ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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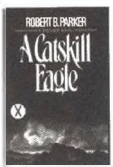

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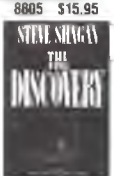

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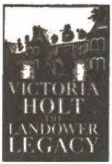

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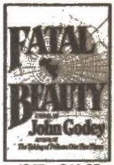

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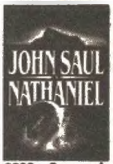

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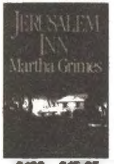

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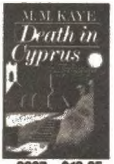

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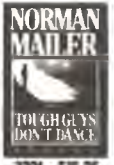

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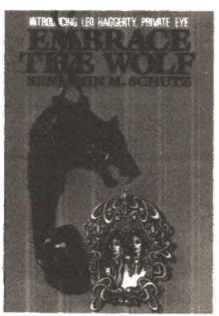

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"I'm most obliged to you for this information, Mrs. D'Abernon," said Buttery.

"Don't feel any obligation whatsoever, Mr. Buttery," she said, flashing a benevolent smile. "After all the hospitality you've shown me in my visits to the shop, I wouldn't even suggest a lunch at the Italian restaurant to celebrate our discovery . . ."

THE CORDER FIGURE

by PETER LOVESEY

Mrs. D'Abernon frowned at the ornamental figure on the shelf above her. She leaned towards it to read the name inscribed in copperplate on the base.

"Who was William Corder?"

"A notorious murderer."

"How horrid!" She sheered away as if the figure were alive and about to make a grab at her throat. She was in the back room of Francis Buttery's second-hand bookshop, where cheap sherry was dispensed to regular buyers of the more expensive books. As a collector of first editions of romantic novels of the Twenties and Thirties, she was always welcome. "Fancy anyone wanting to make a porcelain effigy of a murderer!"

"White earthenware," Buttery told her as if that were the only point worth taking up. "Staffordshire. I took it over with the shop after the previous owner passed on. He specialized in criminology." He picked it up, a glazed standing figure about ten inches in height.

"The workmanship looks crude to me," ventured Mrs. D'Abernon, determined not to like it. "I mean, it doesn't compare with a Dresden shepherdess, does it? Look at the way the face is painted—those

daubs of color on the cheeks. You can see why they needed to write the name on the base. I ask you, Mr. Buttery, it could be anyone from the Prince of Wales to a peasant, now couldn't it?"

"Staffordshire portrait figures are not valued as good likenesses," Buttery said in its defense, pitching his voice at a level audible to browsers in the main part of the shop. He believed that a bookshop should be a haven of culture, and when he wasn't broadcasting it himself he played Bach on the stereo. "The proportions are wrong and the finishing is too stylized to admit much individuality. They are primitive pieces, but they have a certain naive charm, I must insist."

"Insist as much as you like, darling," said Mrs. D'Abernon, indomitable in her aesthetic judgments. "You won't convince me that it is anything but grotesque." She smiled fleetingly. "Well, I might give you vulgar if you press me, as I'm sure you'd like to."

Buttery sighed and offered more sherry. These sprightly married women in their thirties and forties who liked to throw in the occasional suggestive remark were a type he recognized, but hadn't learned how to handle. He was thirty-four, a bachelor, serious-minded, good-looking, gaunt, dark, with a few silver signs of maturity at the temples. He was knowledgeable about women—indeed, he had two shelf-lengths devoted to the subject, high up and close to the back room, where he could keep an eye on anyone who inspected them—but he had somehow failed to achieve what the manuals described as an intimate relationship. He was not discouraged, however—for him, the future always beckoned invitingly. "The point about Staffordshire figures," he persisted with Mrs. D'Abernon, "is that they give us an insight into the amusements of our Victorian ancestors."

"Amusements such as murder?" said Mrs. D'Abernon with a peal of laughter. She was still a pretty woman, with blonde hair in loose curls that bobbed when she moved her head.

"Yes, indeed!" Buttery assured her. "The blood-curdling story of a man like Corder was pure theater, the stuff of melodrama. The arrest, the trial, and even the execution. Murderers were hanged in public, and thousands came to watch—not just the rabble, but literary people like Dickens and Thackeray."

"How macabre!"

Buttery gave the shrug of a man who understands human behavior. "That was the custom. Anyway, the Staffordshire potters made a tidy profit out of it. I suppose respectable Victorian gentlemen felt

rather high-hat and manly with a line of convicted murderers on the mantelpiece. Of course, there were other subjects, like royalty and the theater. Sport, as well. You collected whatever took your fancy."

"And what did Mr. William Corder do to earn his place on the mantelpiece?"

"He was a scoundrel in every way. No woman was safe with him, by all accounts," said Buttery, trying not to sound envious. "It happened in 1827, way out in the country in some remote village in Suffolk. He was twenty-one when he got a young lady by the name of Maria Marten into trouble."

Mrs. D'Abernon clicked her tongue as she took a sidelong glance at the figure.

"The child didn't survive," Buttery went on, "but Corder was persuaded to marry Maria. It was a clandestine arrangement. Maria dressed in the clothes of a man and crossed the fields with Corder to a barn with a red roof, where her luggage was stored and a gig was supposed to be waiting to take them to Ipswich. She was not seen alive again. Corder reappeared two days after and bluffed it out for months that Maria was living in Ipswich. Then he left the district and wrote to say that they were on the Isle of Wight."

"And was he believed?" asked Mrs. D'Abernon.

"By everyone except one tenacious woman," said Buttery. "That was the feature of the case that made it exceptional. Mrs. Marten, Maria's mother, had two vivid dreams that her daughter had been murdered and buried in the red barn."

"Ah! The intrusion of the supernatural," said Mrs. D'Abernon in some excitement. "And did they find the poor girl there?"

"No one believed Mrs. Marten at first, not even her husband, but, yes, eventually they found Maria buried under the floor. It was known as the Red Barn Murder and the whole nation was gripped by the story. Corder was arrested and duly went to the gallows." He paused for effect, then added, "I happen to have two good studies of the case in fine condition, if you are interested."

Mrs. D'Abernon gave him a pained look. "Thank you, but I don't care for that sort of reading. Tell me, what is it worth?"

"The figure of Corder? I've no idea."

"It's an antique, isn't it? You ought to get it valued."

"It's probably worth a few pounds, but I don't know that I'd care to sell it," said Buttery, piqued that she had dismissed the books so offhandedly.

"You might, if you knew how much you could get for it," Mrs. D'Abernon remarked with a penetrating look. "I'll make some inquiries. I have a very dear friend in the trade."

He would have said, "Don't trouble," but he knew there was no stopping her. She was a forceful personality.

And the next afternoon, she was back. "You're going to be grateful to me, Mr. Buttery," she confidently informed him as he poured the sherry. "I asked my friend and it appears that Staffordshire figures are collectors' items."

"I knew that," Buttery mildly pointed out.

"But you didn't know that the murderers are among the most sought after, did you? Heaven knows why, but people try to collect them all, regardless of their horrid crimes. Some of them are relatively easy to obtain if you have a hundred pounds or so to spare, but I'm pleased to inform you that your William Corder is extremely rare. Very few copies are known to exist."

"Are you sure of this, Mrs. D'Abernon?"

"Mr. Buttery, my friend is in the antique trade. She showed me books and catalogues. There are two great collections of Staffordshire figures in this country, one at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the other owned by the National Trust, at Stapleford Park. Neither of them has a Corder."

Buttery felt his face getting warm. "So my figure could be valuable." He pitched his voice lower. "Did your friend put a price on it?"

"She said you ought to get it valued by one of the big auctioneers in London and she would be surprised if their estimate was lower than a thousand pounds."

"Good gracious!"

Mrs. D'Abernon beamed. "I thought that would take your breath away."

"A thousand!" said Buttery. "I had no idea."

"These days, a thousand doesn't go far, but it's better than nothing, isn't it?" she said as if Buttery were one of her neighbors on Kingston Hill with acres of grounds and a heated swimming pool. "You might get more, of course. If you put it up for auction, and you had the V and A bidding against the National Trust . . ."

"Good Lord!" said Buttery. "I'm most obliged to you for this information, Mrs. D'Abernon."

"Don't feel under any obligation whatsoever, Mr. Buttery," she said, flashing a benevolent smile. "After all the hospitality you've

shown me in my visits to the shop, I wouldn't even suggest a lunch at the Italian restaurant to celebrate our discovery."

"I say, that *is* an idea!" Buttery enthused, then, lowering his voice again, "That is, if your husband wouldn't object."

Mrs. D'Abernon leaned towards Buttery and said confidentially, "I wouldn't tell him, darling."

Buttery squirmed in his chair, made uneasy by her closeness. "Suppose someone saw us? I'm pretty well known in the High Street."

"You're probably right," said Mrs. D'Abernon, going into reverse. "I must have had too much sherry to be talking like this. Let's forget it."

"On the contrary, I shall make a point of remembering it," Buttery assured her, sensing just in time that the coveted opportunity of a liaison was in danger of slipping by. "If I find myself richer by a thousand pounds, I'll find some way of thanking you, Mrs. D'Abernon, believe me."

On Wednesday, he asked his part-time assistant, James, to manage the shop for the day. He got up earlier than usual, packed the Corder figure in a shoebox lined with tissue, and caught one of the commuter trains to London. In his corduroy jacket and bowtie he felt mercifully remote from the dark-suited businessmen ranged opposite him, most of them doggedly studying the city news. He pictured Mrs. D'Abernon's husband reading the same paper in the back of a chauffeur-driven limousine, his mind stuffed with stock-market prices, uninterested in the dull, domestic routine he imagined his wife was following. Long might he remain uninterested!

The expert almost cooed with delight when Buttery unwrapped his figure. It was the first William Corder he had ever seen and a particularly well preserved piece. He explained to Buttery that Staffordshire figures were cast in simple plaster molds, some of which were good for up to two hundred figures, while others deteriorated after as few as twenty castings. He doubted whether there were more than three or four Corders remaining in existence, and the only ones he knew about were in America.

Buttery's mouth was dry with excitement. "What sort of price would you put on it?" he asked.

"I could sell it today for eight hundred," the expert told him. "I think in an auction it might fetch considerably more."

"A thousand?"

"If it went in one of our sales of English pottery, I would suggest that figure as a reserve, sir."

"So it might go for more?"

"That is my estimation."

"When is the next sale?"

The expert explained the timetable for cataloguing and pre-sale publicity. Buttery wasn't happy at the prospect of waiting several months for a sale, and he inquired whether there was any way of expediting the procedure. With some reluctance, the expert made a phone call and arranged for the Corder figure to be added as a late item to the sale scheduled the following month, five weeks ahead.

Two days later, Mrs. D'Abernon called at the shop and listened to Buttery's account of his day in London. She had sprayed herself lavishly with a distinctive floral perfume that subdued even the smell of the books. She appeared more alluring each time he saw her. Was it his imagination that she dressed to please him?

"I'm so thrilled for you," she said.

"And I'm profoundly grateful to you, Mrs. D'Abernon," said Buttery, ready to make the suggestion he had been rehearsing ever since he got back from London. "In fact, I was wondering if you would care to join me for lunch next Wednesday as a mark of my thanks."

Mrs. D'Abernon raised her finely plucked eyebrows. "I thought we had dismissed the possibility."

"I thought we might meet in Epsom, where neither of us is so well known."

She gave him a glimpse of the beautiful teeth. "How intriguing!"

"You'll come?"

She put down her sherry glass. "But I think it would be assuming too much at this stage, don't you?"

Buttery reddened. "How, exactly?"

"One shouldn't take anything for granted, Mr. Buttery. Let's wait until after the sale. When did you say it is?"

"On May fifteenth, a Friday."

"The fifteenth? Oh, what a pity! I shall be leaving for France the following day. I go to France every spring, before everyone else is on holiday. It's so much quieter."

"How long will you be away?" Buttery asked, unable to conceal his disappointment.

"About a month. My husband is a duffer as a cook. He can survive for four weeks on rubbery eggs and burnt bacon, but that's his limit."

Buttery's eyes widened. The future that had beckoned ever since he had started to shave was now practically tugging him by the sleeve. "You go to France without your husband?"

"Yes, we always have separate holidays. He's a golfer, and you know what they're like. He takes his three weeks in July and plays every day. He doesn't care for travel at all. In fact, I sometimes wonder what we *do* have in common. Do you like foreign travel, Mr. Buttery?"

"Immensely," said Buttery huskily, "but I've never had much opportunity—until this year."

She traced the rim of the sherry glass with one beautifully manicured finger. "Your thousand pounds?"

"Well, yes." He hesitated, taking a glance through the shop to check that no one could overhear. "I was thinking of a trip to France myself, but I don't know the country at all. I'm not sure where to head for."

"It depends what you have in mind," said Mrs. D'Abernon, taking a sip of the sherry and giving Buttery a speculative look. "Personally, I adore historical places, so I shall start with a few days in Orléans and then make my way slowly along the Loire Valley."

"You can recommend that?"

"Absolutely."

"Then perhaps I'll do the same. I say," he added, as if the idea had just entered his head, "wouldn't it be fun to meet somewhere in France and have that celebration meal?"

She registered surprise like a star of the silent screen. "Yes, but you won't be going at the same time as I—will you?"

Buttery allowed the ghost of a smile to materialize fleetingly on his lips. "It could be arranged."

"But what about the shop?"

"Young James is perfectly capable of looking after things for me." He topped up her glass, sensing that it was up to the man to take the initiative in matters as delicate as this. "Let's make a rendezvous on the steps of Orléans Cathedral at noon on May eighteenth."

"My word, Mr. Buttery! —Why May eighteenth?"

"So that we can drink a toast to William Corder. It's the anniversary of the Red Barn Murder. I've been reading up the case."

Mrs. D'Abernon laughed. "You and your murderer!" There was

a worrying pause while she considered her response. "All right, May eighteenth it is—provided, of course, that the figure is sold."

"I'll be there whatever the outcome of the sale," Buttery rashly promised her.

Encouragingly, she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the lips. "So shall I."

When she had gone, he went to his Physiology and Anatomy shelf and selected a number of helpful volumes to study in the back room. He didn't want his inexperience to show on May eighteenth.

The weeks leading up to the auction seemed insufferably long to Buttery, particularly as Mrs. D'Abernon appeared in the shop only on two occasions, when by sheer bad luck he happened to be entertaining other lady customers in the back room. He wished there had been time to explain that it was all in the nature of public relations, but on each occasion Mrs. D'Abernon curtly declined his invitation to join the sherry party, excusing herself by saying she had so many things to arrange before she went to France. For days, he agonized over whether to call at her house—a big detached place overlooking the golf course—and eventually decided against it. Apologies and explanations on the doorstep didn't accord with the cosmopolitan image he intended to present in Orléans.

So he made his own travel arrangements, such as they were: the purchase of an advance ticket for the cross-Channel ferry, some travelers cheques, and a map of the French railway system. Over there, he would travel by train. He gathered that Mrs. D'Abernon rented a car for her sightseeing, and that would have to do for both of them after Orléans because he had never learned to drive. He didn't book accommodation in advance, preferring to keep his arrangements flexible.

He also invested in some new clothes for the first time in years: several striped shirts and cravats, a navy blazer, and two pairs of white, well cut trousers. He bought a modern suitcase and packed it ready for departure on the morning after the auction.

On May fifteenth, he attended the auction. He had already been sent a catalogue, and the Corder figure was one of the final lots on the list, but he was there from the beginning, studying the form, spotting the six or seven dealers who between them seemed to account for three-quarters of the bids. They made him apprehensive after what he had once read about rings that conspired to keep the prices low, and he was even more disturbed to find that a number

of items had to be withdrawn after failing to reach their reserve prices.

As the auction proceeded, Buttery felt increasingly nervous. This wasn't just the Corder figure that was under the hammer—it was his rendezvous with Mrs. D'Abernon, his initiation into fleshly pleasures. He had waited all his adult life for the opportunity and it couldn't be managed on a low budget. She was a rich, sophisticated woman, who would expect to be treated to the best food and wines available.

"And so we come to Lot 287, a very fine Staffordshire figure of the murderer, William Corder . . .

A pulse throbbed in Buttery's head and he thought for a moment he would have to leave the sale-room. He took deeper breaths and closed his eyes.

The bidding got under way, moving rapidly from 500 pounds to 750. Buttery opened his eyes and saw that two of the dealers were making bids on the nod at an encouraging rate.

"Eight hundred," said the auctioneer.

There was a pause. The bidding had lost its momentum.

"At eight hundred pounds," said the auctioneer. "Any more?"

Buttery leaned forward anxiously One of the dealers indicated that he had finished. This could be disastrous. Eight hundred pounds was below the reserve. Perhaps they had overvalued the figure.

"Eight fifty on my left," said the auctioneer, and Buttery sat back and breathed more evenly. Another dealer had entered the bidding. Could he be buying for the V & A?

It moved on, but more slowly, as if both dealers baulked at a four-figure bid. Then it came.

"A thousand pounds."

Buttery had a vision of Mrs. D'Abernon naked as a nymph, sipping champagne in a hotel bedroom.

The bidding continued to 1,250 pounds.

The auctioneer looked around the room. "At 1,250 pounds. Any more?" He raised the gavel and brought it down. "Hudson and Black."

And that was it. After the auctioneer's commission had been deducted, Buttery's cheque amounted to 1,125 pounds.

Three days later, in his blazer and white trousers, he waited at the rendezvous. Mrs. D'Abernon arrived twenty minutes late, radiant in a primrose-yellow dress and wide-brimmed straw hat, and

pressed her lips to Buttery's, there on the Cathedral steps. He handed her the box containing an orchid that he had bought in Orléans that morning. It was clearly a good investment.

"So romantic! And two little safety-pins!" she squeaked in her excitement. "Darling, how thoughtful. Why don't you help me pin it on?"

"I reserved a table at the Hotel de Ville," he told her as he fumbled with the safety-pin.

"How extravagant!"

"It's my way of saying thank you. The Corder figure sold for over a thousand pounds."

"Wonderful!"

They had a long lunch on the hotel terrace. He ordered champagne and the food was superb. "You couldn't have pleased me more," said Mrs. D'Abernon. "To be treated like this is an almost unknown pleasure for me, Mr. Buttery."

He smiled.

"I mean it," she insisted. "I don't mean to complain about my life. I am not unloved. But this is another thing. This is romance."

"With undertones of wickedness," commented Buttery.

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"We're here by courtesy of William Corder."

Her smile returned. "Your murderer. I was meaning to ask you: why did he kill poor Maria?"

"Oh, I think he felt he was trapped into marriage," Buttery explained. "He was a philanderer by nature. Not a nice man at all."

"I admire restraint in a man," said Mrs. D'Abernon.

"But, of course," Buttery responded, with what he judged to be the ironic smile of a man who knows what really pleases a woman.

It was after three when, light-headed and laughing, they stepped through the hotel foyer and into the sunny street.

"Let's look at some shops," Mrs. D'Abernon suggested.

One of the first they came to was a jeweler's. "Aren't they geniuses at displaying things?" she said. "I mean, there's so little to see in a way, but everything looks exquisite. That gold chain, for instance. So elegant to look at, but you can be sure if I tried it on, it wouldn't look half so lovely."

"I'm sure it would," said Buttery.

"No, you're mistaken."

"Let's go in and see, then. Try it on and I'll give you my opinion."

They went in, and after some rapid mental arithmetic Buttery

parted with three thousand francs to convince her that he really had meant what he said.

"You shouldn't have done it, you wicked man!" she told him, pressing the chain possessively against her throat. "It was only a meal you promised me. I can't think why you did it."

Buttery decided to leave her in suspense. Meanwhile, he suggested a walk by the river. They made their way slowly down the Rue Royale to the Quai Cypierre. In a quiet position with a view of the river, they found a *salon de thé*, and sipped lemon tea until the shadows lengthened.

"It's been a blissful day," said Mrs. D'Abernon.

"It hasn't finished yet," said Buttery.

"It has for me, darling."

He smiled. "You're joking. I'm taking you out to dinner tonight."

"I couldn't possibly manage dinner after the lunch we had."

"Call it supper, then. We'll eat late, like the French."

She shook her head. "I'm going to get an early night."

He produced his knowing smile. "That's not a bad idea. I'll get the bill."

Outside, he suggested taking a taxi and asked where she was staying.

She answered vaguely, "Somewhere in the center of town. Put me off at the Cathedral and I can walk it from there. How about you? Where have you put up?"

"Nowhere yet," he told her as he waved down a cab. "My luggage is at the railway station."

"Hadn't you better get booked in somewhere?"

He gave a quick, nervous laugh. She wasn't making this easy for him. "I was hoping it wouldn't be necessary." The moment he had spoken, he sensed that his opportunity had gone. He should have sounded more masculine and assertive. A woman like Mrs. D'Abernon didn't want a feeble appeal to her generosity. She wanted a man who knew what he wanted and took the initiative.

The taxi had drawn up and the door was open. Mrs. D'Abernon climbed in. She looked surprised when Buttery didn't take the seat beside her.

He announced, "I'm taking you to lunch again tomorrow."

"That would be very agreeable, but—"

"I'll be on the Cathedral steps at noon. Sweet dreams." He closed the door and strode away, feeling that he had retrieved his pride and cleared the way for a better show the next day. After all, he

had waited all his life, so one more night in solitary was not of much account.

So it was a more assertive Buttery who arrived five minutes late for the rendezvous next day, found her already waiting, and kissed her firmly on the mouth. "We're going to a slightly more exotic place today," he told her, taking a decisive grip on her arm.

It was an Algerian restaurant on the fringe of the red-light district. Halfway through their meal, a belly dancer came through a bead curtain and gyrated to taped music. Buttery clapped to the rhythm. At the end, he tossed the girl a five-franc piece and ordered another bottle of wine.

Towards 3:00 P.M., Mrs. D'Abernon began to look restless.

"Had enough?" asked Buttery.

"Yes. It was wonderfully exciting and I enjoyed every minute of it, but I have to be going. I really must get back to my hotel and wash my hair. It must be reeking of cigar smoke and I made an appointment for a massage and manicure at five."

"I'll give you a massage," Buttery informed her with a no-nonsense statement of intention that pleased him as he said it. It more than made up for the previous day's ineptness.

"That won't be necessary, thank you," responded Mrs. D'Abernon, matching him in firmness. "She's a qualified masseuse and beautician. I shall probably have a facial as well."

He gaped at her. "How long will that take?"

"I'm in no hurry. That's the joy of a holiday, isn't it?"

Buttery might have said that it was not the joy he had in mind, but he was too disconcerted to answer.

"We could meet again tomorrow for lunch, if you like," offered Mrs. D'Abernon.

He said, letting his resentment show, "Do you really want to?"

She smiled benignly. "Darling, I can think of nothing I would rather do."

That, Buttery increasingly understood, was his problem. Mrs. D'Abernon liked being treated to lunch, but there was nothing she would rather do. Each day that week she made some excuse to leave him as soon as possible afterwards: a hair appointment, a toothache, uncomfortable shoes. She declined all invitations to dinner and all suggestions of night-clubbing or theater-going.

Buttery considered his position. He was going through his travelers cheques at an alarming rate. He was staying at a modest hotel

near the station, but he would have to pay the bill sometime, and it was mounting up because he spent each evening drinking alone in the bar. The lunches were costing him more than he had budgeted and there was nearly always a taxi-fare to settle.

In the circumstances, most men planning what Buttery had come to France to achieve would have got discouraged, cut their losses, and given up, but Buttery was unlike most other men. He still nursed the hope that his luck would change. He spent many lonely hours trying to work out a more successful strategy. Finally, desperation and his dwindling funds drove him to formulate an all-or-nothing plan.

It was a Friday, and they had lunch at the best fish restaurant in Orléans, lobster scooped wriggling from a tank in the center of the dining room and cooked to perfection, accompanied by a vintage champagne. Then lemon sorbet and black coffee. Before Mrs. D'Abernon had a chance to make her latest unconvincing excuse, Buttery said, "I'd better get you back to your hotel."

She blinked in surprise.

"I'm moving on tomorrow," Buttery explained. "Must get my travel arrangements sorted out before the end of the afternoon." He beckoned to the waiter.

"Where do you plan to visit next?" asked Mrs. D'Abernon.

"Haven't really decided," he said as he settled the bill. "Nothing to keep me in Orléans."

"I was thinking of driving to Tours," Mrs. D'Abernon quickly mentioned. "The food is said to be outstanding there. I could offer you a lift in my car if you wish."

"The food isn't so important to me," said Buttery.

"It's also very convenient for the chateaux of the Loire."

"I'll think it over," he told her as they left the restaurant. He hailed a taxi and one drew up immediately. He opened the door and she got in. "Hotel Charlemagne," he told the driver as he closed the door on Mrs. D'Abernon. He noticed her head turn at the name of the hotel. It hadn't been difficult to trace. There weren't many that offered a massage and beauty service.

She wound down the window. "But how will I know—?" Her words were lost as the taxi pulled away.

Buttery gave a satisfied smile as he watched it go.

He went to the florist's and came out with a large bouquet of red roses. Then he returned to his hotel and took a shower.

About seven, he phoned the Hotel Charlemagne and asked to speak to Mrs. D'Abernon.

Her voice came through. "Yes?"

In a passable imitation of a Frenchman, Buttery said, "You are English? There is some mistake. Which room is this, please?"

"Six fifty-seven."

He replaced the phone, went downstairs to the bar, and ordered his first vodka and tonic.

Two hours later, carrying the roses, he crossed the foyer of the Charlemagne and took the lift to the sixth floor. The corridor was deserted. He found 657 and knocked, pressing the bouquet against the spy-hole.

There was a delay, during which he could hear sounds inside. The door opened a fraction. Buttery pushed it firmly and went in.

Mrs. D'Abernon gave a squeak of alarm. She was dressed in one of the white bathrobes that the best hotels provide for their guests. She had her hair wrapped in a towel and her face was liberally coated in a white cream.

"These are for you," said Buttery in a slightly slurred, yet, he confidently believed, sexy voice.

She took the roses and looked at them as if a summons had been served on her. "Mr. Buttery! I was getting ready for bed."

"Good," said Buttery, closing the door. He crossed to the fridge and took out a half bottle of champagne. "Let's have a nightcap."

"No! I think you'd better leave my room at once."

Buttery moved closer to her, smiling. "I don't object to a little cream on your face. It's all right with me." He snatched the towel from her head. The color of her hair surprised him. It was brown, and grey in places, like his own. She must have been wearing a blonde wig all the times he had taken her to lunch.

Mrs. D'Abernon reacted badly. She flung the roses back at him and said, "Get out of here!"

He was not discouraged. "You don't mean that, my dear," he told her. "You really want me to stay."

She shook her head emphatically.

Buttery went on. "We've had good times together, you and I. Expensive lunches."

"I enjoyed the lunches," conceded Mrs. D'Abernon in a more conciliatory vein. "Didn't I always express my appreciation?"

"You said you felt romantic."

"I did, and I meant it!"

"Well, then." He reached to embrace her, but she backed away. "What's the matter with you? Or is something the matter with me?"

"No. Don't think me unappreciative, but that's enough for me, to have an escort during the day. I like to spend my evenings alone."

"Come on, I've treated you well. I've spent a small fortune on you."

"I'm not to be bought," said Mrs. D'Abernon, edging away from the bed.

"It's not like that at all," Buttery insisted. "I fancy you, and I reckon you fancy me."

She gave an exasperated sigh. "For pity's sake, Mr. Buttery, I'm a married woman. I'm used to being fancied, as you put it. I'm sick of it, if you want to know. All evening he ignores me, then he gets into bed and thinks he can switch me on like the electric blanket. Coupling, that's all it is, and I want a break from it. I don't want more of it. I just crave a little innocent romance, someone to pay me some attention over lunch." Then Mrs. D'Abernon made her fatal mistake. She said, "Don't spoil it now. This isn't in your nature. I picked you out because you're safe. Any woman could tell you're safe to be with."

Safe to be with? He winced, as if she had struck him, but the effect was worse than that. She had just robbed him of his dream, his virility, his future. He would never have the confidence now to approach a woman again. He was finished before he had ever begun. He hated her for it. He hated her for going through his money, cynically eating and spending her way through the money he had got for his Corder figure.

He grabbed her by the throat.

Three days later, he returned to England. The French papers were full of what they described as the Charlemagne killing. The police wished to interview a man, believed to be English, who had been seen with the victim in several Orléans restaurants. He was described as middle-aged, going grey, about 5ft 8ins and wearing a blue blazer and white trousers.

In Buttery's well informed opinion, that description was worse than useless. He was 5ft 9ins in his socks, there was no grey hair that anyone would notice, and thirty-four was a long way from being middle-aged. Only the blazer and trousers were correct, and he had dumped them in the Loire after buying jeans and a T-shirt. He felt

amused at the problems now faced by all the middle-aged Englishmen in blue blazers staying at the Charlemagne.

He experienced a profound sense of relief at setting foot on British soil again at Dover, but it was short-lived. The immigration officer asked him to step into an office and answer some questions. A CID officer was waiting there.

"Just routine, sir. Would you mind telling me where you stayed in France?"

"Various places," answered Buttery. "I was moving along the Loire Valley. Angers, Tours, Poitiers."

"Orléans?"

"No. I was told it's a disappointment historically. So much bombing in the war."

"You heard about the murder there, I expect?"

"Vaguely. I can't read much in French."

"An Englishwoman was strangled in her hotel bedroom," the CID man explained. "She happens to come from the same town as you."

Buttery made an appropriate show of interest. "Really? What was her name?"

"Mildred D'Abernon. You didn't meet her at any stage on your travels?"

He shook his head. "D'Abernon. I've never heard of her."

"You're quite sure?"

"Positive."

"In that case, I won't detain you any longer, Mr. Buttery. Thank you for your co-operation."

In the train home, he tried to assess the case from the point of view of the police. In France, there was little, if anything, to connect him with the murder. He had traveled separately from Mrs. D'Abernon and stayed in a different hotel. They had met for lunch, but never more than once in the same restaurant and it was obvious that the descriptions provided by waiters and others could have applied to hundreds, if not thousands, of Englishmen. He had paid every bill in cash, so there was no question of his being traced through the travelers cheques. The roses he had bought came from an old woman so short-sighted that she had tried to give the change to another customer. He had been careful to leave no fingerprints in the hotel room. The unremarkable fact that he came from the same Surrey suburb as Mrs. D'Abernon and had been in France at the same time was hardly evidence of guilt.

All he had to do was stay cool and give nothing else away.

So he was irritated, but not unduly alarmed, when he was met off the train by a local policeman in plain clothes and escorted to a car.

"Just checking details, sir," the officer explained. "We'll give you a lift back to your place and save you the price of a taxi. You live over your bookshop, don't you?"

"Well, yes."

"You answered some questions at Dover about the murder in Orléans. I believe you said you didn't know Mrs. D'Abernon."

"That's true."

"Never met the lady?"

Buttery sensed a trap.

"I certainly didn't know her by name. Plenty of people come into the shop."

"That clears it up, then, sir. We found a number of books in her house that her husband understands had been bought from you. Do you keep any record of your customers?"

"Only if they pay by cheque," said Buttery with a silent prayer of thanks that Mrs. D'Abernon had always paid in cash.

"You don't mind if I come in, then, just to have a glance at the accounts?"

The car drew up outside the shop and the officer helped Buttery with his cases.

It was after closing-time, but James was still there. Buttery nodded to him and walked on briskly to the back room, followed by the policeman.

"Nice holiday, Mr. Buttery?" James called. "The mail is on your desk. I opened it, as you instructed."

Buttery closed the door and took the account book off its shelf. "If I'd had any dealings with the woman, I'm sure I'd remember her name," he said as he held it out.

The officer didn't take it. He was looking at an open parcel on Buttery's desk. It was about the size of a shoebox. "Looks as if someone's sent you a present, sir."

Buttery glanced into the box and saw the Corder figure lying in a bed of tissue paper. He picked it out, baffled. There was a letter with it from Hudson and Black, dealers in *objets d'art*. It said that the client they had represented in the recent auction had left instructions on the day of the sale that the figure of William Corder should be returned as a gift to its seller with the enclosed note.

The policeman picked out a small card from the wrappings, frowned at it, stared at Buttery, and handed it across.

Buttery went white. The message was handwritten. It read: You treated me to romance in a spirit of true generosity. Don't think badly of me for devising this way to show my gratitude. I can well afford it.

It was signed: Mildred D'Abernon.

Below was written: P.S. Here's your murderer.

a *NEW* Griswold story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Dowling was one of those men who are adept at parlor tricks. He could do complicated things with spoons and bits of string, for instance. He also knew all sorts of odd facts and out-of-the-way matters on which he would urge you to bet, and which bets he always won—a sure-fire way of making oneself unpopular . . .

CHILD'S PLAY

by ISAAC ASIMOV

I might have known what would happen when I saw Baranov's expression settle into one of fatuous pride. It was the look of someone who is determined to make up for his lack of achievement by boasting of some infant descendant.

"My eldest grandson," he said, "is a genius. That child—he's only in the third grade—wrote a composition you wouldn't believe."

He was groping in his inside jacket pocket and I said in alarm, "Are you going to ask us to read it?"

"No," said Baranov haughtily, "I wouldn't waste it on you. I just want to show you what the teacher said."

Jennings said, "I have a granddaughter, only five, who—"

I said, "I'm sure that you two each had grandparents who boasted about you endlessly, and look at you. Do you ever hear me talk about *my* grandchildren?"

"You don't have any," they said in chorus.

"So? I could easily invent some for the purpose. Besides, how can we speak of child prodigies in the presence of Griswold here."

"I didn't know Griswold was a child prodigy," said Jennings.

"Ask him," I said. "He'll tell you he was."

Griswold snapped awake at once and took a long deliberate sip

at the Scotch and soda he was holding. He said, "I was *not* a child prodigy. School bored me silly. —I had my points, of course."

"Of course," I said. "How old were you when you solved your first mystery?"

"Nine," said Griswold. "Oh, I took care of a few trifles earlier, but I was nine before I actually earned money at it. Mere child's play, of course. You wouldn't be interested—"

"Probably not," I said.

But since you ask so prettily [said Griswold], I will allow myself to be persuaded.

As I said, I was only nine, and it was before the stock-market crash of 1929. My family was well off, then. We lived in a rather impressive house and we entertained frequently. Afterwards, with my father more or less wiped out when the stock prices plummeted, things got rather sticky for a few years—but that is neither here nor there.

There was a social gathering at my house one evening not long after my ninth birthday and I was there. I don't mean I was there on an even standing with the grownups; in fact, I had been sternly ordered to my room immediately after I had finished my own supper. I was *always* sternly ordered to my room on such occasions, but I had found that if I emerged from my room quietly and sat at the head of the stairs, the chances were that no one would notice me for most of the night.

It wasn't that there was much profit to be gained by this line of procedure. I usually failed to grasp what everyone was laughing about and certainly found none of the proceedings interesting. However, the feeling that I was doing something forbidden made up for the boredom. Had I been told I *had* to attend I would have sneaked away at the earliest opportunity. My parents never grasped this basic truth of human behavior.

This party, however, was different. A man was present who amused me greatly. I don't remember his name, but, after all, I was only nine. It won't hurt if I call him Dowling.

As I said, I found Dowling fascinating. I realized later, looking back on it, that he must have been one of the city's prime bores. After all, someone who fascinates a nine-year-old is by that very fact bound to be a bore to those who have left nine far behind. I was not strong on social psychology in those days, however, and the thought never occurred to me. I thought he was wonderful.

Dowling was one of those men who are adept at parlor tricks. He could do complicated things with spoons and bits of string, for instance. He also knew all sorts of odd facts and out-of-the-way matters on which he would urge you to bet, and which bets he always won—a sure-fire way of making oneself unpopular.

I watched him with my eyes and ears wide open and it was all I could do to keep from laughing at all the very funny things (it seemed to me) that he was saying. If I had laughed, of course, I would have been noticed, and banished at once.

Finally, he said, "I tell you what. I have a list of thirteen words here, common English words, which I have written out in alphabetical order on slips of paper. I'll pass the slips around. Each of you look at the list and decide what all the words have in common. Once you've done that, you can think up a better way of arranging the words than in alphabetical order. Just write down the words in the new order and hand the new list back to me. Let's see if any of you, *any* of you, can come up with something sensible in an hour. Or, if you want, you can discuss it openly and see if the whole lot of you together can come up with something sensible."

He passed the slips of paper around the table. I don't know that he created much enthusiasm, but people are bound to be polite. Everyone took up the list and stared at it, while he handed out little blank sheets of paper as well.

He made a small pile of the slips and blank sheets that were left over and placed them on an empty chair next to him. That put them rather close to the stairs and, overwhelmed by curiosity, I inched down them a slow step at a time, praying that I wouldn't be seen. Finally, when I was at chair-level, I reached out and just managed to obtain a slip and a blank sheet. I crept up the stairs again and studied the list. I've kept it—after all, it was my first triumph—and I should have it somewhere here in my wallet. Pardon me a moment, gentlemen. Ah, here it is. A little faded and grimy with the accumulated dust of decades, but there you are.

You'll notice that the words are: accent, advantage, cipher, evince, except, exist, give, line, mist, mix, sadly, solve, summer.

Although the company, as I said, did not seem to be very interested at the start, it was the sort of thing that they were soon caught up in. There's nothing like word games to grab people. They seem simple, and they deal with units that are familiar to everyone. They don't arouse the primitive fears that come with puzzles involving numbers, however simple.

In no time at all, people were arguing back and forth and eliminating possibilities. My father, who was a very orderly man, suggested that all the obvious eliminations be listed on a piece of paper to avoid wasting time on the same thing more than once.

I couldn't repeat the conversation that followed word by word, of course. I couldn't even make a consecutive summary of it. However, I do remember that they noticed that the number of letters in each word varied from three to nine; that the syllables varied from one to three; that there were six nouns, five verbs, a conjunction, and an adverb; and that there seemed to be nothing in common among the words from the standpoint of definitions.

One scrap of conversation I remember was something a rather fat man said. "I find it significant that the word 'cipher' is included. Perhaps the whole thing is a cipher so that each word stands for another word. If the proper key to the transformation could be found, we could transform all the words and then list the new words in a new alphabetical order."

"Yes, but what's the key?" asked someone else, and there was no answer to that.

After a while, everyone fell silent and simply stared, and Dowling said rather slyly, "Of course, if one of you sees the connection, you don't have to tell the others—just list the words in the new order and, if you want, we can make a small bet on whether you're right or not. If you're sure you're right, risk some money on it and I'll be glad to pay up if you *are* right."

"Yes, but see here, Dowling," said another man. "You can always say we're not right. Not that I don't consider you to be the soul of honor, but how will we settle whether we are right or not if there is a disagreement or question about it?"

Dowling fished into his upper right vest pocket. "I have the answer in this small envelope, which is sealed. If there is any question, we can open it. I will prop it up here against this candlestick. It will be up to you, gentlemen, to see that no one helps himself to an unauthorized peek. Not that I don't consider you all to be the souls of honor, of course."

I think now that the last sentence was spoken in heavy irony, but I didn't hear any such thing at the time.

Time passed and the silence grew heavier and thicker and more disagreeable.

Dowling said, "What? No one sees an answer on which he is willing

to make a bet with me? It's really very simple—mere child's play. I'm surprised that you should all be stumped by something like this."

All he got for his pains were black looks, which was, perhaps, what he wanted, and he responded with what even I could understand was a very annoying chuckle. Still no one seemed to want to give up. Or, rather, I imagine everyone wanted to give up, but no one wanted to be the *first* to do so.

I notice that you gentlemen have copied down the list of words on a sheet of paper of your own and keep staring at it now and then instead of listening to me. Don't bother. You won't get the answer.

It took a while for me to work up my courage. After all, the chances were I'd be led to my room without a chance to explain, so I decided I would have to say something to begin with that would keep me from being ordered away—at least for a while.

I held up my sheet of paper and said, in what I am now sure must have been a young boy's treble made more treblish by excitement and a little fright, "I have the answer, people. I have the answer."

My father looked up in astonishment and his face wrinkled into a majestic frown as he said, "Son, what are you doing sitting there when you have been instructed to— You have the answer? What answer?"

"The answer to Mr. Dowling's puzzle, poppa."

Mr. Dowling smiled indulgently. "Well, there's a bright young lad," he said. "What makes you think you have the answer, sonny?"

"I've got to have it. You said to find what the words have in common, then arrange them in some sensible way that wasn't alphabetical order. Well, if you find something in common that gives you such a sensible way of arranging the words right away, your answer *has* to be right, doesn't it?"

"Maybe, maybe," said Dowling. "Do you have them arranged in a new order?"

"Yes, I do," I said earnestly. "And I explain why right on the paper."

"Good, let me see it," said Dowling. He was still smiling.

But I said, "No. Didn't you say we should bet?"

"Do you mean you want to put a small bet on the fact that you're right?"

"Yes, sir."

Through all this, my father and mother stood as though frozen. Everyone else was watching with increasing interest.

"And how much do you want to bet?" said Dowling. "How about fifty cents?"

"How about fifty dollars?" I said.

There was a gasp from the gathered company and the smile on Dowling's face vanished. Fifty dollars was a sizable sum. It was worth then, in buying power, what five hundred dollars would be now—after taxes.

Finally, he said, "Do you have the fifty dollars, boy?"

I came downstairs and said to my father, "Could you lend me fifty dollars for ten minutes, poppa?"

My father hesitated. We were well off at the time, but, even so, fifty dollars was not something one could easily risk on the savvy of a nine-year-old. He managed to rise to the occasion, however. After that brief hesitation, and without saying a word, he took out his wallet, removed five ten-dollar bills from it, and laid them on a table before me.

I shoved the bills toward the middle of the table and said, "Do you have fifty dollars, Mr. Dowling?" I suppose that was close to being impertinent, but Dowling, who was frowning by now, reluctantly flipped out five ten-dollar bills and added them to the pile.

"Now let me see your paper," he said sourly.

I handed him my paper, and instantly wished I had made two copies. What if he tore my only copy into little pieces and claimed I was wrong. Of course, he couldn't have gotten away with that, but I was only nine and I thought grownups could get away with anything.

But just as I thought I couldn't stand it any more, he put down the piece of paper and shoved all the bills in my direction.

"You win," he said, and it was clear that Mr. Dowling was one unhappy man.

I counted out five of the hills and said, "Here's your money back, poppa." I put the remaining bills into my pants pocket and said, "I'd better go to bed now," and I left hastily.

My father never said a word about it the next morning, but he and my mother seemed to be in a very good humor all day.

Griswold allowed his lips to stretch into a smile of reminiscence under his ragged white mustache, took a last satisfied sip at his drink, and put his slip of paper carefully away in his wallet.

Baranov said, "But, damn it, you haven't told us the answer."

"Oh, do you need to be *told?*" said Griswold. "But it's simple. Each

word had two consecutive letters which formed a Roman numeral and it was only necessary to list the words in order of increasing numerals—though the order of decreasing numerals would have done just as well, I suppose. Here is the paper I handed him at the time. I kept that, too."

And on a sheet of paper in a childish, penciled scrawl was:

GIVE 4
EVINCE 6
MIX 9
EXIST 11
LINE 51
SOLVE 55
EXCEPT 90
CIPHER 101
ACCENT 200
ADVANTAGE 505
SADLY 550
MIST 1001
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"Of course," said Griswold, with unaccustomed humility, "I had just learned Roman numerals in school, and the adults present had probably forgotten all about them decades before. I told you—it was child's play."

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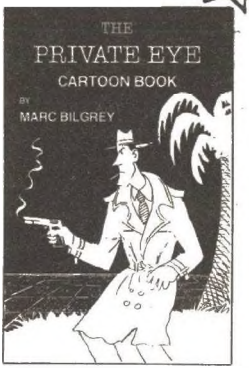

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THE SCARLETT SYNDROME

by DONALD OLSON

Ivy Whitmeyer found it impossible to share her friend Grace's sympathy for that parade of down-and-outers, lame ducks, and misfits that marched through Grace's life to the martial beat of her social conscience. Unhappiness more often breeds selfishness than sympathy and Ivy was unhappy. What made her unhappiness all the more acute was her difficulty in justifying it without confiding the reason for it to others, and this she was too proud to do except in the case of her best friend Gracene Everard.

Ivy lacked for nothing in the material sense and was probably as nearly well off as Gracene, whose husband had left her a sizable fortune in blue chips and real estate. Ivy lived with her executive husband Ralph in a big house with a swimming pool and spacious grounds in Coldbrook Estates. She drove her own Mercedes, had accounts at all the best stores, and was an active member of her upper-class suburban coterie. As for looks, Ivy had never been a great beauty but at forty-six she was by no means falling apart, even if the outward semblance of youth now required more time and greater skill to create. She was the type more likely to attract the envy of other women than the admiration of men.

Men, nevertheless, were the cause of Ivy's unhappiness. The Scarlett O'Hara syndrome was Gracene's pointedly apt description of her friend's romantic dilemma. She often accused Ivy of being as blind as the heroine of that memorable epic of misguided affections. Twenty years earlier, Ivy had fallen in love with Maynard White, a gifted but penniless painter. Maynard admired Ivy and was genuinely fond of her but did not love her. When he married a woman of more than ample means, which Ivy at the time was not, Ivy was crushed. She married Ralph Whitmeyer partly out of spite and partly

out of practical good sense, yet over the years she continued to nourish her secret passion for Maynard.

With his wife's patronage and wealth, Maynard's career flourished. He became moderately fashionable as a portrait painter. For years Ivy dreamed of having an affair with Maynard, willfully disregarding the painter's polite but persistent disinterest. She chose to regard Maynard's slightest compliment and kindness as evidence of a deeper feeling the integrity of his character prevented him from revealing. Meanwhile, Ivy's never strong affection for Ralph turned into a contempt for everything about him, which he was either too obtuse or too preoccupied with business to appreciate and which she remained too dutiful a wife to openly demonstrate.

And then, two years ago, Maynard's wife died. He was free. He sold the big house and moved into a studio-cottage overlooking the Sound, less than two miles from Coldbrook Estates. Ivy's hopes brightened, even though Maynard remained elusive and unforthcoming, blandly withdrawing from her somewhat less than subtle overtures behind an impenetrable screen of smiling, good-humored badinage. Ivy easily persuaded herself that it was now not his wife's presence in his life but Ralph's in Ivy's that kept him from betraying his true feelings.

"My poor dear Ivy," Gracene told her, "you would be utterly miserable as an artist's wife, living in that charmingly dinky cottage. You and Maynard White have absolutely nothing in common. He realized that years ago and it's high time you did."

"You don't understand him. He has scruples."

"His scruples didn't stop him marrying for money."

"He was just being practical, as I was when I married Ralph."

"Well, now he needn't marry anyone."

"He would if the woman he wanted to marry were free."

Gracene smiled. "Meaning you."

"You've never seen the way he looks at me."

"He's a portrait painter. He looks at everyone that way."

Ivy's pale-grey eyes turned soft. "If I were free—"

"If you were free, it wouldn't make a lot of difference. Ask him yourself."

Ivy was horrified. "Maynard isn't like Ralph. Vulgar displays of emotion repel him. What's between Maynard and me is something very delicate. Something *felt*. If I were to throw myself at his head he'd lose all his respect for me."

"Really, Ivy, the way you cling to this absurd schoolgirl crush."

"But I'm so unhappy."

"You're simply bored—and I have the answer to that." Gracene launched into a spirited and vigorous account of her latest enthusiasm, something to do with giving a helping hand to the lost souls who patronized the downtown Mission. It sounded frightfully dreary and tiresome to Ivy.

"Well, the least you could do," Gracene persisted, "is help the poor creatures regain their self-esteem."

"How? By volunteering in the soup kitchen? How depressing."

"What I had in mind was giving them part-time work around your place. You know very well the gardening is too much for Ralph at his age."

Ivy's mouth puckered in contempt. "The garden is Ralph's hobby."

"He still could use some help with the heavier work."

Weary of her friend's relentless assaults on her conscience, Ivy finally agreed she would have a word with Ralph.

"I'm sure you won't," said Gracene. "So I shall. You're coming for cocktails on Friday, aren't you?"

"If you promise not to pass the hat."

Boyd Ramsey showed up at the Whitmeyer's one sunny morning prepared to trim the half mile or more of hedges enclosing the property. If his work proved satisfactory, Ralph had promised Gracene he would find other jobs for the fellow to do. Prepared for some shifty-eyed, scruffy-looking, woebegone creature, Ivy had to admit the man's appearance didn't fit the image. He was in his late twenties, on the short side but well built, with dull gold hair curling sleekly around his broad and muscular neck. One of his teeth was crooked, but he had deep-blue eyes—ungiving though neither cold nor shifty—that gave his tanned face a look of innocent willingness to please.

"I can't believe Ralph would agree to hire an ex-con," Ivy had protested to Gracene the day before.

"Boyd Ramsey is not an ex-con. Reverend Fisher at the Mission vaguely mentioned something about a prison experience, but nothing serious—all drifters get tossed in the pokey somewhere along the line. He assured me Ramsey is entirely trustworthy. He worked very hard for the Gavenders and Lauffords. Marjorie couldn't praise him highly enough. Just give him a chance, dear."

Ivy had to admit, watching him from her bedroom window, that Boyd Ramsey was no shirker. He quickly worked up a sweat and

Ivy saw him pause only once, to pull off his shirt and tie a bandanna around his forehead, before resuming his hedge-clipping, the hot sun glistening on his powerful but surprisingly slender arms and shoulders.

Midmorning, Ivy carried a pitcher of cold lemonade across the lawn to where Ramsey was working. "I should have told you there's an outside faucet by the garage if you get thirsty."

He thanked her and quaffed a tall glass of the lemonade.

"Mrs. Everard said you were a good worker," Ivy remarked. "I can see what she meant. Don't be afraid to take a break now and then."

"I like this kind of work," he replied, setting down the glass and reaching for the clippers.

That evening when Ralph came home he expressed satisfaction with what Boyd Ramsey had accomplished but revealed no curiosity about the young man. He ate his dinner, retired to his study as usual, and that's all Ivy saw of him until bedtime.

Boyd arrived early the next morning, conferred for a few minutes with Ralph, and when Ivy looked out the window later the young man was pulling out the lawnmower. Ivy toyed with the idea of driving over to Maynard White's cottage on the off-chance he might be free for lunch, then decided she was in no mood to be frustrated by what she was sure would be his air of polite distraction. She decided instead to take a swim in the pool. After that, she reclined on the chaise and watched Boyd Ramsey at work.

At noon she fixed some sandwiches and took them out to him with a bottle of beer.

Again he thanked her and said how much he appreciated their giving him the work.

"Are you from these parts?" Ivy inquired. When he replied with a simple no, she asked him if he had any intentions of settling down instead of drifting from place to place and job to job.

He shrugged his brown shoulders and looked thoughtful. "Maybe someday. I don't know—there are still a lot of places I'd like to see."

"It must be wonderful," she said, "that kind of freedom."

He seemed really to look at her for the first time, though with no more than polite curiosity. "Don't you folks do any traveling?"

She laughed shortly. "My husband is too busy to travel much. But we usually manage to get away for a few weeks in the winter."

"Ever been to Mexico?" he asked.

"No. Why? Do you like Mexico?"

"Never been there. But I've seen movies about it. It's where I want to go more than anyplace else."

"What's stopping you?" she asked.

"Money." His wistful tone implied the hopelessness of his ambition.

Ivy said she wasn't sure Mexico would appeal to her. "All I can think of is bandits and indigestible food."

"It's more than that." When he smiled, the crooked tooth somehow gave his expression a forlorn charm.

"We all have our dreams," she admitted, thinking of Maynard and his cottage by the sea. And of her own life—so barren and purposeless. She was sure Maynard cherished the deepest feeling for her—why must he let some medieval code of behavior rob them of the happiness they might enjoy together?

It became clear that Boyd Ramsey wanted, without being discourteous, to get back to work, so she was obliged to defer for the time being her attempt to find out more about the young man. With only the dimmest awareness of what inspired this desire, she wandered disconsolately back to the house, dissatisfied with everything and feeling like crying at the thought of the swiftly passing years. Oh, Maynard. If only she were free! Maynard would never come to her unless she were free. He was too civilized to settle for any other arrangement.

In the living room, she stood before the portrait Maynard had done of her. When she looked at it, which she did more frequently than into her mirror, she thought, yes, that's the way I am—for not even her best friends would have told her that Maynard White always flattered his subjects, bathing their features in a glowing nimbus of romantic unreality.

The following day, she awoke to the sound of Boyd Ramsey's ax as he attacked a stately but diseased maple tree at the far edge of the lawn. As soon as she was dressed, she rummaged through the desk for some half remembered travel brochures, smiling when she found them and flicking through them as she strolled out to inspect Boyd's progress with the tree.

He paused as she approached, wiping the sweat from his face and leaning with one hand on the ax-handle. "I've been telling Ralph for years that tree ought to come down," she said, then held out the brochures with a rather curt gesture. "I thought you might like these. I don't want them back."

He unfolded them in his hardened hands—not like Ralph's hands,

she thought, so hairy and spongy-soft, nor like Maynard's, which were as strong-looking as Boyd Ramsey's but longer-fingered and more expressive. The sudden light of interest in Boyd's dark-blue eyes provoked in Ivy an equally intense though unfathomable excitement.

"You said you hadn't been there," he reminded her.

"I haven't. We thought of going one winter but then Ralph decided to combine business with pleasure in Tucson."

The light slowly faded from his eyes. "Travel folders. They're about as close as I'll ever get."

"You got this far," she said.

"That's different. I don't know the language down there. I couldn't pick up jobs so easy."

Regarding the deep notches he'd driven into the tree, she spoke with elaborate unconcern. "There's nothing you can't do at your age if you make up your mind to it. I want things, too, but I'm faced with even greater obstacles. It's awful, isn't it, to want something desperately and not to be able to have it?"

His eyes swept the grounds, the house, the pool. "What could you want, Mrs. Whitmeyer, that you haven't already got, or couldn't buy?"

She contrived a smile of the profoundest melancholy. "The sort of freedom you enjoy—I can't buy that. As for the house and all this, I'd be happier in a cottage—with the right person. It sounds foolish to you, I suppose." She added this almost rudely, as if rebuking him for her own indiscretion in engaging this hired man in so personal a conversation. Why *am* I doing it? she thought, for she was quite unaware as yet what inscrutably devious process of the mind had inspired this growing intimacy with so unlikely a confidant. And yet, as if the process was already irreversible, she heard herself say: "If it weren't for my husband, I'd get rid of all this—share the proceeds with others who need it more than I do."

She turned her burning face away from him, afraid to see the look that might have greeted such a wildly extravagant statement. Yet his soft laughter implied no disbelief in her sincerity. "Frankly," he said, "I can't see Mr. Whitmeyer living in a cottage."

"Oh, I didn't mean *he* would ever live in a cottage. I meant if he were gone and I was left alone." Appalled at her boldness, she quickly changed the subject, said she supposed she was wasting his time. Still, as he picked up the heavy ax, she didn't move until he said, "Better step back, Mrs. Whitmeyer."

She retreated only far enough not to interfere with the swing of the ax, watching him as he assailed the age-hardened trunk of the massive tree with repeated rhythmic blows, her heart quickening at the sight of the gleaming muscles along his back and shoulders and arms. Such visible display of brute strength and determination fascinated her.

As the tree fell with a crash, he glanced around at her with a look of quiet satisfaction. As if she had discerned a shade of complicity in that look, she said: "Yes, I wish I could work out my own frustrations like that."

"It's just a job, Mrs. Whitmeyer."

As if as immovably rooted as the tree stump, she remained where she stood while he began hacking off the smaller branches. She felt a sudden reckless need to regain his attention. "Tell me, Boyd, have you ever been arrested?"

She steeled herself for the look of outrage this deserved, yet all he did was glance briefly around at her and laugh. "No, ma'am. Not yet, anyway."

She hastily apologized. "I didn't mean to sound rude. I was only thinking, you know, the way young men hitchhike around the country they're almost sure to be picked up—or what's the word, hassled?—by the police."

"I guess I've been lucky," he said and bent to his work.

Ivy turned and walked back to the house. He lied, she thought with a heart-skipping jump of triumph. He lied. Gracene said he's been in prison.

That night, lying in the adjoining bed listening to Ralph snore, she saw in her mind's eye the swing of the ax, the set look on Boyd Ramsey's face, the tree toppling, dead, finished. And then until sleep came she thought about Maynard and his cottage and what it would be like to lie at his side with the whisper of the sea to lull her to sleep.

Pretending there was something amiss with the Mercedes, she called Gracene next morning and begged a lift to the club for their bridge luncheon that afternoon. Before Gracene arrived, she sought out Boyd, where he was still chopping away at the tree, reducing it to fireplace logs. She asked him if he would take the time to wash the Mercedes while she was at the club. Then she transferred a few miscellaneous articles to another bag along with a hundred dollars in bills and tossed the bag onto the front seat of the car.

Over bridge, Gracene inquired about young Ramsey and looked pleased as Ivy praised his efficiency. "I can't understand why he left the Cavenders and Lauffords."

"Oh, Bill and Laura had only a few things for him to do and, well, you know Marjorie."

"Meaning what?"

"Oh, come now, you can't have forgotten the little episode with the chauffeur. And Ramsey's not a bad-looking young man. All those muscles, and he's rather sweet to boot—just Marjorie's type. She told me all about it, you know Marjorie. It seems young Ramsey wouldn't play. Walked out and didn't come back. He's obviously not looking for trouble."

"Maybe he's been in enough trouble."

"But not Marjorie's kind of trouble, apparently."

When Gracene dropped her off, Ivy saw the Mercedes, cleaned and polished, standing in the driveway, but no sign of Boyd. For a moment she felt absolutely certain he was gone for good, along with the money in her bag, and she felt a sense of release from the gradually mounting tension, escape from an act of folly which still remained undefined. She walked to the Mercedes and opened the door. The bag lay there and she picked it up, but she waited until she was back in the house before opening it—to discover the money untouched. Perversely, she felt now that Boyd Ramsey had betrayed her by proving her judgment wrong. Later, however, she decided he was simply too smart to do anything so obviously incriminating. He was not about to risk his neck for a hundred dollars.

Friday was pool-cleaning day. Ivy sunned herself for an hour, watching from behind dark glasses as Boyd carried logs from the edge of the lawn to the garage annex. Presently, she slipped off her robe, removed her watch—one of Ralph's more extravagant presents—and carefully placed it in the center of the glass-topped table on the patio beside the pool. The bright sun picked out the cluster of diamonds on its face. When she emerged from the pool, she left the watch there and walked back to the house.

Once dressed, she remained in her bedroom, watching from the window while Boyd finished his task and prepared to clean the pool and sweep the patio. Excitement crept to the tips of her fingers as they touched the concealing curtain behind which her eyes followed his every movement until the moment she was waiting for. She saw him pause upon discovering the watch, touch it, and then, glancing

toward the house, withdraw his hand. A moment later, the watch disappeared into the pocket of his faded jeans. But Ivy's furtive gasp of triumph died on her lips as she faced the possibility that she had outsmarted herself. The watch alone could take him a lot farther than Mexico. Yet what mattered was that she had redeemed her faith in her original judgment of Boyd Ramsey: he was a drifter, a liar, and a thief.

She had just sat down on her bed when the bell at the back door sounded. When she went down to answer it, she found him standing there, a smile revealing the crooked tooth that gave his smile its peculiar, innocent charm. He held out the watch. "You must have forgot it after your swim. It was down there on the table."

She felt a stab of hatred as the smile lingered on his brown face, his deep-blue eyes seeming to penetrate to the heart of her clumsy stratagem.

"Oh," she said coldly, taking the watch and slipping it nonchalantly on her wrist. "How careless of me. Thank you so much."

His smile refused to fade. What did the idiot expect, a reward? Anger impelled her to behave even more rashly. "While you're here, do you suppose you could help me move a chest of drawers?"

"Sure thing, ma'am."

"Please," she said irately, "don't call me ma'am. It sounds revoltingly servile."

He looked taken aback by her vehemence. "Sorry. Just being polite."

"Servility doesn't become you. The chest is upstairs in the bedroom."

He carefully wiped his boots clean before following her through the house and up the wide, white-carpeted staircase to the bedroom. If his eyes swept the room, she didn't notice, not daring to observe his expression. She indicated the chest, an antique lacquered commode between the beds. "I want it over against that wall. It's heavier than it looks—we'd better take out the drawers first."

She stood back and let him remove the top drawer, watching him closely as he glimpsed the gun resting on a pile of white handkerchiefs. She said nothing as he lowered the drawer to the floor beside the wall. When the commode was moved and before he could replace the drawers, she picked up the gun.

"Do you know anything about firearms, Boyd?"

"Not much, Mrs. Whitmeyer."

"They scare me. And it's so pointless having it here. Ralph says

it's for our protection, but frankly I think it's more of a danger. You've never owned a gun?"

"No."

"It's loaded. When he bought it, Ralph was determined that I learn how to use it, but I refused. I was petrified at the idea. He laughed at me. I could no more fire a gun than I could—chop down a tree."

"You could if you had to," he said.

"No, I couldn't. Not possibly. As I say, it's more of a danger than a protection. An intruder could find it and use it on *us*. He could just walk into the house and shoot us."

"He wouldn't know about the gun."

Ivy tried to choose her words carefully. "But if he did know—" She stared deeply into Boyd Ramsey's eyes. He stared back at her, unblinking, but with a waiting, watchful air.

"What are you trying to say, Mrs. Whitmeyer? What is it you want from me?"

The brutal directness of the question, stripping away any chance to equivocate, made her feel as if he had pushed her rudely against the wall. She felt herself losing control of the situation. Tears sprang into her eyes.

"I'm so unhappy. I'm so dreadfully unhappy. All these years when it could have been so wonderful. I don't love my husband, Boyd. I'm nothing to him, no more to him than his stocks and bonds. He has more money than you can imagine." She flung her arm toward a Renoir reproduction on the wall. "There's a safe behind that picture, Boyd. And in the safe there's a great deal of money. Cash. Enough money to buy anything, go anywhere in the world."

He made a protesting gesture. "I don't think you ought to be telling me these things, Mrs. Whitmeyer."

Still holding the gun, she laughed through her tears. "What are you afraid of, temptation? Am I putting temptation in front of you, Boyd?"

His tone now betrayed not the slightest hint of servility, nor even politeness. "That's what you are doing, isn't it? It's what you've been doing all the time. Leaving your bag in the car for me to find. And the watch. Even those travel folders. What is it you want from me? You want me to kill your husband, is that it?"

A shudder of something almost like rapture sped through her. "You could do it, Boyd. I couldn't. I haven't the courage. It could all be arranged so easily. It would look like an intruder."

Her passion astonished him. "Look, lady, stop waving that thing around. Let's just forget you said any of this."

"Oh, don't pretend! You've been in prison. You're not perfect. You lied to me, but I know—"

"You asked me if I'd ever been arrested. I haven't. But I've been in prison, sure. In a prison camp in Viet Nam."

"Then you must have killed before now."

"Not even in the war. Look—"

The ringing of the phone cut him off. He turned away as she stepped across to pick up the receiver, eager, the gun still clutched in her hand.

"I can't talk now, Gracene," she said impatiently. "Of course I'm all right, I'm just in the middle of something. No, of course I haven't . . ." She listened, her eyes fixed on the back of Boyd's head, her mind finding it all but impossible to make sense of what Gracene was saying. Finally, without saying goodbye, she slowly put down the phone.

Boyd moved toward the door. "I'll finish my day's work, Mrs. Whitmeyer, and then I'll be off. I won't be back. I'll tell your husband—"

"No! You will not tell my husband *anything!* You won't destroy *me!* You're all alike, every one of you. You lie and lie and lie to me. You will not tell my husband—"

"I mean I'll tell him I'm leaving town and can't work here any more."

She moved toward him, her fingers tight upon the gun. "Liar! I know what you'll tell him!"

His eyes widened and she felt a delicious tremor of satisfaction in the fear that crossed his face. It was like being out on the lawn watching him swing the ax, only it was now she holding the ax, exulting in the power and bliss of finally being able to strike out at all those who had made a fool of her with their lies and their pretenses. She raised the gun, and as it trembled in her hand she brought up her other hand to steady it, aiming it straight at Boyd Ramsey's heart. He sprang forward, seizing her wrists and trying to wrench the gun from her grasp. As it went off, he saw the strange, leaping blaze of triumph in her eyes in that fleeting instant before she realized the bullet had not found its mark in him.

"I blame myself," said Gracene mournfully to Marjorie Laufford over cocktails at the club. "Of course it's terrible for Ralph never

knowing why she did it. Well, of course, darling, it would be heartless to tell him. He never suspected a thing. It was all so pathetic. Poor Ivy, I tried so often to make her understand what an idle, impossible dream it was. Maynard felt sorry for her, he didn't want to hurt her. I think he would have been wiser to tell her bluntly that she was all wrong about his feelings for her. But, as I say, I blame myself. It was simply that I couldn't have borne to see the look in her eyes if I'd told her to her face. So like a coward I used the phone. I told her as gently as I could that Maynard and I were getting married. I should have known, the way she just listened and didn't say anything."

"You mustn't blame yourself, Gracene. But tell me about Boyd Ramsey. Is it true he's left town?"

"Yes, it's true. He was really shaken up, hearing the shot and finding Ivy's body like that. I understand he had a long talk with Ralph, and Ralph—he's really a dear, you know—felt terribly sorry for him. I heard at the Mission that Boyd's going to Mexico, of all places. I've an idea Ralph must have given him some money."

"Just as well he's gone," said Marjorie. "I know you're a marvelous judge of character, Gracene, but most people in our set feel a bit leery having a drifter about the premises, you know. I'm surprised Ivy didn't feel the same way, she was always such a scaredy-cat."

"Yes, I know. That was Ivy, poor dear. Afraid to say boo to a goose."

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PAUL THEROUX

"The Parrishes argued about everything," Strang said, "but most of all they argued about things they lost. I mean, things she *lost. She was incredible. At first he barely noticed it. She lost small things, lipstick, her cigarettes, her comb . . . Usually she didn't even try to replace the things she lost. The funny thing is, she seemed to do it on purpose."*

"Loser Wins" is from the story collection titled The Consul's File *published by Houghton Mifflin in 1977. That same year, Paul Theroux received an Academy Institute Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. His novel,* The Mosquito Coast, *is being made into a motion picture directed by Peter Weir and produced by Saul Zaentz, winner of an Academy Award earlier this year for* Amadeus . . .

LOSER WINS

by PAUL THEROUX

The insects warbled at the windows, and on the wall a pale gecko chattered and flicked its tail. It was one of those intimate late-night pauses—we had been drinking for two hours and had passed the point of drunken chitchat. Then, to break the silence, I said, "I've lost my spare pair of glasses."

"I hadn't noticed," said Strang. A surveyor, he had the abrupt manner of one who works alone. He was mapping this part of the state and he had made Ayer Hitam his base. His wife, Milly, was devoted to him, people said; it seemed an unusual piece of praise. Strang picked up his drink. "You won't find them."

"It's an excuse to go down to Singapore for a new pair."

Strang looked thoughtful. I expected him to say something about Singapore. We were alone. Stanley Chee had slammed the door for the last time and had left a tray of drinks on the bar that we could sign for on the chit-pad.

Still Strang didn't reply. The ensuing silence made my sentence about Singapore a frivolous echo. He walked over and poured himself a large gin, emptied a bottle of tonic into the tall glass, and pinched a new slice of lemon into it.

"I ever tell you about the Parrishes?"

A rhetorical question: he was still talking.

"Married couple I met up in Kota Bharu. Jungle bashers. Milly and I lived there our first year—looked like paradise to us, if you could stand the sand flies. Didn't see much of the Parrishes. They quarreled an awful lot, so we stayed as far away as possible from their arguments. Seemed unlucky. We'd only been married a few months." He smiled. "Old Parrish took quite a shine to Milly."

"What did the Parrishes argue about?" Was this what he wanted me to ask? I hoped he was not expecting me to drag the story out of him. I wanted him to keep talking and let it flow over me. But even at the best of times Strang was no spellbinder; tonight he seemed agitated.

"See, that shows you've never been spliced," he said. "Married people argue about everything—anything. A tone of voice, saying please, the color of the wallpaper, something you forgot, the speed of the fan, food, friends, the weather. That tie of yours—if you had a wife she'd hate you for it. A bone of contention," said Strang slowly, "is just a bone."

"Perhaps I have that in store for me." I filled my own drink and signed for that and Strang's.

"Take my advice," he said. "No—it was something you said a minute ago. Oh, you lost your specs. That's what I was going to say. The Parrishes argued about everything, but most of all they argued about things they lost. I mean, things *she* lost. She was incredible. At first he barely noticed it. She lost small things, lipstick, her cigarettes, her comb. She didn't bother to look for them. She was very county—her parents had money, and she had a kind of contempt for it. Usually she didn't even try to replace the things she lost. The funny thing is, she seemed to do it on purpose—to lose things she hated.

"He was the local magistrate. An Outward Bound type. After a

week in court he was dead keen to go camping. Old Parrish—he looked like a goat, little pointed beard and those sort of hairy ears. They went on these camping trips and invariably she lost something en route—the house keys, her watch, the matches, you name it. But she was a terrific map-reader and he was appalling, so he really depended on her. I think he had some love for her. He was a lot older than she was—he'd married her on a long leave.

"Once, he showed how much he loved her. She lost fifty dollars. Not a hard thing to do—it was a fifty-dollar note, the one with the mosque on it. I would have cried, myself, but she just shrugged, and knowing how she was continually losing things he was sympathetic. 'Poor thing,' he says, 'you must feel a right charlie.' But not a bit of it. She had always had money. She didn't take a blind bit of notice, and she was annoyed that he pitied her for losing the fifty sheets. Hated him for noticing it.

"They went off on their camping trips—expeditions was more like it—and always to the same general area. Old Parrish had told me one or two things about it. There was one of these up-country lakes, with a strange island in the middle of it. They couldn't find it on the map, but they knew roughly where it was supposed to be—there's never been a detailed survey done of the Malaysian interior. But that's where the Parrishes were headed every weekend during that dry season. The attraction was the monkeys. Apparently, the local *sakais*—they might have been Laruts—had deported some wild monkeys there. The monkeys got too stroppy around the village, so being peace-loving buggers the *sakais* just caught them and tied them up and brought them to the island where they wouldn't bother anyone. There were about a dozen of these beasts, surrounded by water. An island of wild monkeys—imagine landing there on a dark night!

"In the meantime, we saw the Parrishes occasionally in the compound during the week and that's where I kept up to date with the story. As I say, his first reaction when she lost things was to be sympathetic. But afterward, it irritated him. She lost her handbag and he shouted at her. She lost her watch—it was one he had given her—and he wouldn't speak to her for days. She mislaid the bathplug, lost some jewelry, his passport disappeared. And that's the way it went—bloody annoying. I don't know what effect this had on her. I suppose she thought she deserved his anger. People who lose things get all knotted up about it, and the fear of losing things makes them do it all the more. That's what I thought then.

"And the things she lost were never found. It was uncanny, as if she just wished them away. He said she didn't miss them.

"Then, on one of these expeditions she lost the paraffin. Doesn't seem like much, but the place was full of leeches and a splash of paraffin was the only thing that'd shake them loose from your arms or legs. They both suffered that weekend and didn't find the island, either. Then, the next weekend, she lost the compass, and that's when the real trouble started. Instead of pitying her, or getting angry, or ignoring it, old Parrish laughed. He saw how losing the compass inconvenienced her in her map-reading, and she was so shaken by that horrible laugh of his she was all the more determined to do without it. She succeeded, too. She used a topographical map and somehow found the right landmarks and led them back the way they'd come.

"But Parrish still laughed. I remember the day she lost the car keys—*his* car keys, mind you, because she'd lost practically everything she owned and now it was his stuff up the spout. You could hear old Parrish halfway to Malacca. Then it was the malaria tablets. Parrish laughed even harder—he said he'd been in the Federation so long he was immune to it, but being young and new to the place she'd get a fever, and he found that screamingly funny. This was too much for her, and when his wedding ring went missing—God only knows how *that* happened—and Parrish just laughed, that was the last straw. I suppose it didn't help matters when Parrish set off for the courthouse in the morning saying, 'What are you going to lose today, my darling?'

"Oh, there was much more. He talked about it at parties, laughing his head off, while she sulked in a corner, and we expected to find him dead the next morning with a knitting-needle jammed through his wig.

"But, to make a long story short, they went off on one of their usual expeditions. No compass, no Paludrine, no torch—she'd lost practically everything. By this time, they knew their way, and they spent all that Saturday bushwhacking through the *ulu*. They were still headed in that deliberate way of theirs for the monkey island, and now I remember that a lot of people called him 'Monkey' Parrish. She claimed it was mythical, didn't exist, except in the crazy fantasies of a lot of *sakais;* but Monkey said, 'I know what you've done with it, my darling—you've lost that island!' And naturally he laughed.

"They were making camp that night in a grove of bamboos when

it happened. It was dusk, and looking up they saw one of those enormous clouds of flying foxes in the sky. Ever see them? They're really fruit-bats, four feet from tip to tip, and they beat the air slowly. You get them in the *ulu* near the coast. Eerie, they are—scare the wits out of you the way they fly, and they're ugly as old boots. You can tell the old ones by the way they move, sort of dropping behind and losing altitude while the younger ones push their noses on ahead. It's one of the weirdest sights in this country, those flying foxes setting off in the twilight, looking so fat and fearsome in the sky. Like a bad dream, a kind of monster film—they come out of nowhere.

"She said, 'Look, they're heading for that island.'

"He said, 'Don't be silly—they're flying east, to the coast.'

" 'There's the light,' she said, 'that's west.' She claimed the bats preferred islands and would be homing in on one where there was fruit—monkey food. The wild monkeys slept at night, so they wouldn't bother the bats. She said, 'I'm going to have a look.'

" 'There's no torch,' he says, and he laughs like hell.

" 'There's a moon,' she says. And without another word she's crashing through the bamboos in the direction the foxes are flying. Parrish—Monkey Parrish—just laughed and sat down by the fire to have a pipe before bed. Can you see him there, chuckling to himself about this wife of his who loses everything, how he suddenly realizes that she's lost herself and he has a fit of laughter? Great hoots echoing through the jungle as old Parrish sees he's rid of her at last!

"Maybe. But look at it another way. The next morning he wakes up and sees she's not there. She never came back. At first he slaps his thigh and laughs and shouts, 'She's lost!' Then he looks around. No map, no compass, no torch—only that low dense jungle that stretches for hundreds of miles across the top of the country, dropping leeches on anyone who's silly enough to walk through it. And the more he thinks about it the more it becomes plain to him that *he's* the one who's lost—she's wished him away, like the wedding ring and the torch and the fifty-dollar bill. Suddenly he's not laughing any more.

"I'm only guessing. I don't really know what he was thinking. I had the story from her, just before she left the country. She said there were only two monkeys on the island, a male and a female, bickering the whole time, like her and her late husband. Yes, *late* husband. No one ever found him—certainly not her, but she wouldn't, would she?"

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This new "first story" is also a new Sherlockian story, written by Gilbert Youmans, Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Missouri, where he teaches mainly English Linguistics. He has published a good many professional articles, but this is his first fiction.

We're pleased to publish "Mrs. Hudson Stays for Tea" in time for the 1986 Baker Street Irregulars Dinner held annually in Manhattan on the first Friday in January . . .

MRS. HUDSON STAYS FOR TEA

by GILBERT YOUMANS

Based on the characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, used by permission of Dame Jean Conan Doyle

"You will find today's *Times* quite to your taste, Watson," said my old friend and fellow lodger, Sherlock Holmes, as he tossed the paper onto our tea table.

"How so?" I asked, prepared for the inevitable ironic barb.

"It subordinates truth to imagination on every page." With the wry smile that accompanied all his humor, he added, "Britain's reporters seem to be more and more emulating your friend Doyle. No doubt 'The Speckled Band' will insinuate its way into the newspapers soon."

The publication of "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" was still a sore point between us, marking the end of our collaboration with my medical-school classmate, Arthur Conan Doyle. As usual, I rose to Doyle's defense. "You yourself demanded that your cases be thor-

oughly disguised to protect your identity, Holmes, so it's hardly fair to complain about fictional license."

"Fiction is one thing, Watson—fabrication is another. I was willing to ignore trivial exotica such as my supposedly storing tobacco in a Persian slipper, ludicrous though this notion is in London's damp climate. I overlooked the unaccountable migration of your Afghan war wound from your shoulder to your leg as the Holmes saga lumbered on. I remained silent in the face of countless other absurdities—soliciters writing themselves into the wills of their clients and the like—because, after all, an especially inept professional might be ignorant of so elementary a point in British law. I even ignored my supposedly ordering poor Mrs. Hudson to dance about with my wax bust under the gunsights of Colonel Moran. That at least had the virtue of portraying me as a knave rather than a fool. But when I 'solved' the case of the Speckled Band by deducing that Dr. Grimesby Roylott had trained his swamp adder to respond to a whistle, that was beyond tolerating. Sherlock Holmes, the founder of scientific criminology, was supposedly as ignorant as an Indian tourist of the fact that snakes are deaf. Really, Watson, has Britain given up requiring its medical students to read zoology?"

"Holmes, you're overreacting. A small error here and there. It's inevitable."

"Small errors, as you are pleased to call them, are what differentiate romance from science."

I was about to add that these errors served his purpose well, since they ensured that Doyle's stories would be read as fiction rather than biography. But there was no reasoning with Holmes on this subject. Fortunately, Mrs. Hudson chose that moment to interrupt us with afternoon tea.

Mrs. Hudson no longer prepared our meals. Holmes relieved her of that burden when he hired a cook some years after we first moved to Baker Street. It was more out of ritual than necessity, then, that Mrs. Hudson still brought us tea and biscuits every day at four o'clock. It was her way of showing her esteem—approaching reverence—for her illustrious boarder. Without understanding the details or the scope of his consulting work, she knew him well enough to be awed by his enormous intellectual gifts.

Holmes, in his turn, appreciated Mrs. Hudson's sacrifices on our behalf. Very few landladies would have endured years of his malodorous chemical experiments, midnight excursions, restless pacing to and fro to the accompaniment of a melancholy violin. One by one,

all her other lodgers fled Baker Street for diggings elsewhere. Holmes cheerfully paid Mrs. Hudson the lost rent so that she need not seek new tenants or be forced to explain his odd behavior to old ones. As his income grew, he was grateful for the additional privacy and security this arrangement afforded.

"Is your tea quite satisfactory?" said Mrs. Hudson, lingering longer than usual.

"Yes, yes, quite," said Holmes and I, adding warm milk and honey to the brew. It was one of Holmes's many idiosyncrasies to prefer dark honey to refined sugar in all of his food, and I had acquired the habit from him.

"And the biscuits? They're a bit underdone, I'm afraid."

"On the contrary. Top marks as usual," we said.

Mrs. Hudson hesitated, as though screwing up her courage to speak. I confess it occurred to me that we might have forgotten our rent, but Holmes rose to the occasion. "Would you care to join us for a spot of tea, Mrs. Hudson?" he said.

"No, no, Mr. Holmes. I couldn't possibly."

"Nonsense," I said. "Stop a minute and sample your delicious biscuits."

"Well, there is something I've been meaning to ask you," she said as I held a chair for her, and for the first time in our nearly ten years at Baker Street, Mrs. Hudson joined us for tea.

"I don't know how to begin," she said, quite flustered.

"No doubt it has to do with your new gentleman friend," Holmes prompted.

"Really, Holmes, I say!" Holmes's deductions sometimes bordered on invasions of privacy, and this seemed to me one of those occasions.

"Tut, tut, Watson. Mrs. Hudson asks our assistance, and I am only pointing out the obvious—that her anxiety is likely to be connected somehow with her gentleman friend, about whom, incidentally, I know nothing whatever apart from the fact that he is an American who is employed or lives in the neighborhood of Soho."

"Mr. Holmes, you are a wonder!" Mrs. Hudson said.

All of this was news to me, and I couldn't help blurting out, "You haven't been spying, have you, Holmes?"

He was insulted: "Watson, you continually underestimate the power of observation, perhaps because you practice it so seldom yourself. Spying was hardly necessary to note that Mrs. Hudson replaced her customary widow's black with a handsome new spring wardrobe three months ago." Mrs. Hudson blushed. Holmes contin-

ued, "Recently, after her Saturday marketing trips to Soho, she has brought us our tea rather later than usual, and she has always worn a white orchid. Englishmen are more likely to choose carnations. Americans prefer orchids, which they consider a symbol of luxury." Holmes turned to Mrs. Hudson: "Add to that the fact that Americanisms have begun to creep into your speech lately and probabilities begin to take on the aroma of certainties."

"Well, Mr. Holmes, there's no hiding anything from you!"

I looked at Mrs. Hudson in astonishment. I hope my jaw did not drop. Holmes was quite right—I had not observed her closely in years. I had taken her for granted, like a familiar pair of slippers. She had been our landlady for nearly a decade, and she was some ten years older than Holmes and I. In the egocentric way of many shallow observers, I had assumed that the rest of the world regarded her exactly as I did—an older woman comfortably entrenched in her role as our appendage, so to speak. But she had had a husband once, a sergeant in the Afghan campaign. The same war that wounded me widowed her.

I examined her with new eyes. She was not a handsome woman, to be sure, but she had a trim figure and a solid British look that was appealing. Her hair was done up in a knot, greying slightly, but retaining enough of its youthful black to make her look younger than her fifty-odd years. Certainly she would make a comfortable wife for a well established English shop-keeper or tradesman—but an American?

Holmes, displaying unusual tact, eased Mrs. Hudson into her story: "It all started about four months ago," she said, "when I stopped at my favorite fish stall. There was a new owner, a Mr. Fowler, who introduced himself as an American gentleman new to this country. He wanted to become acquainted with each of his customers personally, he said, to help him 'make a go of it.' We chatted for a time, and he ended by offering me cut prices."

"That explains those delectable oysters Cook has been serving lately," Holmes interjected.

"Yes. Mr. Fowler really can't be profiting from them. In fact, all his prices are astonishingly low. He's become quite the most popular stall-keeper in Soho. It worries me sometimes, but he assures me that it's a standard business practice in America to operate at a loss for a few months to attract clientele."

Holmes looked thoughtful. He began to fill his pipe, as he often did when an interesting problem presented itself.

"The next Saturday, I chatted with Mr. Fowler again. He asked if he might accompany me about the market for a bit. He seemed very keen on learning what Englishwomen look for in Soho, and he wanted me to show him all the best stalls and prices. To be perfectly truthful, he didn't seem to need my assistance at all, since he has a very canny eye for a bargain."

"Did he leave his own stall unattended?" asked Holmes.

"No, he has two assistants. He owns the stall, but he doesn't actually handle the fish himself." She seemed quite anxious to make this point. Holmes had no more questions, so she continued, "From then on, one thing led to another. He took to marketing with me every Saturday, showing me the best produce at the best prices, until my market basket became quite the envy of every woman in Soho. We began having little picnics together after the marketing was done, and for the last month Mr. Fowler has been calling on me here at Baker Street on Sunday afternoons. I don't mind saying I've enjoyed his company." Her cheeks reddened.

"When did you first become concerned about him?" Holmes asked delicately.

"Just last Saturday. I got an early start and arrived at his stall half an hour sooner than expected." She hesitated, disturbed by the memory. "He seemed to be—making free with one of his assistants, a girl young enough to be his daughter, though attractive, I suppose, in a common sort of way."

"Making free?" asked Holmes.

"I don't know how else to describe it, Mr. Holmes. His actions were not significant in themselves, perhaps, but they seemed to imply much more."

"Yes, quite," Holmes said. "Pray continue."

"I was surprisingly upset. Somehow the singular nature of our situation came home to me. As you know, Mr. Holmes, I am a widow, nearly fifty-three years old, and Mr. Fowler is a foreign gentleman who is barely forty-four."

"He told you his age?" asked Holmes.

"Yes, he has always been very forthright with me." After another pause, she continued, "In any case, I passed his stall without stopping. As you can imagine, I thought the matter over during my walk home, and the more I thought about it the more improbable his attentiveness toward me seemed. I began to suspect that he was more interested in my house and my widow's pension than in my company. I had no desire to follow in the footsteps of those vulnerable

women described in the *Times* who are swindled out of their life's savings by attractive young men.

"Well, the next day I had nearly made up my mind to see no more of Mr. Fowler when he knocked at my door. He told me that he had seen me pass by his stall the day before and he could tell I was angry. 'I've fired Carrie,' he said—meaning he had discharged his young assistant—'because I don't want anyone to come between us, Dottie.' He calls me Dottie, you see." She blushed at this admission. "I was astonished, Mr. Holmes. He seemed on the point of declaring himself. The next thing I knew he was asking me to come to Brighton with him for the weekend—properly chaperoned, of course. He said he wanted us to share a nice holiday together and that he had something important to discuss with me."

"Did you accept?" Holmes asked.

"I was too confused to answer at the time, Mr. Holmes, so I merely told him I would talk to him about it next Saturday."

"He agreed to that?"

"Yes. He said he didn't want me to rush so important a decision." She paused, thoughtful.

"What would you have us do, Mrs. Hudson?"

"Well, I don't know precisely, Mr. Holmes. My own feelings are so unsettled. I rather like Mr. Fowler, despite his American manners and his youthfulness." Holmes and I smiled at each other—we were a year younger than Mr. Fowler. "I could never feel about him the way I felt about Mr. Hudson, though perhaps that is too much to expect for a woman my age—and I do value his friendship."

"Perhaps we can make a few discreet inquiries," Holmes suggested.

"Would you, Mr. Holmes? That would certainly take a weight off my mind, though I confess I feel guilty about prying into his affairs and I wouldn't want him to become aware of it."

"We can appreciate your scruples, Mrs. Hudson," I interjected, "but your actions are entirely justified under the circumstances."

"Yes, yes, quite," said Holmes. "I shall make a few preliminary inquiries tomorrow. Then Watson and I shall join you for your Saturday appointment with Mr. Fowler."

Early the next morning, Holmes disappeared to Soho. When he returned late that afternoon, he wore a somber expression. "This case develops much as I feared it would," he said. I knew better than to press him for details. "I think it best," he added, "to keep Mr.

Fowler entirely in the dark about my involvement in the matter. I shan't accompany you, then, to our Saturday rendezvous."

It was arranged that I meet Mrs. Hudson for tea at a small shop bordering on an open square near Soho. The day was pleasant and I found her sitting at one of three outdoor tables with a woman I had never seen before. Mrs. Hudson introduced her as her cousin, Cornelia Ransom, a woman about her own age, dressed in sooty black, with a broad-brimmed bonnet that masked her expression. She might have been tall if it had not been for a prominent hump on her back. Instinctively, I avoided looking at her, not wishing to embarrass her in her disfigurement.

We decided to order tea while waiting for Mr. Fowler. When the waitress turned to leave, Miss Ransom called after her, "I take mine with honey, my dear—dark honey if you have it." I looked at her closely for the first time. She returned my stare with keen eyes, a hint of a smile on her face.

"I say, Holmes, this predilection of yours for disguises is getting to be pathological!"

"You were fooled, Watson—confess it."

"Yes, I'm ashamed to say, I was. The hump was the final touch."

"Quite so. Nevertheless, you would have recognized me soon enough. It was prudent to surprise you now rather than later. Can you carry out the ruse? On no account must we arouse Mr. Fowler's suspicions."

I hardly had time to answer before Mr. Fowler himself arrived. Mrs. Hudson introduced us: "This is my cousin, Miss Cornelia Ransom, and my lodger, Dr. Watson."

"Cornelia, huh? I'll bet your friends call you Corny." Fowler laughed loudly, until passers-by looked at us inquiringly. "And Doctor Watson, is it? I could use a little snake oil to ease my aching back, if you know what I mean."

He was a bluff fellow, but he had an open face and it was easy to imagine women finding him attractive. He was clean-shaven, with brown hair, and youthful, regular features. He wore a new, well tailored English suit. On the whole, he gave every appearance of being prosperous, if not well bred. He handed a white orchid to both Holmes and Mrs. Hudson. I nearly burst out laughing when Holmes pinned the flower to his dress, but my hilarity was very much in keeping with Mr. Fowler's own mood, so no harm was done.

In the guise of asking Mr. Fowler's advice, Holmes soon turned

the conversation to finance: "My inheritance has always been invested in three-percent bonds."

"Sounds like your safest bet," said Mr. Fowler.

"Yes, but naturally I'd like a higher rate of return. I was wondering whether your market stall might be a good investment."

"Sure, why not? I can bankrupt you as easy as me—right, Dottie?" He laughed good-naturedly. "But seriously, Cornelia, if you're thinking of reinvesting your money, you need to talk to somebody who knows the local scene. I'm a real babe-in-the-woods over here."

After that, Mr. Fowler regaled us with stories of his experiences in America. We were on the point of leaving when a young hooligan suddenly banged into our table, snatched both ladies' purses, and dashed across the square.

"Come on, Watson!" Mr. Fowler shouted, and the chase was on. I am reckoned a swift runner for one my age and weight, but Mr. Fowler quickly outdistanced me. He was rapidly gaining on the thief, who turned suddenly and threw Holmes's purse at his pursuer. Mr. Fowler stopped to pick it up and tossed it back toward me. "Guard this!" he shouted, and resumed the chase. By the next crossing, I had lost sight of them both, so there was nothing for it but to return to the tea shop, somewhat embarrassed at my failure. Mr. Fowler arrived shortly afterward.

"I lost him," he said, disappointed. "But he didn't get away with your purse, Dottie." He laid it on the table. "Watson and I'll chip in if there's any cash missing. Right, Watson? We wouldn't want you fine ladies to be broke on our account, would we?"

"Of course not," I said.

Six pounds had been stolen. "Did he take your keys, too, Dorothea?" Holmes asked in a nervous flutter, emptying his purse on the table. Mrs. Hudson did the same, but nothing else was missing. Holmes fingered both sets of keys absentmindedly.

After our shared adventure, the conversation revived with a new sense of camaradarie. Mrs. Hudson made much of our "heroic" pursuit of the thief. When the party finally broke up, all of us agreed to meet again on the morrow to take the early train to Brighton. Mrs. Hudson and Mr. Fowler departed from the shop first, leaving Holmes and me behind.

"Well, what do you make of him?" Holmes asked.

"He's no ordinary swindler, that much is certain," I answered.

"Yes, I gave him plenty of rope to hang himself there, if he had been so inclined. His market stall isn't run for profit, either. He's

perpetually absent except Saturday mornings, quite as if his sole purpose were to meet Mrs. Hudson."

"Apparently her house and pension aren't his objects, then," I said.

"Nor, I fear, is romance," Holmes said. "You noted, I am sure, that he is astonishingly fit for a forty-four-year-old tradesman. And his hands are decidedly those of a man in his early thirties, not forties."

"Well, perhaps we'll learn more about him at Brighton."

"Unless I'm profoundly mistaken, Watson, Mr. Fowler's destination tomorrow will be Mrs. Hudson's flat, not Brighton."

"And what leads you to that conclusion?" I asked.

"Mrs. Hudson's latchkey. It felt distinctly of wax. Today's diverting episode seems to have been staged primarily to obtain an impression of her key. In any event, you and Lestrade and I must be prepared to receive visitors at Baker Street tomorrow morning."

We sent Mrs. Hudson to the train station as planned—accompanied by a true rather than a fictitious relative—in order to keep her out of harm's way and as insurance against the possibility that we had misjudged Mr. Fowler. Lestrade arrived on schedule, muttering a good deal about wild geese, but I suspect he was secretly prepared for an eventful morning. I pocketed my service revolver and settled in to wait.

At 9:35, while peering through the front curtain, I spied Mr. Fowler. We each took our places—Holmes and I behind the window curtain and Lestrade in the cloak closet. But Mr. Fowler passed by Mrs. Hudson's door without stopping and mounted the stairs to our flat. He knocked loudly at the door above and shouted my name three times. Hearing no answer, he returned downstairs to Mrs. Hudson's flat. He inserted the key, jiggling it until it finally turned the bolt. Once inside, he closed the door quietly and strode to the middle of the room where he set down two leather satchels. He opened one to produce a tape measure and carefully measured from the front window (not three feet from Holmes's and my toes) to a spot some twelve feet from the front wall. He marked the spot on Mrs. Hudson's carpet with a piece of chalk. Next, he placed a table over the mark, removed a hammer and chisel from his satchel, climbed onto the table, and prepared to chip a hole in the ceiling.

"That will do, Mr. Fowler," Holmes said, stepping from behind the curtain, "no need to damage Mrs. Hudson's plaster. Lestrade, I think you will find an explosive device of some sort in one of Mr. Fowler's satchels." At this cue, Lestrade and I burst into view. Mr. Fowler was frozen in panic for a moment, then he jumped off the table and

dashed for the door. Holmes struck him hard on the shins with his walking stick, sending him sprawling, then he hit him once more, sharply, on the back of the head. Lestrade jumped on him like a bulldog and cuffed his hands behind his back while he was still stunned.

When we revived him, Mr. Fowler was sullenly silent, evidently more afraid of his employers than of us. Nevertheless, it was easy enough to reconstruct his plan after we examined the two satchels. One contained a powerful bomb set to explode at tea time on Tuesday. I shuddered to think that not only Holmes and I but possibly Mrs. Hudson, too, would be in our sitting room at that very moment, immediately above the spot of the explosion.

The other satchel included plastering tools so Mr. Fowler could cover his handiwork when he had finished. "People seldom look at ceilings," said Holmes, "so his patchwork was almost certain to escape notice."

Lestrade bundled Mr. Fowler off to Scotland Yard. We dispatched a message to Mrs. Hudson, which reached her just before her train departed. When we broke the news to her, she took it with surprising calm. It seemed to confirm her doubts about Mr. Fowler more than dash her hopes, though naturally she was disturbed by our near-brush with death.

Holmes remarked, "This is a perfect illustration why I can not permit you and your friend Doyle to publish my actual cases, Watson. Publicity would serve only to increase the frequency of incidents like this." He gazed off into the middle distance. There was a hint of emotion in his voice as he continued. "Even now, it is questionable whether I can continue, in good conscience, to endanger the lives of my friends by living among them."

"Holmes!" I said.

"Dr. Watson is right, Mr. Holmes," said Mrs. Hudson earnestly. "You mustn't let threats influence you—evil must never be allowed to triumph without a struggle. All of us are duty-bound to share your danger." I don't know when I've heard a pluckier speech. Holmes seemed genuinely moved. A decade after Sergeant Hudson's death, Mrs. Hudson was still the soldier's wife.

The immediate threat of danger was renewed much sooner than we expected. Lestrade returned that afternoon wearing a hangdog expression. He informed us with some embarrassment that Mr. Fowler had escaped on the way to Scotland Yard. "But don't worry, Mr. Holmes, all England is looking for him. He can't escape us for long."

Three days later, Lestrade returned again, this time with the news that Mr. Fowler's body had deposited itself on the shore of the Thames, apparently drowned. Most curious of all, a meaningless string of letters was newly tatooed on his left forearm. Holmes puzzled over the jumble for a few moments, then sat down at his desk with pen and paper. Ten minutes later, he had the solution. "As I suspected, it is a simple substitution cipher." He handed us his translation, which was written out in large block letters: "Congratulations, Mr. Holmes. You live to fight another day. London waits with me outside your door—stalking."

Holmes walked over to our sitting-room window, clasping his hands behind him. I joined him to watch the fog roll up Baker Street from the direction of the Thames. "Will reason and order ever be allowed to prevail, Watson? I don't mean in our lifetime, of course, or even in our children's—but ever?"

I had no answer to give him.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PROLOGUE IN BAKER STREET

by PHYLLIS WHITE

When the agony column is bland
And nothing of note is on hand,
It is time for a knock
And a client in shock—
The rest may be read in *The Strand.*

Dori MacDonald's first professionally published fiction, "Oatmeal," in the May 1985 issue was the first story she ever submitted anywhere, and it brought much favorable comment. Of this second contribution she says, "There's nothing like succeeding at the first attempt to strike terror into the hearts of even the bravest, and I hope I am more than a 'one-shot wonder.'" She certainly is more than that, and more besides . . .

THE PRIDE OF MRS. WILLIAMS

by DORI MacDONALD

When Detective Frank Anthony first saw the woman, he felt a wave of resentment wash over him. The officer had seated her in the chair in front of his desk, handed him several papers, and departed, obviously relieved to be out of this particular situation. Anthony inwardly raged at the action, feeling it was just another form of the overt and covert racism within the police department. The old woman was black, he was black, and therefore they would have plenty in common, right? Of course not. Nothing could be further from the truth. Then he read the papers. Then he understood.

The old woman stared at Anthony, hands folded in her lap, waiting and waiting and ready to wait forever if she had to. He guessed she had to be six feet tall, if not more, and as solid as a rock. She was dressed entirely in black from head to foot, ancient black, adding to her solid appearance, and everything about her screamed rural! uneducated! Everything he had fought against and looked down upon all his life.

The old woman cleared her throat. She had to be in her eighties—according to the reports in front of him, she actually was

in her eighties. She appeared to be fully aware of everything, not senile or helpless in any sense of the word. "When I was a gal," she began. Her voice was slow and dark and heavy as southern mud. "They wasn't no colored po-leese. Now you *is* the po-leese."

She sounded so proud of his accomplishment.

Frank Anthony felt his insides constrict. Colored? That term was as archaic as slavery itself, and almost as insulting. He had to compensate for her age, he supposed.

"Now, Mrs. Williams. Why don't you tell me everything? From the beginning."

Mrs. Williams took a deep breath. "Mr. Williams married me when I was a gal not more than sixteen."

Oh, God, not that far back! he wanted to shout at her, but didn't. It wouldn't be professional, and besides it could be relevant to her case.

"He was a good man, Mr. Williams was, and so very proud. He used to walk with his shoulders back like they wasn't nothing could bend him, and he held his head high like he was a king. When he used to walk into the Baptist church on Sundays, all the gals used to just stare at him, but Mr. Williams was a God-fearing man and wouldn't take notice to no such nonsense in the Lord's House.

"Prettier gals than me tried to catch his eyes, but he wouldn't have none of them. It was me he courted, and me he axed to marry, and I did, when I was bout sixteen. We was married at the Baptist church by Reverend Doctor Tyler, and he took me back to the house he built with his own hands.

"Mr. Williams could build anything, and if he couldn't build it it couldn't be built. He built me a fine house with five rooms and a real wooden floor, and then he put in the plumbing and the lectricity when we could ford it.

"Kept that house up, too. We never had no peeling paint nor broken-down steps. Had a fine garden, too, with flowers and everything.

"Mr. Williams had great big hands. You'd think a man with such big hands couldn't be gentle, but he was the gentlest man I ever met. Gentle and proud, he was.

"I gave Mr. Williams seven childring. Two of my babies he put into the ground before they was a day old. He made them little white coffins and he dug them two tiny graves with his own hands. He didn't cry none when Reverend Doctor Tyler prayed over them little graves, but you could tell by his hands he was grieving. His hands

kept turning his hat round and round like a wheel. His hands never stopped moving. Never. It was like they had a life of they own.

"I was able to stay at home with my childring. Raised them proper, Mr. Williams and me, we did. Both my gals got married to decent Christian men, one to a colored doctor, the other to a minister. Two of my boys was in the arm service, one of them died on one of them little islands what the Japs was on, and the third boy was a schoolteacher. I got seventeen grandchildring and some of them got babies of they own. Mr. Williams was proud of them childring and he was good to them, and he loved the grandbabies.

"When Mr. Williams was a boy, he was prenticed to the blacksmithy. The blacksmithy is long gone, long with the hosses, but Mr. Williams didn't worry bout that none. He set them hands of his to fixing automobiles and radios and such. Everybody brought they broken things to Mr. Williams for fixing. Everybody respected him—even the white folks respected him and brought him their broken things. He got so popular I could stay at home with my childring.

"Like I said, Mr. Williams was a proud man. He had dignity. He always had relied on them hands of his to make his way in life and it pained his dignity to see his body get old. He caught the rheumatisms. His mind was always sharp, but his body was getting old. But not his hands. He kept on fixing things with them hands, but he couldn't keep on much longer, and he knowed it. We both knowed it.

"My oldest gal, Cecilia, she and her husband, the Reverend Doctor Allen, they made us a place in they house. Cecilia, she said she wanted us to come stay with her—what with her own childring out grown and gone, she was lonesome. But Mr. Williams didn't like that much. He didn't feel it was right for a man to live off his daughter. A real man wouldn't live off his daughter, he said.

"Cecilia, she wasn't fended by that at all. She said, Daddy I understand, and she knowed something better. Her oldest boy, Brady, was living real good down in Florida. He had a house out back of his house and he had it all fixed up for us. A real nice house, too, close to the ocean, and it wouldn't be no problem for Mr. Williams and me to move in.

"Wasn't no charity, neither. Brady couldn't fix nothing in that big house of his and something was always broke. Mr. Williams wasn't as fast with fixing things as he used to be, what with the rheuma-

tisms and all, but he wasn't dead, neither. Might take him a little longer, but it got done, and his hands wanted to work.

"Brady's wife, Evelyn, bless her soul, worked with the blind childring at the school, and she let the principal know that Mr. Williams could fix anything. Pretty soon that principal had an automobile sent for Mr. Williams nearly every day, saying this was broke or that was broke, and Mr. Williams would go and come back with some spending money in his pocket.

"You don't know what good that did for him. He was walking with his head up again. They wasn't paying him a lot, but it was good enough for a picture show or his see-gars or candy and to set a little aside. Brady's wife Evelyn did our grocery-shopping and such, and course we wasn't paying no rent. Living in Florida seemed to be the best thing that could of happened.

"But one day Mr. Williams said he didn't feel like getting up. He was feeling poorly, he said. His back hurt him awful, and then his legs wouldn't do nothing. He was getting pains in his head. They was mornings he couldn't even get out of bed. Brady called in doctors to look at him. They took him to the hos-pital and drawed out blood and took them hex rays. They said he had cancer. The cancer was in his blood, in his bones. They said Mr. Williams' bones was dee-generating inside him, just rotting away like old wood, and they wasn't nothing they could do cept keep him comfortable. They said he should go to the hos-pital to live, but Mr. Williams wouldn't have nothing to do with that. He said hos-pitals is where you go to die and he wasn't ready to die just yet. So the doctors, they gave him all sorts of medicines to ease the pain. Evelyn offered to stay home and care for him, but I was his wife—I done cared for that man all my life and I wasn't bout to stop now.

"See, Mr. Williams was in a lot of pain, but he wasn't one to complain. The only thing that bothered him was that he couldn't go to the school for the blind childring and fix things. His hands still wanted to work, but the cancer wouldn't let him. Them hands never stopped moving, always tinkering with something whilst he was lying in his bed.

"Then the day came Mr. Williams said to me, 'Mrs. Williams,' he said, 'we done been together for over seventy years. Some of them years been good, some been lean, but they's been more good than lean and I preciate everything we got. The Good Lord's done give us more years married than He gave some folks life, and I promised to love and cherish you forever, til death do us part. But I think it's

time we parted, Mrs. Williams. I'm not long for here and the pain is so bad I'll be glad to go Home to my Father.'

"And he said he had his old pistol in the highboy, and he told me what he wanted me to do with it. I begged with that man, got down on my knees and prayed for deliverance. I been married to that man for over seventy years. I gave that man babies. I couldn't shoot him like he was an old hoss and I told him so. The Good Book says Thou shalt not kill and surely I would burn in hell for even thinking such thoughts. But Mr. Williams said he couldn't stand the pain no more, not the pain he was in and not the pain he was causing me.

"He said the Lord made woman to stand by her man and to help her man and to obey her man, and the Lord would forgive me cause I was doing what He intended.

"So I did it. I got that old pistol from the highboy and put it in his mouth and shot him. His body jumped oncet, and them big hands opened and closed, and then he was gone. Just like that, Mr. Williams was gone."

Mrs. Williams began to cry. She pounded her huge black handbag, sobbing loudly. Deep, painful sobs. Anthony was paralyzed. The world had ceased to exist beyond the back of her chair.

"I killed Mr. Williams!" she said. "He was in such pain and he couldn't bear to live without working. He was so proud! I couldn't just watch him waste away with all his pride gone! He was a good man, such a good man, and the Good Lord knows I loved him."

The paralysis broke. Detective Frank Anthony jumped up and sped around his desk to hold the old woman, to comfort her. He knew exactly what to say and how to say it. "Mrs. Williams," he said very calmly and very slowly. "Listen to me. You did the right thing. Your husband wanted you to help him, and you did help him, believe me. You did the right thing. You didn't do anything wrong."

Mrs. Williams blinked at him, surprised. "I didn't?"

"No, you didn't. Not a thing. Your husband wanted your help and you were right to give it. But you have to listen to me. Don't ever, *ever* help anyone like this again. Do you understand, Mrs. Williams? You were married to your husband, and when you married him you promised to love and cherish him. You didn't promise that to anyone else, not even your children or grandchildren. They have their own husbands and wives. Do you understand?"

"But the Good Lord—"

"The Good Lord has a special place for you at His right hand. You didn't do anything wrong."

Mrs. Williams produced a starched white handkerchief from the depths of her gigantic handbag, the handkerchief being the only thing on her that wasn't black, and dabbed at her eyes. In an even softer tone, Detective Anthony asked her if she wanted a cup of tea, then offered her a ride home with an officer. The old woman refused the tea, but said he was very kind and patted his cheek and commented on how nice it was to have colored po-leese these days. She allowed an officer—a po-leese lady—to take her home to her granddaughter-in-law.

After she was gone, Detective Anthony stared at the report for a long time, thinking about Mrs. Williams. Thinking about love and pride and what a strong, brave woman he had spent the last hour with.

Then he closed the report and tried to clear his mind. Mrs. Williams—what a rare lady indeed.

Zacharias Williams had committed suicide.

Two men sat in front of Tom carrying on a whispered conversation. "The Center will be interested in the ramifications of this case," said the first man.

"I dare say," mumbled the second.

"We must be sure to get a full transcript for the next C.C.S. board meeting."

"Quite . . ."

NOTHING VENTURED

by J. M. SMALL

The sign, set high on the aged brown brick, was visible only to very tall passers-by. A basketball star with an observant bent might have noticed it. Few basketball stars, however, strolled the quiet cul-de-sac in fashionable midtown. Had they done so, it is unlikely that any of them could have deciphered the intricately entwined and totally illegible initials on the dull bronze plaque.

Had a tall enough engraver been found, he could have translated the swirling scrollwork into readable script—the initials C.C.S. Canadian Calligraphic Society? Central Crochet School? No, the initials represented the vaguely named Center for Criminal Studies. Tom Booker had spent the better part of a week tracking it down.

No movement disturbed the rigid pleating of the curtains. No bees dared to alight on the windowbox geraniums and alter their obsessive symmetry. The building, if dead, was mummified rather than decaying. It was neat, orderly, and characterless. A building to be passed scores of times without being consciously taken in.

Its neighbors showed some personality. A psychiatrist's office in the half restored house on one side welcomed the anxious with a cool-green glossy door and a demand to Walk In. To the left of the C.C.S. building, an unrestored brownstone housed a woman of in-

determinate antiquity and her twenty-three cats. The odor in the minute front garden was overwhelming on the humid summer day.

Tom Booker took up a position opposite #19 (such was the number of the C.C.S. building), leaning carelessly on a cement post thoughtfully provided by the municipality to support street lighting, parking signs, and watchful newsmen. In the time-honored tradition of fictional and cinematic sleuths, Tom removed from beneath his left arm a folded copy of the sleazy tabloid which employed him, raised it to partially obscure his face, and mentally reviewed the events that had brought him to this particular street on this particular Friday afternoon.

It had begun innocently. A slow summer day sent photographers to the beaches for large photos of buxom beauties in tiny bathing suits while newshounds prowled the city bars and corridors of power, hoping that a politician might drop a scandal or two. Tom, as a junior and untalented reporter, was dispatched to the unairconditioned discomfort of the courthouse to determine if the extradition hearing of a petty criminal might warrant a bit of ink. The copy he produced was up to his usual lackluster standard.

It was during the judge's deliberation on the merits of the wildly different assertions of fact presented by the crown and defense counsels that Tom first heard the initials C.C.S. Two men sat in front of him carrying on a whispered conversation. "The Center will be interested in the ramifications of this case," said the first man.

"I dare say," mumbled the second.

"We must be sure to get a full transcript for the next C.C.S. board meeting."

"Quite."

Tom might not have thought about this exchange had not the first man managed to drop a business card as he left at the end of the hearing. It was thickly embossed with the inscription *C.C.S.—Membership Representative.* Curious. But Tom did not immediately pursue any sort of inquiry as to the identity of this mysterious organization. He had other fish to fry.

The fish in question were the dealers and wares displayed at an antiquarian book fair about to grace a local hotel. The editors of his newspaper wisely realized that in spite of Tom's deficiencies, he did possess a certain flair when it came to reporting the doings of the book world. That event kept him gleefully occupied for a week and produced an in-depth study of the antiquarian trade. Tom had received his formal training in librarianship, which profession he had

followed until lured from the stacks by the allegedly glamorous and exciting life of an ace reporter.

And so Tom wrote his long article, saw it hacked to thin, fluffy pieces, and began his summer vacation. While others might go to the beaches, Tom chose to find a scoop. When a week of listening to the police band produced nothing newsworthy, he resorted to cleaning out his jacket pockets—bringing to memory the incident of the C.C.S. calling card and the cryptic overheard conversation.

Many phonebooks, business directories, and record searches later, Tom was standing across from #19. His quarry remained fixed and motionless, but the door of #17 opened and a man came trotting across the road.

"Excuse me," he said politely, "I wonder if you could discontinue your surveillance for just a few minutes. I've got a patient in there who's convinced you're Mr. Death and won't leave."

Tom's cover pierced, he moved on.

A Saturday, he thought, would be a good day to reconnoiter further. He got up early and by 7:00 A.M. was nonchalantly pacing the street in front of #19. No movement, no change. He strolled around the block, cut through the rank back yard behind a grocery store, and came to the back of #19. There was no sound—but there was an open window, a curtain wafting in the slight breeze.

Tom pressed his body against the building and inched sideways to the window. It was a large window, low on the wall—a window, in fact, which begged to be used as a door. Summoning up a rashness foreign to him, Tom parted the curtains and peered in—to an empty room. He paused, he listened, and made his decision.

He was in the room and across it before he thought to look behind him. Even then, he only looked back the way he had come when he heard the distinctive sound of a window closing. The back of the man at the window looked familiar. He was the more voluble of the courtroom conversants. The man secured the window lock and turned, drawing a gun smoothly from his pocket. He smiled. "Mr. Booker. How good of you to drop in."

Tom gaped at him and at the gun.

"Quite so," responded his host with an understanding smile. With the shiny pistol he motioned Tom to a door.

The next room was more spacious and better furnished than the one Tom had entered. The chairs were deep and beckoning. Tom gladly subsided into the welcoming upholstery pointed to by his companion.

"Have you had breakfast?" asked his host. "We'll have a little something to buck up our spirits, eh?"

He pressed a button at the side of the fireplace and took a seat opposite Tom.

Tom was then treated to a detailed history of the life and times of Tom Booker. Mr. Smith, as the man introduced himself, knew more of Tom's antecedents and early days than Tom did himself.

The arrival of fruit, croissants, eggs, and coffee, borne by an efficient, evil-looking servitor, took the conversation off on another track. While Tom ate, Mr. Smith acquainted him with the history, development, and philosophy of the Center for Criminal Studies.

It had been founded ninety-nine years before by a philanthropist anxious in his twilight years to train others in the profession which had brought him fortune, if not fame—crime. This benefactor described himself as a "student of human foible." A more accurate description was blackmailer. The monument to his ill-gotten gains initially served as an information clearing-house. Former associates had kept the files updated and in a modest way carried on their founder's work. Various worthy criminals of advancing age could find a safe haven in the house and paid for their room and board with information, knowledge, and experience.

Gradually, talented youths were introduced to the C.C.S. and trained at the feet of the masters. They supported the establishment as their fortunes grew. Today the membership was extensive and covered all walks of life. Regular tutorials were held, professional development seminars were conducted, and the future of the C.C.S. looked bright.

Mr. Smith offered Tom a tour of the establishment and Tom accepted the invitation.

As Tom had suspected, an organization such as that described by his host could not be housed in a residence of only three stories. In fact, the Center's premises were extensive and mostly underground.

It was before 9:00 on a Saturday morning, yet the facilities buzzed with activity. There was the Duplicating Department, a sprawling complex two floors below ground where some students were learning the intricacies and potential of the photocopier and printing press and others sat hunched over what looked like the plates for one-hundred-dollar bills.

In Document Generation, Tom was surprised to see a prominent politician deep in thought at a typewriter. Beside him was a stack

of the unmistakable letterhead of a rival party. A well known leader of industry outfitted for golf chortled with a bespectacled man over a set of financial records.

Tom was conducted to the Communications Center, where a group sat in front of computer terminals tapping into privileged information and another learned wire-tapping and other more sophisticated methods of listening to conversations they weren't meant to hear.

The main entrances to the C.C.S. complex were bristling with closed-circuit television cameras, voice-sensitive locking devices, and thick steel doors. Access was gained from the grocery store behind the building, from the dressing room of a fashionable clothier, or from the lowest level of a seldom-used parking garage.

Tom observed trainees learning to pick locks and open safes; classes in criminal law, the avoidance of arrest, and disguise. He was shown fireproof vaults filled with incriminating evidence. Later he and Mr. Smith returned to the main house, where he viewed the guest rooms for visiting lecturers and fugitives.

At length the two men sat down to a light lunch, during which Mr. Smith continued to extol the virtues of the Center and Tom marveled at his good luck. This was the scoop he had long sought. Tom Booker, librarian-turned-reporter, had stumbled upon one of the greatest crime stories in history. He was about to rock the newspaper world. As he drank a second cup of tea laced with a sleeping draught, he was imagining his name at the top of the list of Pulitzer winners the following April.

It was dark when he woke up. The sound which in his dream had been tumultuous applause proved to be a ghastly ringing in his head.

His eyes grew accustomed to the dark and he spotted a bedside lamp. He switched it on. There were his framed pictures of Lords Thompson and Beaverbrook and his gleaming vinyl suitcase. Getting up, he found his clothes in the closet and in the chest of drawers. But his bedroom this was not.

A discreet knock sounded on the door and Mr. Smith peered in. "Ah, Booker, you're awake," he whispered. "We needed you asleep for a while in order to make some arrangements. I hope you find the room comfortable."

Tom was feeling dizzy again. He collapsed on the bed. "White slavery," he said . . .

When he next awoke, Smith was opening the curtains, letting in daylight. A breakfast and large pot of coffee lay invitingly on a tray. Tom's attempts to feign sleep were wasted on his host, who began to chat and pour out the coffee. "It came to me rather suddenly this morning," he said in a bemused way, "that you were under the misapprehension that you found us and not the other way around." He smiled benevolently at Tom. "You thought you'd found your scoop, I suppose—the highlight of a short and undistinguished career."

Tom stared at him. "You're going to kill me. I knew you wouldn't let me go after showing me around this place."

"Kill you! Mr. Booker, you shock me!" cried Smith with glee. "That's the furthest thing from my mind. Kill you, indeed. What kind of people do you think we are here?"

"Criminals."

"Oh, yes—that certainly. But do you think we would have remained undetected for ninety-nine years if we engaged in the wanton destruction of harmless human life?"

Tom stared.

"No," continued Smith, "you shall keep your life for as long as it's useful to you. But you shall spend it working for us. How does that strike you?"

Tom stared.

"Don't be modest, Mr. Booker. You have decided advantages as a prospective employee. First—" he began to count off on his fingers "—you are virtually without relatives. Those you have don't care about you. Second, you are ambitious but misguided. Third, you are a librarian and a writer of sorts. You want to write a book and a book you shall write."

Tom blinked.

Smith went on. "Our centennial approaches. And while we have long shunned publicity, the celebration of such an anniversary has inspired us to commission a history of our little organization. We wish to engage you for that purpose. The distribution, I regret to say, will be limited, but we see it as a handsome, leatherbound edition, tastefully illustrated, printed here in our own shops. An exciting project, is it not, Mr. Booker?"

Tom nodded his agreement, but it was tainted with doubt.

"Ah," sighed Smith sympathetically, "you're wondering what will become of you after the production of your magnum opus. Have no fear, Mr. Booker—you will then take up your duties as our official

archivist. No longer will you be governed by the constraints of time and insensitive editors. You will chronicle our successes and occasional failures, produce monographs, biographies—"

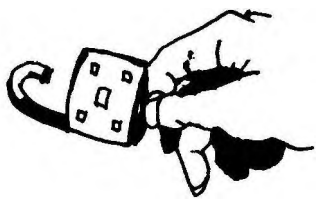
"But," he said, rising, "we have time enough to discuss the future. I'll leave you now to shower and shave. I'll meet you then in the office we've set up for you in the library. It's to the right at the foot of the staircase just outside your door." Which he opened.

Tom called to him. "Mr. Smith! Do I have a choice?"

Smith turned, smiled, and shrugged. "No, Mr. Booker, actually you don't. We all look forward to working with you, but the alternative is, well—" The expressive gesture of forefinger running across neck resolved any doubts Tom had about launching the suggested new career.

Tom Booker's absence from the newspaper went unnoticed for three days. Then his employers received a postcard from Greece announcing his resignation. He wasn't missed. His landlady had been well paid in lieu of notice by a cleverly disguised counterfeit Tom Booker and she immediately rented the room to another tenant.

The offices of the Center for Criminal Studies continued to function as they had but, as time passed, the shelves of the library slowly filled with increasingly well written histories, biographies, and scholarly volumes on crime and criminals. Tom Booker had found his niche.



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a *NEW* short story by

CLARK HOWARD

"What's your cat's name?" Joe asked.

Darcy's lips tightened momentarily, then she answered, "Mo."

"Moe, huh? You name him after one of the Three Stooges?"

"No. It's short for Mozart. I found him on the street one night after we performed Mozart's 'Sinfonia Concertante' . . ."

HARMONIC INTERLUDE

by CLARK HOWARD

From where Joe Gates stood, pressed into a darkened doorway on West Fifty-fifth Street, it sounded as if every siren in Manhattan was screaming directly toward him, about to converge, eardrum-splitting, right in front of him.

That was not the case, he knew. The sirens, a lot of them, were on their way to the foreign-exchange clearing house six blocks away, where a bank night messenger, a security guard, and Joe's partner Angelo all lay shot and bleeding on the sidewalk. The other sirens, those that had not been routed directly to the crime scene, were fanning out to seal off an area of midtown for probably eight or ten blocks in every direction.

Joe wet his lips and with the sleeve of his coat blotted perspiration from his forehead. His left hand, gripping the handle of the bank messenger's money bag, felt clammy. The .38 revolver under his belt was still warm against his stomach from the three shots he had fired during the robbery.

Peering out in both directions up and down the street and seeing no one threatening—a few innocent pedestrians, a couple of window browsers—Joe left the doorway and walked east. He walked briskly, but not *too* briskly—he didn't want to give the impression he was

rushing. No one took special notice of him. They could hear the sirens, but in New York no one paid any attention to them unless they came right up onto them. If I can make a couple more blocks, Joe thought, I can get outside the net before it closes.

But he didn't make it. In the middle of the next block, he saw a radio car screech to a stop at the corner and two patrolmen begin stopping cars and pedestrians coming from the direction of the shooting. Joe quickly stepped into another doorway.

As he tried to decide what to do next, a sudden chill made him shiver—he was sweaty from running those first three blocks, and from tension, and fear. The only time he had paused was when he had passed Carnegie Hall and had to slow down for the audience flowing out. Now, in his stomach, acid was churning like volcanic lava. He was breathing in short gasps. There was a needlelike pain in his right side.

Desperately, he tried to decide on a route of escape. Going back the way from which he had come was out of the question—he could tell by the winding down of some of the sirens that the scene of the shooting and several immediate blocks around it were now thick with cops. And going straight ahead was now impossible because of the police checkpoint on the corner. North a few blocks was Central Park, but that was out—the cops always sealed off the park first. That left south.

Clenching his jaw, Joe walked back down to the last corner he had passed and turned toward Fifty-fourth Street. Rounding that corner, he headed east again. He didn't get far—Fifty-fourth was blocked just as Fifty-fifth had been. Reversing direction again, he went down to Fifty-third, then Fifty-second—and found them manned. He was going to try Fifty-first, but a north-south police checkpoint now prevented him from proceeding any farther downtown. He was forced to move back into the net.

As he moved along the night streets, his shirt sticking uncomfortably to his back, his bowels threatening, Joe could hear the sirens, one by one, stop screaming. Soon the night would be quiet and the police net would begin tightening. Joe touched his revolver for reassurance as he hurried along.

He was back in another doorway on Fifty-fifth when he saw the woman. She was coming from the direction of the police checkpoint, arms filled with her purse, a bag of groceries, and an oblong leather case of some kind. At one of the buildings directly across from where

Joe stood, the woman went up the outside steps and paused at the front door, trying to get her keys out of her purse. Glancing up and down, Joe saw that the street was reasonably clear. Stepping quickly out of the doorway, he hurried across the street and up the steps behind the woman. She was just pushing through the door into the foyer and he pushed through behind her. Startled, she stepped away from him. "Oh!"

Joe pulled out the revolver and displayed it in the muted foyer light. "See this, lady? See this? Answer me."

"Uh—yes."

"Good. I won't use it on you if you do as I say." He put the gun back under his belt. "Which apartment is yours?"

The woman, beginning to tremble, didn't respond. Joe snatched the keys from her hand and looked at the mailbox key. It had 3A stamped in the metal. Peering at the row of mailboxes, he found 3A. The name on the box was *D. Simmons.*

"You live alone?"

"Uh, no. My, uh—I have a husband."

Joe's eyes narrowed suspiciously. He looked at her left hand and saw no ring. Opening her mailbox, he removed several envelopes. Two of them were addressed to Miss Darcy Simmons. "You live alone," Joe said. He bobbed his chin toward the inside door. "Move."

It was an older building, five stories with no elevator. They walked up two flights to the third floor. No one passed them on the stairs. There were two flats on each floor: A in the front, B in the rear. Inside her apartment door, Darcy Simmons switched on the lights. Joe stepped in behind her, closing and double-locking the door. A multi-colored house cat rushed up and hissed a protest at Joe's presence. The woman set her things down and gathered the cat into her arms.

"Ssh, it's all right."

They were in a small living room, modestly furnished, a bit sparse almost, but giving the impression of being fuller than it was because of its untidiness: several articles of clothing lying about, a couple of newspapers, some open magazines, a tray with unwashed dishes on it. Joe quickly checked the small bedroom, which was even messier; the bathroom, a windowless cubicle that looked like a disaster area; and opened the folding door to the Pullman kitchen, the condition of which he could not believe. But he wasn't concerned with how the place looked, only whether there was anyone else there, or any extension phones. When he had satisfied himself that there

weren't, he went to the front window, moved the drape an inch, and peered down into the street. It appeared quiet. Turning from the window, he found Darcy Simmons staring at him.

"Do something," he ordered. "Put your groceries away." She set the cat down and reached for the grocery bag. "Wait a minute," he said. "What's in that?" His eyes were on the oblong leather case she had been carrying.

"My flute."

"What?"

"My flute. It's a musical instrument."

"I know what a flute is." His tone was indignant.

"Yes, well, I'm a—a flautist. I play with the New York Philharmonic."

"Put your groceries away," he said again.

When the woman was busy in the Pullman kitchen, Joe quietly opened the case and looked inside. Sure, he thought. It was like a big silver piccolo. He closed the case.

He was peering out the window again when Darcy Simmons returned to the room. "May I feed my cat?"

"Go ahead." As she walked away, he added, "Make a pot of coffee, too. It's going to be a long night."

At eleven o'clock, Joe turned on the television to see if there was anything on the news about the robbery. There wasn't. When he turned the set off, the woman asked, "Are you the person they're looking for? Those policemen at the corner?"

"Never mind who I am," he replied irritably. "All you have to know is that I'm in charge here for a while. Just you do as you're told and don't ask no questions, understand?"

"Yes," she said. "I understand."

"Okay. You better go to bed now."

She turned toward the little bedroom, but he vetoed that. "Not in there. Out here where I can keep an eye on you."

He let her use the bathroom and when she emerged she was wearing the nightgown and robe that had been hanging on the back of the door. She got a comforter and pillow from the closet. As she started to remove her robe, she hesitated.

"Don't worry about it, lady," he said. "I got more important things on my mind."

Feeling herself blush, Darcy lay down on the couch and pulled the comforter over her. Presently she felt the cat jump up and find a place to curl up at her feet.

An hour later, she woke with a start, surprised that she had been sleeping at all. Only one small lamp was on in the apartment. The man with the gun was still sitting by the window; the canvas bag was next to his chair; he was sipping coffee. She felt herself doze back off.

She woke up several times that night, and each time he was at the window.

When Darcy woke up, it was to a grey, cheerless dawn that she saw through drapes that were now open. The man was in front of the televison, watching the morning news. Darcy saw his expression tighten as he listened to a report about a robbery the previous evening. One of the robbers, someone named Angelo something, had been killed. So had a bank messenger and a security guard. The security guard was a New York City policeman moonlighting for extra income. One thousand of his fellow policemen had volunteered to work their off-duty shifts with no pay to conduct a building-by-building check of the midtown area in which a second unidentified gunman was believed to be hiding.

"Son of a bitch," Joe Gates said quietly, burying his face in both hands. A moonlighting cop. What a lousy break. Then he grunted softly. What made him think he'd start getting *good* breaks?

Noticing that the woman was awake, he said, "How about fixing some coffee?"

Darcy felt like hell from sleeping on the lumpy couch and wanted nothing more than to brush the foul night-taste from her mouth, but the tone of the man's voice told her that he needed the coffee more than she needed refreshing, so she went to make it for him.

Later in the morning, she asked if she could bathe and dress. He told her she could. Toward noon she said, "I have to practice."

"What?"

"My flute. I have to practice."

He shook his head. "I've got a headache."

"If I don't practice, my landlady will think I'm ill. She'll come to the door."

He let her practice. Darcy put a recording of C. P. E. Bach's "Trio Sonata for Flute, Violin, and Harpsichord" on her stereo, adjusted a pair of foam earphones on her head, and switched the music to remote. Putting the flute to her lips, she began. Although she herself heard the recorded trio while she played, Joe Gates and her landlady

heard only the soft notes from her flute. Joe watched her the entire hour that she practiced.

Around three, she said, "What about tonight?"

Joe frowned. "What about it?"

"I have to go to work."

"Give me a break, lady. You don't think I'm going to let you out of here, do you? I'm not crazy."

"If I don't go in, the assistant conductor will call to see what's the matter."

"Tell him you're sick."

"The landlady will come up if she doesn't see me go to work."

"Let her," he snapped. "Just don't open the damned door."

Darcy retreated to a chair in the corner, where she sulked. The cat tried to console her, jumping onto her lap, nuzzling her hands. Darcy stroked it absently.

An hour later she made another plea. "Look, I'll be honest with you. Tonight is very important to me. We're doing Beethoven's 'Septet in E-flat, Opus 20,' and the maestro is substituting flute for clarinet as one of the six instruments. It's the closest I've come to anything remotely resembling a solo. It's *very* important to me.".

Joe was not impressed. "My life," he said matter-of-factly, "is more important. You're not going out. How about fixing me a sandwich? I'm starving."

Darcy angrily returned to the corner chair, from which she sat glaring at him. When it became obvious that she didn't intend to make him a sandwich, Joe shook his head resignedly and went into the kitchen area to do it himself. The sink and counter were such a mess, he almost lost his appetite. He had to wash off a place to put the bread down.

As he ate the sandwich, Joe noticed Darcy stroking the cat. "What's your cat's name?" he asked.

Darcy's lips tightened momentarily, then she answered, "Mo."

"Moe, huh? You name him after one of the Three Stooges?"

"No. It's short for Mozart. I found him on the street one night after we performed Mozart's 'Sinfonia Concertante.' He was half starved, had infected eyes, ticks in both ears. I took him to an all-night vet clinic and got him some shots. I've had him ever since."

Joe nodded and said nothing further about the cat. But an hour later he told her, "I've changed my mind. You can go to work."

She was too elated to question his motive. At quarter past six, when she was dressed and ready to go, she said, "Look, I know you're

taking a big chance doing this. I just want you to know I appreciate it." She had already decided to show her appreciation by calling the police as soon as she was safely away. But as she was about to open the door, Joe scooped the cat into his arms.

"If you tell anybody I'm here," he said pointedly, "Moe will never forgive you. Take my meaning?"

The color drained from Darcy's face. She took his meaning, all right.

After she was gone, Joe sat down on the couch, scratching the cat's neck. In a minute his head slumped and he fell into an exhausted sleep.

To his utter shock, Joe slept through the night. When he awoke, it was the next morning and he was stretched out on the couch with a pillow under his head and a comforter over him. Throwing the cover off, sitting up as panic grew inside him, he drew the gun from his belt and rushed to the window. Everything outside looked normal. There was a burning sensation on his stomach—he pulled up his shirt and saw that the gun had made a deep, red indentation in his skin where he had slept on it. Hearing a sound behind him, he whirled to see Darcy sitting at the breakfast bar, calmly eating an egg-on-toast. Frowning, he walked over to her. She looked at him.

"Thanks for not hurting my cat," she said. There was a copy of *The Times* on the counter. She pushed it toward him. "They know who you are."

Joe unfolded the paper and felt his insides churn in aggravation as he looked at a picture of himself on the front page. He recognized it as the full-face half of his prison identification photo from Auburn. Below the picture he read: SUSPECT IN COP KILLING.

"I didn't shoot that cop," he said, thinking that it might be important for Darcy to know that. "Or the bank messenger, either. It was Angelo shot both of them." His eyes shifted downward, as if embarrassed. "I shot at them but I missed," he admitted.

"Here," Darcy said, pouring him a cup of coffee. He stood at the end of the breakfast bar and sipped it. "The paper says there's still a door-to-door search going on," she told him.

Joe nodded. "It'll take them a week to check every apartment in every building in the area."

"What happens when they get here?"

"That's up to you. You could just open the door and tell them you haven't seen anybody suspicious. They won't come in unless you ask

them to." He cocked his head inquisitively. "Why didn't you take your cat and get out last night when you had the chance?"

Darcy shrugged. "Mo was sleeping on your leg when I got home—I was afraid I'd wake you if I moved him. When it got to be very late, I just decided to cover you up and leave you there. If you hadn't hurt me already, I decided you probably wouldn't."

Watching her closely, Joe sensed that she might be agreeable to helping him, if handled properly. "Look, if I could just stay here for a while, I promise I wouldn't be no trouble. I'd keep out of your way, and soon as it was safe I'd split."

"If you could pay for your own food," Darcy said tentatively. "I barely get by on what I make."

"Money's no problem," Joe said quickly. He went to the canvas bag and brought back a sheaf of five hundred dollars in twenties. "Stock up on whatever you need," he said expansively. "Let me know when that runs out."

"There's one other thing," Darcy said hesitantly.

"What's that?"

"You're starting to remind me of Stanley Bruner."

"Who's Stanley Bruner?"

"One of the viola players. Sometimes he doesn't bathe before a performance. Half the orchestra can tell when."

Joe got another sheaf of bills from the bag. "I'll write down my sizes and you can buy me some clothes."

They agreed on a few ground rules. He was to be completely quiet anytime she was gone from the apartment so her landlady and neighbors wouldn't know he was there. At night, when she went to work, he could use only the bedroom light, which could not be seen from outside. He was to sleep on the couch, act like a guest and not an intruder, keep that dreadful gun out of sight, and not interfere in any way with her comings and goings. Joe agreed to everything—he even buried the gun at the bottom of the canvas bag, under the money.

Darcy went out that afternoon when she finished her one-hour practice session. While she was gone, Joe cleaned up the messy kitchen and dusted the furniture. Two prison terms had made him extremely neat. When Darcy returned, she had bought him some slacks, sport shirts, underwear, socks, and a pair of house slippers, as well as some shaving and grooming supplies. After he had cleaned up, he felt and looked a lot better—when he emerged from the bath-

room, Darcy studied him with interest. He was not bad-looking, really.

While she was out, she had picked up some deli meats and cheese, French bread, small cartons of bean and potato salads, and a bottle of Bordeaux. They had a picnic on the coffee table before she dressed for work.

While she was gone that night, Joe put on one of her records, Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique,* and listened to it in the dark with the earphones Darcy used for practice. It was the first time he had ever consciously heard classical music by a full orchestra. He was oddly moved by it.

"How did you get to be a flute player?" he asked Darcy at breakfast the next morning.

She was eating fresh strawberries and cream, something she had never been able to afford on her own before. "My father is a high school music teacher in a small town in Ohio where I grew up. He started me on piano at six. By the time I was twelve, he was convinced that my fingers would never be suited to a piano keyboard, so he switched me to flute. I loved it. While other girls were going to dancing classes and playing basketball, I was practicing the flute. After high school, I went to the New England Conservatory of Music. I won a few solo competitions, played with the Tanglewood Fellowship Orchestra for a season, and eventually was accepted for postgraduate study at Juilliard. That was where the maestro came looking for a flautist. He picked me."

There was pride in her voice as she told the story. Most of it meant nothing to Joe, but he knew from the way she spoke that what she had done was an accomplishment.

"The maestro," Darcy continued, "said my technique was impeccable—I had a light, aggressive clarity he liked. There was a slight problem with my intonation because I have this overbite, but he helped me clear that up in a few months by having me push my lower jaw out. I feel like a chimpanzee when I play, but my intonation is perfect. Next year, I'm entering the James Pappoutsakis flute competition in Boston. He's the former first flautist in the Boston Symphony. It's a very prestigious competition."

"I like listening to you practice," Joe admitted.

"How nice," Darcy replied, smiling at him for the first time. "It would sound a lot better if I had good reproduction to back me up. That stereo of mine is so ancient it has no tone at all."

Without a word, Joe went and got the canvas bag. "How much would a new one cost? The best?"

"No, I couldn't do that."

"Come on. How much?"

"For a room this size, with quad speakers, good Dolby sound, probably around three thousand. But really, I—"

"No arguments," he insisted, forcing the money into her hands. "Go out and get it today."

She did. While she was gone, Joe used the time to clean up the bedroom and bath.

Joe enjoyed the new stereo as much as Darcy did. The first night it was there, he listened to Wagner's *Tannhauser Overture.* It enthralled him. He didn't tell Darcy he was listening to her records while she was gone—he wasn't quite sure how she'd react. He would have liked to listen to them during the day, too, but he didn't. He was acutely careful to be a guest, not an intruder, as she had stipulated.

The police finally came on Joe's fourth day there. Mrs. Medavoy, Darcy's landlady, brought them up early in the afternoon. Joe hid in the bathroom while Darcy talked to them at the apartment door.

"They're checking all the buildings, dear," Mrs. Medavoy assured Darcy. "It's no reflection on our building, is it, officers?"

"No, ma'am," one of the policemen replied. He showed Joe's full-face-and-profile prison identification photo to Darcy. "This is the latest mug shot we have of the guy. It was taken when he was released from prison two years ago."

"What was he in prison for?" Darcy asked. She didn't think Joe could hear her with the bathroom and bedroom doors closed.

"Armed robbery the last time," the officer replied. "Before that for burglary. He's got a long juvenile record, too." He handed Darcy a slip of paper with a phone number mimeographed on it. "Just call this special number if you think you see him."

Later, Darcy said to Joe, "The policemen said you'd been to prison twice. He said that you were in trouble a lot when you were younger."

Joe shrugged self-consciously. "Yeah. I was what the social workers called an 'incorrigible.' "

"How do you suppose you got like that?"

He shrugged again. "Bad breaks, I guess. Old man ran off, old lady was a drunk—and worse. I spent a lot of time on the streets. When you do that, you learn all the wrong things."

He bobbed his chin at the new stereo. "This music of yours—it's the first good thing I've ever had the chance to learn about. I guess I might as well tell you. I've been listening to your records at night—with the earphones, so your landlady can't hear. And I've been reading the little booklets that come with the records, telling all about who wrote the music. I found out that Berlioz—" Darcy noticed he pronounced it correctly "—could never learn to play a single musical instrument. And that Wagner was one of the nastiest bastards that ever lived. That kind of stuff really excites me: to think this kind of music was written by—well, guys that weren't perfect." Joe looked away. "Guys like me."

"I think that's marvelous," Darcy told him. "And it's a credit to you. I mean, you're not just lying around watching television. Though I doubt you'd be doing *that*—the picture on most channels is so bad on this old set of mine, you wouldn't enjoy it anyway. Maybe if I had cable it would help the reception. In midtown—"

"You want a new TV?" Joe asked eagerly. "And cable?" He hurried to the canvas bag. Again she protested when he tried to give her the money, saying she was sorry she'd mentioned it and accepting it only after a respectable amount of insistence on his part.

Later, as she got ready to shop for their supper, she said, "There's a gourmet food center over on Sixth. It's expensive but it's worth it. Have you ever eaten Brazilian guinea hen in wine sauce?"

Now that Joe had confessed his interest in her classical records, he was able to listen to them during the day also. Darcy would awaken some mornings to find him already up, a record revolving silently on the turntable, the earphones on Joe's head, their twenty-foot cord stretched into the Pullman kitchen where he might be cleaning the oven, or into the bathroom where he would be scouring the tub, or the living room where he would be dusting furniture or waxing the hardwood floor. The apartment had taken on the aura of a display window at a furniture store. To Darcy, it was sometimes a little *too* neat—she preferred a place to at least look lived in—but she said nothing to discourage Joe's labors. After all, she didn't even have to do token cleaning any longer. Joe even fed Mo for her.

He began to talk more and more about classical music and its diverse and unusual composers. Although as a music major Darcy had studied the lives of most of them, she was amazed at the trivial facts Joe gleaned from the booklets accompanying the recordings—things she had never learned in college.

"That Schumann was something, wasn't he?" Joe would ask rhetorically. "When Clara was putting out to him, his work was right up there with the best of the romantic composers. But when she cut him off from time to time, his work was junk."

Or: "Can you imagine that guy Liszt? If you couldn't speak French, he wouldn't talk to you. I mean, he *could*—he spoke several languages, even Hungarian—but he *wouldn't*. With him, it was French or silence. I think he was bugs."

Or: "I can't get over the fact that Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Borodin, and even Rimsky-Korsakov were scornful of Tchaikovsky. I mean, they thought his work wasn't as *Russian* as theirs. What a joke! Anybody who listens to Tchaikovsky can tell he was a better composer than the four of them put together!"

By the time Joe had been there a month, Darcy had a new microwave oven with a complete set of cookware, a video cassette recorder, a small remote-control color TV in her bedroom, and an expanding wardrobe of new clothing, including an Albert Nipon suit that cost eight hundred dollars. It was the most expensive article of clothing she had ever bought. She was eating much better, too. No more ground-beef patties or frozen TV dinners or day-old bread because it was half price. Now she bought only the best: bakery quiches, prepared quail, game rabbits, the best-cut steaks, fresh strawberries, cream, French bread, delicate pastries, and melons—washed down with imported coffee, Perrier, or Mumm's extra dry.

Eventually she stopped practicing her flute every day. There were television shows that she began following—daytime dramas, she called them. Usually she watched them in her bedroom, sitting up with a tray on her lap, munching some new delicacy she had bought, stroking Mo who lay beside her. Joe, in another part of the apartment, with the earphones on his head, paid no attention to her. It meant nothing to him whether she practiced or not. As long as she didn't interfere with *his* space, he couldn't care less. He had been briefly concerned about the amount of money she spent—after a while it seemed like her hand was always out. One afternoon when she was shopping, he determined that it was costing him about two thousand dollars a week to stay there. Emptying the canvas bag and tallying up the remaining sheaves of currency, he found he had eighty-six thousand left. He decided he wouldn't worry until it got down to fifty thousand. Two thousand a week was little enough to

pay for the security of being there and what he was learning about classical music.

In their relationship, Joe and Darcy went out of their way to please each other. When she twice came home angry because the conductor had criticized her playing, Joe salved her feelings by giving her money to go out and spend on herself. When Darcy noticed that something she prepared for dinner especially pleased Joe, she made a point of serving it again soon. Joe kept the apartment spotless and Darcy tried her best to pick up after herself. When Darcy fell into the habit of sleeping until noon, Joe took pains to be extra quiet so as not to wake her. When Darcy noted that Joe seemed to be developing a preference for the works of Schumann, she bought him a set of the composer's four symphonies performed by Rafael Kubelik and the Bavarian Symphony Orchestra. The consideration they demonstrated toward each other was always noted, appreciated, and reciprocated. Ultimately, it led them to bed.

It happened on a rainy afternoon with Strauss playing softly on the stereo, chocolate torte and Grand Marnier settling warmly in them as they lounged about, he in silk pajamas she had bought him, she in a lacy Dior thing that was shadowy rather than actually concealing. Joe looked frankly at the flesh she displayed and it was clear what was on his mind.

"I've been wondering how much longer we could avoid this," Darcy said. She was sitting on the floor, one knee up, making no effort to cover her exposed thigh.

"Why should we avoid it?" Joe asked. "I mean, we seem to get along okay."

"Yes, I'd say we're very compatible."

"Well, then?" Joe asked.

"Why not?" Darcy said, almost defiantly. She rose and strutted into the bedroom. Joe turned Strauss up a decibel so they could hear it in there, and followed her.

They were enjoying the afterglow, drinking cappuccino at the kitchen bar in their robes, listening to the rain as evening filtered into the apartment when Joe asked, "Will you do something for me?"

Darcy smiled coyly. "Again?"

"Not that," Joe said with a grin. "Will you play something for me?"

"You mean right now?"

"Yeah. I think listening to you play would be the perfect touch this minute. Maybe I shouldn't ask."

"You *should*. It's very sweet, really." She got her flute. "Any particular piece?"

"Jolivet's 'Chant de Linos.' "

"Nice choice," she said. "That one was *written* for the flute."

"And the harp," he added.

"Well, yes, the harp, too," she admitted, just a little grudgingly.

In her robe, standing barefoot in the tiny kitchen area, Darcy positioned her flute and began to play. Soft, round, melodious notes flowed gently into the apartment. Joe smiled and closed his eyes. His right hand, an inch off the breakfast bar, moved in concert with the lilting music. Darcy saw on his face the same look of rapture that she had seen in the bedroom. It pleased her now as it had pleased her then. She closed her own eyes.

She had been playing for perhaps three minutes when she heard him say, "No—" Opening her eyes, she removed the flute from her lips. Joe was shaking his head. "You played that last passage wrong."

Darcy stared incredulously at him.

"What?"

"That last passage—it was wrong. Your F-sharp wasn't high enough."

"Are you *serious?*"

"I'm very serious," Joe assured her. "Jolivet meant that passage to be bright and positive. You're giving it a hint of pathos that isn't there."

"A hint of *pathos!*" Darcy exploded. "Where the hell are you getting that kind of talk? From those goddamned *booklets?*"

"The booklets and the narrative introductions on the records. Now listen to me, I can help you—"

"Help me? *You?*"

"Yeah. See, your F-sharp in that passage is too moody—that's what's throwing the whole passage off. In order to carry the verve of the composition, that note has to be open and calm—it has to be a very *secure* note."

"That's enough!" Darcy stormed.

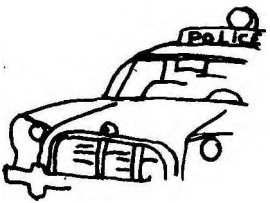
She glared at him with unconcealed hatred for a brief moment. He looked back at her in confused innocence. Presently, Darcy turned away from him and strode into her bedroom. She slammed the door and locked it . . .

When Joe awoke the next morning, he knew even as he sat up on the couch that she was gone, because the canvas money bag was gone, too.

Padding around the apartment in his silk pajamas, he checked to see if anything else was missing. Her suitcase was still there, and all of her clothes except the Albert Nipon suit. And her flute was still there. Even Mo was still there.

Shaking his head resignedly, Joe went into the kitchen, poured some milk for the cat, and put coffee on. Then he switched on the stereo to warm up and plugged in the earphones. While he waited for the coffee, he browsed through the collection of records.

This morning, he thought, he would listen to a little Schoenberg.



DETECTIVERSE

STRICTLY FROM HUNGER

by CHARLOTTE TOBIE

Said the burglar, "I rarely see red.
"With my flashlight, there's nothing to dread—
"Except a cat wide awake
"At the time of the take
"Who meows that it wants to be fed."

THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

One of the beliefs held with universal conviction in our field relates to the importance of Ellery Queen the writer and the preeminent quality of his works. I was thus a bit disconcerted to find, on recent inquiry, that only some 13 of his 35 novels are in print in any form in this country, and none of his short-story collections. But now at least some remedy to this latter deficiency is at hand.

The Best of Ellery Queen (Beaufort, $16.95), edited by Francis M. Nevins, Jr., and Martin H. Greenberg, collects 15 stories, originally published over four decades and very nicely representing the 78 shorter works in the Queenly canon. Enter here the special, bewildering world of Queen: the dying message, the impossible crime, the cryptic clue . . . enter and enjoy. Enjoy, too, Nevins' knowledgeable introduction, and if that but whets the appetite consult his penetrating 1974 booklength study of Queen and his works, still in print *(Royal Bloodline,* Bowling Green University Popular Press).

Sol Stein wishes in *The Touch of Treason* (St. Martin's, $15.95) not just to provide suspenseful narrative, but also to explore in some depth such matters as loyalty, integrity, and patriotism. The result is a finely crafted, truly absorbing novel, just a few small plot holes short of a masterwork. Martin Fuller is an aging expert on Russia who understands the Soviet mind well enough to predict its actions. Under heavy security and surrounded by those who love and respect him, he's writing down his insights so that others may use them after he's gone. But he dies, and the state of New York prosecutes one of Fuller's acolytes for murder. U.S. Intelligence's objectives in all this are obscure, but lawyer George Thomassy (who appeared in two earlier Stein books) is retained to defend. And Thomassy finds himself personally captured, ensnared in a complex and fascinating web of relationships.

Alisa Craig (Charlotte MacLeod) returns with more amusing foolishness in *The Grub-and-Stakers Quilt a Bee* (Doubleday, $11.95), not a word of which is to be believed. Lobelia Falls, a little Canadian town in which everyone knows everyone else's business, is outfitting a museum. The locals hire a retired American dodderer as curator, but he makes the mistake of falling off the museum roof on his head. Townsfolk begin to think of murder, and suspicion makes the swiftest rounds. Such a collection of characters you've never before encountered, most of whom have creative names and talk like people in a book, an old book. *Quilt a Bee* is probably mostly for acquired tastes, who will find it good fun.

High Adventure (Mysterious Press, $15.95), Donald E. Westlake's latest, is what its title suggests: the author is pleasuring himself and us with outrageous characters and whacky schemes and villainies in a remote and thrilling place, here the South American nation of Belize. Kirby Galway ill-advisedly purchased a patch of jungle, the only assets of which prove to be a dubious crew of natives. But perhaps if he "discovers" Indian ruins on his property certain acquisitive Americans might become interested in buying antiquities. Such activities, in turn, deeply interest Innocent St. Michael, who, innocent of nothing, is the larcenous real-estate agent who sold Galway his forbidding landscape. He's also Belize Deputy Director of Land Allocation. And of course if an American academic, a lissome lass determined to prevent the despoiling of native treasures, descends upon Belize with missionary zeal, the situation is likely to deteriorate further. Westlake is a trifle long-winded here, but he provides sport for all.

Jonathan Kellerman, California clinical psychologist, introduces Dr. Alex Delaware, clinical psychologist, in *When the Bough Breaks* (Atheneum, $15.95). This excellent first novel explores its ungodly themes with understanding and high tension; I expect it will get close attention by the Edgar committee. Delaware burned out at age thirty-three after helping the sex-abused children of a day-care center in L.A. and having the molester commit suicide in his home. Now retired and overstressed by *in*activity, he's drawn into the investigation of the butchering of a fellow psychologist. Detective Milo Sturgis asks Alex to look into the dead man's patient files, and the trail leads to "upright" and powerful citizens and the deeds they practice in the dark. These folks are dangerous to cross, as Delaware discovers.

Seething academia, with interdepartmental warfare, faculty-student confrontations, administrative fulminations, a spot of murder or two. That's Canterbury College in Maine, in Susan Kenney's *Graves in Academe* (Viking, $14.95). And if this all seems a tad unreal, we should remember that Kenney teaches at a college in Maine. To Canterbury comes Roz Howard, earlier well met in Kenney's *Garden of Malice* (1983). Howard is there to substitute for an English professor who died, unexpectedly and unpleasantly, it seems. And his was not the first death. Roz, variously attracted and repelled by fellow faculty, begins to sense—can it be possible?—connections between campus violence and the manner of dying in the works in her course syllabus. A fanciful, stylish tale.

A. M. Pyle debuts with *Trouble Making Toys* (Walker, $13.95), which launches Cincinnati homicide detective Cesar Franck (a distant relative of the composer). Franck is doubly burdened: someone dispatches the unlovable CEO of a toy company, and Franck is obliged by bureaucrats to complete an impenetrable budgetary form.

The toys in question are dolls, very sexy dolls, and Cesar watches the vultures fight over their legacy; maybe one of the vultures is also a killer. Franck is a pleasant fellow, his first case is agreeable, and he should be back again.

Another debut, a most engaging narrative with a well caught cast and a sleuth worth many more appearances, is *Death of a Gossip* by M. C. Beaton (St. Martin's, $12.95). John and Heather Cartwright, compulsive anglers, run a fishing school in Scotland. Its latest class of eight includes a poisonous woman with the uncanny knack of striking each person at his weakest point, and it seems altogether fitting that she should die. Hamish Macbeth, constable, bachelor, occasional poacher, unvalued by the city detectives who shortly arrive on the scene, has also tasted the gossip's venom. But pride—and his quiet passion for a wealthy beauty who can never be allowed to look as low as he—drives him to carry out his own enquiries. Delectable tale.

Jack S. Scott departs from his Inspector Rosher series in *A Time of Fine Weather* (St. Martin's, $12.95). Here tragedy visits the neighbors of ex-cop Charlie Wood and his reporter-wife Sally: the home of the Grovers is fire-bombed, killing wife and daughter. The husband, operator of a restaurant and a trucking company, shortly goes missing. Inspector Pete Parsons, who knows well both the Woods and the Grovers, soon finds the affair getting messier, with the violent tracks of the IRA in his turf. The story is nicely paced and quite readable, but a more clearly defined central character would have made it stronger.

DETECTIVERSE

LIGHT OF HAND

by PETER GODFREY

Jack and Jill went up the hill—
At least, that's what they said.
But Sheriff Brown proved they'd gone downtown
And robbed a bank instead.

a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

Neil collected the tin-opener and the high-sided dish but could see no tin of tuna on the counter where Lottie customarily left it.

"Not to worry," he reassured the cat, who was doing tight figure eights around his ankles, "she must have left it in the cupboard." But which cupboard? The first one he opened concealed glasses. Then he uncovered plates. Then, behind the third door . . .

SAFE AS HOUSES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

"There's that ugly cat on the window ledge," Serena said as she sipped her coffee. "I wish the tide was in. I'd swing open the window and knock him into the river."

Neil Marx was eating toast with lime marmalade. "Teekay is too clever. He'd be safely home aboard Lottie's boat before you could take hold of the handle."

"If he's so smart, how come he only has one eye?"

"A fight down in Somerset years ago. Lottie brought him with her from Taunton. She told me 'Teekay' is short for TKO, technical knockout. He was winning on points when the other cat got in a lucky swipe."

"Lottie Braithwaite tells you everything." Serena raised an eyebrow and the fashion-model features became mischievous under a dishevelment of chestnut hair. Her recent comedy series on BBC Television had been watched less by people who appreciated her jokes than by those who wanted to stare at her face. "Should I be jealous?"

"I feed the lady's cat when she's away for the day. I try to be a

good neighbor. Which is more than anybody else along the mooring has done."

"This is a white, Anglo-Saxon preserve in the heart of cosmopolitan London," Serena said. "You must allow them their winter of bigotry before they defrost."

"Some winter. It's been seven months." Neil began clearing breakfast things from the table, carrying them into the galley. "Don't you have a rehearsal?"

"You can't seduce me that easily." Serena dropped her robe and began searching casually for something to put on her naked, golden body. "I have to go to a rehearsal."

Neil Marx kept his head down, resolutely loading dishes into a sinkful of frothy water. "Will you be coming back here tonight?"

"Depends what happens today." She pulled on jeans and a T-shirt and a leather vest. "Hey, you," she called and he looked up from his rinsing. "I like spending the night aboard *Leprechaun*. You and I are good for years, okay?"

Lottie Braithwaite was relaxing under a canopy on the front deck of Houseboat *Prez* when she saw movement in the doorway of *Leprechaun*. Neil Marx climbed up into the sunlight and stood with hands in pockets, looking at gulls wheeling over the Thames. He took a breath of river air. Her neighbor's astonishing pink hair amused Lottie. She knew he had it colored because it gave him a semi-punk appearance which helped him in his work. Marx was an apprentice with a company that produced videos for pop-music artists.

"Neil," she said quietly, her resonant voice projecting across ten feet of water separating the boats, "have you time for coffee?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he said. He crossed by means of a couple of gangways from his boat to the mooring pontoon and thence to the deck of *Prez*.

"I saw your lady leaving a while ago."

"When she goes," he said, "she doesn't kid around."

Lottie made two trips inside and came back with mugs of coffee and then a plate of biscuits with raisins in them. She looked splendid in an ankle-length sundress that exposed dark shoulders and arms. Her modified afro contained elements of smoky grey. "Perhaps you're wondering why I called this meeting," she said.

"I don't blame you for being bothered," Neil assured her. "I told Delbert Coombes, I told Zinnia Fernleigh, I told the whole gang of

them at the boat-owners' meeting, including that oaf, Scottie Belderman, that they had no business making a fuss just because you had a party and created a bit of noise."

"It was that bitch aboard *White Cliffs,* wasn't it?" Lottie narrowed her eyes as she stared down the mooring to where Zinnia Fernleigh's lofty upper deck was visible. "She started it."

"Yes, but Coombes should have supported you. He's the head of the association." Neil remembered the mood of the meeting. "They aren't all bad. Some of them would have gone along with me if Coombes had taken a stand."

Lottie made a mouth. "Old soldiers never die," she said, "but I wish Coombes would make the effort."

"It baffles me." Neil kicked off his shoes and extended bare feet into a patch of sunlight beyond the canopy's shade. "You are the widow Braithwaite. Your late husband, Denis, was the outstanding West Indian cricketer to settle in England in the past twenty years. Somerset county never won so many matches as when Denis was opening batsman. He was respected all over Britain as a superb athlete and a gentleman."

"Play cricket for the county, by all means," Lottie intoned, "but don't move into my community."

Seven months ago, her husband had totaled his car on the motorway and in that instant improved the chances of success in the league for teams which would no longer have to get Denis Braithwaite out. His widow, suddenly affluent with insurance and pension money, decided to flee Somerset and lose herself in London. The mooring came to her attention accidentally. A boat called *Mozart* was empty, abandoned by a bankrupt owner, taken over by the Company for charges owing. When Lottie Braithwaite walked in and wrote a check for the asking price, a relieved executive took the money and signed the papers without a second thought.

Now, over half a year later, Lottie's grief had diminished from a succession of tidal waves to a periodic swell which she had come to accept as her normal condition from here on out. As for the houseboat community, their panic at this alien presence was thriving like a patch of poison ivy.

Neil was afraid to ask, but he did. "The meeting agreed on a formal letter of complaint. Did they send it to you?"

"I read it and burned it." She allowed herself a laugh. "While reciting a few ancient curses from the Islands."

Getting his shoes back on, Neil said, "I must go to work."

"That video on *Top of the Pops* last week, the one set in the graveyard, did you guys make that one?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was great when the heads popped out of the ground and began singing."

"Thanks."

"I wasn't sure about the flying gravestones that turned into pages from the calendar. How do you do that?"

"Electronic wizardry," he explained. "And bad taste."

Leaving the mooring, heading for Chelsea Embankment, Neil kept his face aimed straight ahead as he passed Houseboat *White Cliffs*. A plummy voice hailed him from above.

"Mr. Marx?"

"Morning to you, Miss Fernleigh."

"She's been filling your ear, I don't half think."

He pretended not to understand. "Who has?"

"Our dusky friend aboard whatever it is. Mrs. Thing. I do wish they wouldn't change the names of the boats. *Mozart* was a lovely name. I don't see why she couldn't have kept it." The aristocratic voice tootled on. "At least her politics are right. In both senses of the word."

Neil was pleased to correct the old bigot. He could see her flowered sun hat but a wispy veil obscured the pale, flat face and blue-veined nose. "The name *Prez*, indeed an abbreviation for President, does not refer to the man in the White House. It recalls a tenor saxophone player whose name was Lester Young. Were he alive today," Neil concluded, "you would not number him among your dusky friends. Lester was gay."

It was a hard day at the studio. Neil Marx's dream was that one day he would become a director and a millionaire would come to him and say, "Take this money and create a feature on any topic that interests you. Show it to me only when you're finished."

"Look alive, Marx!" a voice boomed through a talk-back speaker, "that desk won't move itself."

"Sorry." His job was that of general slavey, shifting things when other people told him to.

Serena Salverson restored Neil's status by calling for him in the evening. Normal activity in the studio came to a halt. The golden girl concentrated her attention on Neil because she loved him and

also because she got pleasure out of inflaming the other men by ignoring them.

They drove to the King's Road, hid her car in a cul-de-sac, then did a tour on foot of three pubs and a restaurant, arriving back at the mooring around half past ten, full of pasta and wine. As they approached his boat across a pontoon in rolling motion (the tide was flowing), Neil saw a sheet of paper pinned to his door. He was unfolding it when he heard Lottie Braithwaite's voice.

"It's from Coombes. He came by around six."

"Care for a drink, Lottie?" Neil called. "We're going to have one."

"I won't say no. It's that time of night when the haunting begins. Give me a few minutes to make myself disreputable."

Inside the boat, with Serena opening a bottle of wine, Neil read the handwritten message from Delbert Coombes. It was on the printed letterhead of Houseboat *Shrapnel*. "Could I have a word with you here at your convenience, old boy?" it read. "I've been informed of a wee tactical problem involving your good self. Nothing we can't sort out over a glass of the grape. Ring me, would you please? Coombes."

Lottie came down the stairs in slashed crimson silk. She accepted a brimming glass, sipping from it as she settled gracefully onto a small chair. At some time in her past, she had been taught straight back and crossed ankles. "None of my business, your note," she said. Then she smiled tolerantly. "Or is it?"

"He wants me to come and see him."

"Never trust a man," Lottie said, "who names his boat after one of war's nastier weapons."

"Shrapnel? No, no, not the stuff that flies around when a shell explodes. Coombes's boat is named for Sir Basil Shrapnel, father of his wealthy wife, Lizbet. It led to a large inheritance when Sir Bas snuffed it ten years ago. How else could Delbert afford to be a professional alcoholic?"

"Is he one?"

"He tells us all the time."

The threesome worked their way through a bottle of Valpolicella. Lottie said she was sure Coombes wanted to talk about her. Neil couldn't insist he believed otherwise. Serena said so what, let the small-minded boat people think what they liked—Mrs. Braithwaite had paid good money for her dwelling and the rest of them could go whistle.

"Thanks for that," Lottie said. "But it isn't easy for me. Nobody

ever insulted Denis when he was alive. Now he's gone, I don't like to humor these people."

Made bold by drink, Neil telephoned Coombes at half past eleven. "Mr. Coombes, it's Neil Marx. I have your note."

"So sorry, dear boy. Never meant to alarm you. Forgive me, quite drunk at the moment, comes of being an alcoholic. A matter of some delicacy . . ."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"Not suitable for a telephone conversation."

"Then I'll come over."

"No, don't do that. Don't mean to be inhospitable but Lizbet is watching late-night something or other on the goggle-box and she hates it when people come in."

"Then you come here, sir."

"Should I? Shall I? Yes, if you insist."

Ten minutes later, a tall figure appeared in the doorway of *Leprechaun,* broad shoulders and neat head silhouetted against the glow of pontoon lights. "Knock knock, anybody home? Picked my way like a sandpiper along the gangways. They don't half resemble a fun fair when the tide is up. One of the benefits of being an alcoholic, you never hurt yourself." Delbert Coombes looked the part of the military man—tall, lean, a prisoner of the habit of good posture, handsome face not quite destroyed by the effects of whiskey.

"I couldn't imagine what you want to see me about," Neil lied. Serena gave the visitor a glass of wine.

"No big mystery, my lad. Mmmm, respectable plonk, that." He set down the glass, half empty. "Simply a matter of the company you've been keeping. Zinnia gave me a dingle this morning after she'd spoken to you and she told me you've been—" The old man suddenly became aware of the fourth person in the room. "Good Lord, I didn't see you there!"

"We do blend into the shadows," Lottie murmured.

Coombes pleaded that it was not him, that if he had his way . . . Neil dismissed the copout. Coombes, as head of the association of boat-owners, was required to put the case for all. Serena said the tempest was bound to blow itself out and Lottie would become part of the community. Why not sooner instead of later?

The widow Braithwaite had the last word. "Do you think I need you lot making me into a special case? I'm an educated woman with money and I had a famous husband. Back home I'm a well known journalist. I don't give a damn about your opinions. I love this lo-

cation—the river, the experience of living on a boat. For the time being, I intend to stay, with or without your acceptance. So don't worry, Neil and Serena, about protecting me. Lottie Braithwaite will go when she gets good and ready."

In the weeks that followed, Neil's contact with Lottie was sporadic. He was busy at the studio and even his time with Serena was curtailed. One brief encounter took place on the King's Road outside a shop called Toy City. Lottie was coming out of the store with a package under her arm. "Is it my birthday?" Neil asked as he ran for a bus.

"It's my hobby," she called after him.

Neil came and went, took his meals on the hop, sometimes didn't even make it home to sleep. He spent more than one night on a cot at the studio. During this period, the attention of the boat-owners was diverted by a run of atrocious luck. As one accident after another inflicted damage on the floating homes, they began referring to it as "the black summer."

Zinnia Fernleigh's boat was the first to be hit. On a sunny morning, Neil was on his way to work when he came upon a group of residents staring down at the damaged side of *White Cliffs*. The tide was out, the boat was resting on the mud-and-gravel bottom, and there, thrusting through the hull like a battering ram, was a hefty chunk of driftwood.

"I heard a bang in the night," Zinnia was repeating her story for each newcomer. "The tide was turning, we were rocking like mad, and it was as if a great fist thumped me at the water line. Then this awful cracking sound and water began slopping in. Ruined acres of Wilton broadloom."

Serves you right, Neil thought, for fitting a boat with expensive carpets.

Scottie Belderman was watching from the deck of *Fancy Free*. "Looks like dry-dock, Zinnia," he called. "They'll never patch you up properly otherwise."

"Do me a favor, dear," Zinnia replied.

"Anything, love."

"Shut your yap."

From fifty yards away, the group heard a bell-like laugh. It pealed across the mooring and they turned as one to see Lottie Braithwaite vanishing inside the open doorway of Houseboat *Prez* . . .

Three days later, being driven home in the evening by Serena, Neil said, "We don't have to stay late."

"Stay as long as you like."

"The lady is lonely, she invited us to have dinner with her. What was I supposed to say?"

"Have *I* said anything?"

"You've got a look on your face."

Serena negotiated the laneway concealing her secret parking space. "I'm sick of all the contention. We'll be there five minutes and the conversation will turn to rotten old Delbert Coombes and Zinnia and Scottie and the way they persecute her."

"She isn't imagining it."

"And people are starving all over the world. Let's talk about something else while we eat."

"I don't always know when you're joking."

They got out of the car and Serena locked up. "She's a vital, sexy woman of forty-eight and you enjoy her company more than I do," she said. "May I be jealous, please?" As they walked toward the river, the comedienne added, "She scares me. There's something primitive about her."

After dinner, Lottie got a tape going and then she passed the Courvoisier. From the stereo speakers, a plaintive, husky voice sang, "No woman no cry—" and a spasm of applause ran through a crowd outdoors on what sounded like a summer night. "Bob Marley," she said.

Serena's mood had improved. Neil was floating. The widow Braithwaite was never so threatening in the flesh as she was when considered from afar. The only reference to bad neighbors had taken place hours ago, a brief description of Lizbet Coombes's frozen face seen in the office that morning when Lottie was dropping off a check to pay her electricity bill. Now she had a more important subject to discuss. "Are you away in a fortnight's time, Neil? Or will you be here?"

"Should be aboard. Why?"

"I'll be in Taunton that weekend. The cricket club wants to hand me a scroll. Posthumous recognition of Denis's time with the team."

"And you'd like me to feed Teekay."

The fat black cat sat on the window ledge, extremities tucked under like a turkey in a roasting pan. Its head moved one degree and the solitary eye opened and closed languidly.

"Could you, please?"

"Sure thing. Remind me closer to the date."

The weeks that passed before Lottie went away were not without incident. First, there was the unexpected collapse of *Shrapnel*'s roof. It happened at the end of a long period of rain. A section twenty feet square covering the sleeping area seemed to go soft and sink inward like a doomed souffle, letting the worst aspect of a wet summer cascade onto Delbert and Lizbet, who were in bed at the time. An autopsy on the dead roof was inconclusive. "Never seen nuffink like it," the inspector said. "The structure is all corroded. Acid rain, maybe?"

On the following Monday, the traffic incident of the year took place on the road overlooking the mooring. An open truck bound for a construction site and loaded with steel rods made for reinforcing concrete suddenly skidded on oil, spun two and a half revolutions, and struck its back end against the embankment wall. The impact caused it to shed its load, the steel rods flying through the air like the famous volley of Agincourt arrows. Not many of them missed. The good ship *Fancy Free* absorbed the barrage above the waterline. Scottie Belderman's screams roused staff and neighbors. One of the mooring men said it looked like a total rebuild and Zinnia Fernleigh suggested Scottie rename his boat *Porcupine*.

"Very nice for some," Belderman grumbled during the residents' meeting later in the week. He was addressing Neil Marx. "You sit there next door to the Black Widow and you're safe as houses."

"What are you implying?" Neil demanded. "Are you saying Mrs. Braithwaite is damaging the boats? She spun that truck in your direction and she made Delbert's roof collapse and she guided half a ton of driftwood into Zinnia's hull?"

Coombes was displaying alarm and despondency. "Rum situation," he said. "I can't fathom it. But you must admit, Neil, nothing like this happened to us before she came aboard."

"And we never had weather like this," Neil said, "before they invented atom bombs."

They all nodded thoughtfully.

"Teekay feeding time," Neil said, climbing out of bed. It was eight o'clock on a Saturday morning.

"Can't you feed it later?" Serena mumbled.

"Not fair. Animals are creatures of habit. He's accustomed to having his meal at this hour."

Putting on a dressing gown over his pajamas, Neil climbed the front stairs, pushed open the door, and stepped out into a glorious August morning. He was carrying the spare key given to him by Lottie Braithwaite. As he crossed the deck of Houseboat *Prez,* he saw the furry face of Teekay observing his approach with approval before the animal slipped through the cat-flap. Inside, Neil collected the tin-opener and the high-sided dish but could see no tin of tuna on the counter where Lottie customarily left it.

"Not to worry," he reassured the cat, who was doing tight figure eights around his ankles, "she must have left it in the cupboard." But which cupboard? The first one he opened concealed glasses. Then he uncovered plates. Then, behind the third door . . .

They looked like what they were, plasticine models of houseboats, three of them, shaped by the hands of a talented child. Neil recognized the outlines instantly—*White Cliffs, Shrapnel,* and *Fancy Free.* When he saw something else, his mind boggled as it tried to evade, then began to cope with, the evidence before his eyes.

He opened a window and called across to his own boat. "Serena!"

Her tousled head rose into view at the bedroom window, doing a Teekay imitation with one eye closed.

"Come over! You must see this!"

She fixed him with a threatening glare. "Neil, if you think we're doing morning love in a strange bed—"

"No, this is *important!*"

When she joined him ten minutes later, there was evidence of wounded pride. She had dressed herself and had washed all comfortable signs of sleep from her face. "Show me."

He did.

Her jaw sagged. "Is it possible?"

"It explains a lot."

They examined the models. *White Cliffs* had a sharpened wooden pencil thrust into its hull—as far as Neil could remember, it was positioned just about where the driftwood had hit. *Shrapnel*'s roof was collapsed exactly as the catastrophe had struck the original. The superstructure of *Fancy Free* was an explosion of needles thrust in with determination, protruding like the spines of a hedgehog.

"Voodoo?" The television comedienne was not joking.

"They say it works with people. Gullible people who believe in hate." Neil blinked. "But boats?"

When Lottie arrived home late on Sunday night, Neil gave her

time to organize herself, then he telephoned. Their windows were on a level, and as they talked he was able to watch her—corresponding heads in lighted frames. "Why did you do it?" he asked without preamble.

"Do what?"

"I had to look for cat food. I searched the cupboards."

"You found my models."

"Why, Lottie?"

"I've always liked modeling in plasticine. You saw me buying my supply at Toy City. When the accidents started happening, I used the damaged boats as subjects."

Neil let her hear plenty of silent disbelief. "You mean you made the models *after* the accidents?"

"Of course." She laughed. "Did you think I made them before?" Her delight was infectious and Neil began laughing with her. "You actually thought my boat dollies made the accidents happen? You sure are superstitious, whitey."

Serena heard a report of the conversation late on Monday. "I still think you should call the police," she said.

"And tell them what?"

"Malicious damage, or whatever it's called. Voodoo must be a crime."

Summer merged into autumn, descending days, cool evenings with people drinking on deck before retreating inside to light the fire. "I'm leaving England, Neil," Lottie said. He experienced more relief than disappointment and this made him feel ashamed. They were watching the disco boats cruise past—thudding music, gyrating figures behind walls of glass.

"You don't like it here," he said.

"So I'm going back. My job is open on the newspaper."

"London's loss is St. Vincent's gain." He waited while she refilled his glass and then he said, "What happens to the boat?"

"I thought of fitting a paddle-wheel and sailing home, flags flying."

"I'll come with you."

"Yeah, sure." She sounded disenchanted, as much with him as with everybody else. He let it pass. "I'm selling the boat to Delbert Coombes. He's so glad to see the back of me, he's giving me what I paid plus ten percent."

"Not a bad profit," Neil acknowledged.

"And they say we have no head for business . . ."

Lottie's departure was swift. It was preceded by the sound of carpentry in the small hours, a persistent beavering noise from the interior of Houseboat *Prez,* as if somebody was doing things with hammer and chisel. Neil woke, heard it, and fell asleep again.

In the morning, there was a package on his front deck. He found it on waking, brought it inside, and opened it while Serena spooned in cereal and watched with suspicion. "It's one of Lottie's models," he said. Serena took over the unpacking as Neil read the enclosed note.

"Dear Neil," the message ran, "you and Serena mean well. But we all know the one about good intentions and the road to hell. Here is a souvenir. When it was my boat it was happy. Now that it belongs to Coombes, I think it will be sad.

"As for your superstitions, you won't need them when you grow up. It's what people actually do that counts. Lottie."

"Look at it," Serena said. She lifted the model out of the box—a representation of Houseboat *Prez.* "Do you see what I see?"

Neil looked where she was pointing. There were four holes in the bottom of the plasticine hull. "Is it possible?" he murmured, remembering the noises in the night. "Could that civilized woman be guilty of sabotage?"

"If anything happens to Delbert's boat," Serena told him, "this makes you an accessory before the fact."

They were considering that possibility as the tide came in and, to the gutsy sound of water rushing through small apertures, the vessel next door gradually filled and sank.

a *NEW* Corrector of Destinies story by

EDWARD WELLEN

This is the first story in a long time about Edward Wellen's "Corrector of Destinies." In first introducing the character in "The Corrector of Destinies" in the June 1974 issue of EQMM, Ellery Queen called him a "Man of Last Resort." He puts us in mind of Cecil Wright, now 78, who learned his law in prison, where he was famous in the 1940s as "the Brain of Alcatraz." Twice his self-taught skills sprang him from "The Rock," and during his forty-two years in prison he reviewed the cases of some four hundred fellow inmates . . .

SLASHAXE

by EDWARD WELLEN

This was a switch. Number 43870 was asking me to help him *stay* in prison.

"Let me get this straight," I said calmly, while I slid an eye to make sure a screw stood handy. The guy didn't look stir-crazy but you never could tell, and never might mean too late if the guy grew physical or threw a fit. He bunked in a different cell block but I had seen him in the yard and in the messhall. I understood he had a non-violent background, being one of the elite in crime—a paper-hanger of some sort, stocks, bonds, or checks, I didn't know just what. He always seemed to be minding his own business, but stir-craziness can creep up on anyone and break out in many ways.

A beefy guard cast a reassuring shadow. Okay. "You're scheduled to get out tomorrow morning, but you want me to come up with something that will convince the warden to hold you an extra day? Don't you know that could throw the whole system out of whack?"

He grinned. "Sounds weird, I know, but I have my reasons."

Being that somebody on the outside would be waiting to take a crack at him as they opened the gate for him and he breathed the blessed pollution?

Before my thoughts could travel very far along that road, he set me straight, beginning with a sigh that said he saw he would have to go into it and here went.

"I've been working in the license-plate stamping shop—on the clerical end, specializing in processing the vanity plates." He looked questioningly at me.

"You mean those personalized license plates?"

He nodded. "Twenty bucks buys John or Jane Q. Public any combination of up to eight characters—numbers and/or letters. It can't be openly obscene and it can't duplicate an already issued plate. A booming business lately."

"Bumper crop," I said.

He gave that a brief laugh. "Yeah. Anyway, this being my last day in the shop, my mind wasn't a hundred percent on my work."

My mouth gave a twitch. As if *my* mind stays a hundred percent on *my* work *any* day.

"I sat at the computer monitor," he said, "looking at the list of vanity plates that came in over the modem from the Department of Motor Vehicles. Some plate requests still stick in my mind—SUNBUM, THE TSAR, REPO II, ME JANIE, IOALOT, EIEIO. Then the name of a guy I know flashed on the screen. The particular plate he asked for went by me before I could register it, I was so busy doing a double-take on the name. Before I could speed the scrolling and get a quick printout of the list, a screw came to take me to the infirmary for the final tests and the paperwork. They were behind schedule and he was hardnosed, wouldn't give me time to stick around and see the printout."

I mentally backed away—way away. I wasn't about to let him make me an accessory before the fact.

He misinterpreted my silence as indicating I had missed the point. "Don't you see? I have to stay here long enough to get back to the license-plates shop one more time. I've got to know what license plate this guy I know is getting."

That reinforced my fear. From his tone, I had a foreboding that this guy he knew was no friend. I wanted no part in helping him make a hit. If I aided and abetted him in learning the license-plate number and he used the knowledge to locate the driver and waste

him, he could be caught and it could come out during the investigation and trial—and I'd have all the more reason to spend my life waiting to use the prison law library.

He sat eyeing me hopefully, expecting me to come up with something to get him a stay of release. Meanwhile my finger was growing numb from holding my place in the heavy law book. When someone breaks in on me when I'm reading in the library, I always shut the volume I'm perusing. I don't want anyone to know the line I'm pursuing. Call it superstition maybe, but I want the details of my own case, and parallels and precedents that could give away the details of my own case, to remain a private matter until I find and sound the note that will bring down the walls of Jericho and set me free.

"You don't need a legal gimmick to extend your stay beyond your scheduled release," I told him. "Use a physical gimmick."

He eyed me in alarm. "You mean give a screw lip, or start a fight with another inmate? Hey, I don't want to stay in *that* long. One extra day's all I need."

I made a sour face. I never give that sort of advice. "You know how to fake a fever? That should do the job. They can't set you loose without giving you a clean bill of health."

He studied a point in space between us, then shook his head and refocused on me. "What good is staying if it means I just spend the time isolated in the hospital getting another going-over by the doctor?"

"Don't worry about it. Take it easy and give the doc all the cooperation he wants. Meanwhile, I'll be getting a printout of the vanity-plates list."

"You can do that?"

"No sweat. Lots of guys here owe me. I'll catch you before you leave. Now go fake your fever."

The following day we met again in the library, huddled in the privacy of the multitude. In his going-away suit, he already looked distanced from the rest of us.

He leaned toward me. "You got the printout?"

I patted the law volume before me.

"Swell! Let's see it!"

"Not so fast. First the story."

"What story?"

"About you and this guy."

For only an eyeblink, he looked ready to make a grab for the book. I outeyeballed him, though, or maybe the guard's shadow prevailed, and he started speaking in a flat, almost offhand tone.

"He was a math whiz—he even taught before he figured he could make much more working in a securities house. That's where we met. I was a clerk and had access to the securities. We pulled a bearer-bonds job together. We made it to Zurich and headed straight for a bank. He's tight, so it didn't surprise me he left *me* to pay off the taxi driver. By the time I followed him inside, he was already in the inner sanctum with the bank president. I waited in an outer room. And waited.

"When he didn't show after nearly an hour, I got worried and braced the secretary. My friend was gone. He had converted the bonds into cash and opened the account, then left by another door. He has a lousy memory, and at first I hoped he forgot the way he had gone in and that I was waiting. But of course he couldn't be that forgetful. When he didn't show at the pension we were to stay at, I knew he had doublecrossed me. While I searched Zurich for him, the Feds who were searching for the two of us caught up with me. I was extradited, stood trial, got sent up. Now I've done my time." Here the bitterness crept in. "And he's back in the States, home free. Guess he's been counting on the statute of limitations—the time to prosecute him is up."

"Not for tax evasion, it isn't," I said. "Still, he must feel pretty safe. It's only by the luck of the draw that you spotted his name on the vanity-plates list."

He glanced at the wall clock and at the bored screw waiting to escort him out. "I can't stay much longer. Tell me, what's the guy's license tag?"

"You never told me the guy's name."

He told me now.

I opened the book at the insert and ran my index finger along the hills and valleys of the accordion-folded printout sheet till it hit the name. Opposite the name and address blazed the requested personalized message:

SLASHAXE

"Well? What is it?" His eagerness made itself felt in his heavy breathing.

Should I or shouldn't I show him? Over the sheet I gazed at him and weighed my move. A lot rode on what I did or didn't do, and yet

I couldn't help seeing the funny side of it—a lifer, me, playing judge and jury and maybe executioner.

I believed his story and felt his anger and pain, knowing betrayal myself. And I had all but promised him the information.

What he did with it was up to him. He had the right to be master of his fate even if he steered onto the rocks. I might be judge and jury, but even the cops can't touch a person till a crime in the mind becomes one in deed.

With a sigh, I swung the book around and let him see what I pointed to on the printout sheet I had tipped in.

He eyed it so intently I thought he must know its meaning.

"Well?"

He shook his head.

I grimaced. His utterly blank look eloquently said the message had him honestly baffled.

" 'Slashaxe.' What the hell does that mean?" He asked it ofhimself and, getting no answer, stared at me.

I stared back. "You have no idea at all?"

"It's Greek to me."

I shrugged. His problem, not mine. I had done my part and could now drop the whole thing.

No. I couldn't. I knew it would nag at me.

"Okay," I said. "Let's puzzle it out. Slashaxe. Why Slashaxe? Ass-before-the-cart sort of phrase, isn't it? Logic would seem to call for Axeslash. One given is that the DMV forces you to squeeze your message into eight characters. So 'slashaxe' could stand for 'slash of the axe.' I don't know how your ex-partner thinks. Can you think why he'd want that particular compression?"

"No," he muttered dismally.

I made a slashing motion with the edge of my hand. "Was he into karate?"

"No. Not then, anyway. Maybe since."

"Not then is what counts."

"What do you mean?"

In the printout margin I wrote the symbol /. "That's a slash. Now we add axe."

I now had /AXE.

"What's *that?*"

I stood up and picked encyclopedia volume *MU to OZ* from the shelf. I brought it back to our table and turned to the entry on

Numerals and found the right paragraph on a left page. I smiled at him.

He leaned toward me. "You solved it?"

"You solved it," I said.

His eyes glowed with banked hope. "Good for me. How did I do it?"

"By what you said when you first saw 'Slashaxe.' "

Blank.

"I'll refresh your memory, as the cross-examiner says. What you said was: 'It's Greek to me.' "

Blank again.

"It looked perfectly good English to me, though cryptic," I said. "But when what you said had a chance to sink in, I knew Greek was what it is."

"It looks perfectly good English to me."

"Greek. Slash capital alpha, capital chi, capital epsilon. In Greek enumeration," I said with all the authority of the entry before me, "alpha is one, slash alpha is 1000, chi is 600, epsilon is five. Add 'em up, it comes to one six zero five. That could be a room number, an address, a date—in 1605 they hanged Guy Fawkes for the Gunpowder Plot. It could be an inmate's number, a mnemonic—"

"Come again?"

"My educated guess is it's the Swiss numbered-account number. You said he has a lousy memory. The plate's a mnemonic, a device to help him remember this number. The fact that he still has the number on his forgetful mind must mean there's a substantial amount in the account. You said he's tight. Looks like he's drawn on the money sparingly—maybe even built on it."

His eyes burned with a murderous glow, but I smiled at him.

"I've just made you rich."

"Huh?"

"Don't you see? You can take revenge on him by way of his purse instead of his person. With a numbered account, all you have to do is produce the number."

He gave a sudden rusty laugh.

I didn't have to tell him what to do: leave for Switzerland and close out the account.

That was it. He got up to shake hands and go. The usual meaningless effusion of gratitude.

I sat limply and in my weary mind followed him dreamily out into blessed pollution.

a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Michael Vlado, a tall, dark-eyed man with a weathered Gypsy face, was in the field with his horses, as Captain Segar had expected he would be. The crops had been harvested for another year and the Gypsy leader could devote time to his true love.

Seeing Segar emerge from his car, Vlado galloped over on a fine bay colt to greet him. "It is an honor to see you again, Captain. Is your visit one of duty or pleasure?"

"Both, I suppose," Segar said . . .

BLOOD OF A GYPSY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It had been some weeks since Captain Segar had last driven into the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps to visit his Gypsy friend Michael Vlado in the little village of Gravita. He never imagined that his next trip would come at the instigation of his commanding officer.

Inspector Krisana sat at his cluttered desk beneath the tricolor Romanian flag with its coat of arms centered directly over his head. "I believe you have some close contacts among the hill Gypsies, Captain Segar."

"Some are friends of mine," Segar admitted. "I speak the Romany tongue quite well."

"You know their leader?"

"I know Michael Vlado. The hill Gypsies are not nomadic. For the most part they live in settlements or villages under separate Gypsy kings. In Gravita, the village I know best, the king is ill and elderly. For practical purposes, authority has passed to a younger man, Michael Vlado. One day he will be king."

"What is their feeling about the Socialist state?"

Segar shrugged. "They live their own lives, by Gypsy law. For minor offenses, they hold court among themselves. On the few occasions when violence has occurred, we have been summoned."

"We need a Gypsy leader to represent his people at a state function in Bucharest next month. Do you think Michael Vlado might be the man?"

"He is very independent, as are all Gypsies. I would have to ask him."

Inspector Krisana nodded. "Drive up to Gravita tomorrow and speak with him. I'll give you the details of the event we wish him to attend."

"I was preparing my reports for the inspector-general's visit—"

"This takes precedence. I have been ordered to choose a Gypsy representative."

"Very well," Segar agreed. "I will drive up there in the morning."

The journey up to the village took more than two hours, but Segar enjoyed the opportunity to get away from the office. Paperwork had never been one of his favorite activities and the drive through the October landscape, filled with unexpected bursts of color, was a welcome relief from his desk.

Michael Vlado, a tall, dark-eyed man with a weathered Gypsy face, was in the field with his horses, as Segar had expected he would be. The crops had been harvested for another year and the Gypsy leader could devote time to his true love.

Seeing Segar emerge from his car, Vlado galloped over on a fine bay colt to greet him. "It is an honor to see you again, Captain. Is your visit one of duty or pleasure?"

"Both, I suppose," Segar said, quickly outlining the reason for his call.

As he spoke, Michael merely smiled, then finally said, "This sort of event is not for me, old friend. The Socialist state tolerates us, but the less we are seen the better."

"Is there anyone else who could go as a representative? The inspector needs a Gypsy." He paused and added, "We must all look after one another in this life, you know. I do you a favor, you do me one in return." Segar knew that Michael would understand the reference to their Moscow trip earlier that year, when the captain had arranged for Michael's horse to race at the Hippodrome.

"I understand that," Michael Vlado answered seriously. "But who would I send?"

"How is King Carranza these days?"

"Still confined to his wheelchair. He could not make the journey." Suddenly Michael spotted a red tractor lumbering along the dirt road. "Let me speak with Arges Gallipeau."

Captain Segar knew most of the village's Gypsy families, at least by sight, and he'd met Gallipeau once or twice. He was a slim man with a wisp of beard clinging to his chin. Like Michael, he was in his early forties, but there all resemblance ceased. His manner was almost timid at times, and he lacked the driving force with which Michael shepherded his people.

"Arges!" Michael called to him. "Wait there so we can talk!" He ran over to the tractor and asked, "Is your brother at his house?"

"He is there," Arges answered somewhat disagreeably. "Probably with Krista."

"Are you headed there now?"

Arges shook his head. "I want to get the tractor into the shed. They say we might get a little snow later."

Segar glanced up at the gathering clouds. With the temperature well into the forties, snow in late October seemed unlikely, though he knew they sometimes had traces in the higher elevations.

Michael allowed the tractor to continue on its way and said to Segar, "We could drive over to see Nicolae. He might be the man you need."

"If you won't do it, I suppose he would be a possibility." Nicolae Gallipeau was a respected member of the Gypsy community, a learned man who had even attended school in Bucharest. Following the death of his wife, he had taken a young Gypsy girl named Krista as a lover, and she was at his house much of the time. This had caused some comment in the community, and even his own brother Arges had turned against him on the matter. To Captain Segar it seemed an affair of little consequence, but he knew that Krista's parents had petitioned Michael to bring the matter before the Gypsy court, or *kris*. Though an informal tribunal, all *kris* rulings carried great weight in the community.

Nicolae's house was one of the village's better homes, a two-story structure with an attached woodshed and wellhouse. The man himself met them at the door, welcoming Michael with a hug and shaking hands with Captain Segar. Though he did not look that much different from his brother, there was a world of difference in their

personalities. Nicolae was clean-shaven and smiling, perhaps a bit heavier than Arges, and he wore a gold ring in his right ear. He remembered Segar from their prior meetings and immediately began questioning him about recent events in the city.

When they finally sat down, Segar quickly brought up the subject of his visit. "What?" Nicolae asked with a chuckle. "You want me to represent the Gypsies? At what—a firing squad?"

"A Socialist anniversary," Segar said, filling in the details.

"The Romanian Gypsy is rarely so honored," Nicolae observed. "Did you ever read Bram Stoker's *Dracula,* Captain?"

"I expect every literate citizen has," Segar answered stiffly.

"At the end of the novel, Count Dracula's coffin is being transported through a snowstorm on the back of a Gypsy wagon. Jonathan Harker and the others overtake it, fight off the Gypsy knives, and drive a knife through Dracula's heart. I think that is still the image some Romanians have of the Transylvanian Gypsy—the knife-wielding cohort of vampires."

"I doubt it's as bad as all that."

"At the very least they view us as flouting their stupid tax laws."

"We are guilty of that," Michael agreed. Romania imposed a tax on unmarried people over the age of twenty-five, and on childless couples, in an effort to spur the country's sagging population. Gypsies believed their traditional tribal laws took precedence over such government interference.

Nicolae took a pipe from the pocket of his fringed leather coat. "Then why do they want us represented at their anniversary?"

"They want better relations," Segar told him with a sigh. "Is that so difficult to understand?"

"It is for me," Nicolae retorted, but his reply was cut short by the entrance of Krista into the room. She was dark-eyed and lovely, the sort of awesome Gypsy beauty famed in song and story but rarely encountered in real life. Segar knew she'd been listening to their conversation even before she spoke.

"Nicolae, I think you should go," she announced, sweeping across the room in a colorful skirt that almost touched the floor. Her low-cut blouse did little to hide her voluptuous figure and her raven-black hair glistened in the light. "You will be representing all of us."

The sight of her coming to the aid of his argument spurred Segar to renewed efforts. Michael joined in, too, urging with greater vigor than before. Finally, Nicolae threw up his hands with a rueful smile.

"All right, I'll consider it. At least give me an hour or so to get used to the idea. Come back after lunch and I'll give you my decision."

Krista was going down to the main street of the village to shop for fresh vegetables, and Vlado and Segar accompanied her. "Do you think we convinced him?" Michael asked.

"After all these years, you know him better than I do," she replied. "But I think so."

While she shopped, Michael suggested a bit of lunch. Captain Segar followed him into a little café next to the vegetable stalls. The wind had turned sharply colder and he was beginning to believe the warnings of snow. The café consisted of a few tables and a bare wooden counter, behind which the food and drinks were prepared. It was nothing like the wine shops and restaurants one found in the city, and for a moment it seemed like a foreign country to Segar. Michael Vlado spoke to the young man behind the counter in the Romany tongue and ordered a light lunch for them both. When the man disappeared into the back, Michael said in a low voice, "That's Trey Zuday. He used to be Krista's lover. I didn't realize he was working here."

Presently the young man returned with their food, and Captain Segar studied him with more than passing interest. He was certainly younger than Nicolae Gallipeau, and handsomer, but apparently Krista had chosen the security of an older, successful man. From what Michael had said earlier, even the opposition of her parents had failed to sway her.

It was at this point that Krista herself entered the café with a bag of vegetables, ready to join them as planned. It was immediately apparent that her former lover's presence in the place was as much a surprise to her as it had been to Michael.

"Krista!" Trey Zuday exclaimed, his face a mixture of emotions. "What brings you in here?"

"I was shopping. I came to join Michael and the Captain."

He gave her a sardonic smile. "I hoped you might have come to see me."

"I thought you still worked on the farm."

"The harvest is finished for the year. I needed work."

"Oh." Her face was flushed and she looked away, not knowing whether to sit down or run out the door.

"How are your parents?"

"They are well, thank you."

"And Nicolae?"

"I—" The words caught in her throat and she was unable to answer.

"More vigorous than ever, I imagine, with a fine bedmate like you!"

"Trey, don't—"

He used some Romany phrase that Segar couldn't catch, and she burst into tears. Michael got to his feet. "She doesn't deserve obscenities," he told Trey quietly.

"Are you taking care of her now?"

Michael barked a few words in Romany and the young man fell grudgingly silent. "Let's get out of here," Krista said.

They followed her out, the food uneaten. "I thought I knew the language," Segar told Michael, "but I still have a few words to learn."

"Better you don't know those. They could bring you a Gypsy knife in the gut under the wrong circumstances." He called out, "Krista! Wait up!"

"I'm sorry," she said, and turned a tear-streaked face to them. "I shouldn't involve you. Go back and finish your lunch."

"When my people are involved, I am involved," Michael Vlado said. "Let us walk back to the house with you."

"There are a few flurries," Segar pointed out. "The snow is starting."

It was a ten-minute walk back to Nicolae's house, but it was still warm enough to melt the snowflakes as they fell. Nicolae saw them approaching and came out to take the bag of vegetables from Krista. Behind him they saw his brother Arges, scratching his wispy beard. "I must be going now," Arges said. "Good to see you, Krista."

"Can you not stay a bit?" she asked.

"No, no—Nicolae has agreed to what you asked, Michael. He will tell you."

They turned toward Nicolae and he nodded. "I will represent the Gypsy community. My brother agrees that I should do it."

"That is good news," Captain Segar said, shaking his hand.

Arges gave a wave and headed across the field to his waiting tractor. Segar watched him for a moment, but his attention was distracted by the sudden appearance of Trey Zuday, running up the road from the center of the village. "What does he want?" Nicolae asked. "I thought you were finished with him, Krista."

"I am! We ran into him at the cafe. Be careful, Nicolae."

"I came to settle this, Nicolae!" the young man shouted, still

twenty feet away. His hand moved quickly to the back of his belt and appeared holding a hunting knife.

"Trey!" Krista shouted. "Don't be crazy!"

Segar stepped quickly between the two men, holding out his hand with a gesture of authority. Perhaps it was the sight of his uniform that made Zuday hesitate. "Let him come!" Nicolae shouted. "I'm still man enough to beat him with my bare hands!"

"No, no!" Krista ran from one to the other, first pushing the older man back toward his house and then urging the young one to turn away from his foolhardy mission.

"You'd better go in," Michael told Nicolae. "We'll talk later about the Bucharest trip."

Krista had finally persuaded Trey to return the knife to his belt. This was the moment for which Nicolae had been waiting. He broke free of Michael's half-hearted grasp and ran at the younger man, striking him a glancing blow off the jaw. Trey staggered but did not go down. Instead, his hand went back to the knife, and it took both Segar and Michael to keep the two men apart.

Even Krista seemed disgusted by the action. "Nicolae—my God, you're worse than he is!"

The snow was falling harder now, and Krista led Trey away. Segar watched them part a little way down the road. The young man said something that made her throw up her hands and go off in the opposite direction. He continued back the way he had come.

"Go inside now," Michael commanded. "We're all getting wet."

Nicolae spat on the ground. "That young bull thinks he can win her back, but I can best him any day—with a knife or in the bed!"

"Go inside!" Michael repeated. "We all need to cool off."

Nicolae reentered the house, closing the door behind him. Now the grass was beginning to trap the wet flakes and Segar saw the trail his footprints had made.

"They'll calm down," Michael told him, with perhaps more hope than assurance. "Gypsy blood is hot, and passion is always near the surface."

Segar's car was parked a little way down the road and they turned toward it. "You're sure Nicolae won't change his mind about going to Bucharest?"

"If he gives his word, he keeps it," Michael assured him.

Suddenly there was a muffled shout from the direction of the house, and both men turned. Through the falling snow they saw the

front door begin to open. They had a glimpse of Nicolae Gallipeau, his face and chest covered with blood.

"Come on!" Michael shouted, running toward the house through the light dusting of snow. Segar turned to summon Krista, but neither she nor Trey was in sight.

The door had swung shut by the time they reached it, but it hadn't latched. Michael pushed it open and went at once to Nicolae, who had staggered back and collapsed face down near the big wood stove. Michael started to turn him over and then took his hands away, staring up at Segar in disbelief. "He's dead. His throat's been cut!"

Segar knelt by the body and confirmed the fact that Nicolae Gallipeau was indeed dead. The blood had come from a terrible gash across his throat. The sight almost sickened him. "After his throat was cut, he managed to stagger from the parlor to the front door. See the trail of blood?"

"Where is the killer?" Michael asked, looking carefully about the room.

Segar drew a 9 mm. pistol from his holster and stepped into the kitchen. Like most houses in Gravita, the place was equipped with telephone and electricity but no running water. A pump brought water to the kitchen sink and an open well beyond the woodshed was available for hauling it up by the bucket. Segar moved carefully through the kitchen and woodshed to the wellhouse, checking cupboards and wood piles without success. A heavy door leading to the basement was bolted on the kitchen side, and though the back door of the wellhouse was unlatched the snow outside was unmarked. A small anvil stood near the door, apparently to hold it open when need be.

Segar returned to the front room where Michael had remained with the body. "He must be hiding upstairs." He started up, more cautious than before, his pistol extended in front of him. He checked the bedrooms one at a time, looking in closets, under beds, and even in some of the larger drawers. At one end of the second floor, he checked the storeroom which served as a sort of attic. A large trunk yielded nothing but blankets and shawls. He tried the windows, seeking access to the roof, but they were all latched tight from the inside. There was noplace even a child could have hidden.

Back downstairs, Michael Vlado stared at him as he returned. "Nothing?"

"Nothing. It makes one believe in Gypsy curses."

"The snow is unmarked at the back of the house?"

Segar nodded. "Stay here while I walk around the outside." Only a few flurries were drifting down, but the light coating on the ground provided an effective shield for the house. No one had entered or left since the snow fell, except by the front door. Segar even checked the outhouse, though the unmarked snow told him it would be empty.

He returned to the front of the house and told Michael, "The killer is still inside, if there ever was a killer."

"What other possibility is there?"

"He might have committed suicide."

"Cutting his own throat?" Michael Vlado shook his head. "Then where is the weapon? It's nowhere in the room."

"He might have thrown it as he opened the front door."

"We would have seen it. The snow's not deep enough to hide anything."

Nevertheless, Segar inspected the ground near the front door. Not even a razor blade could have escaped his scrutiny. There was nothing in the snow. "You're right," he finally agreed, straightening up.

"I must tell his brother," Michael said, "and Krista, if I can find her. Will you stay here with the body?"

Captain Segar nodded. "I'll phone my office and have them send a team of investigators up here. And an ambulance for the body."

Michael Vlado frowned. "He must be buried here, on Gypsy land."

"Not until we do an autopsy. I want a full report on that wound. We might get some idea as to what caused it. Perhaps a booby trap of some sort that did not require the murderer's presence—"

"It was his own house. He'd been in it only moments before. And what sort of booby trap would leave no traces?"

Vlado left Segar and went off across the fields toward Arges' house. Segar went back inside and used the telephone near the front door, trying not to look at the body on the floor. He spoke directly to Inspector Krisana, who promised to have people there from a district substation within thirty minutes. Segar didn't bother to tell him that the victim had been the would-be representative at the forthcoming state function.

Michael Vlado returned in twenty minutes, looking frustrated. "Arges isn't at home and I can't find Krista. Trey Zuday isn't in sight, either."

"It's still snowing a little. Not exactly the sort of weather for working outside, or taking an autumn stroll."

"Did you phone your headquarters?"

Segar nodded. "They should be here shortly. They're coming from Racari." He had another thought. "What about the basement? The door was bolted, but I should check down there anyway. How far does it run?"

"Under the main part only. It's more for food storage than anything else."

"Stay here. I'll take a look."

He used his flashlight to inspect the dirt-floored basement, finding only a thick festoon of spiderwebs that covered the ceiling. No one was hidden there and it seemed unlikely that anyone had ventured into the place in many months.

By the time he returned upstairs, a state militia car and a government ambulance were pulling up before the house. Captain Segar spoke quickly to the new arrivals and watched while they went about their tasks. The medical intern on the ambulance pronounced Nicolae dead, noting the date and time on his records. Then the technicians from the Racari substation took some pictures and dusted halfheartedly for fingerprints. "Where's the weapon?" one of them asked.

"No weapon," Segar told them.

"These Gypsies are nothing but trouble. Why do we drive all this distance for a Gypsy killing? Let them cut throats all they want."

Michael Vlado was close enough to hear and Segar saw the line of his jaw tighten. Perhaps he was remembering the Gypsies who had died in Hitler's concentration camps alongside the Jews. "Come outside," Segar told him quietly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Is that the government position?"

"Of course not." They went into the brisk afternoon air, still white with drifting snowflakes.

The ambulance attendants came out to their vehicle for a large plastic body bag. The technicians, finished with their work, were leaving. "Where are the suspects?" one of them asked Segar. Even the sight of the official vehicles had attracted no curious neighbors. It was as if the village and the countryside were suddenly deserted.

"There aren't any," the captain replied, turning helplessly to Michael Vlado.

"The sight of government officials keeps the villagers away," Michael explained. "They will mourn Nicolae's death at the proper time and in the proper Gypsy manner—when the outsiders have gone."

The intern and ambulance driver were having a cigarette before

returning to their task. Segar stood in the snow, staring up at the house and wondering what its secret was. "He's in there someplace," he told Michael. "That's the only possibility. There has to be a secret panel somewhere."

But Michael shook his head. "I helped Nicolae build that house. It has no secret panels or hidden rooms."

"You agree that the killer was waiting inside?"

"It would seem so."

"He was inside when we returned to the house."

Michael nodded. "Or else he slipped around the back and entered through the woodshed while we talked out front, before the snow had accumulated enough to show his tracks."

"It could have been Trey Zuday."

"Or anyone else."

"Someone small enough to hide—where?" He remembered how carefully he'd searched the house. "That big wood stove inside the door?"

"Surely it is in use on such a cold day."

The intern and driver finished their cigarettes and returned to the house, pushing open the front door as they unfolded the body bag. Gallipeau's head hung down as they lifted his leather-jacketed body and half slid, half rolled it into the bag, zipping shut the side opening. The dead man's right ear seemed to be listening, and in that moment it was as soft and unadorned as a baby's at birth. Perhaps we all die that way, Segar mused—listening, like babies, to some distant trumpet. He wondered what his Socialist masters would think of such spiritual meditations. Surely in Russia men had been shot for less.

"The well!" Michael said suddenly, as the body was being slid into the back of the ambulance.

"What?"

"The well! When you searched the house, did you look in the well?"

"No," Segar admitted. "I looked at it, but not into it."

"Come on!" Michael turned to the driver. "You men stay here until we return."

Segar repeated the order so it would be obeyed, then followed Michael inside. "How could anyone be hidden in the well? Wouldn't they drown?"

"There are iron rungs in the side for climbing up or down. Nicolae was always afraid someone would fall in and drown before they could be pulled out."

It was a good idea, but the flashlight revealed that the well was empty. The rungs led down to the water, but no one was standing on them. They watched long enough to establish that no one was holding his breath just beneath the water's surface. "That's all right," Segar assured Michael. "We all have our ideas."

Michael walked over to the wellhouse door and opened it. "There are footprints by the outhouse."

"Those are mine," Segar told him. "I checked it earlier." He glanced around for something to prop the door open, finally settling on a block of wood. "I think we should search the house together while the ambulance people watch the front door."

Michael agreed, and they quickly went through the place. No one was hidden there, and no one had run out the back door across the snow. The house was as empty as on the previous search. Segar reluctantly told the driver to proceed to Racari with the body.

"A wire might have been pulled across his throat," Michael speculated.

"By whom?" Segar demanded. "Where did it go?"

"Perhaps a knife was thrown."

"Then where is it? Who threw it? The thing is impossible. If Trey Zuday killed him, he was invisible."

Michael Vlado watched the ambulance pull away. "Impossible. And yet it happened. Nicolae is certainly dead."

Segar could see Gypsies emerging from their homes now that the police and ambulance had departed. Only he remained, and they trusted him. Krista was one of the first to reach the house, and she sobbed as Michael told her what had happened. She entered the house and stared bleakly at the floor where blood still marked the place of Nicolae's death. "Where is the little rug?" she asked.

"It was bloody," Michael answered. "Perhaps the ambulance attendants threw it out."

"Something else is missing," Segar said suddenly. "When I searched earlier, there was a small anvil in the wellhouse. Just now I couldn't find it. I used a block of wood to prop open the door."

"Anvil," Michael repeated. Then, "Quickly! To your car!"

"What?"

"We have to go after that ambulance!"

It was a nightmare ride, speeding over back roads, once taking a wrong turn. What did the missing anvil have to do with catching the ambulance? Segar kept asking Michael the question, but the

Gypsy was not yet ready to answer. He only urged Segar to drive faster, to use his siren.

Finally they saw the vehicle ahead through the falling snow. Siren pulsating, Segar's car passed it and forced it to stop. Then Michael was out of the car, running like a madman to the back of the ambulance, opening the door, yanking the plastic body bag out onto the snowy road. It was the final scene of *Dracula* again, Segar thought. His friend had surely gone mad, coming here to plunge a stake through the heart of a dead man.

But Michael was more interested in raising the dead than in killing them again. He yanked open the body bag and tugged at the body inside. "Come out of there, you murderer! Just as Cain slew Abel, you have killed your brother!"

And Segar saw that the man inside was not dead, and it was not Nicolae Gallipeau. It was his brother Arges.

Michael accompanied Segar and the others into the substation at Racari, and while he drank a cup of coffee he answered Segar's questions about the amazing case. "What did Arges plan to do? Why had he taken his brother's place in that body bag and how did he accomplish it?"

The Gypsy leaned back in his chair. They were in a plain, drab office where a large blue, yellow, and red Romanian flag on the wall was the only decoration. It reminded Segar glumly of Inspector Krisana's office back at headquarters. "Oh, I have no doubt Arges would have cut his way out of the bag and leaped from the ambulance when it arrived here," Michael Vlado said. "He still had the murder knife with him."

"How did he do it?"

"Simple. He left us in front of his brother's house, made a wide circle, and reentered through the rear wellhouse door just as the snow was beginning to stick to the ground. He planned to kill his brother and exit in the same manner, but by the time he returned to the back door the snow had accumulated enough to show footprints. He was trapped inside the house."

"But where did he hide? I searched the house twice."

"The first time he was in the well, clinging to those iron rungs. Later, when the technicians departed and the intern and driver went outside for the body bag, he saw his opportunity. He changed places with his victim. You must have noticed that they look something alike, as brothers would. Hacking off his wispy beard with his knife

or a handy scissors, he removed Nicolae's distinctive jacket and put it on over his own clothes. He smeared blood over his face and neck to cover the stubs of his beard, and lay down in his brother's place. The body had been examined already, so the ambulance people merely placed it in the body bag without a second thought."

But Captain Segar was not satisfied. "What did he do with the real body? We searched the house a second time, remember. A dead body would have been as impossible to hide as a living one."

"You solved that mystery yourself when you mentioned the missing anvil. Nicolae's body was dropped down the well, weighted with that anvil. And the rug Krista noticed was missing—that was probably used to pull the body out to the wellhouse so there wouldn't be more blood spread through the place. The body was probably wrapped in it before he dropped it down the well."

"How did you know all this?"

"It came to me when you mentioned the missing anvil. I also remembered something odd about the body as they placed it in the bag. Perhaps you noticed it, too. The right ear was bare, though Nicolae wore an earring in that ear. If Nicolae's body had gone down that well and the killer was escaping in the ambulance, I knew it must be Arges. No one else looked enough like Nicolae to get away with it."

"Why did he do it?"

"I asked him that. His motive was Cain's motive—jealousy of his brother's achievement. Choosing Nicolae for that honorary appearance in Bucharest was the last straw. He'd always loved Krista from afar and that played a part, too. Nicolae had the better house, the better woman, and now the honor of representing all the Gypsies. Arges could take it no longer."

"I only went to him because you turned it down."

"Yes," Michael said. Clearly, he had considered that.

"What will I do now?"

"I will go to Bucharest," Michael Vlado decided. "I owe Nicolae and Arges that much."

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

SUZANNE JONES

Mrs. Cade felt that her world was shrinking, and she rather welcomed it. She knew that eventually it would shrink to the size of the space reserved for her at her husband's side in Pioneer Cemetery. But she was concerned over the dwindling number of people for her to love . . .

HORIZONTAL SINS

by SUZANNE JONES

The town Mrs. Cade lived in had a bewildered look, as though it had forgotten its purpose, lying as it did so far away from the main roads that connected the cities of the state. The dry, treeless fields of that high valley seemed to drain away resolution, drawing off what little vitality had chanced into the town.

There were no young people on the street, mostly just those in middle age or older who had the look of survivors cast up by providence on a safe though uncompromising shore. As if in puzzled gratitude, they stayed on. But gratitude was insufficient to maintain vitality—it sufficed to allow them to exist, and although existence became a habit to be stubbornly defended it was inadequate to nurture growth or even hope.

Over the years, people moved away furtively, avoiding their neighbors' eyes with insincere promises and submissive postures, abandoning the common struggle to withstand the days that came in artless and endless succession over the high mountain.

Although the imperfect reception of the television kept the town part of the country—that is, it kept the people of the town aware of life beyond the mountains and the fact that they were part of all the people (they were the heartland, holding admired if slightly out-

of-fashion values)—so isolated were they by distance and difficulty that they wore their isolation self-consciously, partially as stigma, partially with pride.

If asked, they would say they lived there in the town because they liked it. But it was nearer the truth to say that they lived there because they had always lived there. They had always lived there, and their parents had always lived there, and they were puzzled and a little angry as they discussed among themselves the various reasons the town was dying. They held the anger in, though the act of holding it in created a kind of barrier to all passion—as if one were loosed, all would stream out uncontrollably and leave behind husks as withered as the corn in the field behind the old boarded-up high school.

Mrs. Cade looked out the snow-streaked glass of her front window at the pinkish-grey sky heavy with the promise of more snow and thought of warmer weather. She sighed a little and marched a few words through her head concerning the vulnerability of the idea of a warmer spring.

Mrs. Cade knew that the people of the town thought of her only as the former English teacher, but that was because they did not know about the writing. She had tried years ago putting some of the words on paper, but they withered there, their delicate edges retreating in the white glare of the paper like crisped insects. After a time, she stopped trying to put them down, but she never stopped writing. Occasionally, when she had several glasses of tawny port over a long winter's evening, she would let a few words escape her mouth to buzz thrillingly about the room, glancing off the brass lamp, bouncing off the pale-blue flowers on her living-room wallpaper, skittering across the highly polished floor to curl themselves before the fire with the cats and drop to sleepy silence.

Her writing most often concerned love: romantic love, familial love, love symbiotic and parasitic. Mrs. Cade believed with all her heart that love was the prime mover of the universe and she was not surprised at all that some called it God.

It was one of the continuing sadnesses of Mrs. Cade's life that there were so few people left in it that were convenient for her to love. Her husband died long ago. Time had blurred his image and she knew she had replaced most of his memory with invention. She had never loved him in the high old ways of love between men and women and she feared that their marriage had been more an accommodation to custom than to passion, though it had dutifully

produced a son, born to them in 1944. Her husband, who had been a banker with poor vision, was refused for the Army, so he was one of the few young men left in the town when she had come back to visit her parents that long-ago summer during the war. They had married and she had found a teaching position. In those days there had been a high school in the town and despite the war there was an air of optimism. She reflected now with some pride that her husband had been one of the moving forces behind that optimism, lending money and encouragement to the farmers and ranchers—so much so that they made him mayor in every election until he dropped dead from an aneurysm on a trip to Denver in 1948. A young man, really, at forty-one.

Mrs. Cade wondered sometimes what might have become of the town if he had lived, if somehow he might have stopped the deterioration and decline. She hoped so whenever she thought of it, but Mrs. Cade did not dwell on the past. She mistrusted those who hadn't the good sense to go forward. There was really no point in fussing over what might have been.

Her son was killed in a car crash while he was in his last year at the University. Mrs. Cade knew she should have been more grieved, but when he left her he returned so seldom, she had grieved so much already that she had only a few tears left when they brought him back to lie near his father in Pioneer Cemetery. It was a comfort to Mrs. Cade to visit them there in the good weather, and she had assumed the responsibility of the presidency of the Cemetery Association, not out of any fascination with the dead but out of her sense of duty. And under her competent leadership, everyone agreed, Pioneer was very well run, turning a modest surplus each year that Mrs. Cade held in trust against the possibility of epidemic or continued inflation.

She retired from teaching when she was still in her fifties—over ten years ago, when they closed the high school. Since then she had concentrated on her writing, the church (although she had stopped speaking to the pastor six years ago in a dispute over doctrine), the Cemetery Association and Genealogical Society, and her reading —although over the past year she had been experiencing some difficulty with her vision.

Mrs. Cade felt that her world was shrinking, and she rather welcomed it. She knew that eventually it would shrink to the size of the space reserved for her at her husband's side. But she was concerned over the dwindling number of people for her to love.

She had rejoiced, therefore, when Cap Crossman moved into the Elderberry place.

He had intrigued her from the first. She thought he had the face of a man who was drawn to suffering. In the last century, he might have become an arctic explorer, enduring terrible, often grisly hardships without complaint, sacrificing various physical appendages over the white wasteland for no more reason than that it was there and untracked. Or perhaps he would have been a climber, a mountaineer when there were mountains left unclimbed to test and torture those who dared to try, buffeting them with winds and blinding them with snow and hurling ice down dark ravines to tear their tents from their moorings and tumble them toward eternity.

His face had the precisely defined look of one of those men.

His name was Roger Crossman, but he was called Cap. One snowy spring it was reported to Mrs. Cade that a new man had moved into the Elderberry place, and soon it seemed Cap had always lived there. Still, he was always known as the new man, a title which could only be surrendered in the unlikely event another stranger moved into or near the town.

The place Cap moved into had stood empty since Neal Elderberry's wife had run off over the mountain to Denver and he had gone to find her many years ago. Neither of them had ever returned and after a while the county sheriff drove his then new black-and-white Ford out to the house and boarded it up to keep the kids out of it. That was years ago when there had been children in the town.

Cap was retired military, having left the Air Force (where he had been a pilot) because of a service-acquired disability. He was still a young man, certainly no more than forty, and was attractive in his sinewy, weatherbeaten sort of way. He had a pleasing way about him, a self-deprecating manner that was at once likeable and confident while at the same time reserved. Intimate in the ways of men, a little forward with the women—regardless of their age or circumstance—in a light-hearted, teasing sort of way, though always with that reserve Mrs. Cade found interesting, as if inside him there were wounds that had scabbed over but were still painful.

He came to the town, he said, because he remembered coming with his father years ago one summer for the hunting and fishing on the mountain. Later Mrs. Cade learned that his wife had recently died after a long, lingering, and expensive illness, and it would seem that he had come to the town to start over—in a place that he remembered, as he said with a smile and a wink, "better than it

was." But he offended no one. It was clear that he regarded himself now as part of the butt of the joke.

Mrs. Cade would see him moving with his stiff, almost painful gait, as if the effort of movement was psychically burdensome, along the main street—always with purpose, crossing the crest of old snow and dirty ice that lay like the track of a snail down the middle of the main street from November to June.

People didn't walk the streets of the town without purpose any more, even in the summer evenings when the breeze ruffled the cottonwoods and the crickets made their night sounds and the mountain had withdrawn to a cool presence which almost seemed benign. Mrs. Cade could still remember when people used to stroll on such evenings and the old people would sit on their porches and talk of the war far beyond the mountain in places that could not easily be pronounced. What few of the young men left to go to the war seldom returned and gradually people stopped going out on the soft summer evenings and sat instead in darkened rooms, watching television.

Cap Crossman attended the United Methodist Church, swelling the congregation by ten percent. He sat with the others Sunday after Sunday, listening to Pastor Gordon's increasingly confused sermons (since his stroke). Then he moved carefully, like an injured animal, to his small foreign truck and the town would see him perhaps once or twice more during the week, at the drugstore (where it was reported to Mrs. Cade that he bought both sleeping pills and prescription drugs for pain) and the grocery store (where he shopped sparingly every week instead of loading up like most of the townspeople once a month except for perishables).

Mrs. Cade found him prowling the cemetery on one of the cold, clear days after a spell of dry weather. He was looking, he said, for the old man who had been his father's guide on their hunting trips. Mrs. Cade helped him find the grave and stood with him in companionable silence while he paid his respects. Observing him closely like that, Mrs. Cade thought that his health had only the appearance of fragility. She also welcomed the impression that he considered himself a permanent resident even though he had been in the town then only a few weeks.

From time to time, the sheriff, Henry Coombs, drove out to the Elderberry place "to see if Cap was all right," but mostly out of boredom and curiosity and to admire the two fine saddle ponies Cap had bought from Alma Dean's brother in Buena Vista and to listen to a joke or two. Henry learned nothing new about Crossman that

snowy spring except that he had children who lived with his dead wife's parents back East and had arranged for them to spend the summer with him. He did have guns, Henry noted—mostly hunting rifles. But he also had a service revolver which Cap said was for protection, and Henry had been amused since occasionally old Jack Two Hawks got drunk at Alma Dean's hotel bar and would go into the lobby and try to climb the fireplace, but that usually was as menacing an event as ever occurred in the town.

When Cap Crossman came to town, Mrs. Cade had immediately thought of Etta Feldman, one of the people left in the town Mrs. Cade loved. Etta had been in the last graduating class of the high school and had gone off to junior college in Alamosa, and then returned when her mother died to help her father get out *The Chronicle* every week.

Etta had been one of Mrs. Cade's best students and a friendship had grown up and strengthened between them when Etta returned to town. Etta was a pretty girl—inclined to thinness, Mrs. Cade thought, and unfortunately deaf in her left ear, in which she wore a flesh-colored hearing aid. Etta would usually stop by Mrs. Cade's on her way home from work, almost every evening in the summer and two or three times a week even this time of year. Mrs. Cade looked forward to her visits. They would share lemonade or port, depending on the season, and talk of almost everything. It was to Etta Feldman that Mrs. Cade had confided the reason she stopped speaking to Brother Gordon six years ago.

It had been over her concept of sin and its horizontal nature. All sins, Mrs. Cade believed after considerable thought on the subject, were "horizontal," in that they were equal in the sight of the Lord. As evidence for this concept, she pointed out that except for the First Commandment, the others had no priority ranking. Was it not therefore most probable that God viewed them as equal offenses? Though there might be differences to society (more heinous to kill than to lie or commit adultery or fornication), there was no difference to God. The pastor had taken grave exception to this assertion, insisting that to assume God's point of view was proud, presumptuous, and heretical. Mrs. Cade had never spoken to him again and only resumed attending his sermons after he had his stroke because she thought she owed that much to his wife.

When Mrs. Cade first became aware of Cap Crossman, she thought of Etta because she was the only really eligible woman under thirty in the town except for Henry Coombs' younger sister, who Mrs. Cade

felt was not quite right mentally. Mrs. Cade arranged to bring Etta and Cap together at a Cemetery Association meeting and invited them to take a glass of port with her afterward. As she had hoped, Cap gently teased Etta out of her shyness and she had talked almost freely to him, carefully watching his lips.

Mrs. Cade's heart swelled with cautious optimism as they began to be seen more and more in each other's company. But soon discomfiting stories reached her ears. Henry Coombs reported that he had seen Etta's car coming into town more than once past 1:00 A.M. and Alma Dean's brother said he had seen Etta's car parked out at Cap's place early one Sunday morning when he had come by to collect a payment on the ponies. Etta came by to see her less and less often that summer, and when she did she seemed preoccupied and distracted (although she had never looked prettier).

By this time, Cap's children had arrived, a boy and a girl aged ten and six. Mrs. Cade was at first saddened by their fragile beauty and their quiet good manners, and was heartened over the summer to see them grow brown from the sun, stronger and almost boistrous, riding Cap's ponies along the road to the town. She was sure her contentment was shared by the others.

Just to hear the sounds of children again.

She promised to make a present of the pride of her cat Gorbeduc's next litter to the boy, Richard, when they returned to spend Christmas vacation with their father—having first been assured by Cap that the kitten would be welcome even after the children returned to their grandparents.

It was a beautiful summer, full of mild weather, and Mrs. Cade hadn't been so content for a long time. She rather expected a wedding before too long, fearing that the talk might be true and a wedding might be necessary and suspecting that the bloom on Etta's cheeks might well be from guilty pleasures. But Mrs. Cade tried not to judge others, for that also was a sin and God would view all their sins equally, Etta's no more severely than her own.

At the end of August, Cap took his children back East for the beginning of the school year and didn't return for a long time. September came and went, along with the last of the good weather.

A distance had come between Mrs. Cade and Etta that at first Mrs. Cade ascribed to Etta's preoccupation with Cap but which she ultimately felt had been occasioned by her unspoken criticism of Etta's behavior. So when Etta left for Alamosa to spend some time

with her aunt, Mrs. Cade had only Etta's father's terse word for it that she hadn't heard a word from Cap since he had been gone.

He returned in late October and brought with him a bride—a small, attractive blonde woman who dressed very well and drove a shiny red Blazer and, it was said, was very interested in horses.

Mrs. Cade took to her bed for a week in disappointment. When she recovered, she noticed with guilty satisfaction that Cap did not look happy. The lines in his face had deepened and he was seen once or twice in *The Chronicle* office talking to Etta, who had returned to the newspaper and appeared pale and withdrawn.

It took almost no time at all for the new Mrs. Crossman to run afoul of Mrs. Cade, who found her aggressive, willful, and unfeminine. Mrs. Cade invited the couple to her house one Sunday in November after one of Mr. Gordon's more incomprehensible sermons. Mrs. Crossman (her name was Judy) had far too much port and spoke rudely about the town and the isolation. Mrs. Cade could not deny that physically she was exquisite—pale, clear skin, hazel eyes, silky hair, the color of which Mrs. Cade was almost certain was artificially enhanced—but she closed her eyes just remembering the spilled port on the fine white tablecloth she always used for company, and the embarrassed and uneasy look on Cap's face.

Mrs. Cade was distressed for Etta, who could not always avoid the Crossmans, and in her own disappointment she grew more and more to dislike the appearance of the shiny red Blazer parked at the hotel where Judy Crossman had found a friendly ear in Alma Dean.

A few days before Christmas Eve, therefore, when Mrs. Cade noticed the Blazer settle into its accustomed place in front of the hotel, she flung on her coat, seized the basket of candies she had made for the Crossman children, and tore out the ten miles to the Elderberry place as fast as her old station wagon would safely negotiate the frozen road.

She had driven herself over the back roads fearlessly in all kinds of weather over the years and she drove fast and skillfully. It was very cold and the clouds over the mountain seemed to press down on all sides. Mrs. Cade devoutly hoped to deliver her gift and be safely away before either the storm struck or the dreaded Mrs. Crossman returned.

It was late in the lead-colored afternoon when she slid the car to a stop in front of the ranch house and noted with misgivings that Cap's truck was missing. Still, there were lights on in the house as

if to ward off the terrible cold, and she carefully made her way over the frozen ground onto the porch.

Richard opened the door at once.

"Oh, Mrs. Cade," he sobbed, flinging himself into her arms. "She hates us! Please find my kitten. Please! Please!"

She quieted him and the little girl and got him to tell his story.

After their father had left to do some last-minute Christmas shopping in Salida, their stepmother had taken the kitten away because it was dirty and made them all cough and sneeze. She said she would take it to town and find a good home for it, but he was sure he saw her stop far down the road and throw it out. By the time he got his heavy clothes on and ran to the spot, it was gone. But Mrs. Cade could find it, couldn't she?

Without any real hope in her heart, she said she would try and promised to return. She drove down the road to the spot he had indicated and stopped the car. She crossed the frozen ditch and climbed carefully through the barbed-wire fence that lined the road, into the treeless field. The first flakes of snow were beginning to fall, and as she called and listened for the small sounds distressed kittens make, straining to see any movement in the brown grasses stiff with frost, she felt the ice forming around her own heart. She called and peered into the darkening fields, the snow hissing onto the grass, until she felt almost as cold inside as out.

She got back into her car but did not return to the children as she had promised. She drove instead back to the town. She scarcely noticed Crossman's truck flash past her. She drove mechanically until she saw the red Blazer still parked in front of the hotel, then she pulled over in front of the newspaper office and waited, her lights off, the motor running the heater to keep her warm. The snow was coming down in thick flakes that swarmed like angry insects around the light in front of the hotel.

At last Mrs. Cade saw the small figure stumble from the brightly lit foyer of the hotel to the Blazer. After a moment or two of fumbling, Judy managed to get the door open. Mrs. Cade saw the car's interior light flash on. Long moments passed after it flicked off until Mrs. Cade heard the engine catch and surge to life.

Mrs. Cade waited until the Blazer had pulled away to turn on her own lights and ease the station wagon out into the empty street and the full blast of the storm. She followed at a distance as the bright red taillights led the way out of town, the station wagon gently rocking her over the frozen road through the dark. Occasionally she

would lose sight of the taillights, and she edged closer until she could discern them again through the whiteness.

She watched the odometer as closely as she dared. The road was itself now hard to see, its edges blending with the white stubble of the ditch. Gradually, steadily the numbers rolled by in the light from the dashboard—black on white, black on white. After five miles, she increased her speed until she came abreast of the Blazer, then she turned the wheel gradually to the right, crowding the side of the old station wagon against the side of the Blazer, and flinched, waiting for the sound of grinding metal—which never came. Instead, the Blazer wheeled off the road and bounced through the frozen ditch into a fencepost. The station wagon slewed crazily over the frozen surface, but Mrs. Cade kept it upright on the road.

She searched the rearview mirror and saw the Blazer's lights slanting away from the road into the field. She stopped the station wagon at a wide place in the road and carefully backed around. She could hear now, over the sound of her own engine and the hiss of the snow, the grinding of the starter, the engine catch and die, and again the grinding of the starter.

Mrs. Cade eased the station wagon into gear and drove slowly away toward town. Behind her, the sound of the Blazer's starter grew fainter and fainter until it disappeared altogether in the dark.

She was very tired by the time she had made her way home, and the telephone ringing in the midnight hours took her from a deep sleep to groggy consciousness. It was Cap. The children said Mrs. Cade had been there. Had she seen his wife Judy on the road?

"No," Mrs. Cade said. She talked a while longer and hung up with yet another sin on her conscience to join the others of a long and imperfect life. She lay chilled in her bed under the three quilts her aunts had made years ago and stared into the darkness, offering up more hope than expectation of forgiveness.

Then Gorbeduc was on the covers, searching for comfort. She put her hand gently on the cat's throat and felt it tremble with contentment.

They found Judy Crossman's body almost two miles from the Blazer in the center of the road, where she had fallen for the last time. Mrs. Cade was spared the additional sin of hypocrisy when Cap declined to have the interment in Pioneer Cemetery and took the body back East to Judy's relatives.

Etta Feldman took an editorial position with the *Alamosa Sentinal*

and seldom comes back to the town. Her father complains of this, but also tells Mrs. Cade with satisfaction that she is seeing an older man in Alamosa who owns a mercantile store.

Cap Crossman did return a few weeks after the tragedy, but he disappeared after a month or so—just sold his horses and took off. Henry Coombs agreed with Mrs. Cade's suggestion that maybe Cap had gone somewhere else to start over.

Mrs. Cade hasn't felt all that well lately and goes out less. She was disappointed for Etta and Cap and the children that things hadn't worked out differently, but she thought that she had lived long enough to understand that things do work out. Or at least go on. Her cats come and go, the storms roll down the mountain. Mrs. Cade sits in front of her fire and stares out the snow-streaked window and writes of love and sin and suffering. The words patter on in her mind as incessantly as the flakes of snow fall on the town and on the fields, as far as the eye can see.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

SAME DIFFERENCE

by C. H. BUFFALO

49 The barkeep, too free with a knife,
50 Was imprisoned for killing his wife.
51 "This sentence," said he,
52 "Changes nothing for me,
53 "Since I've been behind bars all my life."

a *NEW* Quark story by

ROBERT TWOHY

"So the idea we're planting is that Monica went to your place, you were out, Stella was bombed, and Monica killed her with your gun." Carol frowned, fiddled with her neat chin. "What's her motive?"

Lampson spread his hands. "Unclear. Which is okay—in fiction, motives have to fit snug, but not in real life."

Quark asked, "Isn't this fiction?"

"Not to the characters in the movie—to them it's real life."

The movie in question, dear audience, is decidedly of the film noir *school . . .*

THE MOVIE GAME

by ROBERT TWOHY

One Thursday night last April, a fortyish type sat down by Carol Hagen, bought her a margarita, said his name was Elvin Lampson and he needed some help in developing a movie script—might she be interested?

She smelled baloney but maybe not—he might be a porn producer prowling the Bay Area shops for talent. She put the question.

He chuckled, said no. "This is a sophisticated suspense story with only three characters—like *Sleuth,* only different. Did you see *Sleuth?"* Yes. "Like it?" Yes.

He had sharp brown eyes in a round face and not much grey-black hair. With English-type jacket, gold digital, and nifty Italian shoes, he looked like someone she could learn to like.

She asked what did he mean, he needed help with a movie script? He said that he was after a new kind of reality, requiring not profes-

sional actors but real people being themselves. He would set up four or five conversations, which would be taped, and from the tapes the script would develop.

He said he had a Hollywood connection, naming a famed actor he said he'd met at a tennis tournament at Pebble Beach and they had hit it off. Lampson had told him his idea and the actor had said he'd like to have a look at the finished script.

Carol said to tell her more. He said he would, tomorrow—but now was the time to forget business.

She hefted her overnight kit and they oozed out of the dump into a silver Porsche. A few minutes later they were wafting into the hills west of Lindenvale, where spreads start at $300M and go way up.

On Lockhaven Lane, he turned into a long slopy driveway splitting an acre of glassy lawn, a one-story rancher at the end—$400M, she judged, not overwhelmed as she had been a paid guest at fancier layouts.

Excusing himself, he scooted around an attached garage, probably deactivating a burglary alarm, which all homes in The Hills have. Then they went in and he continued to forget business.

Next morning over breakfast that he fixed, he sketched the movie idea and told her how they would go about putting it together—and though she didn't get all of it, and considered it overtricky, she had to agree on one point: it was a lot different than *Sleuth*.

He said that he needed another person—would she know someone who might be right for the third character?

He described the type guy he wanted and she thought of a friend of hers, Jim Quark, and described him back. Lampson said that he sounded good and to bring him around.

He gave her a cash giftie for last night plus $100 advance on her movie earnings, plus $500 to give Quark to show he was serious. He said that they would each earn $250—and for her, of course, would be separate gifties for favors apart from the script.

He dropped her at her apartment in Lindenvale, near the Rec center across from the park. She said that she would see Quark today and call Lampson tonight—he had given her his unlisted number.

That afternoon she drove her '77 Pinto to Quark's hole on North Claremont in San Mateo. As a night cabdriver, he should be up and more or less conscious by 3:00 P.M.

He opened up and said, "Oh. You."

"Uh huh." She gave him her perky waif's grin. "Still sore?"

He grunted. She trotted past him into the mangy studio, which she knew well, having lived there for three or four weeks last fall, then suddenly taking off—which was why he was sore, though on moving in she had told him that would happen because that's the way she was, take it or leave it. He had taken it, as guys will when it's there to be took, and got sore, as guys will, when suddenly it wasn't.

She laid the $50 on him, said it was to meet a guy who wanted to make a movie, and there would be $200 more if the guy decided Quark was right for the part.

He slouched in the rocker that didn't rock as she perched on the high end of the brokenback couch and talked about the movie for about fifteen minutes. "Why me?"

" 'Cause I like you, and you're what he wants—not a hood or a freak but an okay sort. No mental giant, but not exactly stupid, either—sort of like Jimmy Stewart in those old Hitchcock films, getting involved in something where he doesn't quite know what the score is."

"I just play myself?"

"Uh huh. And I play me, and he plays him, a guy with a rich wife. The names will be changed later. There's no script, and only a general plot line—we sit around, he lays out the situation, and we wing it."

"Him, you, me—how about the wife?"

"She won't be in it. She doesn't know about it."

"I guess you didn't meet her."

"No, guys I go home with I rarely get to meet their wife. She's off in the wine country with some friends, doing a bunch of parties. Do you still have Sunday–Monday off?" He did. "He wants us to meet at his place Sunday."

Quark worked his mouth like chewing something he couldn't quite nail down the flavor. "We won't be on camera, just taped?" She nodded. "And there's no action, we just sit around and talk?"

"Well—there may be action, but he doesn't know what it'll be yet. One thing will lead to another, if it does. He thinks it will. First we sit around and talk over the murder plot. He got the idea from his own life. He used to fantasize about how great things would be if his wife dropped dead."

Quark's unaggressive grey eyes were watchful as she went on.

"He decided he'd turn the fantasies into a movie. He'd hire two nobodies and the plot would be that he was hiring them to make a movie about plotting the murder of his wife—and things would go from there. Whatever developed would be the script, kind of."

Quark jammed out his Pall Mall and got up and slouched around, then stood staring at the wall, which had a light nicotine tan and other stains overlaid. When she had lived here, Carol had washed the dump cover-to-cover because she couldn't live in filth, which he had never had any trouble doing in the past and obviously didn't now.

"He doesn't know the ending?"

"No. We'll talk out a scene, not knowing what the next one will be or where we're headed—like life."

They kicked it around a little more, then he watched her trot away to the Pinto, having agreed to go with her Sunday to Lampson's.

About 2:00 P.M. she picked him up and they tooled up to Lockhaven, she sliding the car down the slopy driveway and alongside the garage beyond some hanging trees, where she told Quark Lampson had told her to put it so it wouldn't be seen from the road. He let that slide as it was nothing to him where she parked.

Lampson sat them down in a low, wide living room with appropriate furniture and got a highball for Carol and a Bud for Quark. Carol was on a couch and Quark in an armchair big enough for his loose-hung frame. Lampson stood at a roughstone fireplace over which was a portrait of a pale brown-haired woman in a blue frock with small eyes and a cold smile.

After ten minutes of amiable probing, which brought out among other facts that Quark owned a car which was operable, Lampson went to a desk, fiddled a few seconds, came back, and said, "The tape's on. What I'm saying right now, and everything we say from here on, will be part of the script. The movie's not only the murder story we'll develop but also us working out the movie." Quark didn't quite get that, as he hadn't when Carol had tried to explain it, but he supposed things would get clearer.

Lampson turned to look at the portrait. "That's Stella. In 1976 I took a job with her first husband, in his realty office in Boston. In 1978 he went out a window of their condo, fourteen floors up. She was in New York that night, with friends."

He paced around on the hearthstones. "No suicide note, no health or financial problems, so there were plenty of suspicions. But she

was in New York—and if he'd been slugged in his sleep, dragged to the window, and dumped out, there was no evidence. No word that she had a secret lover to whom she might have given keys—and no one saw a man letting himself into their place that night."

Quark had got interested. "Is all that stuff made up for the movie?"

"No, it's fact. After inheriting about twelve million, Stella sold the realty business and moved to Florida. A year later we were married there. Two years later we came to San Francisco, and early this year moved here."

Quark rubbed his fair-sized jaw. "So in the movie the guy, you, wants to murder his wife so he'll inherit, like she did."

"Not quite. He wants to hire two people to help him make a movie based on his fantasies of murdering his wife."

He announced that they needed fresh drinks, got them, plopped himself down on a fat purple pillow near the hearth, grabbed his shins, rocked, gazed at Carol. "Do you know anyone in Palo Alto?"

She frowned, said she might, but didn't think so.

"Sometime next week I'll drive you to a nice hotel there, where you'll register as Monica Langley."

"Who's she?"

"No one. You'll wear an expensive outfit, a dark wig to hide your blonde hair. Stella is nearly your height and build—she has a storeroom full of clothes and a dozen wigs she doesn't use as they're no longer in style. On a day she's out, you'll go through her stuff and take your pick."

"Why not right now?" Carol's blue eyes were bright.

Lampson grinned. "No, another day, another scene. At the hotel, you'll wear tinted glasses, heavy makeup, carry a new suitcase. I'll buy you those things and any appropriate accessories."

Carol said, "This is the movie, right? You're the guy talking in the movie?"

"Right—laying out the murder plot. Which is that you're going to establish the identity and whereabouts of Monica Langley. I'll visit you, show you off in nifty restaurants in Palo Alto. Some nights I'll spend with you at the hotel. The idea is that I'm your wealthy lover, coming around in my silver Porsche. Monica will be fiction but I'll be myself, to be remembered later. Two weeks should create the impression we want.

"Then on a particular night to be arranged, Monica will scrub bathroom, woodwork, doorknobs, anything that might take fingerprints. You smoke Salems, Monica will smoke Benson&Hedges, let's

say. She'll leave some butts in an ashtray and scraps of a torn-up letter in a wastebasket—nothing else.

"With suitcase and handbag, she'll stride into the lobby, announce to the deskman that she'll be gone a few days—the room will be paid a week ahead—and ask him to call a cab. He and anyone else in the lobby will observe her stalk around, gobbling cigarettes. Cab arriving, she'll hurl suitcase, handbag, and herself into it and tell the guy to take her to Lockhaven Lane, in the Lindenvale Hills.

"Paying him off, she'll walk down the drive to the house and let herself in with the key I'll give you. I won't be home. I'll be at a hotel in the City, where for the past two nights I'll have been getting sloshed in various spas where I'll make a point to be memorable. Stella will be home but you won't have to worry about her as Quark will have paid a call a little earlier."

Before Quark could call for a clarification of that, Lampson had got up and was crossing the room to a fuzzy plant in a wooden tub at a far wall, where he bent, fished around, and came up with a gun he swung at arm's length, two-handed like a TV hitman, sighting on Quark, who sucked in air and went stiff. Carol gave a squeak and her blue eyes got round.

Lampson paced over to Quark, gun leading the way, and said softly, "Movie or reality?"

Quark stared at the hole in the gun six feet from his nose. He saw the finger on the trigger tighten, heard a click—

Closed his eyes, took some breaths, opened the eyes, and stared at Lampson four feet away, gun at his thigh. Lampson murmured, "I thought it might punch up this scene—hope you weren't too startled."

Quark didn't say if he was or wasn't. He watched Lampson poke the gun back into the tub. He looked at Carol but her bright round eyes were fixed on Lampson.

He went back in front of the fireplace and stood, hands behind his back, smiling at Carol and rocking on his toes. "I'd like to test the hotel bit, see if we could really pull it off, make Monica a believable person. Remember that I'm after reality."

"You mean you want me to actually register at a hotel, do Monica in real life?"

"Yes. It would be pleasant enough—I'd pick a nice place."

Carol's look was that she wouldn't mind.

Lampson turned, gazed at the portrait of Stella. "She's a sleeping-pill addict. When not doing the social round, she bombs herself out

early—that's a regular and inevitable practice. So on the night we decide on, she'll be bombed out when *you—"* a nod at Quark "—come calling."

"I'm supposed to come here that night?"

"Yes—approximately half an hour before Carol gets here." He glanced toward the plant. "Normally that .22 is in a drawer in my den, but that night it'll be there in the plant—loaded, of course. You'll have on gloves. Take the gun and go to Stella's bedroom down that hall there, to the end door—which won't be locked. Slip in, put the gun to her head, and shoot her."

After about ten beats, Quark said slowly, "All you've told us and what I'm saying right now is the movie."

"Of course. We're all characters in the movie within the movie."

Carol was forward on the couch, chin on her fists. "The movie is about all of us making a movie where we talk about this murder plot, and sometimes we're the characters in the plot and sometimes we're outside the plot, talking about the movie—we sort of slide in and out."

"You've grasped the theme—illusion and reality come together, separate, come together again, each time rubbing a little off on the other. After a while, which is which?"

He walked around, gazing off. "There've been experiments. A group dresses like Nazi guards, another group like concentration-camp inmates—and sometimes amazing things happen. Not physically, though that's happened, but as to attitude, states of mind—the game takes over, fiction commands." He smiled. "Is that the mood I seek for this movie—that maybe things can get out of control?"

After a while Quark said, "So the guy in the movie tells me to shoot Stella. So I say okay—is that what you want?"

"Say what seems natural."

"For the character I play in the movie, you mean."

"Yes—for Jim Quark, the character in the movie."

"Okay, I shoot Stella—then what?"

"Put the gun back in the plant for the cops to find later. Drive to the airport. Soon after you leave here, Carol will arrive." He turned to her. "You'll have gloves on, too. You'll smoke a couple of Benson&Hedges, leave the butts. After about twenty minutes, call a Lindenvale cab—or, wait. Do you know other Lindenvale drivers?"

"Just Quark. But I use the cabs."

"But you'll be Monica, dark glasses, wig, makeup, carrying a new suitcase, and it'll be night—it's not likely you'll be recognized."

"A chance, though," said Quark.

Lampson said with a slight smile, "Chances are to be taken, if the prize seems worth it. Which is why fish bite."

He said to Quark, "At the airport you'll park in a secluded area we'll agree on, where Monica will come after the cabdriver drops her in some routine place. You'll drive her to your apartment, where she'll change, become Carol. Clothes, wig, makeup, glasses, all the things that made Monica will go into the suitcase, which Carol will leave for you to dispose of later in a way we'll work out. You'll drive her home. Next day I come home from the City, find Stella murdered, call the cops."

"And tell them about Monica," said Carol.

"Tell them nothing. Let them find her—giving them a stake in her reality."

Quark asked, "What if they don't find her?"

"They will. Stella's photo will be in the papers and on TV—so will mine. Someone at Monica's hotel will recognize me and call the cops. They'll go there, go to Monica's room, find the cigarette butts matching those at my place, and the torn-up letter in the wastebasket. They'll talk to the deskman and others, find the Palo Alto cabdriver, trace Monica to my place, then to the airport. Everything will come down to her, but she'll be gone, on a jetplane to anywhere."

After a little silence, Carol said, "What's the torn-up letter?"

"A note from me to Monica, saying that Stella has caught onto our affair and ordered it finished, so here's some money, goodbye, thanks for some sweet memories."

"So the idea we're planting is that Monica went to your place, you were out, Stella was bombed, and Monica killed her with your gun." She frowned, fiddled with her neat chin. "What's her motive?"

Lampson spread his hands. "Unclear. Which is okay—in fiction, motives have to fit snug, but not in real life."

Quark asked, "Isn't this fiction?"

"Not to the characters in the movie—to them it's real life."

Quark had to grant that that made sense.

Lampson picked up on the theme of motives. "Manson's?—grotesque. Loeb-Leopold?—the same. Many others. Cops and D.A.s live in a murky world where crimes rarely come neatly packaged. Don't worry—if they accept the existence of Monica, they'll accept her as Stella's killer."

Quark asked, "What's her background?"

Lampson sighed. "There I can't help you, Sergeant. I picked her

up at a bar near the airport one night—didn't press for a biography—our affair was strictly of the gonads. She said she had come in from Chicago, that's really all I know."

He dropped on the fat pillow, bowed his shoulders, laced his fingers, stared up and around like taking questions from various cops. "No, I never gave her a key to my house. She must have got a dupe from the kitchen drawer, returned it after the—afterwards. Yes, I brought her to the house—two times. It was exciting to sneak her in with Stella out on pills. We went to my den, next room to Stella's bedroom, made love by firelight. The second time I heard what I thought was a window being pried and I went for my .22. It was a false alarm, but she saw me take it from the drawer. Yes, she could have known where the alarm switch is. Both times when we arrived I stepped around behind the garage to switch it off."

He blew another sigh. "No, I had no thought that she could be homicidal. Yes, I left that note for her at the hotel, two days before the—before it happened. I enclosed a thousand dollars." He chewed a lip, stared down at the twined hands, said low, "Poor Stella. Why would Monica—? If I'd had any idea— But when Stella told me to end the affair I was bitter, wanted to be alone, went to the City, drank myself stupid. Then I came home and found her—" he swallowed a lump "—lying there."

He sagged, looking forever haunted—almost fell on his face. Straightened, beamed at Carol and Quark.

Carol asked, "Won't they be suspicious?"

"Of course. But I'll have my alibi, as Stella had hers in Boston. And you and Quark won't be in the picture—nobody will know of our connection. We'll run risks as we have to. Think of the prize!"

Carol murmured, "Twelve million for you. How about us?"

"You're speaking as Carol in the movie now."

She blinked, then got her perky smile. "Sure."

"When I get the settlement, and things get calm, I imagine you can just about name your own fee."

Carol gazed up at Stella, who smiled back coldly.

Quark said, "Why me?"

"As murderer? Because I have to set up my alibi, and Carol will be concentrating on her act at the hotel—much better that she get here and the job's done."

Quark growled, "I never hurt a woman in my life. I'm not a killer." He rubbed his head, stared around, muttered, "What am I babbling about?"

"You're getting caught up in your part." Lampson jumped up, clapped his hands, and said cheerily, "That's our opening scene. —Do you want another drink?"

Quark flashed on how when you hear "Another drink?" you start grinning and bobbing your head, but when it's "Do you want another drink?" you usually say no, if reasonably sober. He didn't know why that was, but he said no, and Carol did, too.

Lampson said, "I'll show you the alarm switch," and smiled. "All in the name of reality. The more detail we cover, the more real things will seem."

They followed him out the front door and down the walk around the garage to a back door on it. Crouching, he ran an arm through high weeds. "A foot up and three inches left of the frame you'll feel a tin hatchcover. Flip it open and you'll feel the switch, down now. Up is on, down is off." Quark reached and felt as told, Carol did likewise.

They walked to the Pinto. Lampson said to Carol, "I'll call you tomorrow. Depending on Stella's social schedule, we'll lay plans for next week." His smile was for them both.

Carol backed, turned, and they went up the drive, Lampson at the door smiling after them.

"Whada you think?"

Carol shrugged. She had a frown like she'd as soon work out her own thoughts, okay? They went down the hill in silence.

She let him off at his hole, said she'd be in touch when Lampson called, and took off.

Quark lay on the couch with feet on high, stared at the tanned ceiling, and tried to figure what the afternoon added up to.

Then he rolled to his feet, lit up, walked around, said aloud, "It's a movie." He walked some more, felt weary suddenly—jammed out his butt, flopped back on the couch, closed his eyes, and started to drift.

—Could you shoot a woman?

—That's just stupid.

—This isn't some sweet old grandma. This is a woman who got her lover Lampson to push her rich husband out a window.

—He made that up for the movie.

—How about the experiment he told you, guys starting to think they're Nazis?

—Putting some suspense into the movie, like maybe fiction could take over.

—Could it?

—Of course not.

—What if you're wrong?

—That's silly. Anyway, if things started to get heavy I'd just bail out.

Which was the thought he took into sleep.

Next day he walked to Club Miami, on Sixth Street, the ultimate dive, shot pool, and got moderately wasted—a normal Monday off.

Tuesday he didn't get word from Carol, or Wednesday. Thursday night he stopped the cab at her apartment, but the Pinto wasn't in sight and her windows were dark.

Friday no word, and her place dark, no Pinto—Saturday the same story.

Sunday by 4:00 P.M. he was at the Miami, sort of watching a ballgame and shooting pool. About 7:00 P.M. Dirty Fred behind the bar told him to take the phone.

Carol said, "Hi. We're going to do a scene."

"Where've you been?" The music was blasting. He was alone at the end of the bar and could talk loud—had to.

"At the Casa Ria." A high-toned inn south of Palo Alto. "We've been creating Monica."

"Why didn't you call me?"

" 'Cause you don't have a phone."

"I know I don't. You could have left word at the cab office, or put a note under my door."

"Well, I didn't. Listen, he's at my place now with his recorder—how soon can you get here?"

"I can't. My car's home and I've had too much to drink anyway."

"He'll pick you up. In my car."

"Where's his?"

"At the S.P. He walked to my place. He'll pick you up on Delaware, ten minutes."

Quark walked along Delaware and in ten minutes saw the red Pinto come over the rise, southbound. He waited as it swung past him and around a corner, then came back, pulling up by him with the door flopping open. He got in. Lampson wore old clothes and a broad-billed old cap hiding most of his face. He looked like no one

in particular, certainly no one who lived in The Hills. Quark said, "Disguise, huh?"

"For the plot. No connection between me and you, or me and Carol."

"So how come you pick me up in her car?"

"She's in costume." They passed the high school, nearing Lindenvale limits. "If anyone she knows sees me in her car, I'm just a guy she brought home who she sent out for booze."

Quark shook his head. "This is like a kid's game."

Lampson grinned. "It is, isn't it? That's what movies are—costumes, posturing, pretending, setting up game situations—catching the mood, getting caught up."

He turned on the avenue, went two blocks west, and pulled into the parking area by the tennis courts. They crossed the street to Carol's apartment, where the lights showed.

Lampson opened with a key and they went into a sparse front room, as neat as Quark's was raunchy.

Lampson waved at a big brown box with buttons under a table by the couch. "The recorder's on."

Quark sat in a chair. Lampson took off the cap and went into the kitchen.

A deeply tanned lass with shining black hair in a comely black frock with silver studs here and there slid out of the bedroom. She wore green-tinted glasses and lots of wet-looking orange lipstick.

Lampson came in with a Bud for Quark, who popped it, gazing as the dark feline went down onto the couch and stretched a familiar-looking tan gam along it. He couldn't make out her eyes very well, which of course was the idea of the green shades.

Lampson took the end of the couch, laid the end of the gam across his lap, and, stroking it, said, "I've visited Monica at the Casa Ria, we've been to Palo Alto restaurants, two nights I stayed over. People have noticed the dark adventuress and her balding lover with his silver Porsche. We'll be remembered."

Quark drank beer. "So Carol's living it up."

The orange lips pursed, a sweet voice cooed, "I'm Monica."

"Yeah. Fancy outfit, wining and dining. What have I got out of this? Fifty bucks, spent."

Lampson said, "You'll be paid Thursday." He had a faint smile. "With maybe a bonus."

He held out a key. Quark said, "What's that?"

"A key. It opens both front-door locks at my place. Stella has no

engagements after Wednesday—she'll be resting up for the next round of parties. About nine-thirty P.M. Thursday night, drive to my place, as we discussed last time. Flip the alarm switch down—"

"I remember the plot. You'll be in the City, getting tanked."

Lampson wiggled the key. Quark shrugged and took it.

"Afterward you'll drive to the airport, park at the top level. Keep your eye on the elevator. A little after ten, Monica will show. Drive her to your place—"

"I said I remember." Quark drank more beer. "This is just talk for the movie, right?"

"Not quite." The brown eyes were sharp and steady on Quark's. "Carol and I have got involved in our roles—time for you to."

"You actually want me to go to your place and to the airport?" He hadn't pocketed the key. "What's the point?"

"Involvement."

They watched each other, Monica sitting quiet. Quark flashed on what he had told himself last Sunday. *If things start getting heavy, I'll bail out* . . . But things weren't getting heavy, they were getting ridiculous. "No way." He held out the key.

Lampson looked at it, said in a quiet voice, "On Stella's closet shelf, rear left corner, is a pile of wigs. Under it will be your two hundred."

Quark got up and walked around, flipping the key. Lampson said, "The loaded .22 will be in the plant. Stella will be in bed, knocked out on pills. That will be the situation."

"This is the movie plot you're talking about."

"Of course."

"Are you telling me to—" He licked his lips, frowned. "What are you telling me?"

"The situation Thursday night." Linking his fingers, Lampson gazed down at them. "I won't be there. Neither will Carol until after you've left. Do what seems in character—remember to wear gloves."

"Why?"

"So you'll be in character."

Quark looked at Monica. She sat still, no expression he could make out behind the shades. He flipped the key. "How will it help the movie if I go to your place?"

"Because in a later scene you'll tell about details of the murder night—the things you did, the fears you felt."

Quark slid the key into a pocket, got his Bud from the chair, finished it, crushed the can, set it on the low table. Lampson slid

out from under the gam, hopped up, and said briskly, "That's the situation. Now this scene is finished." He got his cap.

Monica cooed, "G'night, Quark."

On the ride to Quark's place, Lampson sat quiet, with a little smile like satisfied with the scene just done, and scenes to come. Quark sat quiet, too, not smiling.

As he was getting out, Lampson took his wrist and said softly, "If you're a little edgy, that's fine—that's the way you should be. It suits the character."

"Why should I be edgy? This is a movie is all."

"That's all. Just a movie." Lampson smiled. Quark shut the door and he drove away.

Inside, Quark sat on the couch and smoked and looked at the tan wall.

Monday morning, he drove his old Pontiac to Carol's and the Pinto was parked there. She opened up, in her blue bathrobe, grinned, chirped that she was about to drive with Monica's gear to a garage in Foster City that Lampson had rented. She would change, then he'd pick her up in the Porsche and they'd go to the Casa Ria and show themselves off for their public.

Quark cut in, "What kind of game are we playing?"

She patted him, kind of moving him toward the door. "Life's a game, he's a player." Her smile had an odd twist. "I am, too. I know that when it's your move, you take it or forfeit the game."

She had the door open. He asked, "Is what you just said for the movie?"

"Sure."

With that smile, she closed the door.

He drove to the Point and looked at the bay for a while. Then he drove to the Miami and drank beer and played cards, losing $11. Then he drove the Pontiac home before getting wasted, walked back to the Miami and got wasted. Then it was shamble-home-and-pass-out time.

He got through Tuesday, Wednesday. Wednesday night he talked in a creaky whisper, botched some calls, whined to Fuzzbuzz the dispatcher that he felt really rotten, must be flu—setting up Thursday morning's sick call.

He would drive to Lampson's that night because $200 was on Stella's shelf. He would play it cool, be in control, and nothing heavy would come down.

About 9:15, he hunched the Pontiac up to Lockhaven, down the driveway past the hanging trees next to the garage. One soft light showed in the front room. He walked through the weeds behind the garage to the door there, shoved an arm through, felt the tin hatch-cover, then the alarm switch, which was up, downed it, went to the front door, and with Lampson's key let himself in.

A lamp was on in the living room. He went to the fuzzy plant, bent, scratched around, saw the .22, and left it there.

He'd forgotten gloves. So what? He moved down the hall to the door at the end—

Opened, peeked. Moonlight through a slatted window showed a thin pale profile under brownish-grey hair on the pillow, lips parted, slight but clear indications of breathing—

Saw on the bedtable a pill-bottle and a glass with a little water. Saw also a letter opener, maybe an antique—thin, 6″ blade, long twisty gold handle. Why should it give him a jolt?

Because he was jumpy was why. In canvas shoes, he had sneaked into a rich lady's bedroom where he had no right, because Lampson had no right to manipulate him into this room with his wife not knowing. If she woke up— Lampson said she'd be zonked, but how did Quark know? Lampson was a game player. Quark had some notions but didn't know for sure what the game was.

He crossed the room to the closet, stretched up and over the shelf at the left end at the back, touched hair, in a pile. Pinching a clump near the bottom and pulling slowly, he got the pile to the edge of the shelf. Glancing around, he saw the profile on the pillow as before.

Under the pile of hair was a thick white envelope, 5×8″.

Softly closing the door he skulked back down the hall to the living room, ripped open the envelope, and pulled out a hefty stack of bills—

Dropped in a blue chair and leafed the stack, and every bill he scanned was $100. His fingers went limp and the pile fell apart. He sat there with a lapful of $100 bills—

Heard a sharp click, stared, saw the front door opening—

Got his legs under him and was up, money floating around. He stared as Monica Langley in a neat tan jacket over the black frock, with a handbag and trim white suitcase, came in. Setting the suitcase and bag on the floor, she came to him, went down on one knee, pulled off the shades, picked up a bill, stared, and let it slide off her fingers.

Quark sat down and watched as Carol, tucking the shades in a jacket pocket, hurried to the fuzzy plant, bent, and got the gun.

She was wearing knit gloves. She came to him, gun at her side, gestured with her other hand at the money around the floor, and said, "Under the wigs?" He nodded. She said in a low voice, "So he's signaling that it's a money game, not a movie. So now we know, and it's our move. Is she asleep?"

Quark said, "You weren't supposed to come until after I'd left."

She looked at her watch. "It's past ten." He didn't see how it could be—had he blacked out when he saw all the money? Not having a watch, no clock in view, he couldn't check. And what was the difference? Inside he heard, *the time is now.*

She said again, "Is she asleep?" He nodded. She stepped closer to him, gun held out. He sat with hands clasped, shook his head.

"You won't do it?"

He shook his head.

She looked at him ten seconds or more, then spun abruptly and walked to the hall, gun at her side.

She was halfway down the hall when he yelled, "No!" and shoved out of the chair and tore after her—

Scooped up a heavy Chinese-type urn in the hall, balanced it, and heaved—but she had opened the end door and the urn slammed into the end wall, exploding, painted clay flying.

He ran and in two seconds was at the door and in moonlight saw Carol at the head of the bed. The thin profile on the pillow was as before—his yell and the exploding urn hadn't penetrated Stella's zonked zone. The gunhole was an inch from her temple—

A quick ripping sound, then another. Quark hung on the doorframe, whispered, "No." But yes, the game had taken over and was riding high.

Carol had him by the shoulder. Life was a game. He wasn't a player but a pawn to be moved. Carol was a player and so was Lampson. Stella was a dead pawn with two shells in her head.

Carol had moved him down the hall. He stood and watched as she placed the .22 in the wooden tub, scratching dirt over it. "Pick up the money." Pawn moved as directed—he went to the blue chair, got down, started gathering bills, stacking them.

"Walking-around money." Carol had that odd smile he'd noticed Monday. "Remember what he said—when things get settled, we name our own fee."

She was puffing hard on a cigarette. "From here, we do just like

he said—are you okay to drive?" He nodded. "Drive to the airport. I'll wait ten minutes, then call a cab. Remember where we meet?" He nodded. "Tell me."

He mumbled, "Top level, airport parking. I watch the elevator."

Carol glared. "You don't have gloves! What've you touched?"

"Nothing—the front doorknob, her doorknob. The alarm switch. The pile of wigs, maybe the shelf—"

"Get the money and that torn envelope there. I'll wipe where you were."

He had stacked nearly all the money. His hip bumped something soft—she was on her knees near him, helping, skinny blueish fingers reaching for one bill, then another. But Carol had pink-tipped little-girl fingers—and wore a black frock and tan jacket, not a peach-colored nightgown. Something warm and sudden plopped on his hand, a blob of red.

Yelling, he scrambled away, staring. Stella Lampson turned her bloody profile full face, lips framing a grin as she whispered, "Look at your floozy."

Ten feet away lay Carol, eyes wide and final. The tan jacket was open, and sticking from a wide red smear about her black front was a twisty gold handle. Perky Carol, no longer perky, a player no more—a dead pawn.

Quark went down, not knowing when he hit the floor or when two seconds later Stella stumbled over to him, threw up her bloody face, gave a piercing seagull scream, and fell across him.

—Out of the woodwork they came, a dozen, more. Elvin Lampson dropped beside Carol and scooped the top of her up, plucked the gold handle from her that had no blade attached, tossed it, and hugged her, getting blood on his shirt as he laughed.

Stella had rolled off Quark and hitched herself over to hug Lampson and Carol and others who came over—hugs and laughter were the thing, except for Quark, who lay partly up, staring at the two bloody women and wondering who were the others, demons?

Someone swooped on him, an arm squeezed and hauled him so he was sitting, and he yelled because it was the demon-in-chief, Elvin Lampson, pressing his bloody shirt to Quark's jacket and shouting, "You're beautiful!"

Quark didn't want his false compliments or his bloodstains. He flung his legs around, trying for the vertical. Rolling on his left hip, he swung at Lampson's face, missed, and fell with his head in Lamp-

son's lap. Lampson stroked his cheek and assured him he loved him like a small brother.

Now he was surrounded and demons were patting and poking, crying out and showing their teeth. Over the racket came a sharp cry, "Let him be, give him room—he's scared! He doesn't know what's happening!"

They moved away and he was reprieved, for the moment anyway. Carol pushed close, nuzzled and held him, putting more blood on his jacket.

Lampson was coming in at nine o'clock—"A movie, Quark, like I kept telling you!"

Quark said, "Sure."

"A movie for cable TV, a semi-doc—how an ordinary decent shmoe can get caught up in a murder game. I said you'd be taped, which was true, but you didn't know that the first time here, and of course tonight, and at Carol's place both times, and walking the street, and in Club Miami, and you and me in Carol's car, and in your cab you were being photographed by these lovely camera people, all here tonight for the grande finale, which it was—and for our wrap-up party!"

Quark said, "So you lied."

Lampson beamed. "You have to, or nothing gets done."

The demons laughed and whooped. Drinks were going around. Someone pushed a can of Bud into Quark's hand, he on his feet now. He popped it and drank, peered around on the floor near the blue chair—no stack of $100s. "You said I'd get two hundred."

Lampson shouted, "Does Quark deserve a bonus?" and got a general plus. "Was he just what I said he'd be—all the way?" You bet, yeah, yah, yahoo, right on, Elvin!

Quark ducked from the craziness, said to perkily grinning Carol, "You knew."

"Uh huh."

"The Casa Ria—were you ever there?"

"No, that was made up."

"So it was all a gag on me. Which you helped pull."

"She had to," said Lampson. "The whole point was if and how you'd get sucked into the game. You were the star."

"Yeah. Like Jimmy Stewart."

Stella came over to him, a green bathrobe over the peach-colored nightgown, face clean of blood, which was good as she nuzzled him

and he already had enough false blood. "I'm Jane McDonald, I do little theater in the City."

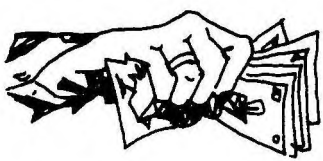
"I'm Quark. I drive cab."

The party went on and gradually he got more with it, though never completely. Never really happy and bubbly like the others—the camera people, the various gophers, Lampson, who was the Orson Welles of this little troupe it seemed, Carol the street-waif with maybe a future in the troupe if Lampson's feelings for her were more than just of the gonads, Jane McDonald with maybe a future, too—he lacked their sense of achievement because until it ended he hadn't known what he was doing. Nor did he know now what everything added up to.

About 4:00 A.M. Friday, he was home and on the edge of the couch, three new $100 bills beside him, smoking and wondering, Why didn't I take the gun when Carol held it out to me? Why did I let her get halfway down the hall before I jumped up yelling— Did I balance the urn half a second longer than I had to? If so, why?

Maybe when he saw the movie he'd know the answers—if he ever saw it, if it was ever produced. Which right now, he'd just as soon not.

Slowly he leafed the money. Why did he feel like a loser?



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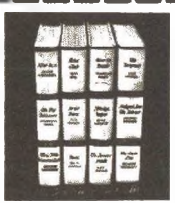

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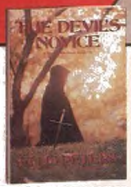

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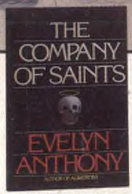

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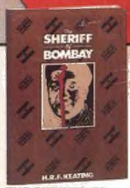

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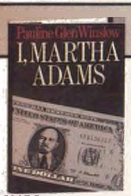

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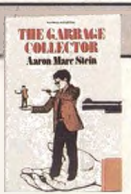

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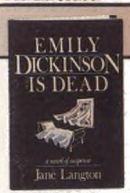

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