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TERROR in His HEART

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PUBLISHER: *B. G. Davis* **EDITOR:** *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 32, No. 2, Whole No. 177, AUG., 1958. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.), at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Fan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879. *© 1958 by Davis Publications, Inc. (formerly Mercury Publications, Inc.) All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **RUFUS KING**

TITLE: ***Rendezvous With Death***

TYPE: Detective-Crime Novelette

LOCALE: Halcyon, Florida

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Tragedy made Lily Verta, known as the Ugly Duckling, one of the richest young women in Florida. But was Lily pursued, hounded, by tragedy? Was there no hope for her?*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

WHENEVER LILY VERTA'S FRIENDS met — from the time the tragedy occurred (last Tuesday)— they would start a catty discussion of Lily's problematical future. Usually they ended up with some distorted analogy to the fable of The Ugly Duckling.

All this was rather unfair, because when you considered Lily as a plain human being, the question of her money or her unfortunate looks became so pointless. She was young, she was by no means malformed in any freakish sense of having two heads, and under a defensive shell of deadpan cynicism she was basically a nice person. Her hidden wants were simple. She merely wanted to be liked. And did, of course, everything possible to prevent it.

"If Lily ever does get married it will be for her money," was the prediction usually made about her —now that she was twenty-two, the sole blood remainder of the Verta clan, and one of the richest young native-born women in Florida.

As a natural follow-up it was then predicted that when a fortune hunter did hook her, he would sooner or later do away with Lily and hustle off with the Verta loot into the arms of a blonde.

Lily's present position as an heiress was dismally owing to the fact that the *Claire-Louise* (named after her mother) had exploded last Tuesday on striking the guarding reef to an islet in the Bahama group that her father had been thinking of buying.

Both parents had drowned, as had Lily's older sister Eleanor and the yacht's crew of five. Ironically, the captain was the lone survivor. Captain Jorgsen had been flown from the scene of the disaster and had been lying in shattered unconsciousness for the past few days in St. Anthony's Hospital in Halcyon—a seaboard town to the north of Miami Beach, at the outskirts of which lay the Verta ancestral home. None of the bodies had been recovered, having presumably been blown to bits.

Bordering on delayed shock, Lily made daily inquiries about Captain Jorgsen's condition, driving heedlessly above the speed limit to the hospital in her Mercedes-Benz, not from any sense of *noblesse oblige* but because she and the captain had always got on well together. They tacitly understood each other's problems since he, too, was far from handsome to look at and besides had a twisted arm.

The day that he died—Saturday—had been Lily's first meeting with Mr. Etherton.

Mr. Etherton was the southern investigator for the marine insurance company that had underwritten the *Claire-Louise*. He was a gentlemanly, unobtrusive little man with a friendly if cautious face, given to dressing in businesslike suits of lightweight materials, mostly taupes.

"It's too bad he couldn't talk," Etherton said, as he and Lily stood in the illness-flavored corridor outside the door of death. "Only that meaningless scribble."

"Scribble?"

"I suppose his mind was wandering, Miss Verta. Small wonder, of course. The thought of himself alone, the captain, surviving the wreck must have been ghastly for him. Such a complete smashing of marine tradition. Anyhow, just before he died he managed to scrawl on a pad of paper—*must have been for - - -* the last word sort of dribbling off."

"Could the *r* have been a *g*? Could he have meant to write *fog?*"

Etherton shrugged. "Who knows? Now?"

Later, at home, Lily went over with Etherton her share in the steps leading up to the sinking. Although she did not appreciate it, the death of Jorgsen—added to those of her parents and sister—was very nearly the last straw her nervous system could take.

"Papa," she told the insurance investigator numbly, "never did grow out of being a romantic—like Conrad's Lord Jim. The idea of owning an island in the Carib-

bean appealed to him irresistibly."

"How did he ever dig one up? There's so rarely one for sale."

"Wallace heard about it last week while fishing at Bimini."

Wallace Mannering, Etherton knew, had married Lily's now defunct older sister Eleanor who, unlike Lily, was reputed to have been an all but classic beauty. Etherton had met Mannering for a moment in the law offices of Jasper Cole, who was the attorney both for Verta Industries and the estate.

Etherton had neither liked nor disliked Wallace Mannering. He was what Etherton classified as "the silhouette type"—good-looking, well built, undoubtedly aware of the proper use for each fork at a formal dinner, but lacking in a third dimension. Just pictorially flat.

This could not, Etherton conceded to himself, be entirely true or Mannering would never have been given the job (however titular) of vice-president in Verta Industries, Inc.—marine engineering construction, building bridges, the more fantastic pools of the Gold Coast, and what-have-you. He had held the job for the past five years. It had been in the nature of a wedding present to the groom, an added fillip to the expensive beach estate which had been Eleanor's wedding present and where the Mannerings lived.

"I suppose the island was a private sale, not a government one, Miss Verta?"

"Yes, an English family, the Tuckers, owned it. They seem to have petered out, and when the last one died the executors put the island on the market. Wallace knew that papa would be interested, and notified him."

Etherton wanted details. He was dissatisfied with the whole setup, and even without Captain Jorgsen's deathbed scribble he would have, as he already had done, arranged for divers to make a thorough examination of the wreck. The divers were to start some time next week.

He said, "I know that Mr. Mannering telephoned from Bimini and that your father was interested. But exactly what arrangements were made?"

"Wallace was to go to the island from Bimini and be there when the yacht arrived. The island is simply a dot on the government charts—it's off all the regular lanes—but years ago the Tuckers had a cartographer make special maps. Wallace had a copy flown over for Captain Jorgsen, and they sailed as soon as the chart got here."

"So Mr. Mannering was waiting for the yacht on the island, but you, Miss Verta . . . Was there any particular reason why you didn't sail with them?"

"A stupid one. Just as we were getting ready to leave for the basin, I fainted. Mama brought me out of it with smelling salts, but she

thought I'd better stay home and rest. I did. She made me promise to see Dr. Mallerby."

"Have you?"

"I intended to go the next day. But the next day it happened."

Etherton's insurance-conditioned mind made him look at Lily speculatively. Would she be a good risk? He discounted her apparent state of apathetic shock. She appeared healthy and solid enough. But that was just it. Occasionally such prospects would turn out to be the very worst bets, driving the actuaries mad.

"Are you subject to fainting spells, Miss Verta?"

"No, I've never had one before. I can't imagine what caused it. I simply blacked out, and I don't know why."

His mind, trained to suspicion and a storehouse for the most implausible insurance frauds, filed away the disagreeable thought that the faint could have been a fake, an excuse for Lily not to sail aboard the yacht. He hoped not. He liked Miss Verta, and sympathized over the handicap her unpleasing appearance must always have been for her. Beyond that, he sensed an aura of misfortune surrounding her —his Pennsylvania Dutch grandmother would have said that the girl had the hex on her, was one of the ill-fated ones. Nevertheless, the faint could have been shammed under a guilty foreknowledge of the catastrophe to come. If it were possible, he intended to check it.

"I don't want to seem presumptuous, but wouldn't it be wise for you to see a doctor? The faint could be symptomatic of any number of things that need correction."

"I know that you are right, Mr. Etherton. I'll see my doctor this afternoon."

Lily did.

Dr. Fairchild Mallerby had been the Verta family physician for several decades. Years ago, as a young practitioner, he had grown a mustache and goatee to inspire confidence. He had kept them both, and today he was a facsimile of the traditional Southern Colonel.

He took specimens, made certain tests, including an electrocardiogram, dismissed Lily, then retired within an inner mental chamber and searched what the years had left of his soul. Too many extraneous elements were involved to make his problem—to tell Lily, or not to tell Lily—an easy one. There were the careers of the people who were dovetailed into Verta Industries, and the responsibilities entailed in Lily of the Verta wealth.

Etherton found Dr. Mallerby still deeply sunk in this unhappy and bemused condition when he called at the doctor's office next day —a short while after Lily had been there to learn the results of the previous day's checkup.

After the essential politenesses, Etherton said, "I have only one question, Doctor. A delicate one."

"Yes, Mr. Etherton?"

"The question is this, Doctor—and naturally whatever you may say will be held strictly confidential. Would you consider that Miss Verta's fainting spell, the one that prevented her from boarding the yacht with the others, was genuine?"

Dr. Mallerby drifted more deeply into his private fog. The question made little sense to him except as a possible insurance angle (otherwise why would the man be here?) and all insurance matters were confusing to Mallerby, whose aversion to reading fine print was almost toxic. Health? Of course that was it—Lily's health in connection with some whopping policy now that she had inherited the estate. Poor child. Poor, poor child!

"Genuine?" he said. "Most genuine. I shall confide this to you, Mr. Etherton, because it is bound to affect the insurance picture. Besides, your company examiner, will find it out for himself and advise you accordingly. My silence could only serve to delay."

By now Etherton was as fog-bound as Mallerby.

"Find what out, Doctor?"

"The pitiable fact that Lily Verta has little more than a few months to live."

Etherton was truly shaken. He had been fishing for guilty foreknowledge, the result of which might conceivably have led Lily Verta to the electric chair for the mass murder of a yachtful of people, as in that case where a planeload of passengers were blown up on the west coast. The legal execution of Miss Verta, presuming she were found guilt, could be stomached academically, but when Nature handed down a death sentence under such circumstances it seemed cruelly unfair. Etherton wondered if his premonition about Lily (via his Pennsylvania Dutch grandmother) could have been leading to this fiat of death by disease. Oddly enough, he thought not; the danger, as he now sensed it, lay rather in a human field.

He said, "You're sure about it, of course?"

"It is my considered and professional opinion."

"Did you tell her?"

"Outright? No, Mr. Etherton. I simply suggested that, having become the controlling head of what amounts to a local industrial empire, she ought to put her affairs in order as quickly as possible."

"And her reaction?"

"Lily is, unfortunately, an unusually perceptive young woman."

Etherton said with harsh distaste, "I see!"

Mallerby was offended at the tone.

"You misjudge me, sir. The suggestion was tendered on the grounds that, as Miss Verta controls the destinies of many people—she has inherited eighty-one percent of the stock in Verta Indus-

tries—it becomes her immediate duty. I mentioned accidents—the fact, for example, that Florida stands third among the states in automobile fatalities alone. I even used the tragic destruction of the *Claire-Louise* as an example of what can happen unexpectedly."

"And the nature of her illness, Doctor?"

Mallerby stood up, a picture of professional dignity under polite control.

"I think, Mr. Etherton, that I have said all I should. As to the nature of Miss Verta's ailment—medication, even surgery can be of no avail. But the poor child will not suffer. The end will come swiftly, unexpectedly, like the blow that fells an ox. Naturally I intend to arrange for a consultation with Seward—he's the best cardiac man in the state—when he returns in several weeks from a vacation in Hawaii. Possibly your company examiner might care to sit in?"

Etherton felt disinclined to become involved. In any case, it was an angle that was none of his business. If Lily Verta had guessed Mallerby's tragic verdict (and Etherton believed she would have), there was little that he could do.

"I'm sorry, Doctor, but I am flying over to Nassau in an hour. I don't know how long my work will keep me there. Days, surely, possibly weeks."

They parted on this note of mutual confusion.

It seemed to Lily that she had always been suspended in a state of some sort of waiting, but this new waiting—for a rendezvous with death—was intolerable. She had easily read between the lines of Dr. Mallerby's circumlocutions and she had no doubt that he was right. As long as she could remember, Dr. Mallerby's dicta had been sacrosanct in the Verta family. If he said you had something, you had it.

She had left his office (missing Etherton by a scant quarter of an hour), refused supper, gone to bed, and dozed in a shocked stupor into the dawn. The idea of death itself held no terrors for her. What did bother Lily was the dread of facing it alone or in the company of a disinterested person. If only she could have someone with her who truly cared for her! Not love—that would be too much to hope for—but someone at least to hold her hand, to help her over the last hurdle . . .

Some paid-for companion? A nurse? Horrible thoughts. Mama had really cared, papa too in his fashion, but they were gone. Wallace, a relative-by-law, meant nothing to her, and her attitude was reciprocated. No, there was no one, and the despair of loneliness increased overpoweringly.

The hour neared sunrise and the eastern sky was ribboned in pistachio greens and rose. As despondency and the general futility of

her situation overwhelmed her, Lily began seriously to wish that she had gone down with the yacht, with mama and papa and even with Eleanor. To be with them now in the sea, all waiting over—

The sea? Of course, the sea . . .

Lily put on a swim suit and a terry-cloth robe, and let herself out of the silent house. She used the station wagon for the drive to Halcyon Beach.

In its complete anonymity the beach had for years been Lily's retreat—a public beach as remote as Asia from the tall-drinks set that clung to the sterile artificiality (no matter how beautiful or costly) of papa's famous pools.

Lily looked along the stretches of Halycon Beach's six a.m. emptiness. No, not complete emptiness. At its southern end sat an indifferent figure, minimized by distance, in the pose of Rodin's Thinker.

Sand darkened under her unhurried footsteps to the languid surf where the water greened, grew brownish over a sandbar, then went from green again to the indigo blue of the Gulf Stream as the ocean met the morning sky. A beautiful way to end this thankless waiting —kindly, brief, with one flashback across her past (as Lily understood the clichéd interpretation of death by drowning), then . . . nothing.

A swarm of little fishes pinged with delicate curiosity against her ankles as she waded out. She crossed the bar and started swimming along the pathway to the sun.

Finally, she forced her body to go down and down. Her lungs shrieked to be filled. Well, this is it, Lily thought, and drew in a gulp of salt water. To her immediate surprise there was nothing beautiful, quick, or painless about the result. Her whole physical being was shocked into revolt.

Lily surfaced, thrashing about violently in a complete panic. She went under again, came up again. And then strong arms gripped her.

While being brought to shore Lily concentrated on the arms and the extraordinary sensation their grappling had aroused in her. Literally, it had been her first physical contact with a man's muscled flesh. It explained later what otherwise would have been the fantastically improbable hour she spent recuperating on the still-deserted beach alongside the arms' owner.

It also explained the ominous and final twist that was about to take place in the story of Lily Verta.

He was her own age, a compact, dark-haired, dark-browed young man, interesting-looking in a smoldering fashion, like a banked coke fire. His tough physique was entirely exposed except for flamingo swim shorts.

"I came here to do the same thing," the young man said.

The wonder of it, the impossible coincidence of it, hit Lily with the

shocking impact of a minor miracle.

"*You?*" She took in his rugged appearance with increasing appreciation. "*You* kill yourself? Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes."

"Why?" Lily asked.

"Why you?"

For a timeless hour they talked, saying nothing, saying everything, in relief-lightened reaction to death averted. And toward the hour's end they saw nothing but each other's eyes and all the wordless things, the true things, in their depths.

Each was of the golden age when such things can happen. Each felt a welding bond of circumstance, and certainly in Lily's case something more, beyond reason or reasonableness. Hope. A blazing desire to live. A compulsion to escape Dr. Mallerby's pronouncement of doom.

Both were in a way fresh-born, with all that had besmirched their brief pasts as dead as each would now have been dead, but for the other. Little on earth could have drawn them together so powerfully.

Late the following afternoon, Wallace Mannering hurried into the law office of Jasper Cole, brushed pleasantries aside, and said, "Lily has gone crazy. I've just had a wire from her."

Jasper Cole (a clean-shaven counterpart of Dr. Mallerby) experienced a surge of relief. Mad or otherwise, the heiress to the Verta estate was at least alive. During the past twenty-odd nervous hours it had been presumed—the Verta station wagon having been discovered at Halcyon Beach, and with none of her clothes other than a swim suit and a terry-cloth robe missing from the house—that Lily had drowned.

"What's in the wire?" the lawyer said. "Where is she?"

"It's from Georgia. She was driven there in this fellow's car yesterday morning and they got married."

"What fellow? *Married?*"

"His name is Duke something-or-other." Wallace searched the telegram. "Duke Hart. Sounds like a gambler or a con man. I tell you we must do something about it at once. The bum might be a bigamist. He might even be a killer."

"Stop talking like an oldtime tent show, Wallace. Sit down."

Wallace sat. "Well, if I'm wrong, you figure it. He's out for her money, that's for sure."

"Lily would not," Cole pointed out reasonably, "blaze with diamonds in a swim suit, and she's not the kind of girl who announces on meeting a stranger that she's an heiress."

"Don't forget that her photo was plastered over all the papers after the *Claire-Louise* went down. Of course this crook recognized her."

"You may be right. You probably are right. But Lily is of legal age,

certainly of legal sanity, and a free agent in control of her resources. So what about it?"

Wallace looked at Cole in outraged amazement. "Surely you don't condone this—this bargain-counter type of husband?"

Cole pursed his lips judiciously. "We neither know this young man, Wallace, nor Lily's motivations. Legally, she can buy and discard a husband on impulse as well as after due deliberation. There is nothing we can do about it."

"Well, there's something I can do. I intend to stick around out there when they get back, and find out exactly what's up!"

"Wallace, you're blowing this up out of all proportion. They're married and that's the end of it. It's none of your business or mine." The floodgate of memory opened for a moment, sweeping away Cole's habitual reserve. "The young do fall in love—blindly, on the touch of a hand. Even I can remember that." The lawyer pulled himself together. "Does the wire say when they expect to be back?"

"They were on their way when Lily sent it."

Of necessity there were moments of readjustment.

Especially, Lily appreciated, for Duke. His reaction to the solid evidence of her wealth presented by the Verta homestead was a strange one, a silent tightening that crept over him in a thin glaze. Lily believed that she understood it, this first faint veiling between them. Duke's whole character, as she knew it, would rebel against the role of a man living idly on his wife's money. So very shortly he would either again take up his profession of naturalist, or he would train himself to look after her interests in Verta Industries.

Shortly . . .

The thought, as it did almost every hour of the day and night, curbed Lily with the painful pressure of a bit. Duke must never learn the impending doom of which only she and Dr. Mallerby were aware (Etherton's sharing of the secret was unknown to Lily). The dread that Duke might find out ran like a dark undercurrent through her heart even when tight in the miracle of Duke's embrace.

Her customary restraint toward people was helpful in reducing the visits of the curious. She had never gone in for confidences, so she confided nothing, explained nothing. Not even to Wallace, whose frequent appearances were peculiar and marked with rather studied good fellowship.

During these visits Wallace would manage to engineer a moment of privacy with Lily under the guise of discussing some policy concerning Verta Industries. On such occasions he would casually sound a note of warning, not very subtly, with allusions to the more celebrated cases where moneyed

women were unpleasantly erased by husbands whose pasts had been cleverly concealed.

The latest such private talk occurred on the morning of the ninth day after the *Claire-Louise* had foundered, and Lily was getting thoroughly fed up with it.

"Whatever you are trying to prove, Wallace, I want it stopped. If you think you can poison my mind about Duke, you can't. So let's call this campaign of yours off."

"Not poison, Lily. I only want you to keep your eyes open."

"They have never been more so." She studied Wallace with cold speculation. "I believe I *will* tell you Duke's background, and that will be the end of it. Good California family—graduated last year from Cal. Tech., where he majored in animal morphology—"

"In *what?*"

"It deals with the form and structure of animal life—birds, mammals, snakes—"

"Snakes?"

"Yes, snakes. Duke collected a scarlet king while we were in Georgia."

"What's a scarlet king?"

"What he calls a 'false' coral. Perfectly gentle and harmless."

"I hope to heaven he's right, Lily. You know as well as I do that the coral snake is the deadliest one around here. Where does he keep it?"

"With a few other specimens he found coming East from California."

"Just what did he come east for, Lily?"

"Because he killed his brother."

Wallace forgot his careful pose of concern. "He *what?*"

"I thought that might please you," Lily went on acidly. "The two boys and their mother were the only ones left of the Hart family. Duke and his brother went deer-hunting. Only Duke came back. His mother was suffering from a heart condition and she died from shock and grief."

Wallace leaped on this thumbnail sketch of raw tragedy.

"So he's a refugee from murder!"

"Duke is a refugee from nothing. A coroner's jury completely exonerated him. The trouble is, Duke never exonerated himself."

"And he just came east to forget," her brother-in-law murmured.

"Yes, you could put it like that," Lily said.

Wallace left. He was uncertain whether or not he believed a word of Duke's story. Certainly Lily did —that much was obvious.

Then two things occurred that night.

In order of their sequence, Lily pulled open a bureau drawer, and Etherton came back from Nassau.

The trade wind was mimosa-laden, and the pungent scent of the night seemed to Lily to carry in its sweetness a taint of decay.

"Coming?" she said to Duke.

"Soon, Lily. Just want to think for a while."

She left him stretched out in compact, muscled fitness on a bamboo chaise-longue in the patio, and went up to her dressing room. While preparing for bed the little worry of this deviation from pattern nagged at her. They had always come up for the night together, with no wanting-to-think-for-a-while about it.

Think of what? . . . The furnishings of the room were of her grandparents' era, and the drawer Lily pulled at in a mahogany highboy to get her pajamas opened with difficulty as a result of innumerable swellings and shrinkings. Still mildly disturbed by Duke's strange wanting-to-be-alone, she stood with her hands resting on the drawer's edge, looking down unseeingly at the orderly layers of nightwear and lingerie.

Unseeingly, that is, until the surface of the topmost layer of pajamas seemed to move. Did move. With a gentle rippling motion.

Brief shock stabbed her.

Then reason took over. One of Duke's specimens, of course, that had got loose and somehow landed in her drawer. Certainly Duke had had nothing to do with it. Unless it were a practical joke. But Lily shook her head. The silly stupidity of practical jokes just didn't fit Duke's character.

Conceivably it could have occurred while one of the maids had been making up the room. She might have been putting fresh laundry in the drawer and left it standing open for a while—Lily recalled once, during a season of strong winds and torrential rains, reaching onto a closet shelf and touching the dry skin of a pilot blacksnake, lying there sluggish in refuge from the storm.

But this was not the season of strong winds and heavy rains.

She moved a standing lamp so that its light shafted down on lime nylon. Movement had stopped. Carefully, Lily lifted the pajama top. There, like a slender necklet of black and coral and yellow jeweled stripes, it lay exposed under the brilliant light. The scarlet king, the "false" coral from Georgia.

Lily's immediate impulse was to slam shut the drawer, but it was an odds-on bet that the drawer would stick, as it usually did stick. So she made no move. But the snake did, beginning a series of uneasy shifts. This shifting . . . what *had* Duke told her of the differences between the "false" coral and the true? The true coral (she remembered now) gave no warning when startled or angry but would "shift uneasily in order to disarm the watcher," then like a flash of lightning it would seize the disturber's hand, grinding flesh with its lethal jaws.

This was not the scarlet king.

Under the control of an immobilizing, seeping horror Lily

studied the snake's markings more critically. The bands of the "false," as Duke had told her, were similar red and yellow rings except that the black stripes which bordered the yellow were narrower. Then the head. That of the "false" was sharp and conical, the snout red, whereas the true coral's head was rounded and the snout black.

This was no gentle, friendly creature. This was death. She had learned her lesson in zoology (Lily thought while a sickening germ of suspicion spawned) very well.

Too well?

Just the plain plethora of death—all those aboard the *Claire-Louise* —the knife that Nature poised to stab her heart—the true coral substituted for the "false" and placed in waiting for her hand to touch—all of it socked Lily straight into the bleachers.

The coral continued its uneasy shifting, its guise of helplessness an invitation to the enemy to come within lightning reach. It was hypnotic after a fashion, and Lily watched the nervous moving as though it were a catalyst resolving her own problem.

Premise? *If* she were to believe —*if* Duke had arranged this attempt to kill her . . . then why? Lily's practical nature shook out the state's community property angles of the law among husbands and wives. A solid lump for the other upon either's death.

The irony of the situation brought a racking smile. The end was waiting for her anyhow, without this unnecessary and premature prod. A fact that Duke did not know. Tell him? Or let the plotting thicken, leaving vengeance to the law's device? Well, what would she be up against then? A further burden of suspense in heart-killing suspicion of every drink, of each dish, of each accustomed place to put her hand . . . yes, the insidious drips, with their Iago touch, that Wallace had for days been spatting —they were now beginning to throw their weight.

No outer sound or movement other than the coral's shifting had registered in her mind. Suddenly out of nowhere Duke's arms were around her, swinging Lily off her feet and away from the highboy.

"I'll handle it," he said.

"I didn't hear you—"

"I know."

"That thing is real—not the scarlet king."

"I saw," Duke said. "I know."

With trained competence Duke killed the coral and flung its slender brilliance through an open window out into the night. Then they stood, not close, suddenly at an abyss, with Lily reading in Duke's guarded eyes a perception of her doubts, of the gap that had appeared in the wall of her absolute trust.

"Well, Lily?"

"Where did it come from, Duke?"

"Me."

His coldness, his take-it-or-leave-it attitude stirred a faint anger in her.

"For your experiments?"

"For comparative dissection."

"You said nothing of having it."

"It might have worried you, knowing that so dangerous a specimen was in the house. That it might get loose, as it did get loose."

"Have you others?"

"Harmless ones."

"Duke—"

"Yes, Lily?"

Things broke—all the knots that were twisted up inside her—and nothing mattered whether sane or insane; nothing whatever but the wanting him.

"Will you keep on loving me, Duke? Even for a little longer? Will you be patient?"

"What do you mean by a little longer? What should I be patient for?"

"I can't—it's nothing, Duke."

"I don't get it."

"Don't try. Just say you will. Say it, Duke?"

"I will, Lily."

The indifferent moon traversed its appointed arc and the night moved along toward dawn. The climax of nightmare (a jeweled rippling under jade nylon that was jade water that was the beckoning surface of the sea that swirled into monstrous shape) woke Lily on a guttural scream choked off at birth. Her body was drenched with sweat, but she felt chilled all over. She flung a hand out, to grasp Duke's shoulder, in the way of a child lickety-splitting it for home base. He wasn't there.

Lily turned on a bed lamp and he still wasn't there. Her look came to rest on the settee where he had tossed his clothes last night. The clothes were gone. His pajamas lay on the floor.

No explanation came readily, but a phrase of her former thoughts while standing at the opened highboy drawer returned in corroding repetition: *or let the plotting thicken*. Into what?

Lily felt no immediacy of physical danger; rather it was the danger of thought, of the mind that has stripped a cog and revolves in zany patterns out of control. It became of enormous importance, under the confused apprehensions, to look for Duke and find him. Quickly.

She dressed and went downstairs through a tomblike hush of the familiar house. No lights were on, nor was there the feeling of any other human presence in the thin pallor of false dawn that rectangled the windows in spectral grays.

The front door stood ajar. Lily went out, a wraith adrift in the departing night, and along crushed coral to the garage. Duke's car was gone.

On her way back to the house, coming at her from a pool of black beneath a mango tree a low voice called, "Lily!"

"Duke?"

But it wasn't Duke who stepped toward her from the mango's concealing base. It was Wallace.

Showered, shaved, and freshened from the plane hop from Nassau, Etherton drove through the wash of daybreak to Chief of Police Conway's home in Halcyon. He had telephoned in advance and had expressed a certain urgency. He was expected. They sat in the kitchen, over coffee.

"I covered the island deal and the wreck from Nassau," Etherton said. "One of my men handled the Verta Industries angle of it here in town."

Conway (retired from the F.B.I., comfortable in his post of chief, and conditioned by now to the political niceties of his job) was thoughtful. Verta Industries. The influence swung by just the Verta name alone.

"The wreck was sabotage?" he said.

"That, and murder." Etherton dropped the word factually. "Premeditated mass murder."

"Who?"

"Wallace Mannering. I'll need one of your men along to make the arrest."

"I'll come myself. The—it's a little delicate, Etherton. Bad to go off half-cocked. Repercussions. You feel the evidence is conclusive?"

"Well, here is part of it. Mannering's war service was with the Sea Bees, and his familiarity with demolition and explosives can be taken for granted. To get the materials he needed was simple—directly from the construction supplies of Verta Industries or, without the slightest suspicion, from their supply houses."

"Were any traces of such a device found? Traces usable in court?"

"The divers salvaged enough metal fragments to give us a general idea. Almost booby-trap stuff, only on a somewhat larger scale. You may know about it—where they removed the handle and cap from a grenade and screwed a plunger arrangement in its place? Step on the concealed plunger, it fires a blank .22 cartridge which ignites the fuse to the explosive, and you've had it."

"My son was in Korea. He's told me."

"In this particular device of Mannering's the spring tension of the plunger could stand the force and slap of the sea but not the blow when the yacht struck the solid coral rock of the reef. It was attached magnetically to the yacht's keel, up at the prow end. Answer, the crash—chain reaction to fuel tanks—exit all the Vertas, leaving Mannering top man in absolute control of Verta Industries. The stock was entirely family-owned."

"It hardly seems to make sense. Eleanor Verta had plenty of the stock."

"Not enough. Not until the old man died and she inherited."

"Even so, they weren't suffering any pain. They pretty much lived it up in champagne and T-bone style."

"You can blame it on gambling. Mannering had the absolute system for beating the horses—and lost his shirt at nearly every track in the country."

"What touched it off? What scared him?"

"The old man was getting suspicious—not of Mannering, but he knew that something was rotten and that someone was responsible. My man here in Halcyon got all this from various contacts he made in the construction outfit. Mannering knew it was only a question of time. The island being put up for sale seemed a heaven-sent opportunity."

"On this question of time, Etherton. Way I heard it, Mannering learned of the island while fishing with some tuna-happy pals of his at Bimini. He telephoned Verta and the yacht sailed practically the next day. You don't assemble the parts of a reasonably intricate detonation device and then attach it to the prow of a yacht all in twenty-four hours."

"He didn't. My inquiries at Nassau were with the Tucker estate executors and any number of other people. Both at Nassau and at Bimini. They prove that Mannering learned of the island's being on the market well over a month ago, during a previous fishing trip. He simply took an option and waited to spring it on Verta when everything was set, including what he thought was a perfect alibi."

"Yes, time enough for all the arrangements."

"He was familiar with Verta's habits and character. He knew that Verta would shove off at once to inspect the island, and would take his wife and daughters with him. Lily Verta's last-minute failure to sail was an unexpected monkey-wrench. It left her filed under the heading of unfinished business. His whole scheme is a washout—while she's alive."

"I can see that. She's now the controlling head." Conway waved vague gestures. "Audits—investigations—bound to be a state and federal checkup when the estate is probated. Any day now."

"Exactly my point. The girl is in constant danger, possibly this very minute. My bet is that Mannering will try to rig the job so that this new husband, this unknown quantity, will end up as Suspect Number One and probably fry at Raiford." Etherton shoved his coffee cup aside. "That's why I feel an immediate arrest is advisable. My company will prefer sabotage charges from the marine insurance angle. The indictment for the murder of the people aboard the yacht will naturally lie with the D.A. and the grand jury."

"One thing—how could Mannering possibly have been sure that the yacht would miss the passage and strike the reef?"

Etherton shoved his chair back impatiently and stood up.

"The answer to that," he said, "lies in Captain Jorgsen's deathbed scribble. Let's go."

The urgency to locate Duke remained, although momentarily shelved by this daybreak appearance of Wallace.

"Why the Dawn Patrol act?" she asked.

"Patrol is the right word, Lily. I've been debating for the past quarter hour about waking you. The telephone connection just got through, you see."

Lily didn't, yet Wallace was neither a drunkard nor a fool. The accumulation of oddities—the coral snake, Duke's leaving, now Wallace and his intense cold-fire look, all were dulling her sense of perception.

"What telephone connection, Wallace?"

"To California. To—" Wallace stopped abruptly with the metal clank of a turned-off water tap. "Is Duke still in bed?"

"Duke is gone. He's driving around somewhere."

"Oh?" Wallace digested this. "Why?"

"I don't know. What's this about a call to California?"

"I've had no sleep, Lily—first called a newspaper friend in Los Angeles and got him to look the case up in the morgue."

"Morgue?"

"His paper's files. I got the right county, then finally got the sheriff."

Impatience and irritation mingled with an unsuppresible flash of curiosity in Lily's mind.

"You were checking Duke's story?"

"Luckily, yes. Listen to me, Lily."

"I'll listen, but on the road."

She started back toward the garage. Wallace kept step with her.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To find Duke."

"Then you know where he is?"

"I've an idea."

Lily used the Mercedes-Benz, and Wallace got in beside her. The car slid into the drive, passed Wallace's parked convertible, and went through coquina gateposts onto the highway.

"Where's the spot?" Wallace asked.

"Halcyon Beach."

"You expect to find him there at this hour? To find anybody there?"

"Yes. Now tell me: what did you get from the sheriff?"

"I think you could call it a pattern for murder."

"Let's cut the purple melodrama, Wallace. Just give me the facts."

"All right. The verdict was death by accident, granted. But."

"But what?"

"This, Lily. The coroner's jury

was out for two solid hours."

"There's always a question of doubt in most hunting accident cases."

"No, just the contrary. And you know it."

Lily did know it. Usually the firer of the accidental shot ("I saw something move. I guess I got buck fever. Anyhow—oh, it was terrible!") was suffocated with sympathy by friends and handled with the most perfunctory sort of investigation by the law.

"What a case of that sort really resolves into," Wallace went on, "is motive."

"Just what was Duke's motive supposed to have been? Or didn't the sheriff disclose it?"

"I managed to drag it out of him. The tritest of all motives, Lily—a desperate need for money. Inheriting the family citrus groves being the solution to an unpaid tab for five grand held by his bookie, with an 'or else' attached to it."

"What utter contemptible rot!"

Lily turned the car eastward onto a two-mile stretch of boulevard that ran through undeveloped marshland to the bridge spanning the intracoastal waterways and the beach.

"That's scarcely the point," Wallace said. "Fact, fiction, or conjecture—it's immaterial. The important thing is the way the authorities and the people will look at it here."

It was a curious remark, certainly freighted with threat, and Lily eased her pressure on the accelerator as she turned her head for a deliberate study of Wallace.

"Just what are you getting at?" she asked.

Wallace considered the empty sweeps of marshland, the trafficless roadway ahead and behind.

"Wasn't the coral snake in the highboy drawer an indication?" he said.

Lily stopped the car, leaving its motor idling. The picture was now quite clear. Wallace's sole source of knowledge about the coral would be the fact that he himself had put it there.

Curiously, it was a deep anger rather than fright that possessed Lily—a cold anger, with a wanting to know the how and, especially, the why.

"When did you do it?"

"While you and Duke were away on one of your lovesick drives. Eleanor kept her keys to the family homestead, you know."

Lily found nothing in Wallace's face but a bland, determined expression of iron intention, barely tinged with regret.

"You've never liked me, Wallace, and I've never liked you. But why this? Why murder?"

"Money."

"You'll get Eleanor's after probate. You could even draw against it right now."

"Not enough. It's 'gone' money, Lily. Verta Industries' money."

Anger flamed in Lily to an unreasoning peak. There were no

clear thoughts—just a blind, consuming rage.

"Get out."

Wallace didn't stir. Only his hand moved, sliding into a jacket pocket. He said, with some compassion, "Not here."

"I said get out."

"We will both get out at the beach, Lily. I didn't only take Duke's coral specimen yesterday. I also found and took his gun." The .32 positive rested loosely in Wallace's hand, on his lap, its muzzle pointing at Lily.

He said curtly, suddenly vicious, "Get going."

She eased the Mercedes-Benz ahead, loafingly, under pressure of trying to sort out the elements of the very pressure itself.

"You're pretty much of an opportunist, Wallace."

"Let's say a prepared one."

"This daybreak appearance was to kill me?"

"Originally, no. Merely to check on the outcome of the coral snake trap. But your being up, Duke's being gone, and your not only starting to look for him but actually taking me with you—well, shall we say it's most opportune? I even have Duke's gun. You see, don't you?"

"Not clearly."

Wallace became sadistically exact. Every trait of cruelty, selfishness, self-love, cupidity, trickled through the mask of his normal face. You could all but paint a childhood steeped in wing-stripped flies.

"I shoot you, Lily. If we do run into Duke, and I hope we shall, I shoot him, too. Suicide pact, or murder-and-suicide—either verdict will be satisfactory. If we don't meet him I simply do the job and drop the gun, wiped clean. The chances are excellent that its serial number is on file in California. Step on it a bit, Lily."

"Why should I? Why hurry it?"

Wallace said with caustic cynicism, "The bunch of carrots before the donkey. The slim but shining hope that Duke might just be there, and be able to put on that act always billed as The Marines Have Landed."

They reached the bridge with its high sweeping arc and from the central draw Lily spotted, on the lip of the distant beach, a single parked car. Duke's car. A diagram of the shore's physical layout occupied Lily's mind's eye.

Yes, she thought, it might be done. If by the grace of its power and low-slung gravity the Mercedes-Benz could without bogging hit the stretch of loose sand between the parking strip and the hard wet pack of the tide's edge . . .

She would die—but she was slated for death anyhow, either from Dr. Mallerby's decree or by Wallace's trigger-finger. The solacing feature was that Wallace would die, too. And Duke would live.

She pressed the accelerator and shot down the bridge's exit ramp,

swung onto hardtop, then jammed the accelerator to the boards, streaking head-on for the beach and the line of creaming surf.

Wallace yelled once—a strangled "Stop!"—and had raised the .32 to pump lead into this woman suddenly gone berserk when the car shuddered at the ridge sand, recovered, then quickly lunged on. Under the jounce of impact the gun flew from Wallace's hand. He struggled to leap out as, again in traction, the car hurtled to the sea. But he could not.

A barrier of water, negligent but with the implacability of surging surf, rolled the Mercedes-Benz to the sweeping tide.

It was a cycle completing its destined orbit and coming to an end, Lily thought, as the water swirled her in her plunge when she was shot clear of the Mercedes-Benz. The moves in a supernal game. Halcyon Beach—to a rebirth of living (one week) with love—back to Halcyon Beach—to the strength of arms grappling—and unconsciousness.

"He's done for," Duke said. "Got pinned under when the car rolled. He was dead when the cops dragged him ashore."

This slow return to the normal —Lily accepted it with a gratitude so deep that thankfulness could never be enough. They were in Duke's car, headed home. They were talking, all right, but the talk seemed in Lily's still rattling state of nerves to be on a vaguely disconnected plane.

"It was all so useless, Duke."

"Not when it ends like this."

"You don't understand how I mean it. If Wallace had only had patience, if he had only waited a little longer . . ."

"That's the second time you've pulled that patience and a little longer stuff."

"Dr. Mallerby was foggy about the time limit."

"Look here, Lily. You tell me about this. Whatever it is, and right now."

Lily did, and for a stunned moment Duke absorbed the ugly portraiture of fate as Lily so calmly, so impersonally had outlined it.

"The man is nuts," he said.

"No, Duke. He's been our family doctor since before I was born. It's my heart—one of those out-like-a-light-any-minute propositions."

Duke's expression cleared almost with the sweep of an eraser across a dark slate.

"Lily, listen to me. You're still half-doped, but will you listen to me and get this straight?

"All right."

"I mean no disrespect to Dr. Mallerby. Even specialists can and do make mistakes. But if his diagnosis was correct, you'd be a dead duck right now. What's the therapy for a bad heart?"

"Well, I suppose it's—"

"It's rest. Calm, absolute rest and

an avoidance of any shock. And brother, have you been shocked! You've had enough shocks to make a fatal heart condition yell uncle and give up. Do you know where you and I are heading for as soon as this Wallace mess is cleared up?"

"Where?"

"The Mayo Clinic. They'll take the slightest doubt out of your mind." (Some weeks after the inquest the Mayo clinic did exactly that.) "You pulled a plain faint, and what of it? They'll tell you why."

Etherton accepted a cocktail from the maid. He added a canapé of anchovy on bland cheese. The Verta patio rested in the half light of fading day, and the tableau of Lily and Duke, easy in lounge chairs beneath the fleshy branches of a frangipani tree, was soothingly pleasant after the earlier hours of official activity, statements, and reports.

"You'll want to know," he said.

He repeated the dossier on Wallace much as he had given it to Chief Conway over coffee at daybreak. When it was done Lily said, as Conway had said, "I don't see how Captain Jorgsen possibly could have missed the opening in the reef. He was an expert navigator. And he had that special chart which the Tuckers had had made for the island, and which Wallace sent him."

Captain Jorgsen couldn't understand it, either. The answer came to him only just before the end."

"That incomplete scribble? I remember you said it read *must have been for*. With the letter *r* dribbling off. I suggested that he might have meant the *for* to be *fog*."

"We checked. There was no fog. No, the divers salvaged the chart Wallace had sent over. The submersion in sea water had not been long enough to make chemical and spectroscopic examination useless. The tests turned out perfectly clear. The location of the opening in the reef had simply been cleverly blocked in, and its position on the chart relocated. You see, Miss Verta, what the captain was writing when death struck would have read: *must have been forged*."

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EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**THOMAS WALSH**
TITLE:	***Terror in His Heart***
TYPE:	Cop Story
DETECTIVE:	Dan Flanagan
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*About the Piper — a little punk without the backbone of a roach — a pigeon who knew terror in his heart all his life . . .*

THE PIPER KEPT VERY QUIET WHEN he saw the two men come in. From his niche under the apartment house stairs, where he was standing with his back to the radiator, coattails spread to warm his thin shanks, he blinked his nervous brown eyes at them and drew his shoulders together as much as he could—with an idea perhaps that if they met he would be hidden completely. At first he did not know who even the big man was, but if he had known, that would not have mattered to the Piper. He knew his place; he never presumed on it.

The two men stopped inside the door, not going back toward the stairs. The big one in the derby hat took a scarf from around his neck and wound it tightly, fold on fold, about something he held in his right hand. The Piper could hear him breathing. Almost immediately, in the street, a truck raced its motor and backfired once or twice. "Now," the big man said. "Half a minute, Eddie. He'll have just passed the truck."

The Piper knew who he was then, by the voice: Mike Hoffman. In his corner he shivered and clenched suddenly damp hands tightly together before his stomach. It was too late, too dangerous, to slip out through the cellar door beside him. Frozen in the shadow,

© 1939 by Thomas Walsh; originally titled "Pigeon"

the Piper waited, afraid even to breathe.

The two men in the front of the hall did not speak again; they just stood there silently, vaguely visible to the Piper against the dim light shining in from the street beyond, through the glass upper half of the front door, until another man came up the outside steps, stopped a moment in the vestibule as if he were looking into his mailbox, and then opened the door and came in.

Hidden by the overhang of the stairs, the Piper saw everything perfectly—he saw the man who had just entered stop suddenly as he bumped into the other two, stiffen, and start to turn. But the big man had his left arm rigid against the door then, forcing it shut, while his right, muffled by the scarf, he held level with his chest. He said, "Angelo, pal," in a hating and deadly voice, then added a name after as if he were spitting it out. The truck outside kept on roaring; in the hall there were two flat and absurdly quiet reports, drowned out at once by the backfiring from the street.

The man who had just come in fell to the floor, and the big man, holding the scarf at his head now, bent over him for a moment. There was another report, no louder than the popping of a paper bag filled with air.

Slowly the big man straightened, repeating the name he had used before, in the same instant that the Piper's breath burst out of him in a strangled and horrible fashion.

He knew the big man would hear him before the cry was clear of his lips, so that blindly he turned and groped over the wall at his side. Somehow his hand caught the knob of the cellar door and yanked it open, but as he plunged through the oblong patch of blackness he missed the first of the descending steps, and tumbled halfway down before his outstretched hands snatched at the banister and stopped his fall. Feet running above him made him drop down again until he hit the cellar floor and stumbled across it, in six steps catching the impact of a wall on his chest.

It took him an eternity to find the yard door; when he did there was a bolt shot in place across it that cost a precious moment to force back. The steps behind him were on the stairs, on the floor, before the Piper, knocking the bolt free, plunged out to a dim yard, across it and through a swinging door in a fence.

He was breathless with terror and haste; his legs would scarcely support him; he almost fell before he reached the street. There he glanced wildly up and down, found it deserted, and sobbed a broken, frightened sob. The corner was fifty feet away; the Piper knew he could never reach it.

He did not try. He ran ten feet, stopped, turned, and started back, his hands in his pockets, his mouth

puckered up in an unsteady whistle, just as the two men burst out of the alley behind him.

In the light of the street lamp he could see Mike Hoffman's right hand jammed into the slash pocket of his overcoat, the fringe of the scarf foaming out over his wrist. He looked at the Piper, and then up and down the street. "Take the corner, Eddie," he told the second man. "See who's there."

"Hello, Mike," the Piper said, and forced his loose lips up in a grin. "What's the matter? What're you—"

The big man moved his left hand out and took him by the collar of his coat. "Hey!" the Piper said, in a husky voice he tried desperately to make amused. "You after somebody, Mike? A guy came out of the alley before you—I saw him running. He ducked into that hallway across the street. He—"

The other man, running back from the corner, moved his shoulders. "Clean," he said. "Just a guy and a girl coming down. You better let them get by, Mike."

Before he was finished the big man took his hand from the Piper's coat and slapped him twice, once on each cheek, rocking his head from side to side.

"Another guy," he said. "Another guy, Piper, huh? You weren't him, were you?" A sweep of his hand, striking the Piper's chin, knocked him to the pavement.

"Listen, Mike," the Piper said, staying on his knees. His eyes were almost phosphorescent with terror. "I don't know what you're talking about. I never—"

"Hold it, Mike," the second man cut in nervously, moving his head toward the corner as the man and girl came around it.

Shivering violently, the Piper pawed at the big man's arm. "Mike, listen—Mike, honest to God—"

The girl hesitated when she saw them. The Piper, feeling her eyes, wiped blood away from his mouth.

"Dan!" the Piper heard her say. "They've knocked him down. Dan. What are they doing to him? What's the matter?"

"Push on," Mike Hoffman told her harshly, swinging around. "Push on before I—"

"What?" the man with her said, in a pleasantly inquiring voice. "What, Brother?"

He was a big man, too, with well-set shoulders, a sharp chin, and blue eyes steadier and colder, deeper under the brows, than Mike Hoffman's own. The Piper, when he saw who it was, grinned at him foolishly; the Piper grinned at everyone.

"The tough cop," Mike Hoffman said, in a disgusted way. But he released the Piper as he said it, and stepped back against the wall.

Walking over to him, stopping just before him, the tough cop glanced sidewise at the Piper.

"Too tough," he said, "to pick a spot like this. You're no terrier,

Brother. Piper Prout!" He laughed. His blue eyes never left Mike Hoffman's.

"It's all right, Mr. Flanagan," the Piper said. "Me and Mike—"

He stopped to wet his lips. The big man had his hand in the pocket of his overcoat, covered by the scarf. He did not move it and he did not speak.

"Come on," Flanagan said, "come on and break it up before I work you over to see how tough you are. And if you don't think I can, Brother, just stay where you are and keep on looking that way at me."

Mike Hoffman said, "Cops can do anything. Tough cops like you." He smiled slowly and stepped out from the wall, keeping his hand in his pocket. The Piper tried not to watch it, or to look at him; his eyes were jerking crazily all around for thinking of it.

"Mike," the second man said hurriedly, as if he were thinking of it too—and maybe Angelo, pal, sprawled out in a hallway in the next block. "Let's get started. Let's—"

"Okay," Mike Hoffman said. But he paused for a moment to look down at the Piper, and to add, "I'll be seeing you, Piper. Sometime around. You remember that and be a good boy."

Over his shoulder Flanagan winked at the girl. "Mike Hoffman," he told her. "Hard guy. He doesn't even wear his scarf. He just carries it around in his pocket like that to show people how rugged he is."

Smiling again, the big man took his hand from his pocket. Before he went on down the street his eyes touched the Piper's briefly, and warningly, cold yellow flares in the depths of them.

After he had gone the Piper wiped his mouth. He was a skinny little man with flabby features, and a shifty way of moving his eyes. Mostly when he was talking, he kept a perpetual, loose-lipped grin twitching nervously around his mouth. It was there now. He had colorless light hair and weak-looking eyes that blinked a lot. Huddled in a big overcoat, ferret-faced under a shapeless brown hat, he was in his late thirties, and looked fifteen years older. Now, ducking his head to the girl, to Flanagan, he started to sidle away.

But Flanagan caught his arm. "No hurry, Piper," he said. Then to the girl, "Suppose we fix him up in your place, baby. Think you could stand it?"

"Why, of course," the girl said. "I've iodine and peroxide, and his cheek's all cut." She looked after Mike Hoffman angrily. "The—the big bully! I wish now you'd given him a good one, Dan."

Chuckling, Flanagan pushed the Piper ahead of them. They walked up two blocks and into the entrance of a new brick apartment house, where, in the bathroom of a front

apartment on the third floor, the girl painted a cut on the Piper's cheek, and had him rinse out his mouth with some foamy stuff. Then she and Flanagan went out to the living room while he washed his hands and face; it was just across a narrow hall, so close to the bathroom door that the Piper could hear them talking.

Flanagan didn't keep his voice low. When Piper shut off the running water he was saying, "Don't get hepped up about the Piper, baby. He's used to getting the works. I don't think he'd feel at home without it."

"But why?" the girl said. Her voice was nice, the Piper thought —soft and yet kind of angry, as if she were sore at him and yet sorry for him at the same time. "He's so skinny. He's so harmless. He's such a poor little man."

"The Piper?" Flanagan laughed, and then added quite cheerfully: "Poor little punk! Someone like that you'd never understand, baby. He's a little yellow no-good without the backbone of a roach. I only brought him up here because if Mike Hoffman was bothering him there's a chance he might know something Mike wouldn't want us to. Maybe—" He stopped to call, "Piper! You hung yourself?"

The Piper was grinning vaguely into the mirror. He didn't mind what Flanagan said; he didn't mind what anybody said. He wiped his hands on a towel and went out.

Watching him from an easy chair, Flanagan's eyes were sharp, and faintly puzzled.

"What got you in wrong tonight, Piper? What did Mike Hoffman tag you for?"

Not sitting down, standing by the door with his hat in his hands, the Piper moved his mouth sidewise, and grinned at him.

"I don't know," he said. "Honest, I don't, Mr. Flanagan. Maybe he had a drink or two. Tomorrow he'll be all right. Tomorrow—" The Piper raised his hand and put two fingers of it together to show what good friends they would be in the morning.

"Nothing? Flanagan repeated softly. "Now you wouldn't lie to me, Piper? Because if I told Gilhooley I thought you had—"

"Dan!" the girl cried angrily. Her eyes were flaming. "You'll stop that right now. You'll leave him alone. Do you hear?"

The Piper ducked his head quickly, once to her, once to Flanagan, and scurried for the door. The girl followed him, taking her pocketbook from a table in the small entryway and thrusting something into his hands while he fumbled with the lock.

"You don't let them hurt you again," she said, her dark eyes still angry. "You stick up for yourself, Piper. Punch them back the next time and they'll leave you alone. It will make you feel good."

"Sure," the Piper mumbled.

"Thanks, lady." He could feel the bill in his palm—a buck, anyway. He was lucky.

Nodding and grinning, he closed the door after him and went down the stairs.

Two nights later Gilhooley and Flanagan cornered him in a side street off the avenue, on his way to Louie's coffeepot for his nightly bowl of soup and all the stale rolls Louie would let him have for his dime.

They walked him down the avenue, and into the recessed entrance of a tailor shop under the shadow of the El posts. There Gilhooley grabbed his wrist, crushing it only slightly; while Flanagan, very natty in a camel's-hair topcoat and a dark brown hat, planted his legs wide apart and stared at him steadily with cold blue eyes.

That moment of deep silence made the Piper's heart almost burst against his ribs. Flanagan let it go on and on; then suddenly he growled, "You dirty little rat!" half lifting one hand, before hesitating, looking at Gilhooley, and letting it fall to his side. "I should have let Mike Hoffman beat your head off the other night—maybe I will yet. If I'd known then you were going to lie to me—"

Licking his lips, the Piper let his eyes drift out hopelessly to the street beyond. "Look," he said, his voice so anxious to please that the words slurred together. "Look, Mr. Flanagan. If I knew what you meant maybe I could find out something for you. Maybe—"

Putting a hand under his chin Flanagan forced his face up.

"I mean the man they found in the hallway," he said harshly. "The man Mike Hoffman knocked off."

"That," the Piper said, as if he were surprised. "I don't know nothing about that, Mr. Flanagan. I swear—"

Gilhooley did something to his wrist, so he yelled and rose up on his toes. Flanagan looked uneasily away. "All right, Gil," he growled. "Save that. Give him a chance to open up."

The Piper began to cry then; he could cry as easily as he could talk. He swore, he promised, he begged—the only thing clear to him was the picture of Mike Hoffman's eyes watching him as they had that night, narrowed, muddy, deadly. That was horribly clear through the things Gilhooley did to his arm—so clear that the Piper chose even Gilhooley before them. And in the end it wasn't as bad as he had feared it might be; Flanagan called the other man off almost as soon as the Piper began to cry.

"Hell," he said, "let the little punk alone, Gil. Maybe he saw something that night and maybe he didn't; but anyway we couldn't put Mike Hoffman away on any story he'd tell. Whatever we get we'll have to get some place else."

"I guess," Gilhooley said, sighing.

But before he went he cuffed the Piper hard into the side of the door. It was always best, Gilhooley figured, to give these guys something to remember you by.

They day after that, on his way past the public school just as it was letting out, the Piper met Flanagan's girl again. Although he saw her coming he lowered his head and would have gone by without speaking, if she hadn't stopped before him and called his name. The Piper wasn't accustomed to having anybody want to talk to him; awkwardly he lifted his hat, darted a glance at her, and then lowered his eyes immediately to the pavement.

"You've been all right, Piper?" she asked. "No one's been bothering you again? If they have, you tell me. I'll get Dan to fix them up."

"Fine," the Piper mumbled, staring past her in embarrassment with the fixed grin on his lips. "No trouble, lady."

"Well—" the girl said. She hesitated a moment, then opened her purse, and the Piper said, "Thanks, lady. Thanks very much," and took the dollar she held out. One of the kids around told him her name was Miss Kennedy, and she taught the fifth grade inside; after that, two or three times a week, he made it a point to be there when she was leaving.

He always got something; once she even took him home with her and made him up a parcel of cold meat sandwiches. Then she began to send him on errands—foolish little errands she could have done easily by phone. The Piper realized why that was; he realized she was trying to reform him, and make him work for his money. He realized, too, that he'd struck it soft; he called her lady and was always as polite to her as he knew how to be.

In November, when it turned cold, she rented a room for him in the boarding house on the corner, a room that had a radiator in it, and a mirror, and a little sink. Sometimes the Piper thought he was imagining it; sometimes at night, in the room she paid for, he lay on the bed and thought about her.

The thoughts the Piper had weren't romantic ones—he'd never had any idea of those, never in his life. They were just thoughts, all mixed up, of Flanagan and Miss Kennedy and himself, and occasionally of Mike Hoffman. At such times the Piper pictured himself as standing up very straight the way Flanagan did, cold-eyed and sarcastic, not afraid of anybody or anything.

Sometimes, too, he took down his one treasure from the shelf in the closet—a shiny, flat automatic he had picked up three years before, out of an alley ashcan where it had been flung after a holdup. So small, so resolute, so definite, so powerful—it was a symbol of all the

Piper would have liked to be, and knew he never would be. . . .

Miss Kennedy began to give him books; she even had him learn a poem out of one of them: *Invictus*. One evening, he recited that in a mumbled and shame-faced fashion, while she listened very seriously, and told him how fine it had been at the end.

She was a pretty girl, the Piper thought. He liked her.

Occasionally she'd take him with her to the stores and have him help carry the packages home.

One evening, laden with packages, they came home across an empty lot near the corner where Mike Hoffman had caught him that night. There was a narrow path across it, winding through scraggly bushes as high on either side as a man's waist. It had snowed that day, and the ground was icy, so that on a little rise, unable to see his feet for the packages he carried before him, the Piper fell over a branch. When he tried to save himself by flinging out his arms, the packages went every way out of his hands.

One was thrown into the brush. It was dark in the lot and he had to grope around for it, with Miss Kennedy helping. At last he found it and looked up to see her standing in the middle of the path behind him, staring wide-eyed at something her fingers must have closed on in the search.

The moment the Piper saw it he knew whose it was. He'd never forgotten that scarf. It had turned a little moldy now, but it still held its color, it still held, too, the gun that had been wound in its center.

The Piper, of course, didn't tell her whose it was. Instead he shivered, and looked around him at the darkness with suddenly panicky eyes.

"It's a gun," Miss Kennedy said, holding it for him to see. "It's a gun, Piper. Why would it be here?"

In that moment Mike Hoffman's small eyes seemed to be all around them in the shadows.

"Throw it back, lady," the Piper said, reaching for it with fumbling hands. "Don't touch it. Here!"

But Miss Kennedy was already tucking it under her arm.

"No. I'll give them to Dan. He'll know what to do with them, Piper; he's coming over later for supper."

Staring at her, the Piper could not stop the rattling chatter of his teeth. But he said no more; head down, short legs scurrying, he followed her across the lot to the street, expecting every moment to see Mike Hoffman before them.

But they gained her corner and no one stopped them; no one noticed them. They came to her apartment, and turned on the lights, and no one was waiting for them. There, in the kitchen, Miss Kennedy discovered that she had forgotten the cream.

"Darn it!" she exclaimed, tying the apron around her. "Dan wouldn't speak to me all night if he had to take his coffee black. Run down for some, Piper; it will only take you a minute. A half pint, remember."

The Piper took her half dollar and went downstairs very slowly, stopping a moment in the shelter of the doorway to peer nervously up and down the street. Terror wasn't something extraordinary to the Piper; it was a cold material thing that had been in his heart all his life. Terror of the old man, and of the kids at school—terror of pain and humiliation, of the senseless, overmastering fear that took his small body and shook it like a tree in a great wind.

Now he wasn't more afraid of Mike Hoffman than he had been of those other things; the quality, the pitch, was no more frightening. But as he stood there in the doorway something else came into the Piper; he tried to fight. With his jaws clenched tightly, his hands trembling in his pockets, he stepped out to the street, and, keeping close to the shelter of the buildings, hurried down to the delicatessen on the corner.

And Mike Hoffman did not stop him; Mike Hoffman was nowhere about. While they were getting the cream for him he licked his lips and straightened a little, the Piper did. She always told him that if a man didn't want to be afraid, he didn't have to be afraid; and now, the first time the Piper tried it out, it seemed miraculously true.

Mike Hoffman—who was Mike Hoffman? And how would he know about the gun and the scarf? That was reassurance, a base to stand firm on, and come back to. How could Mike Hoffman know? Positively, incontestably, the Piper saw that he could not know; he had not been there to see them.

It was that knowledge which helped the Piper, so that when he had the cream and the change he went out to the street, not hesitating this time, holding the fear down somewhere inside him as if it were a solid thing he could prison with his hands. The feeling it gave him was marvelous. He could feel himself growing inside—becoming big, savage, fearless. The simplicity, the force of it went to his head like wine. Halfway down to her apartment he stopped and turned around. He had an idea; he'd get his gun. And then if Mike Hoffman, or Flanagan, or anybody tried to tell him what to do—

With the door closed in his room and the light on, he took the gun down from his closet shelf and hefted it in his hand. Then he put it in his pocket and looked at himself in the dresser mirror, pushing the gun up and out a little the way the gangsters did in the movies.

The pose made him feel so good that he looked at himself for a long while, until steps sounded in the

hall. The Piper stared at his door with a cold grin, narrowing his eyes, wishing that they were Mike Hoffman's steps. If they only were—

"Piper, pal," Mike Hoffman said, smiling at him from the doorway, and then coming in and closing the door behind him. "I heard you were roosting here—I been hanging around a couple of days waiting to see you. Only you never came in the front door till now, kid. That gave me a crazy idea you might be ducking me."

The grin on the Piper's lips was changing. He could feel it change, and he could feel his mind changing too. The sureness, the recklessness was gone out of it; even the hard gun butt in the pocket of his coat turned in an instant soft and spongy, so that he took his hand away from it quickly and moved back two steps until the wall of the room stopped him.

Without any haste Mike Hoffman crossed over to him.

"But you wouldn't be ducking me, Piper. I knew that even when guys told me different. Me, I said you were okay; I said you'd play ball and keep your mouth shut. I said you'd never squawk."

The grin was sliding and slipping all over the Piper's face now, the way it always had, save for the few moments just gone that were unreal and inconceivable now, with Mike Hoffman before him. He managed to say, "I told you—"

"Sure," Mike Hoffman said. "Sure you did." His hand came up to the Piper's throat in a playful gesture, tightened there, then released itself. "And I wanted to tell you something, too, kid—something maybe you ain't figured out yet. If I'm ever picked up, if there's ever a call out for me, I'll know where to look. I'll know it's you put the finger down, Piper. And before they take me in I'll see you. Maybe not long—maybe only for a couple of seconds. But long enough—plenty long enough. See what I mean, Piper, pal?"

It was then the Piper knew he'd been betrayed; it was then the Piper found out that a man couldn't help what went on inside him, no matter how hard he tried.

"Mike," he whispered, plucking the big man's sleeve. "It wasn't my fault, Mike. You can't blame me. She found them. She—"

"What?" Mike Hoffman asked softly. "Found what, Piper?" His face did not lose its smile; but his eyes—the Piper made a little sound when he saw his eyes, and began to talk fast, breathlessly, running his words together.

Mike Hoffman seemed to understand them all right, because he asked no questions, he said nothing; only, when the Piper had finished, he blinked once or twice at a spot on the wall over the Piper's head, as if he saw something there he had never expected to see.

"Eddie!" Mike Hoffman said at

last, in a curious and reminiscent way. "Eddie! I told him to throw them in the river that night because I wasn't sure Flanagan wouldn't follow me and pick me up if you talked. I couldn't be grabbed with them on me. And Eddie must have seen a cop, or something that turned him yellow. He just dumped them there and lied to me. And I had a license for that gun; it's registered. They'll have the bullets they dug out of Angelo, and they'll prove they came from that gun. Flanagan even saw the scarf in my pocket and made a crack about it. And the holes in it—"

His mouth creased savagely, as if he were laughing.

"I don't take the chair, Piper. Not Mike Hoffman. There's one out. You go back there and tell her to call Flanagan. When he comes you see that she gives him the stuff. He'll hustle right out then to have it checked up. He'll—"

Even in his blind panic the Piper understood one thing: he understood that he must not let Mike Hoffman know that Flanagan was coming over anyway. He knew if he did that he'd never leave the room again, and he chattered inaudible promises while Mike Hoffman led him downstairs, walked with him along the street, and stopped with him at the entrance of the girl's apartment.

"Piper," Mike Hoffman said in a husky voice that made his words sound thick and heavy, "they can't burn me twice. Remember that. Because if Flanagan don't come out this door with the things she picked up in half an hour—"

The muddy yellow points were in his eyes again. He dug his thick fingers deeply into the Piper's arm, then shoved him up the stoop toward the entryway, so violently that the Piper almost went to his knees.

Ten minutes later, precisely at six, Flanagan rang the downstairs bell. The Piper did not turn at the sound; he remained in his place by the window, watching a tan car jockey into position on the corner of the avenue, ten feet from the stone stoop, and placed lengthwise to it, so that when Flanagan came out again he'd be walking past the windows of it after he came down the steps. The Piper knew whose car it was; he knew who'd be in it. Licking his lips, he wiped his sweating palms jerkily down the sides of his trousers.

He didn't even wonder what Flanagan would do when he found him there; but Flanagan, after one incredulous and exasperated growl, forgot everything in the story Ann poured out. When the gun and the scarf were in his hands he whooped aloud.

"Baby," he yelled. "Mike Hoffman's scarf—I'd bet a million. Remember it in his pocket that night? And the gun, his gun, by all that's holy—"

A promotion, Flanagan swore. A raise. A first-class dick.

"A guy," he crowed, his face all twisted up, "could get married on dough like that. Why, it wouldn't cost him a nickel extra." He grabbed her hands and crushed them into his coat. "I'll bet that's what you found them for. I'll bet you hunted for them so that you and I—"

"Are you crazy?" Ann demanded, in a breathless voice. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then make a guess," Flanagan said, "How about the works, baby—flowers and music and all the trimmings? And Piper our best man—Piper in a morning coat, with a gardenia in his lapel."

Then the bell rang again and Flanagan gathered up the gun and the scarf, and kissed Ann hurriedly. "That's Gilhooley. He was going to meet me here. Wait till he sees this stuff, baby. Wait till—"

Then he was gone, and Ann was staring at the door.

"Crazy man!" she said again softly. "Can you imagine anyone as silly as that?"

The Piper looked at her dully, feeling hot all over, and queasy in the stomach, waiting for only one thing—the shots. Because the tan car was still waiting, undisturbed, on the corner; Gilhooley had not noticed who was in it. But then there was no reason why he should; the curb was lined with cars. And Mike Hoffman would take a chance on the two of them. He'd have to. It was the only chance Mike Hoffman had left.

The Piper put his hand in his pocket and touched the gun he had forgotten was there. All the time she went on talking about that crazy man. What had he intended? Piper! Did he really think— The Piper did not look at her. But he knew who she meant. He knew who her eyes were shining for.

Not him. The Piper knew how crazy the thought of that was. *Invictus* and the story of Abe Lincoln—he got those things. Sandwiches, too. Hot coffee. Money now and then. A room. The Piper expected nothing else; he was aware himself of the limits of his world.

It was a queer thing now that for a moment those limits were vanished, so that the Piper felt all strange and funny inside. It was nothing; she'd been kind to him the way she was kind to everyone. That was all. And she had betrayed him too, by telling him something that wasn't true, by getting him to believe it until Mike Hoffman came and showed him what a lie it was. If it had been true, the Piper saw what he would do now—the one thing that anyone like the Piper could ever do for anyone like her.

But he knew he couldn't do that thing. Not the Piper. Because she had lied to him, and if he tried and failed, there would be Mike

Hoffman's big hands, and Mike Hoffman's narrowed eyes, waiting for him.

He knew he couldn't do it, even while he slipped out to the kitchen and through the door to the back stairs. Just thinking of it made the flesh of his body crawl, and his legs quiver so much that he stumbled going down the stairs.

And yet he reached the ground floor, passed through a door to the yard, and moved from that around the corner of the building to the areaway, without a break in the silence that hummed and throbbed dizzily in his ears. On the steps leading up to the pavement he stopped and shivered, being more afraid in the heavy shadow of the areaway than he'd ever been before in his life of fear. The stoop leading down from the apartment house entrance was ten feet to his left; the tan car was another ten feet beyond that. Because it was still parked there, the Piper knew Flanagan had not come out yet; he was talking then in the hallway, to Gilhooley. Any minute—

Sick with terror, the Piper moved up another step, so that his head was level with the sidewalk. He did it because he thought of the girl, of her eyes and her voice when she had spoken of Flanagan upstairs just now. And he put his hand in his pocket and clenched it around the handle of his gun, even though touching that was like touching a snake. He tried to think of nothing else but her, only the fear in him wasn't anything he could fight that way; fear was his blood and his heart and his bones now. She was wrong, the Piper knew. She was wrong. If a man didn't want to be afraid—crazy. Crazy, crazy, crazy!

Then the apartment door opened above him, and Flanagan's voice, jubilantly impatient, said, "That's the story, Gil. Come on now—let's get started." He came down the steps toward the street and the Piper made some kind of sound—not a word, not a call. But Flanagan heard it, and Flanagan turned, and in the window of the car Piper saw the vague suggestion of a face pushing forward.

In a moment the face was clearer; there was the shape of a gun rising under it. The Piper knew it was then or never, and somehow he got his own gun up, somehow he fired. One, two, three, four—his finger pulled frantically at the trigger. Glass smashed in the windshield of the tan car, and then its motor roared, and the feel of the gun, the sound of the shots, the face in the car that slid back and vanished at the Piper's second shot, or maybe his third—they weren't separate things. They all combined, they became suddenly, intensely meaningful, so that at the effect of them a light burst and flamed in the Piper's mind, a great glow unfolded in his heart.

He ran out to the street from the areaway as the driver of the tan car

smashed it frantically into gear. He wanted to cry in the strong, sure, masculine joy that possessed him, "Flanagan, Gilhooley, you got nothing on me. Not a thing. See? I fought something you never had to fight. And I licked it—maybe not for always, but for once. And I licked it because—because, Flanagan—"

The Piper never could have expressed in words the thought he had there; it was something he'd never have admitted, even to himself. Dan Flanagan, on the stoop above him, turning to him a moment before the face and the gun had showed themselves in the window of the car, standing between the Piper and the spot where the car had waited—Flanagan, hearing the whine of the bullets past him, seeing the vicious spurts of flame spouting toward him from the shadowy figure in the areaway, did the only thing he could do, the automatic thing his life had forced him to do. He fired twice at the man he thought was trying to kill him, his hand jamming down his gun through the cloth of his coat, his lips parted, stretched out wide.

On the avenue behind him the tan car was roaring into action, but neither Flanagan nor Gilhooley noticed that. They were turning over the Piper, who had stopped rolling almost at their feet.

When he saw who it was Flanagan cursed slowly, in amazement. He never was able to understand why the little punk had tried to pull anything like that on him.

Two miles away the driver of the tan car dumped Mike Hoffman out into the river road underbrush, with one of the Piper's bullets between his eyes. A cab driver saw him there the next morning, and Flanagan spent a lot of time wondering who had saved the state that job.

But the Piper, of course, was the only one who knew, and the Piper couldn't tell him; you might have placed a matchbox over the two holes Flanagan had laid in his chest, over the Piper's heart.

NEXT MONTH...

An unusual gambling story—Fergus O'Breen versus a professional cardsharp—

ANTHONY BOUCHER's *The Last H nd*

a new story by

GEORGE HARMON COXE

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **GEORGE HARMON COXE**

TITLE: ***Two Minute Alibi***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Dr. Lane was positive Maynard had not murdered his wife. So Lane's conscience did not really trouble him when he found himself not only the key witness for the defense but also the judge and jury . . .*

WHEN THE DOOR OF THE GRAND jury room opened and the clerk said, "Doctor Lane, please," Thomas Lane stood up and straightened his jacket before he glanced down at the girl and the boy who had been sitting next to him on the wooden settee.

Janet Watkins looked back at him, her young face pale but composed beneath the ash-blonde hair, the hazel eyes open and unguarded so that the doubt and uncertainty showed through even as she tried to fashion a smile of encouragement. She had already been questioned and there was nothing more she could do now except wait for the word that would free Don Maynard or indict him for murder.

Beside her, Maynard's grin was tight and fixed, but his gaze was forthright and unwavering as it met Lane's, reflecting confidence rather than fear and reaffirming the doctor's conviction that Maynard could not have murdered his wife.

"Don't worry," Lane said with a confidence he did not feel. "It'll be all right."

Forbes, Maynard's attorney, who had been chain-smoking for the past hour, sighed and said, "That may depend on you, Doctor."

The high-ceilinged jury room reminded Lane of a classroom at the university, the members arranged not in rows as he had expected but scattered informally in front of him like one of his lecture classes, with tables to make note-taking easier. He was at once aware of their interest, and when he had been sworn in he gave his audience an absent smile, knowing that he looked his best in his dark suit, white shirt, and plain-colored tie, and certain that his thick white hair was neatly combed.

He gave his name, address, and occupation, adding that while he had a degree in medicine he had decided early to devote his life to research and teaching. At the time of his retirement three years ago he held the post of a full professor at the university; since then he had been working on a book dealing with the effect of modern-day living on the heart.

"Now then," said the Assistant District Attorney, whose name was McCann, "will you tell us how long you've known Janet Watkins?"

In his quiet way the Doctor said that he had known the girl about a year and a half. He had wanted someone to do manuscript typing and the university had recommended her. Since then he had seen her perhaps once a week.

"You became very fond of her, Doctor?"

"Yes," said Lane, finding it unnecessary to add that he had come to look upon Janet Watkins as the daughter he might have had if she had lived to grow to womanhood.

Then he was telling what he knew about Don Maynard and how Janet had brought him to the apartment one evening nine months earlier. After that the boy generally came when the girl had a manuscript to deliver and sometimes they would have coffee with him; occasionally they would play cards.

"You knew that Mrs. Maynard lived across the quadrangle from you in this housing development," McCann said. "On the same floor, I believe. You knew her before you met her husband?"

"I knew her by sight," Lane said.

He did not add that it would be impossible not to have noticed her with her tight dresses and bold, hip-swinging walk, her flamboyant blonde hair whose shading could only have been achieved by some chemical process.

"You were aware that she had company from time to time," McCann said, consulting his notes. "There were male escorts who frequently brought her home."

Lane waited, knowing he had made such statements in the preliminary questioning. He had not kept track of the escorts nor had he consciously watched the apartment across the way. For all of this he knew the lights were often on late but he had seldom speculated about their significance.

"You did not approve of Mrs. Maynard," McCann said, and when there was no reply, "In your mind this was a rather sordid situation."

"Sordid perhaps but not unique."

"Lately, when Mr. Maynard and Miss Watkins began to visit you, did you express some opinion about Mrs. Maynard?"

"We never discussed her."

"Really?" McCann allowed himself a small smile for the jury's benefit and then his tone grew crisp. "But during those months these two people fell in love. You must have been aware of this."

"I suppose I was."

"You were fond of Janet Watkins. You had her best interests at heart. Yet you approved of this affair, knowing that Maynard already had a wife."

"Don's marriage was adolescent and ill-advised," Lane said, "the result of the Korean war."

"That is your opinion, Doctor."

"The Maynards had been separated a year before Don met Janet," Lane persisted. "She had nothing to do with the separation."

"Yet it was because of her that Maynard demanded a divorce."

The Doctor did not argue this because he knew the circumstances too well: how Don had sold his few government bonds and borrowed on his life insurance to give his wife a lump-sum payment and how, in the end, she had demanded additional sums to be paid weekly.

"Which brings us to the night of December 12th," McCann continued. "Maynard had just found out his wife wanted weekly payments that he could not make. He came to your apartment"—again the Assistant District Attorney consulted his notes—"about nine forty-five. Why, Doctor? Did he want advice. If so, what did you tell him?"

The scene remained vivid in the Doctor's mind and he thought again of the young man who waited outside with Janet Watkins. On that fatal night Maynard's face had been tight and deeply furrowed, his resentment and agitation showing in his voice and in the jerky movements of his body as he paced the floor and poured out his story. The Doctor gave no details now.

"Maynard knew his wife had been going out with other men," he said. "I suggested that, distasteful as it might be, he engage a private detective and try to get the divorce himself."

McCann considered the jury and restated the State's case but the Doctor was no longer listening. He knew the State's case: Thwarted by a woman he hated, Maynard had rushed from Lane's rooms in a fit of rage and frustration, crossed the quadrangle, and hurried to his wife's apartment with a gun in his pocket. When she continued to defy him, he simply used it.

Because he had a window open,

the Doctor had heard the shot. Other tenants nearby had also heard it. The time had been pinpointed but only one person investigated. Three or four minutes after the shot a man on the same floor, egged on by a curious wife, had gone down the hall, noticed the door which was ajar, and glanced in to see Maynard on his knees beside his wife's body, an automatic in his hand—a war souvenir the police had been unable to trace.

Against such circumstantial evidence Maynard could offer only his own unsupported story. He admitted he was worried and upset about his wife's demands but he had no gun and he intended only to threaten her. He denied hurrying to his wife's apartment — the weight of his problem had slowed his steps. At the entrance of the building a man running out of the foyer had bumped into him. Because the light was bad Maynard had not seen the face but he had an idea of the man's size and the way he was dressed. He maintained that this must have been the man—one of the half dozen whose names had been in his wife's address book—who killed his wife because when Maynard went upstairs, he found her dead on the floor. Still in shock and not knowing what he was doing, he had picked up the gun. He was still holding it when the tenant saw him . . .

"Now, Doctor," McCann was saying. "In your statement to the police you said it was not more than two minutes after Maynard left that you heard the fatal shot. You have stuck to that statement. But you admit you did not glance at your watch when Maynard left, or look at it when you heard the shot?"

"No, sir."

"You have some special gift for estimating time?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it is not really an estimate —it is only a guess."

Before the Doctor could reply a jurywoman spoke up. "May I ask a question?" She sat near the front of the room—a plump pleasant-faced woman in a brown tweed suit. "Have the police checked to see how long it would take a man to go from one apartment to the other?"

"They have indeed," McCann said. "Under various circumstances. Actually a man could use the stairs about as quickly as the elevators. A man in a hurry—not running across the quadrangle but hurrying —can make the trip in two minutes and ten seconds. Allowing another ten seconds more to enter the apartment and use the gun—" He did not finish the thought but turned back to the Doctor.

"I would like to test the accuracy of your guess, Doctor. You have no objection?"

Lane had known something like this might happen. He had, in

effect, given Maynard an alibi. If the jury believed that no more than two minutes had elapsed between Maynard's departure from Lane's apartment and the shot, then someone else must have fired it. McCann had to attack that alibi—to prove the Doctor's sense of time was faulty—and Lane knew there was nothing he could do but face the test calmly. When he nodded, McCann said:

"Suppose we have a trial run first. You, Madam"—he nodded to the woman in brown—"would you turn away from the clock and close your eyes, please. When I give the word tell me when two minutes are up."

The Doctor felt compelled to turn in his chair so he could see the wall clock which was diagonally behind him. He heard McCann's signal and watched the second-hand move. He was both surprised and dismayed when, after seventy-two seconds, the woman said, "It's two minutes now."

There was laughter in the jury room as McCann turned to a man on the right. "Will you try it, sir?"

Again the Doctor glanced at the clock, understanding that this man would be certain to wait out the full two minutes but feeling the same sense of dismay when the man's guess proved to be two minutes and twenty-eight seconds. Again soft laughter rippled through the room and this time McCann said:

"Now, Doctor, if you're ready let's see how close you can actually come to this two-minute interval we've heard so much about. And so that you will get no hint from the jury's reaction, kindly bow your head and close your eyes . . . Oh, one more thing: your watch."

"I beg your pardon?"

McCann took time to smile at the jury and his tone was gently chiding.

"I see you're wearing a wrist watch. You wouldn't want to stack the deck, would you, Doctor?"

Lane could feel his cheeks redden as he unstrapped the watch and slipped it into his pocket; then he folded his hands and bent slightly from the waist, his head down. It was an attitude he took Sundays in church and it seemed fitting now because, as the signal came from the Assistant District Attorney, there was a prayer in his mind.

Concentrating, Lane realized how important this test was. He now understood fully what Forbes, Maynard's attorney, had said earlier.

"If they indict Don, it's going to be rough because the police are going to forget all those guys his wife's been running around with. We know one of them killed her and if the D.A. doesn't get his indictment the police will *have* to get to work on those names. It's the only way the guilty one will ever be found."

The room was now utterly quiet. There was no sound from the

clock, no sound of breathing from the jury, which had become mute and immobile. The passing seconds seemed interminable but the Doctor's concentration was now profound.

As he once more considered the attorney's words, he saw that there was another side to the argument and it was this other side that helped his conscience. Years of teaching had given him an insight into character that was seldom wrong and the proof had come from students who had gone out into the world to fulfill his judgment, whether good or bad.

In his heart he did not believe Maynard had killed his wife and the basis for his judgment was the man's conduct and attitude when he was with Janet Watkins. It was not just Maynard's consideration and good manners it was the way he looked at her, his gentleness, the loving glances he thought were unobserved when she was talking. Yet for all this, it might have been physically possible for Maynard to have killed his wife—and this was the basis of the State's case.

It was not the Doctor's wish to act as judge and jury but he understood that a verdict of "No Bill" was not the same as an acquittal. If additional evidence could be offered—if later on there was conclusive proof that Maynard actually was guilty—a new jury could be summoned and a different verdict rendered. For the moment it was important that the police be forced to look elsewhere for the guilty person . . .

"Now, I think," he said huskily, lifting his head.

He heard the gasp from the jury —little throaty sounds that grew into a buzz of whispered exclamations. He knew somehow that he had won even before he saw the look of incredulity that warped McCann's face and the small shrug of failure that accompanied it . . .

A little later, after the jury had voted "No Bill," Forbes insisted they all have a drink at the tavern around the corner. The boy and girl sat close, their eyes shining with relief and gratitude as they held hands under the table.

Forbes, who had discussed the case briefly with the Assistant District Attorney after the verdict had been given, was jubilant as he addressed the Doctor. "You were the key witness," he said, "and McCann is still talking to himself. If the jury believed you, how could they vote to indict? He chuckled. "McCann says you missed by only one second."

"I deliberately added an extra second," the Doctor said.

"Deliberately added—?"

The Doctor smiled at the boy and girl, understanding their happiness and sharing it with them.

"My fingers were folded round my wrists," he said, "in such a way that I could take my pulse."

"Your pulse?" Forbes leaned for-

ward, staring. "But I thought it varied—that any emotional stress would speed it up."

"Oh, it would, normally. To a layman even the thought of something exciting—like, say, a vacation or a round of golf—would increase the beat." He smiled faintly. "But I'm hardly a layman. I've devoted a large part of my life to the study of the heart, and I've taken my pulse countless times while I've been working on my book. And under all sorts of conditions."

"Oh—"

"Also"—the smile came again, not smugly but with dignity—"it is possible with practice to control one's thoughts . . . I have a slow and even pulse. Very constant. Sixty-four, as a matter of fact. I deliberately added an extra beat or two—perfect timing would have been open to suspicion."

Ten days later the Doctor had a drink by himself. There had been times during those days when he'd had twinges of conscience about the manner in which he had outwitted McCann. Now his mind was at ease as he reread the newspaper account which stated that the man who had killed Mrs. Maynard had been arrested and had broken under police questioning. That man—one of the half dozen whose names were listed in Mrs. Maynard's address book—had now confessed, closing the case . . .

The story is told how a famous author once wrote a tale of postwar Paris, sent the manuscript to a well-known literary agent who, in turn, sent it to a noted editor. The editor liked the story but had misgivings. The basic plot point seemed familiar to him—he couldn't help feeling that he had read the story, or a similar version of it, before; but no matter how hard he prodded his memory, the editor could not recall where he had come upon the earlier version.

Other editors were consulted and all of them admitted to the same sense of familiarity. But no one could quote chapter and verse—it was just a persistent, gnawing conviction that the basic plot point had appeared in print before.

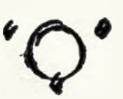
Then the first editor got an inspiration. He bought the story and prefaced its publication with an editorial note—actually, it was a challenge to his readers. If any reader, the editor said, thought the basic plot point familiar and could tell the editor the title of the original version, the name of its author, and the book or magazine

in which it had first appeared, that reader would be sent a modest prize. (We'll tell you later what happened.)

Now that you have read George Harmon Coxe's "Two Minute Alibi," perhaps you feel that literary lightning has struck twice. Did Mr. Coxe's story have a familiar ring? . . . After writing "Two Minute Alibi," Mr. Coxe was informed by various people that the basic plot point of his story had already been used. Mr. Coxe had never read it before, or to the best of his knowledge, ever heard of it. So far as he knew, the plot point and its development had been born in his own brain. But while these various people felt that Dr. Lane's method of outwitting the Assistant District Attorney was not new to fiction, none of them could identify the original source.

When the question was put to us, we promptly decided to show the sincerest form of flattery—by imitating the earlier editor's idea (with a doff of our collective hats to the brilliance of his inspiration). So now we offer you an opportunity to combine business with pleasure. If any of you can confirm the suspicion that Mr. Coxe's basic plot point has previously appeared in print, simply drop us a note or post card, giving us the title of the earlier story, the name of its author, and where the prior version was first published, and we too will send you a prize—a one-year free subscription to EQMM, or if you are already a subscriber, an extension of one year free.

Oh, yes . . . what happened in the earlier experiment? Well, you've probably guessed it. Not one reader could point out a previous publication of the same basic plot. Will history now repeat itself? Frankly, we don't know. The verdict is up to you.



"Unusual" is the word for Cyril Hare's new story. You will find that the detective is unusual—the Reverend Arthur Meadows of St. Mary's, Markhampton. The scene of the crime is unusual—a church. And the nature of the crime is also unusual—but read about that for yourself . . .

SERMONS IN BAGS

by CYRIL HARE

THE SERMON WAS OVER AT ST. Mary's, Markhampton. The congregation rose to their feet. The last hymn was announced, and the worshipers began fumbling in handbags and pockets for the collection. It was at that moment that a woman left her place at the end of a pew halfway down the nave and walked rapidly to the west door.

George Gray the verger, from his post just inside the church porch, saw her coming toward him. He was an old man, but he retained the keen eye for detail that had been his pride when he was Detective-Sergeant Gray of the Markshire Constabulary. Noticing several things about this lady that interested him, he slipped through the door in front of her and intercepted her on the porch.

"Excuse me, madam," he said.

She made no reply. and tried to brush past him. Gray laid a hand on her arm.

"One moment," he said. "Are you sure that is your handbag you are carrying?" He said it softly.

Under her arm was a large black handbag, fairly new and obviously expensive. At Gray's words she took it in her hand, held it up, and burst into tears.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. Then, thrusting the bag at Gray, she went on, "Take it—give it back—only let me go!"

Gray took the bag with one hand, while retaining his hold on her with the other.

"I'm sure you don't want to make any more trouble than necessary," he said quietly. "There's a policeman on the other side of the square, as you may have noticed. Now don't you think you had better come back with me into church until the service is over?"

The Reverend Arthur Meadows was genial, tubby, and bald. His shabby cassock reached almost to the ground, so that the movement of his feet was hardly perceptible and he seemed to roll about on

wheels rather than walk. He listened in silence to what his verger had to tell him, then turned to the elder of the two women.

"And is this your bag, Mrs. Winter?" he asked.

"Yes. Quite new, as you see, Vicar, and—"

The other woman interrupted—.

"Mrs. Winter!" she exclaimed. "You're Mrs. Winter!"

"What's it to you who I am, Mrs. Haynes? You knew that bag was not your property. Are you going to call the police, Vicar? If not, I shall."

Mr. Meadows sighed.

"There have been too many thefts from this church lately, have there not, Mr. Gray?" he said. "It is not for me to stand in the way of justice." He turned to Mrs. Haynes. "But first, I should like to hear what you have to say."

"I took it by mistake. It was on the seat beside me and I thought it was mine."

"In that case," said the priest equably, "your own bag should be there still."

He ambled gently up the church, followed by the others.

"This is your regular pew, is it not, Mrs. Winter?" he said. "I don't see a lady's bag there, I'm afraid." He pursed his lips, shook his head, and went on, "Perhaps we could discuss this more comfortably in the vestry. Will you come this way, ladies? No, not you, Gray, I want you to . . ." The rest of the sentence was quite inaudible.

The two women sat side by side on plain wooden chairs, not looking at each other. The vicar stood facing them.

"Mrs. Winter," he said abruptly, "what was my sermon this morning about?"

Taken aback, she stammered, "I don't know, I'm sure, Vicar. I was so upset—"

"Odd. You have heard it several times before. My sermons have a habit of recurring every two years or so. Can *you* tell me, Mrs. Haynes?"

"Repentance and—and forgiveness—"

"Quite right. Now, please don't snivel, woman. It doesn't help—not at all. And why did you leave before the last hymn? Don't you like music, or did you want to avoid the collection?"

Mrs. Haynes said nothing. She only shook her head miserably.

"Well, if you won't tell me, I must form my own conclusions. Now, madam," he went on briskly, "why did *you* take this lady's handbag?"

"But I told you—" Mrs. Haynes began, then stopped abruptly as the Vicar cut her off with a gesture.

"I am speaking to *you*, Mrs. Winter."

Mrs. Winter rose. She was a tall woman, and looked down at Mr. Meadows with an air of immense dignity.

"I didn't come here to be in-

sulted," she announced, and stalked to the vestry door. She opened it to find Gray on the other side.

"Have you found that bag, Gray?" the Vicar asked.

"Yes, sir. Stuffed behind a radiator at the end of the pew."

"Excellent! You identify your property, Mrs. Haynes? Very good ... Sit down, Mrs. Winter. You have failed to answer two questions of mine. Let me try a third. How is it that you knew Mrs. Haynes by sight although she did not know you?"

Mrs. Winter remained silent.

"Quite an interesting little problem, isn't it, Mr. Gray?" said Mr. Meadows, rubbing his chin reflectively. "And I see that I'm going to get no help in solving it. Here is Mrs. Haynes quite overcome by my very pedestrian efforts in the pulpit—and equally overcome at finding that her neighbor in the pew is Mrs. Winter. Here is Mrs. Winter, who on her side knows all about Mrs. Haynes, and improves the occasion by taking her handbag. What is the link between them?"

Mr. Gray shook his head.

"Drawing a bow at a venture," the Vicar went on, "could it be—*Mr.* Winter?"

Both women began to talk at once; but Mrs. Winter's voice completely drowned the other's.

"Let her deny it if she dare," she shouted. "The adulterous hussy!"

"I see that I was right," said the Vicar with satisfaction. "Then you knew Mrs. Haynes because you had been watching her?"

"Any wife would!"

"We'll confine ourselves to what this wife did, if you please. While Mrs. Haynes was absorbed in my sermon, you removed her handbag, which was on the seat between you, and substituted your own. You wanted to look inside her bag, and nothing would be easier than to pretend that you had opened it by mistake when the collection plate came round. And when you opened it, you hoped to find—what, Mrs. Winter? Evidence to humiliate your poor weak sinner of a husband—letters, like those you are now trying to conceal in your prayer book?

"You were sorely tempted, Mrs. Winter, and it was perhaps excusable to open it. But for what followed there can be no excuse. When Mrs. Haynes hurried out of church with your bag under her arm, you decided to improve on the plan. You not only took your husband's letters—but you hid Mrs. Haynes's property and accused her of stealing your own.

"I have only one more word to say to you, Mrs. Winter. Next time you decide to commit a crime in church, choose a Vicar who is *reading* his sermon. Mine was an old one which I knew by heart, so that my eyes were free to roam, and it is surprising what one can see from the pulpit!"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ELLERY QUEEN**

TITLE: ***The Motive***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Deputy Sheriff Linc Pearce

LOCALE: Northfield, in New England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Almost everything was a complete mystery — the date of the murder, the identity of the murderer, but most baffling of all, the motive. An editorial experiment: Part One of a 2-part serial — concluding installment next month.*

YOUNG SUSAN MARSH, RED-HAIRED librarian of the Flora G. Sloan library, Northfield's cultural pride, steered the old wreck of a Buick around the stanchion blinker in the center of town and headed up Hill Street toward the red-brick Town Hall, coughing as the smoke came through the floorboards. Susan did not mind. She had discovered that the 1940 sedan only smoked going up steep grades, and the road between town and her little cottage in Burry's Hollow three miles out of Northfield, her usual route, was mostly level as a barn floor.

The vintage Buick had been given to Susan a few weeks before, in October, by Miss Flora Sloan, Northfield's undisputed autocrat and, to hear some tell it, a lineal descendant of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"But Miss Flora," Susan had exclaimed, her ponytail flying, "why me?"

"'Cause all that robber Will Pease offered me on her was a measly thirty-five dollars," Miss Flora had said grimly. "I'd rather you had it for nothing."

"Well, I don't know what to say, Miss Flora. She's *beautiful*."

"Fiddle-de-sticks," the old lady had said. "She needs a ring job,

© 1956 by Ellery Queen; originally titled "Terror Town"

her tires are patchy, one headlight's broken, the paint's scrofulous, and she's stove in on the left side. But the short time I had her she took me where I wanted to go, Susan, and she'll take you, too. It's better than pedaling a bike six miles a day to the Library and back, the way you've had to do since your father passed on." And Miss Flora had added a pinch of pepper, "It isn't as if girls wore bloomers like they used to when *I* was twenty-two."

What Miss Flora had failed to mention was that the heater didn't work, either, and with November nipping up and winter only weeks away it was going to be a Hobson's choice between keeping the windows open and freezing or shutting them and dying of asphyxiation. But right now, struggling up Hill Street in a smelly blue haze, Susan had a much more worrisome problem. Tom Cooley was missing.

Tommy was the son of a truck farmer in the Valley—a towhead with red hands, big and slow-moving like John Cooley, and sorrow-eyed as his mother Sarah, who had died of pneumonia the winter before. Tommy had a hunger for reading rare in Northfield, and Susan dreamed dreams for him.

"There's not an earthly reason why you shouldn't go on to college, Tommy," Susan had told him. "You're one of the few boys in town who really deserves the chance."

Tommy had said, "Even if Pa could afford it, I can't leave him alone with the farm."

"But sooner or later you've got to leave, anyway. In a year or so you'll be going into the Army."

"I don't know what Pa'll do." And then he quietly switched the subject to books.

There was a sadness about Tommy Cooley, a premature loss of joy, that made Susan want to mother him, high as he towered above her. She looked forward to his visits and their snatches of talk about Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. Tommy's chores kept him close to the farm; but on the first Monday of every month, rain, snow, or good New England sunshine, he showed up at Susan's desk to return the armful of books she had recommended the last time and go off eagerly with a fresh supply.

On the first Monday in November there had been no Tommy. When he failed to appear by the end of that week, Susan was sure something was wrong, and on Friday evening she had driven out to the Cooley place. She found the weatherbeaten farmhouse locked, a tractor rusting in a furrow, the pumpkins and potatoes unharvested, and no sign of Tommy. Or, for that matter, of his father.

So on Saturday afternoon Susan had closed the Library early; and here she was, bound up Hill Street for Deputy Sheriff Linc Pearce's

office on an unhappy mission.

It had to be the county officer, because Northfield's police department was Rollie Fawcett. Old Rollie's policing had been limited for a generation to chalking tires along Main and Hill Streets and writing out overtime parking tickets for the one-dollar fines that paid his salary. There was simply no one in Northfield but Linc Pearce to turn to.

Susan wasn't happy about that, either.

The trouble was, to Linc Pearce she was still the female Peter Pan who used to dig the rock salt out of his bottom when old Mr. Burry caught them in his apples. Lengthening her skirts and having to wear bras hadn't changed Linc's attitude one bit. It wasn't as if he were immune to feminine charms; the way he carried on with that overblown Marie Fullerton just before he went into the Army, for instance, had been proof enough of *that*. Susan had counted on the Army's taking a boy and returning a man, and in a way it had; Linc came home quieter, more settled, and he was doing a fine job as Sheriff Howland's deputy in the Northfield district. But he went right back to treating Susan as if they were still swimming raw together in Burry's Creek.

She parked the rattletrap in the space reserved for Official Cars Only and marched into Town Hall with her little jaw set for anything.

Linc went to work on her right off. "Well, if it isn't Snubby Sue," he chuckled, uncoiling all six foot three of him from behind his desk. "Leave your specs home?"

"What specs?" Susan could see the twitch of a squirrel's whisker at two hundred yards.

"Last time I passed you on the street you didn't see me at all."

"I saw you, all right," Susan said coldly, and drew back like a snake. "Linc Pearce, if you start chucking me under the chin again—!"

"Why, Susie," Linc said, "I'm just setting you a chair."

"Well." Susan sniffed, off-guard. "Is it possible you're developing some manners?"

"Yes, ma'am," Linc said respectfully, and he swung her off the floor with one long arm and dropped her into the chair with a smack that jarred her all the way up to the teeth.

"Some day! . . ." Susan choked.

"Now, now," Linc said gently. "What's on your mind?"

"Tommy Cooley!"

"The silk purse you're working on?" Linc grinned; and Susan said to herself, Steady, girl. Her cultural interest in young Tom had been a source of amusement to Linc for a long time. "What's Plowboy done now, swiped a library book?"

"He's disappeared," Susan snapped; and she told Linc about Tommy's failure to show up at the Library and her visit to the deserted Cooley farm.

Of course, Linc looked indulgent. "There's no mystery about John. He's been away over a month looking to buy another farm as far from Northfield as he can find. John took Sarah's death last winter hard. But Tommy's s'posed to be looking after the place."

"Well, he's not there."

Linc shrugged. "Probably took off on a toot."

"Leaving a $4,000 tractor to rust in a half-plowed lot?" Susan's ponytail whisked about like a red flag in a high wind. "Tommy's got too much farmer in him for that, Linc. Besides, he's not that kind."

"He's seventeen, isn't he?"

"I tell you I know Tommy Cooley, and you don't!"

Deputy Sheriff Lincoln Pearce looked at her. Then he reached to the costumer for his hat and sheep-lined jacket. "S'pose I'll never hear the end of it if I don't take a look."

Out in the parking space Linc walked all around Susan's recent acquisition. "I know," he said gravely. "It's John Wilkes Booth's getaway car. Where'd you dig her up?"

"Miss Flora Sloan *presented* her to me three weeks ago when she won that Chevrolet coupé at the Grange bazaar raffle!"

Linc whistled. Then he jackknifed himself and got in. "Is it safe? The chances I have to take on this job!"

He went on like that all the way into the Valley. Susan drove stiffly, cheeks smarting in the November wind.

But as they turned into the Cooley yard Linc said in an altogether different kind of voice, "John's home. There's his jeep."

"He must have just got back, then," Susan said. "I tried phoning this morning and there was no answer."

They found John Cooley crouched in a Morris chair in his parlor, enormous shoulders at a beaten-down slope. The family Bible lay on his massive knees, and he was staring into space over it. He was still dressed in his blue Sunday-meeting suit.

"Hi, John," Linc said from the doorway. Susan looked in from under his propping arm.

The farmer's head came about. The bleached gray eyes were dazed.

"My boy's gone, Lincoln." The voice that rumbled from his chest had trouble in it, deep trouble.

"Just heard, John."

"Ain't been home for weeks, looks like." He peered through the dimness of the parlor. "Where's Tommy at, Sue Marsh?"

"I don't know, Mr. Cooley." Susan tried to keep her voice casual. "I was hoping you did."

The farmer rose, looking around as if for a place to put the Bible. He was almost as tall as Linc and half again as broad, a tree of a man struck by lightning.

"When did you see Tom last, John?"

"October the second, when I went off to look for a new place." John Cooley swallowed. "Found me one down in York State, too. Figured to give Tommy a new start, maybe change our luck. But now I'll have to let it go."

"You hold your horses, John," Linc said cheerfully. "Didn't the boy leave you a note?"

"No." The farmer's breathing became noisy. He set the Bible down on the Morris chair, as if its weight were suddenly too much.

"We'll find him. Sue, you saw Tom last on the first Monday in October?"

Susan nodded. "It was October the third, I think, the day after Mr. Cooley says he left. Tommy came into the Library to return some books and take out others. He had the farm truck, I remember."

"Truck still here, John?"

"Aya."

"Anything of Tom's missing?"

"His .22."

Linc looked relieved. "Well, that's it. He's gone off into the hills. He'll show up any minute with a fat buck and forty-two kinds of alibis. I wouldn't worry."

"Well, I would," Susan said. She was furious with Linc. "Tommy'd never have left on an extended hunting trip without bringing my library books back first. He knows I always give him two weeks more than the rules allow as it is."

"There's female reasoning for you," Linc grinned. But he went over to Cooley and touched the heavily muscled shoulder. "John, you want me to organize a search for him?"

The shoulder quivered under Linc's hand.

But all the farmer said was, "Aya."

Overnight, Linc had three search parties formed and the state police alerted. On Sunday morning one party, in charge of old Sanford Brown, Northfield's first selectman, headed west with instructions to stop at every farm and gas station. Rollie Fawcett took the second, going east with identical instructions. The third Linc took charge of himself, including in his party Frenchy Lafont and Lafont's two hound dogs. Frenchy owned the Northfield Bar & Grill across Hill Street from Town Hall. He was the ace tracker of the county.

"You take her easy, John," Lafont said to John Cooley before they set out. "Me, my dogs, we find the boy. Why you want to go along?"

But the farmer went ahead packing a rucksack as if he were deaf. Frenchy glanced at Linc and shook his head.

Linc's party disappeared into the heavily timbered country to the north, and they were gone a full week. They came back bearded, hollow-cheeked, and silent. John Cooley and Frenchy Lafont and his two hounds did not return with

them. They showed up three days later, when the first snowfall made further search useless. Even the dogs looked defeated.

Meanwhile, Linc had furnished police of nearby states with handbills struck off by the Northfield Times job-press, giving a description of Tommy Cooley and reproducing his latest photograph, the one taken from his high school yearbook. Newspapers, radio and TV stations, cooperated. Linc sent an official request to Washington; the enlistment files of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force were combed. Registrars of colleges all over the country were circularized. The F.B.I. was notified.

But no trace of Tommy Cooley —or his hunting rifle—turned up.

Linc and Susan quarreled.

"It's one of those things, I tell you." The cleft between Linc's eyes was biting deep these days. "We haven't been able to fix even the approximate time of his disappearance. It could have been any time between October third and the early part of November. Nobody saw him leave, and apparently no one's seen him since."

"But a grown boy doesn't go up in smoke!" Susan protested. "He's got to be *somewhere*, Linc."

"Sure," Linc said. "In Canada prospecting for uranium, or hunting Mau Maus in Kenya. Kids are pretty irresponsible characters."

"So are some grown men I know," Susan said through her teeth. "Tommy did *not* run away from home, he *isn't* irresponsible, and if you were half the sheriff's whitehaired boy you think you are you'd find out what happened to him."

This was unreasonable, and Susan knew it; for a thrilling moment she thought Linc was going to get mad at her. But, as usual, he let her down. All he said was, "How about you taking my badge, half pint, and me handing out library books?"

"Do you think you could locate the right one on the shelves?"

Susan stalked out. After the door banged, Linc got up and gently kicked it.

Once, in mid-December, she drove out to the Cooley farm. The rumors about John Cooley were disturbing. He was said to be letting the farm go to seed, mumbling to himself, poring over his Bible night and day.

She found the rumors exaggerated. The house was dirty and the kitchen piled with unwashed dishes, but the farm itself seemed in good order, considering the season, and the farmer talked lucidly enough. Only his appearance shocked Susan. His ruddy skin had grayed and loosened, his hair had white streaks in it, and his coveralls flapped on his frame.

"I've fetched you a blueberry pie I had in my freezer, Mr. Cooley," she said brightly. "I remember

Tommy's saying blueberry's your favorite."

"Aya." Cooley looked down at the pie in his lap, but not as if he saw it. "My Tom's a good boy."

Susan tried to think of something to say. Finally she said, "We've missed you at Grange meetings, church . . . Isn't it awfully lonesome for you here, Mr. Cooley?"

"Have to wait for the boy," John Cooley explained patiently. "The Lord would never take him from me without a sign. I've had no sign, Susan. He'll come home."

"Sometimes—" Susan began. But she stopped. There was a look on the farmer's face that it would have been sheer sin to dispel. She prayed silently that the fanatical light might never have reason to go out.

But it was a vain prayer. Tommy Cooley was found in the spring.

The rains that year were Biblical. They destroyed the early plantings, overflowed ponds and creeks, and sent the Northfield River over its banks to flood thousands of acres of pasture and bottomland. The main highway, between Northfield and the Valley, was under water for several miles.

When the waters sank they exposed a shallow hole not two miles from the Cooley farm, just off the highway. In the hole lay the remains of John Cooley's son. A county crew repairing the road found him.

Susan heard the tragic news as she was locking the Library for the day. Frenchy Lafont, racing past in his new Ford convertible, slowed down long enough to yell, "They find the Cooley boy's body, Miss Marsh! Ever'body's goin' out!" He was gone before she could open her mouth.

How Susan got the aged Buick started in the damp twilight, how she knew where to go, she never remembered. She supposed it was instinct, a blind following of the herd of vehicles stampeding from town onto the Valley road, most of them as undirected as her jalopy. All Susan could think of was the look on John Cooley's gray face when he had said the Lord had given him no sign . . .

She saw the farmer's face at last, and her heart sank. Cooley was on his knees in the roadside grave, clawing in the muck, his eyes blank and terrible, while all around him people trampled the mud-slimed brush like a nest of aroused ants. Linc Pearce and some state troopers were holding the crowd back, trying to give the bereaved man a decent grieving space; but they need not have wrestled so. The farmer might have been alone in one of his cornfields. His big hands alternately caressed and mauled the grave's mud, as if he would coax and batter it into submission to his frenzy. Once he found a button rotted off his son's leather jacket sleeve, and Linc came over and tried to take it from him; but the

big hand became a fist, a mallet, and Linc turned away. The big man put it into the pocket of his checkered red mackinaw along with a pebble, a chunk of glass, a clump of grass roots—these were his son, the covenant between them, Mizpah . . . Occasionally he lifted a corner of the canvas that had been dropped on the body after it was lifted from the grave—peering, trying to make sense out of the jumbled clay. His face was a dirty gray abomination; and for the first time Susan wept.

Afterward, when the heap under the canvas had been taken away by Art Ormsby's hearse, and most of the crowd had crawled off in their cars, Susan was able to come close. They had John Cooley sitting on a stump near the grave now, while men hunted through the brush. They were merely going through the motions, Susan knew; time, the ebbing waters, the feet of the crowd would have obliterated any clue.

She waited while Linc conferred with a state trooper lieutenant and Dr. Buxton, who was the coroner's physician for Northfield. She saw Dr. Buxton glance at John Cooley, shake his gray head, and get into his car to drive back to town. Then she noticed that the lieutenant was carefully holding a rusty, mud-caked rifle.

When the trooper went off with the rifle Susan walked up to Linc and said, "Well?" They had hardly conversed all winter.

Linc squinted briefly down at her and said, "Hello, Sue." Then he looked over at the motionless man on the stump, as if the two were connected in his mind, painfully.

"That rifle," Susan said. "Tommy's?"

Linc nodded. "Tossed into the hole with the body. They're going to give it the once-over at the state police lab in Gurleytown, but they won't find anything after all this time."

"How long—?"

"Hard to say." Linc's firm lips set tight. "Doc Buxton thinks offhand he's been dead five or six months. Even a post mortem, he says, probably won't permit him to fix the date closer than that."

Susan's chest rose, and stayed there. "Linc . . . was it murder?"

"The whole back of his head is smashed in. What else there is we won't know till Doc does the autopsy."

Susan swallowed the raw wind. It was impossible to associate that canvas-shrouded lump with Tommy Cooley's big, sad, eager self, to realize that it had been crumbling in the earth here since last October or early November.

"Who'd want to kill him?" Susan said fiercely. "And why, Linc? *Why?*"

"That," Linc said, "is what I have to find out."

She had never seen him so humorless, his mouth so much like

a sprung trap. A wave of warmth washed over her. For the moment Susan felt very close to him.

"Linc, let me help," she said breathlessly.

"How?" Linc said.

The wave recoiled. There was no approaching him on an adult level, in the case of Tommy Cooley as in anything else. Susan almost expected Linc to pat her shoulder.

"It's a man's job," Linc was mumbling. "Thanks all the same."

"And are you the man for it, do you think?" Susan heard herself cry, as from far away.

"Maybe not. But I'll sure give it a try." Linc took her hand, but she snatched it away. "Now, Susie," he said. "You're all upset. Let me do the sweating on this. With the trail five-six months old . . ."

Susan sloshed away, trembling with fury.

In the weeks that followed, Susan kept tabs on Linc's frustration almost with satisfaction. She got most of her inside information from Dr. Buxton, who was a habitué of the Library's mystery shelves, old Flora Sloan, and Frenchy Lafont. Miss Flora's all-seeing eye encompassed events practically before they took place, and Frenchy's strategic location opposite Town Hall gave him the best informed clientele in town.

"Linc Pearce's bellowing around like a heifer in her first season," Miss Flora remarked one day, in the Library. "But that boy's all fenced in, Susan. There's some things the Almighty doesn't mean for us to know. I guess the mystery of poor Tommy Cooley's one of 'em."

"I can't believe that, Miss Flora," Susan said. "If Linc is fenced in, it's only because it's a very difficult case."

The old lady cocked an eye at her. "Appears to me, Susan, you take a mighty personal interest in it."

"Well, of course! Tommy—"

"Tommy my foot. You can fool the men folks with your straight-out talk and your red-hair tempers, Susan Marsh, but you don't fool an old woman. You've been in love with Lincoln Pearce ever since *I* can remember, and I go back to bustles. Why don't you stop this fiddling and marry him?"

"Marry—!" Susan laughed. "Of all the notions, Miss Flora. Naturally, I'm interested in Linc — we grew up together—this is an important case to him—"

"Fiddle-de-sticks," Miss Flora said distinctly, and walked out.

Frenchy Lafont said to Susan in mid-May, when she stopped into his café for lunch, "That Linc, he's a fool for damsure. You know what, Miss Marsh? Ever'body but him know he's licked."

"He's *not* licked, Mr. Lafont!"

Susan saw Linc that same day. He was striding up Sanford Street

toward Hill, past the Library. He looked so gaunt and squeezed out, such a leaning tower of trouble, that Susan wished a great wish that he would look up, to be comforted by an old friend's smile through the doorway, which was wide open to the opportunity. But Linc passed by without a glance.

The fact was, there was nothing for Linc Pearce or anyone else to grab hold of. The dead boy's skull had been crushed from behind by a blow of considerable force, according to Dr. Buxton. His shoulders and back showed evidences of assault, too; apparently there had been a savage series of blows. But the weapon was not found.

Linc went back to the site of the shallow grave time after time to nose around in a great circle, studying the road and the brush foot by foot . . . long after Tommy Cooley was buried in the old Northfield cemetery beside his mother. But it was time wasted. Nor were the state police technicians more successful. They could detect no clue in the dead boy's clothing or rifle. All they could say was that the rifle had not been fired—"and old Aunty Laura's blind cow could see that!" Susan had snapped—so that presumably the boy had been killed without warning or a chance to defend himself. Tommy's rifle had been returned to his father, along with the meaningless contents of his pockets. John Cooley had broken down then, collapsing in tears.

Linc retraced the ground covered by his November search parties, trying to find someone who might remember seeing Tommy Cooley after October third. But no one did. So even the date of the murder was a mystery.

Motive was the darkest mystery of all. It had not been robbery: Tommy's wallet, containing most of the hundred dollars his father had left with him, had been intact in the grave. Linc went into the boy's life and through his effects, questioned and requestioned his friends, his old high school teachers, canvassed every farmer and field hand within miles of the Cooley place. But the killing remained unexplained. The boy had had no enemies, it seemed, he had crossed no one, he had been involved with no girl or woman . . .

"John," Linc had pleaded with Cooley, "can't you think of anything that might tell why Tommy was murdered? Anything?"

But the farmer had shaken his head and turned away, big fingers gripping his Bible. The Book was now never far from his hand. He plodded about his farm in the spring aimlessly, doing no planting, letting the machinery rust. Once a week or so he drove into Northfield to shop in the supermarket. But he spoke to no one, and after a while no one spoke to him.

One night toward the end of

May, as Susan was sitting on her porch after supper, rocking in the mild moonlight and listening to the serenade of the peepers in the pond, the headlights of a car swung into her yard and a tall familiar figure got out.

It couldn't be! But it was. Linc Pearce come to Burry's Hollow. The mountain to Mohamet . . .

"Susie?"

"Well, if it isn't Lanky Linc," Susan heard herself say calmly. Her heart was thumping like an old well-pump. "Come on up."

Linc hesitated at the foot of the porch steps, fumbling with his hat. "Took a chance you'd be home. If you're busy—"

"I'll put my dollies away," Susan said, "for you."

"What?" Linc sounded puzzled.

Susan smiled. "Sit down, stranger."

Linc sat down on the bottom step awkwardly, facing the moon. There were lines in his lean face that Susan had never noticed before.

"How've you been?" Susan said.

"All right," he said impatiently, and turned around. "See here, Susie, it's asinine going on like this. I mean, you and me. Why, you're acting just like a kid."

Susan felt the flames spread from her hair right down to her toes. "*I'm* acting like a kid!" she cried. "Is that what you came here to say, Linc? If it is—"

He shook his head. "I never seem to say the right thing to you. Why can't we be like we used to be, Susie? I mean, I miss that funny little pan of yours, and that carrot top. But ever since this Cooley business started—"

"It started a long time before that," Susan retorted, "and I'd rather not discuss it, Linc, *or* my funny pan, *or* the color of my hair, if you don't mind. What about the Cooley case?"

"Susie—"

"The Cooley case," Susan said. "Or do I go to bed?"

Linc almost said something sharp. But then he shut his mouth and scowled into the blackness of the willow grove bordering Susan's pond.

"All right—" she began.

"What do you want me to say? There's nothing to tell."

"Nothing at all?"

"Hopeless. It'll never be solved."

"Because you haven't been able to solve it?"

"Me or anybody else," Linc said, shrugging. "One of those crimes that makes no sense because it never had any. Our theory now is that the Cooley boy was attacked on the road by some psychopathic tramp, who buried him in a hurry and lit out for other parts."

"In other words, the most convenient theory possible."

Linc said with elaborate indifference, "It happens all the time."

"And suppose it wasn't a psychopathic tramp?"

He looked at her then. "What do you mean?"

"I think it was somebody in Northfield."

"Who?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"I don't know that, either."

Linc laughed.

"I think you'd better go, Linc Pearce," Susan said distinctly. "I don't like you any more."

"Now, Susie—"

The phone rang in the house. It was three rings, Susan's signal, and she stamped inside.

"It's for you, Linc," she said coolly. "The bartender over at Frenchy Lafont's."

"Bib Hadley? Should have known better than to tell Bib I was stopping in here on my way home," Linc growled, unfolding himself from the step. "Some drunk acting up, I s'pose . . . What is it, Bib?"

Discussing me in a bar! Susan thought. It was the last straw. She could see Bib Hadley's belly jiggling under the beer tap, and the knowing leers on the faces of the barflies. Susan turned away in cold rage.

But then she heard Linc say, "I'll get right on out there, Bib," and hang up; and something in the way he said it made her turn back.

Linc's sunburned face was ludicrously like a Hallowe'en pumpkin, a lumpy orange mask set in a ghastly grin.

"What's the matter?" Susan said quickly.

"Another murder."

An icy hand seized her heart.

"Who, Linc? Where?"

"Frenchy Lafont." Linc's voice sounded thick. "Some kids out in a hot rod found his body just off the Valley road. Whole back of his head caved in."

"Like Tommy Cooley," Susan whispered.

"I'll say like Tommy Cooley." Linc waved his long arms futilely. "Bib says they found Frenchy lying in the exact spot where we dug up Tommy's body!"

(*To be concluded next month*)

Don't miss the conclusion next month of this baffling thriller as murder continues to strike in panicking Northfield—who is the next victim?—and Sheriff Linc Pearce solves the mystery of the extraordinary motive . . .

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EDWIN SAMUEL**

TITLE: ***The Old Museum Keeper***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Paris

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An interesting character study that has a gentle Anatole France bite but is not without a true Gallic irony . . .*

HENRI BOUZOU WAS A *mutilé de la grande guerre.* This meant little more than a permanently stiff leg; but it had entitled him to preferential treatment when he applied for a minor government post at the end of the first World War. He became a keeper in the Cluny Museum of medieval art in Paris and wore with pride its dark-blue serge uniform with gilt buttons. The large peaked cap came down to his ears, hiding his white hair, but for most of the week the white stubble on his face betrayed his 65 years.

Ever since he had returned from the front incapacitated and had been thrown over by the pretty daughter of the pork butcher to whom he had been apprenticed, Henri Bouzou lived alone—a confirmed old bachelor. He hardly lived at all outside the Museum: he merely slept in a tiny room at the top of a tall house near the Sorbonne—a room so small and dingy that not even an African student would live in it. He had no friends—not even one. Returning from duty each evening, he would buy a little something from a neighborhood grocer and clomp up five stories, carrying a long loaf and a bottle of wine, to cook his meagre supper on a rusty gas ring. Then he would take off his uniform and lie on his bed, staring at the wall with unseeing eyes. He had never managed to read with ease: now even the newspaper was too much of an effort. His mind hardly worked at all.

Nevertheless, Bouzou was known at the Museum as A Good Man. He was quiet and reliable, sitting there on the stool that an earlier solicitous Curator had provided to take the weight off his damaged leg. Bouzou got on well with the other keepers and was amiably polite to Monsieur Charles, the Chief Keeper, with his waxed mustache and three gold stripes on his cuffs—an important man in the Museum, having got his post through political influence. Bouzou had no ambition left in his old body, nor any jealousy. He just sat on his stool inside the door of the first room on the upper gallery and kept watch on the valuable illuminated Book of Hours in the central cabinet.

All round the ancient walls were well-lit cases of small domestic objects from the Middle Ages —kitchen spoons, babies' rattles, jewelery, and inkhorns. There Henri sat, his leg stuck out straight in front of him, thinking of nothing at all, summer and winter. The room always had the same warmed-up temperature, stuffy and airless, bathed in the subdued artificial light that flooded from the cases over the tiled floor and beamed ceiling.

It was a quiet, restful life: one week was exactly like any other week. Time drew slowly away from last payday and advanced effortlessly toward the next, taking Henri with it. He was quite happy, except on Tuesdays when the Museum was closed. Then he lay all day long on his bed, staring in front of him, waiting for the morrow and his return to the company of his colleagues. His annual vacation was even a greater trial: he had nowhere to go and after a couple of days on his bed he would unobtrusively return to duty and to his life at the Museum. Back on his stool, he would be lulled by the endless, shuffling stream of visitors, especially on Sundays when entrance to the Museum was free. Then old people, who were up for the day from the country, would wander in, awestruck by so much glitter; but they soon tired and sat with swollen feet on the velvet-covered benches in each deep, windowed recess. Whole families would arrive with bored children whose only joy was in switching off and on the lights of certain cases or in turning pages of the Book of Hours. For the rest of the week most of the visitors were lovers with arms around each others' waists, in search of privacy and quiet after the tumult of the boulevards; or foreigners with guide books, doing their tourist duty; or students, many of them pretty girls in sandals with large black notebooks.

"How strange," Henri thought to himself one day, "that people seem to go straight to some of the cases while they hardly ever give

a glance to others." As for him, what he liked best was a pair of wrought-iron medieval firedogs set on the cold open hearth. They reminded him of the jolly glow in the farmhouse of his grandfather sixty years before. But no one else seemed to notice them: everyone's eye was caught by the smaller things that shone in the bright light of the cases against their velvet backgrounds, especially if one of them was important enough to have a whole case to itself.

After pondering on this for many weeks, Henri moved his stool nearer to the case along the inner wall, with its rare pendant of dark-blue enamel studded with pearls. Everyone stopped at *that* case and, in the first morning hours, when hardly any visitors had yet arrived, Henri would sit and stare at the pendant. Who had worn it? he would ponder. What kind of woman would have owned such a wonderful treasure? A queen, perhaps, or a countess? Was it a royal gift? He had once given a woman a present—the brooch he had bought for his fiancée, the pork butcher's daughter, before he went off to the war. And then she had been dissatisfied. "Women!" he muttered to himself, whenever he thought of it.

But in his muted old brain a spark had settled. The pearl-studded pendant, so brilliantly lit, was something to remember and to muse about when he lay on his bed on Tuesdays and stared at the wall. He even began to look into the windows of the antiquary shops that he passed on his way home from the Museum—not the big shops on the main street with large plate-glass windows where whole rooms of antique furniture were displayed in genteel order for foreign buyers; but the little shops where the goods were hung in strings against the inside of the windowpane or filled old cardboard boxes in a dusty jumble.

There, one day, old Henri saw his pendant. This one was quite different from that in the Museum: no dark-blue enamel or pearls, simply plain gold, rather severe in design, with a frayed black silk ribbon. It was beautiful.

On a sudden impulse he went in and bought it. It was quite inexpensive. He hid it in his deep pocket, took it up to his room, and polished it with an old rag until it gleamed in the evening light. Then he hung it up on the brass rail at the foot of his bed and lay looking at it by the hour. It helped to bridge the gap between his room and the Museum; indeed, his room seemed to become more friendly and warm than it had ever been before.

As he lay there night after night, gazing at the gold pendant swaying gently at the foot of the bed, a doubt began to gnaw at Henri's mind. At first it was just something he was trying to remember, some

connection between this pendant and—what? Eventually his tortoise mind crept back through the placid years at the Museum to the day when there was a great excitement. The Museum had been broken into in the night and many valuable small objects had been stolen. He seemed to remember that some pendants had been taken—not the blue enamel one with the pearls; that cabinet had been too stoutly built for obviously amateur thieves. But they had smashed the glass of one of his larger cabinets and taken everything inside it. The police had been called in but nothing was ever recovered. For weeks the big cabinet remained empty, dark and reproachful like a deserted house. Then the glass was repaired and the cabinet filled with other objects. But the image of the old ones still lay etched in Henri's mind. Yes, there had been a gold pendant. Was it the one he had just bought?

As the weeks passed and as he kept staring at it, old Henri became certain that it was. But with every day that passed he grew more and more dependent on it. He now locked the door of his room even more carefully when he left in the mornings—so that he could be sure the pendant's gentle, golden face would greet him when he returned in the evening. It was his most secret, his most treasured possession. It was his—he had bought it with his own money. So he said nothing to Monsieur Charles, the Chief Keeper, about his suspicions.

That winter was hard: endless rain and snow. By the time Henri reached the Museum each morning he was soaked through. Sitting on his wooden stool in damp clothes he caught a chill, then a cough, then a fever, then pneumonia. One morning he was too weak to get out of bed. He had eaten practically nothing for almost a week. So he stayed at home one day, two days, three days, lying in bed, his eyes closed, sweating out his fever. On the fourth day, Monsieur Charles clomped up the five stories to see what had become of old Bouzou. Most unlike him not to report for duty—it had never happened before.

Monsieur Charles put his head round the door. Bouzou was asleep —or was he dead? No, the old man was breathing. Great beads of sweat covered his forehead and his pillow was soaked. So this is where the old keeper lived—in a tiny room with a cheap cupboard, a gas ring, with not even a picture on the wall. Just an old pendant swaying gently from the brass rail at the foot of the bed—

Wait a minute! Let's have a look at that pendant. Looks suspiciously like one of those stolen from the Museum all those years ago.

Monsieur Charles strode to the bed.

"Wake up Bouzou! Wake up! What's the matter with you? Are you sick or something?"

"Oh, it's you, Monsieur Charles. You shouldn't have come up all those stairs. I'll be all right. A bit of fever, no more."

"Where did you get that pendant, Bouzou? Confess now that you took it from the Museum. So it was you who broke open that cabinet. I would never have believed it, Bouzou—never! What did you do with all the other things? Sold them, eh?" And Monsieur Charles untied the pendant from the foot of the bed and put it in his pocket.

To Henri the room grew suddenly colder. "No, Monsieur Charles, I can assure you that I never broke open any cabinet or took any Museum property. I bought this with my own money in an antiquary's."

"Knowing it to be stolen, eh?"

Henri remained silent. He could think of nothing else to say.

The new Curator did everything to prevent the case from going to court. But at that time the Museum administration was under heavy fire from the newspapers for mismanagement and extravagance. So Bouzou was dismissed with ignominy from the Museum service and charged with the possession of stolen goods. The Court took a serious view of this offense in spite of the comparatively low value of the gold pendant. The old museum keeper was sentenced to a year's imprisonment.

Henri Bouzou was not too unhappy in jail. His white hair was clipped a little closer then he really liked. He sat in his cell on a wooden stool not very different from the one that had been provided for him in the Museum. The new stool rested his stiff leg admirably. He was sad when he thought of the gold pendant that Monsieur Charles had taken away from him and that had become the cause of his undoing.

Nor did the old man mind wearing the prison uniform: he had been wearing a uniform all his life. True, it was not of blue serge, and it had no gilt buttons or peaked cap. Nevertheless, it was still a uniform, worn by all the others in his group whom he met at meals, in the exercise yard, and in the prison chapel on Sundays. His cell was warm and small, just as airless and stuffy as the Museum, and with the same endless artificial light. One day passed much like the next. He lay for hours on his bed, staring at the blank wall of his cell. There was no payday to look forward to; on the other hand, Tuesdays presented no special problem. Henri felt strangely content and protected.

In fact, he hardly noticed any difference.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MELVILLE DAVISSON POST**

TITLE: ***The Witness in the Metal Box***

TYPE: Legal-Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Colonel Braxton

LOCALE: Old Virginia

COMMENTS: *A small boy (Uncle Abner's grandson?) was privileged to attend one of old Virginia's most famous trials, and in the eyes of this boy Colonel Braxton was a great magician.*

I SHALL ALWAYS REMEMBER THIS famous case. To me there were romance and mystery and wonder in it. It stands out Homeric in my youthful fancy.

It was tried, as the lawyers say, before Judge Edmond Lewis and a jury, but it was tried, also, before Virginia. For the county came into that trial. The people filled the courtroom to the doors, crowded the county seat, and overran the taverns.

Old Edmond Lewis and his court, and the litigants and their attorneys, were, for the term of that trial, famous. They passed from the tavern to the courtroom through a lane of excited faces. Those who could not force a standing in the courtroom were at least determined to see the actors in the drama, even if they could not see the drama staged.

In this respect I had a great advantage. My grandfather was a relative of Judge Edmond Lewis and I went in with him. I was a small boy, holding to my grandfather's hand. But I was old enough to understand the great event, and I missed nothing of its drama. We had a chair inside the court's railing by the judge's bench, where the lawyers and the officials were assembled.

There were famous men of Virginia in that courtroom.

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Judge Edmond Lewis was a large figure in this portion of the commonwealth west of the mountains. There was something big and undisturbed about him, something almost Oriental in his immobility. He filled the huge armed chair behind the judge's bench, and his very presence gave the proceedings in his court a serenity as of some majestic justice above the affairs of men.

The litigants too were romantic figures. One could not look at Blackmer Harrington and at once withdraw the eye. The man held one's attention, he was so markedly the desperate adventurer: a tall, hawk-faced man in the maturity of life, with a cruel, relentless face that mirrored a will determined to go its way against any barrier. It was a face moving through adventure tales that are read in story books, sprawling by the fire; a face to sack a city, or to run a pirate ship in a boiling sea under the Jolly Roger.

It held me with a dreadful fascination.

And the other! One fell back on the story books in vain to equal her. She came like a fairy thing from the city of Zeus, bringing the wonder of that city with her. For she had, in fact, come overseas from France to defend her inheritance in this court, and she brought into this frontier of Virginia the dress and the manner of that far-off, vaguely imagined land of elegant demeanor. This seems overdrawn for the truth, and I write it here with some misgivings. But it was the profound impression of my youthful fancy, and one cannot disentangle actuality from that golden glamor.

The case I knew thoroughly in detail, for I had heard it discussed in every direction before it came up in the court. It was the most important litigation of the time. There was a great estate to turn on the issue of it, and there was something more than that bare decision to stimulate one's interest.

The facts about the case were not involved: the suit concerned the will of Alexander Harrington. It was supposed at the time that he had died intestate, leaving his great properties to pass by operation of law to his daughter, for he had no other child. This daughter had been sent for her education to France, and was there when her father died. But to the amazement of the county the younger brother of Alexander came forward with a will leaving the estate to him, with some minor provisions for the daughter.

It was a brief will on a single sheet of paper, written by the dead man, and signed after his manner, *A. Harrington,* with an immense, intricate flourish under the signature. It was this signature that stamped it as authentic. That big arabesque of a scrawl could not be imitated. It was known to every-

body. The deeds and contracts executed by the dead man and lodged in the courts all bore that distinguishing evidence of the signature. There was no living man who could duplicate that scrawl.

Mr. Dabney Mason, the clerk of the circuit court, and an authority, held the thing impossible, and this was also the opinion of every scrivener in Virginia; that free-hand, intricate flourish, entangling itself below the name, was the sole artistry of the dead man. There could be no two opinions on that point. It was the signature of Alexander Harrington at the foot of this testament, and as it was a holograph will, it required no witnesses according to old Virginia law . . .

To the eye, Dabney Mason was the most elegant gentleman in Virginia. He always wore a rose-bud in his coat, a pin with some jewel in his neck scarf, and yellow English gloves. And his classic face was clean shaven like a bronze. But he was content with a minor destiny. He was the clerk of this circuit court, and while he hurried to neither fame nor fortune, he prided himself on a unique distinction: it was that he could predict the outcome of a law suit or the verdict of a jury in a criminal case.

And sitting here before the crowded courtroom the clerk could see no way for Colonel Braxton to gain a decision for his client.

Yet he could never be certain of his estimates of Colonel Braxton. He had known this lawyer for a long time, observed him day after day, but, for all that, the man remained an enigma to him. And he had come to qualify his forecasts with a saving clause: "If Colonel Braxton is not counsel for the defense!"

Alexander Harrington had endured no long illness at his death. He had been stricken in the fields at harvest, and had got down from his horse in the shade of an oak tree; from there, unconscious, he had been carried into his house. As the daughter was in France and there was no near relative but this younger brother, word of the illness was sent over the mountains and the man arrived. Alexander Harrington remained for some time in life, but only in periods of fitful consciousness.

It was not known what talk the two men may have had together after the brother arrived, but this was hardly important, since the will was of an earlier date. If it had been of the date of Alexander's death, it would scarcely have stood before a jury: the incapacity of the testator was too apparent.

But the question did not come up. After Harrington's death, the brother called in some of the representative men of the county, and this will was found among the dead man's papers. It came, therefore, into the court with all the

safeguards of the law and all the required formalities to make it legal: a holograph will found among the papers of the testator, in his possession, at his death.

It seemed no intricate case to try. There was only the validity of the will to prove, and, after that, to meet whatever attack the contestant might bring up. And no one could see any firm ground for an attack. The stock ones in such cases could hardly be seriously urged: senility in the testator or undue influence. But who could be found to say that Alexander Harrington had any weakness of the mind? He was not advanced in age, and there was no abler man of business. And how could undue influence by the younger brother be even vaguely shadowed? He lived at a distance over the mountains, or went adventuring about the world, and the testator was here upon his estates.

There seemed no possible point of entry against the testament. That was the consensus.

But here was Colonel Braxton appearing for the daughter, and the experts about the courtroom wagged their heads. One never knew when this eccentric lawyer was involved—a gold eagle from the mint, assailed by him, would be in doubt!

I remember my grandfather and old Edmond Lewis talking in the judge's room in the crowded tavern. They could see nothing here but the formalities of a trial. What could Colonel Braxton do, or any other lawyer? A jury might be moved in its emotions to the daughter's aid. But clearly there was no issue for a jury. There must be some evidence against the will for the jury to consider, exclusive of innuendoes and vague doubts.

Colonel Braxton knew this. But he was an enigma, even to the judges. What did the man have up his sleeve?

To me, on the morning of this trial, the scene was a thrilling thing.

The whole country was present, as though the hills and valleys had emptied themselves into the county seat. The crowd seemed to press in on the courthouse. Long before the court convened, the room was crowded. It was difficult for the sheriff to make a way for the litigants to enter. I sat on a step of the judge's bench, beside my grandfather's chair, with a feeling of immense importance, as though I, too, were a part of this tremendous drama.

But I had a sinking of the heart when I looked at Colonel Braxton's table. A big man, like the judge, filling his chair, a handkerchief spread over his shirt front to screen it from the ash of his cigar; his eyes half closed, his body relaxed and inert, as though it rested at ease after some exertion.

The man required to be awakened! This was no time to drowse

idly in a chair. I thought Destiny had mixed her figures. The adventurer with his ruthless face should have come in with this attorney, and the other lawer — brilliant, young Pennington Carlisle—should have championed the girl. This Colonel Braxton was no knight-errant for romance, unless—and I got a thrill at the idea—unless he were a magician. I hugged the notion with a consuming joy. That was it—a magician! And, in truth, to saner minds the absurd conception had a sort of color.

Colonel Braxton had a small metal box on his table. And it was the only thing there. Paper and law books cluttered the table before young Carlisle: cases from Virginia and the English courts, to refute every possible point that could be made against him; and he had witnesses waiting to be sworn, to establish the legal formalities about the will and to prove the signature of the testator.

But Colonel Braxton had only his metal box.

The amazement in the thing reached beyond one small boy seated on a step of the judge's bench. It extended to the sea of faces, to the very officers of the court. What had this mysterious thing to do with the case at issue —this circular metal box sitting on a lawyer's table?

The clerk summoned the witnesses to be sworn. The adventurer stood up with the reputable citizens that Pennington Carlisle had called to establish the legal formalities about the will. They took the oath, and the judge turned to Colonel Braxton.

"Call your witnesses," he said.

The lawyer took the smoldering cigar out of his mouth and laid it down carefully on the table. He looked vaguely about the courtroom as though it had only then come to his attention.

"I have no witnesses, Your Honor," he replied, "except the witness in this box . . . and I fear it cannot stand up to be sworn."

He put out his hand, touched the mysterious object beside him, and was silent.

I watched the case move forward, and it was the opinion of the experts that Pennington Carlisle managed it with skill. He established the legal requirements about the will, proved the signature by the most reliable person in the community, and then put Blackmer Harrington on the stand.

His purpose, behind the legal pretension, was to show the confidence of the testator in his brother, and to exclude any wonder at the bequest of the estate to him rather than to the daughter. He brought forward the fact that the claimant had for some years acted as the trusted agent of the dead man in the sale of wild lands east of the mountains.

Such lands were the principal

subject of speculation at this time in Virginia. They were purchased in great surveys for a trifling sum and peddled out in small tracts to the settlers. Blackmer Harrington handled this business for his brother; had, in fact, exclusive control of it and—as Carlisle skillfully drew out—the complete confidence of the dead man, as shown by the options and power of attorney in blank which the older brother had sent to Blackmer to use as the requirements of these transactions demanded.

The motive for the testament was more difficult to disclose. It was not Carlisle's intention to bring it out—he was too clever to do that. He would shadow it vaguely, and let it lie, confident in the gossip and the imagination of the jury to supply what the lure of the idea required to fill it. His diplomatic instincts were sound here, but the horse he rode bolted.

The witness, once on the way, could not be pulled up. He elaborated the great aspect of the lure that had won his brother to him: a plan to seize some islands in the West Indies and add them to the Republic. This estate was to be used to that magnificent end. That was the motive for the devise to him. Again and again he had laid the plans before his brother, and finally in the end had won him. It was a vast, splendid dream, that required, for reality, only funds and a man of courage.

Once seized, the American Government would annex the territory, and by that much the Republic would be advanced on its manifest destiny. As Blackmer Harrington warmed to his subject he grew more voluble. And the manner of the man reached a certain element in the courtroom, and got a visible reaction. A vast empire extending itself into the sea fired their fancy. It had been a dream of the early men and it remained vaguely in their descendants.

And yet one could see that Pennington Carlisle was uneasy in his chair.

But he could not stop the thing that he had unwittingly set going. Finally he did break in to ask if the witness knew that the will had been executed. Harrington replied that he did not know it until the will was found among his brother's papers after his death. He had convinced the dead man, but he did not know of that success until the testament was found.

And so Carlisle finally got his witness silenced.

My grandfather and Judge Lewis talked together gravely in the chamber behind the courtroom at the noon recess.

"Edmond," my grandfather said, "it will never do for Harrington to win this case. The wild fool will involve the country in a war, with some filibuster into the South or some piracy on the sea."

Judge Lewis stroked his big face

with his strong-boned freckled hand.

"But what can I do?" he replied. "This intention is not an issue here. The sole issue is the validity of this will. What the prevailing litigant does with the estate he gains is not before me."

But my grandfather was not to be thus silenced.

"The welfare of the nation is before us all," he said. "What did Marshall do, or the great Virginia judges, when a doctrine of law threatened the whole people? The courts take their authority from the people, and in the ultimate exercise of that authority they must protect them."

"Yes," said Lewis, "'in the ultimate exercise of that authority.' But this is a trial court and not a court of last resort. If this feature of the case is to be considered, it is for the Supreme Court of Virginia to consider it. I cannot."

"And they cannot," replied my grandfather. "It will not be in the record, and so this dangerous fool will go out into the grainfields with his torch."

He stood up before the window, a tall, imperious old man with a grave, deep-lined face.

"In my father's house," he said, "there used to be a little circular glass window on which three names had been scratched with the diamond setting of a ring: Aaron Burr, Harman Blennerhassett, and Daniel Davisson. It was a meeting of conspirators; but my father, Daniel Davisson, was not one of them. Burr was a relative and a guest, but my father told him the truth. 'You're an infernal fool,' he said, 'and Tom Jefferson will hang you!'"

He turned to Judge Lewis.

"And here, Edmond, is another infernal fool that you ought to hang, instead of giving the creature a treasure chest and a letter of marque."

I understood even then, in my early youth, the magnitude of this discussion.

My grandfather saw the welfare of the whole country in this case and Judge Edmond Lewis saw the exact limitations of the law in it. Both were right, and even at this day I do not know which opinion should have prevailed. Here was the law as Judge Lewis saw it, confined to a single issue. It could not go beyond that issue. It was better to look hardship in the face than to break down the rules of law—he saw that as clearly as Lord Eldon saw it.

They went back into the courtroom.

The same scene remained, but the case now had a larger meaning. What my grandfather had said to Judge Edmond Lewis had moved the whole drama up out of the mere adjustments of romance.

It had now a sort of national aspect.

I do not mean that the impending wrong to the girl, sitting by her

attorney, tugged any the less desperately at my heart. She was as entrancing as a dream, and she was helpless before this blind stride of the law . . . unless the magician with his magic box could save her.

But what was in that box?

When Carlisle finished with his case, Judge Lewis asked Colonel Braxton if he wished to cross-examine Harrington.

The big lawyer did not reply at once. He sat for some moments looking at the floor, as in reflection. Then he turned toward young Pennington Carlisle.

"I might ask him a question," he said.

The tone was gentle and apologetic, as he were seeking a favor.

Carlisle laughed. "You have my permission, Colonel," he said.

"Thank you, Pennington. It's just a little thing."

Carlisle thought he saw an opening for a checkmate, and he stepped into it.

"About the signature to the will, Colonel?"

Colonel Braxton looked up with wide-open eyes, as in utter astonishment.

"Oh, no," he said, "it's the dead man's signature."

"Undue influence then?"

"Oh, no!" Colonel Braxton's astonishment seemed to increase. "There was no undue influence about the making of this testament."

"Incapacity in the testator?"

"Oh, no!" The words whined like a refrain in some absurd opera. "I couldn't hope to make the jury believe that."

An aspect of victory enveloped Carlisle. He had, by the clever trick of drawing these admissions, covered his case to the wall, cut from under his opponent all the possible supports that could be set up in such a case. He had nothing more to fear.

"It's just a little thing I wanted to ask the witness—for my own information, Pennington," the big lawyer added.

Carlisle made a courteous, ironic gesture of assent. "I would waive almost any rule of evidence," he said, "in order to add to the information of this bar."

There was a ripple of suppressed laughter. And Carlisle took his tribute with a triumphant smile. How could he know, in the arrogance of his visible victory, that he was trifling with disaster!

Colonel Braxton seemed not to realize the innuendo as he turned to Harrington.

The adventurer, like his counsel, was in that pleasant mood of victory when one bears, in a genial fashion, with an irrelevant annoyance.

"I wanted to ask you," Colonel Braxton went on, "if you had ever seen a sodded field plowed."

Everybody was astonished. What had the plowing of a sodded field to

do with the issues of this case?

Carlisle's eyebrows lifted, and the witness smiled. "Why, yes, Colonel," Harrington replied. "When I was a boy on my father's estate, I saw the Negroes plow the pasture."

"Then," continued the lawyer, "you can tell me what happens when the plow crosses a small, narrow, sodded ditch."

The witness replied that if the ditch were small and narrow the plow would jump it, leaving the sod at the bottom of the ditch undisturbed.

Colonel Braxton nodded.

"Ah, yes," he said. "I thought that would be true. I'm not much of a farmer. I wanted to be certain."

That courtroom was full of persons who were very much farmers, and they were certain beyond doubt. The witness was correct.

"Then," the lawyer went on, "it is always possible to tell whether such a small, narrow ditch or depression was present in the sodded field before it was plowed, or made after it was plowed."

The witness replied that this was surely true, because, if it were made after the plowing it would be in the broken ground, but if it existed before the plowing, the plow would jump it, and the undisturbed sod would remain at the bottom of the ditch or depression.

"Ah, yes," Colonel Braxton reflected in his gentle drawl. "But I'm not much of a farmer . . . and I wanted to be certain."

He sat down.

We were all certain. But what had this simple illustration of the plow to do with the case?

Old Edmond Lewis was no less puzzled than the lad on the step of his bench below him. I think he would have ruled out this irrelevant inquiry if Carlisle had asked it. But to Carlisle, in his security, this idle discussion of husbandry was of no importance.

It was incredible, it was beyond belief, but the case was ended. Here was Harrington leaving the witness chair. Here was Colonel Braxton going back to his chair. Here was Carlisle on his feet, making his motion to exclude the evidence and direct a verdict.

The case was ended.

It was a rout, a debacle!

Judge Lewis turned to Colonel Braxton, and when he spoke, his voice was harsh:

"Do you wish to be heard on this motion?"

"No." The big lawyer was now standing up.

"Then you admit the validity of the will?"

"The will," replied Colonel Braxton, "is a forgery."

The tension was tremendous.

"A forgery!" exclaimed the judge. "You have introduced no evidence of forgery."

"The evidence," replied Colonel Braxton, "is on the face of the paper itself. But it takes a good eye to see it, and, in consequence, I have sent

to Baltimore for the best eye that could be purchased."

The man had changed. The leisurely manner had vanished—the stoop of the shoulders, the drawl in the voice were gone.

He opened the metal box on his table and took out a big lens.

He got the will from the clerk.

"The signature is genuine," he said, *"but the writing above the signature is forged!* The signature was on this paper before the writing was added, and one does not sign his name first, and then after that, write his will above it . . .

"Look, Your Honor." Colonel Braxton carried the papers and the lens to the judge's bench and put them down before him. "This paper had been folded a number of times. These folds are across the signature, and extend from it under the body of this writing. And look, Your Honor, how the illustration of the plow on the sodded field parallels the pen on the field of this sheet of paper. When the sheet of paper was flat and unbroken by the folds, the pen ran smooth with no break in its furrow, as in the lettering and the scroll of this signature. But in the body of this writing above the signature, wherever the pen came to a crease of the fold, *it jumped it*—precisely as the plow jumps a narrow ditch—and it left the paper unmarked at the bottom of the fold, precisely as the plow leaves the sod untouched at the bottom of the ditch. This signature was written when the sheet of paper was flat; the writing above it was done after the sheet was folded."

Judge Edmond Lewis stooped over the paper with the lens in his big hand. Then he beckoned to my grandfather, went down to Carlisle's table, and called the jury.

The whole court crowded around him.

And there, under the magnification of the lens, lay the story of the forgery, so clear that the simplest man could see it. Carlisle saw it, and he was appalled. His client had taken one of the blank sheets of paper sent him, signed by his brother and to be filled in with the power of attorney, for it was folded like a letter; and above that signature the younger brother had traced this will, and lodged it among the dying man's papers when he came to attend him at his death.

It was all there, standing out on the white field under the magnification of the lens.

It was tremendous. The whole sea of faces packed into the courtroom was alight with victory. But there was no sound.

I stood up with a wild beating of the heart.

The magician had won for the fairy princess! And I almost expected to see the big figure of the lawyer vanish in some shattering wonder that would split the courtroom.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HAL ELLSON**

TITLE: ***Summer Idyll***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: The Point — somewhere in the United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A story beautifully and simply told, quiet, tender, symbolic, and a poetic slice of life. How 12-year-old Matt wrestled with evil, how a mess of crabs became the Serpent . . .*

FIRST THING AFTER BREAKFAST MATT ran out of the house and climbed into the rowboat. His mother came to the door and screamed, "Your father's going to hear of this. You going out in that boat all the time and not knowing how to swim."

Not listening, Matt pushed off from the bulkhead, gripped the oars, and began to row. The morning was clear, vibrant, and cool, the creek water green and mysterious as always.

Matt was twelve, towheaded, stubborn, and inclined to keep his tongue. He pulled up the creek with quick strokes till he was out of sight of the house, then rested his oars and stared at the water. His mind went back to his mother and he smiled to himself. Her threats never stopped him from doing as he wished. He could take care of himself.

But she didn't understand. His father did. He could see him now, quiet, sober-faced but his blue eyes amused, saying, "Damn it, let him be a boy and do what he wants. All the warnings in the world won't keep him out of that rowboat."

That was true, and it proved how much his father understood, how little his mother did.

Matt picked up the oars again, rowed from the creek and into the bay where a lone fisherman sat humped in his boat.

It was Mr. Goslin, his father's friend. The old man looked up. Matt saluted with his oars and

rowed on. Five minutes later the boat nosed into soft sand. The boy sprang ashore, stripped, waded into the water, then began to swim awkwardly.

Forty yards out he stopped and allowed his legs to drop, certain he was above the sandbar. Instead, he found himself in deep water. Panicking, he started swimming again, flailing and kicking for his life and stopping only when he lay in the shallows, his breath gone and his heart ready to burst. He was safe, but unready to believe it, unwilling to open his eyes.

At last he did, and then stood up. His fear receded quickly and pride took its place. Wait till Pop comes tonight, he thought, and he stepped toward the rowboat.

The whole day lay before him. He decided to row across the bay to the sunken meadows. Mr. Goslin looked up as the boy approached. Two blurred eyes stared suspiciously at Matt.

"Out for fluke?" the boy asked because it was the thing to say.

"Yep."

"Getting any?"

"Some. But I hope you ain't thinkin' of dropping anchor hereabouts."

Matt shook his head. No such idea had entered his mind, for somehow the old man had always evoked a vague unnameable fear in him. Accompanying that now was resentment.

He thinks he owns the whole bay, Matt thought, and he rowed on to the sunken meadows.

An hour later Matt returned to the house. "So you're back," said his mother as he entered the kitchen. "Gone all morning and me not knowing whether you fell in and drowned. Don't you know I worry over you every minute that you're in that rotten old rowboat?"

Matt didn't answer.

"You're hungry, that's why you came back," his mother went on, shifting like the wind. "Otherwise, I wouldn't see hide nor hair of you."

She was right about that, but he wouldn't admit it. Instead, he went to the table, sat down, drank a glass of milk, then got up immediately.

"You haven't eaten," his mother protested.

"I wasn't hungry," he answered and headed for the front of the house. As he reached the porch he picked up a pail and stepped outside. The screen door slammed behind him.

The sun blazed, the white clamshell road gave off a dazzling light. Willows growing along the road hung listlessly.

He set out toward the fields half a mile away but when he reached there, his enthusiasm faded. Brilliant in the savage light, yellow-petaled buttercups and blackeyed susans dotted the fields from end to end.

He picked the equivalent of a

cup of berries, and then, as always, wanted to eat them. This was temptation. He thought of his grandmother back in the city. She could define this.

"Temptation is Satan," she often said. "He stands behind you and tempts you and, if you listen, you sin."

Perhaps it was the intense heat or fatigue. He sank on his knees in the grass, stared at the berries, and decided to taste them.

But this was exactly the design of temptation, another voice of the Devil. Suddenly he was back in the city, upstairs in the cool and shaded solitudes of his grandmother's house, listening to her calm appraisal of Satan, as if she knew him well and had worsted him.

Closing his eyes, he heard the old woman say, "The Devil has many disguises. He may come to you like a kind and smiling old man. In any shape or form . . ."

Matt shivered and opened his eyes to the violent yellow glare. The fields were empty and silent, the grass motionless. He looked around, glanced at the pail, and immediately averted his eyes.

But back they came to the berries and slowly he reached for them. Ripe and warm with the sun, they stained his hands and mouth. Soon the pail was empty, and an acute feeling of guilt possessed him, as if someone had observed this act.

But no one else was present in this isolated spot. Closing his eyes again, he saw his grandmother admonishing him with a wagging forefinger. Her lips moved, forming the silent words: "It takes a long time to learn how to do things right. As for Satan, you'll probably meet up with him and never know by his face."

The proper thing was to pick more berries, but the sun was too hot. He stretched out in the sweet-smelling grass and closed his eyes. An instant later he sat bolt upright. Silence and a golden light pervaded the fields, the audacious yellow of spiked butter-and-eggs reflecting the sun. There was nothing to fear.

But there had been nothing to fear in the Garden of Eden, either, yet the Serpent had come and the fruit of the apple tree had been the instrument of corruption.

Matt watched, but no alien presence was near to disturb the idyll of the afternoon. He lay back in the sweet-smelling grass and closed his eyes once more.

As sleep came, the soft voice of his father warned him again. "When you're picking blackberries watch out for snakes."

He stirred uneasily but fatigue deluged his body and he slept . . .

Clouds shadowed the sky. Like an invisible hand the wind stirred the fields and the heavy encrusted spikes of goldenrod nodded uneasily. A dark figure crossed the

field, stopped, stood above Matt, and raised a pronged spear. An eel spitted on its point writhed in agony.

As the dark face of the eel fisherman became legible, Matt recognized Mr. Goslin. The apparition vanished. Matt stirred and awakened with a feeling that someone was really near. He opened his eyes and gasped, for a scarecrow figure was bending over him.

"You been pickin' flowers?" Mr. Goslin asked.

Matt shook his head.

"Well, if you do, see that you don't yank up the roots like them people from the city. If I catch you pulling roots, you'll know about it."

Mr. Goslin was right, but a spark of defiance in Matt made him say, "These fields don't belong to you."

"They all did once," the old man muttered. Then, casting an embittered look at Matt, he walked away.

"Crazy old fool," the boy said after him.

A little later a car came racing along the clamshell road. Matt's father was returning from work. The boy stood up, shouted, and waved his arms, but the car raced on.

Fifteen minutes later Matt arrived at the house. Supper was on the table. His father looked up as he entered the kitchen, smiled at him, and all things were righted.

Later, they sat on the porch. The sun had set. Silence enveloped the great salt marshes beyond the creek.

"Get any crabs today, Matt?" Abe Meeker asked his son.

"Yep. Twenty-five."

"That's a pretty good haul. I hope they're all big ones. It doesn't pay to catch the small ones. Nothing to eat on 'em. Besides, they've got to breed. These days a lot of people don't think of that, and that's why the crabbing isn't as good as it used to be."

"There's plenty of crabs in the sunken meadows."

"I know, but you have to scap them there. Suppose you fell overboard?"

"I'd swim. I've been practicing every morning. Today I went out to the sandbar."

"Learning yourself is the best way," said Abe. "But don't get too cocky or you'll find yourself in trouble."

It was as if his father already knew about the incident at the sandbar and Matt was glad he hadn't mentioned it. He didn't now, and both of them remained silent, watching the dusk settling over the meadows. Night fell swiftly. Around the house crickets started up and mosquitoes droned in the dark.

Abe smoked another cigarette, finally stood up and said, "Care to take a walk?"

The question meant a visit to Mr. Goslin. Matt didn't want to go but he couldn't refuse his father. Abe didn't notice his son's hesi-

tancy and started for the door, opening it quickly. Matt followed him outside and they walked the clamshell road toward Mr. Goslin's house.

No light shone when they reached there, and a high unkempt hedge barred entry to the front door. They went round it to the back of the house and found Mr. Goslin sitting in the dark. The old man raised his head and nodded.

"Planning on how many fish you'll catch tomorrow?" Abe asked.

"Nope, just sittin'."

"I've been meaning to get out after some fluke myself. How are they running?"

"About the same as always."

Abe chuckled in the dark. "Because they always bite for you," he said.

"I manage to catch 'em."

"I'd appreciate it if you'd take Matt out with you some day and teach him a few tricks."

"I'll think about it," Mr. Goslin answered, and he got to his feet. "Have to go now and catch me some eels."

Abruptly he turned away and went into the house.

"Come on," Abe said after a moment, and he and the boy walked away.

Once on the road they turned toward the tip of the Point and walked in silence till they reached the bay. Dark water slapped below them, a cool wind brushed their faces.

"You shouldn't have asked Mr. Goslin to take me out in his boat," said Matt.

"Why not? He can teach you more about fishing than anybody in these parts."

"He didn't want me to come."

"He's never taken anyone out in his boat, never given any tips on fishing," Abe admitted. "Living by himself so long made him a little queer, I guess, but he's still the best fisherman you'll ever set eyes on."

Oarlocks sounded from the creek, then a lantern flashed on the bow of the rowboat as Mr. Goslin entered the bay. He rowed across it to the edge of the salt marshes and stood up, a tall shadowy figure in the distance with a spear in his hand.

Matt felt chilled. The boat drifted, the shadowy figure remained alert, motionless for some minutes, then suddenly moved and the spear plunged downward, came up again, and an angry eel squirmed on its prongs.

Matt thought of the dream he'd had that afternoon and shuddered.

"Number one," said Abe. "Mr. Goslin sure knows how to catch them."

Matt didn't answer. They returned in silence to the house. Just as they reached it, a car drove up and stopped in front of it.

Abe's brother had arrived. Ben Meeker blew the horn and said, "How about it, Abe? You coming to the Dutchman's?"

That meant only one thing—drinking. Matt's heart dropped.

"What's the matter, you lose your tongue?" Ben called out impatiently.

"I'll be right with you," Abe answered, and he turned to Matt. "You just wait, son, I won't be too late."

Angry, Matt nodded, and Abe started toward the car when Mrs. Meeker called out from the darkness of the porch, "I hope you have a good time, Abe. I don't mind sitting here alone again."

Her sarcasm was not lost on Abe and he swung around. "Do you want to come along and hold my hand?" he asked.

"That's not funny. You know I wouldn't go in such a place, but I hope you come home sober."

"Hell, I'm only going for a few beers. Wait up and boil a load of those crabs Matt caught today."

"I'd be a fool to wait."

"All right, suit yourself," Abe snapped, and he went on to the car.

Seconds later it roared off down the road. Matt stood where he was till the red tail-light faded out. When that happened he felt terribly alone.

"Better come inside before you're eaten up alive by the mosquitoes," his mother said from the porch.

He obeyed merely because there was no point in standing outside. Once on the porch he sat down in a wicker chair, and his mother's voice came out of the dark: "Your father's deserted you again."

Her words cut him to the quick but he answered, "Pop'll be back soon."

"Oh, no, he won't. Don't you realize he never keeps his word when he goes to that awful place?"

Mrs. Meeker stood up and moved toward the door. "You better come up to bed."

Matt didn't answer and his mother went upstairs. An hour later he left the porch and went to the creek across the road.

The moon was up high now. He stood at a tiny cove and stared at the shallow water. Froth edged the sand. A movement alerted the boy. Then a killie, crazed by the moonlight, jumped. Another and another, and Matt thought, They're good bait for fluke.

He bent over, ready to scoop some up when the feeling came to him again and he turned. A shadowy figure stood near.

"Leave them killies alone, Matt."

"What for?" the boy answered, recognizing Mr. Goslin now.

"You heard me. Leave them be. This is my spot and my killies."

"They're not yours and it's not your spot."

The dark figure moved nearer, and Matt's defiance crumbled. He ran for the house. As the screen door slammed behind him his mother called out from above, "What's wrong down there?"

"Nothing," he answered, and he sat down to begin his long vigil.

Past midnight the car returned and stopped in front of the house. Half awake, Matt stood up, heard the men laughing in the car. Seconds later it swung round and then quickly disappeared.

A dark figure came toward the house. The door opened and closed softly. Abe started forward, stopped when he saw Matt, and chuckled.

"So, you little son of a gun, you waited up for me."

"Didn't you want me to?"

"Sure, I did, but it's kind of late. Where's your mother?"

"In bed."

"That's where you should be. Come on now, up with you."

"But what about the crabs?"

"They'll keep till tomorrow night."

There was no arguing the point. Matt went upstairs. His father followed him a few minutes later.

Early the next morning, before the neighbors along the Point stirred, Matt dressed and ran downstairs. His father had gone off to work, his mother was not up yet.

After drinking a glass of milk he hurried out of the house. Immediately, the glory of the morning struck him. It was cool yet, almost chill, and the air was so buoyant that he wanted to shout to express his joy. But the enormous stillness forbade him.

He went to the bulkhead, climbed down to the rowboat, set it free, and rowed leisurely up the creek. The bay was empty and like a great sheet of pale-blue glass.

Matt pulled in his oars and allowed the boat to drift. Fifteen minutes later it struck the soft sand of the beach a hundred yards from the spot where he'd been swimming the day before.

This was an area covered by a great bed of seaweed and bathers avoided it. Matt did, too, but this morning, without knowing why, he left the boat and walked through the bed.

Perhaps it was curiosity, and the expectation of discovering some strange form of marine life. He stooped, lifted some seaweed, and there lay a crab which did not dart away as he expected, for it was a shedder, leathery-soft and unable to help itself.

He picked it up, raised the next piece of seaweed, and saw another soft-shell. Wherever he stooped then, he found one and it was soon evident that he'd discovered a whole bed of shedders. Excited, he worked quickly, gathered two dozen, and rowed back to the house.

The rest of the day passed with aching slowness so he could hardly contain himself. Finally he saw his father's car racing up the clamshell road.

He stood outside the house, waited till his father stopped the car and got out of it. Then he couldn't speak, but his father knew something was up.

"What's on your mind, son?" he said.

"I caught two dozen soft-shells today."

"And I caught a whale," said Abe.

"If you don't believe me, I'll show them to you."

"Two dozen?"

"Yep."

"By George, that's a real haul."

"There's more, hundreds of them where I got these, Pop."

"Tell me about it. Where'd you catch them?"

Matt explained how he'd made his discovery and, when he finished, Abe shook his head.

"By George, you've found their headquarters," he chuckled. "That's something even old Goslin never pulled off. Wait'll he hears about it."

"You're going to tell him?" Matt said in alarm.

"Hell, no, not where he can find them. We're not telling anybody, understand? If word gets around, everybody on the Point will be after them. Remember that, I don't want you to tell anyone."

That evening the Meekers dined on soft-shell crabs, and afterward, when darkness fell, Abe and Matt visited their neighbors along the Point. Abe had only one thing in mind—the soft-shell crabs. He bragged of Matt's discovery but refused to tell where the boy had found the crabs.

Finally they arrived at Mr. Goslin's house and found him in the back smoking his pipe. Mr. Goslin greeted them with a nod.

Abe smiled in the dark and said, "How was the fishing today?"

"Pretty fair. Got some fluke."

"How are the crabs?"

"Some good blue-claws in the channel this year."

"Been picking up any soft-shells?"

Mr. Goslin nodded slowly. "A few," he said.

Abe waited, as if savoring the moment, then said, "Matt got twenty-four today."

The old man lifted his head. "That's a real big haul. He must have been out all day."

"Nope. As a matter of fact, he picked them up easy as pebbles."

Mr. Goslin's eyes shone in the dark. "I've been around the bay a long time now," he said. "Can't say I ever heard of anyone catchin' soft-shells like that."

"Not even yourself?"

"Nope. Not even myself. What's more, I don't think it's possible. Not around here."

Abe chuckled softly. "As a matter of fact, I was of the same mind as you till I came home tonight. You see, Matt seems to have run into a spot where the crabs gather to shed. Lord only knows how many are there. Of course, in a week or two they'll be gone, but as long as they're there Matt'll be taking them."

Mr. Goslin nodded again and remained silent for some moments. Abe waited, knowing the question had to come.

"And just where is this spot?" Mr. Goslin finally asked.

"That's Matt's secret," Abe answered, smiling in the dark. "I don't think he'd want it known."

"Yep, that's right. Everybody on the Point will be there if you tell," said Mr. Goslin, and he stood up. "Well, I've got to be gettin' on. The mosquitoes are starting to bite."

Abruptly, then, he turned and entered the house. Abe and Matt didn't speak till they got out to the road and were on their way homeward. Then Abe said, "The old boy is sore."

"Why?" asked Matt.

"Well, telling him that was kind of upsetting. Maybe it wasn't the right thing to do, but he's always had the idea that the bay is his own personal property and that he knows more about it than anybody else. Truth is, he does but telling him about your find just about threw him. He'll be out looking for those crabs."

"That doesn't mean he'll find them."

"Maybe not, but he'll be keeping an eye on you. So will the others, I guess, and you'll have to be careful they don't find the spot."

"They won't."

"You make sure, son."

Matt nodded, certain that no one would discover his great secret.

Next day Matt was up even earlier than usual. The sun had not yet risen when he rowed out of the creek but there was Mr. Goslin in his rowboat anchored close to a channel buoy.

The old man didn't look up, but that didn't deceive Matt. Mr. Goslin, he was sure, was watching him.

He's not going to find out, Matt told himself, and he rowed on to the next creek. No bulkheads were there, and tall reeds grew close to the shore. He beached the rowboat and, taking a pail with him, made his way back through the reeds till he reached the place where'd he found the crabs the day before. Beyond this spot the land jutted out into the bay and concealed him from Mr. Goslin's spying.

Matt waded into the water, quickly filled the pail with crabs, and went back through the reeds to where he'd left the rowboat.

Mr. Goslin was still anchored near the buoy when Matt rowed into the creek and made for home. The boy feathered his oars now and watched. As he expected, Mr. Goslin lifted anchor and rowed toward the other creek.

He won't find nothing, Matt exulted.

Later in the day, as he walked down the clamshell road, one of the neighbors came out of his house and greeted him with unusual warmth. Matt was immediately on his guard.

"You going for berries?" asked Mr. Grant.

"Yep."

"Get any soft-shells today?"

"Yep."

"Same as yesterday?"

"More."

"I'd sure like to know where you find them, but I don't suppose you'll tell, will you?"

"Nope."

"Not even me?"

"Nope."

"Well, I guess I can't blame you," said Mr. Grant, and his hand went into his pocket. He withdrew a roll of bills, peeled one off, held it up, and smiled.

"This'll buy a lot of ice cream or candy, and it's all yours if you tell me where you get the soft-shells."

Matt was sorely tempted, for he'd never had that much money at one time in his whole life. Still, he shook his head.

"I could make it a little more," said Mr. Grant.

"Nope, I can't tell you," said Matt, and he continued on his way.

Abe laughed that evening when Matt told him how he'd deceived Mr. Goslin and refused Mr. Grant's offer.

"That's the way to do it," said Abe. "Keep 'em guessing and don't tell. But you better bring some of those crabs over to Mr. Goslin. We can't eat them all, and he'll appreciate them. Give him a half dozen, and let Mr. Grant have some too."

Matt was not inclined to give away any, but he did as he was told. Mr. Grant appreciated the gift, but old Mr. Goslin's reaction was different. He accepted with a nod and, when Matt started to leave, he called him back.

"You didn't get these in Mellon's crick," he said.

"Nope," said Matt, watching the old man whose eyes appeared to be burning in the dark.

"Then where'd you get them?"

The question came sharply, and Matt stepped back. "That's none of your business," he retorted.

Suddenly the old man reached forward, grabbed him with his gnarled hands, and began to shake him.

"You better tell or I'll chuck you in the crick," he said.

Matt was frightened, but he refused to answer. The old man shook him again till his teeth rattled, then suddenly released him and stomped into the house.

Abe was waiting on the porch when, the boy returned. "Well, what happened?" he said.

Matt hesitated, then he told his father of Mr. Goslin's threat. To his surprise, his father laughed and said, "He didn't mean anything by that. He was just playing with you, thinking he could make you talk."

"He wasn't playing," insisted Matt. "I was scared of him. It was like he was crazy."

Abe grew thoughtful then,

Finally he said, "Maybe giving him the crabs wasn't the right thing to do. It could have gotten him angry. He's an old man, and maybe he's getting a little queer from living alone so long. But you didn't tell him what he wanted to know?"

"Nope."

"Then you weren't as scared as you thought."

Matt nodded, but he was still frightened.

Next morning he arose early again, rowed out of the creek and was surprised when he didn't see Mr. Goslin in his rowboat. But some minutes later, when his eyes wandered, he noticed a man standing at the very end of the Point. Mr. Goslin was watching him through a small telescope.

Matt rowed across the channel and headed for the sunken meadows to scap hard-shells. An hour later he came back and passed the Point. Mr. Goslin was no longer there.

Three mornings later Matt set out in the rowboat. There was no sign of Mr. Goslin anywhere, so Matt went directly to the beach where the soft-shells were, nosed the boat into the soft sand, and got out.

A few minutes later, while he was wading in the bed of seaweed in search of more soft-shells, he lifted his eyes and saw a man step out from the high reeds that grew thirty yards up from the beach.

It was Mr. Goslin and he was carrying a broken oar. Matt couldn't move. Something was about to happen, he knew, but he didn't know what, and the old man came on.

Seconds later Mr. Goslin waded into the water. His eyes were glassy and kind of wild and he was white around the mouth. Words came from his lips but they made no sense, yet his intent was obvious now, for he'd raised the broken oar.

As he swung at Matt, the boy ducked and ran for the rowboat, shoved it off the beach, jumped in, and grabbed the oars.

The old man followed him, fell, got up, and still came on. He was waist-deep in the water when he caught hold of Matt's boat.

Terrified, Matt kept rowing but Mr. Goslin clung to the boat. Obscene threats and oaths poured from his mouth. Then, with a tremendous effort, the old man tried to pull himself aboard.

The boat wobbled, threatened to capsize, and Matt all but panicked. Then he did what he had to do. He yanked in the oars, lifted one with both hands, and brought it down with all his strength.

The old man groaned, clung to the boat for another moment, then let go and his head went under. Matt waited for it to come up, the oar still in his hands and ready to strike again. The boat drifted slowly with the pull of the tide and the water remained calm and secretive as though nothing at all had taken place . . .

When we think of Bret Harte today, we think of him in terms of an American "classicist." This is true because the literary world — and the academic one — seems to have accepted the opinion of that cynical but scalpel-minded writer-critic, Ambrose Bierce. In 1897 Bierce said that Bret Harte's early stories "place him very close to the head of American authors . . . Bret Harte illuminated everything he touched."

Whether this judgment — based, say, on Bret Harte's half dozen or dozen best stories — is still true or not, there is no doubt that after all these years a surprising vitality continues to emanate from, actually to burst out of, his work.

And now we give you the fifth in our series of Bret Harte's detective, crime, and mystery short stories — "revived," so to speak, and brought back alive; for you will not find "What Happened at the Fonda" in any professorial anthology of Bret Harte's tales. But you will find this a detective story in an almost classical sense — indeed, you may even be startled to discover how formal a detective story Bret Harte could write.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FONDA

by BRET HARTE

"WELL!" SAID THE EDITOR OF THE *Mountain Clarion*, looking up impatiently from his copy. "What's the matter now?"

The intruder in his sanctum was his foreman. He was also acting as pressman, as might be seen from his shirt-sleeves spattered with ink, rolled up over the arm that had just been working "the Archimedian lever that moves the world," which was the editor's favorite allusion to the hand-press that strict economy obliged the *Clarion* to use. His braces slipped from his shoulders during his work, were looped negligently on either side, their functions being replaced by one hand, which occasionally hitched up his trousers to a securer position. A pair of down-at-heel slippers — dear to the country printer — completed his négligée.

But the editor knew that the ink-spattered arm was sinewy and ready, that a stout and loyal heart beat under the soiled shirt, and that the slipshod slippers did not prevent its owner's foot from being "put down" very firmly on occasion. He accordingly met the shrewd, good-humored blue eyes of his faithful henchman with an interrogating smile.

"I won't keep you long," said the foreman, glancing at the editor's copy with his habitual half-humorous toleration of that work, it being his

general conviction that news and advertisements were the only valuable features of a newspaper. "I only wanted to talk to you a minute about makin' suthin more o' this yer accident to Colonel Starbottle."

"Well, we've a full report of it in, haven't we?" said the editor wonderingly. "I have even made an editorial para. about the frequency of these accidents, and called attention to the danger of riding those half-broken Spanish mustangs."

"Yes, ye did that," said the foreman tolerantly; "but ye see, thar's some folks around here that allow it warn't no accident. There's a heap of them believe that no runaway hoss ever mauled the colonel ez *he* got mauled."

"But I heard it from the colonel's own lips," said the editor, "and *he* surely ought to know."

"He mout know and he moutn't, and if he did know he wouldn't tell," said the foreman musingly, rubbing his chin with the cleaner side of his arm. "Ye didn't see him when he was picked up, did ye?"

"No," said the editor. "Only after the doctor had attended him. Why?"

"Jake Parmlee, ez picked him outer the ditch, says that he was half choked, and his black silk neck-handkercher was pulled tight-around his throat. There was a mark on his nose ez ef some one had tried to gouge out his eye, and his left ear was chawed ez ef he'd bin down in a reg'lar rough-and-tumble clinch."

"He told me his horse bolted, buck-jumped, threw him, and he lost consciousness," said the editor positively. "He had no reason for lying, and a man like Starbottle, who carries a derringer and is a dead shot, would have left his mark on somebody if he'd been attacked."

"That's what the boys say is just the reason why he lied. He was took suddent, don't ye see — he'd no show — and don't like to confess it. See? A man like *him* ain't goin' to advertise that he kin be tackled and left senseless and no one else got hurt by it! His political influence would be ruined here!"

The editor was momentarily staggered at this large truth.

"Nonsense!" he said, with a laugh. "Who would attack Colonel Starbottle in that fashion? He might have been shot on sight by some political enemy with whom he had quarreled — but not *beaten*."

"S'pose it warn't no political enemy?" said the foreman doggedly.

"Then who else could it be?" demanded the editor impatiently.

"That's jest for the press to find out and expose," returned the foreman, with a significant glance at the editor's desk. "I reckon that's whar the *Clarion* ought to come in."

"In a matter of this kind," said the editor promptly, "the paper has no business to interfere with a man's statement. The colonel has a perfect right to his own secret — if there is one, which I very much doubt. But," he added, in laughing recognition of the half reproachful, half-humorous

discontent on the foreman's face, "what dreadful theory have you and the boys got about it — and what do you expect to expose?"

"Well," said the foreman very seriously, "it's jest this: You see, the colonel is mighty sweet on that Spanish woman Ramierez up on the hill yonder. It was her mustang he was ridin' when the row happened near her house."

"Well?" said the editor, with disconcerting placidity.

"Well," hesitated the foreman, "you see, they're a bad lot, those Mexicans, especially Ramierez, her husband."

The editor knew that the foreman was only echoing the provincial prejudice which he himself had always combated. Ramierez kept a *fonda*, or hostelry, on a small estate — the last of many leagues formerly owned by the Spanish grantee, his landlord — and had a wife of some small coquetries and redundant charms. Gambling took place at the *fonda*, and it was said the common prejudice against the Mexican did not, however, prevent the American from trying to win his money.

"Then you think Ramierez was jealous of the colonel? But in that case he would have knifed him, Spanish fashion, and not without a struggle."

The foreman saw the incredulity expressed on the editor's face, and said somewhat aggressively, "Of course the boys know ye don't take no stock in what's said agin the Mexicans, and that's the reason why I thought I oughter tell ye, so that ye mightn't seem to be favorin' 'em."

The editor's face darkened slightly, but he kept his temper and his good humor. "So that to prove that the *Clarion* is unbiased where the Mexicans are concerned, I ought to make it their only accuser, and cast doubt on the American's veracity?"

"I don't mean that," said the foreman, reddening. "Only I thought ye might — as ye understand these folks' ways — ye might make some copy outer the blamed thing. It would be a big boom for the *Clarion*."

"I've no doubt it would," said the editor dryly. "However, I'll make some inquiries; but you might as well let 'the boys' know that the *Clarion* will not publish the colonel's secret without his permission. Meanwhile," he continued, smiling, "if you are very anxious to add the functions of a reporter to your other duties and bring me any discoveries you may make, I'll — look over your copy."

He good-humoredly nodded and took up his pen again — a hint at which the embarrassed foreman, under cover of hitching up his trousers, awkwardly and reluctantly withdrew.

It was with some natural youthful curiosity, but no lack of loyalty to Colonel Starbottle, that the editor that evening sought this "war-horse of the Democracy," as he was familiarly known, in his invalid chamber at the Palmetto Hotel. He found the hero with a bandaged ear and — perhaps it was fancy suggested by the

story of the choking — cheeks more than usually suffused and apoplectic. Nevertheless, he was seated by the table with a mint julep before him, and he welcomed the editor by instantly ordering another.

The editor was glad to find him so much better.

"Gad, sir, no bones broken, but a good deal of 'possum scratching about the head for such a little throw like that. I must have slid a yard or two on my left ear before I brought up."

"You were unconscious from the fall, I believe."

"Only for an instant, sir — a single instant! I recovered myself with the assistance of a No'the'n gentleman — a Mr. Parmlee — who was passing."

"Then you think your injuries were entirely due to your fall?"

The colonel paused with the mint julep halfway to his lips, and set it down. "Sir!" he ejaculated, with astounded indignation.

"You say you were unconscious," returned the editor lightly, "and some of your friends think the injuries inconsistent with what you believe to be the cause. They are concerned lest you were unknowingly the victim of some foul play."

"Unknowingly! Sir! Do you take me for a chuckle-head, that I don't know when I'm thrown from a buck-jumping mustang? Or do they think I'm a tenderfoot to be hustled and beaten by a gang of bullies? Do they know, sir, that the account I have given I am responsible for, sir? — personally responsible?"

There was no doubt that the colonel was perfectly serious, and that his indignation arose from no guilty consciousness of a secret. A man as peppery as the colonel would have been equally alert in defense.

"They feared that you might have been ill-used by some evilly disposed person during your unconsciousness," explained the editor diplomatically; "but as you say it was only for a moment, and that you were aware of everything that happened —"

"Perfectly, sir! Perfectly! As plain as I see this julep before me. I had just left the Ramierez rancho. The *señora* — a devilish pretty woman, sir — after a little playful badinage had offered to lend me her daughter's mustang if I could ride it home. You know what it is, Mr. Grey," he said gallantly. "I'm an older man than you, sir, but a challenge from a fascinating creature, I trust, sir, I am not yet old enough to decline. Gad, sir, I mounted the brute. I've ridden Morgan stock and Blue Grass thoroughbreds bareback, sir, but I've never thrown my leg over such a blanked Chinese cracker before. After he bolted I held my own fairly, but he buck-jumped before I could lock my spurs under him, and the second jump landed me!"

"How far from the Ramierez *fonda* were you when you were thrown?"

"A matter of four or five hundred yards, sir."

"Then your accident might have been seen from the *fonda*?"

"Scarcely, sir. For in that case, I

may say, without vanity, that — er — the *señora* would have come to my assistance."

"But not her husband?"

The old-fashioned shirt frill which the colonel habitually wore swelled with indignation, possibly half assumed to conceal a certain conscious satisfaction beneath. "Mr. Grey," he said, with pained severity, "as a personal friend of mine, and a representative of the press — a power I respect — I overlook a disparaging reflection upon a lady, which I can only attribute to the levity of youth and to thoughtlessness. At the same time, sir," he added, with illogical sequence, "if Ramierez felt aggrieved at my attentions he knew where I could be found, sir, and that it was not my habit to decline giving gentlemen — of any nationality — satisfaction, sir! — personal satisfaction."

He added, with a singular blending of anxiety and a certain natural dignity, "I trust, sir, that nothing of this will appear in your paper."

"It was to keep it out by learning the truth from you, my dear colonel," said the editor lightly, "that I called today. By the way, how do you account, Colonel, for your having been half strangled?"

The colonel brought his hand to his loose cravat with an uneasy gesture and a somewhat disturbed face.

"I admit, sir," he said, with a forced smile, "that I experienced a certain sensation of choking, and I may have mentioned this to Mr. Parmlee: but it was due, I believe, sir, to my cravat, which I always wear loosely, as you perceive, becoming twisted in my fall."

He extended his fat white hand to the editor, who shook it cordially, and then withdrew. Nevertheless, although perfectly satisfied with his mission, and firmly resolved to prevent any further discussion on the subject, Mr. Grey's curiosity was not wholly appeased. What were the relations of the colonel with the Ramierez family? From what Starbottle himself had said, the theory of the foreman as to the motives of the attack might have been possible, and the assault itself committed while the colonel was unconscious.

Mr. Grey, however, kept this to himself. He briefly told his foreman that he found no reason to add to the account already in type, and dismissed the subject from his mind. The colonel left town the next day.

One morning, a week afterward, the foreman entered the sanctum cautiously and, closing the door of the composing room behind him, stood for a moment before the editor with a singular combination of irresolution and discomfiture in his face.

Answering the editor's look of inquiry, he began slowly, "Mebbe ye remember when we was talkin' last week o' Colonel Starbottle's accident, I sorter allowed that he knew all the time *why* he was attacked that way, only he wouldn't tell."

"Yes, I remember you were incredulous," said the editor, smiling.

"Well, I take it all back. I reckon he told all he knew. I was wrong!"

"Why?" asked the editor wonderingly.

"Well, I have been through the mill myself!"

He unbuttoned his shirt collar, pointed to his neck, which showed a slight abrasion and a small livid mark of strangulation at the throat, and added, with a grim smile, "And I've got about as much proof as I want."

The editor put down his pen and stared at him.

"You see, Mr. Grey, it was partly your fault. When you bedeviled me about gettin' that news, and allowed I might try my hand at reportin', I was fool enough to take up the challenge. So once or twice, when I was off duty, I hung around the Ramierez shanty. Once I went in thar when they were gamblin'; thar war one or two Americans thar that war winnin' as far as I could see, and was pretty full o' that *aguardiente* that they sell thar — that kills at forty rods. You see, I had a kind o' suspicion that ef thar was any foul play goin' on it might be worked on these fellers arter they were drunk and war goin' home with thar winnin's."

"So you gave up your theory of the colonel being attacked from jealousy?"

"Hol' on, I ain't through yet! I only reckoned that ef thar was a gang of roughs kept thar on the premises they might be used for that purpose, and I only wanted to ketch 'em at thar work. So I jest meandered into the road when they war about comin' out and kept my eye skinned for what might happen. Thar was a kind o' corral about a hundred yards down the road, half adobe wall, and a stockade o' palin's on top of it about six feet high. Some of the palin's were off and I peeped through, but thar warn't nobody thar. I stood thar, alongside the bank, leanin' my back agin one o' them openin's, and jest watched and waited.

"All of a suddent I felt myself grabbed by my coat collar behind, and my neck-handkercher and collar drawn tight around my throat till I couldn't breathe. The more I twisted round, the tighter the clinch seemed to get. I couldn't holler nor speak, but thar I stood with my mouth open, pinned back again that cursed stockade, and my arms and legs movin' up and down like one o' them dancin' jacks. It seems funny, Mr. Grey — I reckon I looked like a darned fool — but I don't wanter feel ag'in as I did jest then. The clinch o' my throat got tighter; everything got black about me; I was jest goin' off and kalkilatin' it was about time for you to advertise for another foreman, when suthin broke!

"It was my collar button, and I dropped like a shot. It was a minute before I could get my breath ag'in, and when I did and managed to climb that darned stockade and drop on the other side, thar warn't a soul to be seen. A few hosses that stampeded in my gettin' over the fence war all that was there. I was mighty shook up, you

bet! — and to make the hull thing perfectly ridic'lous, when I got back to the road, after all I'd got through, darn my skin ef thar warn't that pesky lot o' drunken men staggerin' along, jinglin' the scads they had won and enjoyin' themselves, and nobody a-followin' 'em! I jined 'em jest for kempany's sake till we got back to town, but nothin' happened."

"But, my dear Richards," said the editor warmly, "this is no longer a matter of mere reporting, but of business for the police. You must see the deputy sheriff at once and bring your complaint — or shall I? It's no joking matter."

"Hol' on, Mr. Grey," replied Richards slowly. "I've told this to nobody but you — nor am I goin' to — *sabe?* It's an affair of my own, and I reckon I kin take care of it without goin' to the Revised Statutes of the State of California, or callin' out the sheriff's posse."

His humorous blue eyes just then had certain steely points in them like glittering facets, which the editor knew boded no good to an adversary.

"Don't be a fool, Richards," he said quietly. "Don't take as a personal affront what was a common, vulgar crime. You would undoubtedly have been robbed by that rascal had not the others come along."

Richards shook his head. "I might hev bin robbed a dozen times afore they came along — ef that was the little game. No, Mr. Grey, it warn't no robbery."

"Had you been paying court to the *Señora* Ramierez, like Colonel Starbottle?" asked the editor, with a smile.

"Not much," returned Richards scornfully. "She ain't my style. But" — he hesitated, and then added, "thar was a mighty purty gal thar — her darter, I reckon — a reg'lar pink fairy! She kem in only a minute, and they sorter hustled her out ag'in — for darn my skin ef she didn't look as much out o' place in that smoky old garlic-smellin' room as an angel at a bull fight. And what got me — she was ez light-skinned ez you or me, blue eyes and a lot o' dark reddish hair in a long braid down her back. Why, only for her purty sing-song voice and her '*Gracias, señor,*' you'd hev reckoned she was a Blue Grass girl jest fresh from across the plains."

A little amused at his foreman's enthusiasm, Mr. Grey gave an ostentatious whistle and said, "Come, now, Richards, look here!"

"Only a mere child, Mr. Grey — not more'n fifteen if a day," responded Richards, embarrassed.

"Yes, but some of those people marry at twelve," said the editor with a laugh. "Look out! Your appreciation may have been noticed by some other admirer."

He half regretted this speech the next moment in the quick flush that brought back the glitter in Richards's eyes. "I reckon I kin take care of that, sir," he said slowly, "and I kalkilate that the next time I meet that chap — whoever he may be — he won't see so much of my back as he did."

The editor knew there was little doubt of this, and for an instant believed it his duty to put the matter in the hands of the police. Richards was too good a man to be risked in a barroom fight. But reflecting that this might precipitate the scandal he wished to avoid, he concluded to make some personal investigation. A stronger curiosity than he had felt before was possessing him. It was singular, too, that Richards's description of the girl was that of a different type — the *hidalgo*, or fair-skinned Spanish settler. If this was true, what was she doing there — and what were her relations to the Ramierez family?

The next afternoon he went to the *fonda*. Situated on the outskirts of the town which had long outgrown it, it still bore traces of its former importance as a *hacienda*, or smaller farm, of one of the old Spanish landholders. The patio, or central courtyard, still existed as a stableyard for carts, and even one or two horses were tethered to the railings of the inner corridor, which now served as an open veranda to the *fonda* or inn. The opposite wing was utilized as a *tienda*, or general shop, and also belonged to Ramierez.

Ramierez himself — round-whiskered and Sancho Panza-like in build — welcomed the editor with fat, perfunctory urbanity. The *fonda* and all it contained was at his disposition.

The *señora* coquettishly bewailed, in rising and falling inflections, his long absence, his infidelity, and general perfidiousness. Truly he was growing great in writing of the affairs of his nation — he could no longer see his humble friends! Yet not long ago — truly that very week — there was the head *impresor* of Don Pancho's *imprenta* himself who had been there!

A great man, of a certainty, but they must take what they could get. They were only poor innkeepers; when the governor came not they must welcome the *alcalde*.

To which the editor — otherwise Don Pancho — replied with equal effusion. He had indeed recommended the *fonda* to his *impresor*, who was but a courier before him. But what was this? The *impresor* had been ravished at the sight of a beautiful girl — a mere *muchacha* — yet of a beauty that deprived the senses — this angel — clearly the daughter of his friend? Here was the old miracle of the orange in full fruition and the lovely fragrant blossom all on the same tree — at the *fonda*. And this had been kept from him!

"Yes, it was but a thing of yesterday," said the *señora*, obviously pleased. "The *muchacha* — for she is but that — had just returned from the convent at San José, where she had been for four years. Ah! what would you? The *fonda* was no place for the child, who should know only the litany of the Virgin — and we have kept her there. And now that she is home again, she cares only for the horse. From morning to night! *Caballeros* might come and go, there might be a festival — all the same to her, it makes nothing if she has the horse to

ride! Even now she is with one in the fields. Would Don Pancho attend and see Cota and her horse?"

The editor smilingly assented. He accompanied his hostess along the corridor to a few steps which brought them to the level of the open meadows of the old farm inclosure. A slight figure on horseback was careering in the distance. At a signal from *Señora* Ramierez it wheeled and came down rapidly towards them. But when within a hundred yards the horse was suddenly pulled up, *vaquero* fashion, and the little figure leaped off and advanced toward them on foot, leading the horse.

Richards had not exaggerated the girl's charms. She was indeed dangerously pretty from her tawny little head to her small feet, and her figure, although comparatively diminutive was perfectly proportioned. Gray-eyed and blonde as she was in color, her Latin peculiarities were distinct, and only the good-humored and enthusiastic Richards could have likened her to an American girl.

But he was even more astonished in noticing that her mustang was as distinct and peculiar as herself — a mongrel mare of the extraordinary type known as a "pinto," or "calico" horse, mottled in lavender and pink, Arabian in proportions, and half broken. Her greenish-gray eyes, in which too much of the white was visible, had, he fancied, a singular similarity of expression to Cota's own.

Utterly confounded, and staring at the girl in her white many-flounced frock, bare head, and tawny braids, as she stood beside this incarnation of equine barbarism, Grey could remember nothing like it outside of a circus.

He stammered a few words of admiration of the mare. Miss Cota threw out her two arms with a graceful gesture and a profound curtsey, and said, "*A la disposicion de le Usted, señor.*"

Grey was quick to understand the malicious mischief which danced in the girl's eyes, and even fancied it was shared by the animal itself. But he was a singularly good rider of untrained stock, and rather proud of his prowess. He bowed.

"I accept that I may have the honor of laying the *señorita's* gift again at her little feet."

But here the burly Ramierez intervened. "Ah, Mother of God! May the devil fly away with all this nonsense! I will have no more of it," he said impatiently to the girl. "Have a care, Don Pancho, it is a trick!"

"One I think I know," said Grey. The girl looked at him curiously as he managed to edge between her and the mustang, under the pretense of stroking its glossy neck. "I shall keep my own spurs," he said to her in a lower voice, pointing to the sharp, small-roweled American spurs he wore, instead of the large, blunt, five-pointed star of the Mexican pattern.

Without attempting to catch hold of the mustang's mane, Grey in a single leap threw himself across its

back. The animal, utterly unprepared, was at first stupefied. But by this time her rider had his seat. He felt her sensitive spine arch like a cat's beneath him as she sprang rocket-wise into the air.

But here she was mistaken. Instead of clinging tightly to her flanks with the inner side of his calves, after the *vaquero* fashion to which she was accustomed, Grey dropped his spurred heels into her sides and allowed his body to rise with her spring and the cruel spur to cut its track upward from her belly almost to her back.

She dropped like a shot, he dexterously withdrawing his spurs and regaining his seat, jarred but not discomfitted. Again she essayed a leap; the spurs again marked its height in a scarifying track along her smooth barrel. She tried a third leap, but this time dropped halfway as she felt the steel scraping her side, and then stood still, trembling.

Grey leaped off.

There was a sound of applause from the innkeeper and his wife, assisted by a lounging *vaquero* in the corridor. Ashamed of his victory, Grey turned apologetically to Cota. To his surprise she glanced indifferently at the trickling sides of her favorite and only regarded him curiously.

"Ah," she said, drawing in her breath, "you are strong — and you comprehend!"

"It was only a trick for a trick, *señorita*," he replied, reddening. "Let me look after those scratches in the stable," he added, as she was turning away, leading the excited animal toward a shed in the rear.

He would have taken the *riata* which she was still holding, but she motioned him to precede her. He did so by a few feet, but he had scarcely reached the stable door before she suddenly caught him roughly by the shoulders and, shoving him into the entrance, slammed the door upon him.

Amazed and a little indignant, he turned in time to hear a slight sound of scuffling outside, and to see Cota re-enter with a flushed face.

"Pardon, *señor*," she said quickly, "but I feared she might have kicked you. Rest tranquil, however, for the servant has taken her away."

She pointed to a slouching *peón* who was angrily driving the mustang toward the corral.

"Consider it no more. I was rude. Santa Maria! I almost threw you, too. But," she added, with a dazzling smile, "you must not punish me as you have her. For you are very strong — and you comprehend."

But Grey did not comprehend, and with a few hurried apologies he managed to escape his fair but uncanny tormentor. Besides, this unlooked-for incident had driven from his mind the more important object of his visit — the discovery of the assailants of Richards and Colonel Starbottle.

His inquiries of Ramierez produced no result. *Señor* Ramierez was not aware of any suspicious loiterers among the frequenters of the *fonda*,

and except from some drunken American revelers he had been free of disturbance.

Ah! the *péon* — an old *vaquero* — was not an angel, truly, but he was dangerous only to the bull and the wild horses — and he was afraid even of Cota! Mr. Grey was forced to ride home empty of information.

He was still more concerned a week later, on returning unexpectedly one afternoon to his sanctum, to hear a musical, childish voice in the composing room.

It was Cota. She was there, as Richards explained, on his invitation, to view the marvels and mysteries of printing at a time when they would not be likely to "disturb Mr. Grey at his work." But the beaming face of Richards and the simple tenderness of his blue eyes plainly revealed the sudden growth of an evidently sincere passion, and the unwonted splendors of his best clothes showed how carefully he had prepared for the occasion.

Grey was worried and perplexed, believing the girl a malicious flirt. Yet nothing could be more captivating than her simple and childish curiosity as she watched Richards swing the lever of the press, or stood by his side as he marshaled the type into files on his composing stick. He had even printed a card with her name — *Señorita Cota Ramierez* — the type of which had been set up, to the accompaniment of ripples of musical laughter, by her little brown fingers.

The editor might have become quite sentimental had he not noticed that the gray eyes which often rested on himself, even while apparently listening to Richards, were more than ever like the eyes of the mustang on whose scarred flanks her glance had wandered so coldly.

He withdrew presently so as not to interrupt his foreman's innocent *tête-à-tête*, but it was not very long after that Cota passed him on the highroad with the pinto horse in a gallop, and blew him an audacious kiss from the tips of her fingers.

For several days afterwards Richards's manner was tinged with a certain reserve on the subject of Cota which the editor attributed to the delicacy of a serious affection, but he was surprised also to find that his foreman's eagerness to discuss his unknown assailant had somewhat abated. Further discussion regarding it was naturally dropped, and the editor was beginning to lose his curiosity when it was suddenly awakened by a chance incident.

An intimate friend and old companion of his — one Enriquez Saltillo — had diverged from a mountain trip especially to call upon him. Enriquez was a scion of one of the oldest Spanish-California families, and in addition to his friendship for the editor it pleased him also to affect an intense admiration of American ways and habits, and even to combine the current California slang with his native precision of speech — and a certain ironical levity still more his own.

It seemed, therefore, quite natural

to Mr. Grey to find Saltillo seated with his feet on the editorial desk, his hat cocked on the back of his head, reading the *Clarion* exchanges. But he was up in a moment, and had embraced Grey with characteristic effusion.

"I find myself, my leetle brother, but an hour ago two leagues from this spot! I say to myself, '*Hola!* It is the home of Don Pancho — my friend! I shall find him composing the magnificent editorial leader, collecting the subscription of the big pumpkin and the great gooseberry, or gouging out the eye of the rival editor, at which I shall assist!' I hesitate no longer, I fly on the instant, and I am here."

Grey was delighted. Saltillo knew the Spanish population thoroughly — his own people and their Mexican and Indian allies. If anyone could solve the mystery of the Ramierez *fonda* and discover Richards's unknown assailant, it was he. But Grey contented himself at first with a few brief inquiries concerning the beautiful Cota and her anonymous association with the Ramierezes. Saltillo was as briefly communicative.

"Of your suspicions, my leetle brother, you are right — on the half! That leetle angel of a Cota is, without doubt, the daughter of the adorable *Señora* Ramierez, but not of the admirable *señor*, her husband. Ah! what would you? We are a simple, patriarchal race; thees Ramierez, he was the Mexican tenant of the old Spanish landlord — such as my father — and we are ever the fathers of the poor, and sometimes of their children. It is possible, therefore, that the exquisite Cota resemble the Spanish landlord. Ah! stop — remain tranquil! I remember," he went on, suddenly striking his forehead with a dramatic gesture, "the old owner of thees ranch was my cousin Tiburcio. Of a consequence, my friend, thees angel is my second cousin! Behold! I shall call there on the instant. I shall embrace my long-lost relation. I shall introduce my best friend, Don Pancho, who lofe her. I shall say, 'Bless you, my children,' and it is feenish! I go! I am gone even now!"

He started up and clapped on his hat, but Grey caught him by the arm.

"For Heaven's sake, Enriquez, be serious for once," he said, forcing him back into the chair. "And don't speak so loud. The foreman in the other room is an enthusiastic admirer of the girl. In fact, it is on his account that I am making these inquiries."

"Ah, the gentleman of the *pantuflos*, whose trousers will not remain! I have seen him, friend. But remain tranquil. The friend of my friend is ever the same as my friend! He is truly not enticing to the eye, but without doubt he will arrive a governor or a senator in good time. I shall gif to him my second cousin. It is feenish! I will tell him now!"

He attempted to rise, but was held down vigorously by Grey.

"I've half a mind to let you do it, and get chucked through the window for your pains," said the editor, with a half laugh. "Listen to me. This is a

more serious matter than you suppose."

And Grey briefly recounted the incident of the mysterious attacks on Starbottle and Richards. As he proceeded he noticed, however, that the ironical light died out of Enriquez's eyes, and a singular thoughtfulness, unlike his usual precise gravity, came over his face. He twirled the ends of his penciled mustache — an unfailing sign of Enriquez's emotion.

"The same accident that arrive to two men as opposite as the gallant Starbottle and the excellent Richards shall not prove that it come from Ramierez, though they both were at the *fonda*," he said gravely. "The cause of it have not come today, nor yesterday, nor last week. The cause of it have arrive before there was any gallant Starbottle or excellent Richards; before there was any American in California — before you and I, my leetle brother, have lif! The cause happen first — *two hundred years ago!*

The editor's start of incredulity was checked by the unmistakable sincerity of Enriquez's face. "It is so," he went on gravely. "It is an old story — it is a long story. I shall make him short — and new."

He stopped and lit a cigarette without changing his odd expression.

"It was when the *padres* first have the mission, and take the heathen and convert him — and save his soul. It was their business, you comprehend, my Pancho? The more heathen they convert, the more soul they save, the better business for their mission shop. But the heathen do not always wish to be convert; the heathen fly, the heathen skidaddle, the heathen will not remain, or will blackslide. What will you do? So the holy fathers of those days make a little game. You do not of a possibility comprehend how the holy fathers of those days make a convert, my leetle brother?" he added gravely.

"No," said the editor.

"I shall tell to you. They take from the *presidio* five or six dragoons — you comprehend — the cavalry soldiers, and they pursue the heathen from his little hunt. When they cannot surround him and he fly, they catch him with the lasso, like the wild hoss. The lasso catch him around the neck; he is obliged to remain. Sometime he is strangle. Sometime he is dead, but the soul is save! You believe not, Pancho? I see you wrinkle the brow, you flash the eye; you like it not? Believe me, I like it not, neither, but all life it was savage in my country in those days, and the manner of saving souls was of no moment compared with the savings."

He shrugged, threw away his half-smoked cigarette, and went on.

"One time a *padre* who have the zeal excessif for the saving of soul, when he find a heathen young girl have escape the soldiers, he of himself have seize the lasso and flung it! He is lucky; he catch her — but look you! She stop not — she still fly! She not only fly, but of a surety she drag the good *padre* with her! He cannot loose himself, for his *riata* is fast to the sad-

dle; the dragoons cannot help, for he is drag so fast. On the instant she have gone — and so have the *padre*. For why? It is not a young girl he have lasso, but the devil! You comprehend — it is a punishment, a retribution — he is feenish! And forever!

"For every year he must come back a spirit — on a spirit hoss — and swing the lasso, and make as if to catch the heathen. He is condemn ever to play his little game; now there is no heathen more to convert, he catch what he can. My grandfather have once seen him — it is night and a storm, and he pass by like a flash. My grandfather like is not — he is much dissatisfied. My uncle have seen him, too, but he make the sign of the cross, and the lasso have fall to the side, and my uncle have much gratification. A *vaquero* of my father and a *peón* of my cousin have both been picked up, lassoed, and dragged dead.

"Many peoples have died of him in the strangling. Sometimes he is seen, sometime it is the woman only that one sees, sometime it is but the hoss. But ever somebody is dead — strangle. Of a truth, my friend, the gallant Starbottle and the ambitious Richards have just escaped!"

The editor looked curiously at his friend. There was not the slightest suggestion of irony in his tone or manner; nothing, indeed, but a sincerity and anxiety usually rare with his temperament. It struck Grey also that Saltillo's speech had little of the odd California slang which was always a part of his imitative levity. He was puzzled.

"Do you mean to say that this superstition is well known?" he asked, after a pause.

"Among my people, yes."

"And do *you* believe in it?"

Enriquez was silent. Then he arose, and shrugged his shoulders. "*Quién sabe?* It is not more difficult to comprehend than your story."

He gravely put on his hat. With it he seemed to have put on his old levity. "Come, behold, it is a long time between drinks! Let us to the hotel and the barkeep, who shall give us the smash of brandy and the julep of mints before the lasso of Friar Pedro shall prevent us the swallow! Let us skiddadle!"

Mr. Grey returned to the *Clarion* office in a much more satisfied condition of mind. Whatever faith he held in Enriquez's sincerity, for the first time since the attack on Colonel Starbottle he believed he had found a really legitimate journalistic opportunity in the incident. The legend and its singular coincidence with the outrages would make capital copy.

No names would be mentioned, yet even if Colonel Starbottle recognized his own adventure he could not possibly object to this interpretation of it. The editor had found that few people objected to being the hero of a ghost story or the favored witness of a spiritual manifestation. Nor could Richards find fault with this view of his own experience, hitherto kept a secret, so long as it did not refer to his rela-

tions with the fair Cota. Summoning Richards at once to his sanctum, Grey briefly repeated the story he had just heard and his purpose of using it. To his surprise, Richard's face assumed a seriousness and anxiety equal to Enriquez's own.

"It's a good story, Mr. Grey," he said awkwardly, "and I ain't sayin' it ain't mighty good newspaper stuff, but it won't do *now*. The whole mystery's up and the assailant found."

"Found! When? Why didn't you tell me before?" exclaimed Grey in astonishment.

"I didn't reckon ye were so keen on it," said Richards embarrassedly, "and — and — it wasn't my own secret altogether."

"Go on," said the editor impatiently.

"Well," said Richards slowly, "ye see there was a fool that was sweet on Cota, and he allowed himself to be bedeviled by her to ride her cursed pink and yaller mustang. Naturally the beast bolted at once, but he managed to hang on by the mane for half a mile or so, until it took to buck-jumpin'. The first buck threw him clean into the road. It didn't stun him, yet when he tried to rise, the first thing he knowed he was grabbed from behind and half choked by somebody. He was held so tight he couldn't turn, but he managed to get out his revolver and fire two shots under his arm. The grip held on for a minute, and then loosened, and the somethin' slumped down on top o' him, but he managed to work himself around. And then — what do you think he saw? *That thar hoss with two bullet holes in his neck, still grippin' his coat collar and neck-handkercher in his teeth!* Yes, sir! the rough that attacked Colonel Starbottle, the villain that took me from behind when I was leanin' agin that cursed fence, was that same God-forsaken, hell-invented pinto hoss!"

In a flash of recollection the editor remembered his own experience, and the singular scuffle outside the stable door of the *fonda*. Undoubtedly Cota had saved him from a similar attack.

"But why not tell this story with the other?" said the editor, returning to his first idea. "It's tremendously interesting."

"It won't do," said Richards, with dogged resolution.

"Why?"

"Because, Mr. Grey — that fool was myself!"

"You! Again attacked!"

"Yes," said Richards, with a darkening face. "Again attacked, and by the same hoss — Cota's hoss! Whether Cota was or was not knowin' its tricks she was furious at me for killin' it — and it's all over 'twixt me and her."

"Nonsense," said the editor impulsively. "She will forgive you. You didn't know your assailant was a horse *when you fired*. Look at the attack on you in the road!"

Richards shook his head with dogged hopelessness. "It's no use, Mr. Grey. I oughter guessed it was a hoss then — *thar was nothin' else in that corral!* No, Cota's already gone away back to San José, and I reckon the

Ramierezes got scared of her and packed her off. So, on account of its bein' *her* hoss, and what happened betwixt me and her, my mouth is shut."

"And the columns of the *Clarion* too," said the editor, with a sigh.

"I know it's hard, sir, but it's better so. I've reckoned mebbe she was a little crazy, and since you've told me that Spanish yarn, it mout be that she was sort o' playin' she was that priest and trained that mustang ez she did."

After a pause, something of his old self came back into his blue eyes as he sadly hitched up his braces and passed them over his broad shoulders. "Yes, sir, I was a fool, for we've lost the only bit of real sensation news that ever came in the way of the *Clarion*."

'Q'

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM SANSOM**

TITLE: ***The Dummy Man***

TYPE: "Murder" Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *We wish to thank James Sandoe, "Mystery and Suspense" critic of the "New York Herald Tribune Book Review," for recommending this story as an "uncommonly bright evocation of mood and of a moment familiar and terrifying."*

A BUZZ AT THE DOOR, ONE, SHORTER than the postman's, shy as the finger-push of a visitor who feels his visit has no right. Neal, approaching the door, peered uncertainly at the shape unfocused behind the frosted glass. Certainly this visitor was a short one, short as his timid buzz. He opened the door. There stood a man he had never seen before.

Moreover, this short, strange man was leaning his head forward, standing with his feet close together, smiling. He wore a round, snub-peaked cap of unusual design, an informal uniform of slack pale brown material; from his hand hung a canvas bag like a large quiver, and from this there stuck out the ends of a set of dark, metallic rods. Nor did his next behavior relieve Neal's first small sense of perturbation—for now the stranger made no more attempt to introduce himself, but stood simply quiet and smiling, pushing his face upward and staring with almost, it seemed, love for Neal. For some seconds they stood facing one another.

In this silence, which grew to be uneasily intimate, Neal found that he was observing with disquieting clarity each configuration of the

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stranger's face, as though it were the face in a particularly clear engraving. This may have been occasioned not only by the silence, but by the unease of such an encounter, or even by the features themselves, so large, so grossly defined in a head too big for that small body—and also by the fact that there was snow upon the ground.

The snow, now thawing in a bright February sunlight, refracted a cold light from the ground and thence from the pale house wall, a flood of bright light thus in all directions. It brought into abrupt definition the brown figure sharp against the white yard, yet at the same time flooded the face and front of this stranger with its cold, clinical, reflected light. Neal saw the features of a man of thirty, heavy, yet in many ways feminine, as though perhaps in his boyhood this face had been a girl's yet had now become expanded and grossened by an access of repressed male secretions. The pale eyes were thickly lashed, and dreamed from beneath heavily fleshed lids. The mouth cut too largely across cheeks whose dimples seemed to occur then somewhere by the ears—this was an overformed mouth, baroque-lipped, pink, revealing at each corner two rows of small and absolutely regular teeth. Altogether the face, over its blue hair-growth shaved smooth, of an actor rouged and kohled—yet with such exaggerations and colors richly faded and grown into the tegument of the face itself.

All this Neal saw, engraved round a certain smiled seduction dreaming up in that white light, with the sun sparkling on the thaw-points dripping round; then suddenly the stranger spoke, apologetically, as though he should never have arrived, though arrived as he was he loved it. He said, "Sweep, sir."

A voice so soft that Neal smiled. "Of course." And instantly the scene behind, the snow and the thaw and the cause of so much cold light became recognizable. Neal was soon thinking, as he ushered the sweep inside, that of course there had been neither mystery nor unease in that encountered pause, that only such a strangely vivid light had electrified the man's figure into a harder and franker reality than would normally have been perceived. The meeting had never been unreal, it had merely been too real.

In the shade of the hallway the sweep looked like a quite normal man, with a head too big but in no way cretinous, with a markedly obsequious manner that was hardly unusual, with a smile slow and pleasant but in the soft sense weak.

Neal called through to his wife.

The sweep stood waiting, half bowed, with his feet still close together—a dummy man. Then Elsa came hurrying out from the bedroom, her arms laden with sheets,

her head poking above them, her lips saying many things at once. It had been one of those mornings set aside for accumulated odd jobs, so that perversely they had stayed in bed and breakfasted too long, putting off the businesses in the imagined luxury of a morning containing so many hours—ten o'clock, eleven, twelve offering themselves forward endlessly—yet really munching away the time on their voracious pillows. However, now the sweep had pressed the button for action—and in almost one movement Elsa had gathered up the dust sheets, shepherded the little sweep into the room with the chimney, finally closed the door. So that Neal stood alone in the hall in a sudden quiet after such a feminine, sheet-flurried whirlwind. The draft-felt on the bottom of the door muffled any sound from the room, stifled absolutely whatever Elsa might be saying to the sweep. Provoked by the silence, Neal walked into the room next door, a small empty room where he was painting a chair.

The chair, islanded on its carpet of newspaper, made absolute the vacuum of four undecorated, unfurnished walls. It was anyhow a box of a room, once a china closet among the kitchens of the huge, old house and now a spare bedroom in Neal's flat. There was one window and this looked out onto the level garden. Through this the full illumination of the snow now shone, flooding the ceiling corners white, purifying every inch of the floor, walls, and ceiling in shadowless, bright light. The smell of paint increased the feeling of a room untenanted, exorcising all other faint smells of dust and use.

No sound came through the wall from the other room. Only from outside the thaw dripped, regularly, dripping light, long drops as from an immense, liquid chandelier depending from the bright sun somewhere over all outside. In such a vacuum, in such a silence full of mineral sound, Neal bent down to his brushes, squeezed out the liquid, dipped them in the oiled cream, and began to paint.

For a time submerged in his task, he forgot about the sweep, Elsa, the next room. With long sensuous strokes he smoothed a patina of paint down the chair legs, then itched with fussing dabs the corners and underneath; only once the whole flat surface of the seat welcomed a smearing of wide, easy strokes, when the paint settled down within itself to a most satisfactory square of liquid cream. Through his absorption Neal became conscious now and again of one faint sound, muffled and distant, from the next-door room—the rattle of the sweep's sticks.

Presently, irritated by an endless recurrence of unforeseen, unpainted leg backs, his fingers gloved with quick-drying paint where he had gripped what he had already

painted—he stood up. It was time, even after ten minutes, for a breathing space. His back seemed to curve with ache.

He straightened upright and found himself facing the window. Outside there stood, surprisingly, a snow man. A second later he remembered that, of course, a snow man should have been there—he had built it on the previous day. However, in the change of his eyes from the close focus of the chair to the wide, light room and all the breadth of the world in the garden outside, such a white, man-like figure, still as death, proved naturally to be a surprise. So that Neal studied the figure more intently than before, more detachedly, conferring upon it a greater presence of its own. He chuckled, smiled—and then the smile altogether left his lips.

An old fishing cap stood on the snow man's head, a gray scarf hung slack like a drowned squirrel from his neck, a twig stuck out from the lipless mouth to make a sort of cigarette. The snow man looked at first sight a figure of fun—with its pinioned arms, its no legs, its portly, helpless tilt. But then Neal grew conscious of the eyes. In the place for eyes two round black pebbles had been stuck. Now, of all the pale-tinted, snow-hung garden, where the trees hung heavy and the alive thaw dripped its deadness on every living thing, the snow man was the only creature that might have moved, that might have had life, that had eyes. These eyes stared. Black eyes, small and ghostly as a gull's. Sockets that had shrunk to a squinting second sight. And since the snow man was placed some yards out on the lawn directly opposite the division between the two rooms, it would thus have been able to see into both windows.

Whether it was this omniscient stance or whether the newspapers on the floor—with their stained print telling old stories of real reported deaths——suggested to Neal a sensation of crime, or whether it was probably both . . . together with the thaw's dripping silence and the drafty vacancy of the room . . . however that could be, Neal suddenly felt the presence of the next-wall room, of its separation, of the two people enclosed in it alone; and he felt a sense of evil, of the perpetration of things not right. But—what exactly could not be *right?* Something against his orders? . . . Nonsense . . . he gave no orders. . . . Then something opposed to his views of behavior . . . again what?

He had few such views except on some violences, some extreme familiarities. Such as Elsa flirting with the sweep? He smiled, despite the snow man, despite not quite wishing to smile. He saw Elsa's housecoat falling back from her leg, saw the intense inquiry in her eyes as they lit—as always—to see whether her attractions were prop-

erly received. So—then the sweep would kindle; smothering her with his soot he would embrace her, kiss her with his sweep's lips, do her in; then what? . . . sever her head with his scoops? Stuff it up the chimney? Stuff it in the soot bag? . . . Neal laughed aloud, so that the empty walls rang back the laugh which then sounded as absurd as his imagining. Impatiently he turned back to the chair.

Nevertheless, some negative sense persisted, slightly, deeply—a spiral of unease drifting behind his other thoughts. It was the same feeling, he remembered suddenly, as when he had returned once to find the flat burgled. Then also there had not been much to complain about. Only a broken window, a few oddments taken in a hurry. But cupboards were open, a suitcase had been moved, drawers were not shut as they should have been . . . there was a dark sensation, a whisper, a veil of ancient dread along the passages and round corners, behind doors and in every room, a whisper not of violence or of attack, but more a sense of privacy invaded that translated itself into words repeated and repeated in his ear, softly, as though from the reaches of very distant years, the deep and hollow warning voice from a fairy tale: "Someone has been here," the whisper groaned, as it hovered over each possessive corner of his house, "someone has been here . . ."

Irritated, he turned abruptly back to his work. The brush was sticking to a piece of newspaper. He tore it off. The paper stuck to his fingers. A line of paint fell in a thread like white treacle down to spot his shoe. He swore, turned the chair upside down to paint the underneath; but then the top, newly painted, began to stick to the paper. At the same time he saw that a quarter-inch rim around the base of each leg had yet to be covered. If that was painted, then reversed, each stump of chair leg would stick to the paper too . . . the whole affair seemed absurdly difficult with only the most tedious resource, that of leaving it to dry and starting all over again to paint at some other time . . . He got up again, and, suddenly tired, abandoned the chair altogether.

Walking with the paint pot in his hand, he crossed to the wall and began to edge the brush along the wooden dado rail. In silence he worked for some minutes. Sometimes, as he edged along, his shoes shuffled on the boards, sounding a resonance from underneath, echoing like a sudden cough in the stillness. Conscious then of the depth of the quiet, of the immobility of the air, of the snow's reflection on the white plaster, of the disquieting purity of such an acrid, paint-poisoned silence glassed and ticking with the outside drip, drip, drip—Neal began to whistle.

He whistled two bars of a popu-

lar tune, then as abruptly stopped. Absorbed in his brush, the tune had struck his ears impersonally, as from another agent but his own lips, violently human in such a painted silence.

He stopped whistling, self-conscious. The silence dropped again like a stone weight. The paint brush smoothed along quietly, with no sound whatsoever, surprisingly quiet even when it gathered into its whiteness a sharp speck of grit. Then Neal suddenly halted the brush—for some reason, not the whistle, not the quiet paint brush, the silence was different from what it had been before.

He stared into the wall—with an alertness possible only to a person alone in a room charged with his own solitude. He cocked his head, listened. Then he had it! The one sound—the sound of the rattle of the sweep's stick—had stopped.

For how long? How long had the rattle not been? As he thought back, it seemed that such a sound must have stopped some time ago. An irregular sound, it could not have suddenly forced a contrast of quiet, like the stopping of a clock. What then?

Facing the blank wall, his mind flashed sideways toward the snow man and to the snow man's eyes that could see into the other window. He felt again the presence of such a comic, powerful figure—felt that, as with the penetrating sightlessness of a blind man, whose eyes look inward and think, these slate-black eyes of the snow man knew all about him, all about the house, all about the morning . . .

In momentary puzzlement he saw down by his shoes and through fluttering screen of his eyelids an old newspaper folded out thin and flat on the floor. An old paper, dead a fortnight at least. Fuzzy photographs proclaimed faces among the headlines. Headlines of violence—deaths, robberies, accidents, manslaughters, murders.

All these had happened two weeks ago, all were forgotten: now this very fact seemed to prove their greater reality. This in turn suggested instantly that such things being true, they could happen again, in the future, or now, and anywhere. They were no longer the fabrications of the day, the served-up cereal of breakfast news—but histories, true stories happening in certain houses visible in ordinary streets on the turning of a corner — associated with daylight and with suburbs, no longer with the laurel groves and decrepitudes of old, empty houses, but now with linoleum and the vacuum cleaner, rolls of wallpaper and clear windows and all the loneliness of one clean house in an endless row of villas.

Neal was suddenly seized between his legs with a terror; staring at the white wall of plaster facing his nose, he was wildly seized with the idea of *possibility*, of what

might happen at any time to anyone, and what suddenly he was sure might be happening to him and his morning and his house at that moment.

What risks, what terrible risks are taken at each moment of existence!

How one moves so assured that such an accident or such an attack would never be ours, so bolstered against events by the report of similar happenings arranged neatly round the inviolate circle of our own acquaintance, so confident in our capacity for living unharmed. And yet . . . all our lives, what might have happened! What *did* happen, two miles away, round the corner, or at this place we chose not to visit on the whim of a moment in favor of that other place to which we went? And when an accident does occur, when something really at last happens to us—then how personal it feels, personally divided from all other experience, never part of the chain of all accidents, but something entirely individual and private . . .

But here—Neal shouted within his mind—there is no door! Only wall, muffling barricade of soundless wall. So huge in that second, the little wall stretched its plaster endlessly to either side of the silence—no fissure, no picture hung like a window to the imagination, no nail mark, only plaster, plaster, plaster white as a paper blind, dry as the stonemason's yard, as the doll shop, the sculptor's floor, the powdered province of the concrete mixer, a white and powdery blankness blinding everything inevitably with only the answer *NO*.

And if this is happening, Neal's mind screamed, if this moment is the *now*, then this is the unique fraction of time given me to act, and if I don't act, what might not be stopped or what might I even now be too late to stop?

He threw down the paint pot, its paint spewed and piled avidly out onto the boards, he was at the door tugging around the handle, clattering out, tugging at the second door handle in the hall, and then had flung open the second door and was on the threshold of that other room beyond the wall.

What faced him then was a waxwork scene.

Still, suspended, in that clean, daylit second as washed as the sober morning ever was—there the familiar room stood photographed. In it, two figures. Elsa, his wife, bent over the desk, motionless. Neal saw the hump of her bent back, the blue housecoat bumped with the lines of her body, her hand outstretched and reaching, her face bent awkwardly round toward the door. The other, the sweep, crouching by the fireplace, one of the thick-sooted rods held in his hand. Over the fireplace hung the black sweep screen, and against this in that second Neal saw the sweep's brown-overalled legs braced astride,

the body low, agile, and frogged with a leaping force, the blunt rod swung back in the hand beneath his face bent forward in profile toward Elsa's body.

Then, like a halted film put suddenly into motion, the sweep's rod curled round toward the fireplace and with it these braced legs bent down to their knees on the hearth; and Elsa's face, flickering for a moment with indecision, blank as a face awakening from the possibility of having dreamed, suddenly realized Neal's presence and smiled with what seemed to be relief; the lips said, "Oh, it's you!" And the outstretched hand drew forth the book for which it had been reaching behind the desk—and she stood up.

The sweep was rattling his sticks far up the chimney, absorbed in the mouselike sound of a little mortar pattering down behind the sheet. Neal stood foolishly, his one hand still on the door handle, his other collapsed slackly to his side. Outside, the sun glinted on a million sparkling thaw-drops, the tinseled light threw festive clarity as in a bright, Nordic room. Nothing, Neal said to himself, nothing . . .

Then, as often, things inanimate took charge. There came a sigh and a light thud from the garden. Neal turned quickly to the window. The snow man's head had toppled off its thawed neck, and now lay, face upward, staring blankly into the blind sky.

NEXT MONTH...

All ten stories in Stanley Ellin's MYSTERY STORIES were published originally in *EQMM*. The book received "rave" reviews. Anthony Boucher said in "The New York Times": "consistently close to perfection . . . virtually flawless tales . . . a permanent classic among short story collections." Francis Iles wrote in "The Manchester Guardian": "as brilliant a collection of stories by a single author as has been published during the last 25 years." Julian Symons, now mystery critic for "The Sunday Times" of London, wrote: "all Mr. Ellin's stories have their own distinctive flavour."

If you are a Stanley Ellin fan (and who isn't), don't miss his newest tale of suspense—"Unreasonable Doubt"—in next month's issue.

a new story by

EDITOR'S FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **FREDERICK NEBEL**

TITLE: ***Pity the Poor Underdog***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: George Carmichael

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Strange how one case can involve beautiful Miss Palermo and foxy Harry the Weeper—strange what diverse elements can be part of a cop's job . . . As lively and spirited a yarn as we have read in years!*

GEORGE CARMICHAEL SAW HER AT least a dozen times before he spoke to her, and when that happened, the day he grabbed Harry the Weeper, everything went haywire. And thanks to Miss Palermo, it didn't get any better. She was so lovely to look at, too, George thought, and so intelligent besides.

He discovered her name the second week he was attached to the Bridge Street Police Station, a stranger in the Third Precinct; young, twenty-six, a detective third-grade, and of recent vintage. It was Mr. Straub, custodian at the Delaney Trade School, who directed George to the station house the first day he was sent down, and whenever they saw each other thereafter they exchanged greetings. And it was Mr. Straub who, in reply to George's affectedly offhand inquiry, supplied him with the pretty young teacher's name.

It was plain the little children adored her. George, striding to work past the steel-mesh fence of the Community Play School yard, could see them hopping about her, squealing joyously. The way her laughter pealed out, like the pealing of bells, put a catch in his throat, a lilt in his heart. The scene

was almost always slightly different, but always touching. Sometimes he saw her reading to them, or telling them a story. But just seeing her made his day brighter, and he arrived at the station house, four blocks beyond, with a whistled song on his lips.

"Well, well, well," the desk officer said one day, "here we are again, our little ray of sunshine, our very own."

"Yup!" George said, full of zing.

For that was the day Miss Palermo had noticed him standing at the fence. She had turned away; then she had looked up again. George had tipped his hat and Miss Palermo, in pretty confusion, had given him a devastating smile and returned to her charges.

Bounding up the stairs to the detectives' squad room on the second floor, he had a hunch, almost a conviction, that he was destined to meet her. But how could he have guessed, even in his wildest dreams, that destiny would deal in Harry the Weeper as an intermediary?

It started casually enough when Lieutenant Seidenberg, in charge of the precinct detectives, handed out some routine assignments to the men gathered in the squad room. He was a sad-eyed man, never in a hurry, never loud; small, thin, composed; always neat as a pin in dark-blue serge and starched white linen. George, who had a tendency to bellow and could not seem to walk without a roll to his shoulders and a swing to his arms, greatly admired the lieutenant and wished he could be more like him.

"Oh, by the way," Seidenberg finished up, almost as an afterthought, "just in case you spot him on the street or can reach him through your contacts, pick up Harry Spane—Harry the Weeper—for questioning. Personally, I hate the sight of him and he's always a headache to have around. But Headquarters wants to run him through the line-up. Some woman got her pocketbook snatched while she was feeding her kid a bottle in Grant Park and the description fits Harry. They think. Maybe yes, maybe no. Anyhow, keep 'em happy. You all know him? You, Georgie, you're new here—you know him?"

George nodded. "Last summer, over in the Sixth, when I was in uniform. He was rolling a lush, but I jumped him too soon, before he got the drunk's dough, and he screamed he was only trying to help the guy up. Boy-oh-boy, you could hear him a block away, screaming like he was being murdered. Crying like his heart was busted. Made a damned fool out of me." But George held no resentment, no malice. He grinned, shook his head. "Harry the Weeper, all right."

"Well, George," the lieutenant said, "you're big-hearted about it,

and that might be a good idea, because I don't—and you other boys pay attention, too, please—I don't want Harry slapped around or marked up or brought in here yelling bloody murder and crying his eyes out. I just can't take it."

George, having been through the mill with Harry, could understand how the lieutenant felt. The Third Precinct was tough—a gritty conglomeration of warehouses, wholesale produce markets, tenements, flop houses, saloons, and pool parlors, all of it squeezed in between the river on one side and the railroad yards on the other. A cop could walk into the boom-boom end of a gun any day or night, and so far as George was concerned that was okay, it was part of a cop's job. But Harry the Weeper was another matter. He never went armed, not even with a penknife, and the physical danger involved in picking him up was nonexistent. It was the headache you got. And so George, busy enough with warehouse breaks, waterfront knifings, dark-street muggings, deliberately made no effort to run down Harry the Weeper.

But Harry walked right into him.

It was a fine morning, made extra-special for George by the sight of Miss Palermo showing the kids in the Community Play School yard how to use the camera. The Play School was an annex to the Delaney Trade School, an institution set up by a former mayor in an endeavor to teach underprivileged teen-agers useful trades.

George, halfway down Delaney Street, peeled a stick of gum, popped the wrapper down a sewer grating, and gazed through the steel-mesh fence in a pleasurable daydream. He chewed absently with his fine white teeth and laughed a little, nodding approval, when Miss Palermo clapped her hands over the success of one of her pupils.

Then he saw Harry the Weeper. Harry was coming down the street, bent over, hurrying, seeing only the sidewalk in front of him. There was nothing else George could do about it in good conscience; so he sighed, shrugged, and as Harry scuttled by, George gently tapped him on the shoulder. He said quietly, like Lieutenant Seidenberg, "Just a minute, Harry old boy."

Harry wheeled, a hundred and ten pounds of ageless skin and bone, clutching a batch of comic books to his breast.

"Remember me?" George said with a teasing wink. "You don't? I used to be in uniform—"

Harry threw up his hands and backed away, cringing. He yelled in a wild, cracked voice, "Look out, now. Now, you look out, you leave me alone!" And he was a sight, really, with one eye swollen shut, a puffed lower lip, and minor lacerations on his jaw. "No, no!" he screamed, scuttling for the curb like a panicked crab.

"Sh!" George said. "For Pete's sake, Harry, cut out the act. You want people to think—"

Harry threw himself flat across the curb, clawing with his bleached, bony hands. George bent down, got hold of him by the back of his collar and the back of his pants and pulled. He had quite a time, because Harry hung onto the sewer grating for dear life. But George, aware of a roiled babble of voices in the background, and wishing to wrap up such nonsense, put everything he had—six-feet-two, one-ninety—into a prodigious heave. Harry came up, all right—he sailed into the fence, rebounded, and on the wings of implacable momentum plowed up George's shirt-front with his nose.

"You!" Miss Palermo choked from behind the fence, her dark beauty wracked with revulsion. "Oh!" she choked, pressing a hand to her lovely throat. "You horrible person. You big, horrible, disgusting—and in front of these poor little children, too—children I've been teaching to be kind and gentle—Oh, dear!"

"Huh?" George gasped, pawing Harry out of the way. But Harry teetered and joggled around, his face and shirt bloody from his rammed nose; so George had to hold him up, one-handed, at arm's length. And then, at his wits' end, he bellowed, "Harry, so help me, if you don't stop bawling I'll slap you silly!"

"Just a moment, you," Miss Palermo said, pointing. "You lay a hand on that poor little man again and I'll call the police. You've done enough—and making him lose his comic books down the sewer, too."

"Police!" George choked, pounding himself on his bloody shirt front. "What do you think I am? Ma'm, Miss Palermo, my name is George Carmichael, detective, Third Precinct—"

"Oh?" Miss Palermo said, smiling with her mouth but not at all with her eyes. "Oh, indeed. Well, I'm very glad to know that."

"And as for this—this—" George couldn't think of anything adequate to call Harry that would be acceptable to the ears of women and children. But he looked daggers at him and swung his fist back and forth just for the vicarious thrill.

It was at that moment that the shutter of Miss Palermo's camera clicked. "And I hope it turns out," she said, with renewed fire in her flashing dark eyes. "I have a very good friend on one of the morning newspapers."

"W-w-wait," George croaked.

But Miss Palermo was writing briskly on a piece of paper. And George, as bewildered as Harry the Weeper was dazed, began picking up such odds and ends as they had lost in the scuffle—loose change, sticks of chewing gum, several pencils. He saw the piece of paper she handed Harry slip from the Weeper's agitated fingers. George recov-

ered it, making a mental note for his little black book: Palermo, Apt. 4D, 98 Hillside Street. Then he passed the note on to Harry.

"If you need a witness, sir," Miss Palermo said, "don't hesitate to call on me."

Lieutenant Seidenberg was a patient man, never one to jump down one's throat and rip out the answers. For a moment he did not recognize Harry the Weeper; considering Harry's condition, this was not surprising; but when he did, he winced. Then he gazed at George with only the faintest glimmer of bitter raillery in his mournful eyes.

"I can explain," George said.

"Ah?"

When he was extremely displeased the lieutenant's voice became soft as silk. His melancholy eyes dreamed on vistas distant and imaginary. He listened with deferential dippings of his lean, flat-templed head. This general behavior pattern was embroidered from time to time by wispy, evanescent smiles and brief fingernail inspections; and there was an over-all effect of angelic remoteness.

He heard George through, the whole story, every detail, even the small pitiful excursions into self-justification, without one word of censure. Then he said, "Mmm," and studiously built a steeple of his fingers. "And you, Harry? What have you to say?"

"Me?" Harry snuffled. "Nothin'."

"You affirm what George said?"

"Nothin' to say."

"You deny it?"

"Nothin' to say."

George bellowed in righteous indignation, "For the love of God, Harry, you know I never slugged you!"

But Harry only burrowed his fox's face between his shoulders and his one open eye skittered about between rheumy lids, half in fright and half in opportunistic cunning. He glanced from George to the lieutenant, back and forth, his lips alternating in spasmodic succession between a bold leer and a frightened grimace.

"Okay, Georgie," the lieutenant said, "waltz him over to Headquarters. If you're lucky, that woman will identify him and that'll take a lot of the stinking wind out of his sails. And I mean stinking. Get him out of here before I throw up."

But George wasn't lucky. The woman said that Harry might be the man and he might not—how could she tell, the condition his face was in? Harry wept a little, and that did it. She was positive he was not the man. And besides, if he was an example of the cruel and inhuman treatment the police meted out to people, even before they were found guilty, she wanted no more truck with them.

In order to save departmental

face, a captain, two inspectors, and a deputy commissioner gave George a tongue lashing right in front of the woman. And Harry the Weeper, of course, was released.

George was fit to be tied when, after dark, he got back to the station house. He pounded his fist on the lieutenant's desk and howled in hurt, impotent rage, "That zombie! That dirty Harry." And then he gaped and said, "Huh, what's this?"

There it was, all right, the picture, blown up in all its lurid detail, George looking daggers at Harry and with his fist cocked. Harry made a pathetic figure, bloody and disheveled, limp as a dishrag, seeming not to care whether he lived or died.

The lieutenant was bleak. "The reporter just stopped by with it, for verification of the identity of the parties pictured. They're going to print it tomorrow."

"They print that," George said, "and I'll sue 'em. Take 'em to the highest court, Supreme Court of the United States. I'll show 'em—" But he limped to silence under the sad gaze of Lieutenant Seidenberg.

"George," the lieutenant said in his softest, silkiest voice, "you shouldn't have dingdonged Harry the Weeper. You let me down, Georgie boy."

George gazed back at the lieutenant in dismal hopelessness. He turned and groped his way blindly from the office and went downstairs heavy-heeled, all the zing out of him.

"My, my," the desk officer said. "No little ray of sunshine?"

George stared straight ahead, swallowing.

He was hungry but he knew he couldn't get anything down. His stomach growled, he felt like a bundle of nerves, as if a thousand tiny spindles were clicking away throughout his body. His self-prescribed remedy for this condition was a tall glass of ginger ale. But in the hurly-burly of a crowded bar, and in his own fog of disenchantment, he drank somebody else's double bourbon highball.

George knew that he himself was a nobody, a workaday detective, with no influence anywhere. But he was a young man of simple probity and Lieutenant Seidenberg's attitude hurt him deeply. Beneath a lonesome street light he scrutinized Miss Palermo's address in his little black book. He clung to the tattered remnants of his romantic dream: she was beautiful, she was good, wonderful with little children, sympathetic toward the underdog. He found her address in a decent, plain neighborhood—a six-story walk-up, with a mirror in the entrance hall which he used to examine himself critically, meanwhile brushing back his hair and adjusting his tie.

"Good evening, Miss Palermo," he said humbly but with dignity,

when she opened her door. "You may not remember me—"

"Detective Carmichael, I believe?" she said on a rising note of challenge.

George nodded gravely.

"And reeking of liquor," Miss Palermo observed.

"I—hic—can explain," George said, still managing to retain his dignity. "May I come in and explain?"

"Please do," she said, with mockery in her lovely dark eyes. "We've just been discussing you. May I introduce a good friend of mine, Mr. Riley McGuire? Mr. McGuire, Detective Carmichael." She added pointedly, "Mr. McGuire is the newspaperman I told you about."

George thrust out his hand and McGuire, overlooking it, said, "That face. I remember that face." He was a small man, chunky, with a red-haired crewcut and ice-blue probing eyes. "About three years ago. You were in uniform, a traffic cop." He grinned wickedly, showing teeth set wide apart. "A ticket, for doing only five miles over the limit. I remember your exact words. 'Well, well, buster, you going to a fire? You want a bell and siren, maybe? You maybe want a fireman's uniform?' Remember? Mmmm?"

"Well," George said, "I guess I'll be going."

"But you just got here," Miss Palermo protested. "Let me get you something for your hiccups." She got a glass of water and said, "Now hold a finger in each ear, I'll hold the water, and you take slow, regular swallows." And as he drank, he thought he glimpsed a sweet softening in her eyes, commiserative and understanding. She even nodded a little. "I know," she said. "Remorse."

"Thanks," George said, tapping his lips with his handkerchief.

"Oh, I'm quite understanding," she told him. "I've had some experience in social service work, and I realize that when remorse takes possession of a person he's apt to overindulge in liquor as a means of escape. You were cruel, brutal, but afterward, when remorse overtook you—" She put her head to one side and gave him a tender smile and the deep, understanding depths of her dark eyes. "And you've come by to apologize!"

"No word-of-mouth stuff, though," McGuire snapped. "A written statement. A deposition, notarized. Something to be published right along with the picture. It'll add validity. Moreover," he said craftily to George, "it might tend to put you in a better light. People will think—well, temper, temper, but at any rate the big lug has the decency to admit he was wrong."

George said, "Where's my hat?"

"No, wait," Miss Palermo urged, showing some irresolute concern. "Riley, I think Detective Carmichael, just by coming here, hum-

bling himself, displays a right and proper spirit. All that's necessary is a short note of apology addressed to Mr. Spane, and then I'll phone the newspaper and forbid them to use the picture."

"My hat," George said.

"Oh, please, please," Miss Palermo pleaded. "I do so hate to go through with this." There were tears in her eyes. "You did wrong, and it's only right, only fair, that you should make amends."

"Yak-yak, yak-yak," McGuire said. "Can't you see the big palooka knows he's been stymied? What'd he come here for? Sure—to wheedle, maybe to threaten you. But you weren't alone. I was here. Me. A witness."

George turned his back on McGuire and looked down on Miss Palermo from a dignified height. "I regret," he said with touching formality, "any inconvenience I may have caused you, ma'm. I don't doubt that you are a woman of honor and integrity, and I greatly admire you. It is unfortunate that we don't see eye to eye, but that is life."

"Look out," McGuire said. "Look out for that old Irish smoosh. He's on the hook and trying to wriggle off."

George wheeled about and snarled, "What slimy bog did you crawl out of, worm? You don't like those air-cooled teeth you got? You want new ones, uppers and lowers?"

George rushed out of the small apartment, head down, already red with shame for blowing his top that way in front of Miss Palermo. He plodded the dark streets until midnight, shunning people, feeling miserable and abandoned. He boarded with his sister May and her husband Ed Bensiger, a railroad fireman; and when he got home they were having a late snack.

"You look like you had a rough day," Ed said. "Pull up a chair."

George said, "You ain't kidding, brother-in-law," and out of sheer weary disgust took off his coat and flung it the length of the room. "Oops," he said. "Sorry." And fed up with himself too, he growled, "I think I'll go back in the Marines."

"Just like Pop used to be," May said, scooping up the coat. "On top of the world one day, down in the dumps the next." She picked up a pencil that had fallen out of the coat and gave it a casual glance. "Some trouble at the Delaney Trade School, brother?"

"Where'd you get that idea?"

She tossed the pencil on the table and George fiddled with it absently, saying, "Nah." But as the lettering on it came into focus he blinked, seeing himself again on the sidewalk by the steel-mesh fence picking up things after his scuffle with Harry. Nervous excitement tickled him; he giggled a little, nervously, then said, "Yeh-yeh, whaddaya know!"

And couldn't wait, all at once, till the next day.

But next day Lieutenant Seidenberg said, "I've got news for you," and in measured tones read a directive from Headquarters: "'Carmichael, George, detective third grade, to be separated from the department until further notice. To engage in no departmental activities whatsoever. To turn in shield, service revolver and/or any other departmental property. To take effect immediately.'"

"I'm being persecuted," George said.

The lieutenant peered down bleakly at the copy of the morning newspaper that lay on his desk. "Some picture, all right. Georgie, I don't know—you puzzle me. What it says here, I mean—this story by Riley McGuire—'reeking of liquor.' In the name of common sense, fella, if you had to look the girl up, why did you go loaded?"

Suddenly George was through with all protestations of innocence. He plunked down his gun and shield. "Yeah, I was stinko. Also, I beat the stuffing out of Harry the Weeper. You wanna know something else? I steal bubble gum from kids."

Because he had no idea where he was going, he blundered into Delaney Street before he realized it. He heard someone calling, "Detective Carmichael. Oh, Detective Carmichael." Miss Palermo's anxious face seemed only vaguely familiar, something out of a distant, roseate dream. "Wait. Wait, please, Detective Carmichael. Please try to understand—" They went along that way, George striding on one side of the fence, glassy-blind, Miss Palermo hop-skipping anxiously along on the other. Until a building wall stopped her.

George strode on. Past the basement entrance of the Delaney Trade School, where Mr. Straub, undecided for a moment, ducked hastily out of sight. "Him too," George muttered, dodging a newsboy who called out, "Hey, Mr. Straub—your paper." And then it began to rain.

"Well, George," his sister May said when he got home, shaking her head as she stuffed the newspaper into the garbage can. "It just goes to show."

George squeezed her shoulder. "I'm all right, May. Thanks, though, sister."

She sighed. "It's odd, isn't it? I inherit Mama's easy-going ways and you—well, Pop's temper."

Ed said, "I gotta rush, sweetie," and picked up his lunch pail. He gave George a cool, sideways look. "So long, Slugger."

"Gimme Korea," George said. "Machine guns. Bazookas. Flame throwers."

A man grievously ill attains in time a state of mind wherein pain becomes normal and nothing matters. Thus George wrapped him-

self in numb indifference and stoical detachment. The series on Harry the Weeper ran all week in the morning paper. Titled *Harry Spane, Underdog,* it did not attempt to minimize his long record of petty crimes and exasperating misdemeanors, but it intimated, with artful sophistry, that every time Harry tried to go straight the police dragged him down. His latest effort—selling comic books of an educational nature to school children—had resulted only in his being beaten insensible on the street by one Detective Carmichael. Letters to the editor were one hundred to one for Harry, the solitary exception being anonymous. The radio picked it up and Harry made an appearance on television, on a program called "Help Your Neighbor," where he received a complete new wardrobe, two hundred dollars in cash, and a week's stay in the Governor's Suite of the Castle Tower Hotel. Even Hollywood was interested and Pravda printed a stinging editorial on capitalistic decadence.

"Me a capitalist," George brooded. "Sixty-eight fifty a week. Taxes. Insurance. The dentist."

That was the day—the end of the week, Saturday—Miss Palermo found him in McInerney's Bar and Grill, around the corner from where he lived, in the booth farthest from the door.

"Your sister said you might be here," she told him. "I had an awful time finding out where you lived. They wouldn't tell me at the station house." She looked pensive, lovelier than ever.

"My sister talks too much," George said, like knifing himself.

"May I sit down?"

"It's a public bar, ma'm," he said, giving the knife a twist.

She smiled a little, tenderly. "You're so sweet, so old-fashioned, the way you say 'ma'm'." She sat down. "I'm afraid I've done you a great injustice."

"You don't want to worry your pretty little head about it," George said. "You don't see any bruises, do you? Nothing that'll show in a picture, do you? I'm fine. Best of health. Never felt better in my life. And now if you'll excuse me, I have to go across the street to the dentist and get a tooth drilled. That I can take!"

When he got out of the dentist's chair and fled into the waiting room, she was there. He was considerably shaken by his dental encounter and all he could do was give her a painful grimace and barge on downstairs. She caught up with him on the sidewalk.

"But you must listen," she cried, grasping him by the arm.

George laughed wildly, like a man on the point of losing his sanity. "Even my own sister, my own flesh and blood. All I hear is the poor underdog this, the poor underdog that. Nobody cares for anybody but the poor underdog."

Miss Palermo nodded, dabbing at the corner of her eye. "You're right, you're only too right. All my life my heart has gone out to the underdog. I've always hated to see anyone put upon. But I think Riley McGuire went too far. And now—now—and all because of me, because of something I started in honest indignation and other people made into a circus—" She put her face in her hands and wept remorsefully.

"Oh, now, oh, now," George said, making patting gestures that didn't quite touch her. Then he made his voice hearty: "Who cares? Sticks and stones. So what? You just dry your eyes, dear—I mean Miss Palermo—

"But you are, you are!" she cried, showing him wonderfully dark eyes sparkling with tears. "*You* are the underdog now and it's my fault and I hate myself. I don't care what my picture showed. It's what I feel inside now. And I feel something is wrong, I don't know what, somewhere, somehow—but *something*. Because I *believe* in you."

"Nobody else does," George warned her.

She nodded helplessly. "I know, I know. Only me. And a lot of good that will do you. Pictures don't lie, they say."

"Sh!" George said. "You wait, ma'm. You watch."

He felt the old moxie steaming up in him and smacked fist into palm.

When someone believed in you, just one solitary person in all the world, anything was possible. And when that person was beautiful Miss Palermo, how could you lose? Who needed a shield or a service revolver? And if they tossed you in the clink, so what? Miss Palermo would come to see you. But one thing was certain: you weren't going to let her go around eating her heart out with remorse and self-reproach.

At noon, and just in the nick of time, George went through the basement entrance of the Delaney Trade School. Mr. Straub, in a cubbyhole off the furnace room, was removing his overalls preparatory to leaving for the week end. On a wall desk were his glasses, a pipe, a clip-board, and a cracked plastic water glass containing several pencils. In the gloom Mr. Straub peered near-sightedly at George and groped for his glasses. George handed them to him and he hooked them on his ears.

"Oh," he said, and then looked every which way. "Long-long time no see."

"Tuesday morning," George said, and he wagged a teasing finger at the custodian. "I saw you duck out of sight, Mr. Straub, when you spotted me coming up the street. I figured at the time you were just like everybody else, giving me the cold shoulder after that story broke in the paper. But you hadn't read the paper yet. Remem-

ber? Remember the newsboy was yelling after you?"

Mr. Straub had difficulty getting into his coat and George helped him, settling the collar neatly at the neck. Then he took the pencil from his pocket and held it under the custodian's nose.

"How'd Harry the Weeper get this, Mr. Straub?" George flicked a piece of lint from Mr. Straub's lapel and adjusted his tie so that it hung neatly. "He mooch around here?" George said, casually catching hold of the custodian's hand. "Your knuckles just about healed up, huh? You look like a peaceful gent, Mr. Straub. You sure must have been sore as a boil the way you sockerooed Harry. How come?"

"I am a peaceful gent," the custodian said. His eyes clouded and he turned toward the wall and leaned his forehead against it. His shoulders sagged. "But Harry had me over a barrel. Once, twenty years ago—hard times, no work—I got in some trouble in Chicago. Sold a gas stove the landlord owned and they gave me six months in jail and that's where I met Harry. He's the only one here knew I ever was a jailbird. Couple of months ago he recognized me on the street and followed me here. I shoulda done it then—I shoulda socked him then. But now—"

George said, "For goodness' sake, Mr. Straub, any man can make a mistake once, get in trouble. Who's casting stones?"

The custodian shook his head. "I shouldn't 've let him hang around in here. Those comic books. If I'd had any idea—"

"Comic books?" George said.

"Selling 'em to the kids, the teen-agers, which seemed okay, no harm. Until I found out that day and beat him up." His voice broke, but he got hold of himself, as George squeezed his shoulder reassuringly, and said, "Mr. Carmichael, you give me courage. If you hadn't come here, I—I'd never have got up the courage. But for the kids' sake, those poor kids, I—I'll have to put the finger on Harry. To hell with what happens to me."

George took a chance. It wasn't the proper, sensible way to do, and on that score he had no illusions when, an hour later, he walked into the lobby of the Castle Tower Hotel. No gun, no shield, no authority whatever. But Harry was his slab of bacon and he wanted to bring it in. It wasn't wrapped up, yet, by any means: it would be Mr. Straub's word against Harry's but that was the long chance. And whoever got anywhere on short ones?

Harry let him into the Governor's Suite, saying, "This must be a social call, account of I hear they took away your tin badge." And beyond him there was the gush of a siphon as a beetle-browed bellboy, with a cigarette pasted

to his lower lip, juiced up a highball. "So I don't," Harry said, not cringing, "have to call you detective, flatfoot."

George shuddered as a man might on coming into contact with a loathsome disease. But he said, jovially, "Some layout, kiddo," intending to bide his time till the bellboy left. And though revulsion crawled up his spine like a hairy spider, he chomped down on an enthusiastic grin. "And look at you, Harry, all dolled up like a governor!"

Indeed, Harry looked like a new man, the scrawniness of his frame leavened by a suit of pastel overplaid; and he was redolent of Eau de Cologne. But his simulated nonchalance was less than skin deep. Some sixth sense, an inbred cunning, an alley rat's wariness, caused him to keep moving about the large, sumptuous drawing room, squinting out windows, at doors, gauging distances.

"Whaddaya want?" he snapped at last. "Get it off your chest, Fast. And then scram. I'm a busy man."

"My, my," George said. "What've they been feeding you, vitamins?" He sat down, stretched his arms and his legs. "When the bellhop goes. Okay?"

"Will that be all for now, Mr. Spane?" the bellboy said, deadpan.

"Yeah, yeah, sure. And Bernie, on the way out take them old comics and chuck 'em away."

"Well," George said, getting up, "I may as well run along too, Harry, if you're going to act like a sorehead."

"Ah, can't yuh take a little kiddin'?" Harry said. "Siddown, siddown. I'll mix you a drink."

"Some other time, Harry," George said, taking an extra-long stride in order to catch up with the bellboy at the entryway. And right behind him now, close, seeing the bellboy's over-the-shoulder glance of alarm. George had a sixth sense too, a cop's, and when he heard the spitting snarl of Harry's voice—"Pull up, copper!"—the tone was more significant than the words. His arm swung over the bellboy's right shoulder; the instant he got the choke-hold, he wheeled, wheeling the bellboy round with him, between himself and the muzzle of Harry the Weeper's shiny new gun. One by one the comic books fell, fluttering, from the bellboy's hand.

"Success go to your head, Harry?" George said. "You're a big shot now, with a gun and everything, huh? Only don't use it. Don't kill your pusher, Harry. Dope means the clink, sure enough, but you know what murder means."

Harry coughed. He began to come apart, to cringe, and little by little, with tears and venom oozing in his eyes, he let the gun droop. It made a soft sound, dropping on the deep pile of the figured carpet. . . .

George said to Miss Palermo, "The son of a gun, he had some stuff on him that day by the fence. That's why he scrounged around, getting rid of it, the evidence, down the sewer. Nothing there when I looked this afternoon—those heavy rains the other day must've floated the comics out of the catch basin and down to the river. Dope. White stuff, like a headache powder, stuck in between a couple of pages of each comic book and then the pages pasted together. At the hotel, when I got Lieutenant Seidenberg over, the count was twenty-two comic books, all loaded. So with that evidence, airtight, I don't have to drag in poor Mr. Straub."

"I feel so humiliated," Miss Palermo said, opposite George at a cozy table in the Romany Tavern. "To try to help him the way I did, and then to have that happen—and trying to sell it to teen-agers, too! It—it shakes my faith in the essential goodness of human nature!"

George made a move to touch her hand but restrained himself. "Don't let it do that," he urged. "There's all kinds, and if I didn't think there was some good in most of the bad ones, so help me, I mean it, I couldn't stomach my job."

In the lambent candlelight her eyes dreamed on him with tender affection. "You are really a very wonderful person, George Carmichael. You are the most wonderful person I've ever encountered in my life."

George, a little upset in a delightful sort of way, pulled at his coat lapel, beneath which nestled his shield, restored by prompt executive order. "You know," he said, "you have a wonderful speaking voice—like music." But his loving gaze was on her eyes, then on her lips, which seemed to shape themselves enticingly, almost like a kiss. And he said, "Baby—I mean Miss Palermo, what's your first name?"

"Right now," Miss Palermo said, with gypsy violins in the background, "Baby sounds wonderful."

"Baby," George said, covering her hand. "Oh, Baby."

NEXT MONTH . . .

CORNELL WOOLRICH in top form—

The Penny-a-Worder

A most unusual story—the missing chapter in Cornell Woolrich's new book!

An unusual short-short by a famous author . . .

THAT OLD COMPUTER

by C. S. FORESTER

JENNINGS WAS AN ELECTRONIC ENgineer employed by Electric Subsidiaries, Ltd. He was explaining at dinner the work to which he had persuaded his employers to assign him.

"They've handed the two old computers over to me," he said. "I'd sooner start afresh, but I suppose I'm lucky anyway."

"And what are you going to do with them?" asked Arabella, his wife, showing as much interest as she could.

"I'm going to use them in two stages of integration," went on Jennings. "I think there might be some interesting results."

"How do you mean?" asked Babcock—he was dining with the Jenningses, as he usually did two or three times a week.

"With two stages of integration the process will be necessarily slower," said Jennings heavily. "But the results may be on a far higher scale of accuracy and over a far wider range; it should be the product, and not the sum, of the two stages."

"Clear enough to you perhaps, old man," said Babcock, "but remember I'm no mathematical genius."

"Tell us more about it, dear," said Arabella, with no appearance of resignation.

"It should be possible to obtain reasonably accurate answers to more general questions than usual," explained Jennings. "It's a matter largely of the correct selection of the data to be fed in. With proper selectivity there might be solutions to problems of everyday life as well as to mathematical equations."

"That doesn't really sound like you, dear," said Arabella.

"Could you pick a winner at Goodwood?" asked Babcock.

"I thought you might ask that," replied Jennings. "It's a question of the relevant data, as I said. In horse racing the number of unknowns is kept deliberately high. And there are the unpredictables as well—the state of the weather and the condition of the track. With the unknowns outweighing the certain data, the result would be hardly more satisfactory than your guess —or mine, for that matter." Jennings smiled at Babcock with wintry politeness.

"It doesn't seem as though you're going to do much good then," said Arabella.

© 1957 by C. S. Forester; originally titled "The Last Answer"

"Perhaps not. I've been associated with failures before," said Jennings, turning the same rather wintry smile on his wife. "But negative results have their value, dear. It may be worth trying."

"How long before you get results, old man?" asked Babcock.

"One never knows. Months—weeks—perhaps even a few days will be enough to prove if I'm on the right track. Those two computers need a good deal of adjustment in any case. Then I can run some test propositions."

"And you'll be working Saturdays and Sundays, I suppose?" said Arabella. "You always are."

"If you can spare me, dear," said Jennings.

It was only a matter of weeks afterward that Arabella and Babcock were sitting by the window having a drink before dinner.

"Here he comes," said Arabella, watching the car swing into the garage. "We'll have to ask about that old computer. He was going to make it work today."

"Well, I'll listen," said Babcock.

Jennings came in, treading heavily like a very weary man. He looked stooped and much older.

"Well, dear," asked Arabella brightly, "did you get that old computer going?"

"Yes," said Jennings. He looked from one to the other of them but added nothing to that single word.

"Did you ask the thing any questions?" asked Babcock.

"Yes," said Jennings.

"Did you get any results?"

"Yes."

"What ever's the matter, dear?" asked Arabella.

"I only asked one question," said Jennings. "And I received the answer I did not want."

It was then that Arabella saw the gun in his hand.

NEXT MONTH . . .

STANLEY ELLIN's	*Unreasonable Doubt*
CORNELL WOOLRICH's	*The Penny-a-Worder*
ANTHONY BOUCHER's	*The Last Hand*
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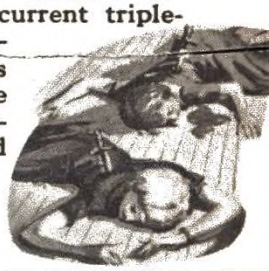

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