and flicker with adult playfulness. Swords were swung with bestial fervor, and there was a great and satisfying show of widely splashing blood. Yet, because the weapons were sharp and light toward the points, all the wounds were neat and easy to close, the colorfully running veins of blood compensating for the absence of any glorious death. No more was sacrificed beyond repair than a triangle of nose from one of the

clumsier beginners. When new men began thrashing one another with iron-tipped, six-foot quarterstaffs, the mob flowed with fresh enthusiasm. And when Buckhorse Smith—a broad-hipped, tattered fellow with a forehead that claimed half of his face—stood dull as a churchman beneath a hurricane of terrific blows to his eyes, the entire arena rose into the air in a religious rapture. Man could feel the pressure of the air about him grow as in a ripening fruit, expectant and threatening, as the watching men and women hummed among themselves to coax out onto the stage the pair of advertised amazons. Every breath came short, and every eye strained, staring wide.

The watchman was, perhaps, the least impassioned spectator in the arena. He had his work to do, and he had as well more knowing experience of these contests than most common Londoners. He knew there was always far more shadow in them than substance, far more wise coordination between the bellowing combatants than any real antagonism. These prizefights were precisely that—fights for prizes, for the gate money and the betting and the advertisement of individual exhibited styles. Man himself had overheard in more than one ale-house conversation between two obscured masters of the noble art in which they agreed to quarrel publicly at the earliest opportunity and to decide between themselves who was to give cuts and who receive. Even before their rehearsed rancor surfaced in the news-sheets, the two would have determined in detail the length and visibility of each cautious injury. Most of the mob, Man supposed, believed in what they saw; yet the watchman was even more admiring, seeing as he did the gifted art that lay behind the crude and passionate artlessness.

Suddenly, in the pressing midst of a single swirl of breath, two women were lifted by cheers onto opposing edges of the stage. Every pair of eyes in the crowd worked quickly from side to side, weighing the women against each other and trying to predict the odds and outcome. Even Man coasted to a stop, eager to see for himself.

As the two women were introduced, a fever of fresh dealings trembled through the arena. The Newgate Market basket woman, Henrietta Cook, fulfilled the type of every watching expectation. She was huge—taller and broader than any man standing about her—with arms that were thick and red with iron muscles and bristling hairs. Her shoulders were gathered upward into stone knots, and her great and hanging breasts seemed to be as powerful in themselves as a

healthy man's thigh. There was nothing so very monstrous in her face, yet a berry-hard dark sheen and a wide scattering of broken teeth gave it a manly heaviness that no one watching could forget.

Martha Chaplin, on the other side, was a vocal disappointment. The Billingsgate fishwife was small, slender, delicate as foam. She was young and unmarked and lovely, as freakish here in James Figg's amphitheater as she must always have appeared among the sour-mouthed fishwomen in the City. The mob today didn't like her much. They didn't like her round porcelain face, her transparent eyes, the rich wash of her hair. They didn't think any girl so light and timid had any place at the center of this encouraging roar. It was not so much that they doubted her chances of winning—everyone knew she had none—but that they thought her innocent, willfully exposed to such paid brutality, sickly and obscene. No one hated her, but they all turned from her, much as they would from a newborn babe appearing branded with an erotic tattoo.

After a few full-lunged words from James Figg himself, the two women faced each other frowning and set to. Each of them gripped hard in each hand a half-crown piece to force herself not to use her nails or pull at hair. Resisting the temptation to fall back upon their natural weapons was the women's first trial, but that was more than balanced by the added weight given each blow by the held silver. In a moment, following some inconclusive probing and guarding, the floating impact of the women's fists seemed to take command of the trapped air in the arena and resound in a hollow fracturing that could be felt at the center of every chest present. The spectacle of the women swinging and punching as if they were steaming men made the whole audience cringe and pant for air, already enraptured by the hateful beastliness they would not have missed for worlds.

Shamefully absorbed by what he saw, Man suddenly twitched to his left to avoid one of the basket woman's louder blows and found himself begging the pardon of the man next to him, asking him how was his foot.

"Eh? No, no, it's nothing, I promise you. I forbid you, sir, to think of it further."

The watchman looked and saw a bulking and blood-faced rock of a man, dressed well and primly with an almost military self-assurance, who was staring at the stage with all the lust with which a starving man stares at food.

The man turned toward him and returned his look, bright and with a youthful energy. "Oh, but we've seen some work done here

today, haven't we? Some fine inside cuts that, you must know, are always much deeper and severer than the outside. You recall that man that lost half his cheek an hour past? Now there was an outside throw, I admit, but one made slanting with a kind of back sweep. He could never have shown him the direct edge, else."

The man beamed at the watchman and hurriedly gave him his hand. "Godfrey's the name, sir. John. Captain. I know these contests better than I know my own soul. Mr. Figg, now, might have done more against his man with a drawing stroke going down to the leg, say I—the same motion I saw this last week send a calf falling down to a poor man's ankle. He is the Atlas of the sword, sir, our Mr. Figg is, and I speak as one that knows better than any. Yet even the finest may have their darker days, and this same house has seen many a brighter afternoon in its own time."

Staring entranced at the Captain from one side as he was, Man could see the bony mask of the great face and the slightly bulging wetness of the keen eye. The Captain was talking incessantly while never turning his professional attention from the active stage, leaving Man to follow along behind as best he could. The watchman soon found more of interest in the Captain's commentary than in the women's boxing, and he satisfied himself with watching the fight through the other man's eyes and voice.

"There she is! The bigger girl, she's moving well with her hands and her feet. Look there, will you? She's trying for the blow under the ear, a damned wise choice with the two blood vessels in there that're both considerably large." He turned for a moment, eagerly wheezing. "You may so strike a man there, sir, that his blood is forced up to his brain and back upon his heart—perhaps even out at his eyes or ears or mouth, if there's luck about. Then the cardiaca, of course, or simple suffocation. But did you see that, the smaller girl moving in toward the stomach?" he crowed in concert with the mob, almost bouncing in his glee. "Both the diaphragm and the lungs will share in that hurt, I can promise you that. It would seem the girls are more equal than any of us thought!"

There was a coolly bloody inhumanity in the Captain's voice that made Man almost blanch. The watchman was not so fond of these mercenary displays of brutality and pain that he could accept any such cruel exuberance in another without feeling somehow disappointed in his species. He relished a good fight as much as the next man, but only when it was necessary, when it meant something personal to each of the combatants.

Now the Captain roared an approval that shivered his cheeks into ripples. Man couldn't take his eyes off him.

"A peg in the mark that I felt in my own stomach! I tell you, the smaller one's got the true British bottom, the heart of a dray-horse. Oh!" Someone was leaping in front of the watchman, obscuring his view. But the Captain missed nothing. "Remarkable judgment in the cross-buttock fall there in the big girl, but it's not saving her. Look—see the strength in the other, equal to whatever's human and standing, an undebauched wind in her I'd never looked after! What d'you think, sir? Can this go on much longer?"

"Where?"

Man was finally able to see round the excitement before him at the flashing, heaving stage. Both of the women were still standing, though both showed some of the wear of the lengthening contest. The larger woman, Henrietta Cook, was crouching forward and swaying slightly, a clenched and turtling look about her as if she were favoring a badly pummeled stomach. There was also an ashen shadow that had settled onto her face, the kind that comes after swallowing something rubbery and wet.

Martha Chaplin, the slighter woman of Billingsgate, would seem to have suffered hardly at all. Her face was unmarked, even her hair was barely disturbed, and she still carried her fists as high as she had in the opening moments of the match. The watchman thought she must have taken some blows upon her throat and chest: a faint blush of discoloration was beginning to spread upward like a lifting veil toward the frail line of her jaw. To some spectators, she might be winning. But there was a studied uncertainty of her stance and in her slowing motions that, considered together with her obvious disadvantages, was intended to tell the mob that time was surely against her.

Just as the women began to lean into each other again, the watchman noticed the edge of a secret dealing a few rows of heads in front of him. Buckhorse Smith, fresh from pounding half a dozen discouraged men from the stage, was bent in close conversation with a sickly, sniffing man with skin as crusty as biscuits. Man had no chance of hearing what passed between them, but it was enough that he could see the pouch of money falling from the softer hand into the harder. And he knew that Buckhorse Smith, in addition to his inborn talents with his fists, had lately shown even greater gifts in arranging bouts in which only the softest blows were exchanged.

So the money was passed, the two men smiled and turned toward

the stage, the two women pushed apart and turned momentarily toward the two men, and George Man and the rest of the audience saw the huge Newgate Market basket woman pause and draw back her elephantine right arm and land a frightful blow upon the smaller woman's turning forehead that buckled her knees and laid her faint and flushing bluely at the center of the stage.

The crowd loved it. The Captain did not.

"Have you ever seen the like, sir? Have you?" he asked Man with white flakes of anger at the corners of his broad mouth. "I have not, myself. Why, this great cow of a woman with her dastard heart, her nurse-wanting courage, her—her wormdread soul, her fly-flap blows such as the pastry cooks use to beat the insects from their tarts and cheesecakes! She's got no talent, no true pile-driving force! The other had her weakened and sick-eyed and all but taking her measure upon the floor. There's a freak here somewhere, sir, you trust me. Someone's played foul, I say, or I'm a woman myself!"

Man turned from the Captain's puckered disappointment to see what was happening on the stage. The Billingsgate fishwife was being hoisted off, her head lolling drunkenly and her open lips fluctuating between coal and chalk. Women in the crowd, even some men, reached out to pat her sympathetically as she was carried past. She looked badly hurt. The winner hung back, apparently unsure of her place, staring first at her thumped opponent and then at the spot in the mob where Buckhorse Smith and his gentleman were dickering still.

Henrietta Cook, awkward with concentration, might have stood there for minutes more—misunderstanding her sudden victory—had not James Figg appeared to nudge her off the stage and introduce the following match. He looked as shaken and glum as the giant winner, almost as if what had so wildly cheered the mob had left the two of them wondering privately what had gone wrong.

George Man was wondering, too. He knew as well as they that it was the delicate fishwife, Martha Chaplin, who had been scheduled as the "surprise" victress of the boxing contest. All the complex plans of James Figg had been attuned to that end; all the gentlemanly betting in the crowd, much of it weighty, had depended upon a perfectly predictable outcome. These were innocent machinations that were used all the time to deflect the expectations of the mob and to complete those of the better sort. Even Man himself had given way to the ease of it, and now he realized that he and his wife would be going without meat for at least the next fortnight or more.

Because the bigger woman had won—turned the whole arena upside down, made the poor richer and the rich poorer—and no one of the screaming voices present could even guess why.

None of this, of course, would have come to anything more than a minor sporting scandal or a topic for rich men to amuse themselves with over wine had not the beaten Martha Chaplin died of her injuries that same day and the winning Henrietta Cook disappeared from view in the swirling obscurity of the puzzling city.

The watchman, George Man, had still his peace-keeping work at James Figg's amphitheater, but in whatever spare time he could find, and from whichever friendly constable or beadle he could persuade to talk, Man kept in peripheral contact with the spreading search for the criminal Newgate Market basket woman. No one anywhere, it seemed, knew anything. Henrietta Cook, certainly more massive and memorable than many men, had evidently found the one place in London where no one knew her or cared to look. Local constables and their bands of watchmen, interested magistrates in almost every ward in London and Westminster, and even a handful of hired thief-takers had been activated in pursuit of the missing murderess.

Because there were no official, city-wide facilities for staging a concentrated hunt or investigation, matters such as these were usually managed more energetically than efficiently. Information was broadcast, but only in outline; a vague design of action was envisioned, but never truly focused. The constable acting currently in the Oxford Road was one Mr. Prosser, a haberdasher whom George Man knew as a hollow and inflated puppy of much less help than nuisance. Never friendly with him himself, Man could still follow his actions from a cold distance as readily as he might have those of a wind over a standing field of grain. What he saw was hardly encouraging, and in a few days the watchman began to lose most of his interest in a crime that had been too accidental to be meaningful and too common to be distinctive.

Yet for all the uncertainty with which the days passed through the maturing decay of October, there was developed in a brief time a generally sharp image of the background and the circumstances of the death at the boxing arena. Much of this information remained speculative, but Man himself thought it matched so well with what he might have imagined that he had no trouble believing it. Un-

fortunately, knowing the personal details didn't seem to help discover the whereabouts of the disappeared Henrietta Cook.

The two women, then, who had met and fought at James Figg's amphitheater had evidently been long and fast friends. It was said they had even grown from girlhood together, both festering in the humid depths of Little Bush Lane, Thames Street. Although each of them took her own work, lived in her own street, neither ever married, and they gradually seemed to have come to live for and with each other, even though they were separate and apart. They often met, often walked abroad together, often visited one another's rooms for days at a time. What had first moved them to stage boxing contests together, no one could guess. Perhaps they had understood early that the obvious contrasts between them—that some incongruity that kept them needing each other—would also attract the simpler gullibility of the betting mob. They had appeared many times throughout the city and beyond under various colorful pseudonyms, their ambitious *noms de guerre;* their last match had been their first as themselves. Many had wondered why, but Man thought he knew. That afternoon at James Figg's had been the first time that the gawking audience had included Mr. Richard Wyvill, the one man whom both women had so desperately adored.

As it happened, Richard Wyvill was not quite the gentleman Man had thought him, watching him barter with Buckhorse Smith. The densely headed Smith was broadly known for his dexterity in arranging relationships between needful women and men with drooping purses. It had cost him little effort to answer the demands of a modest and timid land-jobber like Richard Wyvill, and if he had been somewhat greedy in selling the affections of both women simultaneously, it had been due mostly to his modest desire to please all parties at once. The land-jobber, then, had been dividing his time very fairly between the two, without troubling either with any news of her rival. The women had loved on, each believing herself unique, until just before their last contest at the arena. Someone, it was rumored, must have told either or both, making that meeting between them as taut and volatile as the October weather. The women met with the half-crowns in their fists, saw their shared lover watching them, and warmed to their last fight in earnest. Everyone agreed that, in such circumstances, some sort of tragedy had to happen.

Man had seen the same so many times before. Two women—or two men, for that matter—one handsome and one plain, long friends, both wanting the same work or gift or heart, the two staring emptily

at the foreign and priceless barrier growing unaccountably between them. Until one—almost always the more plain, the effeminate man or the masculine woman—can bear no more and strikes out in a sightless fury of jealousy, and nothing can ever be the same again. Henrietta Cook must have seen more than her weaker friend before her at the center of the whirling crowd that afternoon. She must have seen all the desperation of an unbeautiful woman who knows she has no chance to win mirrored sadly in the lovely form of the friend, who—by merely being what she is—cannot help but destroy everything. The huge Newgate Market basket woman must have been trying to flail her way out of a drowning river.

The watchman told his wife everything about the matter: he almost always told her almost everything about his changing work. To his mind, she was by far the solidest and wisest woman in the city, in the country, in his entire life. Only this last May, by some impossible circumstances, she had acted on her own in making clear the truth behind three interwoven deaths, although the guilty had run free. In this case, Man tried to show his wife how simple and unequivocal human actions could be seen to be once they were studied with an experienced eye. (His own eye, of course, had to be one of the most experienced in London, and she would do well to benefit from its insights.) So when he explained to her how obviously Henrietta Cook's manly lack of beauty had moved her to bitter jealousy and hurt and a dumb reflex of violence, he was only trying to demonstrate how an understanding of the heart was an understanding of reasons and actions. If the missing boxer had not yet been found, that was only an accident of an inept constable or two. Man himself, he needed hardly to add, could have shown them quickly enough.

Sarah, the watchman's placid wife, listened to her husband as dutifully as she could, her fair arms soaped to the elbows in their clattering kitchen. She was interested, but she knew that the daily demands of their rooms in Bow Street were enough to claim all her time. She was modest, she was busy, such matters were so completely foreign to her; Man knew she turned her face pensively away only to please him, only to let him know that she trusted his judgment absolutely.

Yet all this did nothing to help explain why, on her first free afternoon with George away again at Mr. Figg's arena, Sarah found herself confronting in hopefulness and in fear the flickering and

echoing miasma that was the curbed madness of Billingsgate fish market.

Sarah had walked here more than once before, yet every time she came, at her first immersion into its vocal fumes, she paled all over again at its brazen liveliness. Slick fish spit, hawkers howled, fingers figured in midair, a raw humidity hung over each transaction—and all was performed to the lifting accompaniment of such sailing oaths and curses and hot maledictions that should have been enough to scour the sky. Sarah was hardly a delicate woman, but the thick honey of the arguing traders was almost too rich for her. Yet, as always, she had to admit the heady thrill of the place, its windy blood. And particularly how it all seemed to concentrate itself in the figures of the roughest workers here, the notorious Billingsgate fishwives.

It was here that the small, serene Martha Chaplin had lived her dim life before being surprised by her death at the boxing amphitheater, and Sarah wondered now how she had ever managed to feel herself at home in all this hoarse passion. As the watchman's wife walked from stall to stall, descending mindfully ever closer to the greater business of the river, she began to understand something more of the bristling animation happening about her, perhaps even something more of the dead woman she had never got to know. Even the most timid, she thought now as she strode mobbed down toward the river stairs, even the most quiescent of women might well feel she could fit here—here where everything from the scrounging alley dog to the rotting beggar and the dazed foreigner were accepted as they were. Billingsgate was not for everyone, but it was of everyone: the whole of a living England in one very small space.

All this time, making steadily for the river, Sarah kept asking questions of the workers she passed.

"Is it this way, then? Where the girl was used to work? Martha Chaplin?"

"Did she always work so alone and so near the river? Was there no one with her ever?"

"Was she ever happy?"

"Have any come asking after her or her place, since—? The work she left behind must be done by someone, you say?"

"No, I shouldn't think so. But I have lately heard myself that she worked even here to make herself more a woman, more lovely and finer in spite of the fish on her hands. Was that true, too?"

By the time Sarah reached the lapping edge of the river with all

its textures of the sea, she had already decided where to look and what to expect. So she settled everything in a moment by simply turning toward a corner of the quay where a large woman hung with an obscuring cloak was croaching over a tub of sleek, resplendent whitings. Sarah stepped up to her and waited silently until she looked up.

"Mem?"

Sarah couldn't see the wide face beneath the hood's lip, but she had no doubts.

"What do you think to do with the money from the fish, Mrs. Cook?"

The head came up and the hood twitched back, revealing a great face paler than the slippery bellies in the tub between them.

"What is it? Who—?"

"I was only worrying for the profit that should have gone to poor Martha Chaplin." Sarah sat herself down beside the heavy-headed boxer and tried to lean toward her. "You wouldn't keep it for yourself, I think. Not from her."

The two of them, seated on one edge of the laboring market, soon became an isolated pair of scavenging birds, mournfully hunched over the tub of pearly fish. The rest of the river and the ships and the run of Billingsgate itself quickly came to ignore them, sluicing over and around them as if they made together a single polished stone. No one even bent to bother them for a fish, but let them talk on between themselves as though they were taking morning tea in a sun-smeared parlor.

"No," Henrietta Cook answered wearily, folding the hood back a bit from her face, "I'd never thought to keep it myself. Martha has family in town here, and I know she'd have wanted them to hold it as their own. I only work her place because I know she could never rest knowing that her stall stood empty, her fish drying and smelling, her customers wanting. She was ever too good a tradeswoman to—to live well with that."

The big woman's hard face trembled inwardly and her strong voice weakened. "I thought I owed her this at least—to come and see her good name never suffers the same that she did. Oh, I owed her that!" Somewhat less woefully, she added: "And I expected that here would be the last they might look after me. No one would think I'd want to come here—" she looked across at Sarah with a dawning respect "—except you."

The watchman's wife laid a hand lightly on the other's forearm, the way one woman will when she feels a fellowship with another.

"I knew you would come here for the same reasons you've said." She studied the face, its terrible and masculine plainness that no man would ever desire. "I knew you loved her as a sister—perhaps more—and I knew you would miss her every other where but here. I understand, I promise you. I do."

There was somehow growing between the two women something neither of them could have expected: a bond, a mirroring, a sense that magically they almost shared the same skin. Sarah could see now in the rougher look of the misplaced basket woman the kind of aggrieved devotion she sometimes oddly felt herself in her life with George.

"Martha and myself—" Henrietta Cook spoke lowly to the mess of fish "—had stood so many years together, hand in hand. She was all to me—the beauty I never had, the gentleness I always wanted, the chance for being a whole woman with all the grace and soft ways that any man could look for. I've never had none of it myself. I was a low brute since I was a girl, just as you see now, with none of a woman's form or even the tender heart to fill the want. Why, even my own good father would daily turn his face from me and sigh! Martha's fair eyes and voice were all I had of loveliness in my life, and I could not bear the loss of it."

The fish gleamed silver and happily dead at their feet, but October had already skipped a few lost leaves from a far street to scratch dryly at the unmoving quay. "Do you know what it is, madam, never to see a man's excited sight turned toward you in yearning and in pain? No woman should be without that, none. And if she must have it only reflected from another, who better than from the friend she loves even more than herself?" Listening and watching, Sarah caught just the corner of a renunciation that startled and finally pleased her. "And then," the dazed woman stammered on, finishing, "and then to lose her for aye only because she happened to look away—"

"Toward the land-jobber in the crowd," George Man crowed and nodded sagely from his chair. "Toward Richard Wyvill, where he stood disputing with Buckhorse Smith about the two women—which to choose and which to let fall. It is as I told you, wife: a pair of angered females scratching at one another over the one man. I see

nothing dark here. You should be happy with having found her and not pretend to any power to explain what is already clear."

Man and wife were sitting together in a flush of thin October sunlight, fed and resting in their home in Bow Street. Sarah had just finished telling her husband how she had found Henrietta Cook, talked with her, and led her pliant to the house of the nearest constable. Man was smoking now, desperately fashioning a grey cloud to hide his face, and regarding his wife with the classical look of the self-righteously betrayed.

"I allow you, Sarah, some small cleverness merely in being able to find the woman at all," Man went on reluctantly. "It was wise of you to think that she might choose the dead woman's place as that farthest from our eyes, and it was good of you to take her in at once. A woman will go with another woman sooner than with a man. Yet none of this changes any of our thinking on why she killed the poor fishwife. She struck her friend dead in a simple flash of jealousy," the watchman insisted, shrugging. "It's the only explanation that offers itself—and, besides, the boxer must fight her final contest in midair, whatever her reasons."

Sarah turned her head away from her husband's crude reminder of the imminent hangings at Tyburn and tried to focus her thoughts. She must try to make him understand her own subtle comprehension of what had happened at the boxing arena—what had set the tragedy into motion, and why. She felt she owed Henrietta Cook that much.

Finally, after a silence had been allowed to thicken in the room and dim the sunshine, Sarah said what she had to say.

"But you're mistaken, George. All of you. Mistaken."

"What?" the watchman asked, suddenly suspicious. "In what?"

"In your thinking of the girl's getting killed as she did by her friend. Jealousy, you see, had no part in it in any way."

Man bit down hard on his pipe. It twitched. "Then what did?"

"Something," Sarah answered softly, "that we see so little of these times that we've come not to look for it from the first. It was sacrifice, George, that managed everything. Only sacrifice."

"But whose, wife? And for whom?"

Staring at the bare air between them, Sarah said thoughtfully: "What you never considered—and what I thought before anything else—was that what happened that day at Mr. Figg's arena could be seen just as clearly from another side. Many women do come to despise one another out of jealousy, of course, or because of a man that stands between them. But many—most, I pray—regard the

women they love as their dearest sisters. You talk, George, of the unequal relation between two women when one is fair and the other–not so fair. Well, I have seen the same as often as you, and I have seen it as a proof of giving and of love."

Her voice grew firmer as she continued, louder and more persuasive. "Can you ever understand, I wonder, how one woman can be ready to give all for another who is her friend? The big basket woman, Henrietta Cook, had guessed at Mr. Wyvill's feelings before he could see them himself. Unlovely women always know such truths earliest. She guessed, too, that he might be losing his love for the both of them, that he might be wanting to decide and choose. And if that was so, Mrs. Cook wanted nothing more than that he should take her friend, Martha Chaplin, alone and for good and all."

"She told you this, wife?"

"She did—though not all of it in words. I suspect she understood the man better, deeper than her friend did. And she had planned their last boxing carefully, I think, so that it might fall out precisely as she wished. Mr. Wyvill watching, the big woman judging her time to the moment, Martha Chaplin made to lose—"

"To lose?" Man objected. "But why should she want her only friend to lose?"

Sarah looked across the room at her husband with a hard criticism that was unmistakable.

"You simply don't see, do you, George? A plain woman knows deeper than any that no man wants as a mistress or a wife any woman that can box better than he can! No, he wants one that's soft and weak and eager to hide behind his strong hand at the first bit of danger. Henrietta Cook understood that Mr. Wyvill would never want her for long—not for caressing, not for loving—so she did her best to make a place for the only person living that she loved more: Martha Chaplin. And she thought the quickest way to this was to make her into a woman again and not some mannish, roaring boxer that the mob would jabber over. She did what she could, the basket woman: a clumsy, foolish effort to make a lovely woman seem more lovely still. Think of what she gave up, George!" Sarah begged him. "Only her own natural womanliness, a man that might have been hers, the love and trust of her friend! And because the fishwife turned and the blow fell so much harder than expected, she lost to death the very woman she had wanted so much to save."

"And doomed herself as well," Man said, begrudging his wife a dim nod. "Whatever you say, Sarah, the blow killed the other

woman. And I still swear there must have been some touch of jealousy in the giving it."

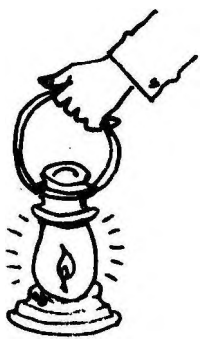
Sarah stormed to her feet and looked down at Man with pity.

"You would say so, husband, with all your great knowledge of the city and all its people!" She clucked her tongue at him. "But what woman, I pray you—hating another and wishing her the worst—would strike her only in the forehead and leave her best features entire and unmarred?"

There was little, now, that Man could say in his own defense. He watched his wife stalking off toward the kitchen, her broad shoulders rigid with irritation. The yellow light of October seemed to pale silver at his feet as he realized he must have hurt her in some way he could not fully understand. Confused and worried, he finally gave way to easier exasperation.

"And how am I to know of such matters as these? What do I look, then? Some damned woman?"

He said it aloud, but not quite loudly enough to carry to the nearby kitchen. And the massive new cooking pot, black and dense, that he had found his wife for her birthday sat forgotten in a corner at the foot of the outside stairs, waiting hopefully for a somewhat better moment.



# THE JURY BOX
## by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Golf has not been overlooked by writers criminously inclined: Albert J. Menendez's *The Subject Is Murder* lists 28 mystery novels with golf themes, and this exceeds the count for other major sports like football (13) and baseball (17). Horseracing commands the field with 128 titles.

*Bullet Hole* by Keith Miles (Harper & Row, $14.95) is another golf tale. It lives and breathes the sport at the legendary setting of St. Andrews, established in 1754 and home of the British Open. Alan Saxon won it once, and seems a definite possibility this year. He drives his motor caravan up to St. Andrews, and along the way is conned into giving an aggressive wench a ride. On arrival we are introduced to the course, its management, and the golfers—Britons, Americans, a noted Japanese, all willing to kill for the trophy. And it seems someone has: the wench is found, strangled and naked, in Saxon's caravan bed. Vivid conjunction of scene and crime.

Stuart M. Kaminsky's fourth tale of Inspector Porfiry Rostnikov is *A Fine Red Rain* (Scribners, $14.95). A circus acrobat leaps to his death from the smiling statue of Gogol. Another member of the same troupe dies accidentally (?) at the circus. Investigating crime in Moscow is not a simple matter: Rostnikov must play games with his politically motivated bosses, must defy orders while seeming to comply, in order to look into the unacceptable coincidence of the two deaths. Kaminsky's novel is rich in the flavor of its people and places, and much to be enjoyed.

WW II is winding down. Hitler's minions working on The Bomb know they're not going to get there in time unaided. Stalin's minions, our erstwhile allies, also figure the U.S. is too far ahead in bomb development. Soviet solution: steal a trainload of uranium en route from Oak Ridge to Los Alamos and leave behind convincing evidence that Germans did the thieving. This is the subject of David Downing's *The Red Eagles* (Macmillan, $18.95). Moscow's agents include several turncoat Americans and a pair of war-weary German officers. The scheme is thought out in detail, quite capable of succeeding with cold-blooded execution—but the emotional responses of people are harder to predict than train schedules. Absorbing narrative.

One of the best of the recent tales about banker Mark Treasure is *Treasure in Roubles* by David Williams (St. Martin's, $14.95). It has a different scene (Leningrad), and quite a good puzzle, together with an interesting array of characters and quite a jolly set piece involving one of Mark's financial colleagues back in England. Treasure and wife Molly find themselves part of a packaged art-appreciation tour

to Russia, not normally their mode of travel. After the usual mixups, they're installed in Leningrad's "best" hotel and making the artistic rounds. But shortly before their arrival, an athletic comrade lifted a few million roubles' worth of artwork out of its museum home and now a tour member has the intercultural bad taste to get himself murdered at the Kirov Opera. Treasure forms an unlikely and agreeable alliance with a KGB colonel to figure it all out.

Kate Gallison's *The Death Tape* (Little, Brown, $14.95) brings back Nick Magaracz, once private eye fallen to working for the beloved taxation department of the State of New Jersey. A department picnic fells a coworker, who leaves behind a curious computer printout. Names of tax cheats, presumes Nick, and sets out to see. He starts with one Gilmore Nash, deceased and leaving behind money he shouldn't have had. But now his widow doesn't have it, either, for after Nash expired someone withdrew the money using a surprisingly authentic Nash signature. This leads Magaracz into the bowels of the Bosnian-American Social Club and the activities, both medical and non, of the de-licensed Dr. Eckes. This is that rarity—a truly funny mystery. Much pleasure to be had here

Mickey Friedman's suspense novels are each very distinct, so different from each other they could be the work of separate pens. This is true also of her fourth, *Venetian Mask* (Scribners, $18.95), a long story of six friends—or alleged friends—and their visit to Venice during Carnival. The six—four men, two women—live in Paris. They are all weak, deeply flawed people, their relationships twisted by sexual intrigues. They decide to go to Venice, to wear masks and disguises, to make a game of hiding their identities from each other. But they all bring to this game their private passions and terrors, and someone brings murder. Very well told, this, with much atmosphere and human understanding and good misdirection.

Ross Thomas also goes off in a new direction with his latest, *Out on the Rim* (Mysterious Press, $17.95). The scheme, as passed from Harry Crites (poet with vague Washington connections) to Booth Stallings (terrorism consultant, just fired), is this: to deliver $5 million to a Philippine revolutionary to induce him to stop trying to destabilize the Philippine government and retire to Hong Kong. The scheme, as passed from Stallings to his henchpersons, is this: to split every dollar among themselves, with not a penny to the revolutionary.

Naturally, the undefined owners of the money have taken certain precautions against such diversion. Naturally, Stallings' henchpersons—contactman Otherguy Overby, female muscle Georgia Blue, pretender-to-the-throne of China Artie Wu, and Quincy Durrant, specialist in this and that—have highly ill-defined and flexible loyalties. Somebody's going to get dead in all the resulting Philippine machinations; somebody might also get rich. This is an

amusing and suspenseful bonanza of cast and plotting in a most intriguing setting. Only the tiresomely repetitious use of fiction's (if not real life's) most all-purpose profanity detracts from the excellence of the proceedings.

Gerald Hammond writes with a very fluid style—one can race through his rather short novels at high speed, enjoying nuances of milieu and character along the way. This is particularly true of *The Executor* (St. Martin's, $12.95), latest in Hammond's series about Scottish gunsmith Keith Calder. Robin Winterton built a fabulous collection of old guns with the help of his friend Calder. Now Winterton is murdered, his widow announces she's sold the dirty old things off for a pittance, and Calder is shocked to learn that as Winterton's executor he has to sort all this out. The widow is truly a poisonous piece of work, but others—Scotland's leading fence, his daughter and cohorts—are no better. A couple of folks, most certainly including Calder's own young/old daughter, are especially well caught.

Mike Weiss, author of the Edgar-winning true-crime book *Double Play: The San Francisco City Hall Killings,* debuts in fiction with *No Go on Jackson Street* (Scribners, $14.95). Ben Henry was once an investigative reporter for the San Francisco *Courier*. Then, accused of dangerous irresponsibility, he was unceremoniously fired by the publisher. Henry took up driving a cab and nursing his hatred. One night a call to Jackson Street turns up no passenger, and Ben later reads that a famous columnist was murdered at that address. Sleuthly instincts to the fore, Henry gets involved—with the dead man's delicious daughter, her low-life, high-flying fiance, cops, a lady professor visiting from England, and an old acquaintance who proves that dying can come easy when a bundle of cocaine is on the loose. A good story, ably told, and Ben Henry is well worth another story or two.



## DETECTIVERSE

### *SHORT STORIES, TOO, WE HOPE*

*by ROSAMOND C. BUSKIRK*

For books I have a murder-tooth,
A violent addiction.
I'm glad that for each crime in truth
A dozen sprout in fiction.

**a "cat detection" reprint by**

**LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN**

*In 1966, Lilian Jackson Braun's fictional Siamese cat Koko was named "the new Detective of the Year" by* The New York Times. *Jove Books has recently reprinted three of the author's "cat" novels—*The Cat Who Could Read Backwards, The Cat Who Ate Danish Modern, *and* The Cat Who Turned On and Off*—as well as three brand new ones:* The Cat Who Saw Red, The Cat Who Played Brahms, *and* The Cat Who Played Post Office. *Three of these published titles have been optioned for the movies and there are five more novels in the works. Judy Werthheimer in the May 1987* Cat Fancy *said, with perfect accuracy, "Braun has a knack for getting 'into' cats, skillfully depicting the unique, entertaining ways they reveal themselves."*

*Lilian Jackson Braun's first fiction, Ms. Werthheimer continued, was published in EQMM in 1962. "The success of 'The Sin of Madame Phloi,' " she wrote, "seemed to confirm Braun's special cat connection. Her editor [Frederic Dannay, wearing his EQ pseudonym as editor-in-chief of EQMM] asked her for more mysteries, specifically cat mysteries, and she wrote about a half dozen more before she embarked on her first cat novel."*

*Here is one of them, from the December 1963 issue—about Phut Phat, a Siamese whose fawn-colored coat is finer than ermine, whose eight seal-brown points are as sleek as panne velvet, and whose slanted eyes brim with a mysterious blue . . .*

"Q"

# PHUT PHAT CONCENTRATES

## *by LILIAN JACKSON BRAUN*

Phut Phat knew, at an early age, that humans were an inferior breed. They were unable to see in the dark. They ate and drank unthinkable concoctions. And they had only five senses—the two who lived with Phut Phat could not even transmit their thoughts without resorting to words.

For more than a year, ever since he had arrived at the townhouse, Phut Phat had been attempting to introduce his system of communication, but his two pupils had made scant progress. At dinnertime he would sit in a corner, concentrating, and suddenly they would say, "Time to feed the cat," as if it were their own idea.

Their ability to grasp Phut Phat's messages extended only to the bare necessities of daily living, however. Beyond that, nothing ever got through to them, and it seemed unlikely that they would ever increase their powers.

Nevertheless, life in the townhouse was comfortable enough. It followed a fairly dependable routine, and to Phut Phat routine was the greatest of all goals. He deplored such deviations as tardy meals, loud noises, unexplained persons on the premises, or liver during the week. He always had liver on Sunday.

It was a fashionable part of the city in which Phut Phat lived. His home was a three-story brick house furnished with thick rugs and down-cushioned chairs and tall pieces of furniture from which he could look down on questionable visitors. He could rise to the top of a highboy in a single leap, and when he chose to scamper from first-floor kitchen to second-floor living room to third-floor bedroom, his ascent up the carpeted staircase was very close to flight, for Phut Phat was a Siamese. His fawn-colored coat was finer than ermine. His eight seal-brown points (there had been nine before that trip to the hospital) were as sleek as panne velvet and his slanted eyes brimmed with a mysterious blue.

Those who lived with Phut Phat in the townhouse were a pair, identified in his consciousness as One and Two. It was One who supplied the creature comforts—beef on weekdays, liver on Sunday,

and a warm cuddle now and then. She also fed his vanity with lavish compliments and adorned his throat with jeweled collars taken from her own wrists.

Two, on the other hand, was valued chiefly for games and entertainment. He said very little, but he jingled keys at the end of a shiny chain and swung them back and forth for Phut Phat's amusement. And every morning in the dressing room he swished a necktie in tantalizing arcs while Phut Phat leaped and grabbed with pearly claws.

These daily romps, naps on downy cushions, outings in the coop on the fire escape, and two meals a day constituted the pattern of Phut Phat's life.

Then one Sunday he sensed a disturbing lapse in the household routine. The Sunday papers, usually scattered all over the library floor for him to shred with his claws, were stacked neatly on the desk. Furniture was rearranged. The house was filled with flowers, which he was not allowed to chew. All day long, One was nervous and Two was too busy to play. A stranger in a white coat arrived and clattered glassware, and when Phut Phat went to investigate an aroma of shrimp and smoked oysters in the kitchen the maid shooed him away.

Phut Phat seemed to be in everyone's way. Finally he was deposited in his wire coop on the fire escape, where he watched sparrows in the garden below until his stomach felt empty. Then he howled to come indoors.

He found One at her dressing table, fussing with her hair and unmindful of his hunger. Hopping lightly to the table, he sat erect among the sparkling bottles, stiffened his tail, and fastened his blue eyes on One's forehead. In that attitude he concentrated—and concentrated—and concentrated. It was never easy to communicate with One. Her mind hopped about like a sparrow, never relaxed, and Phut Phat had to strain every nerve to convey his meaning.

Suddenly One darted a look in his direction. A thought had occurred to her.

"Oh, John," she called to Two, who was brushing his hair in the dressing room, "would you ask Millie to feed Phuffy? I forgot his dinner until this very minute. It's after five o'clock and I haven't fixed my hair yet. You'd better put your coat on—people will start coming soon. And please tell Howard to light the candles. You might stack some records on the stereo, too. —No, wait a minute. If Millie

is still working on the canapes, would you feed Phuffy yourself? Just give him a slice of cold roast."

At this, Phut Phat stared at One with an intensity that made his thought waves almost visible.

"Oh, John, I forgot," she corrected. "It's Sunday, and he should have liver. Cut it in long strips or he'll toss it up. And before you do that, will you zip the back of my dress and put my emerald bracelet on Phuffy? Or maybe I'll wear the emerald myself and he can have the topaz. John! Do you realize it's five-fifteen? I wish you'd put your coat on."

"And I wish you'd simmer down," said Two. "No one ever comes on time. Why do you insist on giving big parties, Helen, if it makes you so nervous?"

"Nervous? I'm not nervous. Besides, it was *your* idea to invite my friends and your clients at the same time. You said we should kill a whole blasted flock of birds with one stone. Now, *please,* John, are you going to feed Phuffy? He's staring at me and making my head ache."

Phut Phat scarcely had time to swallow his meal, wash his face, and arrange himself on the living-room mantel before people started to arrive. His irritation at having the routine disrupted had been lessened somewhat by the prospect of being admired by the guests. His name meant "beautiful" in Siamese, and he was well aware of his pulchritude.

Lounging between a pair of Georgian candlesticks, with one foreleg extended and the other exquisitely bent under at the ankle, with his head erect and gaze withdrawn, with his tail drooping nonchalantly over the edge of the marble mantel, he awaited compliments.

It was a large party, and Phut Phat observed that very few of the guests knew how to pay their respects to a cat. Some talked nonsense in a falsetto voice. Others made startling movements in his direction or, worse still, tried to pick him up.

There was one knowledgeable guest, however, who approached the mantel with a proper attitude of deference and reserve. Phut Phat squeezed his eyes in appreciation. The admirer was a man, who leaned heavily on a shiny stick. Standing at a respectful distance, he slowly held out his hand with one finger extended, and Phut Phat twitched his whiskers in polite acknowledgement.

"You are a living sculpture," said the man.

"That's Phut Phat," said One, who had pushed through the crowded room toward the fireplace. "He's the head of our household."

"He is obviously a champion," said the man with the shiny cane, addressing his hostess in the same dignified manner that had charmed Phut Phat.

"Yes, he could probably win a few ribbons if we wanted to enter him in shows, but he's strictly a pet. He never goes out, except in his coop on the fire escape."

"A coop? That's a splendid idea," said the man. "I should like to have one for my own cat. She's a tortoise-shell long-hair. May I inspect this coop before I leave?"

"Of course. It's just outside the library window."

"You have a most attractive house."

"Thank you. We've been accused of decorating it to complement Phut Phat's coloring, which is somewhat true. You'll notice we have no breakable bric-a-brac. When a Siamese flies through the air, he recognizes no obstacles."

"Indeed, I have noticed you collect Georgian silver," the man said in his courtly way. "You have some fine examples."

"Apparently you know silver. Your cane is a rare piece."

"Yes, it is an attempt to extract a little pleasure from a sorry necessity." He hobbled a step or two.

"Would you like to see my silver collection downstairs in the dining room?" asked One. "It's all early silver—about the time of Wren."

At this point, Phut Phat, aware that the conversation no longer centered on him, jumped down from the mantel and stalked out of the room with several irritable flicks of the tail. He found an olive and pushed it down the heat register. Several feet stepped on him. In desperation, he went upstairs to the guest room, where he discovered a mound of sable and mink and went to sleep.

After this upset in the household routine, Phut Phat needed several days to catch up on his rest—so the ensuing week was a sleep blur. But soon it was Sunday again, with liver for breakfast, Sunday papers scattered over the floor, and everyone sitting around being pleasantly routine.

"Phuffy! Don't roll on those newspapers," said One. "John, can't you see the ink rubs off on his fur? Give him the *Wall Street Journal*—it's cleaner."

"Maybe he'd like to go outside in his coop and get some sun."

"That reminds me, dear. Who was that charming man with the silver cane at our party? I didn't catch his name."

"I don't know," said Two. "I thought he was someone you invited."

"Well, he wasn't. He must have come with one of the other guests. At any rate, he was interested in getting a coop like ours for his own cat. He has a long-haired torty. And did I tell you the Hendersons have two Burmese kittens? They want us to go over and see them next Sunday and have a drink."

Another week passed, during which Phut Phat discovered a new perch. He found he could jump to the top of an antique armoire—a towering piece of furniture in the hall outside the library. Otherwise, it was a routine week, followed by a routine weekend, and Phut Phat was content.

One and Two were going out on Sunday evening to see the Burmese kittens, so Phut Phat was served an early dinner and soon afterward he fell asleep on the library sofa.

When the telephone rang and waked him, it was dark and he was alone. He raised his head and chattered at the instrument until it stopped its noise. Then he went back to sleep, chin on paw.

The second time the telephone started ringing, Phut Phat stood up and scolded it, arching his body in a vertical stretch and making a question mark with his tail. To express his annoyance, he hopped on the desk and sharpened his claws on Webster's Unabridged. Then he spent quite some time chewing on a leather bookmark. After that he felt thirsty. He sauntered toward the powder room for a drink.

No lights were burning, and no moonlight came through the windows, yet he moved through the dark rooms with assurance, sidestepping table legs and stopping to examine infinitesimal particles on the hall carpet. Nothing escaped him.

Phut Phat was lapping water, and the tip of his tail was waving rapturously from side to side, when something caused him to raise his head and listen. His tail froze. Sparrows in the backyard? Rain on the fire escape? There was silence again. He lowered his head and resumed his drinking.

A second time he was alerted. Something was happening that was not routine. His tail bushed like a squirrel's, and with his whiskers full of alarm he stepped noiselessly into the hall, peering toward the library.

Someone was on the fire escape. Something was gnawing at the library window.

Petrified, he watched—until the window opened and a dark figure slipped into the room. With one lightning glide, Phut Phat sprang to the top of the tall armoire.

There on his high perch, able to look down on the scene, he felt safe. But was it enough to feel safe? His ancestors had been watch-cats in Oriental temples centuries before. They had hidden in the shadows and crouched on high walls, ready to spring on any intruder and tear his face to ribbons—just as Phut Phat shredded the Sunday paper. A primitive instinct rose in his breast, but quickly it was quelled by civilized inhibitions.

The figure in the window advanced stealthily toward the hall, and Phut Phat experienced a sense of the familiar. It was the man with the shiny stick. This time, though, his presence smelled sinister. A small blue light now glowed from the head of the cane, and instead of leaning on it the man pointed it ahead to guide his way out of the library and toward the staircase. As the intruder passed the armoire, Phut Phat's fur rose to form a sharp ridge down his spine. Instinct said, Spring at him! But vague fears held him back.

With feline stealth, the man moved downstairs, unaware of two glowing diamonds that watched him in the blackness, and Phut Phat soon heard noises in the dining room. He sensed evil. Safe on top of the armoire, he trembled.

When the man reappeared, he was carrying a bulky load, which he took to the library window. Then he crept to the third floor, and there were muffled sounds in the bedroom. Phut Phat licked his nose in apprehension.

Now the man reappeared, following a pool of blue light. As he approached the armoire, Phut Phat shifted his feet, bracing himself against something invisible. He felt a powerful compulsion to attack, and yet a fearful dismay.

Get him! commanded a savage impulse within him.

Stay! warned the fright throbbing in his head.

Get him! Now—now—*now!*

Phut Phat sprang at the man's head, ripping with razor claws wherever they sank into flesh.

The hideous scream that came from the intruder was like an electric shock. It sent Phut Phat sailing through space—up the stairs—into the bedroom—under the bed.

For a long time he quaked uncontrollably, his mouth parched and his ears inside-out with horror at what had happened. There was

something strange and wrong about it, although its meaning eluded him. Waiting for Time to heal his confusion, he huddled there in darkness and privacy. Blood soiled his claws. He sniffed with distaste and finally was compelled to lick them clean. He did it slowly and with repugnance. Then he tucked his paws under his warm body and waited.

When One and Two came home, he sensed their arrival even before the taxicab door slammed. He should have bounded to meet them, but the experience had left him in a daze, quivering internally, weak and unsure.

He heard the rattle of the front door lock, feet climbing the stairs, and the click of the light switch in the room where he waited in bewilderment under the bed

One instantly gave a gasp, then a shriek. "John! Someone's been in this room. We've been robbed!"

Two's voice was incredulous. "What! How do you know?"

"My jewel case. Look! It's open—and empty!"

Two threw open a closet door. "Your furs are still here, Helen. What about money? Did you have any money in the house?"

"I never leave money around. But the silver! What about the silver? John, go down and see. I'm afraid to look. No! Wait a minute!" One's voice rose in panic. "Where's Phut Phat? What's happened to Phut Phat?"

"I don't know," said Two with alarm. "I haven't seen him since we came in."

They searched the house, calling his name—unaware, with their limited senses, that Phut Phat was right there under the bed, brooding over the upheaval in his small world, and now and then licking his claws.

When at last, crawling on their hands and knees, they spied two eyes glowing red under the bed, they drew him out gently. One hugged him with a rocking embrace and rubbed her face, wet and salty, on his fur, while Two stood by, stroking him with a heavy hand. Comforted and reassured, Phut Phat stopped trembling. He tried to purr, but the shock had constricted his larynx.

One continued to hold Phut Phat in her arms—and he had no will to jump down—even after two strange men were admitted to the house. They asked questions and examined all the rooms. "Everything is insured," One told them, "but the silver is irreplaceable. It's old and very rare. Is there any chance of getting it back, Lieutenant?" She fingered Phut Phat's ears nervously.

"At this point it's hard to say," the detective said. "But you may be able to help us. Have you noticed any strange incidents lately? Any unusual telephone calls?"

"Yes," said One. "Several times recently the phone has rung, and when we answered it there was no one on the line."

"That's the usual method. They wait until they know you're not at home."

One gazed into Phut Phat's eyes. "Did the phone ring tonight while we were out, Phuffy?" she asked, shaking him lovingly. "If only Phut Phat could tell us what happened! He must have had a terrifying experience. Thank heaven he wasn't harmed."

Phut Phat raised his paw to lick between his toes, still defined with human blood.

"If only Phuffy could tell us who was here."

Phut Phat paused with toes spread and pink tongue extended. He stared at One's forehead.

"Have you folks noticed any strangers in the neighborhood?" the lieutenant was asking. "Anyone who would arouse suspicion?"

Phut Phat's body tensed and his blue eyes, brimming with knowledge, bored into that spot above One's eyebrows.

"No, I can't think of anyone," she said. "Can you, John?"

Two shook his head.

"Poor Phuffy," said One. "See how he stares at me? He must be hungry. Does Phuffy want a little snack?"

Phut Phat squirmed.

"About these bloodstains on the window sill," said the detective. "Would the cat attack an intruder viciously enough to draw blood?"

"Heavens, no!" said One. "He's just a pampered little house pet. We found him hiding under the bed, scared stiff."

"And you're sure you can't remember any unusual incident lately? Has anyone come to the house who might have seen the silver or jewelry? Repairman? Window washer?"

"I wish I could be more helpful," said One, "but, honestly, I can't think of a single suspect."

Phut Phat gave up!

Wriggling free, he jumped down from One's lap and walked toward the door with head depressed and hind legs stiff with disgust. He knew who it was. He knew! The man with the shiny stick. But it was useless to try to communicate. The human mind was closed so tight that nothing important would ever penetrate. And One was so busy with her own chatter that her mind—

The jingle of keys caught Phut Phat's attention. He turned and saw Two swinging his key chain back and forth, back and forth, and saying nothing. Two always did more thinking than talking. Perhaps Phut Phat had been trying to communicate with the wrong mind. Perhaps Two was really number one in the household and One was number two.

Phut Phat froze in his position of concentration, sitting tall and compact with tail stiff. The key chain swung back and forth, and Phut Phat fastened his blue eyes on three wrinkles just underneath Two's hairline. He concentrated. The key chain swung back and forth, back and forth. Phut Phat kept concentrating.

"Wait a minute," said Two, coming out of his puzzled silence. "I just thought of something. Helen, remember that party we gave a couple of weeks ago? There was one guest we couldn't account for. A man with a silver cane."

"Why, yes! The man was so curious about the coop on the fire escape. Why didn't I think of him? Lieutenant, he was terribly interested in our Georgian silver."

Two said, "Does that suggest anything to you, Lieutenant?"

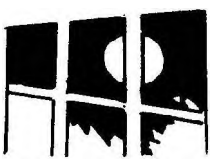
"Yes, it does." The detective exchanged nods with his partner.

"This man," One volunteered, "had a very cultivated voice and a charming manner."

"We know him," the detective said grimly. "We know his method. What you tell us fits perfectly. But we didn't know he was operating in this neighborhood again."

One said, "What mystifies me is the blood on the window sill."

Phut Phat arched his body in a long, luxurious stretch and walked from the room, looking for a soft, dark, quiet place. Now he would sleep. He felt relaxed and satisfied. He had made vital contact with a human mind, and perhaps—after all—there was hope. Someday they might learn the system, learn to open their minds and receive. They had a long way to go before they realized their potential—but there was hope.



*A charming but possibly lethal story about cats and their owners, set in an English village public house called the Goat and Gamp. "I should mention," says its author, Mary Reed, "that the pub name is a bit of a joke. My husband is a meteorologist (hence gamp, of course) and his birth sign is the goat. This will also explain why I called the pub in 'Local Cuisine' (EQ's Department of First Stories, November 1987) the Weatherman Inn. But English pubs have such odd names, anyhow. I remember seeing one—possibly in Oxford, though I couldn't swear to it—called the Goat and Compasses, which is supposed to have been derived from 'God encompasses us.'"*

*In case it would save you a trip to the dictionary, we're here to tell you that "gamp" means umbrella and a "cat's-paw" is one used by another as a tool . . .*

# CAT'S-PAW

## *by* MARY REED

"Well, the only way I can think of for doing away with someone by way of a cat is to bash them on the head with a stuffed one!" Neil, resident wit at the Goat and Gamp, downed the remains of his pint at one swallow.

As if on cue, in walked Colin, carrying a box. Everyone propping up the bar-counter burst out laughing, and his normally sallow face flushed scarlet with confusion. Joyce, our buxom and very blonde hostess, leaned over the mahogany expanse of the counter to ask him, with that often-misunderstood easy familiarity of the English barmaid, what it would be. Colin, putting his burden onto the bar, pushed his hair out of his eyes, gave a grateful smile, and ordered the usual. A light scratching sound came from the box as Joyce set down a foaming tankard in front of him and raised fine-penciled eyebrows.

"Present for the wife," Colin said, wiping foam from his upper lip. "A kitten."

He looked startled at the gale of merriment his innocent reply provoked.

Taking pity on his obvious bewilderment, I moved a couple of feet along the bar and explained. He listened carefully, nose buried in the tankard. Poor old devil, I thought, he's always finding himself in unfortunate juxtapositions of unlikely circumstances. His very name, Colin Andrew Thompson, for example. It rolls off the tongue nicely, and sounds properly imposing for an Executive Insurance Director, which is what it says on the nameplate on his office door, but then he went and married a breeder of Calico Persians, so of course, between that and his initials, the local wags had a field day. He had scarcely set foot in the pub after his honeymoon when he was met with a barrage of jokes about cataloguing catastrophic losses from cat burglary, living in a cathouse (bucolic humor can be very coarse), and so on. But he never said much, just kept on pushing his hair out of his eyes and smiling at all and sundry over his nightly pint. He wasn't what you'd call a drinking man, by any means. A couple of refills would last him all night, and Neil often voiced the opinion that Colin only came in every evening to feast his eyes on Joyce.

Joyce and Gerald, the long-suffering landlord of the Goat and Gamp, had been courting for years. People in the village used to say "when Joyce and Gerry get wed" much as others might say "in a blue moon." Neil was always saying that one day someone—with a meaningful glance in Colin's direction—was going to come and sweep Joyce away, right from under Gerry's nose, and then he'd be sorry for procrastinating for so long. Colin just smiled, never rising to the bait, and said nothing.

Anyhow, the rather bizarre discussion we'd been having when Colin arrived that particular evening had arisen in the somewhat convoluted way pub conversations will. It had started when Gerry, leaning on the cash till, mentioned reading about a wealthy local spinster leaving all her money to her pet Pekinese. Needless to say, the grieving relatives were contesting the will, and he asked me what I thought the ruling might be.

As a solicitor myself, I hedged a bit, pointing out that litigation might well drag on for some time, because it would, so far as I could tell, hinge upon whether or not the deceased was of sound mind when she drew up the will. And that was a circumstance that might,

at this late date, be a little difficult to prove one way or the other. But offhand, and speaking off the record, I guessed that the will would be proved legal, and thus valid, no matter how odd its bequest.

Neil inquired if I had come across any odd wills myself, but Joyce, polishing a glass, pointed out that I could hardly discuss such confidential matters as that, could I? Then she said: "But the wills you read about fair give you the creeps. What about that woman who left all her money to her husband, as long as she was above ground? Of course, he got round that by putting her into one of them fancy mausoleums. And do you remember that fellow in London who wanted to be stuffed?"

When things quietened down a bit, Ned, a local farmer who only happened to be at the Goat and Gamp that evening because it had been market day and he returned home this way, piped up, saying he had actually seen a photograph of the geezer Joyce mentioned. "It gave me a fair turn, I can tell you," he said, signaling Gerry to refill his glass. "Mind, that were years back, before folk got used to all them horror films and such."

Ned being a well known prankster, his supposed recollection of seeing such a photograph provoked some argument. I knew who he was talking about—it was, in fact, a true case—but held my peace. In the end, Neil was dispatched to the ladies' snug across the corridor to consult Marjory, the village librarian. She was a notorious gossip, but she also knew her business, and he returned with confirmation of the story—and, chortling to himself, he stood everyone a pint on the strength of it.

Neil raised his pint to Ned. "Cheers," he said, taking a big gulp, and then continuing: "Well, I don't know about queer wills or odd bequests, but from what you read in the papers it seems like more folk than ought to get themselves ideas about hastening the reading of the will, if you get my drift. Not but what it usually benefits them very much."

This latter gloomy statement was met with more hilarity. It was common knowledge in the village that for years Neil had been anticipating a small remembrance from his grandmother. When, cantankerous to the last, the old girl had died at the age of ninety-something, it turned out to be just that—a small remembrance. To wit, ten pounds and a lecture on the evils of intemperance. Neil spent the lot on standing everyone drinks. I remember we toasted his granny with them. He was never one to bear a grudge was Neil.

Joyce was wiping the bar absentmindedly. "Yes, but the problem

is, Neil, there's few ways you can help folk out of the world undetected, so to say, and get away with it. I mean, there's no such thing as an undetectable poison, like, and guns and knives are so gruesome—and easy to trace, anyhow, aren't they?" Joyce was a great lover of mystery novels, and the more convoluted the better. "Then there's your alibi. You got to be miles away when the murder is committed, don't you? And you can't pay anyone else to do it—there's always a chance of blackmail, right?"

"Well," Gerry commented, "if you can't use someone else, what about *something* else? Like that there Hound of the Basketballs or that Sprinkled Hand? One of them poisonous snakes, it was."

His patrons' general opinion was that poisonous snakes—as well as tarantulas and scorpions—were hard to come by in our neck of the woods. Nor did we have any lonely moors with quicksands over which a devilish dog could hound hapless landowners to death. Though there were several suggestions as to suitable landowners who might be selected for that particular honor, of course. Then someone suggested escaping zoo animals of the fiercer kind, such as tigers, say, or lions.

Surprisingly, it was Ned, the farmer, who addressed that one. "Big cats, you mean," he said from the end of the bar. "Actually, I was once almost frit to death by a small cat. I was having this nightmare about being crushed to death with these huge blocks—like the kind they used to build the Pyramids. It was probably the wife's cooking—her puddings tend to lie a bit heavy, like. Anyhow, I woke up in a bit of a sweat and there *was* this terrible weight on my chest. And when I opened my eyes, there were these huge green ones staring right at me.

Well, you know how it is when you're coming out of a nightmare—you're not sure if you're here or there, so to speak. It was our Tommy, of course. I reckon he were trying to get his revenge on me for having him fixed."

Neil, evidently not a cat lover, suggested putting poison on a cat's claws as a method of poisoning its owner, but Gerry pointed out that the cat would probably scratch itself first, or lick its claws, die, and give away. To which Neil made his retort about bashing someone over the head with a stuffed cat, just as Colin made his entrance.

Funnily enough, just as Colin walked in, I'd been thinking about his wife, Penelope. We didn't see much of her at the Goat and Gamp. For one thing, she was a martyr to asthma, as well as being allergic

to cigarette smoke—or so we understood. Besides which, she was just out of hospital after breaking her leg This she had managed to do by slipping on one of her numerous cats' many toys, at the top of a darkened stairwell, en route to rendering aid to her oldest cat, Queenie. Fortunately, given the severity of the fall and the length of the stairs, Penelope had come out of it relatively unscathed.

Neil, needless to say, had been quick to talk about cats with nine lives, though, give him his due, he didn't say it in front of Colin. This Queenie was positively ancient by feline standards, something like twenty-three years old, and the daughter of one of the first blue-ribbon winners Penelope bred. Penelope is, in fact, quite famous in the cat-breeding world, as Marjory was telling me the last time I went in to change my library book.

However, it was from my wife Marie that I learned Penelope is hypersensitive to short-hairs. This seems unfortunate, because they form the bulk of your everyday domestic-cat population and must be a major handicap in Penelope's chosen profession. Not that I want you to think we spend our time discussing our neighbors. Marie mentioned it because she goes to the monthly sewing-circle meetings at the vicarage and when Penelope joined them, not long after she and Colin moved to Yew Lodge, the vicar's cat, which rejoiced in the name of Ezekiel, was banned from the meetings. Marie said she felt sorry for the cat, which is unusually friendly for a Siamese, and that she thought Penelope was turning into a professional invalid.

Anyhow, back to Colin explaining that there was a kitten in the box and it was a present for Penelope.

"Oh, yes?" Joyce said. "What a nice thought, especially with poor old Queenie dying last month."

Colin reddened again. I never knew a man who blushed so easily.

"As a matter of fact," he confessed, "I'm sort of responsible for that. I was the one that bought the bad fish, you see. We were going to have it for supper, but as my wife was feeling a bit off-color with her allergies she just gave a bit to Queenie for a treat and put the rest in the fridge for the following day." Pointing out how easily the fish might have made them ill didn't seem very tactful, because Penelope had broken her leg going downstairs to see to the cat the night it was taken sick. I wondered if she was speaking to Colin again yet.

"What sort is the kitten?" Joyce was cooing. "Can I see it?"

Colin opened the box and we all crowded around to look. The

kitten reminded me a bit of those cats you see on Egyptian tomb-paintings, only with blue eyes and rather large ears.

"Hey, it looks a bit like Ezekiel," Gerry remarked, leaning over the bar with his nose almost in the box.

"No, this is an Abyssinian—the vicar's is a Siamese," Colin replied, stroking the kitten's head. It was certainly a handsome little thing. Even Neil the cat hater was charmed.

"Not bad-looking, is it?" he said, leaning over the box and breathing beer fumes over the hapless kitten. "So that's why you were borrowing the A–E section of the encyclopaedia. And all those cat books. Wanted to surprise the wife, eh?"

Colin shot him a look of real dislike. "Not much chance of that if the whole village knows, is there?"

"Oh, go on, who's going to tell her what you've been reading in your spare time?" Neil cackled. "Besides, our Marjory only happened to notice because she wanted to look up a few things and you had the A-to-E volume. Anyhow, you'll be giving her her present tonight, right? Then the cat will *really* be out of the bag, won't it?" He chortled at his own joke.

Colin put the lid back on the box and finished his drink just as Gerry called ten minutes to time and there was the usual rush to the bar to order the last drinks of the evening. Colin left not long afterward, and I walked part of the way with him.

We strolled along in silence, past the school and across the green, skirting the war memorial. Our paths parted at the bottom of Church Lane, his taking him left through the ornate iron gates of Yew Lodge, mine bearing right, up the darkened lane. It was a fine, clear night, very quiet. Walking up the hill, I could hear Colin's fading footsteps as he crunched over the gravel in the Lodge forecourt.

But going home, I got to thinking. Abyssinians are short-haired cats, and I remembered not only Ezekiel's banishment from the sewing circle but also the time Ned's youngest got stung by a bee. He had an allergic reaction that was so bad he had to be rushed to the County Hospital, where it was really touch and go for a time. And A-to-E might include Abyssinian and Cat, but it also covered Allergies. The tainted fish that did for Queenie. The fall in the dark. The way Colin stared at Joyce when he thought no one was looking. Penelope's hypersensitivity to short-haired cats and her current immobilization in a plaster cast.

But the whole thing was quite fantastic, wasn't it? At least, that's what I tried to tell myself as I approached the house. I hoped Colin

wasn't contemplating anything foolish. For one thing, he'd never get away with it. For another, as his wife's solicitor, I and [illegible] the terms of the new will [illegible] left the entire [illegible] society. To be sure, there was a legacy for Colin, but it wasn't much. Not enough to keep Yew Lodge, for one thing. And her estate would pay it for only as long as he looked after the cats.

## DETECTIVERSE

*WON'T THEY EVER LEARN.*

*by DOROTHY [illegible] POLLACK*

Between Julia and four million bucks
Stands a husband whose health is deluxe.
But, discreetly applied,
A soupcon cyanide
Solves the problem of which he's the crux.

**a distinguished reprint by**

**JAMES HILTON**

*Under the pseudonym Glen Trevor, James Hilton wrote one of the classic detective novels of the early Thirties,* Murder at School*—published in the U.S. under his own name, with the title* Was It Murder?, *in 1933, the same year his* Goodbye, Mr. Chips *and* Lost Horizons *were published in England. The latter two novels and his* Rage in Heaven *and* Random Harvest *were wonderful acting vehicles for such stars as Ronald Coleman, Ingrid Bergman, Robert Montgomery, Greer Garson, Peter O'Toole, Roy Marsden, and Robert Donat—who won the Oscar for best actor for his portrayal of Chips in 1939, the year* Gone With the Wind *swept away most of the other Oscars. Hilton himself worked in Hollywood for a number of years, assisting in the filming of his novels. He died in Long Beach in 1954.*

*This story last appeared in EQMM in the September 1942 issue. Like "Cat's-Paw," it is set in a pub in the English countryside, this one called the Crown and Woolpack . . .*

# THE MALLET

## *by JAMES HILTON*

"Feel the revivifying forces of youth coursing through your veins—see the pink flush of health in your cheeks when you catch sight of yourself in the bedroom mirror first thing in the morning—no more aches and pains—no more vague feelings of depression—no more hard-earned money thrown away on doctors and quack medicines! For this, ladies and gentlemen, is *not* a quack medicine, nor is it a drug—it is Nature's Peerless Herbal Remedy,

discovered by myself and prepared after a lifetime of trial and experiment! No other man in the world has the secret of it—no other man in the world can offer you the key of this wonderful gateway to Health, Strength, and Life! One shilling a box—no, I'll be even more generous than that—ninepence a box! Ninepence, ladies and gentlemen. Is there any private doctor in this town who would charge you less than half a crown for a bottle of his worthless colored water? I'll tell you what I'll do—it's a special offer and I'll never make it again as long as I live—sixpence! *Sixpence!* Who's going to be the first? —Thank you, sir. Two shillings? Thank you—here's your box and here's your one-and-six change. Are you satisfied? You're quite sure you're satisfied? —Good. Then permit me to give you your sixpence back as well. Take this little box of Concentrated Health, my dear sir, as a gift from me to the most sensible person in this crowd. Now, ladies and gentlemen, who's going to be next? —Thank you, madam."

The loud, far-carrying voice of the cheap-jack echoed across the market square of the little northern town of Finchingfold. The parish clock showed ten minutes to nine. At nine, by order of the municipal authorities, he would have to pack up. Six times already he had gone through his well worn patter about the marvelous life-giving herb he had discovered years before on the banks of the Orinoco River in South America. Captured by a fierce tribe of Indians and left by them to die of malaria, he had managed to crawl a few hundred yards into the trackless forest and there had caught sight of a curious unknown plant. Its pleasant aroma had tempted him to taste it, and lo!—within a quarter of an hour the fever had left him and he was a New Man! Prudently gathering an armful of the precious herb, he had escaped with great difficulty to civilization, there to complete his life work by manufacturing the herb in pill form and selling it in the market places of England.

The story went well as a rule; nor had it ever gone better than in Finchingfold on that warm Saturday in July. Was it that the folk of Finchingfold were more than usually "run down" after a broiling week in workshop and factory, or was it that he himself had been particularly eloquent? He could not make up his mind, but the fact remained—and an exceedingly pleasant one—that he had already sold no fewer than ninety-seven boxes that afternoon and evening. Ninety-seven sixpences—two pounds eight-and-six. Cost of boxes, wrappings, and pills—say, five shillings. Market fee—one shilling.

Net profit—two pounds two-and-six. Not bad at all—oh, decidedly not bad.

Doctor Parker Potterson was therefore in a thundering good humor after his day's labor. His face beamed with joviality as he exchanged his last dozen boxes for the sixpences of the crowd. They were just the sort of people he liked best—quiet, respectable working men and their wives, a few farm laborers from the neighboring countryside, perhaps a sprinkling, too, of better class artisans. Sometimes in the bigger towns there were hooligans who tried to make trouble, or even that far greater nuisance—the "superior" person, often a doctor, who asked awkward questions. But Finchingfold seemed full of exactly the right kind. And that quiet little fellow in the front row who had been the first to buy in the final round—he was just the kind to whom it paid to be generous. Most likely he would find that the pills did him a world of good, and for the next few months would be busily advertising Doctor Parker Potterson's Peerless Herbal Remedy at home, at the workshop, and amongst his friends. Yes, undoubtedly, he was well worth his free box.

By the time the church clock began the chiming of the hour, Potterson had actually sold out—an event that had happened only once or twice before in his entire experience. He hummed cheerfully to himself as he packed his various impedimenta into the small bag. A stethoscope, a highly colored chart of the human body, a fragment of the life-giving herb in its natural state—it was quite easy to transport. Feeling about in his pocket, he abstracted another herb, which perhaps in his heart he felt even to be more life-giving; he lit it and puffed with satisfaction. Ah, life was good. A pocketful of sixpences, a fine cigar, the cool twilight of a summer's day—what could add to the sweetness of such a mixture? Only one thing—and as he thought of it, he licked his lips in anticipation.

Doctor Parker Potterson was a conspicuous figure as he threaded his way amongst the market crowds toward the Crown and Woolpack. To begin with, he was attired in a top hat and a frock-coat—a costume that is not greatly in favor with Finchingfold on market day. But, apart from that, he was (and well he knew it) a man who would always command attention wherever he went. He was six foot three in height, and correspondingly broad. He really made a splendid advertisement for his Peerless Herbal Pills, which he consumed in public at the rate of a dozen or so a day. Fortunately, they were quite harmless. His eyes were a bright and scintillating blue—the kind that rarely failed to fascinate a woman—and his complexion,

tanned by years of open-air life, was all that a health vendor could desire.

The private bar of the Crown and Woolpack seemed smaller and more thronged than ever when Potterson's huge figure stepped in through the swing doors. Instinctively people made way for him as he approached the counter—instinctively people always had made way for him. He was well known, of course. George, the bartender, knew what he liked and had it ready for him without waiting for an order. "Warm night, George," he said, enjoying the first exquisite sip of the long-anticipated "double." His deep baritone carried perfectly across the room full of loud conversation. " 'Evening, boys," he added, nodding to the room in general, and a confused murmur of salutations returned to him. Everybody was staring at him, thinking about him, admiring him—and suddenly, as he glanced over the top of his glass, he perceived that among the admirers was an extraordinarily pretty young woman.

Now Potterson was extremely susceptible to pretty young women, and to exercise his charm over them was the keenest of all his vanities. Wherefore, with a deliberation and a confidence born of long practice, he smiled at her.

Faintly, yet with undeniable encouragement, she smiled back. His spirits rose even higher. She found him irresistible, of course, as all women did. But, by Jove, she *was* a good-looker—red-lipped, dark-eyed, oval-faced—an absolute beauty. From her dress and manner and the hand that rested on the edge of the counter, he reckoned to size her up unerringly—working-class woman, not married long, husband in a poor job, consequently kept short of money, consequently discontented, rebellious, eager to snatch at what life had denied her. Ay, how well he knew the type, and how well he had profited by its existence!

"Thirsty weather," he remarked, looking down at her.

"Too thirsty for me," she answered, perhaps a shade crossly. Her voice, he noted, was pleasantly musical.

"Too thirsty, eh? Well, you're in the right place for that, anyway."

"Yes, if my old man would only buy me another drink."

"And won't he?"

"Not 'im. He's scared of me getting drunk. Now, I ask you, do I look like a woman who would get drunk?"

He wondered if she were slightly drunk already. But he replied, rather hoping she were, "Of course you don't. And have another drink with me if your fellow's too mean to give you one."

He had spoken loudly, and the crowd, as he had intended, overheard and began to titter. He liked them to be spectators of his prowess with a woman. In less than a minute he had reached that stage of jeering with her about her husband! Smart work, that!

"Ssh," she whispered mockingly. "He might hear you, and then he'd knock you down for sayin' that! Better take care, young man!" Across the counter she snapped, "Mine's a gin, George."

The crowd's titter became a gathering roar of laughter, and suddenly Potterson glimpsed the reason for it. The woman's husband was actually standing beside her! Oh, this was really rich—something he would think of and enjoy in retrospect many a time afterwards! A little, undersized, hollow-chested man, pale and careworn, shabbily dressed—the sort that is born to say "sir" to everybody. Then it occurred to him that he had seen the face somewhere before—why, heavens, yes, he was the man to whom he had given the pills that very night, not a quarter of an hour before. What a joke! And how on earth had he managed to net such a splendid creature as that woman? Ah, but life—and especially life as he knew it—was full of such mysteries.

The situation, however, added full spice to his enjoyment. He always took a keen pleasure in emphasizing his own power in front of others who lacked it, and nothing gratified him more than to flirt with a pretty woman before the very eyes of a husband who had not the nerve to object. It made him feel big.

To the little man he said, with patronizing condescension: "Too bad, my good man, to make myself known to your wife without your permission—but then, that's your fault for having such a darned pretty wife. Somebody'll steal her from you someday, you bet—especially if you don't give her what she asks for. Anyhow, you'll join us both in a drink, won't you?"

The man smiled sheepishly (how well Potterson knew his type also) and said he would have a bitter.

Potterson went on, taking care that all the bar should hear: "Your wife was warning me about you just now—told me I'd better be careful or you'd knock me down. Glad to see you don't intend to, after all. I should hate to be knocked down."

Again the man smiled sheepishly. The crowd laughed in derision, and even the woman could not forbear a titter at her husband's expense. "I won't let him," she said, with mock pity in her voice. "He's a real tiger when he's roused—you'd never believe. Ain't you, Bert?" she added, sipping her gin.

"Don't give in to him," said Potterson, keeping up the banter. "He's a terrible fighter, I can see, but you'll win in the end if you tackle him the right way. Fight and win is my motto in this world." He relapsed a little into his marketplace manner. "If you want health, get it—it's there for you to have. If you want wealth—same thing. Fight and win it. If you want to talk to a pretty woman in a pub, well there's no reason why you shouldn't, is there?"

The woman giggled delightfully.

"Have another drink with me, my dear," resumed Potterson, well pleased with his rate of progress. "George, another gin for the lady and another double for me. And this gentleman will take another bitter, I daresay. Yes, after a fairly adventurous life all over the world I think I can claim that I've won pretty nearly all I ever wanted to win. I'm not grumbling. Life's a grand thing when you can say that."

"But a rotten thing when you can't," put in a man's voice from the crowd.

Potterson heard and welcomed the interruption, it made him more the center of attention than ever. "But you *can,* sir!" he thundered, fixing the crowd in general with his carefully practiced Napoleonic stare. "To a man who has red blood in his veins, life is bursting with prizes ripe for capture!" (One of his stock phrases, that was.) "You want something—very well, if you're a man, a *man* in the fullest sense of the word—you get it! Fight for it, if need be—but get it, that's the main thing! Why, if I were to tell you half the things that have happened in my own life—" He drained his tumbler at a gulp, and through the glass he saw the little man looking up at him eagerly, evidently contemplating some remark. "Yes?" he said encouragingly, as a schoolmaster might interrogate a small child.

"Mister," began the man, with obvious shyness and embarrassment. His voice lacked even the semblance of refinement that his wife's had. "Mister, you'll excuse me makin' bold to ask you a question—but what you says interests me a good deal. Now, I'm a bit of a readin' man—in my spare time, o' course—and I've heard about the philosophy of that German fellow Nitsky, or whatever 'is name is—"

Potterson's lip curled. Again he recognized the type—one of those down-at-the-heels fellows you found in public libraries poring over queer books. "Nitsky my foot!" he cried, winking boldly at the woman. "Never heard of the chap and don't want to. *I* have my own

philosophy—my own rules of life—just as I have my own rules of health. And my own are quite good enough for me."

"But Nitsky says—"

"To hell with what Nitsky says. Look here, my good man, it's not a bit of use your stuffing me with the damn fool nonsense of some damned foreigner. What *I* want—and what I'll listen to with pleasure—are your own ideas, if you've got any."

The man flushed under the brutality of the sarcasm. "Well, sir," he resumed respectfully, "if you'll let me put it my own way, mebbe I can explain. It seems to me—not being an eddicated man, o' course—that it ain't much use expectin' to get everythin' in this world."

"And why not?"

"Because there ain't enough of everythin' to go round."

"There's enough for you, my man, if you go in and get it!"

"But some other fellow may get it first."

"Then take if off him."

"Fight 'im, you mean, Mister?"

Potterson roared as he might have done across a marketplace. The naivete of the little fellow went to his brain as intoxicatingly as the whiskey; never had he met a more perfect foil to his own self-conceit. "Yes, my good fellow, *fight* him! Most things worth having have to be fought for. Lord, when I look back and think of the fights I've had—"

"You, Mister?"

"Well, do you think I've never had to put up my fists to a man? *Look!*" With a sweeping gesture, he rolled up his sleeve and bared his arm above the elbow. "Look at that muscle, sir! *Feel* it! Hard as iron, eh? It's years since my real fighting days, but I'll wager tonight I could kill a man with one blow of this arm of mine if I was driven to it!"

He could feel the woman's admiration on him like a warm glow. How she must contrast his splendid strength and virility with the spongy weakness of her little whelp of a husband! With her eyes so eagerly looking upward to him, and the whiskey fumes pleasantly simmering in his head, he felt a veritable superman. Was he not a superman? Could he not dominate a whole multitude by the magic of his voice and personality? Was not this very ordinary little public-house crowd hanging upon his every word?

His heart swelled with pride; he would show them all what sort of a fellow he was. "Drinks all round on me, George," he cried loudly,

and gloried in the respectful murmur of thanks that followed. How easy it was to handle these people! A loud voice and a free drink—or a free box of pills, for that matter—and they were his entirely.

*"Kill?"* he heard the woman whisper, and the awe with which she spoke the word gave him the most rapturous sensation of power. "I guess I wouldn't like to quarrel with you, then, young feller."

He liked the way she called him "young feller"; he was fifty-seven and his hair beneath the dye was an already silvering grey. He laughed loudly and put his huge hand on her shoulder—it always marked a stage when you first touched a woman. And she winced, too—how delightful that was! "My dear, you never need have any fear of me. Never in my life have I raised my hand to a woman. But, by God, if it was a man I was up against—"

"What would you do?" she breathed in an eager whisper, her dark eyes smoldering.

*"Do?"* He took a gulp of whiskey to gain inspiration. "What would I do? I think I'd better not tell you, m'dear. Not nice for a lady to know about."

Suddenly her attitude changed. She began to laugh at him—mockingly—as formerly she had laughed at her husband. She was drunk, of course—quite drunk. "Go on, young feller, I don't believe you! You can brag about all you *would* do, all right—so can anybody. But I'll bet you never *have* done anything!"

"Haven't I?" He leered down at her with a sharp, half angry light in his eyes. He could not endure to be jeered at—though she looked damnably pretty over it, he had to admit. God, she was a fine little creature. If only— But he had to nerve himself for the mental effort of answering her. "That shows how little you know of me," he said. "I'm not a boaster. I don't go round telling everybody what I've done. I've done things, as a matter of fact, that nobody *would* believe."

"An' I'm not surprised, either. We ain't all fools, even if we do buy your sugar-and-soap pills."

He was angry then—furiously angry—and the crowd's laugh, for the first time directed against himself, stung him in his weakest spot. "My good woman," he said, carefully controlling himself, "like all women, you're damned unreasonable. You want to know too much. Nevertheless, I'll tell you—if you want to know, and if you don't believe it, I can't help it, it's the truth, anyway. I've not lived the life of a lounge-lizard. I've seen the world. I've lived with the raw, naked elementals of life." (Another of his stock phrases.) "I've had to fight. I've had to kill. Up the Orinoco River, when I was

attacked by Indians with poisoned darts, I put three of them to sleep with my bare fists and nothing else!"

"Oh, out there—that don't count. Anythin' can happen in them sort o' places. It's over here that matters to most of us. An' if you was to kill a man in England with nothin' but your bare fists, you'd be copped by the police the next day and sent to swing within three months."

"Perhaps," he answered cautiously. "Perhaps not." He was glad that the little man was preparing for another of his plaintive interventions. He heard him say: "She's right, Mister—if you don't mind me sayin' so. A feller with your strength might easily kill a chap, but the trouble begins arterwards when the cops are out agin you."

So the little man was turning on him, too? Ah, well, he knew how to deal with *him*. A little heavy sarcasm. "Cops, eh? So you're afraid of *them,* are you?"

"I daresay I might be, Mister, if I'd done a murder."

"Murder! *Murder?* Who in the name of ten thousand devils was talking about murder?" For the moment his heart stopped beating—then raced on faster than ever as his brain came to the rescue. Murder? Very well, if they wanted to talk about it, *he'd* show them. He said, with studied insolence in voice and manner, "Oh, you *would* be afraid, naturally, whether you'd done a murder or not. You were born that way."

He waited for the general laugh and then continued, gathering impetus: "But let me tell you, sir, that the man who is sure of himself—the man, that is, who is a man in the fullest sense of the word" (he had used that phrase before, but no matter) "that man, I say, is not afraid of the police or of anything or anybody in the whole world!" He paused impressively, enjoying the echoes of his voice.

"You mean, Mister, that a man oughter be able to do a murder an' not be found out?"

"I mean, sir, that a man ought to be successful. That's my creed—my rule of life. If he commits murder, it ought to be a successful murder. And the successful murder isn't found out."

"You think it possible, then, Mister?"

"Possible? Of course it's possible. Everything in this world is possible to the man who knows his job. What do you suppose happens when a fellow pulls off a really well planned affair?"

"You think the police don't get him?"

"My good man, the police aren't even called in. Nobody dreams of 'em. The verdict is accident, maybe, or perhaps even suicide. I tell you, sir, the battle is half lost when the word murder is first mentioned."

"'Alf *lost?* You mean 'alf *won,* Mister?"

"*Won?* No—lost, of course. Oh, well, looking at it from the police point of view, naturally—" He signaled for another drink. "Bah—the police. What are they? They ain't got an idea in their heads, most of 'em."

"Ah, but, Mister, they gets 'old of ideas, some'ow. It's a queer thing, the way they gets 'old of clues an' things. Now my cousin's brother-in-law's at Scotland Yard, and *'e* tells me some o' the things that goes on."

"And you believe him, of course. You *would.* Naturally what a policeman says about himself is very pleasant to hear. But all the time they know—they all know from experience—that the well planned crime is *never* found out!"

He stopped, rather wondering what he had been talking about. He was being pretty eloquent, anyhow—he could see how closely he had seized on the attention of the whole room. Ah, yes, the question of crime and being found out—funny sort of argument to have, but taproom conversations did lead up to queer things. He took a gulp of neat whiskey and added, "Yes, sir, there are men walking the streets of this country today, respected and worthy citizens, who, if the truth were known, would be queuing up for the scaffold. If the truth were known, mark you. But it isn't. And it never will be. The affair was well planned."

"Though they say, Mister, that somethin' always gives you away."

"Not if you've a ha'porth of brains," he snapped contemptuously. "Of course, if you haven't you'd better lead a respectable life." He laughed loudly and finished his glass. Strange how he had been driven to lecture a bar-parlor on such a topic. "Same again, George," he muttered.

The woman was smiling at him provokingly. "Seems to me, then, young feller, that if I ever want to kill anybody I'd better come to you for advice."

She was still half mocking him, but he could see the light of admiration winning through again. It exhilarated him, made him want to renew his conquest to the full. "Well, m'dear, it's not for me to say—but I guess I can give most people good advice about most things."

"Still," continued the little man, with naïve seriousness, "I don't think I'd ever kill anybody, even if I knew 'ow. Not that there ain't some folks as deserve to be put out. My brother, f'instance. Lives up at Millport in a swell 'ouse—servants, motor cars, all that. Rollin' in money—did me out o' my share when my father died. Made 'is fortune doing other people since. Wouldn't gimme a penny, not if I was starvin', 'e wouldn't. Sometimes I sees 'im at the station of an evenin'—'e 'as a factory 'ere—I sees 'im steppin' into 'is first-class kerridge on the Millport train and I could kill 'im with my own 'ands, straight I could."

Potterson stared at him with a certain interest. It was extraordinary that such a mild little fellow should nourish such a hatred. Hardly what one would expect—hardly even what he, Potterson, the student of human nature, would have expected. "Well, why don't you kill him?" he said, with a wink at the crowd.

"I ain't got the courage, that I 'aven't," replied the other. His frankness was so amusing, Potterson began to struggle with whiskified laughter. "Besides, Mister, come to think of it, I dunno as there'd be any way. 'E's so scared of burglars nobody'd ever get in 'is 'ouse."

"Better kill him in the street, then," said Potterson almost hysterically. Really, the fellow was as good as a music hall.

"No, Mister—that wouldn't do, either, with everybody lookin' on."

"Oh, don't—don't," Potterson cried, holding his sides with merriment. "Oh, Lord—you make me laugh more than I've laughed for months! I think I know now why your wife married you—she thought you were the damn funniest thing she'd ever seen!" He laughed till the tears streamed from his eyes and mingled with the perspiration on his nose and cheeks. "Besides," he added, pulling himself together, "you're wrong. There *is* a way. There always is."

"No, Mister. Not with 'im. Even you couldn't find one."

"Couldn't I?" Reaction, after the hysteria of laughing so much, gave him a tone that was curt and almost angry. "Couldn't I, my little fellow? Don't you be too sure what I could and couldn't do!"

He felt the woman's hand on his arm like a bar of fire—another stage, when the woman first did the touching. "I suppose you think you could, eh?" she whispered.

"M'dear," he began thickly, wondering if he might dare put an encircling arm round her waist. He was almost doing so when she turned on him fiercely "None of that!" What a little spitfire she

was! Hopelessly drunk, of course. He heard her continuing, "All talk—brag—boast—no proof—that's the sort he is!"

One or two of the crowd tittered and chuckled. He felt a dull angry flush mounting to his cheeks and stabbing his eyes from the inside. Making fun of him, was she? He'd show her—and the rest, too. "Look here!" he shouted, moving as if to take off his coat. "If there's any man here who thinks I'm nothing but a boaster, let him come up and tell me so—man to man! And if there's any woman thinks so, let her keep her damned mouth shut!"

"Rot!" retorted the woman. "I dare you to prove what you say. You say there is always a way of killin' a chap if you want to. Well, to prove that you gotter take a test case. Take my 'usband's brother—'e'll do as good as any. 'Ow would you work the trick with 'im?"

He felt the crowd veering away from him in sympathy—a thing he could never endure. "Aye, that's a fair question," he heard someone say. Other voices came to his ears—eager, critical, derisive voices. And at the same time, looking down at the woman's face so close to his own, he was filled with an overmastering, intolerable longing to subdue her, to justify himself before her, to make himself forever memorable in her life. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. That woman at Portsmouth—nothing to her. Nor the little French girl. Nor even Maudie Raines—Maudie who years before had driven him to such madness that—

"Same again, George," he muttered. Then he gritted his teeth and fortified himself for a new struggle. "You're a fine pack of fools!" he cried irritably at last. "How the hell can I tell what the best plan would be when I don't know the man or his ways or anything about him?"

"I'll tell you," whispered the woman. "I'll answer anything you want to know about 'im."

Her eyes, lustrous and burning, seemed to swim into his seething brain. *She* would tell him. Could it be that she *wanted* him to succeed before her husband, before the crowd? Was she on his side? Extraordinary—there was something in her eyes, in the way she looked at him, that reminded him of Maudie Raines. He began to speak loudly, in something of his marketplace manner, yet with greater emphasis than he usually employed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "I accept the challenge! I'm a man of my word and I mean every single word that I say. No nonsense about Parker Potterson. He's straight—he delivers the goods. Mind you, in my opinion, this is an entirely abshurd—

absurd—argument, discussing how to kill a man who is living a few miles away at this preshent moment—and who, despite our friend here, is probably a very decent and respectable member of the community. It is, I repeat, an absurd business altogether—and, if I may say so, in very bad taste. It was that, and that alone, that made me reluctant at first to enter into it. But"—and here his voice acquired a rich cathedral tone—"having had my word doubted, ladish—ladies—and gentlemen, having had foul ashpersions cast upon my good faith, what can I do but take up the challenge, good tashte or bad tashte?"

"Get to the point, Mister," cried a voice in the crowd, and Potterson turned upon it savagely. "I'll get to the point in *my* time, shir, and not in yours! And if you dare to interrupt me again, I'll knock your damned head off!"

He paused to appreciate the silence. But, by God, he was getting them—calming them, thrilling them with his words. How marvelous it was to be able to do that! The old sense of power was on him again, but more than ever before—more than ever before in his life. A Berserker fierceness hammered at his temples. *He* would show them—never in Finchingfold would that night at the Crown and Woolpack be forgotten. "Ladies and gentlemen, where wash I? Ah, I remember. Thish gentleman—unknown to me—who lives at Millport. Very well, I accept the challenge"—and he leered down at the woman—"but you must always bear in mind that because *I* could do a thing, it doesn't follow that anybody else could!"

"Never mind. Tell us how *you* would do it."

"I'm going to. I'm going to make you realize that Parker Potterson is a man of his word. If Parker Potterson saysh he can do a thing, then he can do it. Now then—" He turned to the little man. "Did I, sir, or did I not hear you remark a moment or so ago that you often saw your brother at Finchingfold Station, stepping into a firsht-class carriage on the train for Millport?"

"That's right, Mister. 'E travels every day back'ards and for'ards."

"Good. That gives me an idea. He musht be killed on the train."

"But 'ow, Mister?"

"Ah, that's jusht where the brains come in. But it'sh ver' simple. Get into the next carriage when hish train leavesh in an evening. Make sure hish carriage and yoursh are empty—mosht likely they are, ash he travelsh firsht. Then—" He stopped, caught his breath rather wildly, and added: "Ishn't there a long tunnel between Finchingfold and Millport?"

"That's right, Mister. You know the line, then?"

"Never you mind what I know—it'sh a deal more'n you ever will, anyway. Ver' good—the tunnel, then. All you gotter do is wait till the train entersh the tunnel, slip out of your compartment along the footboard, an' get in *hish* compartment, then kill your man—"

"But 'ow?"

"How th' hell d' you think? Heaps of waysh. Throttle him if y'like. Or a hammer. Know how t'ushe a hammer?"

"Tidy-sized mallet might do," said the man with fatuous simplicity. "I'm a carpenter by trade, I am, an' I'm pretty well used to a mallet."

Potterson's eyes lit up with a hectic gleam. "Shplendid! Glad to hear y'can do shomething. An' a mallet'sh all right—jusht as good as a hammer—perhapsh better."

"But what abart after that, Mister? My cousin's brother-in-law, what I was tellin' you of, 'e sezs to me that the real trouble abart these things is gettin' rid o' the body arterwards."

"Cousin'sh brother-in-law'sh a fool. Dishpose of the body—eashy to any man of brainsh!"

"Well, 'ow abart it?"

"Eashy, I tell you."

"But in this 'ere case, Mister, on a train?"

"Eashy. Ain't there a river to crosh—an' a big bridge—jusht before the train getsh to Millport?"

"That's right, Mister. Three-arch bridge over the River Fayle."

"Damnit, then—can't y'shee? Eashy to any man of brainsh. Ash train croshes bridge, open door an' throw body over par-parapet into river! Hey? Ain't that a good plan? Now would you—would you have thought of that? Or you, m'dear?" He turned to the woman, eager to taste the reward of his triumph.

She laughed. "Somebody'd see you from the towpath, most likely."

"Ah! That'sh clever of you, m'dear. Thish li'l plan o' mine worksh besht in winter. Nobody on towpath in winter—choosh nice rainy night in December—November—Chrishmash. An' lishen to me—it'sh a damn good plan, I tell you—becosh when the body comesh ashore, they'll say, 'Poor feller, shad accshident, fell backwardsh, mark on hish head where he hit par-parapet.' An' thoshe who don't believe that'll shay, 'Coursh it'sh shuicide, really—only relativesh tryin' t'hush thingsh up.' " God, what was he talking about—what had he been saying? Who, anyway, had begun this fool argument? He was

mad—the room was whirling round and round, his brain was on fire.

The woman was still laughing. "Yes, it's a plan, all right, I'll grant that. Only I'd like to see my Bert throwin' the body out, that's all! Why, 'e couldn't 'ardly throw a dead cat over a fence!"

For the second time that night, Potterson laughed till the tears ran down from his whiskey-sodden eyes. *Triumph!* He had scored over them all. She was laughing *with* him now, not at him. He could feel her yielding to him—realizing his power and strength as he had willed her to. Lord, what a grand world it was for those who were born to be natural lords over their fellows!

"Mebbe he couldn't!" he cried hoarsely. "But I never guar-guaranteed he could, did I? It'sh a job for a man of shtrength, not for a weakling! All th' world ish open to th' man of shtrength—shtrength and brainsh, both t'gether—an' the weakesht goesh to th' wall!" It was the eternal saga of his dreams.

"Well, Mister," said the little man, "you've give me a fair answer, I'll say that. An' now p'rhaps you'll 'ave just a last drink with me?"

"Dummind. 'Nother one, Georsh."

He knew he was perfectly drunk—too drunk to know what he was doing or saying. Yet a blind, insensate pride in himself made him believe that never, never had he triumphed so mightily. And all because of the woman. But for her, a little idle boasting might have been but nothing else. It was she who had driven him to claim this strange and utmost triumph. She was the sort he would do anything for—just as he had done for Maudie Raines so many years ago. Always, women had been his weakness—his weakness by making him feel so strong. There was nothing he would not have done for a woman he fancied. And there was nothing still that he would not do. At fifty-seven, the same fire was in him as at twenty-seven.

While he was drinking, he made to put his arm round the woman's waist, and this time she did not repulse him. His head throbbed and sang with exhilaration. He was winning her! His arm closed round her, and again he felt that entrancing delicate shrinking of her body away from him. She shrank, but somehow diffidently, almost invitingly.

"Satishfied I'm a man of my word, m'dear?" he hiccupped, and she replied:

"I'll certainly say you are if you'll answer me just one more question. You know, they always do say that it's the little things as gets a man down, as often as not. Now take that mallet, f'rinstance.

What'd you do with it afterward? If you was to throw it into the river with the body, it'd float and be washed ashore somewhere, and then maybe, with the bloodstains on it, it'd give you away—quite likely, anyhow. So you see, young feller, that looks to me the weak spot in your plan—that mallet. Couldn't you get rid of it some way or another?"

"Yes, Mister," the little man echoed in his plaintive whine, "I 'adn't thought o' that, I admit, but my old gel, she's a reg'lar smart 'un—trust 'er for not missin' anythin'."

A murmur went round the bystanders. "Yes, I reckon 'e's got you there, Mister! Tell us what you'd do with the mallet!"

The mallet. What *would* he do with it? Potterson fought for coherence—for coherence to think as well as to speak. *The mallet.* Extraordinary that anyone should be asking him questions about a mallet!

He glanced down and saw the woman's eyes fixed on him. His brain reeled with joy and she began to tremble. She was *his.* She no longer shrank away from his touch or even tried to. He could feel her breath rising and falling like a livid ache in his own body. It was his moment—the moment for which he had always lived.

"The mallet—tell me!" she whispered, and he knew then that he would answer even that last question, an answer that would remove the final barrier between himself and her!

*"Mallet?"* he roared in a voice that made passers-by in the marketplace outside stop to wonder what was happening. "Yesh, 'course you oughter deshtroy th' mallet! Think Parker Pottershon'sh fool enough t'forget important thin' li' that? Yesh—gotter deshtroy mallet altogether, shomehow."

"But, 'ow—that's the question, Mister," queried the little man, with that strange, half pathetic, half exasperating patience.

Potterson smiled then—a wide, uncanny smile from which all the light had gone out except the hideous light of evil. "That'sh right. Lemme think. How deshtroy mallet? Ah! Idea! Idea o' mine—brainsh full o' good ideash, hey? Ain't there a slag-heap jusht outside Millport Shtation—one o' them burnin' shlag-heapsh near gashworksh?"

"That's right, Mister."

"Then, by God, ain't it easy—easy as kishin' a pretty woman like yo' wife—throw mallet on shlag-heap an' in a minute, two minitsh, all burned to shinder!"

And with a strange weakness in all his limbs, he reeled toward the face that at that final moment sharply eluded his . . .

"So that's how you did it?" said the little man suddenly, speaking [illegible] from a different world. "I'd [illegible] ned [illegible] el Potter-Jones, alias Richard Morley, I arrest you for the wilful murder of Thomas Raines on the night of December the twelfth, eighteen ninety-eight."

Two of the bystanders seized the cheap-jack's arms and led him away, the little man and the woman following.

[illegible] hours later as she [illegible] d- [illegible] to throw the mallet on the slag-heap at all? Why not simply have put it in a bag and carried it through the station barrier in the ordinary way? He could easily have destroyed it afterward."

"True," answered Detective-Inspector Howard of Scotland Yard, "but then that wouldn't have been Morley. Some criminals are not clever enough, but Morley was *too* clever. That mallet on the slag-heap was the one quite unnecessary touch of genius that let him down. And he was so proud of it that years afterward he couldn't resist the temptation to brag about it to a pretty woman." He gave his wife an affectionate glance as he added: "Well, Maud, it was *your* triumph, chiefly—you played a dashed unpleasant part remarkably well. But it was the mallet that finished him—as surely as it finished your poor father thirty years ago."

*Third in a trilogy that began in EQMM in August 1979 . . .*

# THE PREY

## *by JOHN DOBBYN*

He was green as a colt that had never been broke,
And I'll never forget how he grinned—
As he pushed through the mob in that Skagway saloon,
You could tell he was ripe to be skinned.
He was one of the thousands who'd flooded the docks
When the word of the strike hit the news—
He was twenty years old, and a chance for the gold
Was an offer he couldn't refuse.
The Nineties were gay for the ones who could pay
For champagne and the music and fun,
But for most of the rest it was soup lines and tears,
And a pauper's grave once it was done.
On the docks of Seattle, he'd fought with the hordes
For the chance to be stuffed in the hold
Of a steamer that headed for Skagway up north—
The first lap in the race for the gold.
It was rough, and he knew it'd get rougher still,
But he had nowhere else he could turn—
He was broke, with no job, and his options were such
That he had no real bridges to burn.
I was dealing the blackjack at Soapy's Saloon
When I first caught a look at his face—
The innocence glowed in those tender young eyes,
But I knew it'd die in that place.
The hunger that felt like a spike in his gut
For a meal—even anything cold—
Was nothing compared to the raging desire
For a stake to get after the gold.
He moseyed around like a dog on the beg,
Just aching to pick up some scraps,
And I knew he'd soon deal with the brokers of hell
Who caught innocent flesh in their traps.

Well, I wasn't the only one noticed the kid—
There was Soapy himself at the bar,
And the greed screwed up lines 'round the eyes that were fixed
On this lamb without even a scar.
I could practically hear the old tumblers click
As his mind focused in on a plan—
He fingered the kid with a jut of his thumb
And a wink to old Indian Dan.
Old Indian Dan—there's a real piece of work,
'Bout as old and as tough as the hills,
Rough-chiseled from bark with two coal-fire eyes
That could give a buck grizzly the chills.
He grabbed off a bottle of booze from the bar
And waved the boy down with his hand—
"Hey, kid, you look beat. Take a load off your feet.
What you say to a drink wit' old Dan?"
They huddled in tight for the rest of the night
And I watched while the Indian dealed.
It was 'long about dawn that the papers were drawn
And I knew that they had the kid sealed.
They'd put up the stake, for just half of the take,
And the kid, well, he'd put up his skin,
To be frozen and cracked on the wilderness rack
For the rest of the gold he'd bring in.
For a sackful of sourdough, bacon, and beans,
And the dogs that he'd need for his quest,
They'd bought a half share of the prize if he won—
That's the deal; they'd let him keep the rest.
Now old Dan was a hustler from Heaven knows where,
Trading mostly in dogs for the trace—
Where he got 'em, well, lots of us had our ideas,
But no one said much to his face.
They were queer—there was something that wasn't just right—
And I'll tell you between you and me
That the blood in those beasts was more blood of the wolf
Than of any dog you'd ever see.

I closed down the game when the powwow broke up,
'Cause I wanted to speak to the kid—
I figured it might be the last chance I'd get,
So I'd better move fast, and I did.

I caught him alone, and I told him straight out
That he'd better be fast on his guard—
I'd seen all I need of Soapy and Dan
To know they were slick as a card.
I figured they'd found them, or stole them, a strike,
But they weren't going to work for the gold—
They just latched onto kids they could buy for a song
And let them break their backs in the cold.
The deal was the same—they'd put up the stake
For a share of the nuggets they found—
But the catch, and I told him as plain as I could,
Was that none of those kids could be found.
He thanked me and grinned, but I still couldn't swear
If my warning was heeded or not,
Then old Dan was there to escort him upstairs
For a few hours' sleep on his cot.

I was there the next day when they all gathered 'round
To see him mush off with Dan's team—
They had plotted a course that would take him northeast
Through the worst of the worst to his dream.
You've heard the expression, "Till Hell freezes over"—
Well, friend, I can tell you it did,
And God set it down on the top of the world,
And that's where they sent that poor kid.
But before he took off, I remember old Dan
Took him aside for a bit of advice—
"Keep the dogs in the harness from sunup till dark,
And at night stake 'em out on the ice.
These ain't what you'd call normal huskies, ya see,
They'll cower and mind when alone,
But just get 'em together and there's hell to pay—
They'll tear you apart skin from bone."
Funny thing, I remember that later that day
Old Dan and the Boss were alone—
I could hear they were griping that something was gone:
That old parka that Dan used to own.
A bilious old thing, and they figured the kid
Had taken it out on the sly,
But the funny thing was he'd left one of his own,
Like a swap, but they couldn't tell why.

In any event, it was eight or nine months
Till we next heard a word of the kid.
It was one of those Eskimos up by the pole
Who came down as they sometimes did,
And in massacred English he babbled a tale
Of a musher whose face was ice white,
Who drove on terrain even Eskimos feared
In the dark of the long Arctic night.
When he said that the dogs looked like wolves on the snow,
We all knew who the rider had been,
And old Dan and the Boss were all ears when he said
That he seemed to be heading on in.
But the Eskimo figured a week at the least,
Consid'ring the speed he could go,
'Cause whatever was weighting the sled took its toll
And the runners sank low in the snow.
The dogs were exhausted, and ten miles a day
Was the most they could possibly do—
The Eskimo figured he'd camp by Pike's Cone
For a night, or maybe for two.
They were up on their feet, the Boss and old Dan,
And their faces were screwed in a grin—
The glance they exchanged was the kind that men give
When they've bet on a horse that came in.
They gave the old Eskimo booze and some gold
To guide them up north to Pike's Cone—
It's the Eskimo told me the rest of the tale
When he mushed back to Skagway alone.

It was early in March, and the days were still short,
But they wanted to mush through the night—
The Eskimo knew the terrain, so he did,
And the next day the Cone was in sight.
They camped and they broke out supplies that they'd brought
And they fed that old Eskimo booze
Till they figured he'd tied on a good one for sure
And he'd spend the whole night in a snooze.
But the old boy could take it and come back for more,
Just like filling an old hollow leg,
So he wasn't passed out, but just high on the nod
When they drained the last drop from the keg.

He saw them sneak out when the moon was full up
And head out by the way of the Cone—
And figured the action, whatever it was,
Was out yonder wherever they'd gone.
So he silently followed the crunch of the snow,
And he heard the old Indian say,
"There's the camp—let's go 'round. I'll take care of the dogs—
Stay behind me back out of the way."
The dogs were chained up out of sight of the camp
And they snarled as old Dan came around,
But he whistled a tone that the dogs seemed to know
And they settled back down on the ground.
He pulled up each chain and they circled and growled
As he kept them at bay with that tone—
He led the whole pack to the edge of the camp,
Where a figure lay sleeping alone.
They crouched and their fangs dripped saliva like blood
As he held them in check by his will,
Till the fury that raged like a bull in a cage
Splintered loose as he screamed the word, "Kill!"
The snow seemed to billow in back of the pack
As they rushed like the surge of a tide—
The lead dog was first in his leap for the prey,
And the rest were right there at his side.
It looked like a kill that a cub could have made,
But the man that they thought was out cold
Sprang out of the covers and met them head on,
And caught the lead dog in a hold.
And this was the part where the Eskimo stopped,
'Cause he couldn't believe what he saw.
The instant the teeth of that lead dog sank in,
He recoiled and fell back on his paw.
He was stunned, and the Eskimo couldn't tell why,
But the cry came again for the kill
And the dogs spun around, and they spotted the man
Who was standing by Dan on the hill.
The fury was back, the confusion was spent,
There was death in their fangs and their claws,
And Soapy, the man who had called all the shots,
Was the target of ten snapping jaws.

He scrambled and ran till he fell in the snow,
And they came with the force of a flood—
They were out of control, first with hunger, then rage,
As they caught the first taste of the blood.
There was nothing on earth that could put on the reins
As their instincts killed all that they'd learned.
When they finished with Soapy, they turned on old Dan,
And his orders and curses were spurned.
The Eskimo said that the fury of Hell
Must be like to the sight on that hill—
By the time that they finished with Soapy and Dan,
They were sated and spent from the kill,
And I guess that that's just about all of the tale—
The kid got the dogs back at dawn.
I reckon he'd found all the gold he could use,
'Cause the kid and the gold are now gone.
Oh, there's one thing the Eskimo asked me about,
Why those dogs turned away from the kid.
He was smart—he was wearing the coat of old Dan,
The one that he'd stolen and hid.
I figure he listened and took me to heart
When I told him he'd better take care—
He knew that the scent on that parka of Dan's
Was the best kind of shield he could wear.

I'm still up in Skagway, but someday I'd love
To go down to the States for a fling—
And I bet if I do, and I look up the kid,
He'll be set up down there like a king.
On the nights up in Skagway, I think about that,
And I always get kind of a glow.
I'd love to see how it worked out for the kid.
Ah, well, maybe next year I'll go.

**a *NEW* Griswold story by**

**ISAAC ASIMOV**

*The writer, Griswold told the others, had never managed to attain critical acclaim or golden opinions, but he did manage to accumulate a sizable estate out of the popular trash he wrote—one of over fifteen million dollars after taxes and expenses were subtracted. What's more, he died without heirs, so that he had the opportunity of making an odd will . . .*

# THE LEGACY

## *by ISAAC ASIMOV*

We were all in our accustomed chairs in the library of the Union Club, and I said, lowering my newspaper, "Last night I finished one of those tales in which a long-lost heir shows up and everyone has to decide whether he's real or an imposter."

I looked across toward the large wingchair in which Griswold rested peacefully, eyes closed, and Scotch-and-soda in hand. I held up five fingers.

Baranov shook his head vigorously, making it clear he refused to wager. He said, "I like that sort of thing myself, and my sympathies are always with the supposed heir. Even if he turns out to be a fake, he has usually worked so hard at making the imposture plausible that you can't help feeling he's earned the money."

Jenkins said, "In the days before photographs, fingerprints, and modern documentation, faking was easy. You even had your Perkin Warbecks and your False Dmitris making plausible claims to be heir to various thrones. Nowadays, though, I don't think such imposture can be maintained at all. Ever. At all."

He was staring at Griswold earnestly as he spoke (as were we all), and now the old fellow finally rose to the bait. His ice-blue eyes

opened and he said, "Such problems of possible imposture are by no means confined to the pre-photographic centuries. Ten years ago, I came up against a case of a disputed legacy myself."

He paused to sip at the drink he had been holding in his death-grip.

"I'm sure you did," I said in a careful pretense of indifference, and turned back to my newspaper. The other two followed suit and Griswold found himself facing two *New York Times* and one *Wall Street Journal.*

Since it is obvious (said Griswold) that you are all agog to hear the story, I will tell it to you.

Back in 1977, a writer who was not particularly skillful—let's call him Smith, to avoid making that judgment too pointed—but who had had the art of capturing the public fancy, died. He had never managed to attain critical acclaim or golden opinions, but he did manage to accumulate a sizable estate out of the popular trash he wrote—one of over fifteen million dollars after taxes and expenses were subtracted.

What's more, he died without heirs, so that he had the opportunity of making an odd will. The bulk of his estate went to a number of charities, but he reserved a million of it for getting back at those who had offended him.

Understandably, he had always chafed at the manner in which critics had sneered at his books. The more successful and profitable his books became—they were a rather dramatic mix of spies, sex, and sadism—the unkinder the critics became, and the more Smith chafed.

Apparently, though, Smith had faithfully kept a tally of those critics who had been harsh, and those who had said a kind word now and then. The bulk of his will, therefore, was a list of a hundred names reading something like this: "William Dash of the *Suchacity Chronicle,* on March 2, 1963, in reviewing my book, *Skin Off My Nose*, had stated that it was fast-moving and held the reader's interest throughout. To him, therefore, or to his chief heir if he is dead, I bequeath the sum of ten thousand dollars, free of tax or impediment."

One hundred names, as I said, were listed. When he was through with the critics who had offered him crumbs of comfort, he went on to list various readers who had sent him particularly laudatory letters and gave each of them ten thousand dollars as well.

At the conclusion of this listing, he said, "To those who treated my books with narrow-minded calumny and with arrogant sneers, I leave nothing."

It was a petty revenge, of course, but it must have lightened and cheered his lonely deathbed.

Of course, the will was hard on the lawyer who had to draw it up, and on whom the responsibility was placed—in return for a suitable fee, of course—of seeing to it that its terms were carried out. This lawyer, Lewis Rothstein, was a friend of mine, and it was he who came to me with a problem.

He described the will to me and said, "You know, I objected to the will on principle and said that it might be interpreted as a product of vanity and that people might laugh. He only snarled, however, and said, 'Let them laugh. Those who took pleasure in writing nasty reviews will know that a kind word would have gotten them ten thousand dollars and *they* won't laugh.'

"So I did it," Rothstein went on. "It was his money, after all, and he was paying me well. Fortunately, he was extremely meticulous in identifying the beneficiaries. If they were critics who had reviewed his books, he gave the newspaper and date. If they were readers who had applauded him, he gave the complete address as it had appeared in the letter. The result was that, although the task was tedious enough, I had no undue trouble in finding ninety-nine of the beneficiaries—or, in several cases, their heirs—and handing over checks for ten thousand dollars. That left one name."

"Ah," I said. I knew something of the sort was coming. My friends rarely seek me out without some ulterior motive, especially in recent years.

"The name in question was listed simply as John Anderson of Washington, D.C. He was the only one for whom a street number or an organization—something specific—was not given. I said, 'Don't you have this Anderson's address?'

" 'No,' said the writer, 'he sent me a beautiful letter, though, which I received on November 8, 1962, as stated in the will. As it happened, he didn't give any address but Washington, D.C., either in the letter or on the envelope, and that much was borne out on the postmark. He referred to himself as "a Washingtonian of some years standing," so you ought to be able to find him.'

" 'Find him,' I said, rather annoyed. 'I'll find too many of him. There must be any number of John Andersons in Washington, D.C.

How do I choose among them? Were there any hints in the letter? Was he young or old? Black? White? Did he have a middle initial?'

" 'I didn't save the letter,' said Smith wearily. 'I think he left the impression of being young. There was no middle initial or I would have recorded it. Just put an advertisement in the *Washington Post* saying that someone who wrote a fan letter to me in November 1962 should get in touch with you to hear something to his advantage.'

" 'I'll get a dozen applicants.'

" 'You take care of it,' he said stubbornly. 'If you can't find him, just divide the money up among the charities.' He would discuss it no more after that."

Rothstein paused and I said, "Well, Lew, and how many applicants showed up when you advertised?"

Rothstein smiled ruefully. "Only one, actually, but I'm still uncertain. All the beneficiaries of the will have received their money and I'm still hung up on this one."

"Does he seem wrong to you?"

"No," he said. "There's nothing wrong with him that I can point to. He has ample documentation to show that he is a John Anderson now living in Washington, D.C. He's forty-two years old, which would make him twenty-seven or -eight years old in 1962 and that would seem to be about right."

"Did you see his birth certificate?"

"Yes, he brought it on request. He was born in Idaho, but there's no requirement he be born in Washington. The John Anderson who wrote the letter merely described himself as a Washingtonian of some years standing. I tried to trap him. I hinted that the letter had been written by someone merely passing through Washington at the time and asked him exactly when he had visited Washington in 1962 and for what purpose. However, he said he wasn't visiting. He had moved to Washington in 1957, when he was twenty-two. That shook me. It sounded legitimate."

"He might merely have suspected a trap," I offered, "And so taken the chance of evading it. Does he have proof of residence at a particular place in 1962?"

"He says he knocked about for a few years, staying at the Y and at various boarding houses. He admits he doesn't have firm documentary evidence of this and says he understands this might cost him the legacy but that he can't help it. Actually, this also sounds as though it might make him legitimate. Wouldn't an imposter have been careful to fake the necessary evidence?"

"Unless he felt that anything fake in the way of documentation would represent a possible stumbling block. It seems to me that he needn't prove himself to be the right Anderson. If you can't prove him to be the wrong one, wouldn't that be sufficient to place you in a position where you'd have to hand over the money?"

"I'm afraid so," muttered Rothstein.

"Well," I said, trying to be helpful, "Does this Anderson have a copy of the letter he says he wrote to Smith?"

"I asked him that, of course. He says he didn't make a copy. It was handwritten."

"Did Smith say it was handwritten?"

"He said nothing about that and I never thought to ask, I'm afraid. In any case, Anderson said it was handwritten and that he attached no importance to it at the time, so that of course he made no copy. Frankly, that speaks in his favor, too. If he had made a copy of a trivial letter, and had saved it all this time and had produced it, I would have strongly suspected it of being a fake. —But it all leaves me insufficiently certain. If a second Anderson were to show up, I might be able to judge between them, but with just this one I'm not sure. What if I give it to this one and then a second Anderson shows up and can prove he was the right one? Getting the money back from this one might be an enormous problem, and a pretty fool I'd look."

"You can't wait forever," I said.

"I know. That's why I've come to see you. Could you help me?"

"I? What can I do about it?"

"You have this feeling for people. I have a meeting with him in my office tomorrow afternoon at two-thirty and it's really the last one. I'll just have to make my decision after that. Would you join me and help size him up for me? If you think he's the right Anderson—or not the wrong one, anyway—I'll let him have the ten thousand and forget about it."

I hesitated, then agreed. It's difficult to refuse a friend.

John Anderson was a pleasant-looking individual, who appeared younger than he was. He had crisp brown hair, a body that looked as though he went to some trouble to keep fit, and a fresh, open countenance. He was a used-car salesman.

"Which puts my honesty under a cloud at once," he said with an engaging smile, "but I can give you the names of some of my cus-

tomers and you can check my reputation with them, if you wish. In any case, I *did* write the letter."

I said, "I hope you don't mind my asking a few questions, Mr. Anderson. Mr. Rothstein, here, is an old friend, and he's asked me to help out. If you object, however, I won't."

"Go ahead and ask," said Anderson. "If I objected, it would look as though I had something to hide."

The impulse to believe him was strong. I imagined he must be a very good used-car salesman.

I said, "How is it you remember writing the letter, Mr. Anderson? It was fifteen years ago. Surely you have written many fan letters. Why does this one stick in your mind?"

"Actually, I haven't written many fan letters," said Anderson. "That's one thing. Then, too, it's the only letter I wrote to Smith. In fact, I didn't particularly like his books or read many of them. I wasn't a fan of his. I suppose if he knew that he wouldn't have left me the money. I hope it doesn't disqualify me."

"No, it doesn't," said Rothstein. "You receive the legacy—if you do—for the letter and nothing else. Thank you for your honesty, though."

I said, "There was this one book you did like, though. What was its title?"

Anderson hesitated. "I'm afraid I don't remember. —Or anything much about the plot, either. I've been assuming someone would ask me that, and I'll admit I looked through a listing of the novels he's written. None of them strikes a bell, though. Actually, it was the circumstances that impressed me and led to my writing the letter, not the book at all. And I remember the circumstances."

"Good," I said. "Tell me the circumstances."

"Well, in late October 1962, there was the Cuban missile crisis. Do you remember that, Mr. Griswold?"

"Of course."

"There you are, then. It was unforgettable for anyone who lived through it, especially in Washington. For a few days, it looked as though we might actually have a nuclear war. It was eyeball to eyeball between us and the Soviets, and fortunately they blinked. The trouble was that I blinked, too, and a lot. I was scared *witless*. The only thing that saved my sanity that week was reading that book. It lifted me out of reality and kept me going."

"But you don't remember what it was about?"

"No, I was just using it as the equivalent of a tranquilizer. But

once the crisis was over and the book was done, I had to write to Smith to tell him that the book had practically saved my life. I didn't go into detail, just kept saying how thankful I was."

"I can understand that," I said. "The Cuban missile crisis was the real climax of the Cold War."

"It sure was," said Anderson. "President Kennedy was my hero at the time and was I glad I had voted for him! I remembered pulling the lever and I had a real sensation of pleasure at the memory. I had voted for Eisenhower in 1956—the first time I voted—and so there was the feeling I ought to vote for Eisenhower's Vice President, Richard Nixon. I managed, though, to switch parties in 1960. The thing was, I just didn't like Nixon. It's easy to say that *now* after he's had to resign the Presidency under fire, but I honestly didn't like him then, either.

"And then a little over a year after the missile crisis, Kennedy was shot in Dallas. That was another rotten few days."

"Did you have another book to pull you through then?"

"No," said Anderson. "I just watched TV all day long and immersed myself in the sorrow somehow."

I nodded. "I did the same at the time. —Well, thank you, Mr. Anderson, for tolerating my presence. I hope Mr. Rothstein will be able to settle the legacy matter quickly."

"I hope so," said Anderson, without any sign of strain that I could see.

After he left, Rothstein stared at me, then said, "Well, what do you think?"

I said, "Lew, don't give the fellow a cent. He's not the man."

And he wasn't. We never did find the correct John Anderson, and the money was distributed to the charities, as directed. End of story.

"End of story!" howled Baranov. "It certainly is not. How could you tell he was a fake?"

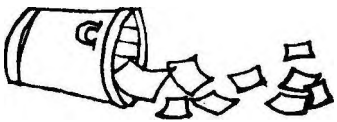
"You mean you don't see it?" said Griswold, in affected surprise. He had finished his drink and now wiped his luxuriant white moustache with the back of his hand. "Surely it's obvious."

"No, it isn't," I said.

Griswold said, "Then suppose you consider that the Twenty-third Amendment to the Constitution first gave the people living in the District of Columbia—which is not part of any state, you know—the right to vote for President and Vice President. It was enacted in 1961, so that the first time that Washingtonians could so vote was

in 1964, when Lyndon Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater. No resident of Washington, D.C., could have voted for John Kennedy in 1960, and no Washingtonian of normal mentality would have been unaware of this, or would have forgotten it since.

"The only conclusion, then, is that John Anderson was not living in Washington in the early 1960s, or he would *certainly* not have made the mistake of saying he had voted for Kennedy. Therefore, he was telling a whopper of a lie in saying he had been living in Washington since 1957. He did not write that letter and was not the right John Anderson."



**a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by**

**PETER TURNBULL**

*"So far as I can see," the hotel receptionist said, "agitated and worried people don't commit suicide. What I mean is, only depressed people or people who are despairing of something commit suicide, don't they? Or maybe people who are in a corner they can't get out of, like a scorpion."*

*"A scorpion?" Sussock said.*

*"Uh huh, my dad told me. He was in the Marines. When they were doing jungle training, they used to catch scorpions . . ."*

# NOT AT ALL LIKE THE SCORPION

***by PETER TURNBULL***

"Riddle me, Jester," said Donoghue, slowly pulling on his pipe.

"Excuse me, sir?" Sussock turned. He was standing close to the double bed on which one person had been lying—the sheets on one side were crumpled, the pillow had the indentation of one head. He was glancing through the personal possessions of the dead man, possessions which lay on the bedside cabinet. A wallet, untouched despite a solid wad of bills and travelers checks and half a dozen credit cards, his passport—Canadian—his watch. The name in the passport and the wallet was the same—Marcel Franier. The address was also the same—a street and district near the city of Montreal. Sussock leafed through the passport and then replaced it among the possessions on the cabinet top, allowing it to rest against an empty bottle which had once contained mineral water. He looked uncomprehendingly at Donoghue.

"I said riddle me, Jester." Donoghue stood by the tall floor-to-

ceiling window. The window was open and the summer breeze wafted the orange curtains gently backward and forward. Beyond the curtains was the balcony. Two hundred feet below the balcony on the baking concrete was chalked the outline of a human body. A police officer in a white shirt stood guard by the outline. Beyond him was an area car with two more cops inside.

Donoghue could from his vantage point see the car, beyond which was the vehicular entrance to the hotel yard from the public highway. Beyond the service road was a row of huge black trashcans humming with flies, and beyond that was the neighboring building—an office block, inconveniently empty, it being a Saturday afternoon. Beyond the office block were more square, angular buildings, more office blocks, more hotels—and beyond them the Clyde, with the docks and the cranes. And far beyond the cranes, in the distance, were the glowing blue and green hills of Argyllshire. For one man, that day had been death in high summer.

"Well, I mean it's the old question, isn't it, Ray?" said Donoghue, who even in the heat had refused to dress in anything other than his charcoal-grey three-piece suit, complete with his gold hunter's chain looping across his waistcoat front. "Did he fall or was he pushed?"

"Indeed, sir," Sussock said, glancing at the indentations on the bed. "He certainly seems to have been relaxing just before he went over the edge. Either he was contemplating suicide—"

"Or?"

"Somebody came in and helped him over the balcony."

"Somebody he knew, or he wouldn't have let them in?" prompted Donoghue.

"Either that, sir, or somebody he didn't suspect or fear."

Sussock walked away from the bed and across the carpet—orange to match the curtains—toward the table and chairs that stood against the opposite wall. He enjoyed the summer; the heavy air didn't hurt his chest. Sussock was a man in his mid-fifties. He was at least fifteen years older than the man in the suit he was obliged to address as "sir," and he had been a smoker all his days. It was a habit he had been able to kick eventually, but it had left him with the legacy of a bad chest. He liked the summer, he loathed and feared the winter, and he always knew by the stabbing pains in his chest when winter was approaching—and this was usually long before the leaves fell from the trees.

"I think he was pushed," said Donoghue quietly—so quietly that

his words rang in the still room and caused the uniformed constable to shuffle his feet and stiffen slightly, in turn causing the bespectacled, awkwardly moving Elliot Bothwell, who was patiently dusting for prints, to look up and blink at the Detective-Inspector from behind his thick-lensed spectacles.

"Do you, sir?" said Sussock.

"Yes," Donoghue smiled, "I do. Bothwell?"

"Sir," blinked Bothwell.

"The bottle on the table there," Donoghue nodded to the glass bottle beside the bed. "Have you dusted it for latents?"

"Yes, sir," Bothwell replied. Bothwell had begun his working life as a chemistry assistant in a secondary school, mixing the same calm chemicals day in, day out, before he applied for a job as Forensic Chemistry Assistant with the Strathclyde Police, and, having secured the position, had never looked back. The hours were irregular, the job was often stomach-wrenching and often involved lifting prints from corpses, many of which had been mutilated or were badly decomposed. Only his mother, with whom he, at the age of thirty-six, still lived, complained. ("You never tell me about your work any more, Elliot.") Bothwell kneeled, resting an arm across his knee. "I've lifted two sets of prints, sir. I don't need it any more."

"Thank you." Donoghue strode around the bottom end of the bed and, using two fingers, picked up the bottle by the rim of the neck. He held it up at eye level and the sunlight flooding through the hotel window clearly illuminated it. "You see, Ray"—Donoghue approached the elderly detective—"you can see the pattern of the fingerprints with the naked eye in these conditions, on the tacky surface of the bottle, and so we can see how the bottle was held. Look how the fingerprints curl round the neck of the bottle, spiraling downward from the top."

"Yes, I can see that, sir," said Sussock as Donoghue turned the bottle round.

"So if I hold it in the same manner," Donoghue said, slowly curling his fingers round the neck of the bottle, "it isn't a comfortable or logical way to hold it unless I hold it in front of me, like so, and unless it was empty." Donoghue stood holding the bottle in front of him, with the base of the bottle upturned, pointing toward the ceiling.

"A weapon," said Sussock. "Ready to smash and push the jagged edges into someone's face. Otherwise known as a Glasgow kiss."

"A weapon indeed." Donoghue turned and replaced the empty

bottle on the cabinet. "I think that a man who is contemplating suicide doesn't arm himself with a weapon. A weapon helps you to survive." He picked up the passport. "So what do we know about him? He is one Marcel Franier, a French Canadian by all accounts, home address and next-of-kin at a place called Dorval." Donoghue glanced at Sussock and raised his eyebrows.

"It's near Montreal, sir," said Sussock. "On the St. Lawrence."

"I see. According to the stamp in his passport, he arrived at Prestwick Airport four days ago. Came with Northwest Orient—here's his boarding pass and return ticket for three weeks from now. He has two thousand Canadian dollars in travelers checks, a suitcase full of clothing, a couple of bottles of duty-free whisky. It's now just two P.M. or thereabouts, he fell or was pushed about an hour ago. There's no indication of alcohol being consumed at the time of his fall, so we can assume he didn't get canned and try to balance himself on the balcony railing. He didn't fall accidentally. He's a youngish man—thirty-two, according to his passport. He's got stamps of many countries, he enjoys traveling, he's an industrial chemist by occupation, a professional man. No suicide note, no indication of personal troubles, no indication of ill health. Although there is still no sign of forced entry."

"But somebody—or some persons—entered the room and helped him over the balcony," said Sussock, following his senior's train of thought, "and if there was a disturbance, the signs were tidied up before the room was vacated."

"Have a word with reception, Ray, see what you can find. I'm going to contact Interpol, ask them to ask the Mounties to do some digging around for us."

"He seemed frightened, if you want my honest opinion," said the receptionist. She wore a pink dress with a thistle logo emblazoned on her left shoulder. She was small-framed and had rich dark hair which fell confidently onto her shoulders.

"Frightened?" Sussock echoed, resting his pad on the reception desk. "You don't mind if I take notes?"

"Oh, no, sir." The receptionist seemed to Sussock to be keen to please, eager to be of assistance. "Frightened? That may be the wrong word. Agitated would be a better description. He reminded me of my mother. She's always agitated. The doctor gave her pills but it does no good. Always hurried movements, fast speech, sometimes gets her words in the wrong order when she talks, anxious

that you've understood her, sticks spokes in her own wheels at every opportunity and just makes things worse for herself. This man reminded me of her—not as bad as her, but he had the same manner. Except that in this case it wasn't a medical condition, it was fear. Either that or he was very upset about something."

"Not just his normal personality, then?" Sussock led her gently. He and the girl had moved to the edge of the reception desk, away from the business of the day—other girls in pink dresses with thistle logos who were busy booking guests in and out.

"Oh, no, sir, really, I get to know people in this job. I got the impression that the Canadian gentleman was really quite a quiet man, really—sort of bookish, probably never knew what fear was until something happened out there, then he came stumbling into the foyer wanting a room just for one night."

"Booked in when?"

"Yesterday. Almost twenty-four hours ago."

"So an agitated man books in for just the one night, then falls to his death the following afternoon."

"Oh." The girl looked surprised. "Do you think he fell—I mean accidentally?"

"Don't you?"

"I really don't know. I mean, it couldn't have been suicide, could it?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, I would only guess not. So far as I can see, agitated and worried people don't commit suicide. What I mean is, only depressed people or people who are despairing of something commit suicide, don't they? Or maybe people who are in a corner they can't get out of, like a scorpion."

"A scorpion?" Sussock said.

"Uh huh, my dad told me. He was in the Marines. When they were doing jungle training, they used to catch scorpions. And what they'd do was pour gasoline in a circle around it and set the gasoline on fire, so the scorpion would be surrounded by a wall of flame—not so close that it was being scorched but still completely surrounded. What the scorpion would then do was turn round a complete three sixty degrees. My dad says it was amazing, the scorpion would do a complete circle and no more—three hundred and sixty degrees to a millimeter, never three sixty-five. Then when the scorpion saw there was no escape route, he would sting himself to death. Death rather than being trapped. Happened every time. I guess people like

that, who find themselves in a right mess and there's only one logical escape, would take a short walk from a high place. But I don't think Mr. Franier did that. He was agitated, wanting a way out, but not at all like the scorpion."

"You don't think he was suicidal?"

"No. His mind was working overtime, he was a worried man, but he wasn't short of hope. He had a long way to go before he was in a state of despair. Really, in no way did he commit suicide. I'm a keen observer of people."

"So what do you think happened?"

"Oh, I think he was murdered," she said with a smile, a practiced-till-perfect smile, a hi-I'm-Lorna-welcome-to-the-Sumsion-Hotel-I hope-you-have-a-nice-day smile.

"Why?"

Oh, I don't know why."

Sussock breathed deeply. "No, where did you get the idea he was murdered?"

"Because somebody phoned asking if he was in the hotel."

"You didn't tell me that."

"I would have done, but I wanted to see if you'd ask if anyone tried to contact him here. It seemed an obvious question to me."

Sussock had to concede, privately, that it wasn't a question that would have occurred to him. It was probably one of the reasons he was still a detective sergeant, and why he had most probably been given the rank as a recognition of long service rather than because of outstanding conduct. He said, "Did this person leave a name?"

"No. He just hung up. But he was weird. See, in my job I get to read voices on the phone as much as I read faces in the foyer. This guy gave me the creeps—cold voice, cold as ice, ruthless."

"Cold voice?"

"Shivery. Not a great deal of emotion in it. It sent shivers down your spine."

"Accent?"

"Just normal."

"Glasgow, then?"

"Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, it was Glasgow all right—the hard sort of voice that belongs to someone you don't look at twice and live to tell the tale."

Sussock scribbled on his pad. Next to him, a middle-aged American couple with loud voices booked into the hotel. They were, they said, "doing Scotland in three days."

"So you told this guy with the hard voice that Mr. Franier was a guest in the hotel?"

"Well, yes I did, frankly. Do you think I shouldn't have done?"

"Probably," said Sussock. "I think you probably ought to have been a little more discreet."

The girl was white-faced. "I'd be obliged if you didn't tell anyone, sir—not the management, anyway. I'd like as not get my books and it won't be easy finding another job."

"I'll see what I can do." Sussock smiled. He felt for the receptionist and the guilt that would be setting in any time now and which she would have to carry with her for the rest of her life. He decided to keep worrying away at the only bone that was being offered. "When did you receive the call?"

The girl looked at her watch. "Well, maybe about this time yesterday, sir, give or take half an hour."

Sussock wrote, "1400 hrs approx," then he said, "Just about three hours after Mr. Franier booked in?"

The girl nodded.

"Give me the content of the call, word for word, as near as you can remember."

"It went something like 'Can you tell me if Mr. Franier from Canada is in the hotel?' And I said, 'Just a minute, please, sir, I'll check the register.' Then I found Mr. Franier's name and realized it was the nervous man who had booked in and I said, 'Yes, he's a guest here.' He said, 'Thank you,' and put the phone down heavily."

"Heavily?"

"Yes. He slammed it down."

"And that was it?"

"That was the conversation. But I can tell you there was someone in the room with him at the other end of the line."

"Oh?"

"Yes, a woman. She seemed to be crying."

"Crying?"

"That's what it sounded like, and it was a large empty room, I think. The voices seemed to echo."

"So someone, a male, who sounds to be a typical West of Scotland hard man is telephoning from a large or sparsely furnished room in which there is also a distressed female," said Sussock, more to himself than to the receptionist. "He inquires about the whereabouts of Mr. Franier, knowing he is Canadian, and puts the phone down heavily, perhaps in anger, when he is told Mr. Franier is a guest at

the hotel. Twenty-four hours later, Mr. Franier dies in suspicious circumstances."

"So you do think it's suspicious, then?" The girl looked worried.

"I think it stinks," said Sussock, snapping his notebook shut and pushing his ballpoint down the spine. "I think it stinks to high heaven."

Interpol did better than Donoghue had expected.

It was 1430 hrs. He was in his office, reclining at his desk, hands clasped behind his head, and pulling enjoyably on his pipe. The windows were open—cool air breathed in from the city. He had taken off his jacket but retained his waistcoat. When the phone rang, he sat forward, took the pipe from his mouth and laid it in the huge black ashtray (large enough for one officer in a moment of familiarity to quip, "All you need now is a couple of goldfish, sir"), and reached for his pad and pen as he put the phone to his ear.

"D.I. Donoghue," he said.

"Hello," said a male voice on the other end of the line. "Hello? Hello?"

"Yes," Donoghue replied. "Hello."

"Ah, hello, sir. Captain Vilde here, Inspector of the Montreal Police Department. Phoning from Canada."

Donoghue sat even farther forward. "Good Lord," he said, "the wonders of modern technology. You know, you sound as clear as if you were phoning internally from the next office."

"Things have improved since the satellite system was introduced," said Vilde in a calm, self-assured manner and, like most North Americans in Donoghue's experience, he spoke slightly more slowly than Europeans. "What time is it with you, sir?"

"Two-thirty P.M.," said Donoghue. "It's a fine, sunny day here in Glasgow. And with you?"

"Just after ten in the forenoon, sir. Already hot—well into the high eighties—and will be into the mid-nineties by midday."

"Rather you than me." Donoghue settled back into his chair, beginning to enjoy the chat. "I don't like excess heat. *Any* weather you've got to keep at arm's length, whether heat or cold, is not at all to my liking. I imagine you have both extremes in Canada."

"We do," said Vilde. "But we dress for it, especially for the winter, so we get by. I was in Scotland one time, some years ago."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yes. We were looking up my wife's relatives. I go back to France

on my side of the family. We're French Canadians—my family comes from Amiens."

"I know Amiens," said Donoghue. "It's to the north of Paris."

"That's it. Impressive cathedral there. My wife, she is also French Canadian, but way way back her ancestors came from Peebles. Do you know Peebles?"

"Peebles, yes. It's on the Borders."

"Really nice countryside."

"It is. Mind you, the Borderers are, shall we say, 'interesting' people, with no disrespect to your wife."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Even in the late Twentieth Century, the Borderers still owe allegiance to themselves before they owe allegiance to Scotland or England, no matter which side of the Border they live on. In the old days, the Borders were something akin to Indian country in the American West, and the Borderers were bandits and vagabonds. They stole sheep, rustled cattle, and held up the mail coaches."

"How fascinating."

"But you're not calling me about that, sir."

"No—I have some information about Marcel Franier."

"That was quick of you."

"The Interpol request came at the very beginning of our working day. We have notified the next-of-kin, Mr. Franier, Senior, and made inquiries."

"Again, I am impressed. We're treating the Franier case as a suspicious death, although we can't rule out accident or suicide—not at this stage, anyway. All we can say is that there are no clear indications of the cause of death, or rather the reason he fell to his death."

"Oh, so that's how he died."

"By falling, yes—or by being pushed. The old conundrum."

"We were only able to inform the next-of-kin of his death, we had no other information to give. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know the outcome of your inquiries so that I can fully inform his father. You will not be withholding the body longer than necessary?"

"No, of course not. But I'm afraid there will have to be a post-mortem, if only to verify that there is no poison in the blood stream which could account for death prior to the fall. The fall caused massive head injuries, and while I'm sorry the body will have to be cut open it was in no condition to be viewed in an open casket, anyway, if the relatives wish to do that."

"I see," said Vilde. "I'll keep that to myself unless I'm specifically asked about it, of course."

"Of course."

"If you have a pen and paper to hand," the Canadian said, "I'll let you know what information I have for you."

"Fire away."

"Well, the deceased was Marcel John Paul Franier, aged thirty-two years, industrial chemist by occupation, lived in the small town of Dorval on the St. Lawrence River. It lies to the east of Montreal. He worked in the city. He lived alone and seems to have been a quiet sort of man—went to work, came home from work, had a small circle of friends but stayed home most nights. Drank nothing stronger than beer as a rule and didn't smoke, like the majority of young Canadian professionals. There's nothing to set him apart."

Donoghue scribbled on his notepad as Vilde spoke.

"We have no previous knowledge of him, not even for the slightest traffic offense. As I said, we have notified his father—who is now sedated but gave us permission to look over the deceased's flat. We found a couple of very mild girlie magazines which suggest that Mr. Franier was a single man for the simple reason that he had not yet found a wife, and for no other reason. Two items under the bed had us puzzled but were innocent enough when we asked Mr. Franier senior about them."

"What were they?"

"One was a long length of rope tied to the bed frame. The other was a child's ball, a little smaller than a basketball and not as heavy. Mr. Franier lived three floors up in a wooden building and the rope was nothing more sinister than a fire escape in case the main stairway was blocked by fire—the ball was part of his aerobics exercise kit."

"I didn't know you used balls in aerobics. My wife goes to aerobics classes and I had the impression it was a roomful of ladies in leotards dancing to music. I can't see it's done her any good, but I dare not tell her that."

Vilde chuckled. "Apparently you hold the ball between your knees and squeeze it with your legs—it develops the thigh muscles."

"I see."

"Well, at least you have a wife who intends to stay in shape. I have a wife I love very much, but she stopped caring about her figure the day we got married twenty-five years ago, aye, aye, aye."

"My wife," said Donoghue, "complains about the hours I have to

keep, but she's been behind me all the way. We have two children still at school. We live in Edinburgh."

"My children are grown," Vilde said. "We live in Montreal. I'm due to retire soon and my wife wishes to visit Scotland again. We won't have too much money when we're living on the pension, so we have to do it soon or never."

"Well, if you come to Scotland, look me up," said Donoghue. "P Division Police Station, Charing Cross, center of Glasgow at the bottom of Sauchiehall Street."

"Thank you, sir. Well, back to Mr. Franier—this is an expensive call."

"Yes. You know, I think the rope and the ball are significant—they say a lot about him."

"In what way?"

"That he is intelligent and imaginative enough to be able to foresee possible dangers and to take appropriate precautions. How many people have been trapped by fire in upstairs rooms because they didn't have a rope to shin down to safety?"

"Good point."

"And the ball means that he's attempting to stay fit—nothing obsessive like body-building, but just making the most of what he's got. No need to run to fat if you can avoid it. So I see the deceased as being a sensible man, blessed with foresight, valuing his life and wanting to make the most of it."

"Not a likely suicide candidate, is what you mean?"

"In a word, yes," said Donoghue.

"I'd be inclined to agree. According to his employers, he was good at his job—not among the 'in' crowd at work, but well enough respected. He had money in the bank according to a passbook we found at his flat, just about the amount you'd expect of a man with his income and outgoings. As to his trip, he was apparently vacationing. He was going to tour the U.K. but his first port of call was to an old college friend in Glasgow. He left an itinerary with his father—flight numbers, dates, the addresses of his U.K. contacts."

"That seems to tie in with what we have perceived about him."

"Doesn't it? Sensible, took precautions, didn't travel to Scotland to do away with himself. Well, you know his arrival date—he was to spend the first few days of his tour visiting his friend Yvette McAfee."

"Oh, a female friend."

"It appears so. She lives at a place called High Moss Farm. I can't read the next word—could it be 'Kilsyth'?"

"Kilsyth, yes," said Donoghue. "It's a small town north and east of Glasgow—hilly country, plenty of farming round there right enough."

"Well, that's really the sum total of my information, Mr. Donoghue."

"Most helpful, Captain," Donoghue replied warmly. "I'll inform you of the outcome, of course. In fact, if you'd like to give me your phone number, I daresay the situation will merit an international call back from the office despite our budget limitations."

Ray Sussock sat at his desk typing up the report of his interview with the hotel receptionist. The door of his office opened without prior knock and Elka Willems stood in the doorway. Tall, wearing her blonde hair in a tight bun, she still managed to look devastatingly attractive in the crisp white blouse and serge skirt, dark stockings and sensible shoes of a WPC. She held a mug of tea in her hand and glanced quickly around the room to be sure they were alone. "How goes it, old Sussock?"

"It goes slow, young Willems." Sussock sat back from the typewriter and flexed his shoulder muscles. "It goes very slow."

Elka put the mug down on Sussock's desk and bent forward to kiss him. He took hold of her waist and held her to him, prolonging the kiss.

"Plenty of time for that later on tonight," she said, pulling away. "We agreed to be discreet, remember."

The desk phone rang and she picked up the receiver. "Detective Sergeant Sussock's office."

*That* was hardly discreet, Sussock thought.

"Who? I see—hold the line, please." Elka held the phone toward Sussock. "It's Sonia, for you." She was not amused.

"Whoever is Sonia?" Sussock took the phone.

"I'm dying to find out."

"Hello," Sussock spoke into the phone. "D.S. Sussock speaking."

"This is Sonia. From the hotel."

"From which hotel?" Elka demanded of Sussock.

"I had a call for Mr. Franier," said Sonia.

"Which hotel?" Elka was scowling darkly.

"Not the same as before," Sonia told Sussock. "This was from the

Northwest Orient agent confirming Mr. Franier's seat on tomorrow's flight back to Canada."

Sussock sat in Donoghue's office.

"So," said Donoghue after rereading Sussock's submission. "A Canadian takes a holiday in Scotland. He arrives, then three days later books into a hotel at his point of arrival. He is then pushed or falls from his hotel window, but not before he canceled his intended return flight and booked a seat on the earliest available return flight. He was a frightened man, all right—but why?"

Sussock nodded in agreement.

"I think we have to visit his college chum at the address given by the Canadians. High Moss Farm, Kilsyth. Who's available?"

"King and Montgomerie are both in at the moment, sir."

"Nothing on?"

Sussock shook his head. "It's fairly quiet at the moment. Apart from the case in question, it's just routine ongoing inquiries, blitzing of paperwork, that sort of thing."

"Right, get them both on it, I think it's a two hander—they're going in blind, we don't know what to look for, so anything could be relevant. We don't even know if he went there at all. If he didn't, we've come up against a brick wall."

The phone on Donoghue's desk rang. He let it ring twice before picking it up. Sussock sat back in the chair and heard half the conversation. "Oh, put him on, please. Yes—hello, sir. I see. I see. Well, thank you—good day." He replaced the receiver. "That was Dr. Reynolds from the Royal Infirmary. He has completed the post-mortem on Mr. Franier. Death was due to head injuries sustained in the fall. No trace of poison or similar suspicious substances in the body, just a slight indication of alcohol in the blood stream, the level you'd expect if Mr. Franier had had a few beers the night before—nothing like the level that would indicate drunkenness at the time of death. So he wasn't playing silly beggars on the balcony!"

"His death wasn't accidental, then?"

"No, and from what Captain Vilde of the Montreal Police has told us about him, he's not a likely suicide candidate, either—especially not since we've just found out that he was intending to return home tomorrow. It's murder, Ray."

King and Montgomerie drove out to Kilsyth. During the journey,

Montgomerie told King what Sussock had told him a scorpion would do if it was surrounded by a wall of flame.

"Franier had an escape route," said King, twenty-five, chubby, bearded.

"That's why they think it's murder," said Montgomerie—tall, chiseled features, down-turned moustache.

They drove first to the police station in Kilsyth and asked directions at the uniform bar.

"Just here, gentlemen," said the bar officer, tapping the map with his pencil. "It's right on the edge of our patch. Not a great deal goes on up there, hills and sheep, sheep and hills."

"Do you know the family, McAfee?" said Montgomerie.

The bar officer shook his head. "I don't. Sarge?"

"Yes?" The sergeant behind the desk looked up.

"Do you know the McAfees of High Moss Farm? Officers from the city making inquiries."

The sergeant stood and walked across to the Rolodex, spun the drum of cards, and then began to flick through individual cards. "One or two McAfees," he said, "but not at the address given."

"Well, that might be good news in a sense," said King.

"Thanks for checking," his partner told the bar officer and the desk sergeant.

High Moss Farm stood a quarter of a mile from the nearest public highway in a fold in the hills. The next nearest building was another farmhouse, which looked to be more than a mile away across rough country.

Montgomerie pumped the horn as he drove up the stony track to the farmhouse. It never does to come up suddenly on people in remote places and he sounded the horn twice every ten seconds as he approached. Closing in on the building, both men saw it wasn't a wealthy farm. The old building was in a poor state of repair and gave the strong impression of having an owner who was struggling to make ends meet. Even in the height of summer, High Moss Farm looked to be a cold and forbidding place.

Montgomerie and King left the car and stepped across the uneven stony surface of the yard in front of the house. The regular horn signals hadn't provoked a response from within the house and so Montgomerie reached for the heavy metal knocker. As he did so, a female face appeared at the window beside the door.

It was covered in bruises.

"Good grief," said King, and Montgomerie tapped gently on the door.

"Who is it?" the woman said.

"Police," King told her.

The door opened. The woman in the doorway was pale, drawn, waiflike, and frightened. There was fingertip bruising around her throat as well as the mottled bruising on her cheeks and forehead.

"Somebody's given you a good doing," said King.

The woman forced a smile. "No use trying to hide it." She had a trace of a North American accent. "What can I do for you?"

"We'd like to ask a few questions, Mrs. McAfee," said King. "In respect of a man we believe to be a friend of yours—a Mr. Marcel Franier from Montreal."

"Marcel." The woman looked very, very startled. "Is he in some trouble?"

It was over an hour, a strong nip of brandy, and innumerable cigarettes and cups of tea before Yvette McAfee was composed enough to talk.

"We were friends," she said. "We go back a long way, when we were students at McGill. I dropped out to marry Angus. Marcel stayed on and did well for himself. I met Angus when he was taking a holiday in Canada. The way he built it up, I thought I was coming to baronial halls, lochs, and pine forests." She glanced around her. "Look at it, will you? Two hundred acres of hill farm. We haven't turned a profit in years. I've forgotten what new clothes are like. It went wrong from the beginning with me and Angus. I was a punching bag from week one. I'm all right if there's a drink in the bottle for him, but if the bottle's empty my blood's on the wall."

"Why don't you leave?"

"It's not easy. I'm trapped here, I have no money. He even restricts my clothing. See the phone? He's fixed a lock on the dial—I can answer it but I can't phone out. I've just lived with the hope that I never have to make an emergency call."

"So what happened when Mr. Franier called?"

Yvette McAfee shook her head. "He got out here alone. Angus wouldn't agree to collect him from the bus station, so Marcel got a taxi. He stopped for one night."

"When?"

"What day is this?"

"Saturday."

"He came here on Thursday from Glasgow after arriving in Scotland the day before. Spent a night in a hotel in Glasgow, got the bus out to Kilsyth, and then got a taxi from the bus station to here."

"This past Thursday?"

"Yes. He arrived late in the afternoon. Angus made a show of being hospitable, but it was obvious he resented Marcel's presence."

"But there was nothing between you?"

"Nothing at all. There never had been. You can make good and valued friends of the opposite sex without it being a romance. That really was the case with Marcel and me. We kept in touch over the years. Other friends just stopped writing, but not Marcel. He was more than a friend—he was like a brother."

She pressed her face with a tissue. "So he arrived—and we talked and we talked. We had a lot to talk about. He was my first visitor from home for close on ten years of unhappy marriage. We talked well into the night. Gradually I told him what it is like here. I hadn't any bruises he could see. I asked him to help me escape back home to Canada."

"What about your own family?"

"I have none—that was part of the problem. I am, or I should say, I *was* an only child. My parents died some years ago, before I met Angus. They didn't leave me with much. I daresay I was quite vulnerable when Angus came along, a warm and charming Scotsman. When he asked me to marry him, I made a mistake. He's a psychopath. He has a dark side to him. It's not just a bad temper—the very core of his personality is evil. He has this gleam in his eye when he's beating me. He lured me out here and he intends to keep me here—the possessed and the possessor."

"Don't you know of the facilities in Glasgow for women in your circumstances?" King had begun to feel a cold anger rising in him. He deplored violence—a value he shared with his gentle Quaker wife—and he especially hated it when it was directed against women and children.

"The Battered Wives Refuge?" She nodded. "Yes, I've heard of it. But how do I reach it? There's a lock on the phone, he's locked my outdoor clothing away and my good shoes—I can't even walk the ten miles into Kilsyth and go to the police there. Especially not in the winter, and it seems to be winter most of the year here. Anyway, I got used to it."

"You got used to it." King was incredulous.

"I got used to it," she repeated. "I got to the state where I thought it was my fault. I'm not very clever, I'm no good with housework, I'm not so good at cooking. If I were better at things, I wouldn't be beaten."

"You don't feel like that now?" King prompted.

Montgomerie wondered what it must feel like to hit a woman. Women to him had always been objects of desire and adoration. He knew the extent of violence to women in the city of Glasgow—he was a cop, of course he knew—but this was the first time he had sat down and talked for any length of time with a regularly battered wife. So what, he thought, does it feel like to lift your hands to someone as delicate as this? It couldn't make you feel like any sort of man, that was for sure.

"No." Yvette shook her head. "Just talking to Marcel did that! He respected me, he listened to what I had to say, he made me realize that I'm still the same woman I was when he knew me in Montreal, when I felt I had some value as a human being. Angus had managed to knock any sense of worth I'd had out of my personality. But within a matter of hours, Marcel allowed my self-respect to come flooding back. You know how it is when you 'click' with someone, when you're on the same wavelength—you communicate instantly. It was like that with Marcel and me from the start back at McGill, and just talking to him the other night made me feel like a new woman."

Montgomerie lit a cigarette and gave it to her. She took it gratefully and inhaled deeply between trembling lips. The sun was sinking behind the Campsie Fells. The farmhouse was getting chilly.

"When I went to bed that night," she said, looking at the cigarette in her hands, "after Marcel and I had talked everything out, Angus was waiting up for me. He had his boots on for to give me a kicking and he had the strap in his hands. He uses a strap from time to time as well as his fists. He locked the door and started on me. He just couldn't stand me talking to another man."

"Go on," said Montgomerie, straining to remain professional.

"The next morning I got up, hoping Marcel hadn't heard anything and had slept through it, but he'd heard everything and thankfully had had the good sense not to interfere. Anyway, he was dressed, packed, and ready to go. He said he wasn't staying a moment longer if he was causing problems like that. He wanted me to go with him. I couldn't, I had no money and no suitable clothing, but I agreed I couldn't stay—I'd already decided that after talking to Marcel the previous evening.

"I'm friendly with the woman on the next farm. She's long suspected what's been going on, but our husbands drink together—she couldn't really take a stand on my behalf."

"Why not?" said King. "What's the relevance of your husbands' drinking together? You needed help she could give."

"I think she was under a lot of pressure from her man not to interfere."

"A bit spineless, if you ask me," said King, now equally angered by McAfee's neighbor as he was by McAfee himself.

"But she'd help me a little sometimes and so I asked Marcel to send me a running-away package in care of her. She'd bring it across in the middle of the day. I asked for money, as much as he could let me have—I said I'd pay it back and then some. I asked for a good pair of shoes, a sweater, and a weatherproof jacket. He said he'd make up the package in Glasgow and cash in all his travelers checks and put the cash in the parcel. He wanted to wait for me in Glasgow, but I said I had to be careful about leaving, it might be weeks before I could go. So he said he'd get the next flight home and I was to look him up in Montreal. He gave me what cash he had before leaving, about fifty pounds. —Angus was away at this point. He works hard and had been away since sunrise."

"So Marcel Franier returned to Glasgow, and that was the last you saw of him?"

Yvette nodded.

"Do you know where your husband is at this moment?" King asked.

She shook her head. "If he's not on the hill, he'll be drinking somewhere."

"He phoned the hotel inquiring about Mr. Franier's whereabouts yesterday?"

"Yes, yesterday afternoon! You see, Angus found the fifty pounds Marcel had left me. He was angry and we had a row. I told him I was leaving and he started to phone round to all the hotels in Glasgow. I think he was just checking that Marcel had left the country and wouldn't be returning to the farm."

"We think it's a little more than that," said King.

Yvette McAfee looked questioningly at him.

"When did you last see your husband?"

"Yesterday afternoon when he was phoning the hotels. He went out after that."

"Did he spend last night here at the farmhouse?"

"He could have done. I've been sleeping in the spare room for these last few nights. It's the normal pattern. He raises his hand and I sleep in the spare room for a week or so. He doesn't mind."

"So you've no idea whether he slept in the house last night or not?"

She shook her head.

"If he's not on the hill, where would he be?"

"In a pit in Kilsyth."

"A pit?"

"A drinking den. Murphy's Bar, it's called. Why?"

"Because I think you might have misunderstood us when we told you Mr. Franier died in a fall," said Montgomerie. "There is evidence to suggest he was pushed."

"We'd like to talk to your husband," said King. "We want to know where he was earlier today. We'd like to take his fingerprints to see if we can match them to the latents found in Mr. Franier's bedroom."

"No. No no no." Yvette shook her head vigorously from side to side. "No no no no."

"If you'd like to collect your passport and a few things," said King, "we'll take you somewhere you'll be safe. It'll be the first step on your journey home."

"You are charged that on the second day of June in the Sumsion Hotel in Glasgow, you did assault Marcel Franier, did beat him about the head, did throw him from the balcony of hotel room number 762, and that you did murder him. You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be used in evidence."

Donoghue laid the charge sheet on the table and looked across at Angus McAfee.

McAfee was a short but powerfully built man, some fifteen years older, Donoghue was surprised to find, than Yvette McAfee. McAfee had been arrested in Murphy's Bar, but it was twelve hours later that he was deemed sober enough to understand the charges. A small man in a grey suit sat next to McAfee.

"My client wishes to remain silent," said the small grey-suited man.

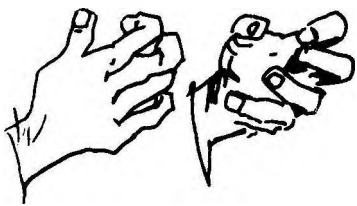
But McAfee looked dazed. He breathed hot breath across the table.

"I got into the room by tapping the door and saying 'Room service,' " he said in a hard voice. "I asked him what he was doing, giving

my wife money. He said he was helping her leave for Canada. There was a wee fight. I tidied the room before I left."

"But you murdered the man." Donoghue searched for a reason. "You picked him up and threw him over the balcony. What harm had he done you?"

"He was helping my wife to leave me!" McAfee opened his hands in a gesture of appeal. "What else could I do?"



## ON OUR COVER

Psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers was born in New York City and received her bachelor's degree from Cornell University and her master's degree and doctorate from Columbia University. Well known from radio and television and her syndicated newspaper and magazine columns, she has been the recipient of many distinguished awards. She is married to Milton Brothers and they have a daughter Lisa. Dr. Brothers is a long-time subscriber to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

Peter Papadopolous has been a commercial photographer for 20 years, with a renowned strength in portrait photography. He, too, has received numerous awards in his field. His studio is in Manhattan.

This *EQMM* cover was shot at the Papadopolous Studios on Black Monday, October 19, 1987, in spite of which everyone involved seemed to have a worry-free time—appearances to the contrary.

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# ELLERY QUEEN

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