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JANUARY 35¢ 1963

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS**

TITLE: ***By the Scruff of the Soul***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Webbtown, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *"That's how it happens up here in the hills: one generation and there'll be aunts and uncles galore, and the next, you got two maiden ladies"—and one of them a wild one from the start . . .*

MOST PEOPLE, WHEN THEY GO down from the Ragapoo Hills, never come back; or if they do, for a funeral maybe—weddings don't count for so much around here any more either—you can see them fidgeting to get away again. As for me, I'm one of those rare birds they didn't have any trouble keeping down on the farm after he'd seen Paree.

It's forty years since I've seen the bright lights, but I don't figure I've missed an awful lot. Hell, I can remember the Ku Klux Klan marching right out in the open. My first case had to do with a revenue agent—I won it, too, and we haven't had a government man up here since. And take the League of Nations—I felt awful sorry in those days for Mr. Wilson though I didn't hold with his ideas.

Maybe things have changed, but sometimes I wonder just how much. This bomb I don't understand, fallout and all, but I've seen what a plague of locusts can do to a wheat field and I don't think man's ever going to beat nature when it comes to pure, ornery destruction. I could be wrong about that. Our new parson says I am and he's a mighty knowing man. Too knowing, maybe. I figure that's why the Synod shipped him up to us in Webbtown.

As I said, I don't figure I'm missing much. There's a couple of television sets in town and sometimes

of an evening I'll sit for an hour or so in front of whichever one of them's working best. One of them gets the shimmies every time the wind blows and the other don't bring in anything except by way of Canada. Same shows but different commercials. That kind of tickles me, all them companies advertising stuff you couldn't buy if you wanted to instead of stuff you wouldn't want if you could buy it.

But, as you've probably guessed by now, I'd rather talk than most anything, and since you asked about The Red Lantern, I'll tell you about the McCracken sisters who used to run it—and poor old Matt Sawyer.

I'm a lawyer, by the way. I don't get much practice up here. I'm also Justice of the Peace. I don't get much practice out of that either, but between the two I make a living. For pleasure I fish for trout and play the violin, and at this point in my life I think I can say from experience that practice ain't everything.

I did the fiddling at Clara McCracken's christening party, I remember, just after coming home from the first World War. Maudie was about my age then, so's that'd make a difference of maybe twenty years between the sisters, and neither chit nor chizzler in between, and after them, the whole family suddenly dies out. That's how it happens up here in the hills: one generation and there'll be aunts and uncles galore, and the next, you got two maiden ladies and a bobtailed cat.

The Red Lantern Inn's boarded up now, as you saw, but it was in the McCracken family since just after the American Revolution. It was burned down once—in a reprisal raid during the War of 1812, and two of the McCrackens were taken hostage. Did you know Washington, D.C. was also burned in reprisal? It was. At least that's how they tell it over in Canada—for the way our boys tore up the town they call Toronto now. You know, history's like a story in a way: it depends on who's telling it.

Anyways, Maudie ran the inn after the old folks died, and she raised Clara the best she could, but Clara was a wild one from the start. We used to call her a changeling: one minute she'd be sitting at the stove and the next she'd be off somewhere in the hills. She wasn't a pretty girl—the jutting McCracken jaw spoiled that—but there were times she was mighty feminine, and many a lad got thorny feet chasing after the will-o'-the-wisp.

As Clara was coming to age, Maudie used to keep a birch stick behind the bar, and now and then I dare say she'd use it, though I never saw it happen but once myself. But that birch stick and Old Faithful, her father's shotgun, stood in the corner side by side, and I guess we made some pretty rude

jokes about them in those days. Anyways, Maudie swore to tame the girl and marry her to what she called a "settled" man.

By the time Clara was of a marrying age, The Red Lantern was getting pretty well rundown. And so was Maudie. She wasn't an easy woman by any calculation. She had a tongue you'd think was sharpened on the grindstone and a store of sayings that'd shock you if you didn't know your Bible. The inn was peeling paint and wanting shutters to the northeast, which is where they're needed most. But inside, Maudie kept the rooms as clean and plain as a glass egg. And most times they were about as empty.

It was the taproom kept the sisters going. They drew the best beer this side of Cornwall, England. If they knew you, that is. If they didn't know you, they served you a labeled bottle, stuff you'd recognize by the signboard pictures. About once a month, Maudie had to buy a case of that—which gives you an idea how many strangers stopped over in Webbtown. We had more stores then and the flour mill was working, so the farmers'd come in regular. But none of them were strangers. You see, even to go to Ragapoo City, the county seat, you've got to go twenty miles around—unless you're like Clara was, skipping over the mountain.

Matt Sawyer came through every week or two in those days and he always stopped at Prouty's Hardware Store. Matt was a paint salesman. I suppose he sold Prouty a few gallons over the years. Who bought it from Prouty, I couldn't say. But Prouty liked Matt. I did myself when I got to know him. Or maybe I just felt sorry for him.

It was during the spring storms, this particular day. The rain was popping blisters on Main Street. Most everyone in Webbtown seems to have been inside looking out that day. Half the town claimed afterwards to have seen Matt come out of Prouty's raising his black umbrella over Maudie's head and walking her home. I saw them myself, Maudie pulling herself in and Matt half in and half out. I know for a fact she'd never been under an umbrella before in her life.

Prouty told me afterwards he'd forgot she was in the store when he was talking to Matt: Maudie took a mighty long time making up her mind before buying anything. Like he always did, Prouty was joshing Matt about having enough money to find himself a nice little woman and give up the road. Maudie wasn't backward. She took a direct line: she just up and asked Matt since he had an umbrella, would he mind walking her home. Matt was more of a gentleman than anybody I ever knew. He said it would be a pleasure. Maybe it was, but that was the beginning of the doggonedest three-cornered

courtship in the county history. And it's all documented today in the county court records over in Ragapoo City. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I've got my office in my hat, you might say, and I hang that in rooms over Kincaid's Drug Store. I was standing at the window when Matt and Maudie came out of Prouty's. I remember I was trying to tune my violin. You can't keep a fiddle in tune weather like that. I played kind of ex tempore for a while, drifting from one thing to another —sad songs mostly, like "The Vacant Chair." *We shall meet but we shall miss him . . . there will be one vacant chair.* I got myself so depressed I hung up the fiddle and went down to The Red Lantern for a glass of Maudie's Own.

Well, sure enough, there was Matt Sawyer sitting at the bar advising Maudie on the costs of paint and trimming and how to estimate the amount of paint a place the size of The Red Lantern would need. Now I knew Maudie couldn't afford whitewash much less the high-class line of stuff Matt represented. But there she was, leaning on the bar, hand in chin and her rump in the air like a swaybacked mule. She drew me a beer and put a head on Matt's. Then she went back to listening to him.

I don't know how long it took me to notice what was really going on: I'm slow sometimes, but all this while Clara was standing on a stool polishing a row of fancy mugs Maudie kept on a ledge over the back mirror. The whole row of lights was on under the ledge and shining double in the mirror. Hell, Matt Sawyer wasn't actually making sense at all, what he was saying in facts and figures. He was just making up words to keep old Maudie distracted—he thought—and all the while him gazing up at Clara every chance he'd get. I might as well be honest with you: it was looking at Clara myself I realized what was going on in that room. The way she was reaching up and down in front of that mirror and with a silk petticoat kind of dress on, you'd have sworn she was stark naked.

Well, sir, just think about that. Matt, being a gentleman, was blushing and yearning—I guess you'd call it that—but making conversation all the time; and Maudie was conniving a match for Clara with a man who could talk a thousand dollars' worth of paint without jumping his Adam's apple. I'll say this about Maudie: for an unmarried lady she was mighty knowing in the fundamentals. Clara was the only innocent one in the room, I got to thinking.

All of a sudden Maudie says to me, "Hank, how's your fiddle these days?"

"It's got four strings," I said.

"You bring it up after supper, hear?" It was Maudie's way never to ask for something. She told you

what you were going to do and most often you did it. Clara looked round at me from that perch of hers and clapped her hands.

Maudie laid a bony finger on Matt's hand. "You'll stay to supper with us, Mr. Sawyer. Our Clara's got a leg of lamb in the oven like you never tasted. It's home hung and roasted with garden herbs."

Now I knew for a fact the only thing Clara ever put in the oven was maybe a pair of shoes to warm them of a winter's morning. And it was just about then Clara caught on, too, to what Maudie was maneuvering. Her eyes got a real wild look in them, like a fox cornered in a chicken coop. She bounded down and across that room . . .

I've often wondered what would-'ve happened if I hadn't spoken then. It gives me a cold chill thinking about it—words said with the best intentions in the world. I called out just as she got to the door: "Clara, I'll be bringing up my fiddle."

I don't suppose there ever was a party in Webbtown like Maudie put on that night. Word got around. Even the young folks came that mightn't have if it was spooning weather. Maudie wore her best dress—the one she was saving, we used to say, for Clara's wedding and her own funeral. It was black, but on happier occasions she'd liven it up with a piece of red silk at the collar. I remember Prouty saying once that patch of red turned Maudie from a Holstein into a Guernsey. Prouty, by the way, runs the undertaking parlor as well as the hardware store.

I near split my fingers that night fiddling. Maudie tapped a special keg. Everybody paid for his first glass, but after that she put the cash box away and you might say she drew by heart.

Matt was having a grand time just watching mostly. Matt was one of those creamy-looking fellows, with cheeks as pink as winter apples. He must've been fifty but there wasn't a line or wrinkle in his face. And I never seen him without his collar and tie on. Like I said, a gentleman.

Clara took to music like a bird to wing. I always got the feeling no matter who was taking her in or out she was actually dancing alone; she could do two steps to everybody else's one. Matt never took his eyes off her, and once he danced with her when Maudie pushed him into it.

That was trouble's start—although we didn't know it at the time. Prouty said afterwards he did, but Prouty's a man who knows everything after the fact. That's being an undertaker, I dare say. Anyway, Matt was hesitating after Clara—and it was like that, her sort of skipping ahead and leading him on, when all of a sudden, young Reuben White leaped in between them and danced with Clara the way she needed to be danced with.

Now Reuben didn't have much to recommend him, especially to Maudie. He did an odd job now and then—in fact, he hauled water for Maudie from the well she had up by the brewhouse back of Maple Tree Ridge. And this you ought to know about Maudie if you don't by now—anybody she could boss around, she had no use for.

Anyways, watching that boy dance with Clara that night should've set us all to thinking, him whirling her and tossing her up in the air, them spinning round together like an August twister. My fiddle's got a devil in it at a time like that. Faster and faster I was bowing, till plunk I broke a string, but I went right on playing.

Matt fell back with the other folks, clapping and cheering, but Maudie I could see going after her stick. I bowed even faster, seeing her. It was like a race we were all in together. Then all of a sudden, like something dying high up in the sky and falling mute, my E string broke and I wasn't playing any more. In the center of the tavern floor Clara and Reuben just folded up together and slumped down into a heap.

Everybody was real still for about a half a minute. Then Maudie came charging out, slashing the air with that switch of hers. She grabbed Clara by the hair—I swear she lifted the girl to her feet that way and flung her towards the bar. Then she turned on Reuben. That boy slithered clear across the barroom floor, every time just getting out of the way of a slash from Maudie's stick. People by then were cheering in a kind of rhythm—for him or Maudie, you couldn't just be sure, and maybe they weren't for either. "Now!" they'd shout at every whistle of the switch. "Now! Now! *Now!*"

Prouty opened the door just when Reuben got there, and when the boy was out Prouty closed it against Maudie. I thought for a minute she was going to turn on him. But she just stood looking and then burst out laughing. Everybody started clouting her on the back and having a hell of a time.

I was at the bar by then and so was Matt. I heard him, leaning close to Clara, say, "Miss Clara, I never saw anything as beautiful as you in all my life."

Clara's eyes snapped back at him but she didn't say a word.

Well, it was noon the next day before Matt pulled out of town, and sure enough, he forgot his umbrella and came back that night. I went up to The Red Lantern for my five o'clock usual, and him and Maudie were tete a tete, as they say, across the bar. Maudie was spouting the praises of her Clara—how she could sew and cook and bake a cherry pie, Billy Boy. The only attention she paid me was as a collaborating witness.

I'll say this for Clara: when she did appear, she looked almost civi-

lized, her hair in a ribbon, and her wearing a new striped skirt and a grandmother blouse clear up to her chin. That night, by glory, she went to the movie with Matt. We had movies every night except Sundays in those days. A year or so ago, they closed up the Bellevue altogether. Why did she go with him? My guess is she wanted to get away from Maudie, or maybe for Reuben to see her dressed up that way.

The next time I saw all of them together was Decoration Day. Matt was back in town, arranging his route so's he'd have to stop over the holiday in Webbtown. One of them carnival outfits had set up on the grounds back of the schoolhouse. Like I said before, we don't have any population to speak of in Webbtown, but we're central for the whole valley, and in the old days traveling entertainers could do all right if they didn't come too often.

There was all sorts of raffle booths—Indian blankets and kewpie dolls, a shooting gallery and one of those things where you throw baseballs at wooden bottles and get a cane if you knock 'em off. And there was an apparatus for testing a man's muscle: you know, you hit the target on the stand with a sledgehammer and then a little ball runs up a track that looks like a big thermometer and registers your strength in pounds.

I knew there was a trick to it no matter what the barker said about it being fair and square. Besides, nobody cares how strong a lawyer is as long as he can whisper in the judge's ear. I could see old Maudie itching herself to have a swing at it, but she wasn't taking any chance of giving Matt the wrong impression about either of the McCracken girls.

Matt took off his coat, folded it, and gave it to Clara to hold. It was a warm day for that time of year and you could see where Matt had been sweating under the coat, but like I said, he was all gentleman. He even turned his back to the ladies before spitting on his hands. It took Matt three swings—twenty-five cents worth—but on the last one that little ball crawled the last few inches up the track and just sort of tinkled the bell at the top. The womenfolk clapped, and Matt put on his coat again, blushing and pleased with himself.

I suppose you've guessed that Reuben showed up then. He did, wearing a cotton shirt open halfway down to his belly.

"Now, my boy," the barker says, "show the ladies, show the world that you're a man! How many?"

Reuben sniggled a coin out of his watch pocket, and mighty cocky for him, he said, "Keep the change."

Well, you've guessed the next part, too: Reuben took one swing and you could hear that gong ring out clear across the valley. It brought a lot of people running and the carnival man was so pleased

he took out a big cigar and gave it to Reuben. "That, young fellow, wins you a fifty-cent Havana. But I'll send you the bill if you broke the ma-chine, ha! ha!"

Reuben grinned and took the cigar, and strutting across to Clara, he made her a present of it. Now in Matt's book, you didn't give a lady a cigar, no, sir. Not saying a word, Matt brought his fist up with everything he had dead to center under Reuben's chin. We were all of us plain stunned, but nobody more than Reuben. He lay on the ground with his eyes rolling round in his head like marbles.

You'd say that was the blow struck for romance, wouldn't you? Not if you knew our Clara. She plopped down beside Reuben like he was the dying gladiator, or maybe just something she'd come on helpless in the woods. It was Maudie who clucked and crowed over Matt. All of a sudden Clara leaped up—Reuben was coming round by then—and she gave a whisk of that fancy skirt and took off for the hills, Maudie bawling after her like a hogcaller. And at that point, Reuben scrambled to his feet and galloped after Clara. It wasn't long till all you could see of where they'd gone was a little whiff of dust at the edge of the dogwood grove. I picked up the cigar and tried to smoke it afterwards. I'd have been better off on a mixture of oak leaf and poison ivy.

Everything changed for the worse at The Red Lantern after that. Clara found her tongue and sassed her sister, giving Maudie back word for word, like a common scold. One was getting mean and the other meaner. And short of chaining her, Maudie couldn't keep Clara at home any more, not when Clara wanted to go.

Matt kept calling at The Red Lantern regularly, and Maudie kept making excuses for Clara's not being there. The only times I'd go to the inn in those days was when I'd see Matt's car outside. The place would brighten up then, Maudie putting on a show for him. Otherwise, I'd have as soon sat in Prouty's cool room. It was about as cheerful. Even Maudie's beer was turning sour.

Matt was a patient man if anything, and I guess being smitten for the first time at his age he got it worse than most of us would: he'd sit all evening just waiting a sight of that girl. When we saw he wasn't going to get over it, Prouty and I undertook one day in late summer to give him some advice. What made us think we were authorities, I don't know. I've been living with my fiddle for years and I've already told you what Prouty'd been living with. Anyways, we advised Matt to get himself some hunting clothes —the season was coming round— and to put away that doggone collar and tie of his and get out in the open country where the game was.

Matt tried. Next time he came to

Webbtown, as soon as he put in at The Red Lantern, he changed into a plaid wool shirt, brand-new khaki britches, and boots laced up to his knees, and with Prouty and me cheering him on, he headed for the hills. But like Cox's army, or whoever it was, he marched up the hill and marched down again.

But he kept at it. Every week-end he'd show up, change, and set out, going farther and farther every time. One day, when the wind was coming sharp from the northeast, I heard him calling out up there: "Clara . . . Clara . . ."

I'll tell you, that gave me a cold chill, and I wished to the Almighty that Prouty and I had minded our own business. Maudie would stand at the tavern door and watch him off, and I wondered how long it was going to take for her to go with him. By then, I'd lost whatever feeling I ever had for Maudie and I didn't have much left for Clara either. But what made me plain sick one day was Maudie confiding in me that she was thinking of locking Clara in her room and giving Matt the key. I said something mighty close to obscene such as I'd never said to a woman before in my life and walked out of the tavern.

It was one of those October days, you know, when the clouds keep building up like suds and then just seem to wash away. You could hear the school bell echo, and way off the hawking of the wild geese, and you'd know the only sound of birds till spring would be the lonesome cawing of the crows. I was working on a couple of things I had coming up in Quarter Sessions Court when Prouty pounded up my stairs. Prouty's a pretty dignified man who seldom runs.

"Hank," he said, "I just seen Matt Sawyer going up the hill. He's carrying old man McCracken's shotgun."

I laughed kind of, seeing the picture in my mind. "What do you think he aims to do with it?"

"If he was to fire it, Hank, he'd be likely to blow himself to eternity."

"Maybe the poor buzzard'd be as well off," I said.

"And something else, Hank—Maudie just closed up the tavern. She's stalking him into the hills."

"That's something else," I said, and reached for my pipe.

"What are we going to do?" Prouty fumbled through his pockets for some matches for me. He couldn't keep his hands still.

"Nothing," I said. "The less people in them hills right now the better."

Prouty came to see it my way, but neither one of us could do much work that afternoon. I'd go to the window every few minutes and see Prouty standing in the doorway. He'd look down toward The Red Lantern and shake his head, and I'd know Maudie hadn't come back yet.

Funny, how things go on just the same in a town at a time like that. Tom Kincaid, the druggist, came out and swept the sidewalk clean, passed the time of day with Prouty, and went inside again. The kids were coming home from school. Pretty soon they were all indoors doing their homework before chore time. Doc Sissler stopped at Kincaid's—he liked to supervise the making up of his prescriptions. It was Miss Dorman, the schoolteacher, who gave the first alarm. She always did her next day's lessons before going home, so it was maybe an hour after school let out. I heard her scream and ran to the window.

There was Matt coming down the street on Prouty's side, trailing the gun behind him. You could see he was saying something to himself or just out loud. I opened my window and shouted down to him. He came on then across the street. His step on the stair was like the drum in a death march. When he got to my doorway he just stood there, saying, "I killed her, Hank. I killed her dead."

I got him into a chair and splashed some whiskey out for him. He dropped the gun on the floor beside him and I let it lie there, stepping over it. By then Prouty had come upstairs, and by the time we got the whiskey inside Matt, Luke Weber, the constable, was there.

"He says he killed somebody," I told Weber. "I don't know who."

Matt rolled his eyes towards me like I'd betrayed him just saying what he told me. His face was hanging limp and white as a strung goose. "I know Matt Sawyer," I added then, "and if there was any killing, I'd swear before Jehovah it must've been an accident."

That put a little life back in him. "It was," he said, "it was truly." And bit by piece we got the story out of him.

"I got to say in fairness to myself, taking the gun up there wasn't my own idea," he started. "Look at me, duded up like this—I had no business from the start pretending I was something I wasn't."

"That was me and Hank's fault," Prouty said, mostly to the constable, "advising him on how to court Miss Clara."

He didn't have to explain that to Weber. Everybody in town knew it.

"I'm not blaming either one of you," Matt said. "It should've been enough for me, chasing an echo every time I thought I'd found her. And both of them once sitting up in a tree laughing at me fit to bust and pelting me with acorns . . ."

We knew he was talking about Reuben and Clara. It was pathetic listening to a man tell that kind of story on himself, and I couldn't help but think what kind of an impression it was going to make on a jury. I had to be realistic about it: there's some people up here would hang a man for making a fool of himself where they'd let him go for

murder. I put the jury business straight out of my mind and kept hoping it was clear-cut accident. He hadn't said yet who was dead, but I thought I knew by then.

"Well, I found them for myself today," he made himself go on, "Clara and Reuben, that is. They were cosied in together in the sheepcote back of Maudie's well. It made me feel ashamed just being there and I was set to sneak away and give the whole thing up for good. But Maudie came up on me and took me by surprise. She held me there—by the scruff of the soul, you might say—and made me listen with her to them giggling and carrying on. I was plain sick with jealousy, I'll admit that.

"Then Maudie gave a shout: 'Come out, you two! Or else we'll blow you out!' Something like that.

"It was a minute or two: nothing happened. Then we saw Reuben going full speed the other way, off towards the woods.

" 'Shoot, Matt, now!' That's what Maudie shouted at me. 'You got him clear to sight.' But just then Clara sauntered out of the shelter towards us—just as innocent and sweet, like the first time I ever laid eyes on her."

I'm going to tell you, Prouty and me looked at each other when he said that.

The constable interrupted him and asked his question straight: "Did she have her clothes on?"

"All but her shoes. She was barefoot and I don't consider that unbecoming in a country girl."

"Go on," Weber told him.

Matt took a long drag of air and then plunged ahead. "Maudie kept hollering at the boy—insults, I guess—I know I'd have been insulted. Then he stopped running and turned around and started coming back. I forget what it was she said to me then—something about my manhood. But she kept saying, 'Shoot, Matt! Shoot, shoot!' I was getting desperate, her hounding me that way. I slammed the gun down between us, butt-end on the ground. The muzzle of it, I guess, was looking her way. And it went off.

"It was like the ground exploding underneath us. Hell smoke and brimstone—that's what went through my mind. I don't know whether it was in my imagination—my ears weren't hearing proper after all that noise—but like ringing in my head I could hear Clara laughing, just laughing like hysterics . . . And then when I could see, there was Maudie lying on the ground. I couldn't even find her face for all that was left of her head."

We stood all of us for a while after that. Listening to the tick of my alarm clock on the shelf over the washstand, I was. Weber picked up the gun then and took it over to the window where he examined the breech.

Then he said, "What did you

think you were going to do with this when you took it from the tavern?"

Matt shook his head. "I don't know. When Maudie gave it to me, I thought it looked pretty good on me in the mirror."

I couldn't wait to hear the prosecutor try that one on the jury.

Weber said, "We better get on up there before dark and you show us how it happened."

We stopped by at Prouty's on the way and picked up his wicker basket. There wasn't any way of driving beyond the dogwood grove. People were following us by then. Weber sent them back to town and deputized two or three among them to be sure they kept the peace.

We hadn't got very far beyond the grove, the four of us, just walking, climbing up, and saying nothing. Hearing the crows a-screaming not far ahead gave me a crawling stomach. They're scavengers, you know.

Well, sir, down the hill fair-to-flying, her hair streaming out in the wind, came Clara to meet us. She never hesitated, throwing herself straight at Matt. It was instinct made him put his arms out to catch her and she dove into them and flung her own arms around his neck, hugging him and holding him, and saying things like, "Darling Matt . . . wonderful Matt. I love Matt." I heard her say that.

You'd have thought to see Matt, he'd turned to stone. Weber was staring at them, a mighty puzzled look on his face.

"Miss Clara," I said, "behave yourself."

She looked at me—I swear she was smiling—and said, "You hush, old Hank, or we won't let you play the fiddle at our wedding."

It was Prouty said, hoisting his basket up on his shoulders, "Let's take one thing at a time."

That got us started on our way again, Clara skipping along at Matt's side, trying to catch his hand. Luke Weber didn't say a word.

I'm not going into the details now of what we saw. It was just about like Matt had told it in my office. I was sick a couple of times. I don't think Matt had anything left in him to be sick with. When it came to telling what had happened first, Clara was called on to corroborate. And Weber asked her, "Where's Reuben now, Miss Clara?"

"Gone," she said, "and I don't care."

"Didn't care much about your sister either, did you?" Weber drawled, and I began to see how really bad a spot old Matt was in. There was no accounting Clara's change of heart about him—except he'd killed her sister. The corroborating witness we needed right then was Reuben White.

Prouty got Weber's go-ahead on the job he had to do. I couldn't help him though I tried. What I did

when he asked it, was go up to Maudie's well to draw him a pail of water so's he could wash his hands when he was done. Well, sir, I'd have been better off helping him direct. I couldn't get the bucket down to where it would draw the water.

After trying a couple of times, I called out to Weber asking if he had a flashlight. He brought it and threw the beam of light down into the well. Just above the water level a pair of size-twelve shoes were staring up at us—the soles of them like Orphan Annie's eyes.

There wasn't any doubt in our minds that what was holding them up like that was Reuben White, headfirst in the well.

The constable called Clara to him and took a short-cut in his questioning.

"How'd it happen, girl?"

"I guess I pushed him," Clara said, almost casual.

"It took a heap of pushing," Weber said.

"No, it didn't. I just got him to look down and then I tumbled him in."

"Why?"

"Matt," she said, and smiled like a Christmas cherub.

Matt groaned, and I did too inside.

"Leastways, it come to that," Clara explained. Then in that quick-changing way of hers, she turned deep serious. "Mr. Weber, you wouldn't believe me if I told you what Reuben White wanted me to do with him—in the sheepcote this afternoon."

"I might," Luke Weber said.

I looked at Prouty and drew my first half-easy breath. I could see he felt the same. We're both old-fashioned enough to take warmly to a girl's defending her virtue.

But Weber didn't bat an eye. "And where does Matt here come in on it?" he said.

"I figure he won't ever want me to do a thing like that," Clara said, and gazed up at old stoneface with a look of pure adoration.

"Where was Matt when you . . . tumbled Reuben in?" Weber asked, and I could tell he was well on his way to believing her.

"He'd gone down the hill to tell you what'd happened to Sister Maudie."

"And when was it Reuben made this—this proposal to you?" Weber said. I could see he was getting at the question of premeditation. Luke Weber's a pretty fair policeman.

"It was Matt proposed to me," Clara said. "That's why I'm going to marry him. Reuben just wanted . . ."

Weber interrupted. "Why, if he wasn't molesting you just then, and if you'd decided to marry Matt Sawyer, why did you have to kill him? You must've known a well's no place for diving."

Clara shrugged her pretty shoulders. "By then I was feeling kind

of sorry for him. He'd have been mighty lonesome after I went to live with Matt."

Well, there isn't much more to tell. We sort of disengaged Matt, you might say. His story of how Maudie died stood up with the coroner, Prouty and I vouching for the kind of man he was. I haven't seen him since.

Clara—she'll be getting out soon, coming home to the hills, and maybe opening up The Red Lantern again. I defended her at the trial, pleading temporary insanity. Nobody was willing to say she was insane exactly. We don't like saying such things about one another up here. But the jury agreed she was a temporary sort of woman. Twenty years to life, she got, with time off for good behavior.

You come around some time next spring. I'll introduce you.

"Q"

a new story by

VICTOR CANNING

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**VICTOR CANNING**
TITLE:	***The Carnation Anniversary***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Department of Patterns
LOCALE:	France
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*What the greenkeeper of the golf course told Marivaux was too intriguing to be ignored—especially since it was so obviously part of a pattern . . .*

THE DEPARTMENT OF PATTERNS has its headquarters in an old house on the Quai d'Orsay. Few people know about it for it courts no publicity and its successes are always ascribed to the regular police organizations. Its functions are twofold: it trains promising young men from the police and military intelligence, and it also deals with cases which others have long dropped as hopeless.

And, of course, it is always looking for patterns—the odd twists and shapes that sometimes come up in the mass of official records.

Monsieur Alphonse Grand is the head of the Department. He is a bluff, red-faced, white-haired man of about 60, looking like a farmer from his own Normandy. Little is known of his past even by the people he works with, but it has obviously not been a tranquil one. One finger of his right hand is missing and the back of the hand badly scarred. The stories about this mutilation are many, but the truth has yet to be known.

But he is a man who is always approachable—if you have something of importance to take to him. Importance for Papa Grand lies mostly in the smallest and oddest of details.

Take this carnation pattern, for instance. I had a week's holiday in May and I went to a small hotel on

the Atlantic coast below Arcachon. I am a well-organized man and I like my holidays to be that way. I played golf during the day on the Les Landes course, and the evenings I spent with a charming lady whose husband, for some reason I could never understand, preferred the company of someone else. But it is not of this lady that I write.

One day in playing the seventh hole at Les Landes I put my ball into a bunker on the left hand side of the fairway about fifty yards short of the green. I was playing by myself and when I came out of the bunker it was to find the greenkeeper enjoying a cigarette under the pines just beyond the bunker.

In the Department of Patterns we never advertise our profession. The greenkeeper knew me as a journalist from *Paris-Match*. His name was Chaparigne—a weather-beaten man of about 50, and always ready for a chat. I sat down beside him and lit a cigarette.

He said, "That was a good shot from the Carnation."

"Carnation?"

He smiled. "That's my name for the bunker. I have names for them all, just for my own private reference."

"But why carnation?"

"Ha, monsieur, why indeed? You're a journalist. Always on the look-out for stories, eh? Well, I can tell you a story about this bunker."

And he did. On the morning of every 13th of June for the last four years the greenkeeper had come along to rake the bunker sand and had found three carnations lying in the bunker. Regularly year after year.

Now, to a man in the Department of Patterns this was an intriguing piece of information.

"What kind of carnations?"

"Just carnations. But not red or white. A kind of mixed-up color. In fact, last year I took them home for my wife, and my daughter—she's at the Bordeaux School of Art—painted one of them as an exercise."

"Have you told anyone about this?"

"No, monsieur. Just my family. You'd like to see the painting? My daughter's work is very good. Maybe your magazine would like to buy it? You could write a story about it, maybe?"

He brought it along the next day and I did buy it. It was very well done, and the carnation was a curious combination of mauve and pink. In the evenings, when my mind was not on other things, I thought a lot about these carnations.

Every year, on the same date, someone strewed them into the bunker. Romantic? And obviously a woman, I was sure. But why? Was it in this bunker that she had met her lover—a lover now lost. I could picture her coming through the summer dawn each June 13th to make her carnation ceremony.

But when I got back to Paris and the Department of Patterns, I found the carnation thoughts not only persistently with me, but also a nagging picture of the bunker, deep and long and narrow like a grave. In the end I asked to see Papa Grand. Never neglect any pattern—that is his motto.

He was sitting at his desk by the little attic window overlooking the Seine.

"Ha, Marivaux. You had a good holiday?"

"Thank you, yes, *patron*."

"And now you have the look in your eyes of a man ready for work. What is it?"

I told him about the carnations and showed him the painting. "I would like the Gironde police to dig in the bunker. A body could be buried in it, three or four feet down, and it would never be disturbed. Fresh sand is put on top twice a year."

Papa Grand, looking at the carnation painting, said, "I had a brother who once grew carnations and I know something about them. This is a perpetual carnation and I think its name is Orchid Beauty. Not the kind normally grown for commercial purposes. Yes, of course, get to the Gironde people. And tell them to do it discreetly—and quickly."

Three days later Papa Grand sent for me. He was sitting at his desk as though he had never moved, and he was staring at an old pair of brown shoes.

Without looking up he said, "*Bon jour,* Marivaux. A beautiful June day. One should be out in the sunshine, not pondering over old shoes. Your little bunker idea produced results. The body of a man has been found buried in it. Been there for some years . . ."

He gave me the details. The body had been badly decomposed and was clad only in shirt, trousers, socks, and shoes. None of the clothes bore any identification marks and were practically rotted away. The face had been battered so that no features could be reconstructed. The police doctor's report said he was about 40, five feet ten tall, and had light brown hair. This description matched none of the records of local missing people.

"There are only the shoes, Marivaux." He held them up. "Handmade. All the maker's marks rotted away inside. But a distinctive brogue pattern. Put them in the stewpot. I fancy our shoe expert will say they are English."

The stewpot was where young men training in the Department spent their first months checking and sifting all sorts of data, and subjecting articles of interest to expert examination. Within days we had an answer about the shoes. Our shoe expert had had little trouble with them. The answer came in a confidential report from Scotland Yard as a result of our expert's request to them to take the shoes to Peel's in London. And the answer

made me sit up with a jerk and apply at once to see Papa Grand.

"Ha, Marivaux," he said, "I can see from the light in your eyes that something has turned up."

"Patron . . . Peel's have identified the brogues as a pair supplied to Captain Pierre Broussac six years ago. Five feet ten inches, light brown hair. That fits his description. Also he was a well-known amateur golfer."

Papa Grand said nothing for a moment. He got up and looked out of the window; then, not looking at me, he said, "Peel's can have made no mistake?"

"No, *patron*. Broussac was an old customer. These were to his special design and never copied for anyone else."

"So, he was particular about his shoes. Always the best. But what is he doing murdered in a bunker when the world thinks he is in Russia? Marivaux, leave this with me for a while. I must speak to the Ministry of the Armed Forces."

I didn't hear anything from Papa Grand for two days. But I thought about *Capitaine de Corvette* Pierre Broussac a great deal. Five years previously there had been a great scandal over him. He had worked on the security side of Naval Intelligence at a research station near Toulon where highly secret work was being done on new submarine detection devices. Then one day he had walked off with a file of the latest plans and specifications of three new instruments. He had been traced to Switzerland and finally Hungary, and reports had come through that he had gone over to the Russians. The Russians had never denied this.

Two days later Papa Grand came into my room—an exceptional event—and said, "Marivaux, it has been decided with the *Contre-Amiral* in charge of Naval Intelligence that you continue to work on this Broussac case. Ever since Broussac disappeared they have felt that there was still a leak in their department. They don't intend to announce the discovery of Broussac's body and they want us to handle it —only the *Contre-Amiral* knows what has happened. It's all yours. But you must be discreet, anonymous, a shadow . . . we don't want anyone to know what's going on. Keep in touch with me personally each day. Even the Gironde police are not to know he was Broussac."

So I packed my clubs, motored down, and registered in my old hotel. Unhappily, my charming friend had gone off to Switzerland, so I was going to miss my evening company. But this trip was strictly work, so maybe it was just as well that I had no distractions.

The next morning I had a look at the Carnation bunker. It was quite close to a long stretch of pine woods and the whole fairway was in a natural, dune-crested bowl. It was isolated and a man could have

been buried there at night without much fear of interruption. The main road was just beyond the pine woods.

I played there for three days, picking any partner who wanted a game, and playing twice with the secretary of the golf club. He was a Monsieur Gamelard, about 40, short, strongly made, and almost completely bald. He was annoyed about the discovery of the body since it had been bad publicity for the club, and his language when he spoke about the affair was vivid and strong. A body in one of his bunkers! It was sacrilege!

What he would have said if he had known that for two nights running I had let myself into his office with a skeleton key, I didn't care to think about. In the office were the past records of visitors to the club and the payment of green fees. I found Broussac's name there. Apparently each year, either in May or June, he had played for a week at the club. And he had always played with another naval officer—*Capitaine de Vaisseau* André Bonnet.

I let Papa Grand know this and he informed me that Captain Bonnet had been at Toulon but was now stationed in Paris. He, too, was a Naval Intelligence officer and had been working with Broussac at the time of his disappearance. Papa Grand said he would have a full investigation made of Bonnet.

In addition, I told Papa Grand that as it was only a few days now to June 13th, I proposed to keep watch in the bunker during the night of the 12th/13th June.

While I was waiting for the night of my vigil, I had a message from Papa Grand.

> Captain Bonnet frequently wears a carnation boutonniere. Lives in Paris flat, no garden or greenhouse, but flowers believed sent to him once a week from Bordeaux district. Spends week-ends away from Paris. Is being watched.

It wasn't much. A lot of men wear a carnation in their buttonholes. Besides, I was more interested in the woman—I was sure it must be a woman—who strewed carnations in the bunker. The power of love, lost or unrequited, is a tremendous thing.

At sunset on the 12th of June I hid myself in the pine trees above the bunker, with the main road about 300 yards away behind me. It was a warm night and quite light with stars, though after midnight a slight ground mist began to curl up.

It must have been about an hour before dawn when I heard the sound of a car on the road. It stopped and then there was silence as the engine was switched off. A few moments later came the cracking and shuffle of pine needles and bracken under the trees. Fifty yards away a shape moved through the waist-high mist.

It was a woman. My mysterious, unknown mourner . . .

She was wearing a white raincoat and had a colored scarf over her head. I watched as she went down across the turf to the bunker. I saw her hesitate for a moment and look round. Then I saw her hand go up in a graceful gesture and I knew she was throwing carnations on to the sand.

When this was done, she crossed herself and then knelt slowly on the wet turf. I didn't wait for any more. I turned and went quickly back through the pines to the road and found the car. There was no one in it.

It was a big, black, old-fashioned touring Mercedes with what looked to me like a special body. The hood was down and there was a tonneau cover over the back seats. I unfastened the cover and wriggled in under. I then clipped the cover tight and curled up.

Within a few minutes the woman was back. As she got into the car I caught a drift of her scent—how evocative, romantic, and wonderful is a woman's scent! What creatures of mystery and delight they are . . .

The car started and we were heading north along the road to Arcachon and Bordeaux. We drove for an hour and we drove fast.

At the end of the drive I heard gravel crunching under the wheels. Then the car stopped, and the woman got out. A door slammed. There was silence except for the morning chorus of the birds outside. I gave her a few moments, then crawled cautiously out. I found myself in a small garage. The large entrance doors were open and there was a small side door in the wall which led, I guessed, into the house.

I went to the open doors and looked out. A long gravel sweep curved away to tall iron gates. There was a stretch of lawn, studded with trees, running down to a small river. To my right I saw the façade of a small chateau-like villa with blue slate turrets that gleamed in the morning sun. The doorway was pillared and flanked by two wrought-iron lanterns. There wasn't another house in sight. Beyond the house and farther down the river was a long flat stretch of meadow.

For confidence I patted my pocket where I had my gun, then went to the side door and into the house. I had no difficulty finding her. I just followed the smell of coffee and came eventually across a large salon to a conservatory which had been built onto the side of the house facing the water meadow.

She was sitting by a small table which held a breakfast tray and a coffee percolator plugged into a wall socket. One side of the conservatory was lined with open shelves along which ran rows and rows of perpetual carnations in pots, the long growths supported with bamboo canes and wire rings.

She was a handsome woman, no more than 30, blonde and well

built; but there was a suggestion of haggardness in her face and her eyes were a bright, almost staring blue. I had the impression of a woman who was only half in this world. Knowing nothing about her, I nevertheless felt an enormous sympathy for her. Without doubt she had loved the man buried in the bunker.

She showed no surprise at my presence, and merely said, "Monsieur?"

I said frankly, "I am from the police. Early this morning you placed carnations in a bunker on the Les Landes golf course. You have done this for some years, always on the same date. A little while ago the body of Captain Pierre Broussac was found in the bunker."

"Pierre! Oh, no, I can't believe it!"

"Yes, madame. I see you did not know. Perhaps you would care to explain?"

For a moment her eyes closed and she gave a half sigh, almost of relief. Then calmly she motioned me to sit down. She switched off the percolator and poured coffee into two cups. Seeing my eyes on the second cup, she said, "It is all right. I was expecting a visitor, but he must have been delayed." She handed me the coffee.

"The world thinks that Captain Broussac deserted to Russia with important secrets. But he was murdered and buried in a bunker. Why?"

"Because it was necessary, monsieur. Yes, although he loved me and I loved him, it was necessary. You see, monsieur, I am Hungarian by birth. When I came to France my parents were still behind the Iron Curtain and I had to work here in the West . . . If I did not do what my masters wanted, my parents would suffer. My name is Lydja Hortovic. I was sent here to work on counter Naval Intelligence with Captain Bonnet.

"He is the real spy, monsieur. But I fell in love with his friend, poor, beloved Pierre. One day Bonnet comes to me and tells me that he is certain that Pierre has discovered about him and about us . . ." She turned away from me, her hands covering her eyes. "I had no choice, monsieur. Pierre had to die. If he did not, then my parents would have been destroyed . . . Oh, so many times since I have wished that I had found the courage to risk everything!

"I drove down to Les Landes to meet Pierre one evening after his golf and we parked the car in the pines where we had so often made love. And then Bonnet murdered him and that night buried him in the bunker. From that moment, although I must still work with Bonnet and he comes here most weekends, I have hated him. Through Bonnet it was easy to get our organization to put out a false trail to make it seem as though Pierre had gone to Russia. But once a year I

put the flowers that Pierre loved so much on his grave . . ."

Her eyes were on me, clouded with fatigue. "That is all, monsieur. I do not care what happens to me now. My parents have died—and poor Pierre . . . and I am dead too. Deep inside, I am dead. Many times I have thought of ending it all . . ."

"Very dramatic," said a voice harshly from behind us. I turned round, my hand dropping to my pocket. But I got no further. Standing in the doorway, pistol in hand, was a tall dark man in a gray lounge suit whom I had no difficulty in recognizing from photographs I had seen in my Paris briefing as Captain Bonnet. He moved over to me, jabbed the pistol into my side, and slid his hand into my pocket, taking my gun. Then he stepped back, and with a grim curl of his lips he said to Lydja, "You shall have your wish soon, but not here. Why should it be quick?" His voice rose, icy and cutting now. "You stupid woman, you stupid romantic woman! So you had to go and put flowers on his grave. This stupid little act and now we must all move."

I said, "I don't know what you have in mind, Bonnet, but it won't work. My Department has been watching you for days. The moment you left Paris they were following you."

He shook his head. "I don't know your name, monsieur, but there are things you should know. Long ago I, like you, worked for Papa Grand. I know his methods. Some days ago I read that an unknown body had been found in one of the Les Landes bunkers. For the last week I have known that I have been watched. When I left Paris I knew I might be followed and I was—by Papa Grand himself. He's in my car outside. I stopped in Bordeaux for early coffee. He parked across the square and I went over to him and invited him to join me for the coffee. Papa Grand can never resist the outrageous. He joined me and I doped his coffee. He went out very quickly and the kindly café proprietor helped me to carry him to my car. I would look after the old gentleman, I said. And so I will —I have a natural affection for him. He will be out for hours and will be left here. But we three, monsieur, will be on our way. Lydja to get what she so longs for, you, well . . . there are new developments in your Department which would be of interest to my people, no matter how stubborn you may be at first to talk . . . Ha, listen. That will be Gamelard."

Distantly and growing louder I heard the beat of a plane's engine.

"Gamelard!" I exclaimed.

Bonnet smiled. "Yes, Gamelard, monsieur. You did not know he was one of us? And a very good pilot, too. Once the body was discovered, we knew that we had little time left."

Through the conservatory windows I saw the shadow of a plane sweep across the long flat meadow. I knew what would happen. A light plane, only a few hours to Switzerland, a private field for refueling, then away again eastward!

The plane came down, bumping for a moment at the far end of the field, then running up toward the house and finally turning away just out of sight of the conservatory.

Bonnet stood aside, waving his pistol at us.

"You first, Lydja, and then you, monsieur. And do not be rash. One false move and I shall not hesitate."

Lydja moved into the salon and I followed her. We went across it and into the hall. The front door stood open, the sunlight bright on the gravel and lawns outside. I followed Lydja down the steps and could hear Bonnet close behind me.

We went round the house and through a small wooden gate into the meadow. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a large car parked by the garage and thought of poor Papa Grand lying drugged on the back seat . . .

The plane's engine was ticking over gently, the propeller sending great waves of air across the meadow grasses. A man in a leather flying jacket and helmet stood alongside the plane, one hand resting on the ledge of the open fuselage door. He had his back to us and was reaching up to fasten the door.

"Gamelard," shouted Bonnet. The man half turned and waved. Then he swung round and began to come across the grass toward us. As he came, I had a swift impression of something being wrong. Then I realized that it wasn't Gamelard. I knew this man well, the way he walked and looked.

"Stop!" The word came curtly from behind us. Lydja and I stopped.

There was no doubt now. The man coming toward us was Papa Grand. He came unconcernedly over the grass with his big, farmer-walking gait, and he was smiling gently at us.

"Patron," I shouted, "be careful, he's armed!"

Papa Grand gave an easy shrug and came on. I half turned and saw Bonnet with his pistol raised.

"Stay where you are, Papa Grand," said Bonnet. There were only five yards between us now, and this time Papa Grand halted.

He took off his helmet and ran one hand over his broad forehead. Bonnet moved to one side and covered all three of us.

"Where is Gamelard?" he said.

"My dear Bonnet," said Papa Grand. "He is in the plane. I met him as he stepped out and welcomed him with one of your car spanners. But he will recover."

"I can fly the plane," said Bonnet. "But you know what it forces me to do with the three of us."

Papa Grand shook his head, "No,

Bonnet, you are wrong. It was many years ago that you did your term in the Department of Patterns. We have improved our methods since then. Also, if I remember, when you passed out your grading wasn't a top one. *Assez bien,* only. You had little moments of carelessness. Like not thinking about Broussac's shoes. You see, *mon cher* Bonnet, one must always check and double-check. Oh, I knew you would know we would soon be after you. Hence these arrangements to leave . . ." His hand waved toward the plane. "But what you didn't know was that I had a man in your flat while you were at work, and had him go through your clothes even while you were sleeping one night in your flat. Through everything you owned, Bonnet. That's why I drank your drugged coffee happily. Because the drug had been changed to a harmless powder. But I play-acted for you. And also that—" He nodded toward Bonnet's pistol. "Try it. You loaded it this morning from the ammunition box in your dressing-table drawer where the gun lay empty alongside it. Try it, Bonnet—they are not even blanks which might burn at a few yards. They're nothing."

As he spoke, Papa Grand pulled a gun from his own pocket.

I saw Bonnet's hand move, heard the snap of the pistol mechanism—but there was no report.

Papa Grand smiled at me, "Take a lesson, Marivaux. Check everything when you gamble for high stakes. And now, let us go back to the house. The police should be here in a few moments." He turned to Lydja, "My apologies, but I took the liberty of telephoning them from your bedroom while I was waiting for Gamelard to arrive."

DEPARTMENT OF FAMOUS LITERARY FIGURES

. . . *discovery!*

Ring Lardner "stopped finding any fun in his work ten years before he died." This was revealed by his close friend, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Perhaps one of the reasons Ring Lardner was a frustrated, melancholy man was because the world, including most of its literary critics, insisted on considering him a sports writer and humorist, interested only in laughs. Today we know differently. William Bolitho, that perceptive man, regarded Ring Lardner as "the greatest and sincerest pessimist America has produced." Today we know Ring Lardner for the superb satirist he was—a "sympathetic hater of the human fourflusher," be he (or she) a baseball player or a politician, a Broadway producer or a smalltown prodigal son, a Manhattan call girl or a Long Island socialite . . .

And now we bring you a Ring Lardner story written about five years before he died. So far as we have been able to check, this story has not been included in any of Ring Lardner's collections of short stories. To most readers, if not to all, "Stop Me—If You've Heard This One" will be a genuine Lardner "discovery." (We wonder if Babette Rosmond and Henry Morgan, editors of SHUT UP, HE EXPLAINED: *A Ring Lardner Selection, published by Scribner's in 1962, knew of the existence of "Stop Me—If You've Heard This One.") In any case, this "unknown" sample ("just a kind of mystery") of Ring Lardner's "great and sincere pessimism" should not be missed . . .*

STOP ME—IF YOU'VE HEARD THIS ONE

by RING LARDNER

ON A CERTAIN DAY IN THE YEAR 1927, Jerry Blades and Luke Garner, young playwrights, entered the Lambs' Club at the luncheon hour and were beckoned to a corner table by an actor friend, Charley Speed. Charley had a guest, recognized at once by the newcomers as Henry Wild Osborne, famous globe-trotter, raconteur, and banquet-hall fixture.

"Sit down, boys," said Charley

after he had introduced them to the celebrity. "I'm due at a house committee meeting and you can keep Harry entertained."

But "Harry" proved perfectly capable of providing his own entertainment and theirs, and he opened up with a barrage of Pats and Mikes, Ikeys and Jakeys, and MacPhersons and MacDonalds that were not only comparatively new but also quite funny—at least, so Blades and Garner judged from the whole-hearted laughter of the narrator himself.

When he had displayed his mastery of all the different dialects of both hemispheres, he related a few personal adventures, in some of which other big men had played parts and which, to his small audience, were much more interesting than the chronicles concerning fictional Mikes, Sandys, and Abes. He told them of Lindbergh, who had accepted an invitation to dine with him in his apartment and had come wearing a hat that did not fit, explaining he had borrowed it at his hotel, not having had a hat of his own since he was a child.

"He's a man of one idea. He will talk about aviation and nothing else. He dislikes crowds and has had difficulty maintaining a show of good nature in the face of unwelcome attention. He has managed to do so, however, excepting when addressed or referred to as 'Lucky Lindy,' a nickname he just can't stand.

"He was kind enough to ask me to fly with him on Long Island and naturally I jumped at the chance. We took a taxi out to the field and every traffic cop on the way stopped us so they could shake hands with him and pat him on the back. I thought we'd never get there, and when we did get there, that we wouldn't be able to leave the ground without killing two or three hundred people.

"He said it was like that every time he attempted to go up or land—hundreds of wild-eyed fans crowding around him in spite of the danger. But we did finally get started and it was wonderful. I felt as safe as if I'd been riding in a chair at Atlantic City."

He told them of Fred Stone—of an occasion when he and Fred had dined together at old Rector's. At the next table were two famous Princeton football players, each over six feet tall and weighing two hundred and twenty pounds. The sons of Old Nassau had been drinking something contentious and tried to pick a quarrel with him and Stone, though they had no idea who Stone and Osborne were and certainly could have had no reason to "fuss" at either of them.

Fred did not want to make a scene and ignored the athletes' slurring remarks, but when he and Osborne got up to leave and the Princeton boys followed and jostled them, the comedian lost his temper, grasped a collegiate throat

in each hand, lifted the pair up bodily, and knocked their heads together till they were unconscious, and then tossed them into the checkroom.

He told them of having been in the Metropole at supper with Herman Rosenthal the night the gambler was called away from the table and shot to death by four gangsters; of having warned Jim Jeffries not to drink the tea that "poisoned" him just prior to the fight with Jack Johnson; of having tipped off Kid Gleason in 1919 that some of his ballplayers were throwing him down; of having accompanied General Pershing to Marshal Foch's headquarters when the American commander offered his armies to the Frenchman to do with as he pleased; of having escaped death by eight inches when the Germans dropped their first bombs on Paris; of having taught Lloyd Waner how to avoid always hitting to left field; of having taken Irving Berlin out of "Mike's" place and set him to writing songs; of having advised Flo Ziegfeld to dress his chorus in skirts instead of tights; of having suggested and helped organize the Actors' Equity; and of having informed the Indiana police where to find Gerald Chapman.

He had been everywhere and seen everything, and Blades and Garner envied him his wealth of experience.

He hoped he hadn't bored them.

"Not at all!" said Blades.

"It's a treat to listen to you," said Garner.

"You ought to write a book of memoirs," said Blades.

"I've been urged to many times," said Osborne, "but I'm never in one place long enough to get at it. I've got chronic wanderlust."

"So have I," said Garner, "but it doesn't do me any good."

"Poor Luke!" said Blades. "He'd like to live on trains, but he's only been out of the state once."

"Not counting two or three trips to Newark," said Garner.

"Travel is a great thing!" observed Osborne. "It has its drawbacks and discomforts, but one's experiences and adventures are worth a lot more than they cost."

"Luke had a queer little experience the only time he went anywhere," said Blades. "Tell Mr. Osborne about it, Luke."

"Oh, it's nothing much. Just a kind of mystery I was mixed up in on the way out to Chicago."

"Let's hear it," said Osborne.

"Well," said young Garner, "I'll try to make it brief. About a year ago I had an idea for a play. I wrote one act and read it to George M. Cohan. He liked it and told me to finish it and bring it to him. When I had finished it, I learned he was in Chicago. I couldn't wait for him to get back, so I decided to go out there and see him, though I had to borrow money for the trip. I was impatient and took the Twentieth Century.

"In the section across from me there was one of the most beautiful women I ever saw—a young woman about twenty-five, dark, well dressed, full of class, *nice*-looking. She had a book, one of J. S. Fletcher's detective stories, but I noticed she didn't turn more than three pages between New York and Albany. Most of the time she just stared at the river.

"She was going to Chicago, too, and I'll confess that I wished we would become acquainted long before we got there. I wished it, but didn't believe it, because she was evidently not the kind you could meet unconventionally.

"I went in the diner about seven and was given the only vacant chair at a table for four. My table companions were an elderly couple and a man a little older than I, a man of striking appearance, handsome, and dark enough to suggest Spanish or Italian ancestry.

"The elderly couple finished their meal and left. The 'Spaniard' was just beginning to eat when the girl from my car came in and took one of the seats just vacated.

"Her glance and the 'Spaniard's' met. There was mutual recognition and an emotion close to panic on both sides. The man got up hurriedly, put a five-dollar bill on the table, and went out of the diner, toward the front end of the train. The girl grasped the table as if she must have something to hang on to. She was utterly white and I thought she was going to faint. She didn't, but her hands shook violently as she wrote her order.

"I pretended I had not observed the little scene and did my best not to look in her direction. I got through as quickly as I could and relieved her of the embarrassment of my presence. As I was paying my check, the waiter asked me if I knew whether the other man was coming back. Before I could reply, the girl said, 'No,' then bit her lip as if she were mad at herself for speaking.

"She returned to her section after a long time, over an hour. She sat staring out into the darkness for a half hour more. Then she got up and stepped across the aisle to me and said, 'I must ask you to do me a favor. You will think it's queer, but I can't help it. You saw the man leave the table when I sat down. I want you to find him and give him this note. I would ask the porter, but I am afraid he might give it to the wrong person. The man is probably in the club car. Just hand him the note. Then come back and tell me. Will you do it?'

"I found him in the club car, delivered the note she had intrusted to me, and returned and reported.

"She said, 'I am very, very grateful.'

"And then I went forward to the club car again and sat down to be out of the way when he came to her, as I felt sure he would.

"He was at the desk writing, but

soon he rose and left. I was in quite a fever of curiosity and it strained my will power to stay where I was and not follow him and witness 'Act Two.' I tried to read and couldn't. When I finally turned in, close to midnight, the girl's berth was dark and the curtains drawn.

"I got up at Elkhart. The curtains were open across the aisle, but there was no sign of the girl. There was still no sign of her as we pulled into Englewood. I called the porter and asked whether he had seen her since the night before. He said why, yes, he had seen her around five o'clock, when he had helped her off the train at Toledo. 'Toledo!' I exclaimed. 'I thought she was going through.' The porter said he had thought so, too, but she must have changed her mind. I inquired if he had seen her talking with a handsome dark man. He said no; that the only real dark man he had seen on that car was himself, and he wasn't handsome.

"I stood on the platform in the La Salle Street Station till all the passengers were off. The girl was not among them; I'm sure of that. But the 'Spaniard' was, and escorting him were two men who were obviously detectives.

"In the two days I was there, I read every story in every paper, trying to find a solution to 'my mystery,' but without success. And that's all there is to it, except that Mr. Cohan turned down my play."

"Very interesting!" Mr. Osborne remarked. "I believe if I had been you, I'd have followed the man and his escort, just to satisfy my curiosity."

"I'd have done that," said Garner, "if I hadn't thought there was still a chance that the girl would appear."

Charley Speed was back from the committee meeting. He and his guest bade the young playwrights goodbye and went out. Blades and Garner discussed the man they had just met.

"He tells dialect stories well," said Blades.

"If that's possible," said Garner. "To me, his own experiences are a lot more interesting."

"But I think," said Blades slowly, "I think somebody else told me that same stuff about Lindbergh and—"

"Yes," interrupted Garner, "and I'm under the impression that the one about Fred Stone isn't new to me. In fact, I'm pretty sure I heard it from Rex Beach and that Rex was with Stone when it happened."

Two years later Blades and Garner, now credited with a couple of Broadway hits, were guests at a "small" dinner party given by Wallace Gore, the publisher. Their host presented them to Mr. Henry Wild Osborne, who acknowledged the introduction as if it were a novelty.

Osborne sat between two adoring women who managed to keep him to themselves through the soup.

But he was everybody's property and soon was regaling the whole table with up-to-the-minute episodes in the careers of Pat, Abe, and MacPherson. He ran out of them at last and his host said, "Harry, I wonder if you'd mind telling these people about your Chicago trip."

"What Chicago trip?"

"About the girl and the foreigner."

"Oh, that!" said Osborne. "Well, if you think they'd be interested."

"Of course they would!"

"Please, Mr. Osborne!"

"All right, then," said Osborne, "but I trust you folks not to spread it around. The Chicago police made a secret of the real facts and I promised them I wouldn't divulge it to any of my friends of the Fourth Estate."

He took a swallow of wine and began: "It was a month ago I had a wire from Charlie Dawes, asking me to come out there and advise him in a little matter—well, we won't go into that. I boarded the Broadway Limited and was settling down to a little session with de Maupassant when I noticed a beautiful girl, an authentic, perfect blonde, in the section across from me.

"I am past the age for train flirtations but this girl held my attention by the expression on her face, a look of ineffable sadness, of tragic longing for—I knew not what.

"I was weaving in my mind a blighted romance with her as its sorrowing heroine when Andy Mellon, walking through the car, saw me and stopped for a chat. He was with me till dinner-time, when he invited me to dine in his drawing-room, but I declined, saying I had eaten a late luncheon and would do without another meal. In reality, I was in no mood for talk, and shortly after he had gone, I made my way to the diner, trusting he would not uncover my mendacity.

"I told the steward I had no objections to sitting with others provided they were strangers, so he placed me at a table for four. A gray-haired, florid-faced old man and his comfortable fat wife were two of my companions. The third was a splendid, healthy specimen of young manhood, Scandinavian young manhood, a yellow-haired, sturdy son of Vikings.

"The old couple finished their simple repast and left. I was ordering and the handsome young giant was beginning to eat when the beautiful blonde girl I had observed in the sleeper came in and took one of the seats just vacated.

"The girl's eyes and the man's eyes met, and not for the first time, I could see. For their glance was charged with electricity—a bolt of lightning that struck something akin to terror in each. An instant afterwards, the young man was up from the table, laying a ten-dollar note beside his plate, and then he was gone, fleeing from the mysteri-

ous horror of this chance encounter with a woman whom God had never intended to inspire young manhood with anything but burning love.

"And the girl, the young woman —I started from my chair, ready to catch her if she swooned. For it seemed she must swoon, so pale she was. But with a marvelous show of courage she forced herself into a state of pseudo-calmness.

"I bolted my meal in a manner that would have caused my doctor intense mental anguish. I asked the waiter for my check and he, observing the young man's money lying there, inquired if I knew whether he was coming back. Before I could speak, the girl uttered a sharp, 'No', then bit her lip as if in rage that she had said it.

"We were between Harrisburg and Altoona when she appeared again in the sleeper. She stopped beside me and put an unsealed, unaddressed envelope in my hand.

" 'It kills me to do this,' she said in a voice barely audible. 'I am not accustomed to asking favors from a stranger, but it is necessary and you look kind. I am sure you noticed the man, the young man, who was with us in the dining car, who got up and left when I sat down. I think you will find him in the club car and I want you to give him this. I cannot trust it to the porter. Don't wait for a reply. Just give it to him, and then come back here and tell me. Will you?'

"I answered, of course I would, and I begged her to inform me if there was something more I could do. 'No,' she whispered, 'nothing.'

"The young man was easily found. He was in the club car as she had guessed, staring straight ahead of him.

"Without a word I handed him the envelope, and returned to her and reported. She expressed gratitude with a smile that was more heart-rending than tears.

"My instinct, or sense of decency, ordered me not to pry. I took my book to the club car and tried vainly to read, for my brain was consumed with curiosity and anxiety as to what was going on between those two torn souls.

"When at length I turned in, at Pittsburgh, the berth opposite mine was dark and its curtains drawn.

"I rose in the morning as we were rushing through the Indiana town of Plymouth. The curtains across the aisle were open now, but there was no sign of the girl. Nor had she appeared as we slowed up for Englewood. My inquiry of the porter—had he seen her since the preceding night—? was answered in the affirmative. 'Yes, suh. She done leave us three hours ago, at Fort Wayne.'

"I remarked I had thought she was bound for Chicago. 'She sho' was Chicago bound,' said George, 'but young gals, dey got a "unailable" right to change deir min'.' I then asked if he had seen her con-

versing with a big, blond, handsome young man. 'No, suh. De only man she co'versed to was maself, and ma bes' frien's don't call me handsome or blond, neithuh."

"I waited on the platform in the Union Station and watched all the passengers as they left the train. The girl was not among them, but the man was, and as he walked out to the taxi stand, I followed him unobtrusively, saw him enter a cab, and heard the starter say, 'Stevens House.' I went to the Sherman and changed, and awaited word from my friend, General Dawes.

"But I could not get my mind off the queer incidents of the trip and you can imagine the shock it gave me to read, in an afternoon paper, the story of a well-dressed, unidentified young woman who had committed suicide by throwing herself in front of the second section of the Broadway Limited at Fort Wayne.

"My duty was clear. I hurried to police headquarters, stated my name, and was received by the Chief. I told him I was sure he could earn the thanks of the Fort Wayne authorities and officials of the railroad by sending one of his men with me to the hotel where I believed my 'friend' of the train was stopping; that if I could find him, I was sure we would be able to learn the unfortunate girl's identity and perhaps the reason for her ghastly deed.

"The chief delegated Captain Byrne to accompany me. As we drove up to the door of the hotel we saw policemen dispersing a crowd and other policemen lifting from the sidewalk the body of a man, the young Viking, with a bullet wound in his head, a revolver lying near where he had lain, and a newspaper clasped in his left hand.

"There were letters in his pocket, merely business letters, addressed to John Janssen, and the initials on his baggage were J. J. He was the son of one of the richest men in Chicago, and he, the young man now dead, had a wife and children in Lake Forest.

"I know who the girl was, too; the police found her name and her picture in young Janssen's possession. But they didn't tell his family and no one besides a few policemen and myself is aware that there was a girl in the case. The published reason for his act was temporary insanity induced by illness. And if he was sick, I have been dead for twenty years."

Osborne's narrative was over. Dinner was over, too, and Garner and Blades lingered behind the others in the march toward the card room.

"What do you suppose he's got against brunettes?" said Blades.

"And why," said Garner, "do you suppose he won't use the New York Central Lines?"

for Christmas . . .

a brand-new* MR. CAMPION *story

. . . with a delightful (and devastating) picture of an English residential hotel named "The CCraven" (with two Cs)—the sort of place which is very popular with the old(er) members of the landed gentry—in a phrase, "a select hotel-cum-Old-Ducks' Home for Mother's Friends" . . . and we wonder if you'll ever really forget the (snap)dragon, Lady Larradine . . . Read and enjoy!

MURDER UNDER THE MISTLETOE

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

MURDER UNDER THE MISTLETOE—and the man who must have done it couldn't have done it. That's my Christmas and I don't feel merry thank you very much all the same." Superintendent Stanislaus Oates favored his old friend Mr. Albert Campion with a pained smile and sat down in the chair indicated.

It was the afternoon of Christmas Day and Mr. Campion, only a trifle more owlish than usual behind his horn rims, had been fetched down from the children's party which he was attending at his brother-in-law's house in Knightsbridge to meet the Superintendent, who had moved heaven and earth to find him.

"What do you want?" Mr. Campion inquired facetiously. "A little armchair miracle?"

"I don't care if you do it swinging from a trapeze. I just want a reasonable explanation." Oates was rattled. His dyspeptic face with the perpetually sad expression was slightly flushed and not with festivity. He plunged into his story.

"About eleven last night a crook called Sampson was found shot dead in the back of a car in a garage under a small drinking club in Alcatraz Mews—the club is named The Humdinger. A large bunch of mistletoe which had been lying on the front seat ready to be driven home had been placed on top of the body partially hiding it—which was why it hadn't been found before. The gun, fitted with a silencer, but wiped of prints, was found under the front seat. The dead man was recognized at once by the owner of the car who is also the owner of the club. He was the owner's current boy friend. She is quite a well-known West End character called 'Girlski.' What did you say?"

"I said 'Oo-er'," murmured Mr. Campion. "One of the Eumenides, no doubt?"

"No." Oates spoke innocently. "She's not a Greek. Don't worry about her. Just keep your mind on the facts. She knows, as we do, that the only person who wanted to kill Sampson is a nasty little snake called Kroll. He has been out of circulation for the best of reasons. Sampson turned Queen's evidence against him in a matter concerning a conspiracy to rob Her Majesty's mails and when he was released last Tuesday Kroll came out breathing retribution."

"Not the Christmas spirit," said Mr. Campion inanely.

"That is exactly what *we* thought," Oates agreed. "So about five o'clock yesterday afternoon two of our chaps, hearing that Kroll was at The Humdinger, where he might have been expected to make trouble, dropped along there and brought him in for questioning and he's been in custody ever since.

"Well, now. We have at least a dozen reasonably sober witnesses to prove that Kroll did not meet Sampson at the Club. Sampson had been there earlier in the afternoon but he left about a quarter to four saying he'd got to do some Christmas shopping but promising to return. Fifteen minutes or so later Kroll came in and stayed there in full view of Girlski and the customers until our men turned up and collected him. *Now* what do you say?"

"Too easy!" Mr. Campion was suspicious. "Kroll killed Sampson just before he came in himself. The two met in the dusk outside the club. Kroll forced Sampson into the garage and possibly into the car and shot him. With the way the traffic has been lately, he'd hardly have attracted attention had he used a mortar, let alone a gun with a silencer. He wiped the weapon, chucked it in the car, threw the mistletoe over the corpse, and went up to Girlski to renew old acquaintance and establish an alibi. Your chaps, arriving when they did, must have appeared welcome."

Oates nodded. "We thought that. *That is what happened.* That is why this morning's development has set me gibbering. We now have two unimpeachable witnesses who swear that the dead man was in Chipperwood West at six last evening delivering some Christmas purchases he had made on behalf of a neighbor. That is *a whole hour* after Kroll was pulled in.

"The assumption is that Sampson returned to Alcatraz Mews sometime later in the evening and was killed by someone else—which we know is not true. Unfortunately the Chipperwood West witnesses are not the kind of people we are going to shake. One of them is a friend of yours. She asked our Inspector if he knew you because you were 'so good at crime and all that nonsense'."

"Good Heavens!" Mr. Campion

spoke piously as the explanation of the Superintendent's unlikely visitation was made plain to him. "I don't think I know Chipperwood West."

"It's a suburb which is becoming fashionable. Have you ever heard of Lady Larradine?"

"Old Lady 'ell?" Mr. Campion let the joke of his salad days escape without its being noticed by either of them. "I don't believe it. She must be dead by this time!"

"There's a type of woman who never dies before you do," said Oates with apparent sincerity. "She's quite a dragon, I understand from our Inspector. However, she isn't the actual witness. There are two of them. Brigadier Brose is one. Ever heard of *him?*"

"I don't think I have."

"My information is that you'd remember him if you'd met him. Well, we'll find out. I'm taking you with me, Campion. I hope you don't mind?"

"My sister will hate it. I'm due to be Santa Claus in about an hour."

"I can't help that." Oates was adamant. "If a bunch of silly crooks want to get spiteful at the festive season, someone must do the homework. Come and play Santa Claus with me. It's your last chance. I'm retiring in the summer."

Oates continued in the same vein as he and Mr. Campion sat in the back of a police car threading their way through the deserted Christmas streets where the lamps were growing bright in the dusk.

"I've had bad luck lately," the Superintendent said seriously. "Too much. It won't help my memoirs if I go out in a blaze of no-enthusiasm."

"You're thinking of the Phaeton Robbery," Mr. Campion suggested. "What are you calling the memoirs? *Man-Eaters of the Yard?"*

Oates's mild old eyes brightened, but not greatly.

"Something of the kind," he admitted. "But no one could be blamed for not solving that blessed Phaeton business. Everyone concerned was bonkers. A silly old musical star, for thirty years the widow of an eccentric Duke, steps out into her London garden one autumn morning leaving the street door wide open and all her most valuable jewelry collected from strong-rooms all over the country lying in a brown paper parcel on her bureau in the first room off the hall. Her excuse was that she was just going to take it to the Bond Street auctioneers and was carrying it herself for safety! The thief was equally mental to lift it."

"It wasn't saleable?"

"Saleable! It couldn't even be broken up. The stuff is just about as well-known as the Crown Jewels. Great big enamels which the old Duke had collected at great expense. No fence would stay in the same room with them, yet, of course, they are worth the Earth as

every newspaper has told us at length ever since they were pinched!"

"He didn't get anything else either, did he?"

"He was a madman." Oates dismissed him with contempt. "All he gained was the old lady's housekeeping money for a couple of months which was in her handbag —about a hundred and fifty quid— and the other two items which were on the same shelf, a soapstone monkey and a plated paperknife. He simply wandered in, took the first things he happened to see and wandered out again. Any sneak thief, tramp, or casual snapper-upper could have done it and who gets blamed? *Me!*"

He looked so woebegone that Mr. Campion hastily changed the subject. "Where are we going?" he inquired. "To call on her ladyship? Do I understand that at the age of one hundred and forty-six or whatever it is she is cohabiting with a Brig? Which war?"

"I can't tell you." Oates was literal as usual. "It could be the South African. They're all in a nice residential hotel—the sort of place that is very popular with the older members of the landed gentry just now."

"When you say landed, you mean as in Fish?"

"Roughly, yes. Elderly people living on capital. About forty of them. This place used to be called *The Haven* and has now been taken over by two ex-society widows and renamed *The CCraven*—with two Cs. It's a select hotel—cum—Old—Ducks' Home for Mother's Friends. You know the sort of place?"

"I can envisage it. Don't say your murdered chum from The Humdinger lived there too?"

"No, he lived in a more modest place whose garden backs on the CCraven's grounds. The Brigadier and one of the other residents, a Mr. Charlie Taunton, who has become a bosom friend of his, were in the habit of talking to Sampson over the wall. Taunton is a lazy man who seldom goes out and has little money but he very much wanted to get some gifts for his fellow guests—something in the nature of little jokes from the chain stores, I understand; but he dreaded the exertion of shopping for them and Sampson appears to have offered to get him some little items wholesale and to deliver them by six o'clock on Christmas Eve—in time for him to package them up and hand them to Lady Larradine who was dressing the tree at seven."

"And you say Sampson actually did this?" Mr. Campion sounded bewildered.

"Both old gentlemen—the Brigadier and Taunton—swear to it. They insist they went down to the wall at six and Sampson handed the parcel over as arranged. My Inspector is an experienced man and he doesn't think we'll be able to shake either of them."

"That leaves Kroll with a complete alibi. How did these Chipperwood witnesses hear of Sampson's death?"

"Routine. The local police called at Sampson's home address this morning to report the death, only to discover the place closed. The landlady and her family are away for the holiday and Sampson himself was due to spend it with Girlski. The police stamped about a bit, making sure of all this, and in the course of their investigations they were seen and hailed by the two old boys in the adjoining garden. The two were shocked to hear that their kind acquaintance was dead and volunteered the information that he had been with them at six."

Mr. Campion looked blank. "Perhaps they don't keep the same hours as anybody else," he suggested. "Old people can be highly eccentric."

Oates shook his head. "We thought of that. My Inspector, who came down the moment the local police reported, insists that they are perfectly normal and quite positive. Moreover, they had the purchases. He saw the packages already on the tree. Lady Larradine pointed them out to him when she asked after you. She'll be delighted to see you, Campion."

"I can hardly wait!"

"You don't have to," said Oates grimly as they pulled up before a huge Edwardian villa. "It's all yours."

"My dear Boy! You haven't aged any more than I have!"

Lady Larradine's tremendous voice—one of her chief terrors, Mr. Campion recollected—echoed over the crowded first-floor room where she received them. There she stood in an outmoded but glittering evening gown looking, as always, exactly like a spray-flecked seal.

"I *knew* you'd come," she bellowed. "As soon as you got my oblique little S.O.S. How do you like our little hideout? Isn't it *fun!* Moira Spryg-Fysher and Janice Poole-Poole wanted something to do, so we all put our pennies in it and here we are!"

"Almost too marvelous," murmured Mr. Campion in all sincerity. "We really want a word with Brigadier Brose and Mr. Taunton."

"Of course you do and so you shall! We're all waiting for the Christmas tree. Everybody will be there for that in about ten minutes in the drawing room. My dear, when *we* came they were calling it the Residents' Lounge!"

Superintendent Oates remained grave. He was startled to discover that the dragon was not only fierce but also wily. The news that her apparently casual mention of Mr. Campion to the Inspector had been a ruse to get hold of him shocked the innocent Superintendent. He retaliated by insisting that he must see the witnesses at once.

Lady Larradine silenced him with a friendly roar. "My dear man, you

can't! They've gone for a walk. I always turn men out of the house after Christmas luncheon. They'll soon be back. The Brigadier won't miss his Tree! Ah. Here's Fiona. This is Janice Poole-Poole's daughter, Albert. Isn't she a pretty girl?"

Mr. Campion saw Miss Poole-Poole with relief, knowing of old that Oates was susceptible to the type. The newcomer was young and lovely and even her beehive hair and the fact that she appeared to have painted herself with two black eyes failed to spoil the exquisite smile she bestowed on the helpless officer.

"Fabulous to have you really here," she said and sounded as if she meant it. While he was still recovering, Lady Larradine led Oates to the window.

"You can't see it because it's pitch-dark," she said, "but out there, down in the garden, there's a wall and it was over it that the Brigadier and Mr. Taunton spoke to Mr. Sampson at six o'clock last night. No one liked the man Sampson—I think Mr. Taunton was almost afraid of him. Certainly he seems to have died very untidily!"

"But he *did* buy Mr. Taunton's Christmas gifts for him?"

The dragon lifted a webby eyelid. "You have already been told that. At six last night Mr. Taunton and the Brigadier went to meet him to get the box. I got them into their mufflers so I know! I had the packing paper ready, too, for Mr. Taunton to take up to his room . . . Rather a small one on the third floor."

She lowered her voice to reduce it to the volume of distant traffic. "Not many pennies, but a dear little man!"

"Did you *see* these presents, Ma'am?"

"Not before they were wrapped! That would have spoiled the surprise!"

"I shall have to see them." There was a mulish note in the Superintendent's voice which the lady was too experienced to ignore.

"I've thought how to do that without upsetting anybody," she said briskly. "The Brigadier and I will cut the presents from the Tree and Fiona will be handing them round. All Mr. Taunton's little gifts are in the very distinctive black and gold paper I bought from Millie's Boutique and so, Fiona, you must give every package in black and gold paper not to the person to whom it is addressed but to the Superintendent. Can you do that, dear?"

Miss Poole-Poole seemed to feel the task difficult but not impossible and the trusting smile she gave Oates cut short his objections like the sun melting frost.

"Splendid!" The dragon's roar was hearty. "Give me your arm, Superintendent. You shall take me down."

As the procession reached the hall, it ran into the Brigadier himself. He was a large, pink man, af-

fable enough, but of a martial type and he bristled at the Superintendent. "Extraordinary time to do your business—middle of Christmas Day!" he said after acknowledging the introductions.

Oates inquired if he had enjoyed his walk.

"Talk?" said the Brigadier. "I've not been talking. I've been asleep in the card room. Where's old Taunton?"

"He went for a walk, Athole dear," bellowed the dragon gaily.

"So he did. You sent him! Poor feller."

As the old soldier led the way to the open door of the drawing room, it occurred to both the Superintendent and Mr. Campion that the secret of Lady Larradine's undoubted attraction for the Brigadier lay in the fact that he could hear *her* if no one else. The discovery cast a new light altogether on the story of the encounter with Sampson in the garden.

Meanwhile, they had entered the drawing room and the party had begun. As Mr. Campion glanced at the company, ranged in a full circle round a magnificent tree loaded with gifts and sparkling like a waterfall, he saw face after familiar face. They were elder acquaintances of the dizzy 1930s whom he had mourned as gone forever, when he thought of them at all. Yet here they all were, not only alive but released by great age from many of the restraints of convention.

He noticed that every type of headgear from night-cap to tiara was being sported with fine individualistic enthusiasm. But Lady Larradine gave him little time to look about. She proceeded with her task immediately.

Each guest had been provided with a small invalid table beside his armchair, and Oates, reluctant but wax in Fiona's hands, was no exception. The Superintendent found himself seated between a mountain in flannel and a wraith in mauve mink, waiting his turn with the same beady-eyed avidity.

Christmas Tree procedure at the CCraven proved to be well organized. The dragon did little work herself. Armed with a swagger stick, she merely prodded parcel after parcel hanging amid the boughs while the task of detaching them was performed by the Brigadier who handed them to Fiona. Either to add to the excitement or perhaps to muffle any unfortunate comment on gifts received by the uninhibited company, jolly Christmas music was played throughout, and under cover of the noise Mr. Campion was able to tackle his hostess.

"Where is Taunton?" he whispered.

"Such a nice little man. Most presentable, but just a little teeny-weeny bit dishonest."

Lady Larradine ignored the question in his eyes and continued to put him in the picture at great

speed, while supervising the Tree at the same time. "Fifty-seven convictions, I believe, but only small ones. I only got it all out of him last week. Shattering! He'd been so *useful,* amusing the Brigadier. When he came, he looked like a lost soul with no luggage, but after no time at all he settled in perfectly."

She paused and stabbed at a ball of colored cellophane with her stick before returning to her startled guest.

"Albert, I am terribly afraid that it was poor Mr. Taunton who took that dreadful jewelry of Maisie Phaeton's. It appears to have been entirely her fault. He was merely wandering past her house, feeling in need of care and attention. The door was wide open and Mr. Taunton suddenly found himself inside, picking up a few odds and ends. When he discovered from all that fuss in the newspapers what he had got hold of—how well-known it was, I mean—he was quite horrified and had to hide. And where better place than here with us where he never had to go out?"

"Where indeed!" Mr. Campion dared not glance across the room at the Superintendent unwrapping his black and gold parcels. "Where is he now? Poor Mr. Taunton, I mean."

"Of course I hadn't the faintest idea what was worrying the man until he confessed," the dragon went on stonily. "Then I realized that something would have to be done at once to protect everybody. The wretch had hidden all that frightful stuff in our toolshed for three months, not daring to keep it in the house; and to make matters worse, the impossible person at the end of the garden, Mr. Sampson, had recognized him and *would* keep speaking. Apparently people in the—er—underworld all know each other just like those of us in—er—other closed circles do."

Mr. Campion, whose hair was standing on end, had a moment of inspiration. "This absurd rigmarole about Taunton getting Sampson to buy him some Christmas gifts wholesale was *your* idea!" he said accusingly.

The dragon stared. "It seemed the best way of getting Maisie's jewelry back to her without any *one* person being involved," she said frankly. "I knew we should all recognize the things the moment we saw them and I was certain that after a lot of argument we should decide to pack them up and send them round to her. But, if there *were* any repercussions, we should *all* be in it—quite a formidable array, dear Boy—and the blame could be traced to Mr. Sampson if absolutely necessary. You see, the Brigadier is convinced that Sampson *was* there last night. Mr. Taunton very cleverly left him on the lawn and went behind the toolshed and came back with the box."

"How completely immoral!" Mr. Campion couldn't restrain himself.

The dragon had the grace to look embarrassed.

"I don't think the Sampson angle would ever have arisen," she said. "But if it had, Sampson was quite a terrible person. Almost a blackmailer. Utterly dishonest and inconsiderate. Think how he has spoiled everything and endangered us all by getting himself killed on the *one* afternoon when we said he was here, so that the police were brought in. Just the *one* thing I was trying to avoid. When the Inspector appeared this morning I was so upset I thought of you!"

In his not unnatural alarm Mr. Campion so far forgot himself as to touch her sleeve. "Where is Taunton now?"

The dragon threshed her train. "Really, Boy! What a fidget you are! If you must know, I gave him his Christmas present—every penny I had in cash for he was broke again, he told me—and sent him for a nice long walk after lunch. Having seen the Inspector here this morning he was glad to go."

She paused and a granite gleam came into her hooded eyes. "If that Superintendent friend of yours has the stupidity to try to find him once Maisie has her monstrosities back, none of us will be able to identify him, I'm afraid. And there's another thing. If the Brigadier should be *forced* to give evidence, I am sure he will stick to his guns about Mr. Sampson being down in the garden here at six o'clock last night. That would mean that the man Kroll would have to go unpunished for his revenge murder, wouldn't it? Sampson was a terrible person—but *no one* should have killed him."

Mr. Campion was silenced. He glanced fearfully across the room.

The Superintendent was seated at his table wearing the strained yet slap-happy expression of a man with concussion. On his left was a pile of black and gilt wrappings, on his right a rajah's ransom in somewhat specialized form.

From where he stood, Mr. Campion could see two examples amid the rest—a breastplate in gold, pearl, and enamel in the shape of a unicorn and an item which looked like a plover's egg in tourmaline encased in a ducal coronet. There was also a soapstone monkey and a solid-silver paperknife.

Much later that evening Mr. Campion and the Superintendent drove quietly back to headquarters. Oates had a large cardboard box on his knee. He clasped it tenderly.

He had been silent for a long time when a thought occurred to him. "Why did they take him into the house in the first place?" he said. "An elderly crook looking lost! And no luggage!"

Mr. Campion's pale eyes flickered behind his spectacles.

"Don't forget the Duchess' housekeeping money," he murmured. "I should think he offered one of the

widows who really run that place the first three months' payment in cash, wouldn't you? That must be an impressive phenomenon in that sort of business, I fancy."

Oates caught his breath and fell silent once more. Presently he burst out again.

"Those people! That woman!" he exploded. "When they were younger they led me a pretty dance—losing things or getting themselves swindled. But now they're old they take the blessed biscuit! Do you see how she's tied my hands, Campion?"

Mr. Campion tried not to grin.

"Snapdragons are just permissible at Christmas," he said. "Handled with extreme caution they burn very few fingers, it seems to me."

Mr. Campion tapped the cardboard box. "And some of them provide a few plums for retiring coppers, don't they, Superintendent?"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MELVILLE DAVISSON POST**

TITLE: ***Dead Man's Gloves***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Uncle Abner

LOCALE: Old Virginia

TIME: Jeffersonian days

COMMENTS: *Benton Wolf had his coffin made in advance and kept it ready in the house; but Benton's coffin and burial clothes were destined for his older brother, Adam . . .*

THE GIRL WAS STANDING APART from the crowd in the great avenue of poplars that led up to the house. She seemed embarrassed and uncertain what to do, a thing of April emerging into Summer.

Abner and Randolph marked her as they entered along the gravel road.

They had left their horses at the gate, but she had brought hers inside, as though from some habit unconsciously upon her.

But halfway to the house she had remembered and got down. And she stood now against the horse's shoulder. It was a black hunter, big and old, but age marred no beauty of his lines. He was like a horse of ebony, enchanted out of the earth by some Arabian magic, but not yet by that magic awakened into life.

The girl wore a long, dark riding skirt, after the fashion of the time, and a coat of hunter's pink. Her dark hair was in a great wrist-thick plait. Her eyes, too, were big and dark, and her body firm and lithe from the out-of-doors.

"Ah!" cried Randolph, making his characteristic gesture, "Prospero has been piping in this grove. Here is a daughter of the immortal morning! We grow old, Abner, and it is youth that the gods love."

My uncle, his hands behind him, his eyes on the gravel road, looked up at the bewitching picture.

"Poor child," he said. "The gods that love her must be gods of the valleys and not gods of the hills."

"Ruth amid the alien corn! Is it a better figure, Abner? Well, she has a finer inheritance than these lands —she has youth!"

"She ought to have both," replied my uncle. "It was sheer robbery to take her inheritance."

"It was a proceeding at law," replied the Justice. "It was the law that did the thing, and we cannot hold the law in disrespect."

"But the man who uses the law to accomplish a wrong, we can so hold," said my Uncle Abner. "He is an outlaw, as the highwayman and the pirate are."

He extended his arm toward the great house sitting at the end of the avenue.

"In spite of the sanction of the law I hold this dead man for a robber. And I would have wrested these lands from him, if I could. But your law, Randolph, stood before him."

"Well," replied the Justice, "he takes no gain from it. He lies yonder waiting for the grave."

"But his brother takes," said Abner, "and this child loses."

The Justice, elegant in the costume of the time, turned his ebony stick in his fingers.

"One should forgive the dead," he commented in a facetious tone. "It is a mandate of the Scripture."

"I am not concerned about the dead," replied Abner. "The dead are in God's hands. It is the living who concern me."

"Then," cried the Justice, "you should forgive the brother who takes."

"And I shall forgive him," replied Abner, "when he returns what he has taken."

"Returns what he has taken!" Randolph laughed. "Why, Abner, the devil could not filch a coin out of the clutches of old Benton Wolf."

"The devil," said my uncle, "is not an authority that I depend on."

"A miracle of Heaven, then," said the Justice. "But, alas, it is not the age of miracles."

"Perhaps," replied Abner, "but I am not so certain."

They had come now to where the girl stood, her back against the black shoulder of the horse. The morning air moved the yellow leaves about her feet. She darted out to meet them, her face aglow.

"Damme!" cried Randolph. "William of Avon knew only witches of the second order! How do you do, Julia? I have hardly seen you since you were no taller than my stick, and told me that your name was 'Pete-George,' and that you were a circus horse, and offered to do tricks for me."

A shadow crossed the girl's face.

"I remember," she said, "it was up there on the porch!"

"Egad!" cried Randolph, embarrassed. "And so it was!"

He kissed the girl's fingers and the shadow in her face fled.

For the man's heart was good, and he had the manner of a gentleman. But it was Uncle Abner whom she turned to in her dilemma.

"I forgot," she said, "and almost rode into the house. Do you think I could leave the horse here? He will stand if I drop the rein."

Then she went on to make her explanation. She wanted to see the old house that had been so long her home. This was the only opportunity, today, when all the countryside came to the dead man's burial. She thought she might come, too, although her motive was no tribute of respect.

She put her hand through Abner's arm and he looked down upon her, grave and troubled.

"My child," he said, "leave the horse where he stands and come with me—for my motive, also, is no tribute of respect; and you go with a better right than I do."

"I suppose," the girl hesitated, "that one ought to respect the dead, but this man—these men—I cannot."

"Nor can I," replied my uncle. "If I do not respect a man when he is living, I shall not pretend to when he is dead. One does not make a claim upon my honor by going out of life."

They went up the avenue among the yellow poplar leaves and the ragweed and fennel springing up along the unkept gravel.

It was a crisp and glorious morning. The frost lay on the rail fence. The spider webs stretched here and there across the high grasses of the meadows in intricate and bewildering lacework. The sun was clear and bright, but it carried no oppressive heat as it drew on in its course toward noon.

The countryside had gathered to see Adam Wolf buried. It was a company of tenants, the idle and worthless mostly, drawn by curiosity. For in life the two old men who had seized upon this property by virtue of a defective acknowledgment to a deed permitted no invasion of their boundary.

Everywhere the lands were posted; no urchin fished and no schoolboy hunted. The green perch, fattened in the deep creek that threaded the rich bottom lands, no man disturbed. But the quail, the pheasant, the robin, and the meadow lark, old Adam pursued with his fowling piece.

He had tramped about with it in all seasons. One would have believed that all the birds of heaven had done the man some unending harm and in revenge he had declared a war. And so the accident by which he met his death was a jeopardy of the old man's habits, and to be looked for when one lived with a fowling piece in one's hands and grew careless in its use.

The two men lived alone and thus all sorts of mystery sprang up around them, elaborated by fancy and gaining in grim detail at every

story-teller's hand. It had the charm and thrilling interest of an adventure, then, for the countryside to get this entry.

The brothers lived in striking contrast. Adam was violent, and his cries and curses, his hard and brutal manner were the terror of those who passed at night that way, or the urchin overtaken by darkness on his road home. But Benton got about his affairs in silence, with a certain humility of manner, and a mild concern for the opinion of his fellows.

Still, somehow, the traveler and the urchin held him in a greater terror. Perhaps because he had got his coffin made and kept it in his house, together with his clothes for burial. It seemed uncanny thus to prepare against his dissolution and to bargain for the outfit, with anxiety to have his shilling's worth.

And yet, with this gruesome furniture at hand, the old man, it would seem, was in no contemplation of his death. He spoke sometimes with a marked savor and an unctuous kneading of the hands of that time when he should own the land, for he was the younger and by rule should have the expectancy of life.

There was a crowd about the door and filling the hall inside, a crowd that elbowed and jostled, taken with a quivering interest, and there to feed its maw of curiosity with every item.

The girl wished to remain on the portico, where she could see the ancient garden and the orchard and all the paths and byways that had been her wonderland of youth, but Abner asked her to go in.

Randolph turned away, but my uncle and the girl remained some time by the coffin. The rim of the dead man's forehead and his jaw were riddled with bird shot, but his eyes and an area of his face below them, where the thin nose came down and with its lines and furrows made up the main identity of features, were not disfigured. And these preserved the hard stamp of his violent nature, untouched by the accident that had dispossessed him of his life.

He lay in the burial clothes and in the coffin that Benton Wolf had provided for himself, all except the gloves upon his hands. These Benton had forgotten to provide in advance. And now when he came to prepare his brother for a public burial, for no other had touched the man, he must needs take what he could find about the house—a pair of old, knit gloves with every rent and moth hole carefully darned, as though the man had sat down there with pains to give his brother the best appearance that he could.

This little touch affected the girl to tears, so strange is a woman's heart. "Poor thing!" she said. And for this triviality she would forget the injury that the dead man and his brother had done to her, the loss

they had inflicted, and her long distress.

She took a closer hold upon Abner's arm, and dabbed her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"I am sorry for him," she said, "for the living brother. It is so pathetic."

And she indicated the old, coarse gloves so crudely darned and patched together.

But my uncle looked down at her, strangely, and with a cold, inexorable face.

"My child," he said, "there is a curious virtue in this thing that moves you. Perhaps it will also move the man whose handiwork it is. Let us go up and see him."

Then he called the Justice.

"Randolph, come with us."

The Justice turned about. "Where do you go?" he asked.

"Why, sir," Abner answered, "this child is weeping at the sight of the dead man's gloves, and I thought, perhaps, that old Benton might weep at them too, and in the softened mood return what he has stolen."

The Justice looked upon Abner as upon one gone mad.

"And be sorry for his sins! And pluck out his eye and give it to you for a bauble! Why, Abner, where is your common sense. This thing would take a miracle of God."

My uncle was undisturbed.

"Well," he said, "come with me, Randolph, and help me to perform that miracle."

He went out into the hall, and up the wide old stairway, with the girl, in tears, upon his arm. And the Justice followed, like one who goes upon a patent and ridiculous fool's errand.

They came into an upper chamber, where a great bulk of a man sat in a padded chair looking down upon his avenue of trees. He looked with satisfaction. He turned his head about when the three came in and then his eyes widened among the folds of fat.

"Abner and Mr. Randolph and Miss Julia Clayborne!" he gurgled. "You come to do honor to the dead!"

"No, Wolf," replied my uncle, "we come to do justice to the living."

The room was big, and empty but for chairs and an open secretary of some English make. The pictures on the wall had been turned about as though from a lack of interest in the tenant. But there hung in a frame above the secretary—with its sheets of foolscap, its iron ink-pot and quill pens—a map in detail, and the written deed for the estate that these men had taken in their lawsuit. It was not the skill of any painter that gave pleasure to this mountain of a man; not fields or groves imagined or copied for their charm, but the fields and groves that he now possessed and mastered.

The old man's eyelids fluttered an instant as with some indecision,

then he replied, "It was kind to have this thought of me. I have been long neglected. A little justice of recognition, even now, does much to soften the sorrow at my brother's death."

Randolph caught at his jaw to keep in the laughter. And the huge old man, his head crouched into his billowy shoulders, his little reptilian eye shining like glass, went on with his speech.

"I am the greater moved," he said, "because you have been aloof and distant with me. You, Abner, have not visited my house, nor you, Randolph, although you live at no great distance. It is not thus that one gentleman should treat another. And especially when I and my dead brother, Adam, were from distant parts and came among you without a friend to take us by the hand and bring us to your door."

He sighed and put the fingers of his hands together.

"Ah, Abner," he went on, "it was a cruel negligence, and one from which I and my brother Adam suffered. You, who have a hand and a word at every turning, can feel no longing for this human comfort. But to the stranger, alone, and without the land of his nativity, it is a bitter lack."

He indicated the chairs about him.

"I beg you to be seated, gentlemen and Miss Clayborne. And overlook that I do not rise. I am shaken at Adam's death."

Randolph remained planted on his feet, his face now under control. But Abner put the child into a chair and stood behind it, as though he were some close and masterful familiar.

"Wolf," he said, "I am glad that your heart is softened."

"My heart—softened!" cried the man. "Why, Abner, I have the tenderest heart of any of God's creatures. I cannot endure to kill a sparrow. My brother Adam was not like that. He would be for hunting the wild creatures to their death with firearms. But I took no pleasure in it."

"Well," said Randolph, "the creatures of the air got their revenge of him. It was a foolish accident to die by."

"Randolph," replied the man, "it was the very end and extreme of carelessness. To look into a fowling piece, a finger on the hammer, a left hand holding the barrel halfway up, to see if it was empty. It was a foolish and simple habit of my brother, and one that I abhorred and begged him to forego, again and again, when I have seen him do it.

"But he had no fear of any firearms, as though by use and habit he had got their spirit tamed—as trainers, I am told, grow careless of wild beasts, and jugglers of the fangs and poison of their reptiles. He was growing old and would forget if they were loaded."

He spoke to Randolph, but he

looked at Julia Clayborne and Abner behind her chair.

The girl sat straight and composed, in silence. The body of my uncle was to her a great protecting presence. He stood with his broad shoulders above her, his hands on the back of the chair, his face lifted. And he was big and dominant, as painters are accustomed to draw Michael in Satan's wars.

The pose held the old man's eye, and he moved in his chair; then he went on, speaking to the girl.

"It was kind of you, Abner, and you, Randolph, to come in to see me in my distress, but it was fine and noble in Miss Julia Clayborne. Men will understand the justice of the law and by what right it gives and takes. But a child will hardly understand that. It would be in nature for Miss Clayborne, in her youth, to hold the issue of this lawsuit against me and my brother Adam, to feel that we had wronged her; had by some unfairness taken what her father bequeathed to her at his death, and always regarded as his own. A child would not see how the title had never vested, as our judges do. How possession is one thing, and the title in fee simple another and distinct. And so I am touched by this consideration."

Abner spoke then.

"Wolf," he said, "I am glad to find you in this mood, for now Randolph can write his deed, with consideration of love and affection instead of the real one I came with."

The old man's beady eye glimmered and slipped about.

"I do not understand, Abner. What deed?"

"The one Randolph came to write," replied my uncle.

"But, Abner," interrupted the Justice, "I did not come to write a deed." And he looked at my uncle in amazement.

"Oh, yes," returned Abner, "that is precisely what you came to do."

He indicated the open secretary with his hand.

"And the grantor, as it happens, has got everything ready for you. Here are foolscap and quill pens and ink. And here, exhibited for your convenience, is a map of the lands with all the metes and bounds. And here," he pointed to the wall, "in a frame, as though it were a work of art with charm, is the court's deed. Sit down, Randolph, and write."

And such virtue is there in a dominant command that the Justice sat down before the secretary and began to select a goose quill. Then he realized the absurdity of the direction and turned about.

"What do you mean, Abner?" he cried.

"I mean precisely what I say," replied my uncle. "I want you to write a deed."

"But what sort of deed," cried the astonished Justice, "and by what grantor, and to whom, and for what lands?"

"You will draw a conveyance,"

replied Abner, "in form, with covenants of general warranty for the manor and lands set out in the deed before you and given in the plat. The grantor will be Benton Wolf, Esquire, and the grantee, Julia Clayborne, and mark you, Randolph, the consideration will be love and affection, with a dollar added for the form."

Old man Benton was amazed. His head, bedded into his huge shoulders, swung about; his pudgy features worked; his expression and his manner changed; his reptilian eyes hardened; he puffed with his breath in gusts.

"Not so fast, my fine gentlemen!" he gurgled. "There will be no such deed."

"Go on, Randolph," said my uncle, as though there had been no interruption, "get this business over."

"But, Abner," returned the Justice, "it is fool work—the grantor will not sign."

"He will sign," said my uncle, "when you have finished, and seal and acknowledge—go on!"

And such authority was in the man to impose his will that the bewildered Justice spread out his sheet of foolscap, dipped his quill into the ink, and began to draw the instrument. And while he wrote, Abner turned back to the gross old man.

"Wolf," he said, "must I persuade you to sign the deed?"

"Abner," cried the man, "do you take me for a fool?"

"I do not," replied my uncle, "and therefore I think that you will sign."

The obese old man spat violently on the floor, his face a horror of great folds.

"Sign!" he sputtered. "Idiot, madman! Why should I sign away my lands?"

"There are many reasons," replied Abner calmly. "The property is not yours. You got it by a legal trick—the judge who heard you was bound by the technicalities of language. But you are old, Wolf, and the next Judge will go behind the record. He will be hard to face. He has expressed Himself on these affairs. 'If the widow and the orphan cry to me, I will surely hear their cry.' Sinister words, Wolf, for one who comes with a case like yours into the Court of Final Equity."

"Abner," cried the old man, "begone with your sermons!"

My uncle's big fingers tightened on the back of the chair.

"Then, Wolf," he said, "if that does not move you, let me urge the esteem of men and this child's sorrow, and our high regard."

The old man's jaw chattered and he snapped his fingers.

"I would not give that for the things you name," he cried, and he set off a tiny measure on his index finger with the thumb. "Why, sir, my whim, idle and ridiculous, is a greater power to move me than this drivel."

Abner did not move, but his

voice took on depth and volume.

"Wolf," he said, "a whim is sometimes a great lever to move a man. Now, I am taken with a whim myself. I have a fancy, Wolf, that your brother Adam ought to go out of the world barehanded as he came into it."

The old man twisted his great head, as though he would get Abner wholly within the sweep of his reptilian eye.

"What?" he gurgled. "What is that?"

"Why, this," replied my uncle. "I have a whim—'idle and ridiculous,' did you say, Wolf? Well, then, idle and ridiculous, if you like, that your brother ought not to be buried in his gloves."

Abner looked hard at the man and, although he did not move, the threat and menace of his presence seemed somehow to advance him. And the effect upon the huge old man was like some work of sorcery. The whole mountain of him began to quiver and the folds of his face seemed spread over with thin oil. He sat piled up in the chair and the oily sweat gathered and thickened on him. His jaw jerked and fell into a baggy gaping and the great expanse of him worked as with an ague.

Finally, out of the pudgy, undulating mass, a voice issued, thin and shaken.

"Abner," it said, "has any other man this fancy?"

"No," replied my uncle, "but I hold it, Wolf, at your decision."

"And, Abner," his thin voice trebled, "you will let my brother be buried as he is?"

"If you sign!" said my uncle.

The man reeked with the terror on him, and one thought that his billowy body would never be again at peace. "Randolph," he quavered, "bring me the deed."

Outside, the girl sobbed in Abner's arms. She asked for no explanation. She wished to believe her fortune a miracle of God, forever—to the end of all things. But Randolph turned on my uncle when she was gone.

"Abner! Abner!" he cried. "Why in the name of the Eternal was the old creature so shaken at the gloves?"

"Because he saw the hangman behind them," replied my uncle. "Did you notice how the rim of the dead man's face was riddled by the bird shot and the center of it clean? How could that happen, Randolph?"

"It was a curious accident of gunfire," replied the Justice.

"It was no accident at all," said Abner. "That area of the man's face is clean because it was *protected.* Because the dead man put up his hands to cover his face when he saw that his brother was about to shoot him. The backs of old Adam's hands, hidden by the gloves, will be riddled with bird shot like the rim of his face."

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 243rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Can a mystery story really be charming? True, Mr. Jayme's story does not deal with murder or any kind of physical violence; the crime in the story is one of theft—of a colossal and most unusual theft. Can theft, especially on a grand scale, be charming? True, also, Mr. Jayme's story, even in the broadest terms of mystery, is offbeat, unconventional, subtle. Can such ingredients make a mystery story charming? We submit they can and do . . .

The author was born in 1925; his alma mater is Princeton. He has delved into the mysteries of promotion (circulation, sales, etc.), has been a senior copy writer and editor, has written and produced U.S. Army radio programs, and is now what is known as an advertising consultant . . . from all of which it can be truly said: "He has the touch."

I WILL PLEASE COME TO ORDER

by WILLIAM NORTH JAYME

TREVOR MACINTOSH WAS WEARing a dinner jacket. He was making his way up the curved marble staircase to the great domed library where the monthly meeting of the One Hundred Club was about to take place. There, in just a few minutes, with only a stained-glass canopy separating him from the heavens, MacIntosh would launch his amazing plan.

True, the plan was improbable, preposterous, outrageous—as MacIntosh himself would have been the first to admit. You're out of your mind, the others would have said. It can't be done.

That is what the other members would have said. But they were not even aware of the scheme. In all the months since the idea first occurred to MacIntosh, he had not shared it with anyone. As a result, finding out if it *could* be done had become as important to his continued existence as water.

He wished he had some water. Now that the crucial moment was near, he found himself somewhat nervous. Tugging at a recalcitrant garter, he almost pitched into the Club president, who was just ahead of him on the stairs.

It was not that MacIntosh wanted the $20,000,000 endowment of the Club. A successful portrait painter, he had received more commissions this past year than ever before.

There had been seventeen actually, averaging $2000 apiece. In a small and deliberately select circle, his work was greatly admired. Only that morning Eldon Varner's wife had telephoned. After innumerable attempts another well-known artist had given up trying to "get" her famous eyes. Would MacIntosh be willing to try?

He had refused, of course. Ethics would not permit him to trespass on the oils of another painter. But the invitation, coming as it did from a woman who had ruled artistic society in New York for a half century, was pleasing evidence of his increasing reputation. In a different way, so was his election last month to the presidency of the National Federation.

No, it was not the money. Nor did MacIntosh bear anyone malice. He was an agreeable, easy, friendly man. Although still comparatively young to have a great deal in common with most of his fellow members, he genuinely enjoyed being with them and he especially looked forward to the camaraderie generated by these monthly affairs.

The real reason was something quite different. It was a collector's desire to acquire an object that was absolutely perfect. And there was no doubt that the One Hundred Club was perfect.

MacIntosh had first noticed it almost a decade before, when Steese Clayson had taken him there as a guest. An architectural historian, Clayson was the ideal guide. The tour had ended in the dining room, and it was while MacIntosh was wiping from his lips the traces of a delectable Welsh rarebit that he became aware of how perfect the place was.

Its perfection did not lie in its beauty. The façade, modeled after the Great Banqueting Hall which Inigo Jones had built for James the First in Old Whitehall, looked anachronistic and shabby in new Manhattan. Over the years it had come to be supported on either side by two towering, white-brick office buildings. Together, the three structures gave the impression of two massive bookends dwarfing a faded miniature.

Inside, the Great Hall had no business having been imported, intact, from the Earl of Stratford's summer castle at Shottley-in-Welting, for which it had been designed 400 years ago. The Hall was wildly out of scale with the Club's other proportions. Even the treasured chair in which the visiting Prince of Wales, later Edward the Seventh, had once been served a nine-course dinner, had no real aesthetic significance. A thoroughly ordinary wooden chair, it was unusual only because the fruits, soup, fish, meat, fowl, vegetables, salad, cheeses, ices, and biscuits which the Prince had consumed were listed by their French names on a plaque set square in the middle of the seat. Predictably, the placement gave rise to a

ribaldry whenever visitors were shown through the dining room.

Nor was the Club perfect because it was practical. Built in a day when men were shorter but ceilings taller, it wasted space on a grand scale. Cleaning the floors and stairs alone required the nocturnal ministrations of eight charwomen. They were the only persons of their sex ever accorded the privilege of mounting above the first floor.

No, the Club was not beautiful. It was not practical. But it was perfect—as the Place des Vosges is a perfect Parisian square, as Man o' War had been a perfect horse, as Queen Victoria had been a perfect monarch.

There was the famous dinner service capable of accommodating 500 people. It included fish knives, fish forks, oyster forks, demitasse spoons—even toothpicks, all in solid gold.

There were the menus for guests, printed without prices so that only the member-host ever knew how much anything cost.

There were the six lavatories. Each had two bathtubs placed side by side, separated only by a low table. On each table at all times was laid out a chessboard with four rooks, four knights, four bishops, two queens, two kings, and sixteen pawns, ready for play.

There was the tiny Post Office just off the Club's entrance. It had been especially authorized in 1891 by an Act of Congress so that the membership, which then included President Benjamin Harrison, might have a convenient place to buy stamps. Except for the first of the month, when bills went out, no more than a dozen pieces of mail a day passed through its wicker window. Yet the branch still commanded a full-time postmaster.

And there was the long, hidden tunnel that led off from the wine cellar. It emerged, eleven city blocks away, at the Hudson River. Most visitors assumed that it had been constructed during Prohibition so that members could escape raids by the police. They were wrong. It had been built just before the Civil War so that in the event of a Confederate invasion the Club's employees, traditionally Negroes, would have a means of saving their skins. The tunnel had cost $840,000.

That day with Clayson, MacIntosh recognized that the One Hundred Club was the most wondrous and civilized object he had ever beheld. It represented everything in this world that was enjoyable and worth preserving. He knew he wanted the place. The only question was how to go about getting it.

Clayson and another member, Campbell Guthrie, a muralist now deceased, had proposed MacIntosh for membership. There had been no problem getting the thirty letters which the Admissions Committee required. At least a dozen members already knew MacIntosh from school days, or from having sat for him. In

addition to volunteering their own recommendations, they were conscientious about getting friends to write. At the end of three years, the normal waiting period, MacIntosh found himself elected, and he rapidly became a popular figure at the window table where members dined, *en famille*, when they were not entertaining guests.

The place came to fascinate MacIntosh as a mirror intrigues a puppy. He spent whole afternoons getting to know every room, every piece of furniture, every *objet d'art*, every book, every fixture. He even discovered the speaking-tube, obediently sealed off during the Twenties, which enabled the doorman to forewarn the bartender of a member's approach so that the man's drink might be waiting.

As MacIntosh's love for the place deepened, so did his apprehensions that one day it might all be lost. What if a new breed of members were to come along—members who might not recognize the Club's perfection? Members who might want to install ping-pong tables, television sets, air conditioning, automatic elevators, hand dryers?

What if some future Board of Governors were to decide to sell the property, say, to a car-parking concession? And what if they were then to use the proceeds to erect on whatever street had come into fashion a new Club, constructed of aluminum and glass and containing complete gymnastic facilities?

MacIntosh was by no means opposed to progress in the outside, everyday world; but when it came to the One Hundred Club he saw in progress a distinct peril. He began to realize that some plan of action was called for, and soon. Once a club began to go, he knew, it went fast. Look at the old Van Cortland. A decade ago, it rivaled the Athenaeum in London. Today, the Van Cortland was a police station for the Eleventh Precinct.

MacIntosh's discovery of how he could acquire the place was accidental. He had been waiting for Gauss Fox one day in the library, idly admiring an illuminated manuscript of the Articles of Incorporation. Suddenly, in paragraphs *H*, *I*, and *J*, there it was, exactly what he had been searching for. He had listened to these bylaws dozens of times at monthly meetings, where reading the paragraphs was part of the ritual. But until now he had never realized their possibilities.

From that moment the *voice* of the plan, as MacIntosh came to think of it, grew. By now, neither love for his friends nor the fear of being found out nor logic was strong enough to silence it.

It was a voice that MacIntosh had heard before. As a boy he had been an acolyte in the Protestant Episcopal Church. One Sunday he had walked out with a small communion bowl. He had concealed it upside down under his altar cap because it fitted his skull exactly.

His father, a man of patience if not imagination, had explained that a communion bowl was for everyone to share. Since the time of Joan of Arc, who was believed to have accepted wine from it in Reims, this bowl had represented man's abiding fellowship.

Precisely, young MacIntosh had argued. That's why he had taken it. Simply ornamented, perfectly proportioned, the silver bowl was too beautiful to share. He wanted it for his very own. Besides, if others used it, the bowl might become damaged. In the end he had obediently returned it to the Rector—but not without reluctance.

This was the same obsessive voice to which MacIntosh was listening tonight as he moved in the slow, disorderly procession toward the topmost floor of the Club. The library was nearly full by the time he reached the door. Standing on tiptoe, he looked around for a seat where he might be less subject to observation. He was doubly rewarded. As he had hoped, there was a place in the last row. Moreover, the seat was next to Haverstraw Goode, who was almost completely blind. He moved as quickly as the gathering would permit.

"It's Trevor MacIntosh," he said, touching Dr. Goode on the elbow so as not to startle him.

"Good evening," Dr. Goode replied. "Did your dessert have raisins?"

"Raisins?" MacIntosh repeated blankly. He had almost no recollection of what had been served during the dinner. Excitement and nervousness had erased the meal from his memory.

"Raisin pudding, by definition, is made with raisins," Dr. Goode stated emphatically. "I've spoken to the dining-room manager about it several times. But apparently, if I want raisins, and I do, I shall have to supply them myself. Tell me, how have you been?"

"Splendid, splendid," MacIntosh replied absently. "And you?" He noticed that Goode had put on his cummerbund upside down.

On the platform the business part of the evening was getting under way. Labadie Dana, the president, was rapping for order. MacIntosh and Goode leaned forward.

"As is customary in these meetings," the president began, "we start by taking stock of ourselves, and I am saddened to report that during the month of October the Club lost one member through removal to another city, and six members through death.

"Memorials to these departed members are now being prepared, and when completed will appear in the Bulletin. We shall miss them all. To paraphrase Dr. Franklin, 'Others may take their place, but none can really replace them'."

The president, a distinguished amateur cellist, was by profession an estate lawyer. The oratorical flourishes of the courtroom did not

make MacIntosh feel any easier. His idea was foolproof, he knew. Discreetly, without revealing his purpose, he had checked with various lawyer friends to determine whether there might be any possible flaw. There was none. Nevertheless, MacIntosh continued to be uncomfortable.

"To look upon the brighter side," the president was saying, "we are now entitled to add new friends to our fellowship, and this we shall proceed to do forthwith, before the entertainment portion of our evening begins.

"As of November first our membership stands at ninety-three. This means, of course, that we are privileged to elect seven new members tonight to bring our group back to the full strength of one hundred. As Noah distributes copies of the printed ballot, let me read aloud the names of the candidates, as required."

MacIntosh looked uneasily around the room. Every eye was on the president.

Dana picked up a piece of paper. "First," he said, "we have Mr. Negley Johnson Truitt, lawyer, painter, proposed by Hoyt Stevens and Klots Houghton. Next, Dr. Harrison M. Dow, university president, author, proposed by Mummery Gore and Shenton Gregg. Third, we have Mr. Charleston Richards the Second, archaeologist, pamphleteer, proposed by Lynes Cox and Haverstraw Goode."

Thump! went Dr. Goode's cane on the floor, and then thump! thump! thump! It was a way he had of expressing pleasure. MacIntosh kept time with his heart. In his eagerness to sit somewhere safe, he had forgotten that Dr. Goode had a candidate up for election that evening. In fact, MacIntosh himself had written a letter for Richards. He felt a twinge of conscience. Before Goode began losing his eyesight, MacIntosh had spent many enjoyable hours playing bezique with him, and he had become fond of the old man. Only two months ago MacIntosh had attended a testimonial dinner honoring Goode's ninetieth birthday. Moreover, he knew it had taken Goode nearly five years to get his candidate in. Richards' youth was the difficulty: he was only 50.

Well, it was sad, but it could not be helped. The path to heaven, MacIntosh knew, was paved with hell. Even for a friend like Goode, he could not afford to compromise.

The list of candidates droned on. It included the former Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese of New York, an atomic scientist who had won last year's Nobel Peace Prize for experiments on fallout, a retired general who had been the chief labor advisor to a President of the United States, a journalist whose column, "The Crow's Nest: Being One Man's Point of View," was read by nearly every literate person in America and by most English-

speaking people abroad, an agronomist who had recently been decorated by Italy for his work with the soil of Somaliland, a sculptor who only last month, as part of the cultural exchange program, had been commissioned to do a heroic statue of the Premier of a foreign power, and a man named Robert C. Martin whose chief qualification seemed to be that he was Chairman of the Board of a large steel corporation.

"The dagger which you will notice before Mr. Martin's name," the president explained, "is, as you know, our private way of designating candidates who, although not involved professionally in the Arts and Sciences, have 'by word or deed measurably advanced the principles for which this Club stands.' I am certain that any members fortunate enough to have attended the opening last month of the splendid new Renaissance Museum in Central Park will agree that a businessman of Mr. Martin's demonstrated affection for the Arts should be made to feel very much at home in this Society."

"Businessman!" snorted Dr. Goode. "The whole idea of this Club is to escape the world of commerce! But I don't suppose there is any use in protesting."

MacIntosh smiled in reply, although he did not feel like smiling. Martin was exactly the kind of member he too feared for the Club. Like most businessmen, MacIntosh reasoned, Martin would probably be a crusader. But $7,000,000, the figure *The New York Times* said the new museum had cost, was an expensive bid for acceptance even in this hallowed institution. MacIntosh broke his promise to be uncompromising. He allowed himself a moment of sympathy for Mr. Martin.

"Finally," the president was saying, "we come to Sullivan Wylie Hughes, proposed by Anderson Gordon-Gordon and Felker Pease." Dana paused and removed his glasses.

"I do not imagine it is necessary to note," he noted, "that Mr. Hughes, who is modestly identified on our ballots as a diplomat, only last week was named by the President to a special post in the Department of State. I think that in these worrisome times, it is singularly fitting that this distinguished gentleman, upon whose shoulders lie so many hopes of the Free World, comes recommended to our group by our member whose surname is Pease."

The pun was acknowledged by exclamations of hear! hear! MacIntosh wiped his palms against his trouser legs.

By this time Noah had reached the back of the room. The elderly steward handed MacIntosh two ballots. One was for Dr. Goode, and MacIntosh passed it along.

"I believe," the president began again, "that you have all received ballots. Before folding and passing

them along to the aisle, we are beholden to give a hearing to Article Seventeen, paragraphs *H*, *I*, and *J*, dealing with Procedures of Election."

MacIntosh stiffened. The fateful moment was at hand. The president recited the bylaws perfunctorily, as he had at every meeting during his twenty-three years in office.

"*H*," he said. " 'If, for any reason, a member shall object to any candidate, he shall so indicate by drawing a line through the candidate's name on the ballot.' *I*. 'One such objection shall be sufficient to exclude.' *J*. 'Ballots shall be left unsigned.' "

The president sat down and began chatting with Rumsey Henning, the naturalist, who was seated beside him on the platform. As soon as the ballots had been gathered, Dana would introduce Henning, who was to deliver an illustrated talk on "The Secret Fauna of Cordillera Isabel," a range in Nicaragua.

Noah began moving slowly down the aisle of the great room, collecting ballots in the brass box that had been used in elections since 1842. MacIntosh looked at Dr. Goode. The nonagenarian was leaning forward on his cane, talking with Trimble Slattery in the row ahead. Even if Goode's eyesight had been perfect, his position would have prevented him from observing what MacIntosh was about to do.

MacIntosh started at the top of the ballot. He hesitated momentarily when he came to Dr. Goode's candidate, and then again at the name of Martin, the millionaire industrialist. But each time he went on.

Last on the list was the new member of the Department of State. Then, finished, MacIntosh folded his ballot.

All eleven names had lines through them.

Waiting for Noah, MacIntosh looked around the room at his fellow members. Ten years? Would it take that long? Probably not, he thought, considering all the gray heads and the increasing frequency with which the Club's flag flew at half mast.

Five years was more like it—yes, five years would do it.

MacIntosh saw himself on the platform, rapping the cherrywood gavel with which Cromwell had once opened Parliament.

"I will please come to order," he was saying to the otherwise empty room.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 244th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . It is certainly an authentic-sounding story—about a haunted man, a man whose like, we all hope, the world will never see again . . .

The author was born in Barbizon, France, in 1904, and educated in France where he "had the benefit of both the Jesuit and the Dominican turns of mind." He did his first military service in Morocco during the Riffian war. He married an American girl in 1926, entered banking, but after considerable traveling in banking capacities, the French government assigned him in 1939 to duty as liaison officer to the British Army and eventually he "footslogged all the way to Dunkerque." Croix de guerre and the British Military Medal. "Guerilla'd in the Maquis and ended war service as liaison officer to the U.S. 103rd Infantry Division (General "Nuts" McAuliffe, commanding)" and awarded the cross of Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur . . .

Surely this man has stories to tell!

THE MAN WHO HEARD WHISPERS

by "EDWARD FORBES"

SHORTLY AFTER 6:30 P.M. ON A muggy Friday last summer, the thinning subway crowd stood in perspiring knots along the platform on the uptown side of the Lexington Avenue Subway at Grand Central Station. A short, very broad man stood apart, close to the edge at the rear of the platform. His clothes hung on him as on a scarecrow. Under his hatless head of graying hair, his squat, bulbous-nosed face was gaunt, his sallow skin sagged in folds, and his gray eyes looked lifeless. He stared at the tracks vacantly, as though they were leading to infinity . . .

Grapes must be harvested and crushed to make wine, even though the wine will be drunk by hated masters. So it was that in 1955 three people met in Ujpest during the annual harvest festival when the grapes of Hungary are pressed into the golden Tokay wine and the vineyard folks rejoice if the crop is good.

Nagy Kossuth was there because he had won the cooperative's prize

for the finest grapes and the heaviest crop of the year. His father before him, and his grandfather before that, had been the best wine-growers and wine-dressers in that district where vineyards meant so much. His twin brother Imre had left the farm about five years before—to seek work in the city. It had surprised everyone because the brothers had been inseparable; but the Kossuth farm was small, and under the Communist regime it could no longer be worked, as it had in their father's time, for the benefit of the family.

So it was that Nagy was working the vineyard and was going to collect the prize. As for Imre, he was luckier—he had escaped to America.

Eva Matyas was there because she was the new bookkeeper for the cooperative. Eva was a small trim girl, good-natured and fun-loving, and she was honey to the swarm of courting suitors who buzzed around her. But Nagy was the one who had found favor in her eyes. They had been engaged for a couple of months, and would be married soon.

The third of the three who met at the festival was Kadar Lazlos. He was there because it was his job to spy on people on such occasions. Kadar was born 42 years ago on a farm near Bioske. Nature had endowed him with a short, powerful body, a certain shrewdness, and a remarkable ugliness of mind. It was this ugly mind and its ugly thoughts which repelled people.

Perhaps Kadar became what he was because nature had simply made him that way. At any rate, he was vain and strong, a bully, and unpopular with the boys whom he hated and the girls whom he chased constantly. His father had turned him out of the family farm when he was seventeen because of misbehavior, and he went to work in the coal mines. He did no better there, and less than a year afterward he was convicted of attempted rape and sent to jail; later he was sentenced again for assault and robbery.

He came out of prison full of hatred for the whole world—for his parents, his condition, the mine, its owners and workers, and for anyone who had something more than himself. He joined the Communist party, was sent to Moscow for training as an agitator, and was still there when the war broke out. He came back to Hungary with the Soviet Army in 1945. Now a captain in the Secret Police, he had an important job and self-satisfying power. Ujpest was one of the towns over which he exercised that power.

On the evening of the festival Kadar was skulking on the grounds when he saw Eva. She was sitting alone, waiting for Nagy. Kadar leered at her and introduced himself. "I am Captain Lazlos—perhaps you have heard of me?" He added smugly, "I should like to be your escort for the evening."

Eva knew who he was. She got up, pointed to Nagy who was just

returning. "I'm sorry, Comrade Captain, but I am engaged," she replied, and walked away.

Kadar remained alone the rest of the evening, like a leper shunned by all. He watched the people enjoy the moonlight, and the shimmering, lapping waters of the lake. He watched them drink the flowing Tokay, and dance to the Tzigane music. And he spied on them as they strolled along the lake, and kissed, giggling and sighing, and made love under the screening willows. He saw Nagy and Eva holding hands and exchanging kisses. And he thought ugly thoughts . . .

For months, on every possible occasion, he stalked Eva and tried to seduce her. He promised and threatened, raged and groveled. But Eva was in love with Nagy. Even if she had been free, she would not have welcomed the advances of the most hated man in Ujpest.

Eva and Nagy were married while Kadar Lazlos was away on business. When he found out, he swore vengeance. But even a Chief of the Secret Police needs some pretext for private vengeance. Of course he would find one eventually—one always can in a police state.

He found it in 1956 when the people of Hungary could no longer stand the miseries, the injustice, and the slavery which they suffered under the Red flag. Revolution burst into flames like a latent fire smoldering under ashes. The rotten regime crumpled like a pile of decayed lumber. Freedom seemed within reach of the oppressed Hungarians, but the Reds found a convenient Quisling in a man named Kadar—another Kadar. This betrayer of his people called on the Soviet to stamp out the blaze, and hope died in Hungary like a fire without fuel.

Red Army tanks crushed the uprising under their bloody tracks. The Secret Police had a field day arresting and executing thousands of rebels. In Ujpest, Kadar Lazlos had charge of the suppression—and found the pretext he needed. He drew up a list of the people to be executed—and at the top he placed the names of Nagy and Eva.

Thus, one day, some sixty men, women, and children stood in the courtroom of Ujpest. Motley as they were, they shared two things in common: a hatred of the Secret Police Chief and an exemplary human dignity.

Behind the judicial bench on a raised platform, Kadar sat omnipotently alone; and alone he both prosecuted and judged. There was no need for a jury or a defense counsel since the prisoners were already condemned. In fact, there was really no need for a trial except for the pleasure it gave Kadar Lazlos. He enjoyed reading the charges which he had manufactured himself, and he savored his own words. It took less than one hour for Kadar the Prosecutor to complete the indictment; then Kadar

the Judge mopped his sweating brow with a large handkerchief and pronounced sentence.

". . . death!" he shouted, pounding his fist on the bench.

The sentence was to be carried out immediately. And immediately the sixty prisoners were marched off under armed guard. Eva and Nagy marched off holding hands.

Kadar Lazlos glared; then he rose from the judicial bench and followed the condemned.

The execution took place in a forest clearing on the edge of town—near the lake where, a year ago, the people of Ujpest had laughed and made love during the wine festival. Nonchalantly smoking a Russian cigarette, Kadar watched the condemned people dig their own graves —Nazi fashion—and topple in as the firing squad shot them in the back.

The day after the execution, Kadar sat behind the judge's bench in the courtroom, seeking to recapture the ecstatic sensation of the previous day. Smug, satisfied, he leaned back and relived his triumph. After a while he looked about him. His glance was caught by an envelope—a plain, white envelope lying on the dark wood of the bench. It was addressed to him. Curious, he opened it.

On a single sheet of plain white paper was written: *Kadar Lazlos, go to the forest and look at the graves—and then remember.*

What did it mean? Kadar's neck became red. Who had the insolence to write such an order to the Chief of the Secret Police? He frowned and pounded his desk in summons. One of his agents rushed in at the double, but before his Chief could question him, the agent cried, "Comrade Chief, the graves!"

"What about them?" Kadar asked.

"They've been disturbed. Two bodies have been removed."

Kadar shook his fist in the agent's face. "What nonsense is this? Who would dare?" he spluttered. Then he laughed. "You stupid fool, don't you know that bodies can't dig themselves out of graves!"

But Kadar Lazlos could not have been sure—he went to the forest to see for himself.

And there he saw. There could be no mistake. At the very end of the long line of graves, beneath two rows of stately oaks, a pair of black holes gaped at him mockingly—two empty graves where Eva and Nagy should have remained forever.

Kadar was puzzled and enraged. He ordered a search of the countryside. Nothing was found to explain the disappearance of the two bodies. No one saw Captain Lazlos laugh or even smile that day, or in the next few days.

Weeks went by and he began to forget the incident.

Then, one evening, he attended an official Party function in Budapest. Strutting about in a heavily bemedalled uniform, he enjoyed

seeing Party officials—the lesser ones—move away as he passed them. But there also were important Party members to whom he paid court. And there was champagne, Russian champagne which Kadar liked.

He drank and strutted. Passing by a group of people who paid no attention to him, he heard—or thought he heard—his name called.

"Kadar . . . Kadar Lazlos . . ."

He turned sharply and looked at the nameless faces in the crowd.

"Kadar Lazlos—remember Eva and Nagy!"

The whispered words seemed to brush his ears. He searched the faces around him. No one looked at him. The whisper—if there had been one—could have come from anyone, or perhaps from no one.

"Did anyone call me?" he questioned at large.

Heads turned, eyes stared at him, and the heads shook silently.

Kadar shrugged and moved on. There was a place by the buffet which was temptingly near the champagne. He stood there and drank by himself. No one offered to keep him company.

"Kadar . . . remember, Kadar!"

He whirled, his face scarlet. The whisper had come from the crowd of party officials all about him. One of these was of such high rank that by comparison Kadar was a mere underling. Without noticing this exalted personage, Kadar barked, "Who spoke to me?" No one troubled to answer him. Blind with rage, he bellowed, "Who called me?"

The high official glared at him. "No one spoke to you, Comrade Captain. And if you can't hold your liquor any better, you should not drink."

Kadar quickly came to his senses, apologized, and slunk away. He drank no more that evening. The official had been right—perhaps that Russian champagne had played a trick on his imagination.

This was just the beginning.

After that there were many occasions when he found himself near a group of people talking together, and again heard the whisper. But whenever he searched the crowd for the faceless whisper, he saw nothing but voiceless faces. And whenever he asked, "Who called me?" people looked at him as though he were mad.

After a while the whisperless days became more nerve-wracking in their unfulfilled expectation. He dreaded hearing the disembodied voice, and his nerves throbbed when he did not hear it. Soon he began to hear whispers when there were none. He took to the bottle, but drunk or sober it made no difference. He arranged to be transferred to another district; and after a while the whisper followed him there.

He had to do something, to get away, far away. At last an opportunity came to him. There was a minor opening on the staff of the delegation to the United Nations.

Kadar was a good Communist who would not desert once in a capitalist country. He got the job.

Landing at Idlewild, he breathed with relief. Here was freedom at last. Not the stupid freedom bleated by the stupid, decadent capitalists—but freedom from those whispers. For the first time in two years he laughed.

As the whisperless days went by, Kadar, who had become thin beyond belief, got fat again on capitalist butter and cream. He became his old self and began to think that America was a pretty good country. All it needed was a small revolution and a few purges.

Almost a year went by and then one day, suddenly, the whisper was there again. It happened in the United Nations Building as he was passing a group of tourists.

"Kadar . . . Kadar Lazlos . . . remember Eva and Nagy!"

The United Nations' guards had a little difficulty in restraining Kadar—he had literally gone berserk, and having knocked down a couple of visitors, was screaming that he would destroy them all.

The next day he was summoned by the head of his delegation and told that if he could not keep sober he would have to be sent home. No further words were necessary to clarify the implications of this banishment.

But this had just been the beginning—the re-beginning rather. Now that the whisper had come back it continued to haunt Kadar just as it had in Hungary. He became despondent, and walking in search of silence he dragged his feet like an old man. What could he do? How and where could he get away from this terrible nemesis—"Kadar . . . remember Eva and Nagy!"

So it was that on a muggy Friday afternoon last summer, Kadar left the United Nations to seek the comparative peace of his furnished room in uptown Manhattan, and stood gazing at infinity on the subway platform in Grand Central Station.

A distant rumble from the tunnel announced an approaching train and fanned a wave of soggy, warm air toward the platform. Suddenly the head of the lone man at the end of the platform jerked as though pulled by an invisible string. He faced the crowd, searching with fearful eyes, listening tensely. Then he froze.

Then just as suddenly he stepped forward, as if pushed by an invisible force, and as the train roared in, toppled over the edge of the platform. There was a long, piercing scream, then the screech of the wheels as they braked to a grinding stop.

The station came alive and swarmed with the excitement of a disturbed hive. People shrieked, and amid shouts and questions the police arrived. Minutes later the lifeless body was removed from under the train wheels and carried away by white-coated men. The police hustled and bustled and

questioned this one and that one. "Did you see anything?" Most people had observed nothing—few people in a crowd ever do. Some denied seeing anything because they did not want to get mixed up in it. But one man volunteered that he thought he had heard something like a whisper just before the man fell. "It sounded like . . . well, like Chinese," he suggested.

"Nonsense," objected another. "I heard it too, but it sounded Russian."

"How d'you know?" asked the policeman. "D'you understand those languages?"

"Of course not! It's just that—well, it sounded *foreign*."

Whatever the police thought, they shrugged their broad, blue-coated shoulders, and shook their blue-capped heads. And since no one had seen the man actually jump or being pushed, they concluded that he must have fallen to his death accidentally.

At Kossuth's, the Hungarian restaurant on 79th Street where they still serve real Tokay, the three-piece orchestra plays gypsy music and nostalgic songs from the old country.

At ten o'clock every night Imre Kossuth gets up and moves over to the microphone by the piano. He raises his hand and waves for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announces, "I now take great pleasure in introducing my good friend, Bela Matyas. He will perform for your entertainment one of the most unusual acts of ventriloquism ever to be presented in America . . ."

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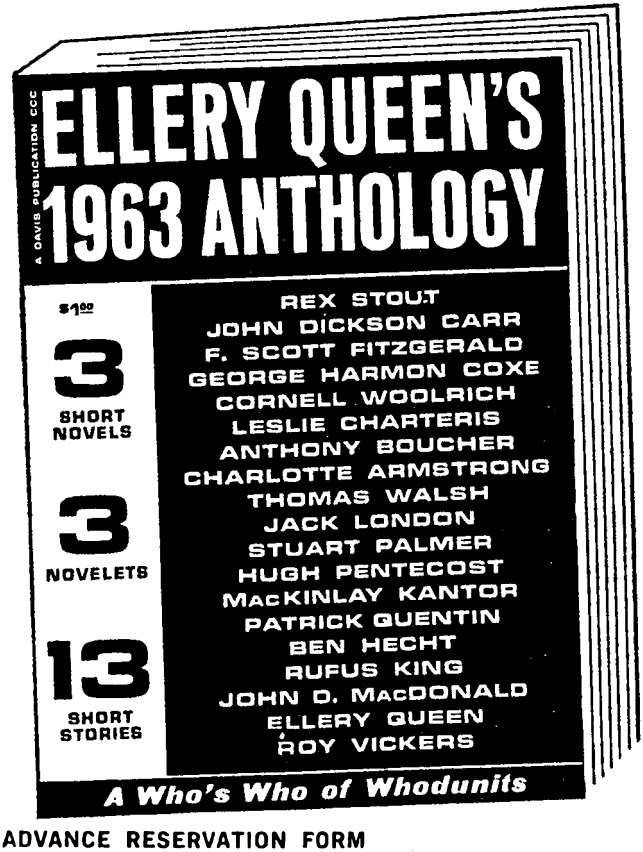

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **CHARLES B. CHILD**

TITLE: ***The Holy-Day Crimes***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Chafik

LOCALE: Baghdad, Iraq

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The master detective of Baghdad versus the master thief of Baghdad—in a case that involved an "invisible man," royal pearls —and murder . . .*

INSPECTOR CHAFIK OF THE BAGHDAD police, a sleek man in a cool white suit, stood near the gateway of the al-Waqi'ah Mosque in the old part of the city, tapping his foot impatiently. It was the hour of *zuhr,* the day was Friday—the Moslem Sabbath—and the Inspector had an appointment with his son to attend the noon service.

"If I had made *my* father so wait, the application of a slipper would have justly rewarded me!" Chafik announced to the holy man who squatted in the shade of the temple wall.

Chafik had a thin, swarthy face, prominent cheekbones, and a long narrow head on which a black *sidarah* was set precisely. He was a proud man; his upper lip, below his neat mustache, curved arrogantly, and he had a trick, when speaking, of rising on his toes to give an illusion of stature.

Thought led to thought as the Inspector considered the punishment due his son; and as was his habit when agitated, he began to talk to himself. "The metaphorical chastisement I received this day from my director was not justified," he said aloud. "Am I the only policeman in Baghdad? Are there not others to prevent this series of holy-day crimes? Why . . ."

His voice became shrill. He heard it and was embarrassed by

the presence of the ragged holy man, who raised astonished eyes from his work of molding beads of clay, mixed with dust from a saint's tomb, which were sold as charms. The holy man had a wisp of hennaed beard, the badge of one who had been to Mecca, and the sunken cheeks of a fanatic.

"Heed me not," Chafik said. "Anger has loosened my mischievous tongue. Nothing, alas, can loosen yours, Husain the Voiceless."

He patted the dumb man's shoulder and watched him engrave on the finished bead the Arabic characters for "the Pardoner," one of the many names of God given in the Koran. Husain set the amulet in the sun to bake and immediately started another. He was a permanent part of the street scene, familiar as its cobblestones.

The chanting of the worshipers disturbed the doves that nested on the blue dome of the mosque, and Chafik looked up as they rose in a swirling cloud. There, where the birds flew, was peace; below, in the tortuous streets of the drab city, stalked a menace that had outwitted the best efforts of the police.

The crimes had begun five weeks before, and all had taken place on Friday, when business premises and cafés were closed and the mosques were thronged. Robbery was the motive and the victims were the gold- and silversmiths who traded in Baghdad's ancient bazaars. There had been terrorism, brutal clubbings, and no witness had dared come forward.

Chafik checked over the precautions he had taken this Friday. He had divided into small areas the warren of covered ways that extended along the left bank of the Tigris River, and he had assigned plainclothesmen to patrol them. A mobile squad of picked officers under the charge of his personal assistant, Sergeant Abdullah, was strategically located to cordon off any sector where trouble arose.

Secrecy was essential, and to explain his own presence in the old part of the city, Chafik had arranged to meet his son for the *zuhr* service; he was known in Baghdad as a devout man, so it was natural he should attend a mosque.

Chafik J. Chafik, what a hypocrite you are! he reproved himself; but God has lovingkindness and will surely understand.

Nervously he toyed with the heavy signet ring on his left hand and looked up and down the street, aware that the underworld would destroy him if the lash of his authority lost its sting.

The neighborhood policeman, Officer Yusif, went by and Chafik made a mental note to chide the man for so elaborately pretending not to see him. Impatiently he looked at his watch and raised the dividend of punishment due his tardy son.

There was a clatter of feet in the

empty street. A small boy, running, turned the corner and the Inspector sighed with relief. Forgotten was anger and the thought of corporeal reprimand; fondly he looked at the boy who came to him with head hanging.

Faisal was an adopted son, and in a flashback Chafik saw the ragged urchin, a waif of the bazaars, whom he had taken into his childless home. He had never regretted the impulse, nor had Leila, his wife of twenty happy years. Little Faisal had filled the only gap in their lives.

Alarmed by the boy's unusual humility, the doting father said, "Fear time, my son, do not fear me. We are both slaves to the hours."

Faisal continued to hang his head and Chafik said in a sharper voice, "Look up! Eye should meet eye when men talk."

"My father, it is because of the eye I do not look up."

Chafik put a hand under his son's chin and raised the heart-shaped face. One of Faisal's eyes was brimming over with tears. The other, closed to a slit, was encircled by a darkening bruise.

"So! You fight on the holy day!"

"It was not that I wanted to fight, my father—truly, I was very meek and took their insults. But when they said you could not catch a crook even if he was under your nose, and that your nose was a big one, then I—"

"Who are 'they'?"

"My men, my father."

The Inspector knew that Faisal referred to the pack of waifs who infested the bazaar. The boy had kept in touch with his old friends, and, inspired by Leila, encouraged them to become useful citizens. Now, the threatened prestige of his father had lost him face, and his leadership of the gutter children was at stake.

And so it begins, Chafik thought. The jackal pups yap at my heels and soon their sires will come to feast on me . . .

Faisal, wound up, was saying, "And it was George, the red-haired one, who said that about your nose, my father, and you know George, his father was an English soldier in the war and his mother one of the women who—"

"Enough!"

"He hit me and I hit him and he blacked my eye and I hurt my hand on his teeth and we fell to the ground and—and he got up and kicked me and I punched him until he cried and—"

"You and I," Chafik interrupted, "suffer alike. My director reprimands me, your 'men' challenge you. Truly we need prayer's comfort!"

He stopped in the gateway of the mosque to look back and saw the local patrolman pass again. Husain the Voiceless had removed his ragged gown and now squatted in his loincloth as he searched for the unwelcome guests that lodged on his emaciated person.

"Do you see what he is doing, my father?" exclaimed Faisal with the embarrassing clarity of youth. "All my years I have never seen the like! Holy men *never* destroy the little things that bite. They say they were sent to keep us awake to recite the Koran, and—"

"Come, Faisal," said Chafik, "let us put our minds to sweeter subjects."

He knelt to remove his shoes and then, hand in hand with his son, walked humbly into the cool, whitewashed interior of the temple.

An hour passed. They had listened to the imam's sermon and commenced the ritual that followed. Inspector Chafik, at peace for the first time in days, stood with hands to his ears to pray. His glowing eyes were fixed on the vault of the dome, where crystal chandeliers vibrated to the chant of the worshipers.

The little man's spiritual concentration was interrupted by Faisal, who tugged at his father's coat, pointed to the courtyard, and whispered excitedly, "Sergeant Abdullah is here, my father!"

A massive man, dark as a mahogany carving, was outside, walking toward the temple. The buttons of his uniform flashed the fire of the sun, and the holster of his gun, polished by wear, was no less bright. His shadow moved ominously before him, and the man stopped at the threshold of the holy place to signify he was here for other duty than prayer.

Chafik said, "Alas! I am not to gain a merit in heaven this day!"

He told Faisal to stay until the service ended and then go home. He stepped over the prostrate worshipers and joined his assistant.

One glance at the gaunt, expressionless face of Sergeant Abdullah was enough, and the Inspector put on his shoes and followed the man to the gate.

"Are you as voiceless as Husain here?" he demanded when they were in the street.

"No, sir, but I could not talk on a secular subject within those sacred precincts—"

"You croak like a bird of ill omen!"

"Yes, sir, I regret to—"

"Another raid?" Chafik suddenly felt cold in the sun.

"On the premises of Elias Samoon, the jeweler, sir. So far as I can ascertain, they took only certain pearls entrusted to Samoon, who was to prepare a necklace for one of the royal princesses. And that is not all . . ."

Abdullah's dark eyes filled with compassion for his superior as he finished. "This time it is murder, sir!"

They went at once to the jeweler's shop not far from the mosque. Inspector Chafik curved his fingers to his forehead, completed the salaam, and said to the corpse, "Elias Samoon, we are both victims of my

failure. The club that killed you destroyed me too."

Sergeant Abdullah interrupted. "Sir, you did all that was possible!"

"When a cracked pitcher returns empty from a well it goes on the rubbish heap," was the Inspector's bitter reply.

He raised the head of the old jeweler. Samoon's thin skull had been crushed by the first blow, yet the intruder had continued the beating—to make sure, Chafik decided. Samoon must have recognized the man, who therefore had to kill him.

Chafik looked at the safe, expertly blown, at the still-crowded trays of bracelets and rings; there was a gap in the otherwise untouched display and he questioned his assistant.

"The pearls were there earlier, sir," Abdullah answered positively. "You may remember I was personally entrusted with their delivery to the deceased."

Chafik nodded. He wondered how the presence of the royal pearls here had become known, and thought perhaps the jeweler, Samoon, had boasted of his appointment to the court—so natural when an artist, and an old one, had arrived at his zenith.

The pearls were rare black ones, perfectly matched, incredibly valuable. The raider had wisely avoided the temptation to take any of the bulkier pieces, which would have been difficult to hide.

"So he curbed his appetite; he has admirable discipline," said Chafik. "Such a man will go a thousand miles and wait years before he disposes of his loot. What action have you taken, Abdullah?"

"I have closed the bazaar, sir. Nobody can go in or out."

"There are so many ratholes, and we have no description of the particular rat that was here. What about the patrolling officer?"

"The thief incapacitated him, sir. We found him in a doorway and he is still unconscious. The alarm was given by the man in the next sector."

"When did you arrive?"

Sergeant Abdullah frowned. "There was delay," he confessed. "I had deployed my squad to the goldsmiths' bazaar to seize an unsavory individual. One named Abu Nahabi, sir. I detained him for loitering."

"Abu Nahabi, Father of Thieves," said Chafik. "An underworld character of note. He has the brains to stage these raids but I am doubtful of his patience. I will interrogate him later; he may have served as decoy."

The little man lighted a cigarette and drew gently on it to make it burn evenly. He noticed fragments of dried mud on the floor, possibly brought in on the killer's feet, and bent to sweep them up.

"No witnesses?" he asked Abdullah.

"Like yourself, sir, the devout of

Baghdad were at prayer and the bazaar was deserted. The deceased, of course, was not of our faith; so unfortunate—otherwise he might be alive. However, there is a woman who claims she saw a man running, a man wearing a cloth over his head."

"How does she describe him?"

"Tall, short, lean and fat, the usual confusion. But she insists he ran down the Street of the Weavers, which leads to the mosque, sir."

"Perhaps the policeman who patrols there saw him."

The Inspector put the fragments of dried mud he had found into an envelope, slipped it into his pocket, and went out.

The al-Waqi'ah Mosque was five minutes away and he found Yusif, the local officer, standing at the gate watching the holy man, who was still absorbed in his devout work. Yusif shook his head when Chafik questioned him. "I saw nobody, sir."

"Then we deal with an invisible man! Did nothing untoward happen on your patrol? Nothing?"

Yusif hesitated; he was a good officer, but dull and factual. "I—— imagined something . . ." he said.

"We are informed by learned doctors of psychiatry that imagination is the picturing power of the human mind, triggered by an actual event. Therefore, my dear Yusif, do not blush; kindly tell me your experience."

"Sir, it is absurd," Yusif said, "but after you entered the mosque and I returned on patrol, I had the illusion—I—it was as if a house was missing from the street, sir!"

Chafik was disgusted. "A house had disappeared, eh?" Doubtlessly you have sunstroke!" he said dryly. He turned to question Husain the Voiceless.

The holy man answered by inscribing in the dust with his forefinger the word meaning "nothing," and returned to his task of bead making. There was a pile of freshly molded amulets in front of him, and on each one he engraved the Koranic name for "the Protector."

"Apparently sacred charms, like secular merchandise come in popular lines," said Chafik.

He lighted a cigarette and over the flame saw a redheaded urchin dart from an alleyway. The boy's freckled face was bruised and when he opened his mouth and shouted, "Yah, Father of Noses!" he exposed a gap where a tooth had recently been knocked out.

Dirt, flung with deadly aim, spattered the Inspector's jacket; the boy was gone before Sergeant Abdullah, outraged, could move.

Chafik stopped his assistant's pursuit, saying, "It is true my nose is over-large and I cannot see the evil under it. Moreover, Abdullah, my son has already punished George."

He walked away, head high, his

eyes alive with shadows, like the warning shadows of vultures gathered to a desert kill.

They were holding Abu Nahabi, the Father of Thieves, in a nearby police station, and Chafik interviewed him in a bare, whitewashed room. The man, arrested on suspicion, was truculent and leaned over the Inspector's desk and shook his manacled fists.

"Can a citizen not walk in the bazaar?" he shouted. "I demand my rights!"

Inspector Chafik put a box of cigarettes at his left elbow, an ashtray to his right. He sat and smoked and was silent until the first butt was discarded; then he said softly, "You shall have your rights."

"That's more like it!"

"The right to pray before they hang you," the Inspector added.

"What? What?" Abu Nahabi's choleric face went gray.

"The right to cleanse your soul with confession before it stands before God for judgment," Chafik continued. "Elias Samoon is dead. Even if you did not do it, the diversion created by your presence in the goldsmiths' bazaar confused my men—made it possible for another ruthless individual to go to Samoon—so at the least you are an accomplice. And an accomplice to murder is hanged."

The little man tidily arranged the discarded butts in the ashtray. "I commend you to the hangman," Chafik went on conversationally. "Fear him not, he is experienced. He will strap you and take you to the scaffold and stand you on the trap; he will put a white hood over your head, lodge a noose under your chin, and drop you fluttering into eternity. The snap of your overlong neck will be the last sound you will hear."

The Father of Thieves went to his knees. "Sir, sir! Not I! I did not kill Samoon!"

"Then who?" Chafik demanded, his voice calm.

"The hooded one, the leader—"

Chafik remembered the woman who had seen a hooded man running in the bazaar. "So there is such a man!" he exclaimed. "Name him, thief!—perhaps I can save you from the scaffold."

Abu Nahabi cried, "He calls himself Ali Rafah and he lives at the house of Zeinab on the Street of the Fountain. He did this killing—not I!"

"Describe Mr. Rafah."

"A man of medium build, thin. I never saw his face; he keeps it covered. A disease has eaten it—"

"And his soul! How long have you been his lieutenant?"

"Six months."

"Oh, faithful servant! How well you served the Devil! And what have been your wages?"

"Nothing yet. He said we must wait, that the things taken must be passed cautiously."

The Inspector considered this.

then chattered aloud to himself, "Just as I thought—patience. Also a persuasive personality and the ability to command authority. What a man!" He toyed with his signet ring, looked casually at the Father of Thieves, and said in a monotone to Sergeant Abdullah, "Remove him: I am reminded of creatures that live under stones."

When the sergeant had taken the man out and then returned, Chafik said, "H'm! It's curious."

"Sir?"

"The Street of the Fountain, where this Rafah fellow lives, is in the neighborhood of the al-Waqi'ah Mosque. I was so close to him and didn't know!"

They went to make their call on Ali Rafah. The house was built around a court where a dusty palm tree struggled for life, like the people who lodged in the sordid rooms.

Chafik said to the woman, Zeinab, who owned the place, "O mother of Cockroaches, where hides Ali Rafah?"

"Respect my sex, thou Father of Noses!" shrilled the hag, and Sergeant Abdullah inserted his foot before she could slam the door. "All right!" Zeinab grumbled. "But why do you want Rafah, that quiet one?"

"You admire quietness?"

"I do not like voices that hiss like snakes, such as yours."

The Inspector held his tongue and followed the woman up the stairs. When they passed a dark cave in the wall, he asked. "What lives there?"

"One who has more merit than you," Zeinab answered tartly. "I give it as a godly gift to that holy man who sits at the mosque gate."

"You mean the amulet maker?" Chafik looked in; there was a straw pallet, a tattered blanket, a bowl for food, foulness and the scampering of rats. "Truly your charity will be rewarded in heaven, Mother!" he said ironically.

They went to the top floor, where Zeinab stopped and drummed on a locked door. "He lodges here, the quiet one."

"Why do you call him 'quiet'?"

"Rafah gives no trouble. He goes out when it is dark and comes back when it is dark. During the day he stays soundless in his room."

"When did he come?"

Zeinab considered "Some seven months ago. I remember it was a month after I took in the holy man, Husain." She beat on the door again. "Strange! Rafah must be there. I did not see him go out."

The Inspector looked at the sergeant. Abdullah applied his shoulder and pushed the door in, deaf to the screeching of the woman. "Empty, sir," he intoned.

Nobody had lived in this room for a long time. The air was stale and the floor carpeted with dust. Chafik's shoulders drooped with defeat, and then straightened as he turned to the landlady.

"Did you lie to me, old woman?" he asked in a deadly calm voice.

She stared blankly into the room. "Rafah lives here! Every week he comes to me and pays the rent. He lives here! Would you have me doubt my eyes?"

"Surely those inquisitive eyes see everything Or almost," Chafik added thoughtfully. "Did you perchance see his face?"

"It is covered. He said he had had an illness, and—"

The Inspector shrugged. "The same story, a faceless man; he lived here yet did not live here. Alas, old woman! You gave lodging to a jinni!"

Zeinab fled in terror, and Chafik, amused, pulled up a chair to the rickety table. He sat with elbows propped on the table, his chin in his hands. Sergeant Abdullah leaned against the wall, resignation on his dark face.

Time was measured by the pyramid of cigarette butts piled in a saucer. After a while Chafik said conversationally to himself, "Rafah went to her and paid his rent; she never had to come to this room. Now that's important, and so is his quietness. Oh, he was here, all right. She saw him go in and out and she sees everything. But what did he do all day? And how did he get out on Fridays in daylight without her seeing him?"

Chafik pulled at his tie and shouted, "The fellow's a Houdini! Look at that unimaginative cluck, Yusif, I had posted at the mosque: he had a tale about a house disappearing when Rafah was about!"

The Inspector's thoughts were diverted and he scratched himself, grumbling, "Bah! there are lice here in this filthy hole!" His thin face lighted up with humor and he said, mimicking the falsetto of his son, "They were sent to keep us awake so we can recite the Koran, my father."

Suddenly he stood up, so abruptly the chair fell over. "Abdullah!" he called.

"Sir?"

"Reprimand me—I had forgotten something."

Chafik took an envelope from his pocket and carefully poured onto the table the fragments of dried mud he had swept from the floor of the murdered jeweler's shop.

"Clay," he murmured, and he carefully picked out the larger pieces and fitted them together. Finally he had enough and turned wordlessly to his assistant.

The sergeant said, "Sir, I observe it is a beadlike object and there is an inscription on it: one of the names of God, sir."

" 'The Just,' " said Chafik, "And I remember another name—'the Protector,' " he added.

Abdullah, now excited, exclaimed, "This is one of the amulets made by the holy man who sits at the mosque! The killer of Elias Samoon must have carried it

as a talisman. Therefore at some recent time he must have bought it from Husain. Therefore Husain may remember him. Therefore—"

"Therefore do not put the untrained horse so eagerly to the fence!" Chafik interrupted. "However, I am encouraged by your reasoning. Kindly go to the jail where we hold Abu Nahabi, the Father of Thieves, and—"

"He is to hang?" the sergeant asked hopefully.

"In due course, without a doubt. Meantime, release him and warn him by his neck to attend at the al-Waqi'ah Mosque with his fellow jackals. And, old friend—"

"Sir?"

"Telephone my home. Tell my son to gather his 'men' and bring them to the same place. Particularly I require the presence of a boy, George; he criticized my nose."

The sunset prayer had yet to be called when Inspector Chafik drove up in an open car and made a characteristic entrance. His shoulders were squared, the white jacket was perfectly set, and he was careful to turn his fine profile to the audience as he lighted a cigarette.

They were all there, the mob that Abu Nahabi had obediently gathered under the whip of fear. A group of urchins of assorted sizes and ages had been marshaled in the background by Faisal, who basked in his father's rediscovered authority.

Chafik made an ironic salaam and went to stand on the mosque steps near Husain the Voiceless. The holy man, disturbed by the gathering, pouched his amulets and shuffled away.

The Inspector gave a prearranged signal, and Sergeant Abdullah, master of ceremonies, ushered in the neighborhood policeman, who obviously disapproved of the performance in his street.

"Ah, Yusif, how your light runs before you!" Chafik said with gentle sarcasm. "Look about, faithful one, and tell me if the house has disappeared again."

Yusif ignored the audience and examined the street brick by brick. He frowned and then cried, "Indeed a house has disappeared! What a woodenhead I am, sir. The holy man isn't here; it was his absence I noticed the other time!"

Two plainclothesmen escorted Husain the Voiceless back to the mosque steps. The dirty and emaciated man clung to his hennaed beard and kept his eyes humbly lowered.

"I need all on my stage, and you went out on the wrong cue—for you," said the Inspector. "And you went so quietly, just as you always do, Husain the Voiceless, Rafah the Quiet . . ."

The silence in the street made it unnecessary for Chafik to raise his voice as he went on, "I know by my records there was a maker of amulets named Husain who lived in the

holy city of Kerbela. Perhaps he died, perhaps he was murdered, but a man who resembled him came to Baghdad eight months ago and was given lodging by the virtuous Zeinab. A month later one who called himself Ali Rafah, and who hid his face, came to the same house; yet he never occupied the room he rented. I submit this was the same man, holy by day and a thief by night.

"This man is clever, very clever," continued Chafik. "Least of all was he suspected by the policeman who patrols this street. Yusif is too familiar with the scene; he did not see when Husain went away to do murder—he thought a house had disappeared!"

Then the Inspector said with pride, "It was a boy—my son—who noticed the major error. Holy men do not destroy the little things that bite them; they believe them to be blessed, sent to keep them awake to recite the Koran." He turned to Husain and reproachfully shook his head.

Husain still fingered his beard, but his eyes were watchful and on the mob.

"You fear them? Did you plan to cheat them?" Chafik asked, deliberately raising his voice. "Were you going to go away with the loot and leave them to hunt the sewers of Baghdad for their faceless leader? And where is all that loot, where are the pearls? What have you here, Husain the Voiceless, Rafah the Quiet?"

Chafik snatched the leather pouch the man wore at his side and opened it. He took out a clay bead and held it up. "This is one of many inscribed 'the Protector,'" he announced. "A jest he played with me when he rolled them in my presence, but not a nice jest to play thus with a name of God."

Between strong fingers the clay crumbled as Abu Nahabi and his friends pushed forward, their feet shuffling on the cobblestones. Inspector Chafik showed them the black pearl hidden in the amulet.

"Find your voice and confess, murderer!" he said to the silent man. "Or shall I leave you to them?"

He got into the police car, and as it moved slowly away, the mob surged in on the criminal like a tide.

Clubs and knives came from under tattered robes. They were a jackal pack, the gutter sweepings of Baghdad, blind with hate and wanting blood.

"Kill!" came the cry. "Kill! Kill!"

And stones began to fly.

Husain ran after the police car. He clutched at the rear but could not hold it and fell; he got up and ran again. Stones battered him, and he shrieked, "Mercy! By the Compassionate One! Mercy!"

Chafik looked back and smiled. "God has so many names," he said. "One is 'the Just,' which was on the amulet you left by accident with Samoon's body!"

"Mercy! They'll kill me! They —"

"Confess!"

"I killed Samoon! I didn't intend —he came on me and knocked the cloth from my face and recognized me as Husain. I had to kill him then!"

The Inspector ordered the car to stop, and Sergeant Abdullah dragged the man to safety just in time. As they picked up speed, Chafik stood and called over the mob to his son, who ran with other whooping urchins in the rear.

"Faisal!"

"Yes, my father!"

"Tell George he is quite right, I do have a big nose—the better to smell criminals with, my son!"

Inspector Chafik, ego repaired, lighted a cigarette.

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Wally the Watchful Eye and the dandy little bank robbery . . .

WALLY AND THE COUNTRY COUSIN

by PAUL W. FAIRMAN

The Watchful Eye Detective School
Parker Building
New York, New York

Dear Wally:

It will no doubt bolster your ego a great deal to know that my youthful cousin, Chester Suggs, is one of your ardent admirers. He is visiting me here in New York and all he talks about is the Watchful Eye Alumni Reunion that you arranged with my help when I furnished you with a list of graduates. Also, your Share-the-Crime idea—when, through use of the Watchful Eye Fingerprint Kit (furnished free to each student with the course) and the training you received from Watchful Eye, you were able to apprehend a notorious confidence man.

Which brings me to the reason for this letter. Chester, a handsome lad of twenty-two, arrived here unexpectedly and caught me at a busy time. I find myself unable, at the moment, to show him around New York City, and because he is a small-town boy like yourself, I don't want him to roam around the big city alone.

So I suggested that he take a train upstate and "meet his idol," as he rather childishly put it. He likes fishing and hunting and I believe you once wrote that there are many fish-bearing lakes around Lettyville. So if you'll just put him up at the local hotel (I assume you do have one), I'm sure he'll be no trouble to you. Also, I know you'll be glad to do me this little favor in return for all the extracurricular help you've received from Watchful Eye.

Sincerely,
John Hayden, President

Dear Johnny:

Great to hear from you again, old pal, and we certainly do have a lot of lakes around Lettyville. Most of them are pretty deep but there is one

shallow one—Lake Gumpert, named after a great-uncle of mine who once got a prize at the County Fair for catching the heaviest fish until they found out he'd filled it with buckshot. I mention this shallow lake because if Chester can't be trusted to walk in the street alone he probably shouldn't be allowed to go near deep water, and we're running a big sale at the grocery store where I work (until I get my private detective license) so I won't have much time for him.

But of course I'm always happy to go out of my way for a pal like you, Johnny.

Yours for lasting friendship,

Wally

P.S. By the way, does Chester have an Adam's apple like a billiard ball he couldn't quite swallow? Also, do his eyes pop out and does he have bucktecth?

W.

Dear Watts:

Just because I ask a small favor of you, there is no need to become insulting. Perhaps I *am* a little prejudiced in Chester's favor but my sister Mabel is a very beautiful woman. Also, she is a fiercely devoted mother, so if anything happens to her son, explanations will get me absolutely nowhere.

I assume from your letter that Chester arrived safe and sound in Lettyville—I should have realized that the mails would be slow in such a backwoods area—and that perhaps he has already caught a record-sized fish. Incidentally, your not-too-subtle implication that Chester doesn't know his own name and thus can't introduce himself is in very poor taste.

Yours very truly,

John Hayden

Dear Johnny:

Maybe Chester knows his own name but he's not using it. He calls himself Marty Marlowe and says he's working under an alias. That's why I had to check with you. And I'm happy to report, old pal, that Chester is not in any danger at all. He's safe and sound in Sheriff Smiley Keenan's jail. The specials here at the store are keeping me so busy I haven't been able to spend much time with him but I do get over there once in a while and old Smiley lets us play gin rummy through the bars.

Wish I could give you more details but the rack of corn flakes is empty. Just wanted to let you know everything is all right with your country 'cousin.

Yours in haste,

Wally

WESTERN UNION

WALTER A. WATTS
LETTYVILLE, NEW YORK
TRIED TO PHONE YOU STOP FAILED STOP NOW YOU HAVE ME COMPLETELY HELPLESS STOP LETTER OF EXPLANATION ON WAY STOP IN MEANTIME PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE HELP CHESTER STOP ALSO LET ME KNOW DETAILS
JOHN HAYDEN

Dear Johnny:

Just a short note—the checkout counter here at the store is jammed—to give you a few more details about Chester. He's in for bank robbery. Oops! The boss is giving me the evil eye.

More later,

Wally

Dear Wally:

As soon as I got the terrible news—that Chester was in jail—I tried to phone you. But I kept getting an old lady who thought I wanted to buy eggs and wanted to know how many dozen she should ship. Tried to get her to relay a message to you but it was hopeless, so I gave up and wired you.

What happened here—the reason I'm helpless—is that I'm down with double pleurisy. It's an old recurring trouble of mine and I'm not allowed to even turn over in bed. So please send me details of poor Chester's horrible predicament. And for heaven's sake, do something for him! I am at your mercy. His mother would descend on me in all her fury if she knew—well, never mind that. Just help him—and me.

A man begging on his knees,

Johnny

Dear Johnny:

Got your last letter telling about the double pleurisy and figure you hadn't received mine telling you what Chester's in for at the time you wrote it. But I guess you have got it by this time. The way it happened was this:

We had a dandy little bank robbery here in Lettyville. The way Chester told it, he was walking past the bank when he saw three men robbing it. He rushed inside to take charge of the situation and overpowered one of the three men.

But it turned out that there were only *two* men robbing the bank. The third man was old Hardacre Hull, the president, trying to stop the other two. So all Chester really did was make a wrong guess and sat on old Hardacre while the two heistmen hauled away the loot.

This made old Hardacre so mad he had Chester arrested as an accomplice which, you will have to admit, he had a perfect right to do under the circumstances.

Sheriff Smiley Keenan did his best, which is also his worst. Of course, all he had to go on was a rubber hip boot that dropped out of their car when the holdup men made their getaway and a piece of front fender that Smiley blew off with his shotgun. He tried for fingerprints on the boot and didn't find any, but he did get the road blocks out in time and the heisters are probably back in their hideout.

By the way, Chester plays a pretty good game of gin rummy but I've taken him for $7.25. He's a little short and says I can collect from you. Please send it right away as I'm a little short myself. The way the case is working out—hold it!—the potato bin's empty.

More later,

Wally

WESTERN UNION

WALTER A. WATTS
LETTYVILLE NEW YORK
PLEASE DO SOMETHING FOR CHESTER STOP IF YOU ARE HOLDING OUT FOR THE MISERABLE SEVEN DOLLARS AND TWENTY-FIVE CENTS I AM REMITTING IT BY WIRE HEREWITH STOP GET CHESTER OUT OF JAIL STOP OBVIOUSLY IT WAS ALL A STUPID ERROR STOP HIRE THE BEST LOCAL LAWYER AVAILABLE TO PREVENT A TERRIBLE MISCARRIAGE OF JUSTICE STOP MY PLEURISY IS KILLING ME
JOHN HAYDEN

Dear Johnny:

Thanks a million for sending the seven and a quarter skins. As to Chester—don't worry. He's out of jail. Things slowed up a little here in the grocery store, so I ran out and showed old Smiley where the bank robbers were hiding while they were waiting for the road blocks to lift and I helped Smiley to pick them up.

By the way, I sold Chester my old fishing rod at a real bargain—$4.98—and he said you'd remit.

Hopefully,

Wally

Dear Watts:

I flatly refuse. Let Chester pay for his own fishing rod. Thanks for helping Chester—but I refuse to be the patsy again.

One small thing I've been wondering about. You've told me that the country around Lettyville is pretty wild—that a person could hide out there for a long time. So I'm wondering how you knew exactly where to put your hands on the two bank robbers. A small point, as I said, but I am curious.

Yours for freer exchange of information,

Johnny

Dear Old Pal:

You're right. There is no reason why you should foot Chester's bills. His mother should take care of them. So I'm going to make him write to her—he's been lax about that—and give her all the news about what's been happening to him. After all, a mother has a right to know such things.

Don't you agree?

Wally

WESTERN UNION

WALTER A. WATTS
LETTYVILLE NEW YORK
REMITTING FOUR DOLLARS AND NINETY-EIGHT CENTS HEREWITH STOP BUT THAT IS LIMIT STOP POSITIVELY STOP CHESTER TO TAKE NEXT TRAIN BACK TO CITY STOP POSITIVELY

JOHN HAYDEN

Dear Johnny:

Sorry I can't send Chester back to New York City on account of he's back in jail. About that question you asked. I told you there is only one lake hereabouts that's shallow enough to be safe—the only one that two bank robbers who are hiding out as fishermen could use hip boots in. That made it real simple.

The reason Chester is back in jail, he was in the store here and saw old Bill Whaley take a box of cookies off the shelf and walk out with it. Old

Bill does that every day and we just mark it up. But Chester didn't know that, so he followed him and made a citizen's arrest.

That made old Sam Whaley—Judge Sam Whaley who is old Bill's brother—hopping mad and old Sam had Chester arrested for crossing Main Street without stopping to look both ways—an old Lettyville ordinance that's never been repealed.

Old Sam fined Chester $20, the legal limit, so if you'll send it along I'll get Chester out and back to you in no time flat.

And by the way, old Nellie Quints says you owe her $9.13—for twelve dozen eggs you ordered when you telephoned and which she sent along in good faith. The $9.13 includes parcel post charges—hope the eggs arrived safe and sound. Please send $29.13 in total, and I'll distribute where it will do the most good.

It was wonderful doing you a favor, old pal, and any time you need another, don't forget your ardent admirer,

Walter A. Watts
(The A is for Alert)

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**BAYNARD KENDRICK**
TITLE:	***A Clue from Bing Crosby***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Duncan Maclain
LOCALES:	United States and Canada
TIME:	Just before Christmas
COMMENTS:	*Duncan Maclain, famous blind detective, uses his highly developed sense of hearing to solve the kidnaping of an industrialist's six-year-old son . . . and the great Bing Crosby helps.*

ON FRIDAY, DEC. 20TH, A WEEK to the day since six-year-old Ronnie Connaster had been kidnaped from Miss Murray's School, Arnold Cameron, Special Agent in Charge of the New York F.B.I., telephoned early in the morning to make an appointment with Captain Duncan Maclain. It was arranged for 10:00 A.M. in Maclain's penthouse office twenty-six stories above 72nd Street and Riverside Drive.

Cameron arrived promptly, bringing with him Special Agent Hank Weeks and Alan Connaster, Ronnie's father. The men were silent, grim.

Captain Maclain, an ex-Intelligence Officer blinded in World War I, had carried on the work of a Private Investigator with the aid of his partner, Spud Savage, for nearly forty years. To him being a Licensed P.I. was a dedicated profession. He hoped by developing his remaining four senses, hearing, feeling, taste, and smell to the highest point of proficiency to prove to the world that a blind man with sufficient intelligence could be just as good, if not a little bit better, than millions of people who had eyes with which to see.

Waiting for Cameron, the Captain had a gratified feeling that maybe after all these years he had at last succeeded. Duncan Maclain was no superman. He had certain

peculiar talents that had proved most useful through the years to various law enforcement agencies, among them the New York Police Department, and on several occasions the F.B.I.

He had known Arnold Cameron for a long time, and worked with him before Cameron became S.A.C. of the New York office. The Captain was the first to admit that neither he nor any private operator could get to first base without the cooperation of the local police or the F.B.I.

Cameron hadn't said what this case was about, except that it concerned the kidnaping of Connaster's six-year-old son. The Captain had heard about Alan Connaster, President and Treasurer of Connaster Products, Inc., the big plant that sprawled over acres on the edge of Long Island City. It was one of those industrial mushrooms that had grown in importance since World War II, mainly through Connaster's personality and engineering genius. The company did a lot of top-security defense work, but the F.B.I. was quite capable of handling any violations of security on their own. Kidnaping, too, for that matter.

At 9:55 Rena, the Captain's secretary showed the three men in. Maclain shook hands around. Cameron's grip was friendly as usual. Special Agent Hank Weeks was properly official, neither cold nor warm.

Alan Connaster wrung the Captain's hand with a grip that was full of despairing appeal. "Mr. Cameron thinks that you can help us, Captain Maclain. My son's been gone for a week now—more like a lifetime to Evelyn, my wife, and me. She has collapsed and is under a doctor's care. It isn't a question of money—I can pay a million and not be hurt. It's the life of my boy—our only child and we can never have another."

A strong man, Alan Connaster, the Captain judged. Six foot, slow spoken, powerful as flexible steel, and younger than one would imagine. From his voice—not yet forty. And right now he was on the verge of flying into little pieces.

Maclain went to the bar set in the paneled wall near the diamond-paned doors to the terrace. He sloshed a liberal portion of cognac into a bell goblet and took it to the red leather sofa where Connaster had slumped down.

"Slug it!" His face was grave with deep concern. "Your hand is as cold as a frozen fish. It won't help your boy if you crack now."

"Thanks. I guess you're right." Connaster downed the brandy in a gulp. "I'm afraid we're saddling you with a hopeless task."

"The world considers blindness hopeless. I haven't found it so." The captain walked to his broad flat-top desk and sat down. "You say your son has been missing for a week?"

"He was kidnaped last Friday, December thirteenth, at ten past three," Arnold Cameron said. "He'd been to a Christmas party at his school—Miss Murray's at 66th Street and Fifth Avenue. The Connasters live in a duplex at 82nd and Fifth—sixteen blocks away. Miss Murray saw Ronnie get into his father's Chrysler Imperial in front of the school at three ten. The car was driven by a substitute chauffeur, who called himself Jules Rosine.

"Rosine stuck up Leon Gerard, who has driven for the family for years, in Gerard's apartment on East 82nd Street—right across the street from the garage where the Chrysler is kept. That was about eleven the night before. Rosine wore a stocking mask. He forced Leon to telephone at gunpoint. Leon talked to Mrs. Murchison, the Connaster's housekeeper, said he was ill, and would send a reliable man to take his place the next day. Nobody thought it suspicious since it had happened a few times before. Leon is getting along in years and his health isn't too good."

Cameron paused. The Captain said, "If you fellows believe his story, then I do too."

"We don't believe anything until we've convinced ourselves that it's true," Cameron went on. "Weeks found and released Leon in his apartment shortly after the kidnaping was reported to us on the evening of the thirteenth. The poor old guy was trussed up like a turkey with adhesive. Anyhow, nothing has been seen of Ronnie or this Jules Rosine since ten past three in the afternoon a week ago."

A hopeless task, Connaster had said. The Captain ran a hand through his dark graying hair. The details of Charles A. Lindbergh, Jr., Bobby Greenlease, Jr., and the tiny month-old Peter Weinberger, all coolly murdered by their kidnapers, were much too vivid in his mind not to realize that Connaster's fears were well grounded.

He kept his thoughts to himself and tried to speak reassuringly. "I've known Arnold Cameron for many years, Mr. Connaster. Neither he nor the F.B.I. consider this hopeless or he wouldn't have brought you here to talk with me." His dark sightless eyes, so perfect that many people thought he could see, turned from Connaster to fix themselves on the S.A.C. "You must have some very good reason for thinking Ronnie is still alive, Arnold."

"We happen, in this case, to know he was alive on Tuesday or Wednesday, and probably yesterday."

"What proof?"

"The sound of his voice, Captain, plus an answer to a couple of questions asked by Ronnie's mother—answers that only Ronnie would know."

"Then you must have made contact by phone." The Captain's eyebrows went up a fraction.

"No. They're the ones who have been in touch," Cameron said. "One-way touch, by Audograph records. Three of them. You've told me often that you live in a world of sound. I also know that you're the best man living on identification of voices. Furthermore, you work with an Audograph all the time and are familiar with its sounds and foibles. Isn't that true?"

Maclain nodded. "I have one right here in my desk drawer." He referred to a compact efficient dictating machine used in thousands of business offices. Not more than nine inches square and five inches high, it records dictation on a flexible blue disc, and the dictation can be played back at the flip of a lever through its built-in loudspeaker, or through plugged-in headphones.

"Here's the first of the three—the first word from Ronnie's captors, for that matter, from Friday to Monday. Let the family suffer. Die a thousand deaths. It softens them up. I could—"

He broke off abruptly, leaned forward and put a brown manila envelope on the Captain's blotter. It was a standing mailing envelope for the feather-light discs. Seven inches square. Printed on the front was: GRAY AUDOGRAM FOR a space for the address—and below that the words PLEASE DO NOT FOLD. The envelopes, like the discs, could be obtained from any Audograph dealer in cities throughout the country.

For an instant the Captain stared at the envelope as though by sheer intentness, he might develop some superhuman power to penetrate its secret.

"That was mailed to Mrs. Connaster at her home," Cameron explained. "Air mail. It's postmarked: Miami, Florida, December fifteenth. That was last Sunday."

Maclain touched it gingerly with his forefinger. "I know what a working over you must have given these things. I was wondering about handwriting, or typing, on the address."

"Not this bird, Captain! He hasn't forgotten that we went through two million specimens of handwriting before we nailed LaMarca as kidnaper of the Weinberger baby. There's not even typewriting. No return address, of course. Mrs. Connaster's name and address has been stamped on with one of those kid's rubber stamps that has separate removable rubber letters. You can buy them in any toy store or Five and Ten."

The Captain took his Audograph machine from the deep bottom left-hand desk drawer. He put it on the desk, then brought up a hand microphone which he plugged into a six-slotted receptacle on the left-hand side of the machine. A switch in the handle of the mike controlled the playing of the record, turning it on when pressed in. For continuous playing, a flick of the thumb could lock the switch.

He took the record from the envelope, felt for the grooved side with his fingernail, and turning it upward put the record on the machine. Unlike a regular phonograph record, the Audograph recorded from the center to the edge.

The Captain slid it into place, turned on the machine, and pushed a lever over to LISTEN. A red indicator-light glowed. When recording, the light showed green. He locked the switch on the hand mike and laid the mike gently on the blotter beside the machine.

Out of nowhere the boyish treble of Ronnie Connaster's voice began to speak. Maclain reached out and turned the volume higher, as though that might help to bring the six-year-old closer to his home.

"*Mommy, mommy, can you hear me? The man says to tell you that I'm all right and that if I talk in here you can hear me. He says that daddy can hear me, too, and that if you do what the man says he'll bring me home. Mommy, please tell daddy to do what the man says. I'm all right, but I'm scared, mommy. I don't want to spend Christmas here. I'm doing just what the man tells me to. Please hurry and do what the man says. I don't want to spend Christmas here. I don't like it and the man says he'll bring me home. So, please hurry.*"

Ronnie's voice quit abruptly. For an endless length of time—actually a few short seconds—the record revolved in mechanical silence. Cameron lit a cigarette. Smoke reached the Captain's nostrils. Leather squeaked as Connaster moved uneasily on the red sofa.

A man's voice took up where the child's voice had stopped; a harsh voice:

"*Your son's been kidnaped, but he hasn't been harmed. It's to prove it that I'm letting him talk to you. You'll be better off if you keep the police out of this as well as the F.B.I. Press me too hard and you'll never hear his voice again, let alone see him. If you follow out instructions to the letter you'll have him back very shortly. In case you don't think that's your son who was speaking, I'm going to offer you further proof. Ask him any two questions you want—questions that only he can answer. Put it in a Personal in the New York Times of Tuesday, December the seventeenth. Sign it 'E.C.' You'll be answered by Ronnie on the next record we send to you. That's all for now. You'll never see me. Just call me: Junior.*"

"Is that all?" The Captain sat up straight in his chair.

"End of Record One," Cameron told him.

Maclain swiftly adjusted the disc to play the last few lines a second time.

Faintly, but clearly, through the man's last few words had come the sound of chimes pealing the opening bars of *Silent Night*. Then a singer had begun:

"Silent night,
Holy night,
All is—"

The song had ended with the click of the mike as the man said, "Junior."

"The musical interlude," Cameron said glumly, "is the first song on Side One of Bing Crosby's Decca Recording DL-8128, entitled *Merry Christmas.* Sales to date about two million. On the last report from our bunion-ridden Agents in Miami, they have found some two hundred radio, record, and music shops, supermarkets, drive-ins, and various other publicity-minded places of business, including second-hand-car lots that have P.A. systems working overtime. They have been deafening the public for a week or more to let them know the time of year. Number One on the Hit Parade is Bing's rendition of Christmas Cheer.

"We don't think Ronnie's in Miami, anyhow. This Jules Rosine —who is trying hard to make us believe that that's his name by calling himself Junior—from the initials J.R.—just doesn't strike me as the type, Captain, who would mail a letter or anything from the same city where he has that boy. As a matter of fact, he jumps around the country like a twelve-legged flea. The second record is from Kansas City and the third one is from Cleveland."

The Captain sat pinching his upper lip and saying nothing.

Cameron put the second envelope on his desk. "Here's the one where Ronnie answers his mother's questions. Mailed Wednesday, December the eighteenth. Air mail from K.C."

There was a tremor in the Captain's sensitive fingers as he removed the first record and put the second on.

"Mommy, the man says that you and daddy can hear me if I talk in here, but I don't see how you can hear me if I can't see you. He said I was to tell you what picture Ted Schuyler and I were going to see with Mrs. Murchison, and what I call my electric engine that pulls the train, and if I didn't tell you I wouldn't get back home. I thought you knew that Ted and I were going to see 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'—except daddy wanted me to come to the plant to meet him and I drank the Pepsi-Cola the chauffeur got me and got so sleepy. And you know my engine is called the Camel because it has a humpback in its middle. I know you told me not to repeat things, but the man said unless I told you that and unless daddy did just what he says, I won't get home for Christmas. I don't want to stay here. There's nobody to play with and I want to come home."

The man's voice took it up from there:

"That answers the questions you had in the Times and proves beyond doubt that your son's alive.

Nobody is trying to torture you. You'll see when we write again that we're not after money. It's possible that we have even more of that than you. The next will tell you what we do want. We know what you want, but don't think we're fooling. Stay away from the police and the F.B.I. and do exactly what I tell you or your precious son is going to die. Cheerio! Junior."

"Junior seems to have split himself in two," the Captain said as he took off the record. "The *man* has become *we*. Do you think it's merely a coverup, Arnold, or is there really someone else involved beside the man?"

"Anywhere from two to two million. They're after something more precious to them than money." He put the third record on the desk. "Listen to this one and you'll see."

Agent Hank Weeks said, "I'm betting there's a woman. Purely because they've kept Ronnie harping on *the man*."

The Captain nursed his chin for a moment. "I'm inclined to agree." He put the final record on.

"Do you mind if I have another brandy?" Alan Connaster's voice was tight and dry.

"Drink up," the Captain said. "Ronnie isn't my son, but nevertheless these records are really getting me."

Connaster poured his drink and returned to his seat. "They're somehow worse than ransom notes to Evelyn and me. They're sadistic. Mean. I find myself wanting to answer Ronnie. Scream at him: 'Tell me where you are!'—as though he were hiding away in some ghostly world of his own. It's unbearable."

"I'd merely sound inane if I tried to express my sympathy." A cold fury was setting the Captain's skin to tingling. "This is the one from Cleveland?"

"Mailed air mail yesterday. Thursday the nineteenth. It arrived in New York this morning at seven. We have a tag out for them at the Post Office. They notified us right away."

The Captain flipped the lever to LISTEN and started the disc to play.

"Mommy, did you hear what I told you about the picture show? The Seven Dwarfs? And my engine, the Camel, on the electric train? I wish that you and daddy would come for me, or answer me if you heard me, like the main said. He says he's telling daddy exactly what to do right now, and if daddy does it I'll come back home. Mommy tell him to hurry, please. Hurry and do it because I miss you so much and I want to see the Macy's parade and get my Christmas presents."

More unbearable silence until the man cut in:

"At six-o'clock, P. M.—eighteen hours Service Time—you and your pilot, Steven Donegan, will take off from the air strip at your plant on

Long Island, flying your Cessna Twin. You will file no flight plan with anyone. At your regular cruising speed of two-hundred-and-ten miles per hour, flying at eight thousand feet, you will follow the regular plane route from New York to Philadelphia, from Philadelphia to Baltimore, from Baltimore to Washington, from Washington to Richmond, from Richmond to Wilmington, North Carolina, from Wilmington to Charleston, South Carolina, from Charleston to Savannah, Georgia, from Savannah to Jacksonville, Florida, from Jacksonville to Daytona, from Daytona to Vero Beach, and from Vero Beach to Miami.

Be on the alert. Somewhere between two of the places named you will be contacted by radio. When contact is made, if you broadcast an alarm your son will be killed. Remember we'll be tuned in on you. We want the complete plans of the SF800T Missile. Those plans consist of forty-four sheets of blueprints that were delivered to you by the Navy a month ago. You are the only one living who has immediate access to them all. Those forty-four blueprints are the price of your son. Particularly the details of the cone.

Once they are received they will be checked immediately by engineers just as competent as you. If they are not approved, or any attempt at trickery is discovered, your boy will die. The clearer those specifications are, the quicker you get your son. Remember, it's his life that's at stake.

Put the plans in a large portmanteau—not a dispatch case—and weight the portmanteau with a couple of sash weights. Paint the portmanteau with phosphorescent paint and be ready to drop it on a moment's notice. You will be contacted by the words: 'Cessna, come down!' and you will immediately start descending to a thousand feet, still holding your course. Watch the ground. One minute before the Answer: Roger, Junior! and look for a red flasher that will turn on on top of a car. When you spot it say: Condition red! and drop the portmanteau as close as possible to the flasher.

You will be directed if you have to make a second try. Follow the straightest compass course between points and there will be no trouble. Another record will tell you where to pick up your boy. If weather reports are generally bad don't attempt to start. That's your hard luck and you'll have to make another try. Happy landings! Junior."

"Sounds like something from out of the wild blue yonder," Maclain said as he stopped the record. "A modern Chekhov nightmare manufactured in Moscow. What are the chances of pulling off such a scheme?"

"My pilot, Steve, says there's a damn good chance," Connaster told him. "I'm a pilot, myself, and I agree. Junior knows that we'll

break our necks to drop that luminous suitcase on his head, if possible. He also knows that the SF-800T is an ace we have in the hole. So I'm supposed to stake the life of my son against the safety of my country."

The Captain gnawed at his mustache. "At least the Soviets have one weakness that will never change: we know that it's impossible to fathom their way of thinking —but they fully believe that they know the thinking of every other country in the world. Now, it's the life of a child against the lives of untold millions. Tomorrow night! That's not much time to make up forty-four sheets of phony blueprints. What does the F.B.I. think, Arnold? What are you going to do?"

"Mr. Connaster is going to drop the plans as ordered," Cameron said promptly. "You're right about Soviet thinking. We've learned a lot since the days of Klaus Fuchs and Harry Gold. Today Naval Intelligence draws up two sets of plans—when the design is for anything as vital as the SF-800T. The second set is slightly different. To discover the bugs in it might take a corps of scientists half a year. That's the set we're feeding to Junior tomorrow night."

"Leaving three people only on the hot seat: Ronnie, my wife, and me!" Connaster's voice was low and deadly. "They're not going to keep Ronnie alive for six months. So they may find some bugs in a couple of days, and kill him then. Then there's always the chance when they get the plans that they'll consider it safer to murder him anyway."

"So we better get busy with what we have, Mr. Connaster: three records, the sound of a kidnaper's voice, and a snatch of song from a P.A. speaker." Maclain shook his head. "It's not very much, but somehow among us we've got to put it together. Before those plans are examined at all, we've got to find your boy. There is no other alternative."

"Knowing you as well as I do," Arnold Cameron said, "I have a vague uneasy feeling that you may be on to something that we've overlooked. I hope so."

"I have some questions." There were lines on Maclain's forehead and his mobile face was set in a look of concentration. "Why did this man pick Audograph records?"

"We have fifteen Audographs in our office at the plant," Connaster explained. "I also have one for dictation at home."

"Do you think he was an ex-employee, Arnold?"

"That's a possibility that we're checking. We're getting a rundown on everyone who has worked at Connaster Products since the war. It's a big job, but it's a top-security plant, so it shouldn't be impossible. But it is going to take time."

"Of which we have none," Con-

naster grunted. "Personally, I think it more likely that Junior called in as a salesman and saw the machines. Employees in our place are too closely checked for comfort."

"How would he know you had one home?"

"Maybe he didn't, but he knew I could always get one and take it home, since he's addressing his records to Evelyn there."

"Okay," Maclain said. "I'm going to start just as if I knew what I was talking about: the same voices made all those records—Ronnie's and Junior's. Let's take it for granted that it's the same man who picked up Ronnie, and drove you to work under the name of Jules Rosine. Would you know him again, Mr. Connaster, if you saw him?"

Connaster gave it a little thought. "I doubt it. He wore a chauffeur's livery. He was dark, I believe, seemed personable enough, slightly built—that is, he didn't impress me as being particularly big and strong. I didn't see him standing up. From the few words he spoke, I'd say he had a French accent. On the drive to Long Island, after dropping Ronnie at school in the morning, I was reading the paper and busy with some figures in the back seat of the car. Since I was occupied, I didn't give him too much thought really."

"He is French, according to Leon Gerard," Hank Weeks stated positively. "He spoke fluent French to Leon when he held him up in his room and forced him to phone the housekeeper."

"So his speech on the records, while marking him as an educated man, has words in it that are as British as a dish of bubble-and-squeak," Maclain declared. " 'Phosphorescent paint'—'portmanteau'—'dispatch case.' We'd say brief case, or luminous suitcase. But his accent isn't really British—just the words he uses. Let's mark him as a French Canadian—Quebec or Montreal. Do you agree?"

"I think I'll buy that Canadian angle right now," Weeks said. "Since Igor Gouzenko skipped the Russian Embassy in Ottawa in 1946 and turned up Klaus Fuchs, they've had troubles aplenty with certain Reds in Canada."

"What would you guess his age to be?" the Captain asked.

"Between thirty and forty as a guess." Connaster sounded a little unsure.

"Well, later if nothing happens, it might pay you to run back through the Year Books of Graduates in Engineering at McGill—University of Toronto, too. A picture just might jog your memory enough to spot him. There's another point I'd like to get clear: Ronnie certainly wasn't kidnaped in your own car—that is, I don't think they'd chance driving him very far."

"Just across the Queensboro Bridge," Cameron said. "The police

found Mr. Connaster's Imperial parked under the approach to the bridge on the Long Island side at 6:20. Ronnie was going to a movie with another boy, Ted Schuyler, at four. You heard that."

Maclain nodded. "I'm interested as to how this Rosine got him to come along without a fuss, and then transferred him to another car. That's not easy in New York City between three and four in the afternoon."

"You know as much as we do, Captain. From what Ronnie says on the records, the kidnaper gave him a line that Mr. Connaster wanted Ronnie to meet him at the plant. He bought Ronnie a bottle of Pepsi-Cola on the way. The police found the bottle still in the car and analyzed what was left. It showed Ronnie must have drunk three or four grains of Seconal. That would have put him out cold in fifteen minutes to half an hour, and he would have stayed out for eight to ten hours, maybe longer, according to the Medical Examiner. Of course they could have given him more on the trip, if they were driving far."

Maclain took a box of paper clips from his middle desk drawer and slowly began to chain them together.

"That's what I was trying to figure—how long would they drive Ronnie and how far. Let's say four hundred miles—ten hours driving. That would put them where they were going about four in the early morning. I think Junior lives there and owns a house most likely. It's not easy to rent a place to hide a child. It must be fairly large—the town, I mean, or the city. Far too dangerous to take him to a small town—"

"What about an isolated farm?" Agent Weeks broke in on the Captain's audible reverie.

"Not close enough to a Post Office and an airport." The Captain put his clips back in the drawer and closed it with a snap. "Let's consider these records: it's obvious that nobody is flying around the country with a kidnaped boy. So the boy's in one place—probably guarded by Junior's wife or some other woman. Women are better with children, anyhow. Now, listen to this."

He found the Miami record and put it on, keeping his hand held up for silence until it was through.

"That record was made by Ronnie and the man on the machine, and at the same time. The machine may be old, or defective, for there's a murmuring drone in the background that records itself all the way through. Junior didn't notice it, so it must be a noise that he's used to. He noticed the start of *Silent Night* quick enough and shut off the machine."

"The record was mailed from Miami, Captain," Cameron reminded him.

"That's my point, Arnold—near-

ness to an airport. I believe that record was made Saturday evening, giving Ronnie time to get instructions as to what he should say. Then Junior took it with him as soon as it was finished and caught a flight to Miami. In his suitcase he was carrying another Audograph machine. He mailed the record from Miami on Sunday. That would check as to time—ample time for him to stop off and make arrangements for the pickup with some Deputy Sheriff, or town constable confederate along the way."

"You're right there," Cameron said glumly. "Deputy Sheriffs and Constables are a dime a dozen, and a police car is made to order—two-way telephone, flasher and all. We can't police every point between here and Miami."

"So again the best bet is to find the woman and the boy," Maclain said. "She'll talk, I believe, if Junior has told her anything. We can be sure that if he'd made arrangements in Miami, the record wouldn't have been mailed from there, any more than if Ronnie was there. Anyhow, we know that after the record was mailed, he hopped the first flight for Kansas City."

"Typical Commie technique, that hopping about," Hank Weeks remarked. "The Boss, in his book 'Masters of Deceit,' says they call it 'dry cleaning'—driving three hundred miles to cover thirty so that no one will know where you've been or where you are."

"Go on, Captain," Cameron sounded impatient. "You've got this Commie Canuck with his Audograph in K.C. now. Where do we go from there—outside of Cleveland?"

Without replying, Maclain put on the second record and played it to the end. "I know that Ronnie made this record on the same machine that recorded record Number One. All the time that Ronnie is speaking you can hear that noise that runs through the first one. As soon as Junior starts to speak, the noise is gone. We must assume that the woman mailed this record to Junior in K.C., and he filled his part in on the Audograph he has with him. The New York Times is available in most cities the same, or the following day. The woman could have seen the personal and told Ronnie what to say, or Junior could have seen it and could have called her long-distance."

"Still more dry cleaning," Cameron said, "to help us Special Agents earn our pay, and put us through a wringer the way we're going through today. Let's hear Number Three."

The Cleveland record clinched the Captain's beliefs—a background noise when Ronnie was speaking, Junior's words clear.

"Could that noise come from a car or a plane?" Connaster asked. "I've used an Audograph in both, but I haven't been conscious of anything like that in the playbacks.

Still, I might have overlooked it just as Junior has."

"It just won't hold water." The Captain's agile fingers beat a tattoo on the desk top. 'I don't believe Ronnie and his captor made that first record while driving in a car. There's that *Silent Night* music, for one thing. Can you picture a man with a kidnaped boy in his car dictating a record and telling the boy what to say? Then a stop in front of a music store where there's a blaring P.A.?"

Hank Weeks said, "Hell no! Nor can I picture the kid being flown around making records in a plane."

Maclain stood up abruptly. "Let's get what we can from the horse's mouth—the Sound Engineer at Gray Audograph. Let him hear these and see what he has to say."

In less than an hour they were in the Gray Audograph offices at 521 Fifth Ave., talking to Carl Schantz, the company's Chief Sound Engineer. Schantz listened to Cameron, then played the three records through without comment.

Finished, he sat down in his desk chair and stared from one to another of his visitors through his gold-rimmed glasses. "The boy's voice and the man's—all of record One—was dictated to the same machine. The man's voice on records Two and Three was dictated to another machine. I'd say that both machines were old. Probably our Model Three, but there's nothing the matter with either of them."

"How do you know that?" Cameron asked. "The differences in the machines, I mean."

Schantz gave a slow smile. "You know from your work in the F.B.I. that there's a difference in every typewriter. Well, there's a difference in the needles of every dictating machine. They cut grooves of different depths on the records. The difference in those grooves is infinitesimal, but it shows up on a tape made by the electric-micrometer on our testing machine—the one I just played those on." He handed the S.A.C. a wide piece of ruled paper marked in purple ink with three wavy parallel lines. "Look for yourself."

The line made by record One, and the two lines made by Ronnie's voice on Two and Three were noticeably similar. There was a difference when Junior started to speak on the Kansas City and Cleveland records, but it still could be seen with the naked eye that those two lines were similar to each other.

"Does this mean that if we find those two machines and bring them in you can identify them for us?" Cameron's voice was eager.

"We'll give it a try."

"What about that noise in the background?"

Schantz shrugged. "I'm afraid I can't help you there."

"Could it come from a nearby power plant or high-tension lines, something like that?" the Captain asked him.

Schantz shook his head. "We have Audographs running in offices with air conditioners, calculators, and IBM sorting machines, sometimes right in the same room, and there's nothing but voice on the dictated record. Now and then, if you're not careful, you can get a loose connection in the six-hole receptacle where the mike plugs in. That will cause a nasty roar—but you can't dictate to the machine." He thought a moment. "The nearest thing to that noise I've heard was on a record dictated in an auto running at high speed with the windows open. The machine didn't pick up the motor, but it picked up the sound of the wind rushing by. That sound you have is steady like that, but deeper. It's almost like the lad was speaking through some distant hurricane." He sighed. "I'm really sorry I can't help you more."

"About those few lines of *Silent Night*—have you any ideas there?" the Captain asked as Schantz was showing them out.

"I thought of a radio in another room, but it's too muffled. It's probably outside the house, from a juiced-up P.A. system. If that's it, the place is right next door, or at the most across the street. Anyhow, it must be very near."

All afternoon the Captain sat in his penthouse office listening to the records that Cameron had left with him.

That background sound was all enveloping. The longer he listened to it, the more it took possession of him, until he almost believed what Schantz had said about a distant hurricane.

He thought of the ocean. It could keep people awake the first night, and in a day or two the noise would be gone. But the ocean wouldn't record like that unless it were a wind-lashed sea.

Could they have the boy on a ship at sea? In a seven day storm? And mailing records air mail to Junior in Kansas City? It showed how feeble the mind could get if you worked it on and on!

He kept coming back to that power plant. Why, when Schantz had said it wouldn't record? Could Schantz be wrong? Or could he, Maclain, whose ears had replaced his eyes, be clutching at straws and building into roaring volume some tiny wisp of sound? Was that noise, that suggested a thousand jet planes busy ripping the skies, merely the hum of a washing machine or an electric dryer? No, it had to be more.

Power, overwhelming power. It had to be. With the life of a six-year-old boy at stake, Maclain didn't dare to be wrong.

He would stick to his own obsessions, too: they'd taken the boy, maybe dressed as a girl, on a single trip of ten hours. Four hundred miles at least. Then why not into Canada? If Junior was a Canadian, his car would have Candian tags.

It would be easy to cross the International Bridge in the middle of the night with a sleeping little girl accompanied by her father and mother . . .

The Captain jumped from the red sofa, shut off the Audograph, and took his Braille map of New York State from a flat cabinet drawer. Moving faster than the eye could follow, he traced a line from New York City to Buffalo. Just 375 miles!

Five minutes later he had Arnold Cameron on the phone. "I've got a fix, Arnold. Two points of sound —like hunting down a hidden radio. Now it's up to you to go get that boy!" For a minute more he talked on.

"Don't tell us how to run our business," Cameron cut in. "Get off the line so I can phone the Border Patrol of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

Just outside the city limits, running at right angles to the river between Stanley Avenue and the Parkway, is a short street with eight neat houses on it. Five on one side and three on the other. On the side with the three houses, and not quite forming a corner with the Parkway, stands the Maple Leaf Tavern, boasting ten spotless bedrooms on the second floor, and downstairs a very good restaurant and a bar.

At seven o'clock, on Friday, December 20th, Mr. Burns, who had owned and run the Maple Leaf for forty years, left his wife to superintend the cooking of dinner in the kitchen. He came into the bar to start his pickup with Bing Crosby's *Merry Christmas* record. The first few chimes introducing *Silent Night* had scarcely pealed forth from the loudspeaker over the Maple Leaf's front door, when Detective Sergeant McMurtrie of the Ontario Provincial Police walked into the bar.

He and Burns were old friends. McMurtrie, tall and cadaverous with sad black eyes, was a startling contrast to the sandy-haired Burns, a Scot grown fat with good living through the years.

They shook hands. McMurtrie ordered an ale and sat down at a table in the empty bar. Burns joined him a moment later carrying two bottles and glasses.

"I'll have an ale wi' ye, Mac."

"On me, if ye like. Looks to me like you've driven all your trade away wi' that racket over the front door."

"A racket ye call it! Don't be blasphemous, Mac. 'Tis one of God's songs, and there's others to come. I've been playing it every night now, except Sundays, for the past ten nights. 'Tis weather that's driven the trade away and not my offering passers-by a bit of Christmas cheer."

"Hmph!" McMurtrie swallowed some ale, his Adam's apple moving up and down. "And would ye have

a permit, Burns, to play that thing? Seems to me the good folks on this street would be kicking with you disturbing their TV and their sleep."

"'Tis you who know perfectly well I have a permit, McMurtrie. Even though I'm outside the city line, who but you has poked his long nose in here every chance he gets, checking every license and permit? And as for the folks on this street kicking, they're all good customers and friends of mine and glad of a little music."

"All?" McMurtrie narrowed his bushy brows. "Now there was one I recalled that you turned in for making subversive talk here during the war. What was his name?"

"Zwicker," Burns said. "Francois Zwicker. He owns the house right across the street. Number Three. God be praised, a year ago he lost his job at the Electric, where he was engineer, and moved away. The house stood vacant for a spell, then was rented for three months in the summer, to be vacant again until just this last Saturday."

"Rented, you say?"

"No, he and his missus are back, but it won't be for long, mark me. He'll hold a job nowhere with his anarchistic tongue. I've forbid him my place. His missus is no prize, either. Louise is her name, a Frenchie like him. Quebec or Three Rivers. She's there by herself right now. He's off again, hunting another job, I'd say."

A party of four came in. Burns finished his ale and got up to greet them. "The ale's on me, Mac. Drop in again, and a Merry Christmas to ye!"

Outside, the detective got in a big black car where four men were waiting for him. "Let's go and get the search warrant," he said. "Zwicker's the name. The house is Number Three." The car moved off.

An hour later, to the accompaniment of Bing's voice singing, *I'll Be Home for Christmas,* McMurtrie rang the doorbell of Number Three. The door was opened by a white-faced woman with burning black eyes and raven hair.

"Provincial Police, Mrs. Zwicker," McMurtrie said. "There are four men posted about the house, and we have a search warrant. Let me in, please. We've come to get the boy."

At 6:00 P.M., on Saturday, December 21st, Alan Connaster's Cessna Twin took off from the air strip at Connaster Products, on Long Island. With Steven Donegan, and Connaster, at the twin controls, it headed south as ordered. Instead of a phosphorescent-painted portmanteau, it was carrying Special Agent Hank Weeks, member of the F.B.I.

Ronnie, safe now with his mother, had come home in time for Macy's Christmas Parade.

Contact by radio was made at 8:20, and almost instantly a red

flasher was turned on on the ground in a large open area about twenty miles north of New Bern, North Carolina. As the Cessna headed for a point directly over the flasher, Hank Weeks spoke into the microphone:

"Zwicker, this is a Special Agent of the F.B.I. speaking to you from the Cessna. Your wife has been arrested and we have the boy. She gave us the name of Walter Vollmer, the County Official who is with you now in that Patrol Car. You were followed and we know exactly where you are—in between Vanceboro and Blount Creek. You are hopelessly trapped, for cars are posted all along U.S. 17 and along State Road 33, as well as the country road you came in on. They have heard this and are closing in right now. There's no use your trying to escape."

The Cessna began to climb. "There's just one thing that gripes me, Hank," Connaster said. "Think of all the trouble you'd have saved if you'd done what Steve and I wanted to—loaded that portmanteau with just one little bomb!"

'Way up north in the Maple Leaf Tavern, Mr. Burns turned over the *Merry Christmas* record for the third time and started *Silent Night* again. On guard in the empty house across the street—in the event that plans went wrong and Zwicker returned to his home—two members of the Ontario Provincial Police were playing gin rummy.

"It would be a silent night if Burns would shut that blasted thing off," one said to the other, slapping a card on the table.

"Aye," said the other.

They went on playing unaware of the noise that filled every room, every cranny and every house and every street for miles around. They had lived in the midst of its deep reverberation far too long to hear it —the stunning boom of the Horseshoe Falls of Niagara, dumping its endless deafening millions of gallons down a drop of 158 feet just a half block away.

a new story by

ED LACY

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ED LACY**

TITLE: ***The Frozen Custard Caper***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *The caper was planned to perfection, down to the most minute detail. But Doc said they needed a third man to pull off the job—a muscle goon . . .*

ALTHOUGH DOC HAYES IS A SMART operator, I was against using a muscleman, from the word go. A guy who thinks with his fists, the joker who considers "toughness" a halo—he's just an animal, and a punk animal at that.

I'm not knocking Doc—he's pulled some split-second bank jobs, the kind you see in movies and TV now with everything going smooth as cream—except in the movies there's always some little detail snafuing the deal in the end. I mean, you know movies and TV.

While I'm not in Doc's class, perhaps, I've knocked off a few smart jobs myself. I'm a loner—I hide in the Men's Room late in the afternoon, then take my time during the night cleaning out an office. Once, over a week-end, I looted an entire small office building—took $13,000 from 15 offices.

Anyway, Doc and I met in a state pen and became friends right off. We kept in touch over the years and it was about five weeks ago Doc suddenly came to my room. I remember it was the start of August—a very hot and muggy day. I was getting ready to take off for the beach when there was a knock.

Doc stood there—cool and neatly dressed, gray hair brushed—the way he always looks. He came in and we gassed for a while and it was growing warmer, so I suggested he go to the beach with me, but Doc said, "Ed, I have something better to cool us off—about two hundred grand. Interested?"

"Beats a sunburn. What's the deal?"

"First we go for a little ride," Doc said. He had a three-year-old Chevy outside and we drove uptown, parked on a corner of upper Broadway. There was a bank on the opposite corner. When I glanced at it, Doc shook his head and told me, "The side street running down to the Drive. We hit that frozen custard stand halfway down the block."

This was a small store with the front pushed out, in the basement of a private house. A fat old guy sold this soft ice cream and soda pop. I'd bet there wasn't fifty bucks in the till at the end of a rush day.

Reading my mind, Doc gave me a tight smile. "I just happened to be lucky on this one—it's fantastic. On a hot day—like today—it gets real bad inside an armored truck. A truck makes a money delivery to the bank every morning at 11 a.m. Three guards. The cop on the beat is at the other end of his post. On hot days the three guards have a cute habit—they park the truck, then they all go down to the shop for a frozen custard break."

"*All* of 'em? Always supposed to leave one guy inside the truck."

"On real hot days the rules go by the boards. In fact, just because they are busting the rules, they all go inside the store to eat." Doc glanced at his watch. "A day like this is hot enough for them to go into their act—in about three minutes."

Promptly at 11 a.m. this armored truck pulled up near the bank, but on the corner facing the Drive. A burly guard got out, wiped his sweaty face, then out popped the second and third guards. Locking the truck, they disappeared inside the frozen custard joint and came out a few minutes later. One guard went back inside the truck, the other two started unloading bags of money.

Doc drove down to the Drive, parked where we got a cool breeze from the river. Lighting a short cigar, he asked, "Too simple to believe, isn't it, Ed?"

"When do we take 'em—when they all leave the truck?"

Doc looked at me, his mild eyes a little sad. "On the street? Ed, we'd have a dozen squad cars on us in less than five minutes. You don't get the beauty of the plan—we hit 'em *inside* the shop! At five to eleven we go in, take out the owner. I'll be in a guard uniform, so will you. When they come in, we throw a gun on them, tie 'em up, take their keys. You'll go back to the truck, drive it down to about here. I'll meet you, we unload the bags into a hot car; then take off. I figure we'll get close to $200,000. Buying in, Ed?"

Looking at him with sheer admiration, I mumbled, "A hundred grand each!"

Doc shook his head. "We'll need a third man, a muscle goon."

"What for? Doc, I'm not greedy, but once you get mixed up with

punks you have to operate on their level."

"Two men can't handle it," Doc said. "While you're driving the truck, the muscle will don a white apron, look after the stand and the guards. I'll leave him to walk down here and help you unload. On the getaway we pick up the goon. Of course we'll junk the stolen heap after we reach my car. Boils down to this: one man can't unload the armored car fast enough, and we can't afford to leave the store unattended for the five or ten minutes it'll take the two of us to unload."

"Okay, then cut in another guy like us—but why a goon?"

"Ed, if things should get rough, I want some muscle in action—a guy who'll take care of the guards, or customers, and take care of them fast. You know Buddy Parks?"

I said I didn't.

"A rough stud, good with his hands and a rod. But I won't let him pack a gun—don't want to chance a possible murder rap. But he's an expert with a blackjack. That's Buddy, sitting on the bench over there."

I followed Doc's pointing finger: Buddy was the typical goon, thickset, heavy in the shoulders, sloppy, with an ugly face. A real ape.

"Ed, I thought of you because we'll need a cool cat to casually walk up to the truck and drive off. We split three ways, from the top."

"I don't like working with thugs," I began. "Always . . ."

"I've thought this through and we need muscle," Doc said, cutting me off. "You buying in?"

"Yeah."

Doc drove over to where Buddy was seated and honked the horn. The goon even had a surly, cocky walk. When Doc introduced us this ape told me, "Get in the back seat, Ed, I like to ride up front."

I told him what he could do and as he started to reach for me, Doc snapped, "Cut it, Buddy. Get in the back seat—we're not driving far."

We drove down to the docks and sat around with our shirts off like sun-hounds. Doc went over the plan in detail. He'd already dug up two guard uniforms, one my size, one his, and he even knew the shift of the armored truck. Buddy was to take care of heisting a small panel truck.

For the next two nights, when the streets were empty, we timed the caper. I drove Doc's car to this spot on the Drive, while he walked down there from the frozen custard store. Then we worked out alternate places to park the stolen panel truck, the best routes to where Doc would have his car waiting, where to junk the panel truck, how we'd part—the works. As usual, Doc had it all down to split-second timing—although it was so simple there really wasn't much to it.

He warned: "Only two things can trip us. First, don't talk to anybody—don't even shoot off your mouths to your girls. The cops will

run to their stoolies and I don't want a soul except us to know about this. Second, when we scatter, don't flash any dough for at least three or four weeks—by then we should be far enough away not to worry about the law. If you're smart, you won't try living it up for at least six months."

There was the other factor we couldn't control—we had to wait for a real hot day. For a time it seemed like the weather was against us. We checked in with Doc every morning at 8 a.m. and for the next three days it rained. But it was hot as hell over the week-end, which didn't do us any good.

The following week was so cool the papers reported it was killing the resort business. By the time it was August 20th, even Doc got tense—if we didn't have a scorcher in the next ten week days, there might not be one until the following summer.

We had time on our hands and Buddy took an idiot's delight in pushing me around. Not actually doing anything, but saying he could take me out with a single punch, maybe break my jaw if he set himself—all that dumb-ox chatter. I sort of cooled him by telling the slob, "Stop it before I work you over."

"*You*'ll do what?"

"Not me—I'll just hire another ape like yourself, maybe two apes. Muscle-for-hire comes cheap these days."

A couple of weeks ago, on a Wednesday, it was 75 degrees at 8 a.m. It was 'der tag' for us—the radio said the day was going to bust all heat records.

Doc and I put on our armored guard uniforms. Doc had the white apron, a change of clothing for us, and masks, in his car. We left his place at 9:15 a.m. Buddy took off to pick up one of several panel trucks he had already cased, farther uptown, and he was to meet us at 10:05 where we were going to park Doc's car. Then we'd drive down in the panel truck, park it on the Drive, around the corner from the frozen custard store.

As Buddy left he asked Doc for a buck. "I'll take a cab up to—"

"Cabbie might remember you, take the bus," Doc said, handing him a dollar. "You have time."

"Bus? Well; okay. See you in about a half hour."

Doc and I drove up to this quiet little street of private houses and empty lots, where we'd park his car, and waited for Buddy. By 10 a.m. I was sweating as if I was in a Turkish Bath, and it wasn't only the hot sun. By 10:15 even Doc was sweating. By 10:30 we both knew it was too late. I changed back into my slacks and sports shirt and had Doc drop me off at the nearest subway.

I rode the subway to the beach for a swim; besides, a crowded beach is a good hideout. I didn't stop sweating until I read about Buddy in the evening papers.

The ape had boarded an empty bus, handed the driver the dollar bill. According to the papers, the driver said Buddy accused him of short-changing him a nickel. There was an argument; the driver insisted he'd handed Buddy three quarters, a dime, and three nickels —he claimed Buddy was hiding a nickel between his thick fingers. When the driver refused to give him another nickel, Buddy—according to the news story, and I believe it—told the driver, "Okay, wise guy, then I'll just take *all* the money you've got!"

He sapped the driver, scooped up a few ones and a handful of change, and ran off the bus. The driver had a hard head—he staggered out of his bus seconds later, blood streaming from his noggin. A passing squad car saw Buddy running, and anchored him with a bullet in his right leg.

Of course Buddy didn't blow the whistle on us, but you see how dumb a punk can be—losing his temper and blowing a two hundred grand job over a lousy nickel!

The hell of it was, the rest of August was the chilliest in the whole history of the weather bureau. Talk about dumb luck!

a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EDGAR LUSTGARTEN**

TITLE: ***Forbidden Fruit***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: London

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Looking back at it, Bob Holt should have known that from the very first moment he met Marian (voted the Top Model of the Year) the inevitable would happen . . .*

THE VERY FIRST MOMENT HE came in last night I guessed from his face exactly what he had to say. Only a half-wit could have missed it. He's not a bad old stick, quite soft-hearted in his way, but I'd swear he only wears that particular expression—as if he were nursing some secret sorrow of his own—in circumstances such as those that made him visit me.

I wouldn't admit to myself, though, that the look of him told me all. There are mental defenses one keeps manned to the last. I quickly thought up some other possible reasons for his coming: my mother was ill, or a message from friends, or pure humdrum routine. For a split second I even half kidded myself that he'd brought good news, that everything was okay. Then he turned his eyes towards me, and I let that idea drop.

"I'm sorry, Holt," he said.

"Yes," I said, fatuously.

I realize now I was trying hard to detach myself from the scene, to escape being emotionally involved in what would follow.

"I'm sorry, very sorry indeed," he said.

We had been playing dominoes when he arrived. I fixed my gaze

on the double-blank, the last piece I had played.

"It's my duty," he said, and hesitated, "my unhappy duty—"

That got through all right. My defenses cracked on the instant, and I met reality.

I knew then for certain that a reprieve had been refused. I knew then that mortal power could do no more on my behalf. I knew then that the day after tomorrow I should hang.

It is only now, though, when those shocks have been in part absorbed, that I also realize there is no longer any reason why I should not tell, in these last hours of my life, the whole truth about Marian and me . . .

The first time I actually set eyes on Marian I had gone to her home as a reporter to get an interview. She had recently been voted Top Model of the Year by one of the countless panels that bestow such-like distinctions, and it was reckoned she would rate a couple of pars on an evening when we were running short of West End stuff. I always got what the Features boys thought not quite worth their while, so this assignment was a natural for me.

When the office gave me her address I remember querying it, and as I pressed the doorbell I still wondered if they had it right. I am not sure exactly what sort of set-up I expected, what sort of background I pictured, for the Top Model of the Year. A flat, I suppose, in a fashionable district; on the small side, possibly, but up-to-date and chic. Certainly not an old-fashioned house with French windows and a garden, tucked away at the foot of a cul-de-sac with a railway running by. It couldn't have been more than a one-and-sixpenny ride from the bright lights, but it was the sort of place that made you tell the taxi-man to wait.

I wasn't kept long in doubt, though. She opened the door herself.

Our picture editor had already had her photographed, and I had judged from the pictures that she was quite a dish. I was ready for the great dark eyes, the mass of raven hair, the faultless curve of the slightly pouting lips. What the pictures didn't—couldn't—catch was the light in those dark eyes, the soft coils of that hair, the provocation in that pout.

She stood still, as if waiting to be admired. I admired her.

"Bob Holt's my name. *Evening Post.* You're expecting me, I think?"

"Of course," she said. "Come in."

She led the way across a middle-class hall to a middle-class sitting-room where the colorless domestic comfort stressed her vividness. It was like seeing a bird of paradise in a hen run. I concluded she must still be living at home with Mum and Dad.

She took a bottle and a glass out

of a cupboard and poured me a stiff Scotch without so much as asking; I could only assume she recognized the type. As she passed me the drink I noticed how slender her hands were and how her long pointed nails resembled delicate red almonds.

"Sorry to make you come so late in the afternoon," she said. "I've been working all day. Only got back at five."

"It would be a pleasure to see you any time," I said, and meant it. "Aren't you drinking?"

She slapped her waist. "Would never do," she said. "Now, tell me, what do you want to know?"

She curled gracefully up in the armchair opposite while I put her through the stock questionnaire. Her answers were invariably brisk and businesslike. She was 25; started modeling at twenty; had always been a freelance, liked it best that way; enjoyed her work, and specially her occasional jobs abroad; wouldn't be specific about her annual earnings, but admitted she was very nicely paid. Ambition? . . .

This was the first time she paused before replying. "I think I'd sooner keep that to myself," she said at last, and momentarily a curious look came into her eyes—a look that suggested we were about to share some intimate secret.

I never worked harder to stretch out an interview. I did my best, but of course I couldn't keep it going forever. Presently it began to grow dark, and she turned on a lamp in a way that somehow pronounced the interview at an end. But I still wasn't willing to part with her. I tried another tack.

"Have you any engagement later on tonight?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Because if you haven't, I'd be delighted if you'd come out with me."

It was only one step better than a pick-up. She might have felt bound at that point to have given me a brush-off which there could be no possible question of going back on, and then I should have been loafing around Fleet Street at this moment instead of sitting here in the condemned cell at the Scrubs.

She might or she might not; that I shall never know. For I had hardly uttered the words before I heard a sound outside—the unmistakable, characteristic sound of the key turning in an automatic lock.

Marian heard it too.

"That'll be Jim," she said.

I don't know why it startled me so to discover she was married. Nothing had been said to imply that she was not. She wore no wedding ring, but girls in her line seldom do. And a husband would account for that house as well as a Mum or Dad.

But I had taken it for granted from the outset—so much so I didn't even bother to inquire—that Marian was entirely without strings

and unattached. Somehow her personality created that impression, and to clinch it there was that curious look that I had glimpsed—not an invitation, mark, it fell far short of that, and anyway invitations hardly form an acid test—but a look that simply didn't go with a girl who had a husband. I couldn't then have told you why. I could do better now . . .

Jim turned out to be a commonplace bloke, older than Marian by twenty years and shorter by two inches. When my errand was explained to him he fairly glowed with pleasure, poured me a fresh drink, and refused to let me leave. There was so much, he said, he could tell me about Marian which, he knew, she would never tell herself.

Had she told me that when they married, seven years ago, nothing had been further from her thoughts than modeling? No. Had she told me that she had never had a lesson? No. Had she told me that she had reached the top at one bound? No. Had she told me how success had never turned her head, how they still lived in this house he had bought before their wedding, how they were just like any other contented married couple?

I glanced at Marian—and saw that look a second time.

"How, then, did she get the chance of modeling?" I asked.

"Through me." He made a deprecating gesture. "I'm in the gown trade. I had to beg her on my knees, mind. But look where she is now."

It was Jim, not Marian, who made me stay for dinner. It was Jim, not Marian, who did the talking afterwards; half the time, as I recall, she wasn't in the room. It was Jim who walked me to the gate, slapped me on the back, and said he knew for sure I'd write up Marian real good.

I had exchanged barely a word with Marian herself since my interrupted and unfinished pass, and she had given no clue to what she felt about that, if indeed she felt anything at all.

Next morning I wrote about her. Then I thought about her. When I'd thought long and hard enough, I dialed her number.

"So you're not working today?" I said, when eventually she answered.

"Who's that?"

"Bob Holt."

"Oh," she said. "No."

"Good," I said, "because I've got stuck in the draft of my article." I called it an article to make it sound important. "There are one or two points I'm not quite clear about. If you don't mind, I'd like to go through the draft with you in detail."

"All right," she said. "Read it to me."

"No good trying over the phone. I must see you," I said.

"What was that?"

I plunged.

"I must see you," I said, and put all my meaning in it.

There was a longish silence, but I could tell she had understood me, and I almost held my breath.

She broke the silence with a laugh —whether of triumph or of amusement or of scorn, I couldn't say.

"I suppose what must be, must be. Come round today at the same time."

"Not till six o'clock?" I said. "But you're at home this afternoon."

She laughed again.

"All right then, make it five."

I was there at half-past four. And I forgot to take the draft.

I was never at any time under any illusion about how and why I wanted Marian. After all, I was thirty-five; I'd knocked about a bit, and even if I didn't know that much about the world, I knew nearly all there was to know about myself. I wasn't inspired by romantic love or by genuine affection; I never even liked Marian very much.

It was a simple case of biological attraction from which all other elements were utterly excluded. I'd had the symptoms far too often not to recognize them—but I also recognized they were exceptionally severe. Marian recognized it too. That was the cause of all the trouble.

Looking back, I can see clearly enough that, even on this plane, Marian didn't really go for me. It was all, I'm certain now, an accident of timing. She had reached an acute stage in a self-suppressed rebellion against her husband and the life he symbolized; the alternative outlet for that rebellion must be a secret lover; I happened to come on the scene and made a play for her; she didn't find me repulsive, and so she took me on. For this inner conflict was positively obsessive.

As we lay in each other's arms, she would intersperse her love talk with bitter attacks on Jim: his stupidity, his unimaginativeness, his lack of elementary social *savoir faire*, and, above all, his stubborn refusal to move from a house and neighborhood which mocked her success and which she had outgrown.

These diatribes had me puzzled; I couldn't see why she didn't walk out on him if she wanted to, and said so. It wasn't as if she need depend on any man to keep her. But she retorted that you couldn't go on for ever modeling; and added that Jim was a very much richer man than I might think, that his will and his insurance policies favored only her, and that she didn't intend to pass them up by being a bloody fool.

This gave me my first inkling of that tough cupidity which I learned later was Marian's ruling passion.

Everything made it an easy affair to manage. Neither of us had any hard-and-fast working hours, and

when we were both with a job immediately on hand I would slip up during the daytime to the house. Jim never returned from business until half-past six or so—it turned out he was boss of quite a big concern—and it didn't seem to worry him even when he found me there (as we thought it wiser that he sometimes should). We told him I was working on publicity for Marian, and that satisfied him; he was not the suspicious sort.

Marian fussed much more about her neighbors; they were a nosey lot, she said, always ready to start gossip, and it would soon be noticed and commented on if I regularly ran the gauntlet of the cul-de-sac. So, more often than not, I would use quite a different route, which took me across the railway line on the blind side of the house, over the garden fence which crowned the low embankment, and through the French window of the sitting room—a window normally left unlatched except at night or when nobody was in. This route not only screened me from prying eyes; it also heightened the flavor of forbidden fruit.

Things had been going on that way for the best part of three months—and I was still content they should go on that way forever—when Marian suddenly made the first big move in her campaign.

That afternoon—it was high summer, and I remember the hot sun beating on our bodies—she pulled unexpectedly out of an embrace.

"It can't go on like this, Bob," she said.

"Like what?" I said.

"The three of us," she said.

I wouldn't give her another lead. I just lay quiet and waited.

"I don't sleep any more for thinking," she said presently. "And I know I'm right, Bob. It's either you or Jim."

I was shocked at this transformation in her attitude, which threatened to destroy the nice soft option I had won. I started handing her the arguments she had handed me; think of the money, I urged, the insurance, the will.

"It'll all go by the board," I said, "if Jim divorces you."

"I wasn't thinking about divorce," Marian said.

It would be drawing it mild to call it an unusual experience. Not one person in a million—I should hope—ever in their lives faces a situation where someone they thought they knew as well as they know themselves, someone they'd always credited with normal human instincts, displays the will and purpose to contrive cold-blooded murder. I've had that experience, and I can tell you this: it doesn't work out exactly as you would expect.

Perhaps just because the idea is so shocking, you don't—or, at least, I didn't—get an instantaneous

shock. At first you take it for granted that the whole thing is a joke—a grim piece of humor, but humor all the same. Only slowly do you tumble to the fact that it isn't a joke to them—they have a vehemence that doesn't go with jokes; you then decide it's temporary rage, a way of blowing off steam, and that they themselves would be horrified if it ever came to the point.

And when you fail to talk them out of it, and you stand on the brink, you don't draw back as you could and should and meant to, because you can't now without appearing a coward and traitor—and, in my case, without losing what I knew I had to have.

Marian must have thought over her plan to murder Jim for a long time before she ever mentioned it to me; otherwise she couldn't have explained it in such detail. Mind, I wasn't given these details all at once—only bit by bit, spread across a week or more, as, I suppose, she judged I was in proper shape to take them. But I soon grasped the broad lines on which the plan was based; the scheming should be hers, the action should be mine.

Her idea was for me to do it in the house, under conditions which would point to common robbery, which would enable me to come and go entirely unobserved, and which—if, notwithstanding, suspicions turned our way—would provide us *both* with a cast-iron alibi.

How shall we make it look like robbery, I asked, and I laughed, with a peculiar catch in my throat; I was still thinking it a rather ghastly game.

That was the easiest one of all for her to answer; she'd tell him she'd be home in the evening, and she wouldn't be; I'd drop in casually, as he'd quite got used to; after I'd done it, I could turn out his wallet—he always kept a fair amount of money on him—and take away, and lose, one or two valuables from the house. Coming and going unobserved? Didn't I do it already? Wasn't there the railway?

My heart sank as she grew more insistent. I was conscious of nerves around my eyes that I didn't know I had.

"You get hanged for murder," I said.

"If you're caught," she said.

I paced up and down, my thoughts whirling.

"You talk," I said, "as if he would sit quiet and let me do it. And *how* am I supposed to do it anyway? Shoot him and have the bullet traced to my revolver? Strangle him and have the scratches noticed on my hands?"

Marian gave me a rather pitying smile. Then she came up close so that I got the scent of her.

"You'll do it with a mallet."

"You must be raving mad."

"Remember the Rattenbury case? That's how Stoner did it." I remembered something else then—the number of crime books that

she'd lately had out of the library. "They'd never have been arrested if she hadn't gabbed. It's the easiest thing coming up behind somebody's chair; if they know you're about the house, they're not going to turn round."

"So it's easy, is it," I said, "for me to come up behind Jim's chair with a mallet?"

"We've a mallet in the tool shed. I'll leave it tucked away in the hall. You have a few drinks with Jim and make an excuse to leave the room. You know both the armchairs have their backs to the door. You come in again. With the mallet."

"And this alibi," I said weakly. "Who's our alibi?"

She pressed her parted lips against my mouth.

"*We shall be each other's alibi,*" she said.

We picked the evening with the utmost care; we had to. It was nearly three months more before all the circumstances favored us. Meanwhile I'd gone around like a man on whom the doctors have passed sentence of death, but who can't believe it simply because he's still alive. Even when we actually reached the day itself and the preliminaries were already under way —when I heard Marian make the phone call we'd rehearsed so often ("Jim, I'm being kept late . . . Back about 10:30, dear . . . Promise you'll be in . . . You know I hate coming into an empty house at night")—when I watched her hide the mallet under the cupboard in the hall—when I fetched her little traveling-case and she crammed it with her night things . . .

We registered at the hotel shortly after seven. I purposely cracked a joke or two with the reception clerk, and Marian asked him some question which he answered civilly. I signed us in as Mr. and Mrs. Robert Holt, and added my address; I used my natural handwriting.

We were shown up to our room, which we had booked in advance for its position (we liked the first floor and the bathroom and the view, I had explained); on the way there I cracked more jokes with the bellhop. We had dinner upstairs and we both chatted with the waiter. After dinner we undressed, got into bed, rang for the maid, and gave her instructions to bring early morning tea.

The moment she went I got up again, drew the bolt across the door, and took out of my suitcase the only apparel besides pajamas I had brought—my old reporter's props, my battered evening clothes . . .

It seemed hours that we stayed taut and silent, listening for the cue. In the banqueting chamber immediately below, a well-known anglers' club was holding its annual stag party, perhaps two hundred strong. We, could hear, though greatly muffled, the shouts of the

toastmaster, sudden gusts of mirth, billows of applause. The speech-making went on and on, and I suppose the fish they were describing got bigger and bigger; certainly the noise grew steadily in volume. I kept looking at my watch, and then across at Marian; in another twenty minutes, fifteen, ten, we'd have to pass it up.

Then, as I started to feel frustration and relief in equal measure—relief at putting it off, frustration at not getting it done with—from the banqueting chamber came a sound of scraping and of shuffling, immediately followed by the strains of Auld Lang Syne.

Without a word or even a glance exchanged between us, I slipped out and gently closed the door behind me.

I met no one in the corridor. Had I done so, I should have turned back; the project would have failed. As it was, the place might have been cleared for my convenience. I walked down the staircase—naturally, I didn't use the elevator—and straightaway got caught up with a seething mass of anglers.

Nobody saw us leave—saw us, that is, as individuals. We were just an amorphous mass; we were The Banquet Breaking Up. The swing doors were swung for us; the porters said "good night"; but not one of us meant any more to them than the faceless silhouettes they use to illustrate statistics.

Immediately outside the door, I made towards a taxi; then deliberately allowed some thrusting chap to win it from me. I moved forward towards another, which I similarly lost. I moved forwards once again, and this time gained the street.

I was out . . .

It was still only September, but quite cold enough at that hour to justify me keeping my coat collar turned well up. I walked as briskly as I could do without drawing attention. I can't remember feeling any emotion, even fear; I was far too busy going over all I had to do, as I might put a story into shape while walking to the office.

Within half an hour I had the back of the house in view, and I could see a light in the sitting room which showed that Jim was home. I crossed the railway line, and as I came over the dark garden I could see him through the partially drawn curtains—a decent, harmless chap patiently waiting for his wife. I noted that impression, without feeling it any concern to me.

I didn't dare go to the front door, with a street lamp opposite. Jim didn't know I ever used the garden route, but I could always say that I'd been ringing and he hadn't heard, and that I'd walked round to see if anyone was in. Jim wouldn't put two and two together—and even if he did it hardly mattered now.

I gave a pretense of a knock at the French window, and walked in.

"Hello, how's tricks?" I said.

I read it myself on the tape in the office shortly after lunch.

The daily woman had called the police as soon as she arrived. They found him lying on the sitting room floor. His skull was broken. A mallet lay nearby. His wallet had been rifled. The pathologist's report would not be available till later, but obviously death had occurred several hours before.

I studied these details with intense concentration but curious detachment. I had no feeling of guilt, no pangs of remorse, no sense of what had happened in terms of life and death. I had one thought only —*Shall we be found out?*

Everything was assessed and measured solely in this context, and, far from flinching at the record of my handiwork, I praised myself afresh for pushing his body to the floor so that it might suggest there had been a struggle with an intruder. It was the sort of precaution that could make all the difference.

Though we were over the biggest hurdles we'd foreseen—like my reentering the hotel with the cabaret customers, and those breathless seconds on the stairs when I gambled on my luck—there were still the statements we would have to make that afternoon. For we had agreed that, immediately the story reached the papers, Marian should go from the hotel straight to the police and tell them with whom and where she spent the night. And that would naturally bring them round to me.

There was nothing much to worry about so long as we kept our heads, but the more it looked like straight robbery, the less we should be asked.

They came to the office about six —Inspector Gorman and a sergeant. Plainclothes men, of course, but you can never fail to spot them, and I got some ribbing from the chap who told me they were there. Murder will out, he said; murder will out, old boy.

I took them to a little room we used for interviews. The Inspector said who they were, and that they were inquiring into the murder, and that Marian had got in touch with them. Would I be willing to answer a few questions? Certainly.

"She says she stayed last night at the Grand Hotel with you."

"That's right," I said.

"I understand from her this is the first time that it's happened—the first time that she's stayed with you all night, and not gone home."

"That's right," I said.

"We know definitely that death took place after ten o'clock last night." The Inspector looked at me affably. "And not later than two. So it's routine to account for the household in between those hours."

"I understand," I said.

"Then they can be eliminated from the investigation."

"We were in bed before ten," I said. "You can ask the chambermaid."

"We have asked her," the Inspector said. "Did you both stay in bed for the remainder of the night?"

"Until they brought tea at eight."

The Inspector went on looking at me affably. "How long has your affair with this lady been going on?"

"Six months."

"Did the dead man know of it?"

"No."

"What sort of terms were you on with him?"

"Excellent," I said.

"When did you last see him?"

I should have been ready for that one, but it very nearly threw me.

"Oh, earlier this week," I said. "I saw him quite often."

"A terrible end for him," the Inspector said.

"Terrible," I said.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Holt."

When they left I got the impression they were satisfied.

I didn't see any more of them for the next two or three days. Marian did, of course, but only on formal matters. We behaved as we supposed they would expect from an erring wife and her paramour. Marian stayed on for the time being at the hotel. I slept at my flat. While there was no point in trying to disguise the fact that we were lovers—that had indeed become our ultimate safeguard—we felt that discretion required we should not flaunt it until we could be certain that the inquiries had been closed.

So I was alone that evening when my bell rang, and I opened the door to Gorman and his sergeant.

"Robert Holt," the Inspector said.

I went, as they say, quietly. They could put me on trial if they liked, but I had a cast-iron alibi.

My counsel decided to call the alibi witnesses first. There was a sporting chance, he said, that the jury might want to hear no more, and then the trial would be over without my having to go into the box.

Certainly the prosecution hadn't been so hot. It was a thin case of identity, depending on an elderly couple who lived in the house next door. It had turned out that my secret visits to Marian hadn't been so secret; this pair could see me cross part of the garden from their window, and, scenting an intrigue, they kept up something like a watch. They knew me as well by sight, they said, as one of their relations; they'd seen me coming and going scores of times these last few months. And they had seen me come and go on the night of the murder too; came about eleven—that was most unusually late—and go less than half an hour afterwards, apparently in a rush.

Wasn't it dark? asked my counsel. Yes, but light shone from the window. Wasn't it past their bed-

time? Not at eleven o'clock. But at half-past? Well, they stayed up purposely. To spy? Yes, if he wished to put it so. But on *this* they couldn't be shaken—they were sure that it was me.

Still, as my counsel said in opening my defense, it's the easiest thing in the world to make a mistake of identification. I saw a juryman nod his head in obvious agreement. It seemed as though one good push now would do the trick.

The evidence from the hotel came out nice and smoothly. It fixed me in bed there at ten to ten that night, and in bed there again at eight o'clock next morning. The prosecution hardly challenged that. The only question was: did I go out in between?

My counsel called Marian.

There was a bit of a sensation when she entered the courtroom—a tribute to her loveliness, her mild celebrity.

"I shall be as brief as possible," my counsel said. "You remember the day you learned of your husband's death?"

"Yes."

"Where did you spend the previous night?"

"At the Grand Hotel."

"With anyone?"

"With . . . Mr. Holt."

Her hands were trembling, and she didn't look at me.

"What time did you go to bed?"

"Early. Before ten."

"Did you have breakfast in bed together in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Did Mr. Holt ever leave you at all during that night?"

Marian shook her head.

"Just give your answer aloud, please, for the purpose of the record. Did he ever leave you that night?"

Marian shook her head again, and finally whispered, "No."

This wasn't at all the Marian I'd been expecting. She had come to see me in prison a few days before the trial, and no one could have overlooked her air of confidence. Now apparently her nerve was failing her. Luckily she hadn't a lot to remember—or forget; so long as she just kept repeating that I'd never left her, there wasn't much that anyone could do.

Prosecuting counsel seemed of the same opinion. He began to cross-examine Marian in a half-hearted style, as if he was resigned to getting absolutely nowhere.

"Are you a heavy sleeper?"

"Not very," Marian said.

"Have you an idea what time you fell asleep that night?"

"Late," Marian said, and a young reporter grinned.

"Before or after two o'clock?"

"After," Marian said.

"So if the prisoner left you before two, you would be bound to know?"

"Yes," Marian said.

It had been drummed into us over and over again that two

o'clock was the latest hour at which Jim could have died. The prosecution had arrived at a dead end.

"And you swear he was with you in that hotel bedroom without a break from ten o'clock till two?"

He couldn't think of any other line to take. He was drawing his gown back, ready to sit down. She had only to say one more word to clinch my alibi.

But she didn't say it. Her mouth worked a little, but she didn't speak. Her hands trembled more now. I watched her, helpless, with an uneasy foreboding.

"Do you swear that?"

The prosecutor was on to it too. He'd perked up, and had let his gown fall back again.

"Do you swear that he was with you in that hotel bedroom without a break from ten o'clock till two? *Without a break*—do you swear that on your oath?"

He was pressing without a clear idea of what he was pressing for. He simply recognized the symptoms of a crackup, and went on hammering hard and hopefully.

"You have not answered my question. Do you swear that on your oath?"

Marian's trembling was painful to behold. Nothing had gone wrong, she hadn't been caught out, she'd never even come under any real fire. But here she was bordering on collapse.

Mechanically I gripped the rail before me with both hands, then realized that Marian in the box was doing the same. She had taken off one glove, and irrelevantly I wondered if my knuckles were showing as white as hers.

"*Do you swear that, madam?*"

The whole court waited in an agonizing silence.

"I won't swear," she said in a muffled, strangled voice. "I don't know. I can't remember."

Then she crumpled, and dropped her face into her hands. The judge said something I didn't catch, and they led her out of court.

The vital hours of that night lay unaccounted for. My cast-iron alibi had gone straight down the drain.

It was no longer a question of whether I could hope to escape the witness box. It was a question of whether I could hope to escape the rope.

My solicitor and my counsel had both pointed out to me the dangers inseparable from an alibi defense. If it flops, you can be left much worse off than you were before. For instance, they said, if you *admit* going to the house that night, but maintain that when you left Kim was alive and well, you will stand a reasonable chance of being acquitted; it's just conceivable that somebody came in and killed him later.

But if you call witnesses to prove that you weren't there *at all,* and those witnesses do not convince the jury, they will be disposed to think you are lying when *you* say you

weren't there, and, moreover, *to infer you've only one reason to lie.* So you must be very sure, they said, about an alibi.

But I *was* sure of mine, I told them, absolutely sure; and I wanted to be on a cert, not on a reasonable chance.

And the result? I had my back right up against the wall, and the knowledge that in the last resort my only hope was me.

I understand that I gave my evidence well. I felt conscious at the time that I wasn't yielding ground. Maybe prosecuting counsel didn't amount to much; maybe I got a bit of extra lift from desperation. Anyway, I could see his attempts to catch me from a mile off, and I had an answer for every single one.

I did best of all, I think, when he referred to Marian—a reference that he must have saved up for a parting shot. We were engaged in a passionate love affair, were we not, he asked. Spending our very first illicit night together? Could I think of any reason, in those circumstances, why Marian couldn't remember whether I stayed with her or not?

"Of course I can think of a reason." I started pulling out the stops. "It doesn't need an awful lot of imagination, either. We were in love with each other, don't you understand? You can say it was morally wrong if you like, but in fact we weren't hurting anyone; up till then it had been something private and sacred to ourselves."

"I didn't invite you to make a speech," said prosecuting counsel.

"You asked me for a reason why Marian went blank in the box, and I'm giving you a reason. She was the only one who could vouch for me that night, because we were alone together, because we were making love. To prove my innocence she had to reveal that publicly, to turn a part of her intimate life into a public shame. Do you wonder it was more than a woman's nerves could take? If I could stand my trial over again, I'd let it go by default rather than put her to such torture."

That had a good effect. I could tell from the prosecutor's shrug as he sat down, and from my solicitor's expression as I went back to the dock. At least, the latter conveyed, we're in the running again.

But though I may have solved the Marian mystery for others, I was still far short of solving it for myself. Possibly it made sense to them; it didn't make sense to me. Marian wasn't the nervous kind, and she wasn't bashful either; you can't be a Top Model without an exhibitionist streak.

What had destroyed the jaunty self-assurance that she still possessed when she last visited me in jail? Was it perhaps going back to live in the house she'd shared with Jim, as she told me she had done on the day before that visit? Had it got her down?

I couldn't see any reason for it; and when Marian said something vague about expense I couldn't forget the news with which she'd opened the visit—that her money from Jim totted up to £30,000. She need not, should not, have gone back. But would she let it get her down—and if it did so, would she have stayed?

Whatever it was, I owed to it the fact that even now I'd barely a fifty-fifty chance of getting out . . .

The jury retired in mellow afternoon sunlight. Night had fallen before they reappeared . . .

I dodged everyone. I wouldn't even stop to say more than a single word of thanks to my defenders. I wanted Marian, and when I heard she had gone home I followed.

Automatically I took the route that had become habitual . . .

The light glowed dully through the drawn curtains. The garden stretched out darkly as it had done that other night. I wondered whether the French window would still be left unlocked.

I tiptoed up to it, intent on surprise, and grew aware of an intermittent voice inside.

I couldn't pick out any words, but I knew it to be Marian. She was obviously speaking to someone on the 'phone, and in tones of such urgency that they stopped me in my tracks.

Very gently I pressed the latch. The French window yielded. I opened it an inch or two, just enough to hear.

". . . doesn't matter how," Marian was saying. "It's not *my* fault, goodness knows . . . All right, all right, but there it is, the fools have let him off . . . Dear darling heart, don't let's argue, there's no time . . . He'll be here before we know where we are, and then what's going to happen? . . . No, listen, honey, bring the car to the usual place . . . I won't have a bag at all, I'm leaving double quick . . . Brighton or somewhere, so long as it's away . . . Yes, dearest boy, in half an hour; my dearest, dearest boy."

She made a noisy, silly, kissing sound—the noisy, silly, kissing sound she used to make to me.

I gave a pretense of a knock at the French window, and walked in, as I had walked in that other night weeks ago.

Her head jerked round and her jaw dropped in the ugliness of horror. She slammed down the 'phone but kept her hand on it so that the black receiver set off her nails, like delicate red almonds.

"Bob," she said. "Bob."

"Hello," I said, "how's tricks?"

You may call it rough justice. But I don't feel that way. I do feel some remorse now over the man I murdered. But I feel no remorse over the woman who murdered me, and I shall go to the scaffold cursing her lovely, broken corpse.

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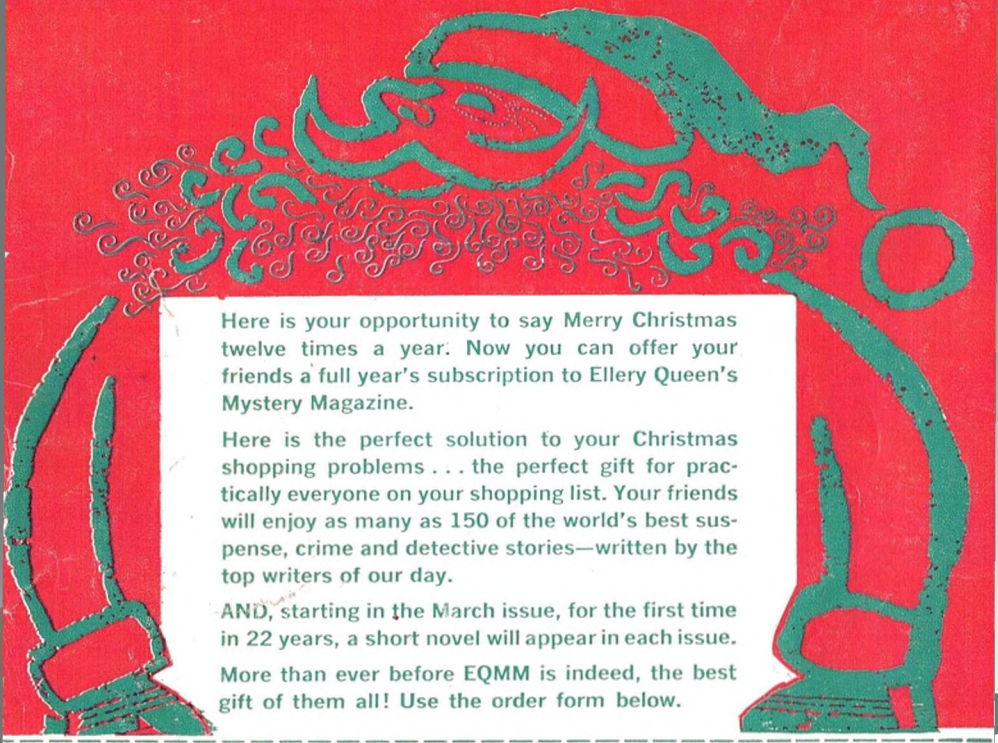

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