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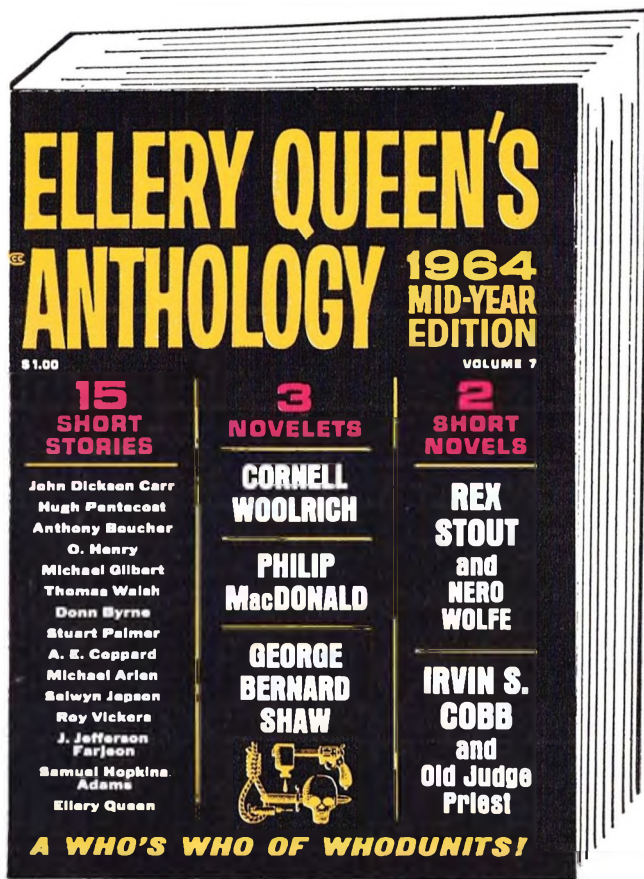
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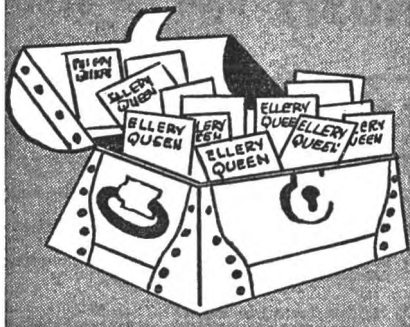
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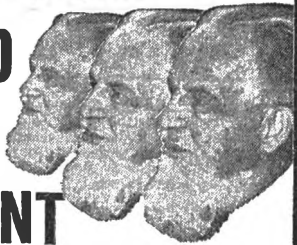
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WHEN LOVE TURNS

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

SHE WAS TALL FOR A WOMAN, but not to the point of being an oddity or of towering over those around her. There was such a perfect proportion between her height and her girth that her moderate fullness kept her from seeming lanky, and her graceful tallness kept her from seeming plump. In short, she had the classic symmetry of an antique statue—a symmetry seldom found in living bodies.

Her hair was blonde, and it was worn in tight little curls clinging closely to her head, as if someone had showered her with gilt wood shavings. Her mouth was charming when she smiled, but smiles are always charming on a pretty face. When the face was in repose, it hinted at the major defect she might possess. There was a stubborn cast to it, an overtone of thin but unyielding determination to have her own way. As if it were saying, "When things go my way, that's all right. But don't cross me, or you'll have trouble." It was a

fair-weather mouth, good only for smiles.

She had almost everything a woman would want—unlimited money, a magnificent home near the Bois de Boulogne that was a show-place, lavish good looks; and if she was no longer in the full flush of youth, neither was she within the gray overcast of its after-years.

She had everything but one thing: the man she loved no longer loved her . . .

The Daimler drove up and Boniface arrived home while she was supervising the final preparations for that evening's festivities. She caught just a glimpse of him through several successive doorways as he crossed the foyer and started up the stairs. He did not seem to see her, and she did not call out to attract his attention. It might be better if they did not meet until later, when she was dressed for the evening. She wanted him to receive the full impact of her completed appearance.

In any case, she reflected philo-

sophically, cupping her palm underneath a bronze chrysanthemum as though she were weighing it, he did not come home to see me. He came home, yes, but not to see me. The two things are not quite the same.

Boniface was that absolute rarity, a mature man without a paunch. Whether this had to do with the gymnasium he attended or with his activity in sports, or a judicious combination of both, the fact remained that his waist was as slim as a bullfighter's after the sash has throttled it. And there was another remarkable thing about him: he was that almost nonexistent man who not only looks good in evening clothes but looks even better in them than in a business suit. One might say that pictorially they had a perfect marriage.

He was her Education, advisedly spelled with a capital. True, she had attended schools and finishing schools as a child and young girl, but little she had learned had remained with her. He had taught her the two main things a woman should know: the art of living and the art of loving. And now the teacher seemed to feel his pupil had graduated. He was out seeking a new student.

And there you have the husband—the man who must have once loved Fabienne deeply, for he had married her.

He came into her dressing room as she was just putting the final touches to her make-up. Richard,

the hairdresser, had finished and gone. She was doing one eye, and only had the other one left to do.

She turned around and smiled at him, and he smiled at her. Noticeably they did not kiss.

"Too soon?" he asked sociably. "Shall I go down ahead of you?"

She crinkled her forehead in a sort of rueful appeal. "No, tonight's my birthday. Wait for me and let's go down together. I have only one eye left."

They both laughed at the funny expression.

He sat down, balanced one leg across the top of the other, and took out a cigarette.

She had stopped and was watching him in the glass. There was character, she thought, even in the way he went about lighting a cigarette. Not fussy or elegant, nothing like that; sort of soothing, calming. It made you feel secure, protected, under his wing. Women, it suddenly occurred to her, really shouldn't smoke. They didn't know how to do it right at all. It was inborn in men, coming down through the generations.

He could make a feminine room like this seem even more feminine, just by coming into it. By contrast, of course. His intrinsic maleness provided the catalyst, the counterpoint to it. He was looking out the window now. Not bored, but quite genuinely curious—the way a man would be who is rediscovering the almost-forgotten view from a

room he never enters any more.

I wonder what her name is this month? she thought poignantly.

What's the difference what her name is? she told herself. Her name is love—the thing we all live and die by. And a strange fellow-feeling for him swept over her momentarily. Not the feeling of a wife for her husband, or of a woman for a man. The feeling of two comrades, two fellow-beings, two alike, both going down in the same whirlpool. But going down separately, not together. Not even clasping hands to ease their drowning.

Smiling, she held out her scarf.

Smiling, he put it around her shoulders.

Smiling, they went toward the door together.

Smiling, side by side, they started down the graceful, slow-curving staircase. Two smiles of compatibility—cordial, comfortable, companionable, even loyal to a point. But the smiles of friendship only.

Not the smiles of love.

It seemed as though half of Paris had stopped in to offer their congratulations—or at least half of the Paris that she and Boniface knew, which of course condensed it a lot, but heightened it in quality. At eleven o'clock and even after, people were still arriving, and very few had left yet—always a sure sign of a successful party. But Fabienne had never given an unsuccessful party in her life.

And yet, as the evening advanced, a disturbed expression began to appear more and more often on her face. A sort of strained expectancy. It was too ephemeral to be noticed by others, or if they did notice it, to be accurately interpreted. Boniface however seemed able to do both. He disengaged himself and went over to her.

He put his hand on her arm as he joined her, in a touch intended to convey encouragement or reassurance, a lending of moral support.

"He didn't come yet?" he murmured, with that unspoken understanding which, when it is shared by two people, requires no further clarification.

"As you can well see," she answered sullenly.

"Perhaps he was delayed."

"Yes," she said, in a tone of cynical disbelief. "Oh, any time at all will do!" she went on resentfully. And as she turned away to join some of the others, she added over her shoulder, "To come here."

He watched her go across the room with a compassionate look in his eyes—the look of one who sympathizes but is unable to help because it is not his problem and he would not be permitted to interfere. He went back to his own business of being a congenial host.

A moment afterward a liveried manservant appeared in the doorway and announced: "Monsieur Gilles Jacquard."

A number of heads turned. Not

Fabienne's, though. A snub of about forty-five seconds followed, but so adroitly delivered that only the recipient was aware of it, before she turned and went over to him.

He was a younger man than Boniface, and startlingly handsome, almost too much so. He had the dark eyes and hair of the Mediterranean peoples, but with that admixture of Celt and Teuton that is basic in most of the French to lighten the over-all effect, to keep him from being swarthy. When he smiled it was not a smile only; it didn't stop there; it was a wide grin, wholehearted, a little too impudent, but boyish enough to be forgiven for it.

Her hand went out in greeting and he took it.

"Many happy returns, Fab," he said. He had a voice of magnificent resonance, which he still had to grow up to.

She smiled and inclined her head without answering. The smile was not the warmest one she was capable of giving.

"I'm a little late, I know."

"Agreed," she said.

"You have no idea what the traffic is."

"The traffic," she said. "That will do as well as anything else."

"My word of honor. Some car or other broke down and created a bottleneck right in the middle of—"

She turned her head aside, as if to point up the fact that it wasn't even worth listening to, then turned it back to him. "There was no

traffic once," she said drily. "It is only now that there is traffic."

They blended into the party together.

Presently they got together again, in a small lounge linking two of the larger rooms. He had seen her enter it, and, detaching himself, went in after her.

"Aren't you going to let me show you the little gift I brought you?" he asked as he joined her.

She unwrapped the tissue paper and opened a small oblong box.

He had very good taste, she reflected—that was one thing about him. Taste—you either have it or you didn't have it; it came with you, it couldn't be acquired. And by the time he was Boniface's age, he was going to be a vastly cultivated man.

And I too have good taste, her thoughts rushed on. I picked well. The one time there was to pick. She put it that way because she knew she would never make another choice the rest of her life. This once—and never again.

He was watching her. She was being purposely casual about it.

"It doesn't please you," he said quizzically.

"It pleases me—"

"But the donor doesn't," he finished for her.

She raised her brows at him coolly, as if to say: Should he? What does he expect?

"And how was Lyons?" she asked.

He gave a slight hitch to one shoulder. "It was a business trip. You know how those things are." He stopped briefly, almost unnoticeably. Then he said, "It was Toulouse, not Lyons."

"It is just as well to remember where one has said one was going in the first place," she concurred. "Even if it takes a minute or two to remember."

He clapped himself, dismayed, in the center of his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Oh, my God, Fab! Now you don't even believe that."

"Boniface and I were coming back from dinner at the Duprez', and we drove past your house."

"And?" was all he said.

"The windows of your flat were lighted up."

"Since when does my street lie along the shortest way home from the Duprez' to your place?" he came back at her.

"It was I who suggested to Boniface that we make a detour and go through there," she admitted imperturbably.

"There it is," was his terse comment. The almost untranslatable "*Voilà*."

"Boniface saw me looking up and said, 'Gilles must have come back sooner than you expected him to.' " And she had reproached him, with that complete objectivity only the French can bring to bear on matters of love. "Imagine how I felt, to be humiliated like that in front of

my own husband! What must he have thought? 'She can't even hold on to her particular friend.' "

"The concierge must have gone up there to clean. Or maybe to repair something."

"At that hour of the night?" She uttered a laugh as cutting as a broken sliver of glass. "You're not even plausible."

The small but expert group of musicians she had engaged struck up an American dance tune (but almost all dance tunes were American, anyway) called *It's All in the Game*. Like two people who in the middle of a dispute obey their reflexes without realizing what they are doing, they fell into dance position and automatically moved out into the dancing area.

A vocalist, obviously non-American, began to sing in suicidal English:

*"Jue houv wards weev heem,
Ond jure future zlu'king deem—"*

"Every time we meet now, it turns into one of these discussions," he said aggrievedly.

"It's a pity, is it not?" she retorted in a brittle tone.

"Yes, it's a pity," he said with a certain amount of heat.

And that ended the "discussion" for the time being. A moment later they had stopped dancing as unpredictably as they had begun.

The party was ended now. There remained only Gilles and a very old but brilliant man with whom Boni-

face was having an interminable philosophical discussion over in a corner.

She and Gilles were in the entrance hall near the front door, where the departure of the last guests had brought her, and where he had followed her, evidently with the idea of leaving himself.

"They will go on for half the night yet, those two," she said indulgently. "I think I've had enough. I'm going up now. Will you join me in a liqueur? I still have some of your favorite that you enjoyed so much the last time."

"I should leave now, Fab," he said, ridging his forehead discontentedly.

She stopped short and turned around again; they stood looking at each other.

"The last to arrive and the first to go," she said accusingly.

"Hardly," he tried to point out. "There's no one left any more but old Bertrand inside there."

"Well, and is this a sacrifice?"

"I feel—" He gestured helplessly. "I don't know how to say it. I feel awkward about it."

She almost laughed outright at his meaning, or what she took to be his meaning. "Surely you don't mean because of Boniface? Don't tell me that. Boniface has always known. And you yourself have always known he has. This is no betrayal, no cheap affair behind his back, no jealous husband sort of thing. Boniface and I have our

own code for living, our *entente*; for me, he wants only what brings me the greatest happiness—he is still my husband by that much. He thinks, and rightly so, that that designates you; therefore he approves of you, and that is all that matters. Don't you remember the night he even came in and joined us for a while, and we had such an enjoyable time talking about love and life and sipping liqueurs, the three of us?"

"What's the good?" he said grimly. "Everything has to stop sooner or later, doesn't it?"

"You wish it to—is that what you're trying to say? Only because you wish it to, that is why it has to stop, not otherwise."

He pointed to a clock standing behind them in the foyer. "Doesn't this run down? Isn't it natural for it to do so? Well—"

"I don't care for your illustration," she said irritably. "A clock is mechanical, love isn't."

"A beautiful woman like you, you could have half of Paris. Why me?"

"That's not the point. I made my choice when I first grew to know you, and my choice remains."

He said something she didn't quite hear.

"What?"

"But does your choice necessarily cover the two of us?"

"Ah, now it comes out!"

"You back me into a corner," he gritted, shoving his hands deep into

his pockets as forcefully as if he were trying to dig up a garden patch. "You practically drag out of me the very thing you do not wish to hear and that I do not wish to say. And then you're wounded, angry. Why not leave things unspoken? My esteem for you has not changed since the day we first met."

"Esteem," she said scornfully. She began to walk slowly back and forth, holding her hands clasped just below her chin. "What have I done? What is it you don't like? Tell me and I'll correct it."

He shook his head hopelessly. "It isn't a question of 'What have I done?' The thing is over, finished. Let's just let it go, and not try to hold onto it, drag it out."

She laughed bleakly. "For you that's easy, yes. Because evidently you never *did* love me from the start. But with me it's different. It's a part of me. I can't let it go."

"I loved you very deeply and very sincerely, Fab. As much as any man ever loved a woman, never doubt that."

"The past tense," she whispered, stricken. "He speaks in the past tense, as if it were completely gone, as if it were dead."

"It is, Fab," he said stonily.

She gripped the lapels of his coat with her hands. Then she held his face pressed between them, in an intensity of supplication. "Make believe, then. Pretend. Just lie close, without saying anything.

Even that is better than nothing. Just so I know you're near."

"Some women can fake love even when they don't feel it. An honest man can't. I'm not a gigolo." He lowered his head so that his face became an ellipse instead of an oval. "It wouldn't work, Fab. Believe me, it wouldn't."

She stared at him, white with mortal insult. Then she began to slap him back and forth across the mouth, swinging her open hand to and fro in an agony of frustration and hatred—over and over until it seemed she would never stop.

He played his part well, played it just as it should have been played. He neither flinched nor averted his face nor drew back, nor did he try to trap and control her punishing hand. He stood his ground, utterly motionless, a faint smile of distant pity for her futile feminine rage half forming on his lips. He just played the man's part, unreachable in his own fastness once the door of love was closed.

She turned aside at last, and with broken breaths that were like sobs, covered her face with both her hands and crept forlornly into some private hiding place of cosmic loneliness that no one else could enter. For loneliness is single; it cannot be shared by two.

Suddenly, with what one might call neat despatch, he turned, opened the door, and was gone, leaving the door unclosed behind him.

She looked around, stunned. The unbelievable had happened. He was finished with her, he had *left* her. All through these last minutes she had never doubted the outcome, never doubted she would win him back; anything else had seemed an impossibility. And now—she had lost him, he wasn't here any more.

All at once she came to life and ran after him, out through the open doorway, like someone pursued by a demon. And she was: the most frightful demon there is, the demon of not being loved when you love. Crying out, careless whether the whole house heard her: "Gilles, I love you! I love you! I love you!"

His little Dauphine, as small as a youngster's play-automobile, had been facing the wrong way, just as he had left it when he arrived. She heard the door slap after him as he got in, and then it came backward toward her, then reversed and gushed forward into a sweeping street-wide turn, and lurched away in the opposite direction.

She stood rooted there at the bottom of the entrance steps, under the glass-and-iron canopy, staring into the empty space the car had left behind it. Around her in the stillness a disembodied cry seemed to linger, like an echo, like the ghost of dead love. Faint and faraway. "I love you." Above her, facile and fickle and having no heart, was the glitter of stars that had seen too many loves die in this town to care about one more.

Boniface was putting on his things to go out when she turned and went back inside again.

"It didn't go well?" was all he said to her, in an understanding undertone.

Her face gave the answer.

"There is always the next time," he tried to console her.

She answered dully, more to herself than to him, "There will be no next. This was the first time. This is the last."

"I'll probably go directly to the office in the morning," he told her. He had a complete wardrobe of clothes—wherever his love was. And why not? she asked herself. It made more sense than to have all his clothes here. "See you at dinner tomorrow night." And he chucked her under the chin, much as one would a little girl whom one suspects will be up to all kinds of mischief the minute one's back is turned. "*Bonne chance.*" Good luck.

Boniface had a gun. He'd gone and she was in his room now. She looked at it as she took it out of the desk drawer. He'd had it ever since the Liberation—that was when she had first seen it. The counter-breakthrough in the Ardennes had just taken place, and for a few breathless weeks it seemed possible that Paris might be occupied all over again. Which would have brought on a panic-exodus even worse than the one in 1940. Because now people knew what to expect. In 1940 she had been robbed of all her jewels on

the clogged, impassable roads, literally had them taken from her at gun point by her absconding chauffeur in full view of scores of people, too indifferent to care about this trifling personal misfortune in the midst of the whole world's collapse.

"In case those gentlemen should come back, I want to show you how to use this," he'd said. And he had shown her. During the Occupation, in conversations among themselves, the French had a habit of referring to the enemy as "*ces messieurs*," those gentlemen, in order to keep the topic more or less casual.

Boniface, then, had a gun. She stood looking at it now as she held it in her hand. So this was the thing you killed a man with.

Holding the gun, she turned and left the room, and went down the stairs and outside to the street, swaying as if she were intoxicated. And she was intoxicated, but not with alcohol—with having been rejected, with jealousy, and with the will to revenge. Not crying out "I love you!" this time.

When the complex of emotions that make up the nerve center known as love are inflamed adversely beyond a certain point, there is only one release, one outlet, one cure; anything else would fall short. And that release is the killing of the culpable loved one. Love turns into death.

And in every case where a woman is the avenger, bringing this retribution, it is always the man she directs

it against, never the other woman. There are valid psychological reasons for this. He was the one she loved, not the woman. He had the power of choice, of decision, not the woman. (The wish must come from him, or else there is nothing: *Unless he wishes her to have him, she cannot have him.*) And finally, the other woman is acting as she herself might very well act, barring a few minor variations in ethics or in circumstances. What one woman does in love, all other women are capable of doing; all that prevents them is the lack of necessity for it.

So the death-wish and the death-act go out to him, and to him alone. And justly so, according to all the statutes of love. The injury has come from him, not the other woman. She merely has profited by it. She has simply stepped into the vacuum that his defection left there . . .

Fabienne went along the street until she had reached a lamppost, and stopped by it and stood waiting there in its light for a taxi to appear. Like a loitering *vendeuse*, only not one selling love.

When a cab finally stopped for her, she got in, and gave the driver Gilles's address, on Boulevard Suchet.

"Yes, madame," he said tractably, and started off.

Paris in the small hours went by, in little scraps and montages that stood out for a moment like color snapshots and then flickered on past.

A man waiting for his dog to pick out an acceptable tree, with that selfless patience that only a true dog lover has, trailing along as though he were the appendage and the dog were the master.

A pair of lovers stepping down off a sidewalk arm in arm, and nearly being grazed by the cab as it went past, so taken up were they in one another, with eyes for nothing else around them. There, she thought wistfully, could go Gilles and I, if only my luck had been different. I hope their story turns out better than ours. (But the girl was younger than she, a fact which Fabienne failed to point out to herself.)

Two men arguing heatedly on a street corner, their arms almost resembling slowed-down propeller blades, they spun around so. A fragment of an angry shout reached her ears. "We *built* Algeria from the ground up, I tell you!"

A panorama of a lighted café streamed by, all out of perspective somehow, like a child's crude crayon drawing of a string of railway carriages—nothing but large, yellow window squares, with no space left over for anything else. On the outside the tables had already been stacked up for the night, but inside there were still a few heads dotted about here and there, weaving slowly like black flies caught on yellow flypaper.

The trees of the thoroughfare on which they were driving were like massed black plumes, dipping al-

most to the ground along its sides; and the boulevard lights, peering down through the trees from above, seemed to cast shafts of yellowish vapor, swirling and fuming with living motes just as if they were inside glass test tubes. The cab, crashing through them, shattered them noiselessly one after the other, but they reformed behind it each time intact, like luminous magic wands.

The cab stopped suddenly, and they were there.

She opened her bag and thrust her hand into it, alongside the cold heel of the gun. She made a discovery that at any other time would have been an embarrassment, but was now inconsequential.

She raised her head. "I have no money," she told the driver. "I forgot to bring some with me."

He sized her up, not eye to eye but through the glass. He must have rated her for what she was: high-class, and not the kind that would be likely to try to bilk him out of a fare. His manner noticeably didn't change; he didn't get excited, raise his voice, become abusive.

"What do you want to do?" he asked even-temperedly.

"I don't know what to do," she said.

"Shall I wait here until you come out again?" he suggested.

"Don't do that," she said with enigmatic brevity.

"Well then—?" He gestured helplessly.

"Here, hold this," she said abruptly, and twisted a large diamond solitaire that Boniface had once given her off her finger, and held it out to him. "Keep it as a pledge, until you get your fare. I'll give you my address; come around in a day or two, and there will be someone there to see that you get your money."

He looked at it big-eyed, but with considerable trepidation. "I'm not sure I ought to do this," he said dubiously. "The regulations are very severe about some things."

"I'll take the responsibility that you won't get into any trouble." She put it in the center of his hand, took hold of his fingers, and pressed them over the ring. "Now don't detain me any longer."

He drove off at a slow crawl, still shaking his head to himself, and tossing the ring up and down undecidedly in the same hand into which she'd put it, his other hand on the wheel.

Gilles's concierge answered her ring at the street doorbell, and the cloudy look with which she'd been about to greet this late night visitor turned into a sunny one when she saw who the visitor was.

"Mademoiselle!" she exclaimed cordially. "You don't get around to see us much any more."

No, I don't, thought Fabienne wryly. But whose fault is that? She said, "Don't announce me, I'll go right up."

She was afraid he might bar his apartment door to her if he were

told she was on the way upstairs.

"Of course not," the concierge agreed. "Anything mademoiselle wishes."

She didn't call Fabienne "madame" because that would have been taking too much for granted.

"I won't forget to show my appreciation," Fabienne promised.

The concierge protested insincerely with two backturned palms, as though the very idea filled her with horror.

Fabienne went to the stairs at the back, and passed by the waiting birdcage elevator. For the same precautionary reason—because she did not want him to hear it bringing her up. It always stopped with considerable jangling and bickering of its parts.

After a brief interval the lower-hall lights went out. But there were lights stationed at each floor level along the stairs. It was only two flights up; he lived on the third floor.

She took out the key he had once given her and inserted it, and the door opened no more dramatically than it had at any previous time—for instance, when she would let herself in to fix tea for him before he came home from work.

She stepped over the threshold. The light was on at the back of the bachelor apartment, in the end room which was the bedroom. She could see it from where she was. The intervening room was dark.

As matter-of-factly as though this were any ordinary visit, she put her

hand to the wall and turned on the light switch, and then went on in.

"Who's there?" his voice called out.

"Fabienne," she said with deadly intensity. "*Tu te souviens de moi?*" Remember me?

His voice said again, but to somebody else in the room with him, "I told you! I was afraid this would happen!"

She appeared in the bedroom doorway, looking in at him. "Yes, you told!" she cried out shrilly as they came face to face. "You told well! You told right!"

That was all she said to him, nothing more, not another word.

He was completely dressed except for his jacket and his tie, and the top button of his shirt. Her eye, glancing quickly over him, took in the detail of the fine-pleated shirt he had worn at her party, but without really seeing it.

But the girl behind him, sitting up in the bed, was just as completely *not* dressed. There was nothing to her at all, nothing to her from head to foot. A mop of scrambled black hair, large frightened eyes like those of a calf, a thin pipe-stem of a neck, bony shoulders the shape of a coat hanger, a scrawny parody of breasts like an adolescent's.

She had nothing, nothing at all—nothing but one thing. Yet that one thing gave her the victory. She had youth.

"You want him?" Fabienne cried

out to her bitterly. "Take him! I give him to you! I give him to you like this, with my compliments!"

She pried open her handbag, scooped out the gun, and stood pointing it at him. The handbag fell with a flutter, its lining coming up out of it like an air blister.

His face didn't even have time to get white—it was just incredulous.

Instead of holding it close to her own body and firing it from there as a man would have, she thrust it out toward him—as if it were a weapon with a cutting or stabbing point. Thus it was the easiest thing in the world for him to grasp her forearm and up-end it, backing the gun away from himself.

It clicked sterily, once, midway between them.

But she was pulling, straining, in reverse impetus now, to get her arm away from him. And in his reflex of self-defense he had caught her forearm in an awkward place, midway to the elbow. Now, trying to shift his grasp to her wrist, the better place to hold her by, his grip slackened for an involuntary instant. Her arm, freed from all her straining effort, sprang back like a suddenly released mainspring, and the gun imbedded itself into her own breast.

The impact itself must have fired it.

There was a hollow, reverberating thud—like the sound an empty flower pot might make if it were dropped many stories down an enclosed air shaft. A minimal

amount of smoke came up between their faces, not much more than if one of them had just released the vestige of some long-pent-up cigarette inhalation.

The gun, its treachery accomplished, fell inert to the floor.

The gap between them closed, as if they were in a final parting embrace. Her hand even crept up to his shoulder, but whether in a last conscious longing or in a blind instinctive seeking for support, there was no way to know. And his arm went around her waist, to try to keep her upright.

So that, at the very last moment, death had turned back to love—or at least to one of the postures of love.

Then she stumbled downward, slipping through the half circle of his arm, which was only meant to keep her from falling outward and back. She rolled over once at his feet, with the ricochet of the fall, and then a second time, with the final galvanic death spasm itself.

And then she didn't move.

The girl in the bed gave a whinny like that of a frightened little foal. There was a blurred kaleidoscopic impression, swirling like a spinning pinwheel, of clothes being snatched at from every direction and all being whisked inward toward a common center, all too quickly for the eye to follow. Then, still only half clad, she scissored her long legs to clear the still form on the floor and scampered toward the outside door and

the public stairway beyond, two shoes held in her hand by their straps and knocking together clackingly all the way.

Meanwhile, he was chopping the edge of his hand down on the telephone brackets, trying to get a connection, and then shouting hoarsely, "Get the police! Tell them to send someone up here quick! There's been a fatal accident! My name's Jacquard. I'm on the third floor, Boulevard Suchet, number—"

And on the floor lay the gown that had caught every eye at the party only a little while before—a shroud now, with a little red-rimmed hole in it like a pair of puckered lips parted in astonishment at what had happened . . .

The girl came out of the prefecture of police with the bedraggled air of a kitten that has been soaked in the rain. A moment later, after he had shaken hands with the lawyers (it had taken three of them to effect her temporary release from custody), Boniface came out after her.

"So this is how you played around with me," Boniface said through grimly clenched teeth as he hustled her over to his waiting car. "Behind my back the whole time, with that young sprout! If poor Fab hadn't thrown a monkey wrench into the whole thing by showing up there tonight, you would have gone on fooling me like this indefinitely, wouldn't you?"

a HERCULE POIROT short novel
— complete!

The small elderly man with the egg-shaped head and the large military-looking mustache—our old friend of the amazing little gray cells, Hercule Poirot—accepts Chief Inspector Japp's invitation to look into a case that has "something funny about it." (And indeed it has—trust Agatha Christie for that!) But Chief Inspector Japp became annoyed with Poirot—even thought him "potty," though "not half as balmy as he looks, mind you." All the same, Japp wished he knew what Poirot was up to. With so many more important things to consider, to analyze and interpret, Poirot seemed interested only in a flamboyant emerald-green quill pen, a wastepaper basket, and a gas fire . . . but beware, dear reader, when the great Poirot is searching for the unimportant . . .

GOOD NIGHT FOR A MURDER

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"PENNY FOR THE GUY, SIR?" A small boy with a grimy face grinned ingratiatingly.

"Certainly not!" said Chief Inspector Japp. "And, look here, my lad—"

A short homily followed. The dismayed urchin beat a precipitate retreat, remarking briefly and succinctly to his youthful friends, "Blimey, if it ain't a cop all togged up!"

The street gang took to its heels, chanting the incantation:

Remember, remember
The fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot.
We see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot.

The Chief Inspector's companion, a

small elderly man with an egg-shaped head and a large military-looking mustach, was smiling to himself.

"Très bien, Japp," he observed. "You preach the sermon very well! I congratulate you!"

"Rank excuse for begging, that's what Guy Fawkes Day is!" said Japp.

"An interesting survival," mused Hercule Poirot. "The fireworks go up—crack, crack—long after the man they commemorate and his deed are forgotten."

The Scotland Yard man agreed.

"Don't suppose many of those kids really know who Guy Fawkes was."

"And soon, doubtless, there will be confusion of thought. Is it in honor or in execration that on the fifth of November the *feu d'artifice* are sent up?

Copyright 1936 by Agatha Christie; renewed; originally titled, "Murder in the Mews"

To blow up an English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?"

Japp chuckled. "Some people would say undoubtedly the latter."

Turning off the main road, the two men passed into the comparative quiet of a mews. They had been dining together and were now taking a short cut to Hercule Poirot's flat.

As they walked along, the sound of firecrackers was still heard periodically. An occasional shower of golden rain illuminated the sky.

"Good night for a murder," remarked Japp with professional interest. "Nobody would hear a shot, for instance, on a night like this."

"It has always seemed odd to me that more criminals do not take advantage of the fact," said Hercule Poirot.

"Do you know, Poirot, I almost wish sometimes that *you* would commit a murder."

"Mon cher!"

"Yes, I'd like to see just how you'd set about it."

"My dear Japp, *if* I committed a murder you would not have the least chance of seeing how I set about it! You would not even be aware that a murder had been committed."

Japp laughed good-humoredly and affectionately.

"Cocky little devil, aren't you?" he said indulgently.

At half-past ten the following morning, Hercule Poirot's telephone rang.

"Allo? 'Allo?"

"Hullo, that you, Poirot?"

"Oui, c'est moi."

"Japp speaking here. Remember we came home last night through Bardsley Gardens Mews?"

"Yes?"

"And that we talked about how easy it would be to shoot a person with all those firecrackers and the rest of it going off?"

"Certainly."

"Well, there was a suicide in that mews. Number 14. A young widow—Mrs. Allen. I'm going round there now. Like to come?"

"Excuse me, but does someone of your eminence, my dear friend, usually get sent to a case of suicide?"

"Sharp fellow. No, he doesn't. As a matter of fact, our doctor seems to think there's something funny about this. Will you come? I kind of feel you ought to be in on it."

"Certainly I will come. Number 14, you say?"

"That's right."

Poirot arrived at 14 Bardsley Gardens Mews almost at the same moment that a car drew up containing Japp and three other men.

Number 14 was clearly marked out as the center of interest. A big circle of people, chauffeurs, errand boys, loafers, well-dressed passers-by, and innumerable children were drawn up, all staring at Number 14 with open mouths.

A police constable in uniform stood on the step and did his best to keep back the curious. Alert-looking young men with cameras were busy and surged forward as Japp alighted.

"Nothing for you now," said Japp, brushing them aside. He nodded to Poirot. "So here you are. Let's get inside."

They passed in quickly. The door shut behind them and they found themselves squeezed together at the foot of a ladder-like flight of stairs.

A man came to the top of the staircase, recognized Japp and said, "Up here, sir."

Japp and Poirot mounted the stairs.

The man at the stairhead opened a door on the left and they found themselves in a small bedroom.

"Thought you'd like me to run over the main points, sir."

"Quite right, Jameson," said Japp. "What about it?"

Divisional Inspector Jameson took up the tale.

"Deceased's a Mrs. Allen, sir. Lived here with a friend—a Miss Plenderleith. Miss Plenderleith was away in the country and returned this morning. She let herself in with her key, was surprised to find no one about. A woman usually comes in at nine o'clock to do for them.

"She went upstairs first into her own room—that's this room—then across the landing to her friend's room. Door was locked on the inside. She rattled the handle, knocked and called, but couldn't get any answer. In the end she got alarmed and rang up the police station. That was at ten forty-five.

"We came along at once and forced the door open. Mrs. Allen was lying in a heap on the ground, shot through the head. There was an automatic in her hand—a Webley .25—and it looked a clear case of suicide."

"Where is Miss Plenderleith now?"

"She's downstairs in the sitting room, sir. A very cool, efficient young lady, I should say. Got a head on her."

"I'll talk to her presently. I'd better see Brett now."

Accompanied by Poirot, Japp crossed the landing and entered the opposite room. A tall elderly man looked up and nodded.

"Hallo, Japp, glad you've got here. Funny business, this."

Japp advanced toward him. Hercule Poirot sent a quick searching glance round the room.

It was much larger than the room they had just left. It had a bay window, and whereas the other room had been a bedroom pure and simple, this was emphatically a bedroom disguised as a sitting room.

The walls were silver and the ceiling emerald green. There were curtains of a modernistic pattern in silver and green. There was a divan covered with a shimmering emerald-green silk quilt and a few gold and silver cushions. There was a tall antique walnut bureau, a walnut highboy, and several modern chairs of gleaming chromium. On a low glass table there was a big ashtray full of cigarette stubs.

Delicately Hercule Poirot sniffed the air. Then he joined Japp where the latter stood looking down at the body.

In a heap on the floor, lying as she had fallen from one of the chromium chairs, was the body of a young woman of perhaps twenty-seven. She had fair hair and delicate features. There was very little make-up on the face. It was a pretty, wistful, perhaps slightly stupid face.

On the left side of the head was a mass of congealed blood. The fingers of the right hand were clasped round a small pistol. The woman was dressed in a simple frock of dark green, high to the neck.

"Well, Brett, what's the trouble?"

Japp was also looking down at the huddled figure.

"Position's all right," said the doctor. "If she shot herself she'd probably have slipped from the chair into just

that position. The door was locked and the window fastened on the inside."

"That's all right, you say. Then what's wrong?"

"Take a look at the pistol. I haven't handled it—waiting for the fingerprint men. But you can see quite well what I mean."

Together Poirot and Japp knelt down and examined the pistol closely.

"I see what you mean," said Japp rising. "It's in the curve of her hand. It *looks* as though she's holding it—but as a matter of fact she *isn't* holding it. Anything else?"

"Plenty. She's got the pistol in her *right* hand. Now take a look at the wound. The pistol was held close to the head just above the *left* ear—the *left* ear, mark you."

"H'm," said Japp.

"She couldn't hold a pistol and fire it in that position with her right hand?"

"Impossible, I should say. You might get your arm round but I doubt if you could fire the shot."

"That seems pretty obvious then. Someone else shot her and tried to make it look like suicide. What about the locked door and window, though?"

Inspector Jameson answered this.

"Window was closed and bolted, sir, but although the door was locked we haven't been able to find the key."

Japp nodded.

"Yes, that was a bad break. Whoever did it locked the door when he left and hoped the absence of the key wouldn't be noticed."

Poirot murmured, "*C'est bête, ça!*"

"Oh, come now, Poirot, old man, you mustn't judge everybody else by the light of your shining intellect! As a matter of fact, that's the sort of detail that's quite apt to be overlooked.

Door's locked. People break in. Woman found dead—pistol in her hand—clear case of suicide—she locked herself in to do it. They don't go hunting about for keys.

"Actually, Miss Plenderleith's sending for the police was lucky. She might have got one or two of the chauffeurs to come and burst in the door—and then the key question would have been overlooked altogether."

"Yes, I suppose that is true," said Hercule Poirot. "It would have been many people's natural reaction. The police, they are the last resource, are they not?"

He was still staring down at the body.

"Anything strike you?" Japp asked.

The question was careless but the Chief Inspector's eyes were keen and attentive.

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly. "I was looking at her wristwatch."

He bent over and just touched it with a fingertip. It was a dainty jeweled affair on a black moiré strap on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol.

"Rather a swell piece that," observed Japp. "Must have cost money!" He cocked his head inquiringly at Poirot. "Something in that maybe?"

"It is possible—yes."

Poirot strayed across to the writing desk. It was the kind that has a front flap that lets down. There was a somewhat massive silver inkstand in the center in front of it a handsome green lacquer blotter. To the left of the blotter was an emerald glass pen-tray containing a silver penholder—a stick of green sealing wax, a pencil, and two stamps. On the right of the blotter was a movable calendar giving the day of the week, date and month;

there was also a little glass jar of shot and standing in it a flamboyant green quill pen.

Poirot seemed interested in the pen. He took it out and looked at it, but the quill was innocent of ink. It was clearly a decoration—nothing more. The silver penholder with the ink-stained nib was the one in use. His eyes strayed to the calendar.

"Tuesday, November 5th," said Japp. "Yesterday. That's all correct."

He turned to Brett. "How long has she been dead?"

"She was killed at eleven thirty-three yesterday evening," said Brett promptly.

Then he grinned as he saw Japp's surprised face.

"Sorry, old boy," he said. "Had to do the super-doctor of fiction! As a matter of fact, eleven is about as near as I can put it—with a margin of about an hour either way."

"Oh, I thought the wrist watch might have stopped—or something."

"It's stopped all right, but it's stopped at a quarter past four."

"And I suppose she couldn't possibly have been killed at a quarter past four."

"You can put that right out of your mind."

Poirot had turned back the cover of the blotter.

"Good idea," said Japp. "But no luck."

The blotter-book showed an innocent white sheet of blotting paper. Poirot turned over the leaves of the blotter-book, but they were all the same.

He turned his attention to the waste-paper basket. It contained two or three torn-up letters and circulars. They

were only torn once and were easily reconstructed. An appeal for money from some society for assisting ex-service men, an invitation to a cocktail party on November 3rd, an appointment with a dressmaker. The circulars were an announcement of a furriers' sale and a catalogue from a department store.

"Nothing there," said Japp.

"No, it is odd . . ." said Poirot.

"You mean they usually leave a letter when it's suicide?"

"Exactly."

"In fact, one more proof that it *isn't* suicide! I'll have my men get to work now. We'd better go down and interview this Miss Plenderleith. Coming, Poirot?"

Poirot still seemed fascinated by the writing desk and its appointments.

He left the room, but at the door his eyes went back once more to the emerald quill pen.

At the foot of the narrow flight of stairs a door gave admission to a large-sized living room—actually the converted stables of the mews. In this room, the walls of which were finished in a roughened plaster effect and on which hung etchings and woodcuts, two people were sitting.

One, in a chair near the fireplace, her hand stretched out to the blaze, was a dark efficient-looking young woman of twenty-seven or -eight. The other, an elderly woman of ample proportions who carried a string bag, was panting and talking when the two men entered the room.

"—and as I said, Miss, such a turn it gave me I nearly dropped where I stood. And to think that this morning of all mornings—"

The other cut her short. "That will do, Mrs. Pierce. These gentlemen are police officers, I think."

"Miss Plenderleith?" asked Japp, advancing.

The girl nodded. "That is my name. This is Mrs. Pierce who comes in to work for us every day."

The irrepressible Mrs. Pierce broke out again.

"And as I was saying to Miss Plenderleith, to think that this morning, of all mornings, my sister's Louisa Maud should have been took with a fit and me the only one handy and as I say flesh and blood is flesh and blood, and I didn't think Mrs. Allen would mind, though I never likes to disappoint my ladies—"

Japp broke in with some dexterity. "Quite so, Mrs. Pierce. Now perhaps you would take Inspector Jameson into the kitchen and give him a brief statement."

Having got rid of the voluble Mrs. Pierce, who departed with Jameson talking thirteen to the dozen, Japp turned his attention to the girl.

"I am Chief Inspector Japp. Now, Miss Plenderleith, I should like to know all you can tell me about this business."

"Certainly. Where shall I begin?"

Her self-possession was admirable. There were no signs of grief or shock save for an almost unnatural rigidity of manner.

"You arrived this morning at what time?"

"I think it was just before half-past ten. Mrs. Pierce, the old liar, wasn't here. I found—"

"Is that a frequent occurrence?"

Jane Plenderleith shrugged.

"About twice a week she turns up at

twelve—or not at all. She's supposed to come at nine. Actually, as I say, twice a week she either 'comes over queer,' or else some member of her family is overtaken by sickness. All these daily women are like that—fail you now and again. She's not bad as they go."

"You've had her long?"

"Just over a month. Our last one pinched things."

"Please go on, Miss Plenderleith."

"I paid off the taxi, carried in my suitcase, looked round for Mrs. Pierce, couldn't see her, and went upstairs to my room. I tidied up a bit, then I went across to Barbara—Mrs. Allen—and found the door locked. I rattled the handle and knocked but could get no reply. I came downstairs and rang up the police station."

"*Pardon!*" Poirot interposed a quick deft question. "It did not occur to you to try and break down the door—with the help of one of the chauffeurs in the mews, say?"

Her eyes turned to him—cool gray-green eyes. Her glance seemed to sweep over him quickly and appraisingly.

"No, I don't think I thought of that. If anything was wrong, it seemed to me that the police were the people to send for."

"Then you thought—*pardon, mademoiselle*—that there *was* something wrong?"

"Naturally."

"Because you could not get a reply to your knocks? But possibly your friend might have taken a sleeping pill or something of that kind—"

"She didn't take sleeping pills."

"Or she might have gone away and locked her door before going?"

"Why should she lock it? In any case, she would have left a note for me."

"And she did not leave a note for you? You are quite sure of that?"

"Of course I am sure. I should have seen it at once."

Japp said, "You didn't try and look through the keyhole, Miss Plenderleith?"

"No," said Jane Plenderleith thoughtfully. "I never thought of that. But I couldn't have seen anything, could I? Because the key would have been in it?"

Her inquiring gaze, innocent, wide-eyed, met Japp's. Poirot smiled suddenly to himself.

"You did quite right, of course, Miss Plenderleith," said Japp. "I suppose you'd no reason to believe that your friend was likely to commit suicide?"

"Oh, no."

"She hadn't seemed worried or distressed in any way?"

There was a pause, an appreciable pause, before the girl answered.

"No."

"Did you know she had a pistol?"

Jane Plenderleith nodded.

"Yes, she had it out in India. She always kept it in a drawer in her room."

"H'm. Got a license for it?"

"I imagine so. I don't know for certain."

"Now, Miss Plenderleith, will you tell me all you can about Mrs. Allen, how long you've known her, where her relations are—everything, in fact."

Jane Plenderleith nodded.

"I've known Barbara about five years. I met her first traveling abroad—in Egypt, to be exact. She was on her way home from India. I'd been at the British School in Athens for a bit and was having a few weeks in Egypt before going home. We were on a Nile cruise together. We made friends, decided we

liked each other. I was looking at the time for someone to share a flat or a tiny house with me. Barbara was alone in the world. We thought we'd get on well together."

"And you did get on well together?" asked Poirot.

"Very well. We each had our own friends—Barbara was more social in her likings, my friends were more of the artistic kind. It probably worked better that way."

Poirot nodded. Japp went on, "What do you know about Mrs. Allen's family and her life before she met you?"

Jane Plenderleith shrugged. "Not very much really. Her maiden name was Armitage, I believe."

"Her husband?"

"I don't fancy that he was anything to write home about. He drank, I think. I gather he died a year or two after the marriage. There was one child, a little girl, who died when she was three years old. Barbara didn't talk much about her husband. I believe she married him in India when she was only about seventeen. Then they went off to Borneo or one of the God-forsaken spots you send ne'er-do-wells to—but it was obviously a painful subject and I didn't refer to it."

"Do you know if Mrs. Allen was in any financial difficulties?"

"No, I'm sure she wasn't."

"Not in debt—anything of that kind?"

"Oh, no. I'm sure she wasn't in that kind of a jam."

"Now there's another question I must ask—and I hope you won't be upset about it, Miss Plenderleith. Had Mrs. Allen any particular man friend or men friends?"

Jane Plenderleith answered coolly. "Well, she was engaged to be married if that answers your question."

"What is the name of the man she was engaged to?"

"Charles Laverton-West. He's M.P. for some place in Hampshire."

"Had she known him long?"

"A little over a year."

"And she has been engaged to him—how long?"

"Two—no—nearer three months."

"As far as you know there has not been any quarrel?"

Miss Plenderleith shook her head.

"No. I should have been surprised if there had been anything of the sort. Barbara wasn't the quarreling kind."

"How long is it since you last saw Mrs. Allen?"

"Friday last, just before I went away for the week-end."

"Mrs. Allen was remaining in town?"

"Yes. She was going out with her fiancé on the Sunday, I believe."

"And you yourself, where did you spend the week-end?"

"At Laidells Hall, Laidells, Essex."

"And the name of the people with whom you were staying?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Bentinck."

"You only left them this morning?"

"Yes."

"You must have left very early?"

"Mr. Bentinck motored me up. He starts early because he has to get to the city by ten."

"I see." Japp nodded comprehendingly. Miss Plenderleith's replies had all been crisp and convincing.

Poirot put a question. "What is your own opinion of Mr. Laverton-West?"

The girl shrugged. "Does that matter?"

"No, it does not matter, perhaps, but

I should like to have your opinion."

"I don't know that I've thought about him one way or the other. He's young—not more than thirty-one or -two, ambitious, a good public speaker—means to get on in the world."

"That is on the credit side—and on the debit?"

"Well," Miss Plenderleith considered for a moment or two. "In my opinion he's commonplace—his ideas are not particularly original—and he's slightly pompous."

"Those are not very serious faults, mademoiselle," said Poirot, smiling.

"Don't you think so?" Her tone was slightly ironic.

He was watching her, saw her look a little disconcerted. He pursued his advantage.

"But to Mrs. Allen—no, she would not notice them."

"You're perfectly right. Barbara thought he was wonderful—took him entirely at his own valuation."

Poirot said gently, "You were fond of your friend?"

He saw the hand clench on her knee, the tightening of the jaw, yet the answer came in a matter-of-fact voice free from emotion.

"You are quite right. I was."

Japp said, "Just one other thing, Miss Plenderleith. You and she didn't have a quarrel? There was no upset between you?"

"None whatever."

"Not over this engagement business?"

"Certainly not. I was glad she was so happy about it."

There was a momentary pause, then Japp said, "As far as you know, did Mrs. Allen have any enemies?"

This time there was a definite inter-

val before Jane Plenderleith replied. When she did so, her tone had altered slightly.

"I don't know quite what you mean by enemies?"

"Anyone, for instance, who would profit by her death?"

"Oh, no, that would be ridiculous. She had a very small income."

"And who inherits that income?"

Jane Plenderleith's voice sounded mildly surprised as she said, "Do you know, I really don't know. I shouldn't be surprised if I did. That is, if she ever made a will."

"And no enemies in any other sense?" Japp slid off to another aspect quickly. "People with a grudge against her?"

"I don't think anyone could have a grudge against her. She was a very gentle creature, always anxious to please. She had a really sweet, lovable nature."

For the first time that hard, matter-of-fact voice broke a little. Poirot nodded gently.

Japp said, "So it amounts to this—Mrs. Allen has been in good spirits lately, she wasn't in any financial difficulty, she was engaged to be married and was happy in her engagement. There was nothing in the world to make her commit suicide. That's right, isn't it?"

There was a momentary silence before Jane said, "Yes."

Japp rose. "Excuse me, I must have a word with Inspector Jameson."

He left the room.

Hercule Poirot remained *tête-à-tête* with Jane Plenderleith. For a few minutes there was silence.

Jane Plenderleith shot a swift appraising glance at the little man, but after

that she stared in front of her and did not speak. Yet a consciousness of his presence showed itself in a certain nervous tension. Her body was still but not relaxed.

When at last Poirot did break the silence the mere sound of his voice seemed to give her a certain relief. In an agreeable everyday voice he asked a question.

"When did you light the fire, mademoiselle?"

"The fire?" Her voice sounded vague and rather absent-minded. "Oh, as soon as I arrived this morning."

"Before you went upstairs or afterwards?"

"Before."

"I see. Yes, naturally. And it was already laid—or did you have to lay it?"

"It was laid. I only had to put a match to it."

There was a slight impatience in her voice. Clearly she suspected him of merely making conversation. Possibly that was what he was doing. At any rate, he went on in quiet conversational tones.

"But your friend—in her room I noticed there was a gas fire only?"

Jane Plenderleith answered mechanically.

"This is the only coal fire we have—the others are all gas fires."

"And you cook with gas, too?"

"I think everyone does nowadays."

"True. It is much more labor-saving."

The little interchange died down. Jane Plenderleith tapped on the ground with her shoe. Then she said abruptly. "That man—Chief Inspector Japp—is he considered clever?"

"He is very sound. Yes, he is well

thought of. He works hard and painstakingly and very little escapes him."

"I wonder—" muttered the girl.

Poirot watched her. His eyes looked very green in the firelight. He asked quietly, "It was a great shock to you, your friend's death?"

"Terrible."

"You did not expect it—no?"

"Of course not."

"So that it seemed to you at first, perhaps, that it was impossible—that it could not be?"

The quiet sympathy of his tone seemed to break down Jane Plenderleith's defenses. She replied eagerly, naturally, without stiffness.

"That's just it. Even if Barbara *did* kill herself, I can't imagine her killing herself that way."

"Yet she had a pistol?"

Jane Plenderleith made an impatient gesture.

"Yes, but that pistol was a—oh! a hangover. She'd been in out-of-the-way places. She kept it out of habit—not with any other idea. I'm sure of that."

"Ah! And why are you sure of that?"

"Oh, because of the things she said."

"Such as—?"

His voice was very gentle and friendly. It led her on subtly.

"Well, for instance, we were discussing suicide once and she said much the easiest way would be to turn the gas on and stuff up all the cracks and just go to bed. I said I thought that would be impossible—to lie there waiting. I said I'd far rather shoot myself. And she said no, she could never shoot herself. She'd be too frightened in case it didn't come off and anyway, she said she'd hate the bang."

"I see," said Poirot. "As you say, it is odd . . . Because, as you have just

told me, *there was a gas fire in her room.*"

Jane Plenderleith looked at him, slightly startled.

"Yes, there was . . . I can't understand—no, I can't understand why she didn't do it that way."

Poirot shook his head.

"Yes, it seems—odd—not natural somehow."

"The whole thing doesn't seem natural. I still can't believe she killed herself. I suppose it *must* be suicide?"

"Well, there is one other possibility."

"What do you mean?"

Poirot looked straight at her. "It might be—murder."

"Oh, no!" Jane Plenderleith shrank back. "Oh, no! What a horrible suggestion."

"Horrible, perhaps, but does it strike you as an impossible one?"

"But the door was locked. So was the window."

"The door was locked—yes. But there is nothing to show if it were locked from the inside or the outside. You see, the key was missing."

"But then—if it is missing . . ." She took a minute or two. "Then it must have been locked from the *outside*. Otherwise the key would be somewhere in the room."

"Ah, but it may be. The room has not been thoroughly searched yet, remember. Or it may have been thrown out of the window and somebody may have picked it up."

"Murder!" said Jane Plenderleith. She turned over the possibility, her dark clever face eager on the scent. "I believe—yes, I believe you're right."

"But if it were murder there would have been a motive. Do you know of a motive, mademoiselle?"

Slowly she shook her head. And yet, in spite of the denial, Poirot again got the impression that Jane Plenderleith was deliberately keeping something back. The door opened and Japp came in.

Poirot rose. "I have been suggesting to Miss Plenderleith," he said, "that her friend's death was not suicide."

Japp looked momentarily put out. He cast a glance of reproach at Poirot.

"It's a bit early to say anything definite," he said stiffly. "We've always got to take all possibilities into account, you understand."

Jane Plenderleith replied quietly. "I see."

Japp came toward her.

"Now then, Miss Plenderleith, have you ever seen this before?"

On the palm of his hand he held a small oval of dark blue enamel.

Jane Plenderleith shook her head.

"No, never."

"It's not yours nor Mrs. Allen's?"

"No. It's not the kind of thing usually worn by our sex, is it?"

"Oh! so you recognize it."

"Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? That's half of a man's cuff link, isn't it?"

"That young woman's too cocky by half," Japp complained.

The two men were once more in Mrs. Allen's bedroom. The body had been photographed and removed, and the fingerprint man had done his work and departed.

"It would be inadvisable to treat her as a fool," agreed Poirot. "She most emphatically is *not* a fool. She is, in fact, a particularly clever and competent young woman."

"Think she did it?" asked Japp with

a momentary ray of hope. "She might have, you know. We'll have to get her alibi looked into. Some quarrel over this young man—this budding M.P. She's rather *too* scathing about him, I think. Sounds fishy. Rather as though she were sweet on him herself and he'd turned her down. She's the kind that would bump anyone off if she felt like it, and keep her head while she was doing it, too.

"Yes, we'll have to look into that alibi. She had it very pat and after all, Essex isn't very far away. Plenty of trains. Or a fast car. It's worth while finding out if she went to bed with a headache, for instance, last night."

"You are right," agreed Poirot.

"In any case," continued Japp, "she's holding out on us. Eh? Didn't you feel that too? That young woman knows something."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, that could be clearly seen."

"That's always a difficulty in these cases," Japp complained. "People *will* hold their tongues—sometimes out of the most honorable motives."

"For which one can hardly blame them, my friend."

"No, but it makes it much harder for *us*," Japp grumbled.

"It merely displays to its full advantage your ingenuity," Poirot consoled him. "What about fingerprints, by the way?"

"Well, it's murder all right. No prints whatever on the pistol. Wiped clean before being placed in her hand. Even if she managed to wind her arm round her head in some marvelous acrobatic fashion, she could hardly fire off a pistol without hanging on to it, and she certainly couldn't wipe it after she was dead."

"No, no, an outside agency is clearly indicated."

"Otherwise the prints are disappointing. None on the doorhandle. None on the window. Suggestive, eh? Plenty of Mrs. Allen's all over the place."

"Did Jameson get anything?"

"Out of the daily woman? No. She talked a lot but she didn't really know much. Confirmed the fact that Allen and Plenderleith were on good terms. I've sent Jameson out to make inquiries in the mews. We'll have to have a word with Mr. Laverton-West too. Find out where he was and what he was doing last night. In the meantime we'll have a look through her papers."

He set to without more ado. Occasionally he grunted and tossed something over to Poirot. The search did not take long. There were not many papers in the desk and what there were were neatly arranged and docketed.

Finally Japp leaned back and uttered a sigh.

"Not very much, is there?"

"As you say."

"Most of it quite straightforward—receipted bills, a few bills as yet unpaid—nothing particularly outstanding. Social stuff—invitations. Notes from friends. These——" he laid his hand on a pile of seven or eight letters—"and her check book and savings book. Anything strike you there?"

"Yes, she was overdrawn."

"Anything else?"

Poirot smiled. "Is it an examination that you put me through? But yes, I noticed what you are thinking of. Two hundred pounds drawn to self three months ago—and two hundred pounds drawn out yesterday——"

"And nothing on the counterfoil of

the check book. No other checks to self except small sums—fifteen pounds the highest. And I'll tell you this—there's no such sum of money in the house. Four pounds ten in a handbag and an odd shilling or two in another bag. That's pretty clear, I think."

"Meaning that she paid that sum away yesterday."

"Yes. Now who did she pay it to?"

The door opened and Inspector Jameson entered.

"Well, Jameson, get anything?"

"Yes, sir, several things. To begin with, nobody actually heard the shot. Two or three women say they did because they want to think they did—but that's all there is to it. With all those fireworks going off there isn't a dog's chance."

Japp grunted. "Don't suppose there is. Go on."

"Mrs. Allen was at home most of yesterday afternoon and evening. Came in about five o'clock. Then she went out again about six but only to the mail box at the end of the mews. At about nine thirty a car drove up—Standard Swallow—and a man got out. Description about forty-five, well set-up military-looking gent, dark blue overcoat, bowler hat, toothbrush mustache. James Hogg, chauffeur from Number 18, says he's seen him calling on Mrs. Allen before."

"Forty-five," said Japp. "Can't very well be Laverton-West."

"This man, whoever he was, stayed here for just under an hour. Left at about ten twenty. Stopped in the doorway to speak to Mrs. Allen. Small boy, Frederick Hogg, was hanging about quite near and heard what he said."

"And what did he say?"

"Well, think it over and let me know."

And then she said something and he answered, '*Allright. So long.*' After that he got in his car and drove away."

"That was at ten twenty," said Poirot thoughtfully.

Japp rubbed his nose. "Then at ten twenty Mrs. Allen was still alive. What next?"

"Nothing more, sir, as far as I can learn. The chauffeur at Number 22 got in at half-past ten and he'd promised his kids to let off some fireworks for them. They'd been waiting for him—and all the other kids in the mews too. He let 'em off and everybody around about was busy watching them. After that everyone went to bed."

"And nobody else was seen to enter Number 14?"

"No—but that's not saying they didn't. Nobody would have noticed."

"H'm," said Japp. "That's true. Well, we'll have to get hold of this 'military gentleman with the tooth-brush mustache.' It's pretty clear that he was the last person to see her alive. I wonder who he was?"

"Miss Plenderleith might tell us," suggested Poirot.

"She might," said Japp gloomily. "On the other hand she might not. I've no doubt she could tell us a good deal if she liked. What about you, Poirot? You were alone with her for a bit. Didn't you trot out that Father Confessor manner of yours that sometimes makes such a hit?"

Poirot spread his hands. "Alas, we talked only of gas fires."

"Gas fires—gas fires." Japp sounded disgusted. "What's the matter with you, old boy? Ever since you've been here the only things you've taken an interest in are quill pens and wastepaper baskets. Oh, yes, I saw you hav-

ing a quiet look into the one downstairs. Anything in it?"

Poirot sighed. "A catalogue and an advertisement."

"What's the idea, anyway? If anyone wants to throw away an incriminating document, or whatever it is you have in mind, they're not likely to pitch it into a wastepaper basket."

"That is very true. Only something quite unimportant would be thrown away like that."

Poirot spoke meekly. Nevertheless Japp looked at him suspiciously.

"Well," Japp said. "I know what I'm going to do next. What about you?"

"*Eh bien*," said Poirot. "I shall complete my search for the unimportant. There is still the dust bin."

He skipped nimbly out of the room. Japp looked after him with an air of disgust.

"Potty," he said. "Absolutely potty."

Inspector Jameson preserved a respectful silence. His face said with British superiority: "Foreigners!"

Aloud he said, "So that's the famous Hercule Poirot! I've heard of him."

"Old friend of mine," explained Japp. "Not half as balmy as he looks, mind you. All the same he's getting on now."

"Gone a bit gaga as they say, sir," suggested Inspector Jameson. "Ah, well, age will tell."

"All the same," said Japp, "I wish I knew what he was up to."

He walked over to the writing desk and stared uneasily at an emerald green quill pen.

Japp was just engaging his third chauffeur's wife in conversation when Poirot, walking noiselessly as a cat, suddenly appeared at his elbow.

"Whew, you made me jump," said Japp. "Got anything?"

"Not what I was looking for."

Japp turned back to Mrs. James Hogg.

"And you say you've seen this gentleman before?"

"Oh, yes, sir. And my husband too. We knew him at once."

"Now look here, Mrs. Hogg, you're a shrewd woman, I can see. I've no doubt that you know all about everyone in the mews. And you're a woman of judgment—unusually good judgment, I can tell that—"

Unblushingly he repeated this remark for the third time. Mrs. Hogg assumed an expression of almost superhuman intelligence.

"Give me a line on those two young women—Mrs. Allen and Miss Plenderleith. What were they like? Gay? Lots of parties? That sort of thing?"

"Oh, no, sir, nothing of the kind. They went out a good bit—Mrs. Allen especially—but they're *class*, if you know what I mean. Not like some as I could name down the other end. I'm sure the way that Mrs. Stevens goes on—if she *is* a Mrs. at all which I doubt—well I shouldn't like to tell you what goes on there—I—"

"Quite so," said Japp, dexterously stopping the flow. "Now that's very important what you've told me. Mrs. Allen and Miss Plenderleith were well liked, then?"

"Oh yes, sir, very nice ladies, both of them—especially Mrs. Allen. Always spoke a nice word to the children, she did. Lost her own little girl, I believe, poor dear. Ah, well, I've buried three myself. And what I say is—"

"Yes, yes, very sad. And Miss Plenderleith?"

"Well, of course she was a nice lady too, but much more abrupt, if you know what I mean. Just go by with a nod, she would, and not stop to pass the time of day. But I've nothing against her—nothing at all."

"She and Mrs. Allen got on well together?"

"Oh, yes, sir. No quarreling—nothing like that. Very happy and contented they were—and I'm sure Mrs. Pierce will bear me out."

"Yes, we've talked to her. Do you know Mrs. Allen's fiancé by sight?"

"The gentleman she's going to marry? Oh, yes. He's been here quite a bit off and on. Member of Parliament, they do say."

"It wasn't he who came last night?"

"No, sir, it was *not*," Mrs. Hogg drew herself up. A note of excitement disguised the intense primness that came into her voice. "And if you ask me, sir, what you are thinking is all *wrong*. Mrs. Allen wasn't *that* kind of lady, I'm sure. It's true there *was* no one in the house, but I do *not* believe anything of the kind—I said so to Hogg only this morning. 'No, Hogg,' I said, 'Mrs. Allen was a lady—a real lady—so don't go suggesting things'—knowing what a man's mind is, if you'll excuse my mentioning it. Always coarse in their ideas."

Passing this insult by, Japp proceeded, "You saw him arrive and you saw him leave—that's so, isn't it?"

"That's so, sir."

"And you didn't hear anything else? Any sounds of a quarrel?"

"No, sir, nor likely to. Not, that is to say, that such things couldn't be heard—because the contrary to that is well known—and down the other end, the way Mrs. Stevens goes for that poor

frightened maid of hers is common talk—and one and all we've advised her not to stand it, but there, the wages is good—temper of the devil she may have but pays for it—thirty shillings a week—"

Japp said quickly. "But you didn't hear anything of the kind at Number 14?"

"No, sir. Nor likely to with fireworks popping off here, there, and everywhere and my Eddie with his eyebrows singed off as near as nothing."

"This man left at ten twenty—that's right, is it?"

"It might be, sir. I couldn't say myself. But Hogg says so and he's a very reliable, steady man."

"You actually saw him leave. Did you hear what he said?"

"No, sir. I wasn't near enough for that. Just saw him from my window, standing in the doorway talking to Mrs. Allen."

"See her too?"

"Yes, sir, she was standing just inside the doorway."

"Notice what she was wearing?"

"Now really, sir, I couldn't say. Not noticing particularly as it were."

Poirot said, "You did not even notice if she was wearing a day dress or an evening dress?"

"No, sir, I can't say I did."

Poirot looked thoughtfully up at the window above and then across to Number 14. He smiled and for a moment his eye caught Japp's.

"And the gentleman?"

"He was in a dark blue overcoat and a bowler hat. Very smart, he was."

Japp asked a few more questions and then proceeded to his next interview. This was with Master Frederick Hogg, an impish faced, bright-eyed lad, con-

siderably swollen with self-importance.

"Yes, sir. I heard them talking. '*Think it over and let me know*,' the gent said. Pleasant-like, you know. And then she said something and he answered, '*All right. So long*.' And he got into the car—I was holding the door open but he didn't give me nothing," said Master Hogg with a slight tinge of depression in his tone. "And he drove away."

"You didn't hear what Mrs. Allen said?"

"No, sir, can't say I did."

"Can you tell me what she was wearing? What color, for instance?"

"Couldn't say, sir. You see, I didn't really see her. She must have been round behind the door."

"Just so," said Japp. "Now look here, my boy, I want you to think and answer my next question very carefully. If you don't know and can't remember, say so. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which of 'em closed the door, Mrs. Allen or the gentleman?"

"The front door?"

"The front door, naturally."

The boy reflected. His eyes screwed themselves up in an effort of remembrance.

"Think the lady probably did—No, she didn't. He did. Pulled it to with a bit of a bang and jumped into the car quick."

"Right. Well, young man, you seem a bright kind of shaver. Here's sixpence for you."

Dismissing Master Hogg, Japp turned to his friend. Slowly with one accord they nodded.

"Could be!" said Japp.

"There are possibilities," agreed Poirot.

His eyes shone with a green light. They looked like a cat's.

On re-entering the sitting room of Number 14, Japp wasted no time in beating about the bush. He came straight to the point.

"Now look here, Miss Plenderleith, don't you think it's better to spill the beans here and now. It's going to come to that in the end."

Jane Plenderleith raised her eyebrows. She was standing by the mantelpiece, gently warming one foot at the fire.

"I really don't know what you mean."

"Is that quite true, Miss Plenderleith?"

"I've answered all your questions. I don't see what more I can do."

"Well, it's my opinion you could do a lot more—if you chose."

"That's only an opinion, though, isn't it, Chief Inspector?"

Japp grew rather red in the face.

"I think," said Poirot, "that mademoiselle would appreciate better the reason for your questions if you told her just how the case stands."

"That's very simple. Now then, Miss Plenderleith, the facts are as follows. Your friend was found shot through the head with a pistol in her hand and the door and the window fastened. That looked like a plain case of suicide. *But it wasn't suicide.* The medical evidence alone proves that."

"How?"

All her ironic coolness had disappeared. She leaned forward, intently watching his face.

"The pistol was in her hand—but the fingers weren't grasping it. Moreover there were no fingerprints at all on the

pistol. And the angle of the wound makes it impossible that the wound should have been self-inflicted. Then again, she left no letter—rather an unusual thing for a suicide. And though the door was locked the key has not been found."

Jane Plenderleith turned slowly and sat down in a chair facing them.

"So that's it!" she said. "All along I've felt it was impossible that she should have killed herself. I was right—she didn't kill herself. Someone else killed her."

For a minute or two she remained lost in thought. Then she raised her head brusquely.

"Ask me any questions you like," she said. "I will answer them to the best of my ability."

Japp began, "Last night Mrs. Allen had a visitor. He is described as a man of forty-five, with a military bearing, toothbrush mustache, smartly dressed and driving a Standard Swallow car. Do you know who that is?"

"I can't be sure, of course, but it sounds like Major Eustace."

"Who is Major Eustace?"

"He was a man Barbara had known abroad—in India. He turned up about a year ago, and we've seen him on and off since."

"He was a friend of Mrs. Allen's?"

"He behaved like one," said Jane drily.

"What was her attitude to him?"

"I don't think she really liked him—in fact, I'm sure she didn't."

"But she treated him with outward friendliness?"

"Yes."

"Did she ever seem—think carefully, Miss Plenderleith—afraid of him?"

Jane Plenderleith considered this

thoughtfully. Then she said, "Yes, I think she was. She was always nervous when he was about."

"Did he and Mr. Laverton-West meet at all?"

"Only once, I think. They didn't take to each other much. That is to say, Major Eustace made himself as agreeable as he could to Charles, but Charles wasn't having any. Charles has got a very good nose for anybody who isn't well—quite—quite."

"And Major Eustace was not—what you call—quite—quite?" asked Poirot.

The girl said dryly, "No, he wasn't. Bit hairy at the heel. Definitely not out of the top drawer."

"Alas, I do not know those two expressions. You mean to say he was not the *pukka sahib*?"

A fleeting smile passed across Jane Plenderleith's face, but she replied gravely, "No, he was not."

"Would it come as a great surprise to you, Miss Plenderleith, if I suggested that this man was blackmailing Mrs. Allen?"

Japp sat forward to observe the result of his suggestion.

He was well satisfied. The girl started forward, the color rose in her cheeks, and she brought down her hand sharply on the arm of her chair.

"So that was it! What a fool I was not to have guessed. Of course!"

"You think the suggestion feasible, mademoiselle?" asked Poirot.

"I was a fool not to have thought of it! Barbara's borrowed small sums off me several times during the last six months. And I've seen her sitting poring over her savings book. I knew, she was living well within her income so I didn't bother; but, of course,

if she was paying out sums of money—"

"And it would accord with her general demeanor—yes?" asked Poirot.

"Absolutely. She was nervous. Quite jumpy sometimes. Altogether different from what she used to be."

Poirot said gently, "Excuse me, but that is not what you told us before."

"That was different." Jane Plenderleith waved an impatient hand. "She wasn't *depressed*. I mean she wasn't feeling suicidal or anything like that. But blackmail—yes. I wish she'd told me. I'd have quickly sent him to the devil."

"But he might have gone—not to the devil, but to Mr. Charles Laverton-West?" observed Poirot.

"Yes," said Jane Plenderleith slowly. "Yes, that's true."

"You've no idea what this man's hold over her may have been?" asked Japp.

The girl shook her head.

"I haven't the faintest idea. I can't believe, knowing Barbara, that it could have been anything really serious. On the other hand—" She paused, then went on. "What I mean is, Barbara was a bit of a simpleton in some ways. She'd be very easily frightened. In fact, she was the kind of girl who would be a positive gift to a blackmailer! The nasty brute!"

She snapped out the last three words with real venom.

"Unfortunately," said Poirot, "the crime seems to have taken place the wrong way round. It is the victim who should kill the blackmailer, not the blackmailer his victim."

Jane Plenderleith frowned a little.

"No—that is true—but I can imagine circumstances—"

"Such as?"

"Supposing Barbara got desperate.

She may have threatened him with that silly little pistol of hers. He tries to wrench it away from her and in the struggle he fires it and kills her. Then he's horrified at what he's done and tries to make it look like suicide."

"Might be," said Japp. "But there's a difficulty."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Major Eustace—if it was him—left here last night at ten twenty and said good bye to Mrs. Allen on the doorstep."

"Oh," the girl's face fell. "I see." She paused a minute or two. "But he might have come back later," she said slowly.

"Yes, that is possible," said Poirot.

Japp continued, "Tell me, Miss Plenderleith, where was Mrs. Allen in the habit of receiving guests, here or in the room upstairs?"

"Both. But this room was used for parties or for my own special friends. You see, the arrangement was that Barbara had the big bedroom and used it as a sitting room as well, and I had the little bedroom and used this room."

"If Major Eustace came by appointment last night, in which room do you think Mrs. Allen would have received him?"

"I think she would probably bring him in here." The girl sounded a little doubtful. "It would be less intimate. On the other hand, if she wanted to write a check or anything of that kind, she would probably take him upstairs. There are no writing materials down here."

Japp shook his head. "There was no question of a check. Mrs. Allen drew out two hundred pounds in cash yesterday. And so far we've not been able to find any trace of it in the house."

"And she gave it to that brute? Oh, poor Barbara! Poor, poor Barbara!"

Poirot coughed. "Unless, as you suggest, it was more or less of an accident, it still seems a remarkable fact that he should kill a regular source of income."

"Accident? It wasn't an accident. He lost his temper and saw red and shot her."

"That is how you think it happened?"

"Yes." She added vehemently, "It was murder—murder!"

Poirot said gravely, "I will not say that you are wrong, mademoiselle."

Japp said, "What cigarettes did Mrs. Allen smoke?"

"Gaspers. There are some in that box."

Japp opened the box, took out a cigarette, and nodded. He slipped the cigarette into his pocket.

"And you, Mademoiselle?" asked Poirot.

"The same."

"You do not smoke Turkish?"

"Never."

"Nor Mrs. Allen?"

"No. She didn't like them."

Poirot asked, "And Mr. Laverton-West? What did he smoke?"

She stared hard at him.

"Charles? What does it matter what he smoked? You're not going to pretend that *he* killed her?"

Poirot shrugged, "A man has killed the woman he loved before, mademoiselle."

Jane shook her head.

"Charles wouldn't kill anybody. He's a very careful man."

"All the same, mademoiselle, it is the careful men who commit the cleverest murders."

"But not for the motive you have just advanced, M. Poirot."

He bowed his head. "No, that is true."

Japp rose. "Well, I don't think that there's much more I can do here. I'd like to have one more look round."

"In case that money should be rucked away somewhere? Certainly. Look anywhere you like. And in my room too—although it isn't likely Barbara would hide it there."

Japp's search was quick but efficient. The living room gave up all its secrets in a very few minutes. Then he went upstairs.

Jane Plenderleith sat on the arm of a chair, smoking a cigarette and frowning at the fire. Poirot watched her.

After some minutes he said quietly, "Do you know if Mr. Laverton-West is in London at present?"

"I don't know. I rather fancy he's in Hampshire with his people. I suppose I ought to have wired him. How dreadful. I forgot."

"It is not easy to remember everything, mademoiselle, when a catastrophe occurs. And after all, the bad news, it will keep. One hears it only too soon."

"Yes, that's true," the girl said absently.

Japp's footsteps were heard descending the stairs. Jane went out to meet him.

"Well?"

Japp shook his head. "Nothing helpful, I'm afraid, Miss Plenderleith. I've been over the whole house now. Oh, I suppose I'd better just have a look in this closet under the stairs."

He caught hold of the handle as he spoke, and pulled.

Jane Plenderleith said, "It's locked."

Something in her voice made both men look at her sharply.

"Yes," said Japp pleasantly. "I can see it's locked. Perhaps you'll get the key."

The girl was standing as though carved in stone.

"I—I'm not sure where it is."

Japp shot a quick glance at her. His voice continued pleasant and off-hand.

"Dear me, that's too bad. Don't want to splinter the wood, opening it by force. I'll send Jameson out to get an assortment of keys."

She moved forward stiffly.

"Oh," she said. "One minute. It might be—"

She went back into the living room and reappeared a moment later holding a fair-sized key in her hand.

"We keep it locked," she explained, "because one's umbrellas and things have a habit of getting pinched."

"Very wise precaution," said Japp cheerfully, accepting the key.

He turned it in the lock and threw the door open. It was dark inside. Japp took out his pocket flashlight and let it play round the inside.

Poirot felt the girl at his side stiffen and stop breathing for a second. His eyes followed the sweep of Japp's torch.

There was not very much in the closet. Three umbrellas—one broken—four walking sticks, a set of golf clubs, two tennis racquets, a neatly folded rug, and several sofa cushions in various stages of dilapidation. On the top of these last reposed a small, smart-looking attaché case.

As Japp stretched out a hand toward it, Jane Plenderleith said quickly, "That's mine. I—it came back with me this morning. So there can't be anything there."

"Just as well to make quite sure," said Japp, his cheery friendliness increasing slightly.

The case was unlocked. Inside, it was fitted with shagreen brushes and toilet bottles. There were two magazines in it, but nothing else.

Japp examined the whole outfit with meticulous attention. When at last he shut the lid and began a cursory examination of the cushions, the girl gave an audible sigh of relief.

There was nothing else in the closet beyond what was plainly to be seen. Japp's examination was finished in short order.

He relocked the door and handed the key to Jane Plenderleith.

"Well," he said, "that concludes matters for the moment. Can you give me Mr. Laverton-West's address?"

"Farlescombe Hall, Little Ledbury, Hampshire."

"Thank you, Miss Plenderleith. I may be round again later. By the way, mum's the word. Leave it at suicide as far as the general public's concerned."

"Of course, I quite understand."

She shook hands with them both.

As they walked away down the mews, Japp exploded! "What the hell was there in that closet? There was *something*."

"Yes, there was something."

"And I'll bet ten to one it was something to do with the attaché case! But like the double-dyed mutt I must be, I couldn't find anything. Looked in all the bottles—felt the lining—what the devil could it be?"

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

"That girl's in it somehow," Japp went on. "Brought that case back this morning? Not on your life, she didn't!

Notice the two magazines in it?"

"Yes."

"Well, one of them was for *last July*!"

It was the following day when Japp walked into Poirot's flat, flung his hat on the table in deep disgust, and dropped into a chair.

"Well," he growled. "*She's* out of it!"

"Who is out of it?"

"Plenderleith. Was playing bridge up to midnight. Host, hostess, naval commander guest, and two servants all swear to that. No doubt about it, we've got to give up any idea of her being concerned in the business. All the same, I'd like to know *why* she went all hot and bothered about that little attaché case under the stairs. That's something in *your* line, Poirot. You like solving the kind of triviality that leads nowhere. The Mystery of the Small Attaché Case. Sounds quite promising!"

"I will give you yet another suggestion for a title. The Mystery of the Smell of Cigarette Smoke."

"A bit clumsy for a title. Smell—eh? Was *that* why you were sniffing so when we first examined the body? I saw you—and heard you! Sniff—sniff. Thought you had a cold in your head."

"You were entirely in error."

Japp sighed. "I always thought it was the little gray cells of the brain. Don't tell me the cells of your nose are equally superior to anyone else's."

"No, no, calm yourself."

"I didn't smell any cigarette smoke," went on Japp suspiciously.

"No more did I, my friend."

Japp looked at him doubtfully. Then he took a cigarette from his pocket.

"That's the kind Mrs. Allen smoked

—gasps. Six of those stubs were hers. The other three were Turkish."

"Exactly."

"Your wonderful nose knew that without looking at them, I suppose!"

"I assure you my nose does not enter into the matter. My nose registered nothing."

"But the brain cells registered a lot?"

"Well—there were certain indications—do you not think so?"

Japp looked at him sideways.

"Such as?"

"*Eh bien*, there was very definitely something missing from the room. Also something added, I think . . . And then, on the writing desk—"

"I knew it! We're coming to that damned quill pen!"

"*Du tout*. The quill pen plays a purely negative role."

Japp retreated to safer ground.

"I've got Charles Laverton-West coming to see me at Scotland Yard in half an hour. I thought you might like to be there."

"I should very much."

"And you'll be glad to hear we've tracked down Major Eustace. Got a service flat in the Cromwell Road."

"Excellent."

"And we've got a little to go on there. Not at all a nice person, Major Eustace. After I've seen Laverton-West, we'll go and see him. That suit you?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, come along then."

At half-past eleven Charles Laverton-West was ushered into Chief Inspector Japp's room. Japp rose and shook hands.

The M.P. was a man of medium height with a very definite personality.

He was clean-shaven, with the mobile mouth of an actor, and the slightly prominent eyes that so often go with the gift of oratory. He was good-looking in a quiet, well-bred way.

Though looking pale and somewhat distressed, his manner was perfectly formal and composed.

He took a seat, placed his gloves and hat on the table, and looked towards Japp.

"I'd like to say, first of all, Mr. Laverton-West, that I fully appreciate how distressing this must be to you."

Laverton-West waved this aside. "Do not let us discuss my feelings. Tell me, Chief Inspector, have you any idea what caused my—Mrs. Allen to take her own life?"

"You yourself cannot help us in any way?"

"No, indeed."

"There was no quarrel? No estrangement of any kind between you?"

"Nothing of the kind. It has been the greatest shock to me."

"Perhaps it will be more understandable, sir, if I tell you that it was *not* suicide—but murder!"

"Murder?" Charles Laverton-West's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "You say *murder*?"

"Quite correct. Now, Mr. Laverton-West, have you any idea who might have been likely to make away with Mrs. Allen?"

Laverton-West fairly spluttered out his answer.

"No—no, indeed—nothing of the sort! The mere idea is—is *unimaginable*!"

"She never mentioned any enemies? Anyone who might have had a grudge against her?"

"Never."

"Did you know that she had a pistol?"

"I was not aware of the fact."

"Miss Plenderleith says that Mrs. Allen brought this pistol back from abroad some years ago."

"Really?"

"Of course, we have only Miss Plenderleith's word for that. It is quite possible that Mrs. Allen felt herself to be in danger and kept the pistol handy for reasons of her own."

Charles Laverton-West shook his head. He seemed quite bewildered and dazed.

"What is your opinion of Miss Plenderleith, Mr. Laverton-West? I mean, does she strike you as a reliable, truthful person?"

The other pondered a minute. "I think so—yes, I should say so."

"You don't like her?" suggested Japp, who had been watching him closely.

"I wouldn't say that. She is not the type of young woman I admire. That sarcastic, independent type is not attractive to me, but I should say she was quite truthful."

"H'm," said Japp. "Do you know a Major Eustace?"

"Eustace? Eustace? Ah, yes, I remember the name. I met him once at Barbara's—Mrs. Allen's. Rather a doubtful customer in my opinion. I said as much to my—to Mrs. Allen. He wasn't the type of man I should have encouraged to come to our home after we were married."

"And what did Mrs. Allen say to that?"

"Oh, she quite agreed. She trusted my judgment implicitly. A man knows other men better than a woman does. She explained that she couldn't very

well be rude to a man whom she had not seen for some time—I think she felt especially a horror of being snobbish! Naturally, as my wife, she would find a good many of her old associates—well, unsuitable, shall we say?"

"Meaning that in marrying you she was bettering her position?" Japp asked bluntly.

Laverton-West held up a well-manicured hand.

"No, no, not quite that. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Allen's mother was a distant relation of my own family. She was fully my equal in birth. But of course, in my position, I have to be especially careful in choosing my friends—and my wife in choosing hers. One is to a certain extent in the limelight."

"Oh, quite," said Japp dryly. He went on, "So you can't help us in any way?"

"No, indeed. I am utterly at sea. Barbara murdered! It seems incredible."

"Now, Mr. Laverton-West, can you tell me what your own movements were on the night of November fifth?"

"My movements? My movements?" Laverton-West's voice rose in shrill protest.

"Purely a matter of routine," explained Japp. "We—er—have to ask everybody."

Charles Laverton-West looked at him with dignity. "I should hope that a man in my position might be exempt."

Japp merely waited.

"I was—now let me see . . . Ah, yes. I was at the House. Left at half-past ten. Went for a walk along the Embankment. Watched some of the fireworks."

"Nice to think there aren't any plots of that kind nowadays," said Japp cheerily.

Laverton-West gave him a fishlike stare.

"Then I—er—walked home."

"Reaching home—your London address is Onslow Square, I think—at what time?"

"I hardly know exactly."

"Eleven? Half-past?"

"Somewhere about then."

"Perhaps someone let you in."

"No, I have my key."

"Meet anybody while you were walking?"

"No—er—really, Chief Inspector, I *resent* these questions very much! I do indeed!"

"I assure you, it's just a matter of routine, Mr. Laverton-West. They aren't personal, you know."

The reply seemed to soothe the irate M.P. "If that is all—"

"That is all for the present, Mr. Laverton-West."

"You will keep me informed—"

"Naturally, sir. By the way, let me introduce M. Hercule Poirot. You may have heard of him."

Mr. Laverton-West's eye fastened itself interestedly on the little Belgian. "Yes—yes—I believe I have heard the name."

"Monsieur," said Poirot, his manner suddenly very foreign. "Believe me, my heart bleeds for you. Such a loss! Such agony as you must be enduring! Ah, but I will say no more. How magnificently the English hide their emotions." He whipped out his cigarette case. "Permit me—ah, it is empty. Japp?"

Japp slapped his pockets and shook his head.

Laverton-West produced his own cigarette case, murmured, "Er—have one of mine, M. Poirot."

"Thank you—thank you." The little man helped himself.

"As you say, M. Poirot," resumed the other, "we English do not parade our emotions. A stiff upper lip—that is our motto."

He bowed to the two men and went out.

"Bit of a stuffed shirt," said Japp disgustedly. "The Plenderleith girl was quite right about him. Yet he's a good-looking sort of chap—might go down well with some woman who had no sense of humor. What about that cigarette?"

Poirot handed it over, shaking his head.

"Egyptian. An expensive variety."

"No, that's no good. A pity, for I've never heard a weaker alibi! In fact, it wasn't an alibi at all. You know, Poirot, it's a pity the boot wasn't on the other leg. If *she'd* been blackmailing him . . . He's a lovely type for blackmail—would pay out like a lamb! Anything to avoid a scandal."

"My friend, it is very pretty to reconstruct the case as you would like it to be, but that is not our affair at all."

"No, Eustace is our affair. I've got a few lines on him. Definitely a nasty fellow."

"By the way, did you do as I suggested about Miss Plenderleith?"

"Yes. Wait a sec, I'll ring through and get the latest."

He picked up the telephone receiver and spoke through it. After a brief interchange he looked up at Poirot.

"Pretty heartless piece of goods."

Gone off to play golf. That's a nice thing to do when your friend's been murdered only the day before."

Poirot uttered an exclamation.

"What's the matter now?" asked Japp.

But Poirot was murmuring to himself.

"Of course . . . of course . . . but naturally . . . What an imbecile I am—why, it leaped to the eye!"

Japp said rudely, "Stop jabbering to yourself and let's go and tackle Eustace."

He was amazed to see the radiant smile that spread over Hercule Poirot's face.

"But yes—most certainly let us tackle him. For now, see you, I know everything—but *everything!*"

(continued on page 99)

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There are Inspectors and Inspectors, but, God wot, there are no Inspectors, in fiction or in fact, quite like Perelman's "private eyes"—his are truly sui generis. For example: meet Inspector Gregory Staines of the C.C.D.M.B.S., known familiarly as the Bulldog of the Bureau—also as the Jaguar and the Polecat—in The Case of the Indelible Bath . . .

DANGER IN THE DRAIN

by S. J. PERELMAN

CASE HISTORIES from Macy's Bureau of Standards' files: THE CASE OF THE INDELIBLE BATH. Offered to Macy's: a preparation purported to reduce obese persons while bathing. Rejected for its dubious merits, with the side comment that should a few drops of iodine chance to fall into the tub while this preparation was being used, the bather would turn a bright and unforeseen blue. In drugs, you are protected by city, state, and Federal authorities. In Macy's, you are further protected by our own tests, run off on the spot, when we consider stocking anything.—*Macy adv. in The Times.*

Inspector Gregory Staines, second in command of the Central Confidential Division of Macy's Bureau of Standards (frivolously referred to as C.C.D.M.B.S. by those "in the know" if they deem one trustworthy and unlikely to tattle), leaned his elbows on the checked tablecloth of our booth in the Blue Ribbon and regarded me quizzically out of a mild blue eye. It was the only one he could regard me out of, the other having atrophied per-

manently over the years from excessive waggishness.

A large, shaggy sheep dog of a man, Gregory affects a deliberate untidiness in his dress and constantly pulls on a foul-smelling pipe, in accord with the prevailing convention in detectives. Though the pipe causes him acute nausea and he is constitutionally thin and meticulous, an unremitting study of English crime films and the novels of Georges Simenon has helped make him authentic. It has required a perseverance and glut-tony few men are capable of to transform himself into a picturesque slob, but Staines has done it.

As for his ability, that is unquestioned. There is no eye quicker to spy a defective bit of kapok in a mattress, nobody who can sniff out with such celerity the single mildewed olive in the jar. Not for nothing—in other words, for something—do his admiring co-workers call him the Bulldog of the Bureau.

"I say, old man," he observed

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tolerantly. "Of course, it's none of my business, but aren't you playing rather fast and loose with your dry cleaner?"

"Why, how do you mean?" I asked, nonplused. Gregory has a way of pouncing when one is sodden with cheesecake that makes it easy to understand why his colleagues also call him the Jaguar of the Bureau.

"Your sleeve," he pointed out. "It's resting in a pool of ketchup."

I looked down with a surprised start. It was true; his uncanny orb, swift to note minutiae the layman overlooks, had unerringly spotted the deviation from the norm. As I hastened, somewhat flustered, to sponge it off, Gregory revealed how he had arrived at his conclusion.

"I thought at first it was blood," he disclosed, "but then I saw an upset condiment bottle next to it, and ruled out all possibilities until I hit on the right one."

"It sounds easy enough when you explain it," I said ruefully.

"Just routine." He shrugged. "By the way, better brush those caraway seeds off your vest while you're at it. We've found down at the Bureau that the spores work their way into tweed and produce a condition in the wearer known as 'dismay.'"

He went on to relate an instance where poppy seeds that had become embedded in a customer's suit in a West Side delicatessen had led to a bothersome action for

damages against Macy's. The customer, alleging that he was continually being beset by flocks of English sparrows, charged that the seeds had originally been woven into the fabric. Weeks of patient investigation, costly chemical analyses, and the testimony of scores of witnesses had been needed to refute his claim.

"Extraordinary life you chaps lead," I commented. "Take that case of yours I read about in *The Times*—the reducing preparation that turned its users bright blue."

"*The Times*?" He frowned. "What's that?" For a man whose knowledge is practically encyclopedic, Staines at times betrays a surprising ignorance of his environment. I told him it was a daily newspaper serving the New York area.

"I don't believe I know it," he ruminated. "At any rate, that *was* a puzzler, the affair of the indelible bath. Care to hear the story?"

"No," I replied.

Gregory knocked the ashes from his pipe into the sugar bowl, stirred the mixture reflectively, and began. It was as strange a tale, God wot, as those hoary walls had heard in many a moon, and when he got through telling it, they were no younger . . .

The first inkling Staines had that anything was amiss was the arrival, on a raw March morning, as he was finishing a kipper in his office, of a messenger with a chit from Grims-

ditch, his superior. Not to put too fine a point on it, Gregory was feeling a bit peckish. To begin with, he abhors kippers and forces himself to eat them only because it is unthinkable for an Inspector to start the day otherwise.

For another thing, Grimsditch's chits—or the chits of Grimsditch, to employ a more felicitous phrase—are totally unnecessary. His office is right next door, and he could as easily have summoned Gregory over the ground-glass partition. But his colonial love of ceremony (he trained in various remote outposts like Neiman-Marcus in Dallas and Gump's in San Francisco) finds its outlet in these irritating formalities.

With a sigh, Gregory detached the gas ring he had used to broil the fish and stowed it in his desk. Under his breath, he cursed the regulations that forbade Macy employees to cook during store hours, forcing them into a hundred ignoble stratagems. For, you see, Gregory is something of an idealist *manqué*.

"Humph," growled Grimsditch when his subordinate entered. "Morning, Staines. I'd appreciate a moment or two of your valuable time, if I'm not interrupting an after-breakfast nap."

Gregory was not sure, but he thought he detected an undercurrent of sarcasm in the Old Man's greeting. More than likely, he had got the wind up over some cus-

tomers' complaint, and so it proved.

"Look at that!" he snapped, extending a half-eaten baby rattle. "Woman from Sunnyside brought it in this morning. Our guarantee says it's incredible."

"Our guarantee *is* incredible," retorted Staines. "I defy anybody—"

"No, no, man, the *rattle*," Grimsditch broke in, exasperated. "I thought our laboratory had tested it."

"They did," said Gregory. "I had two of the junior operatives teething on it for donkey's years." He scrutinized the toy closely and straightened up in triumph. "No baby chewed that," he declared positively. "Those are the tooth marks of a three-year-old schnauzer."

"The deuce you say!" exclaimed Grimsditch.

"Unmistakable," Gregory said. "Note the aggressive upward sweep of the canines, the powerful, even crunch of the molars. You are familiar with my monograph on the tooth marks of the three-year-old schnauzer?"

"No, but I certainly plan to be," said Grimsditch, impressed. "By gad, my boy, I shan't forget the way you handled this."

"Nothing at all, sir," Gregory dismissed it. "I merely used the old think-box, is all. What's new in that matter of the reducing preparation?"

"Blowed if I know," confessed the Chief peevishly. "We can't

break down the manufacturer's claim that it melts away the fat—three of our researchers disappeared completely yesterday—but it also seems to affect the pigmentation. Here's the chart."

Gregory's forehead puckered as his eye skimmed over the findings; something was definitely out of whack. Lathrobe and Shenstone had turned forest green as a result of bathing in the solution, Kugler had emerged streaked with vermillion, and Dismukes was a rich cocoa-brown plaid. Furthermore, the colors were fast; pumice, paint remover, and even emery wheels had been tried without success on the subjects' skins.

"Mind if I take a dekkko at the experiment?" proposed Staines. Deep in his subconscious, a hypothesis, as yet little more than intuitive, was forming that some unknown element in the bath must be responsible for the change. Grimsditch, helpless in the face of an enigma that had baffled the keenest minds in the department, embraced the offer eagerly. Placing his entire resources at Gregory's disposal, he escorted him to the door and slipped a compact blue-nickeled charge account into his palm.

"I don't think you'll need it," he counseled, "but if any agents from Saks-Thirty-fourth Street or Altman's are mixed up in this, it's just as well to be prepared."

Gregory thanked him, and de-

scending to the kitchenwares, in the basement, took an elevator to the testing laboratory on the roof. To anyone watching him, the maneuver might have appeared purposeless; years of experience, however, had taught him the value of extreme caution.

He made his way through a sunny workroom in which besmoked technicians were engaged in tasting oilcloth, setting fire to girdles, jumping up and down on bedsprings, and generally submitting merchandise to normal wear. One of the more unusual probes going forward involved a wheel to each of whose spokes was affixed a metal foot; in the five years the wheel had been revolving, the feet were estimated to have covered a distance of 600,000 miles. Inasmuch as Macy's did not sell metal feet, the object of the inquiry was not too clear, but, thought Gregory, it made a whizbang display.

Crabtree, the head supervisory engineer, was awaiting him when he reached the drug section; Grimsditch had sent ahead a chit to herald Gregory's advent. Crabtree was answerable only to Grimsditch, and Grimsditch, in turn, was answerable only to Crabtree—an arrangement that insured a maximum of harmony and prevented leaks.

The strain of the past couple of days had begun to tell on the engineer. His usually rubicund physiognomy was ashen and his face had paled perceptibly.

"Frankly, we're up a tree," Crabtree admitted, conducting Staines into an improvised bathroom where a fat man was disrobing. "We're convinced some foreign substance is tinting our guinea pigs, but hanged if we can isolate the blamed thing. Are you ready, Wagenhals?"

The fat man returned a melancholy nod and lowered himself gingerly into the steaming bath. Crabtree, about to add the obesity fluid, suddenly checked his hand.

"What's the matter?" he inquired of the man. "Don't you feel well?"

"I'm okay," croaked Wagenhals, his expression belying his words. "It's only—well, I—I heard a rumor that folks looked different after bathing in here."

"Different in what way?"

"That—that they turned various colors, like purple, and orange—"

"Now, hold on, Wagenhals," said Crabtree impatiently. "Have you ever seen any orange people?"

"Just in *Lassie*," faltered the man, "and one time I saw a whaling picture with Don Ameche—"

"Exactly," interposed Crabtree. "Well, forget that cafeteria gossip. You know how people love to talk."

He emptied the solvent into the water; instantaneously its surface boiled into an agitated froth, lashing the sides of the tub with extraordinary violence.

Had Gregory been watching the bather, he might have seen a hint

of clavicle appear below the fleshy throat, the double chin grow taut, but his eyes were pinned on the medicine chest in the wall above Wagenhals's head. Its door was ajar, and from an overturned bottle inside, bluish drops splashed into the bath below.

"Look, look!" cried Crabtree. "He's turning indigo!"

Staines paid him no heed. With the peculiar, catlike spring that earned him the sobriquet of the Polecat of the Bureau, he crossed the floor in a single bound, caught up the bottle, and slammed shut the door of the cabinet.

"Get this man into a tubful of fresh water at once!" he barked at the amazed Crabtree. "Another sixty seconds in that witch's broth and I won't answer for the consequences."

"But I don't understand," quavered Crabtree. "What was in the bottle?"

"Eyewash," said Gregory sternly. "An ordinarily innocuous liquid that, as we have learned to our considerable chagrin, can play strange chemical pranks on the unwary, and that, along with iodine, hair tonic, after-shave lotion, and a host of other brews, you have thoughtlessly allowed to fall into the testing medium."

And leaving an open-mouthed Crabtree to fold a considerably diminished Wagenhals into a pre-tested towel, he went downstairs to file his report . . .

"Well, there you have it," concluded Inspector Staines, refilling the bowl of his pipe with ashes and sugar. "The clue was right under their noses, but, of course, they hadn't the sense to see it. Pure, unadulterated eyewash, found in every bathroom."

"Not to mention one other place," I suggested diffidently.

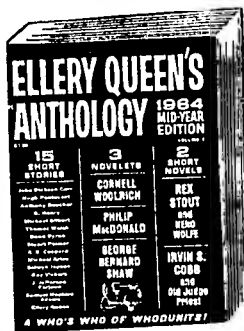
"What's that?"

"Advertising copy," I said.

Staines rose majestically. "I con-

sider that remark in very poor taste," he announced, "and I intend to convey it to Grimsditch at once."

Before I could temporize, he had jammed on his hat and stalked from the restaurant. Not until three seconds after he had gone did I realize that he had forgotten to pay the check. For a man whose love of detail had made his name a watchword at the Blue Ribbon, Staines is at times surprisingly lax.



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"There aren't many young ones her age that could take the kind of weather the good Lord sees fit to send us in the winter." Yes, Alma was born and brought up on the Cape, and like the Cape, she could be sullen and bitter and cold. Mrs. Nettleson was sure she knew the answer to her daughter's problem: she needs a man—and proceeded to encourage Mr. Arbuckle, their winter boarder . . .

A LOVER FOR ALMA

by MILDRED ARTHUR

IN ALL HER YEARS ON THE CAPE, Mrs. Nettleson could not remember a worse winter than the present one. The cold had lasted so long and had penetrated so deep it seemed that nothing would ever get warm again—not the house, not the furniture in it, not Mrs. Nettleson herself.

It was true that winters generally were hard on the Cape, not only for her but for her daughter, Alma. Except for themselves and Mr. Arbuckle, the big house that serviced and housed so many summer boarders was empty, and rattled and knocked in the lashing Cape winds.

Mrs. Nettleson stood at her parlor window and looked down at the bay that was a flat of ice as far and as wide as she could see. The sky was cloudy-gray, sullen and wind-tossed, and even while she stood there the icy-fingered wind reached through the cracks around the sill and stretched an arm across her shoulders. She shivered and drew the woolen shawl tight about her.

From above she heard Mr. Arbuckle's heavy step going across the floorboards. She glanced over at the clock on the mantel. He would be on his way to the closet now, she thought; taking down his fleeced-lined storm coat, slipping his pudgy arms into one sleeve, then the other. Now he would be buckling the belt around his ample middle; now reaching onto the top shelf of the closet for his storm cap.

She could see him settling the cap snugly on his round, nearly bald head, pulling at the woolen earflaps. Next he would be fitting on his rabbit-lined gloves, working each finger into them carefully. He's ready now, she thought, and she heard the floorboards creak above her.

The door to his room opened. She grabbed the dustcloth from the mantel, went out into the hallway, and flicked the cloth over the bannister.

"'Afternoon, Mr. Arbuckle," she said as the boarder descended.

"'Afternoon, Mrs. Nettleson."

"Seems like weather just don't bother you. I mean, it's never so cold you don't take your daily."

"Never that cold, Mrs. Nettleson. Besides, I don't know a better way to keep fit, do you?"

"Can't say I do. But that wind sure chills me to the bone. Now you take Alma, she don't seem to mind it. She'll go out same as you. Only she don't do it quite so regular."

"Well, it's the regularity that counts, is what I always say. A good habit is like a good friend. Never lets you down."

"She'd maybe get the habit . . . except she don't care for going out alone." Mrs. Nettleson's voice grew louder, more strident. "If you've a mind for company, I'm sure Alma'd be glad for the walk."

Mr. Arbuckle's broad fleshy face beamed. "Always pleased to walk and talk with Miss Alma."

"Fine, fine," said Mrs. Nettleson. "Now you just wait here one minute and I'll go fetch her." She hoisted her skirts and bounced up the stairs calling "Alma, Alma!" By the time she got to her daughter's third-floor bedroom she was puffing, and she puffed even harder when she turned the knob on the closed door and discovered it would not open.

"Alma," she called, pounding on the door.

"What do you want?" came her daughter's muffled, distant voice.

"Let me in," Mrs. Nettleson said through her dentures.

There was a long silence.

"Whatever are you doing in there?" Mrs. Nettleson's face was very close to the door. She heard a scurrying from within, a series of sounds like drawers sliding open and shut, and finally the key turned in the lock and her daughter's face appeared. "Land's sake, what are you doing?" Mrs. Nettleson pushed in like a windstorm and her eyes swept over the room. "What were you doing with the door locked?"

Alma, thin and pale, in her middle thirties, with the hand of time already tugging at her, looked flustered. "Why, what *would* I be doing, Mama? I'm working on the dolls."

Buttoning the loose old brown cardigan sweater that had belonged to her father and that she wore all winter long, Alma went over to the worktable by the window where scraps of colored cloth and yarn, old stockings, buttons and ribbons were laid out. Every winter Alma had one occupation: doll-making. She had started the occupation a few years before to help pass the long winters on the Cape. The money she received from selling the dolls to summer tourists was a help.

Before Mr. Arbuckle had come to stay with them, the Nettlesons often went weeks at a time without seeing a living soul. The milkman and the man who delivered bread came at such ungodly hours that neither Mrs. Nettleson nor her daughter was awake. And when a

big snow blocked the roads they could not even get into town to the grocery store, let alone go to church on Sunday.

This was Mr. Arbuckle's first winter with them, and Mrs. Nettleson hoped it would not be his last. He had come early in the spring and had announced that if he liked it here he meant to make this his home. "I was always fond of the Cape," he told her, "and I promised myself that I'd come here one day to live."

It did not seem to Mrs. Nettleson that he was old enough to be retired—he looked to be only in his fifties; but he appeared to have no money problems. He got mail regularly from Boston, and occasionally made a trip there. He paid his rent by the month, always in advance and without being asked. His clothes were well-cut and carefully chosen. He did, in fact, radiate a climate of well-being, and Mrs. Nettleson, who had been struggling since Mr. Nettleson, God rest his soul, passed on, made up her mind that she and Alma would, if possible, share that climate.

"Get your coat on, Alma, and your warm boots. Mr. Arbuckle wants your company on his walk."

"Can't you see I'm busy now, Mama."

"The doll can wait."

"I want to finish it now."

Behind the bright rims and the lenses of Mrs. Nettleson's glasses she narrowed her gaze until it closed

around the tight withdrawn face of her daughter. Alma was a real worry to her mother—had been since her high school days. She never showed much interest in boys, like most girls her age. Mrs. Nettleson had to push her. Her daddy, forever on the go, had taken to squiring her around, and they got to be such great companions that Alma would turn down a date or a chance to have fun with the crowd just to keep her daddy company.

"Here's maybe a chance for you," said Mrs. Nettleson. "Maybe the only chance you'll ever get again."

Alma scowled and her face reddened. "I don't want to go out with him."

Mrs. Nettleson crossed her arms and rested them on the large shelf of her bosom. "Beggars can't be choosers," she said, her words slicing the air between them.

She was remembering the two chances Alma had missed. One had been a nice young man from right here on the Cape who came to the house and took her out. Mrs. Nettleson never did get the straight of it. All Alma told her was that she would never go out with that one again, and she never did.

The other one—he came a few years later—was a summer boarder who was always laughing and joking. He did not turn out much different. He took Alma out once or twice, and then one night she came home in a tizzy and went to her room without a word. The next

day he packed his belongings and moved out, and Mrs. Nettleson never did learn the whys and wherefores.

"Listen, girl," she said emphatically, "you got obligations to me same as I have to you. I don't intend supporting you forever. Now you get your coat and boots on and you go out with Mr. Arbuckle for a walk—and you be nice to him. Hear?"

Alma, silent, raised her great lamenting eyes and stared at her mother. Mrs. Nettleson could almost hear the echoes with which her daughter's silences were peopled. Alma had always been a little strange—not simple and straightforward like most; but lately Mrs. Nettleson had noticed an even greater remoteness. Once in a while she would look at her daughter—when Alma did not know she was being watched—and see her lips move silently; her face would have a far-away abstracted look.

But essentially Mrs. Nettleson was a practical woman, full of the business of living. She had neither the time nor the patience for introspection. "Well, now," she said, "did you hear me? I told you to get your coat on."

Alma, silent, went to the closet and did as she told. When Mrs. Nettleson finally closed the front door against her daughter and Mr. Arbuckle, and watched them go down the path against the wind, Mr. Arbuckle smiling and talking ani-

matedly, she felt she was making progress.

Because the sun went down so early and the evenings seemed to drag on forever, Mrs. Nettleson thought it might be nice, in view of his aloneness and the long evenings, to invite Mr. Arbuckle to join her and Alma after dinner in the parlor. His "room and board" included three meals a day—these being brought to his room as stipulated in the original agreement; but the after-dinner invitation was on a purely social basis.

"Alma and myself would be pleased if you'd come join us after your meal," Mrs. Nettleson said formally as she put the tray on the table in Mr. Arbuckle's room. "You might do with another cup of coffee—or even a bit of sherry, if you've a mind to."

"That's right nice of you, Mrs. Nettleson. I'd be delighted to join you."

"Such a nice polite man," Mrs. Nettleson told her daughter in the kitchen as they sat down to their own dinner. "A girl could do a lot worse."

Mrs. Nettleson waited for a response from Alma, but the girl, if she heard at all, made no reply. She was staring at her mother, but apparently not seeing her; it was plain she was blind with her own thoughts.

Mrs. Nettleson did not like the looks of things at all. It was a fact that Alma did not look well these

days. There were lines around her eyes that had not been there before. The hollows in her cheeks had grown deeper. Always thin, she seemed to have got thinner still, as if something were eating her away from the inside.

She needs a man, Mrs. Nettleson decided conclusively, and finished her dinner in a hurry and got out her good china to serve the coffee in.

Mr. Arbuckle came down at 7:30 with the scant fringe of hair he had left carefully brushed down and with the careful manner and hearty voice of a suitor coming to call. They sat in the parlor with the curtains drawn and the fire making pops and crackles in the grate.

Mrs. Nettleson, who had shed her habitual apron, poured the steaming black brew into her rarely used "best" cups, and chatted almost incessantly of life on the Cape, especially of the winters which she declared only the heartiest could survive.

"Now you take Alma," she said, raising her chin in her daughter's direction. "There aren't many young ones her age that could stay put and take the kind of weather the good Lord sees fit to send us in the winter. Most of 'em go gallivanting off in all directions away from their homes and families. But not Alma. She's like me in that respect—born and brought up here, and expecting to die here. Can't say that was true of her father, rest his soul. He didn't like it up here

for nothing. But then he kind of had the wanderlust. Vacation place, he always called the Cape, meant only for the summers. He should have been a tourist, I used to tell him." After a pause she said, "Would you care to see a picture of my late husband, Mr. Arbuckle?"

Alma, who had been silently stirring her coffee, looked up, a hard intensity in her eyes. "Mr. Arbuckle's not interested in Papa," she said.

"Well, now, Miss Alma," he said politely, "seeing as how you and your Mama are such fine people, I wouldn't mind seeing what the man of the house looked like."

Mrs. Nettleson went over to a sideboard, opened up a drawer, and took out a picture in a stand-up frame. "We keep it out of the light so it won't fade," she explained, handing it to Mr. Arbuckle.

Before a grove of birch trees a small dapper man in the straw hat, gay striped jacket, and high collar of another time leaned jauntily on a cane. His face in the already fading picture was opened wide in a grin.

"They certainly wore odd-looking clothes in those days," Mr. Arbuckle said right off. Then inspecting the picture more closely, he added, "Mr. Nettleson was a handsome man."

In a movement so swift that both Mrs. Nettleson and Mr. Arbuckle were left stunned, Alma rose, snatched the picture, and vanished

with it from the parlor. For several moments the room was silent. Then when the strain of the silence had become somewhat painful, Mrs. Nettleson said, "I declare I don't know what's come over that girl. I expect she's alone too much of the time."

She looked in Mr. Arbuckle's direction expectantly, hopefully, as if to let him know that he had it in his power to remedy the situation.

Mr. Arbuckle did indeed seem eager to remedy the situation. What could he do for Alma? he asked soberly. She was such a fine girl, he wanted to take her out of herself. That, he felt, was all she needed — to be taken out of herself.

He didn't know the half of it, Mrs. Nettleson told him. Alma was a diamond, a genuine diamond. Did he like that cheese soufflé he had for supper tonight? Wasn't it a dish fit for a king? Well, that was Alma's doing. For that matter, she did most of the cooking, and the housekeeping as well. As for sewing, she made the drapes hanging there in front of them, and she made most of her own clothes, not to mention the dolls that were her specialty.

"That's what keeps her so busy these nights," she said, "the dolls. She makes all kinds. Mama dolls, Papa dolls, baby dolls."

"Is that so?" said Mr. Arbuckle, quite impressed. His forehead creased suddenly with the effort of thought. "Now I'm wondering, Mrs. Nettleson, if you would take kindly

to the suggestion that I escort Miss Alma around a bit. Take her out of an evening, if the weather permits—to a movie or a church social."

Subdued for the moment by her boarder's concern for her daughter, she said in half her usual volume of voice, "That's mighty thoughtful of you, Mr. Arbuckle."

Here at last was what she had been angling for. Perhaps he just felt sorry for Alma, but who could tell what his solicitude might lead to?

"Tell you what," Mrs. Nettleson said in a hushed conspiratorial tone, "you ask her out when I'm not around. If I ask her, she might just be contrary enough to say 'No'—to spite me. Daughters do that with mothers sometimes, you know."

"That's very perceptive of you," said Mr. Arbuckle.

"Just plain experience," said Mrs. Nettleson, beaming at the compliment.

The following evening, when Mrs. Nettleson brought Mr. Arbuckle's dinner to his room, the boarder had a peevish hurt look on his face. "You might have told me your daughter was spoken for," he said distantly.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Miss Alma tells me she has a suitor and they are as close as two peas in a pod. He would not take kindly to anyone coming between them, not even for an evening."

"That's a lie." Mrs. Nettleson's face turned bright red. Her eyes widened behind the shining frame

of her eyeglasses. "An outrageous lie!"

"Well, M'am," said Mr. Arbuckle, his voice tinged with sarcasm, "if anybody knows, it ought to be Miss Alma."

Mrs. Nettleson heaved a sigh like a locomotive. "And where, pray tell, would she find a suitor? There's nobody comes to this house all winter long 'cept the milkman and the breadman, and they come when we're fast asleep. She don't go out of the house from one week to the next, and she never gets any calls."

"I'm only repeating what she told me."

"She was lying, I tell you."

"Well, now, Mrs. Nettleson, I can't very well force my attentions on her, can I?"

"I'll have a talk with that girl," she said, the words rumbling in her bosom like the beginning of an avalanche.

Stomping her feet, Mrs. Nettleson made her way up the two steep flights of stairs to Alma's room—and to her surprise she found, for the second time, the door locked against her.

"Alma," she called, "why do you keep this door locked? Open up."

"Go away," came the tense irritated voice from within.

"What's gotten into you, girl? I want to talk to you."

There was some slight movement inside—a kind of swishing sound, as if the bed covers were being pulled up. Then silence.

"Did you hear me, Alma?" Mrs. Nettleson said violently. "I want to talk to you."

"Not tonight," came a voice filled with angry, suppressed excitement. "Not now."

Mrs. Nettleson stood for several moments at the locked door, listening intently, but all she heard was a long and profound silence, broken only by the creaking of the house's ancient boards in the Cape's wild, bitter winds.

At breakfast Mrs. Nettleson was ready to lay down the law to Alma: either the girl came round to fitting and proper behavior or she could take herself out of the house and go it on her own. But when she came into the kitchen, Alma, already at the stove stirring a pot of oatmeal, was humming to herself.

Mrs. Nettleson never remembered hearing her daughter hum before. Also, there was a look about her, an almost tangible excitement that winked out of her eyes—as though she had partaken of some monumental secret. She was alive with energy that seemed to sap Mrs. Nettleson of hers.

"Alma," she began, and stopped. Her daughter's gaze, turned on her momentarily, was somehow familiar; but Mrs. Nettleson could not think when or where she had been regarded with it before. "I think I'll just have coffee this morning," Mrs. Nettleson finished weakly, and sat down in a heap on a kitchen chair.

For the next few days Mrs. Nettleson said nothing to her daughter, but she observed her closely. There seemed now to be a constant element of change and progression in the girl. She was subject to odd and increasing fits of excitement; there was a quickening to her pace and movement, and for no reason that Mrs. Nettleson could make out. Her thin face now had a surprising fullness—the skin was like that of a newly plucked hothouse fruit. She seemed entirely saturated with whatever it was that had happened to her.

Could she really have a suitor, Mrs. Nettleson wondered, and began to look at Alma in a new light. While she was not a beauty, she had fine delicate features and a slim girlish shape. But how was it possible for her to have a suitor? No one came to the house. Alma had not left the house—except for that one walk with Mr. Arbuckle—for weeks.

The shock came a week later—on a stormy night when the howling wind lashed a blanket of snow before it. The sound at the windows was like that of demons trying to get in.

Mrs. Nettleson sat alone in the parlor close by the fire, trying to draw from it what warmth she could. She had been working on a doily while listening to the radio, but the static had got so bad she finally switched it off.

Earlier in the evening Alma had claimed a headache and had gone

up to bed. Mrs. Nettleson would have asked Mr. Arbuckle to join her in front of the fire for a bit of sherry, but he was suffering from a nasty chest cold, and had not been out of his room in three days.

Just before eleven o'clock Mrs. Nettleson laid aside her sewing and got up. She set the thermostat down for the night, switched off the light, and went upstairs. What it was that drew her to the flight of stairs leading to Alma's room that particular night she could not have said; but she found herself slipping up the stairs, without her shoes, making no sound that could be heard against the roaring wind.

She stood outside Alma's door in the glare of the naked overhanging bulb and pressed her ear to the door. At first she heard only outside weather noises, and the old house creaking and complaining in the wind. She noticed then that the key was in the lock. Apparently Alma had unlocked the door to let herself in and had forgotten to remove the key and take it in with her.

Amid the protestation of her joints, Mrs. Nettleson dropped to both knees and with great care removed the key. Her eye at the keyhole could make out very little. There was a dim light in the room—Alma had always been afraid of the dark, ever since she was a child, and she slept with a night light on; but all Mrs. Nettleson could see was a bedpost and the rocker beyond it.

Then she heard Alma's voice, soft, hushed against the outside noises. Mrs. Nettleson strained to hear, but could not make out the words. Still the intonation was clear: an expression of endearment, murmured low, caressing.

Mrs. Nettleson pressed her ear to the keyhole. Was that another voice she heard, a man's voice? Or was it the wind?

She became aware then of some stirring inside, a flutter of movement. Putting her eye once more to the keyhole, she caught the whirl of a diaphanous robe, flowing past. The room, stuffed with darkness, yet diffusing light from somewhere down low, seemed suspended in time as well as in space. She heard the protest of the bedsprings, and then the outside noises again took over.

Mrs. Nettleson's first response was rage that Alma had deceived her. Abruptly she got to her feet, hesitated at the door for only a moment while trying to set her churning face to rights. One vicious turn of the knob and she was in the room, the partly mocking, partly

outraged expression fixed on her face. The sound of her breathing exploded the silence.

With the intrusion of the harsh light from the hall, the room fell once more into its narrow line in time and space. In bed the girl looked up, startled, vulnerable, remote. With glazed eyes Alma, silent, stared at her mother. She lay strained and stiff, as if feeling around inside herself for some safe harbor where she could be secure with her love. Her hand clutched tightly at the blanket, which was pulled up over the pillow beside her.

Mrs. Nettleson moved forward involuntarily. She took hold of the covers and with a quick hard flick of her wrist tossed them aside.

In the delicately woven light of the room the two of them lay—Alma and her lover—she in her filmy gown through which her bony meager body was pitifully exposed, he in his gay striped jacket and high-collared shirt, his stuffed doll's face grinning up at her. Together they made a brightness, vast and intense.



The "perpetrator" describes this as "an urban folksong" . . .

THEY GOT RAVELLI

by RICHARD M. GORDON

They got Ravelli
At Thirty-third and Third.
Yes, they cooled him with a heater
Which is just the way to treat a
Guy like Ravelli
For singing like a bird.
Bang! Bang! They had the last word!

They got Ravelli
And filled him full of lead.
They destroyed the pigeon's fitness
As a prosecution witness.
Poor old Ravelli,
He shoulda stood in bed.
Bang! Bang! Ravelli is dead!

They got Ravelli
For chirping to the cops,
And they made it mighty sure he
Wouldn't serenade a jury.
Bigmouth Ravelli
Should not have beat his chops.
Bang! Bang! The melody stops!

They got Ravelli
For crooning out of tune,
So they left him in the river
With a perforated liver.
Foolish Ravelli,
He thought he was immune.
Bang! Bang! A busted balloon!

They got Ravelli;
They didn't like his song,
And the Senate Crime Committee
Thought it was an awful pity
That poor Ravelli
Had got himself in wrong.
Bang! Bang! Ravelli, so long!

They got Ravelli
And put him on the spot.
They were really forced to do so
'Cause he thought he was Caruso.
They thought Ravelli
Had got a bit too hot.
Bang! Bang! But now he is not!

They got Ravelli
A concrete overcoat,
And they fed him to the fishes
Who all thought he was delicious.
Too bad Ravelli
Had never learned to float.
He sang! A helluva note!



AUTHOR: **JACK LONDON**

TITLE: ***The Dead Horse Trail***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Alaska

TIME: 1890s

COMMENTS: *A tale of murder and manhunt in the frozen north, and of a man who "never had half a chance," who considered life a "skin game," and himself a "cold deck" . . .*

FORTUNE LA PEARLE CRUSHED his way through the snow, sobbing, straining, cursing his luck, Alaska, Nome, the cards, and the man who had felt his knife. The hot blood was freezing on his hands, and the scene yet bright in his eyes—the man clutching the table and sinking slowly to the floor, the rolling counters and the scattered deck, the swift shiver throughout the room and the pause, the game keepers no longer calling and the clatter of the chips dying away, the startled faces, the infinite instant of silence, and then the great blood-roar and tide of vengeance which lapped his heels and turned the town mad behind him.

"All hell's broke loose," he sneered,

turning aside in the darkness and heading for the beach. Lights were flashing from open doors as tent, cabin, and dancehall let slip their denizens on the chase. The clamor of men and howling of dogs quickened his feet.

He ran on and on. The sounds grew dim, and the pursuit dissipated itself in vain rage and aimless groping. But a flitting shadow clung to him. Head thrust over shoulder, he caught glimpses of it, now taking vague shape on an open expanse of snow, now merging into the deeper shadows of some darkened cabin or beach-listed craft.

Fortune La Pearle swore like a woman, weakly, with the hint of tears that comes of exhaustion, and

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plunged deeper into the maze of heaped ice, tents, and prospect holes. He stumbled over taut hawsers and piles of dunnage, tripped on crazy guy-ropes and insanely planted pegs, and fell again and again on frozen dumps and mounds of hoarded driftwood.

At times, when he deemed he had drawn clear, his head dizzy with the painful pounding of his heart and the suffocating intake of his breath, he slackened down; and always the shadow leaped out of the gloom and forced him on in heart-breaking flight.

A swift intuition flashed on him, leaving in its trail the cold chill of superstition. The persistence of the shadow he invested with his gambler's symbolism. Silent, inexorable, not to be shaken off, he took it as the fate which waited at the last turn when chips were cashed in and gains and losses counted up.

Fortune La Pearle believed in those rare, illuminating moments, when the intelligence flung from it time and space, to rise naked through eternity and read the facts of life from the open book of chance. That this was such a moment he had no doubt; and when he turned inland and sped across the snow-covered tundra he was not startled because the shadow took on greater definiteness and drew in closer.

Oppressed with his own impotence, La Pearle halted in the midst of the white waste and whirled about. His right hand slipped from

its mitten, and a revolver, at level, glistened in the pale light of the stars.

"Don't shoot. I haven't a gun," said the shadow.

Perhaps things fell out differently because Uri Bram had no gun that night when he sat on the hard benches of the El Dorado and saw murder done. To that fact also might be attributed the trip on the Long Trail which he took subsequently with a most unlikely comrade. But be it as it may, he repeated, "Don't shoot. Can't you see I haven't a gun?"

"Then what the flaming hell did you take after me for?" demanded the gambler, lowering his revolver.

Uri Bram shrugged. "It don't matter much, anyhow. I want you to come with me."

"Where?"

"To my shack, over on the edge of the camp."

But Fortune La Pearle drove the heel of his moccasin into the snow and attested by his various deities to the madness of Uri Bram. "Who are you," he asked, "and what am I that I should put my neck into the rope at your bidding?"

"I am Uri Bram," the other said simply, "and my shack is over there on the edge of camp. I don't know who you are, but you've thrust the soul from a living man's body—there's the blood red on your sleeve—and like a second Cain, the hand of all mankind is against you and there is no place you may lay your

head. Now, I have a shack—”

“For the love of your mother, hold your say, man,” interrupted Fortune La Pearl, “or I’ll make you a second Abel for the joy of it. So help me, I will! With a thousand men to lay me by the heels, looking high and low, what do I want with your shack? I want to get out of here—away! Cursed swine! I’ve half a mind to go back and settle for a few of them, the pigs! One gorgeous, glorious fight and end the whole damn business! It’s a skin game, that’s what life is, and I’m sick of it!”

He stopped, crushed by his great desolation, and Uri Bram seized the moment. He was not given to speech, this man, and that which followed was the longest in his life, save one long afterward in another place.

“That’s why I told you about my shack. I can stow you there so they’ll never find you, and I’ve got grub in plenty. Elsewise you can’t get away. No dogs, no nothing, the sea closed, St. Michael the nearest post, runners to carry the news before you, the same over the portage to Anvik—not a chance in the world for you! Now wait with me till it blows over. They’ll forget all about you in a month or less, what of stampeding to York and whatnot, and you can hit the trail under their noses and they won’t bother.”

At the door of the shack the gambler hesitated for an instant,

marveling at the strangeness of this man who had befriended him, and doubting. But by the candlelight he found the cabin comfortable and without occupants, and he was quickly rolling a cigarette while the other man made coffee. His muscles relaxed in the warmth and he lay back intently studying Uri’s face through the curling wisps of smoke.

It was a powerful face, but its strength was of that peculiar sort which stands girt in and unrelated. The seams were deep-graven, more like scars, while the stern features were in no way softened by hints of sympathy or humor. Everything was harsh, the nose, the lips, the voice, the lines about the mouth. It was the face of one who communed much with himself. He was narrow but deep; and Fortune, his own humanity broad and shallow, could make nothing of him.

“Lend a hand, Mister Man,” Uri ordered when the cups had been emptied. “We’ve got to fix up for visitors.”

The bunk was built against a side and end of the cabin. It was a rude affair, the bottom being composed of driftwood logs overlaid with moss. At the foot the rough ends of these timbers projected in an uneven row. From the side next to the wall Uri ripped back the moss and removed three of the logs. The jagged ends he sawed off and replaced so that the projecting row remained unbroken.

Fortune carried in sacks of flour from the cache and piled them on

the floor beneath the aperture. On these Uri laid a pair of long sea bags, and over all spread several thicknesses of moss and blankets. On this Fortune could lie, with the sleeping furs stretching over him from one side of the bunk to the other, and all men could look on it and declare it empty.

In the weeks which followed several domiciliary visits were paid, not a shack or tent in Nome escaping, but Fortune lay in his cranny undisturbed. In fact, little attention was given to Uri Bram's cabin; for it was the last place under the sun to expect to find the murderer of John Randolph.

Except during such interruptions Fortune lolled about the cabin, playing long games of solitaire and smoking endless cigarettes. Though his volatile nature loved geniality and laughter, he quickly accommodated himself to Uri's taciturnity. Beyond the actions and plans of his pursuers, the state of the trails, and the price of dogs, they never talked; and these things were only discussed at rare intervals and briefly.

But Fortune fell to working out a system, and hour after hour, day after day, he shuffled and dealt, shuffled and dealt, noted the combinations of the cards in long columns, and shuffled and dealt again. Toward the end even this absorption failed him, and head bowed upon the table he visioned the lively all-night houses of Nome, where the

gamekeepers and lookouts worked in shifts and the clattering roulette ball never slept.

At such times his loneliness and bankruptcy stunned him till he sat for hours in the same unblinking, unchanging position. At other times, his long-pent bitterness found voice in passionate outbursts; for he had rubbed the world the wrong way and did not like the feel of it.

"Life's a skin game," he was fond of repeating, and on this one note he rang the changes. "I never had half a chance," he complained. "I was faked in my birth and flimflammed with my mother's milk. She blamed me for being born, and looked on me as a cold deck. Why didn't she give me a show? Why didn't the world? Why did I go broke in Seattle? Why did I take the steerage, and live like a hog to Nome? Why did I go to the El Dorado? I was heading for Big Pete's and only went for matches. Why didn't I have matches? Why did I want to smoke? Don't you see? All worked out, every bit of it, all parts fitting snug. Before I was born, like as not. That's why! That's why John Randolph passed the word and his checks in at the same time. Damn him! It served him right! Why didn't he keep his tongue between his teeth and give me a chance? He knew I was next to broke. Why didn't I hold my hand? Oh, why? Why?"

At such outbreaks Uri said no word, gave no sign, save that his

gray eyes seemed to turn dull and muddy, as though from lack of interest. There was nothing in common between these two men, and this fact Fortune La Pearle grasped sufficiently to wonder sometimes why Uri had stood by him.

But the time of waiting came to an end. Even a community's lust for blood cannot stand before its lust for gold. The murder of John Randolph had already passed into the annals of the camp, and there it rested. There was gold in the creek beds and ruby beaches, and when the sea opened, the men with healthy sacks would sail away to where the good things of life were sold absurdly cheap.

So, one night, Fortune helped Uri Bram harness the dogs and lash the sled, and the two took the winter trail south on the ice. But it was not all south; for they left the sea east from St. Michael's, crossed the divide, and struck the Yukon at Anvik, many hundred miles from its mouth. Then on, into the northeast, past Koyokuk, Tanana, and Minook, till they rounded the Great Curve at Fork Yukon, crossed and recrossed the Arctic Circle, and headed south through the Flats.

It was a weary journey; and Fortune would have wondered why the man went with him, had not Uri told him that he owned claims and had men working at Eagle.

On the morning after passing Eagle they rose early. This was their last camp, and they were now to

part. Fortune's heart was light. There was a promise of spring in the land and the days were growing longer. The way was passing into Canadian territory. Liberty was at hand, the sun was returning, and each day saw him nearer to the Great Outside.

The world was big, and he could once again paint his future in royal red. He whistled about the breakfast and hummed snatches of song while Uri put the dogs in harness and packed up. But when all was ready, Fortune's feet itching to be off, Uri pulled an unused backlog to the fire and sat down.

"Ever hear of the Dead Horse Trail?"

He glanced up meditatively and Fortune shook his head, chafing at the delay.

"Sometimes there are meetings under circumstances which make men remember," Uri continued, speaking in a low voice and very slowly, "and I met a man under such circumstances on the Dead Horse Trail. Freighting an outfit over the White Pass in '97 broke many a man's heart, for there was a world of reason when they gave that trail its name. The horses died like mosquitoes in the first frost, and from Skaguay to Bennett they rotted in heaps. Men shot them, worked them to death, and when they were gone, went back to the beach and bought more. Some did not bother to shoot them—stripping the saddles off and the shoes and leaving them where

they fell. Their hearts turned to stone—those which did not break—and they became beasts, the men on Dead Horse Trail.

"It was there I met a man. When he rested at midday he took the packs from the horses so that they, too, might rest. He paid \$50 a hundred-weight for their fodder, and more. He used his own bed to blanket their backs when they rubbed raw. Other men let the saddles eat holes the size of water buckets. Other men, when the shoes gave out, let them wear their hoofs down to the bleeding stumps. This man spent his last dollar for horseshoe nails. I know this because we slept in one bed and ate from one pot and became blood-brothers where men lost their grip of things and died blaspheming God.

"He was never too tired to ease a strap or tighten a cinch, and often there were tears in his eyes when he looked on all that waste of misery. At a passage in the rocks, where the brutes upreared and stretched their forelegs upward like cats to clear the wall, the way was piled with carcasses where they had toppled back. And here he stood, in the stench of hell, with a cheery word and a hand on the rump at the right time, till the string passed by. And when one bogged down, he blocked the trail till it was clear again; nor did the man live who crowded him at such time.

"At the end of the trail a man who had killed fifty horses wanted to

buy, but we looked at him and at our own—mountain cayuses from eastern Oregon. Five thousand he offered, and we were broke; but we remembered the poison grass of the Summit and the passage in the Rocks, and the man who was my brother spoke no word, but he looked at me and we understood each other. So we took our rifles and shot them to the last one, while the man who had killed fifty horses cursed us till his throat cracked.

"That man, with whom I welded blood-brotherhood on the Dead Horse Trail—"

"Why, that man was John Randolph," Fortune exclaimed.

Uri nodded and said, "I am glad you understand."

"I am ready," Fortune answered, the old weary bitterness strong in his face. "Go ahead, but hurry."

Uri Bram rose to his feet.

"I have had faith in God all the days of my life. I believe He loves justice. I believe He is looking down upon us now, choosing between us. I believe He waits to work His will through my own right arm. And such is my belief that we will take equal chance and let Him speak His own judgment."

Fortune's heart leaped at the words. He did not know much concerning Uri's God, but he believed in Chance, and Chance had been coming his way ever since the night he ran down the beach and across the snow. "But there is only one gun," he objected.

"We will fire turn about," Uri replied, at the same time throwing out the cylinder of the other man's Colt and examining it. "And the cards to decide who fires first! One hand of Seven Up!"

Fortune's blood was warming to the game, and he drew the deck from his pocket. Surely Chance would not desert him now! He thought of the returning sun as he cut for deal and he thrilled when he found the deal was his. He shuffled and dealt, and Uri cut him the Jack of Spades. They laid down their hands. Uri's was bare of trumps, while he held ace, deuce. The outcome seemed very near to him as they stepped off the fifty paces.

"If God withholds His hand and you drop me, the dogs and outfit are yours. You'll find a bill of sale, already made out, in my pocket," Uri explained, facing the path of the bullet, straight and broad-breasted.

Fortune shook a vision of the sun shining on the ocean from his eyes and took aim. He was very careful. Twice he lowered as the spring breeze shook the pines. But the third time he dropped on one knee, gripped the revolver steadily in both hands, and fired.

Uri whirled half about, threw up his arms, swayed wildly for a moment, and sank into the snow. But Fortune knew he had fired dead

center, else the man would not have whirled.

When Uri, mastering the flesh and struggling to his feet, beckoned for the weapon, Fortune was minded to shoot again. But he thrust the idea from him. Chance had been very good to him already, he felt, and if he tricked now he would have to pay for it afterward. No, he would play fair. Besides, Uri was hard hit and could not possibly hold the heavy Colt long enough to draw a bead.

"And where is your God now?" he taunted, as he gave the wounded man the revolver.

And Uri answered, "God has not yet spoken. Prepare that He may speak."

Fortune faced him, but twisted his chest sideways in order to present less surface. Uri tottered about drunkenly. The revolver was very heavy and he doubted, like Fortune, because of its weight. But he held it, arm extended, above his head, and then let it slowly drop forward and down. At the instant Fortune's left breast and the sight flashed into line with his eye, Uri pulled the trigger.

Fortune did not whirl, but gay San Francisco dimmed and faded, and as the sun-bright snow turned black and blacker, he breathed his last malediction on the Chance he had misplayed.



A new exploit of Michael Dane James and Ted Bennett, industrial detectives and counterspies . . . This time the client is one of the hundred wealthiest men in the United States, and the case involves a proxy fight for the control of a huge corporation. The key to the problem is "a mystery man nobody has heard from in years" . . .

THE MILLIONAIRE BEATNIK

by JAMES M. ULLMAN

MICHAEL DANE JAMES recognized the voice at the other end of the line as belonging to one of the hundred wealthiest men in the United States. And so, despite the hour—it was two in the morning—the business espionage consultant swung out of bed and managed a courteous: "How are you, Mr. Coleman?"

"Right now, in a mess," Stanford Coleman replied. "I'm at the airport, on my way to St. Louis. Mr. James, I want you to meet me there tomorrow."

"What's wrong?"

"Bob Pierce committed suicide."

"Oboy. What does that do to your proxy fight with Allen Morton? For control of Pierce, Inc.?"

"That's what I want you to help me find out. Bob's will leaves a huge chunk of stock—enough to throw the proxy fight one way or another—to a mystery man nobody has heard from in years. You've got to locate the guy, if he's still alive, or bring me proof he's dead. And if he's alive, you'll have your hands

full finding him first. Because spies for Allen Morton will be looking for him too."

At noon the next day, James took a chair in Coleman's hotel suite in St. Louis. With James was Ted Bennett, a tall, lanky agent who had accompanied him from New York.

Stanford Coleman, short, white-haired, dapper, and Patrick Wells, attorney for Pierce, Inc., faced the two business counterspies.

"I assume," Coleman said, "that you've read the newspaper accounts."

James nodded. A middle-aged, crew-cut, stocky man, he settled his horn-rimmed glasses on his pug nose. "Pierce blew his brains out at 6:12 p.m. Except for one servant, he was alone in the house. Earlier, in order, he had three visitors: his doctor, who went away distressed at Pierce's despondency; a business associate, who found Pierce disinterested and vague; and an anonymous Ivy-League-type salesman, who tried to sell Pierce some sort of investment.

Pierce threw the salesman out in a rage."

"Exactly," Coleman said. "So far, no hint of foul play. And Bob, I fear, was noted for his rages lately, despite his other good qualities. That poor salesman couldn't have picked a worse time to call. While Bob was worth millions, the proxy fight had left him short of new investment cash."

"I gather," Bennett said, "the suicide wasn't entirely unexpected."

"No, it wasn't. Last May, Bob learned he was very ill. His wife had died two years before; he'd been quite attached to her. And the proxy fight had put Bob under terrific strain. To tell you the truth, we were all worried about him."

James asked, "Who's the mystery heir?"

"Bob's nephew, Harlan Hoag. Bob owned twenty per cent of the stock in Pierce, Inc. Bob left half of that to his stepson, along with all his other assets. The stepson runs Pierce, Inc.'s Southwestern Division now; I have no doubt of *his* support. But Bob left the other half of his stock to Harlan."

Coleman paused. Somberly, he lit a cigar. "You know the situation, James. Allen Morton wants control of Pierce, Inc. Morton is a raider; he plans to milk the company dry and then move on. As a big Pierce, Inc. stockholder, I was helping Bob fight Morton right down the line. But Morton came close to control at the last annual meeting. If he

should get Harlan's proxy, he could shove Pierce, Inc. into his hip pocket."

"Suppose Harlan Hoag is dead?"

"If he died before Bob, Bob's stepson gets *all* the stock. And Morton will be out of luck."

Bennett said, "Excuse some elementary questions. But won't Harlan, if he's alive, be so grateful for his inheritance that he'll vote the way his uncle would have wanted him to vote?—against Morton. And why don't you just sit back until Harlan reads about his inheritance in the newspapers? If he's alive, he'll turn up fast enough."

"It's not that simple." Coleman glanced at Patrick Wells, Pierce's attorney. "You tell them, Pat."

Wells, elderly and heavy-set, cleared his throat. "The last address we have for Harlan Hoag," he said, "is in Utah. He was prospecting for uranium there four years ago. There's no telling where he is now. And in the circles in which *he* moves, he might not learn of his uncle's death for months."

"He's a prospector?" Bennett asked incredulously.

"Of a sort. He took a geology course during his freshman year at college, which is as far as he got, and developed a liking for prospecting. But when he's not prospecting, he pretends to be a beatnik. Here's his most recent photograph."

Wells took a picture from his pocket and handed it to James. In it a bearded youth, with hair hanging

over his ears, stared sullenly at the lens. He wore hiking clothes. In one hand he grasped a beer can, and in the background, mountains loomed.

"Wow," James mused. "You mean *this* is going to decide a proxy fight involving some of the most influential names in American industry?"

"Unfortunately," Wells sighed. "Harlan is Bob's sister's son. His father lent Bob money to start Pierce, Inc. Bob repaid the loan long ago, but he promised then that his sister—or her son Harlan—would always be in his will with at least half his Pierce, Inc. stock."

"How did Harlan and his uncle get along?"

"They despised each other. After Bob repaid the loan, Harlan's father made some bad investments. Harlan's parents died penniless in a car accident, so Bob tried to raise Harlan as his own son. But there was antagonism from the start. Frankly, Harlan was lazy, shiftless, and untrustworthy. When Bob married late in life, Harlan's hostility became flagrant. Bob's bride, a widow, had a son of her own. Harlan had always looked forward to inheriting Bob's entire fortune. Now, with a new wife and stepson, obviously the fortune would be shared."

"So instead of being grateful for his inheritance, Harlan may be resentful that he didn't get more."

"Precisely. He broke with Bob years ago. He flunked out of college, joined the Navy, and was stationed

in San Francisco. When Harlan left the Navy, Bob offered him a good job at Pierce, Inc. But Harlan refused, unless he could begin as a top executive, which Bob wouldn't stand for. Harlan returned to the West Coast. He prospected, off and on, but mostly he hung out with a San Francisco beatnik crowd."

"When did anyone here see him last?"

"Shortly after that picture was taken. Harlan turned up in St. Louis one day, looking as he does there and smelling like a barn. He stormed into Bob's office and asked for two hundred thousand dollars—to finance a uranium exploration company. Bob blew up. He told Harlan never to come back until he looked and smelled like a civilized human being. Harlan called Bob a lot of names and walked out. He hasn't written since. And Bob never tried to learn his whereabouts."

"James," Coleman emphasized, "I have a large fortune riding on this proxy fight. That's why you've got to find Hoag first. I want to persuade him to sell me his stock, or if he won't, to vote his shares my way. Even if I can't persuade him, even if I'm going to lose this fight, the sooner I know it the less money it'll cost me. And I warn you, the opposition is ruthless. In view of Hoag's dislike for his uncle, I'm afraid of what will happen if Morton gets to Harlan before I do. You ever hear of a man named Jack Lane?"

"It's my business," James said,

"to know about people like Jack Lane. He's a private investigator who specializes in stealing secrets from one company and selling them to another."

"Well, Lane is working for Morton now—when Morton wages a proxy fight, anything goes. Lane is expert at delving into a man's past and coming up with something embarrassing enough for Morton to use as a club. Lane has been tapping our telephones. For weeks he's had a man watching Bob's house, to keep track of visitors. And I know for a fact that Lane is already looking for Harlan Hoag."

"How can you be so sure?"

"A man went to Bob Pierce's home this morning, claiming to be from Pat's law firm. He had fake documents to prove it. He collected every picture of Harlan he could find, even childhood and Navy photos. The picture you have is the only one left—Pat had it in his office. The servant's description of the imposter," Coleman added, "fits Jack Lane exactly."

One afternoon six weeks later, Ted Bennett slipped into a drug-store telephone booth in Carson City, Nevada. The long-distance operator reached Michael Danc James in Denver.

"Mickey? I'm in Carson City. How'd you make out with the banks?"

"No luck. I must have checked out every bank and savings and loan

west of the Mississippi. Hoag doesn't have an account in any of them. How'd you do?"

"I have some good news. Also some bad. The good news is, I tracked Harlan here from that pad he maintained in Los Angeles. He took a lady beatnik with him. Her name's Emma Powell. She got a job as a waitress, while he wandered off on another prospecting trip. She left here five months ago—alone. But she sent one of the other girls at the bar a postcard. From Tucson."

"What's the bad news?"

"As I left the bar just now, I saw a familiar car parked down the street—the same one I thought was following me in Los Angeles. Five gets you ten the driver is telephoning Jack Lane this minute, with the same information I just gave you."

"Okay, I'll meet you in Tucson," James said. "Emma Powell is the first woman Hoag liked well enough to take along on his trips. Maybe she can bring us up-to-date on Harlan's activities. As for Jack Lane, for all we know, he's in Tucson already. We'll just do the best we can."

The restaurant adjoined a gas station, grocery store, motel, and liquor store. The little settlement, forty miles from Tucson, was ringed by desert and distant mountain ranges. Ted Bennett pulled the car into the parking lot and cut the engine.

"This," James sighed, "must be the place."

"Pretty desolate."

"Emma Powell got fired from her last job in Tucson for stealing from the register. So she can't be too choosy about another job. Let's go."

They walked into the restaurant and took a table. A woman sauntered over from the bar. In her late twenties, she was tall, dark-haired, and plump. She wore a sheer white blouse and tight red capri pants.

"Two beers," James said. "And if you're Emma Powell, why don't you join us? We're really here to talk to you."

"What about?" she asked guardedly.

"Harlan Hoag."

"Buy me a drink?"

"Of course."

The woman got three beers from the bar. She sat down and began filling her glass.

"What about Harlan?" she asked.

"You know where he is?"

"Naturally. I ought to know. I'm his wife." She raised the glass, drank, and set it down empty. "And if you don't believe me, I've got a marriage certificate to prove it. From Los Angeles County."

"I don't doubt you for a minute," James said smoothly. "As to Harlan, now . . ."

"I still use my maiden name," she continued, "because it's easier to find work as 'Miss.' Anyway, if I called myself 'Mrs. Hoag,' I'd have to explain about 'Mr. Hoag.' And how could anyone explain Harlan?"

"I see."

"Harlan," she added, refilling her glass, "is weirder than weird. He prospects. I went with him once but couldn't dig that. We climbed a million hills and Harlan got bit by a rattlesnake. He almost died. After the doctor fixed him up, I told him, 'Harlan, honey, when you get tired of chipping rocks, come see me. I'm going back to Peoplesville.'" She drank some more beer, then gazed shrewdly at James. "You must've come a long way to find him. You dress like New York. It must be important."

"Did Harlan," Bennett asked, "ever tell you about his uncle?"

Emma began to grin. "You mean," she said delightedly, "the old square kicked off?"

James nodded.

"What do we get?"

"Some stock. That's what I'd like to talk to Harlan about."

The woman turned and called to the bartender. "Hey, you. I quit. And bring me another bottle. I'm a customer now."

Nervously, James looked at Bennett. His associate shrugged.

"Ain't that nice," the woman sighed, turning back to them. "How soon you want to start looking for Harlan? I can be packed in five minutes."

"You told us you know where he is," Bennett said.

"I know *roughly* where he is," Emma replied. "He's in the upper half of New Mexico. He wanted to find an old silver mine—to see if it

could be reactivated. Usually he visits me every couple weeks, but I haven't seen him now in nearly two months. Now and then he sends a card. What I'd suggest is, we all drive up to a city called Eureka. I'll mail post cards from there to General Stores in a dozen little towns where I know he might drop in for supplies. I'll tell Harlan where we are, so he can telephone me. We'll have to do it that way because he'd be angry if I sent strangers up to see him without telling him first. He's got this fixation."

"What fixation?"

"The last month or so," Emma said, "he's had the notion that somebody is trying to murder him."

Ted Bennett was slumped behind the wheel of a car parked on a side street in Eureka, New Mexico, reading a week-old copy of *The Wall Street Journal*. Michael Dane James opened the door and slipped in beside him.

"Seven weeks I'm away from New York," Bennett complained, "and the Dow-Jones average is down more than twenty points. I'm ruined."

"Never mind. You'll just have to work harder for a living. I received confirmation on the marriage license—Hoag *did* marry Emma in Los Angeles. But here's something else. Guess who I spotted chewing on a breakfast steak in that restaurant over there?"

"Harlan Hoag?"

"No. Jack Lane."

Bennett folded the paper. "That's great. He must have traced us from where we picked up Emma. Mickey, we've been stewing in this town for five days—we're just sitting ducks. If you'll take my advice, we'll quit hanging on to Emma and start scouring the buttes for Harlan."

"We can't afford to antagonize him, Ted. Ridiculous as this arrangement seems, we've got to play it Emma's way. If she or Harlan gets angry at us, we could kill Coleman's chance to buy that stock."

Bennett opened the door. "I'll rent another car and try to get a line on Lane—where he's staying, what he's up to, what kind of heap he's driving. But I have a hunch we're in for real trouble."

"He's at a back table," James said. "The mean-looking guy with curly black hair and a mustache."

Bennett walked off. James drove quickly to their motel. He got out and approached the pool, where Emma Hoag, in white bikini, straw hat, and sunglasses, reclined on a lounge. In one hand she held a tall, frosty glass.

"About time you got back," she said. "I just had a long talk with Harlan. He telephoned here half an hour ago."

"He would make his call," James said disgustedly, "while I was away."

"He's still very nervous. He said someone took another shot at him last week. Up on the mesa."

"Is that where he is?"

"I'm not telling," she countered.

"But isn't he going to talk to us?"

"Not right away. He said you might be from his uncle's company and then again you might not. He said he never heard of anyone named Michael Dane James, or Ted Bennett, either."

"I told you that."

"Well, he doesn't like the idea of meeting two strange men up there one bit. He said if you want to see him, bring someone along he knows. He said bring his uncle's lawyer—somebody named Wells. He said he knew Wells himself, years ago. He said he'd talk if Wells was with you, and no other way."

"I see. Doesn't he understand that since his uncle died, he's inherited stock worth millions of dollars?"

"I told him that. He said if it's true, the stock will always be there. But before he believes it, he wants this lawyer Wells to tell him so, face to face. When Wells gets here, I'll send Harlan another card. Then he'll telephone again and talk to this Wells before the meeting—to make sure it *is* Mr. Wells. He said he'd know the lawyer's voice."

"All right," James said. "I'll call St. Louis and get Wells up here. Meanwhile, we're moving to another motel. Far out of town. Maybe in another town. So get packed."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just think a change of scenery will do us all good."

Patrick Wells laced his boots and rose. He limped awkwardly to a

mirror in his motel room and surveyed himself in his new Western garb. At what he saw, he shook his head.

"I never heard of a man," Wells declared, "as reluctant to claim a fortune as Harlan Hoag. He could verify his inheritance without going through all *this* trouble. Of course, perhaps he *is* terrified of someone. His wife said he claims a man tried to run him down with a car in Albuquerque. And that he's been shot at three times."

James, seated on the bed, tugged thoughtfully at his ear. Like Wells, he wore hiking clothes in preparation for the journey to Harlan Hoag's lair.

"An idea did occur to Ted and me," James said. "But Hoag's sending for you apparently rules it out."

"You mean that Emma has been stringing you along? And Harlan isn't up on the mesa at all?"

"That's right. You know the terms of Bob Pierce's will. If Harlan was already dead when Pierce died, the stock goes to Pierce's stepson, and Harlan's widow would get nothing. So maybe Harlan died some time ago. Emma said a rattlesnake bit him once. And now she's going through all this with a confederate in order to establish that Harlan outlived his uncle. All I can say is, if we get up there and find a body she identifies as Harlan's, I, for one, will be mighty suspicious."

"So will I. But the man who called Emma yesterday and talked to

me *sounded* like Harlan—as best I can remember Harlan's voice. And he seemed to know a lot about Harlan's boyhood when I asked him those test questions."

"As Harlan's wife, Emma would know something about Harlan's boyhood." The telephone rang. James picked it up. "Ted? What's the trouble? You were supposed to drive Emma over here so we could—she what? Who? When? Okay."

Angrily, James slammed the receiver down.

"Come on," he said, rising and moving quickly to the door. "Our trip to the mesa is called off. I was afraid of this, when Ted learned last night that Lane had disappeared. We've been outfoxed, Pat. Harlan Hoag just showed up at Emma's motel. And Jack Lane was with him."

The car screeched to a stop in front of Emma's motel unit, where Emma, in shorts and a blouse, was loading a hatbox into the trunk of a car. James recognized the car as the one Bennett had seen Lane driving around town. Bennett sat nearby in his own car, moodily smoking a cigarette.

"Oh, hi," Emma called. "It's kind of hard to explain. You two better talk to Harlan about this. I'm sorry."

James and Wells got out and started toward the motel. Bennett flipped his cigarette away and joined them.

"They're both inside," Bennett said.

"How'd it happen?" James asked.

"I'm not positive. But remember, I saw Lane nod to a woman on the street the other day. I thought it was funny, his knowing a woman way out here, but I assumed she was just a waitress or someone he'd met casually. In view of the fact that Lane disappeared right after Emma got that phone call yesterday from Harlan, I'd bet anything now the woman was a long-distance telephone operator. All she'd have to do is tell Lane where the call to Emma came from. *Anybody* could find Harlan after that." Bennett paused. "You should see him."

"Let's," James said.

The three men went inside.

Jack Lane, haggard but triumphant, was sprawled in a chair. He wore slacks and a sports shirt and held a near-empty soft drink bottle. Harlan Hoag, heavily bearded, dressed in rags and in dire need of a haircut, kneeled on the bed closing a suitcase. He looked up.

"Hello, James," Lane drawled. "We've never met, but we're sort of in the same business."

"Sort of," James said curtly. He turned his back. "Mr. Hoag?"

"I have nothing to say to you," Hoag declared positively.

"Maybe you'll have something to say to me," Wells injected. "Harlan, you dragged me all the way from St. Louis. The least you can do—"

Hoag nodded at Lane. "This gen-

tleman," Harlan said, "found me at my cabin last night. He told me how Allen Morton wants my proxy votes, how Morton was fighting my uncle and Mr. Coleman for control of Pierce, Inc. I didn't know about all that."

"Does it matter?"

"It sure does. I wanted you up here to arrange to sell the stock as soon as it's mine. But the proxy fight changes that. I'm going to keep the stock and give Mr. Morton my proxies. That would have enraged my uncle, and I know it'll infuriate his stepson, who inherited everything I should have inherited. Mr. Lane says that until the estate is settled, Mr. Morton will lend me plenty of money, so Emma and I can live in style."

"What about all those attempts on your life?" James asked. "Don't they worry you any more?"

"I'm not *accusing* my uncle's stepson of anything," Hoag said. "But Mr. Lane is going to protect me from now on."

"I'll bet," Bennett muttered.

Harlan picked up the suitcase. "Sorry, Mr. Wells, to put you to all the trouble. But I'm leaving. C'mon, Jack."

Harlan Hoag and Jack Lane walked outside and into the car, where Emma was waiting in the back. Lane climbed behind the wheel; Harlan got up front beside him.

Emma stuck her head out the window.

"So long," she called with a wave. "We're gonna live in New York! And have a never-endin' ball!"

Lane backed the car around. He wheeled it onto the highway. The car accelerated and disappeared behind a bend in the road.

James glanced at Wells. "Was that really Harlan Hoag?"

"Without a doubt." Glumly, Wells looked down at his Western costume. He pulled at a price tag still attached to his trousers. "Anyhow, I'll have *something* to show for this. My grandchildren will get a big kick out of me in this outfit."

Bennett asked, "We going back to New York?"

"Not immediately," James mused. "Ted, Lane was mighty sure of himself—to bring Harlan Hoag here to pick up Emma. He knew Wells and I would learn about it, and get here before Hoag left. All of which leads me to an entirely new set of speculations. So I want you to go to San Francisco, where you'll talk to a lot of photographers—while I visit every hotel and motel in the Greater St. Louis area."

A tuxedoed waiter padded silently to a rear table in an intimate and expensive Manhattan restaurant, carrying a highball on a tray. Harlan Hoag, in a \$200 blue suit, dabbed at his bearded chin with a napkin. He sat back as the waiter served him the drink and whisked empty plates away. Hoag reached for the tall glass and sipped.

As he did so, Stanford Coleman and Michael Dane James strode into the restaurant and made for him. James was carrying a brief case.

Hoag scowled and put the glass down.

"Afternoon, Harlan," Coleman smiled but did not extend his hand. He sat to one side of Hoag; James pulled up a chair on the other side. "Perhaps you don't recognize me. But I knew you as a boy."

"I recognize you, Mr. Coleman. But as I told you on the phone, I have no wish to speak to you. Or to your spy."

"I don't understand. I'm willing to pay a fair price for your stock. I've *got* the purchase money and Morton can't possibly match my offer. He's not even offering to buy from you. And what will happen if you hold on to your stock and give Morton your proxies? Morton will run the company into the ground. Sooner or later, your stock will go down in value—and not just pennies."

"Mr. Morton," Hoag said, "is all right with me. He understands business, I don't. And you know how I felt about my late uncle. Anybody who was against *him*, I'm *for* him."

"I can't really believe that," Coleman said. "Maybe you didn't like your uncle, but I can't buy the notion that you don't hold *some* gratitude. Bob left a fortune to a shiftless wanderer who openly hated him—just to keep his word to your mother. He didn't have to, you know. But

the stock he left you has taken you out of that rundown shack in New Mexico, out of those slums where you tried to be a beatnik, and it has put you here—living in a first-class hotel and dining at a restaurant where lunch costs ten dollars. No, I don't believe it—you can't be that callous."

"If that's all you have to say—"

"It's not all," James interrupted. He looked at Coleman, who nodded.

"Go ahead, James. I hoped it wouldn't come to this."

"Come to what?" Hoag demanded.

James unzipped the brief case. "Come to an open speculation, Mr. Hoag, on how you would look with your beard shaved off."

"I don't understand," Hoag mumbled.

"Oh, yes, you do. My associate, Mr. Bennett, found a San Francisco photographer who took some pictures of you when you were in the Navy. You had to shave *then*. Here—take a look."

James tossed a sheaf of prints on the table. Stolidly, Hoag gazed at them.

"In those pictures," James went on, "you bear a remarkable resemblance to the Ivy-League-type salesman who was the last man to visit Bob Pierce before he killed himself—such a remarkable resemblance, in fact, that the servant who let you into the house has already made a positive identification."

"He's wrong!"

"We have more than that, Mr. Hoag. I found your signature on a hotel register in St. Louis for that date. You registered under your own name—you didn't know when you did so what was going to happen to your uncle. But it's proof positive you were in St. Louis the day your uncle died."

Hoag remained silent.

"Here's what *I* think happened," James continued. "According to Emma, you wanted to reactivate a silver mine. But that takes money. So you swallowed your pride and did what your uncle told you to do before he'd speak to you again—you shaved off your beard and got new clothes. You went to St. Louis, walked into Pierce's house, and braced him with your silver mine scheme. But because you'd been out of touch so long, you didn't know of your uncle's other troubles. To him, you and your silver mine were the last straw. He threw you out. And a few hours later he killed himself."

"I admit nothing. It's all in your imagination," Hoag protested.

"Is it? Mr. Hoag, we've got you nailed to the wall. When you bought a newspaper that night and read of your uncle's death, you realized how your visit would look. A principal heir turning up after all these years—the last visitor to see Pierce alive tossed out after a quarrel. In view of your character and background, people might jump to all sorts of wild conclusions. So you ran back to New Mexico—to hide in the hills until

your beard and hair grew out again, so you'd never be connected with that well-groomed anonymous salesman.

"You didn't even let your wife see you—you'd never stayed away from her so long before. And that's why you've been stalling even after we found your wife."

James paused. Then he enunciated with deliberate sharpness. "And to explain your aversion to appearing in public until you looked properly shaggy, you invented a story about someone trying to kill you."

Hoag's lips were tight.

James went on, hammering at every word.

"But someone *did* learn your secret. Jack Lane had a man watching Pierce's house. When Lane stole your photos from Pierce's home, including the Navy shots with your face clean-shaven, he recognized you immediately as Pierce's last visitor. So when Lane found you in New Mexico, he told you that if you wanted your secret kept, you'd have to deal with Allen Morton.

"But we know your secret now, and if we talk, everyone will know it. You're caught in the middle. Whichever side you deal with, the other side will expose you."

Harlan Hoag drained his glass. Angrily, he looked at Coleman.

"Is that true? Now *you're* blackmailing me?"

"You're already being blackmailed," Coleman replied, "by Allen Morton who is offering you nothing

for your proxies except his silence and the loan of some money for living expenses. I'm offering you a generous price for all of your stock—much more than you'd get if you dumped it on the open market."

"Even if Morton does expose you," James argued, "the publicity won't kill you. You didn't commit a crime. It's been quite a while since Pierce died, and except for a few scandal sheets, the story won't cause as much of a stir as you think. And if the publicity does upset you—well, with the money Mr. Coleman will pay you for the stock, you and Mrs. Hoag can go into seclusion on the Riviera, or in the South Seas."

"That," Hoag admitted, "is a point." Absently, he tugged at his beard. He looked at Coleman. "Until the estate is settled and title to the stock passes to me, could you advance me some cash?"

"Certainly. Whatever Morton's been paying you, I'll give you double."

"Okay." Harlan rose. "It's a deal. I never did like Morton anyway. He reminds me of Uncle Bob."

Harlan walked out.

"The deadbeat," James observed, "didn't even pay for his meal."

"I'll pay for that too." Coleman snapped his fingers for a waiter. "And I think a drink is in order for us. I only wish your friend Bennett was here too."

"Ted's at his broker's," James explained, "buying up Pierce, Inc. stock like mad. I wonder, Mr. Coleman, if Hoag will ever realize you were bluffing just now—that even if he had turned you down, you wouldn't have exposed his secret. You were bluffing, weren't you?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know. And thank heaven I won't ever find out."



a new story by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

An interesting story that poses curious problems—or we might say, a curious story that poses interesting problems—with more than one contemporary irony along the way. And not the least interesting-curious of the problem-ironies is the question: When is a theft not a theft?

THE PURPLE IS EVERYTHING

by DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS

YOU ARE LIKELY TO SAY, READING about Mary Gardner, that you knew her, or that you once knew someone like her. And well you may have, for while her kind is not legion it endures and sometimes against great popular odds.

You will see Mary Gardner—or someone like her—at the symphony, in the art galleries, at the theater, always well-dressed if not quite fashionable, sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of other women all of whom have an aura, not of sameness, but of mutuality. Each of them has made—well, if not a good life for herself, at least the best possible life it was in her power to make.

Mary Gardner was living at the time in a large East Coast city. In her late thirties, she was a tall lean woman, unmarried, quietly feminine, gentle, even a little hesitant in manner but definite in her tastes. Mary was a designer in a well-known wallpaper house. Her salary allowed her to buy good clothes, to live alone in a pleasant apartment within

walking distance of her work, and to go regularly to the theater and the Philharmonic. As often as she went to the successful plays, she attended little theater and the experimental stage. She was not among those who believed that a play had to say something. She was interested in “the submerged values.” This taste prevailed also in her approach to the visual arts—a boon surely in the wallpaper business whose customers for the most part prefer their walls to be seen but not heard.

In those days Mary was in the habit of going during her lunch hour—or sometimes when she needed to get away from the drawing board—to the Institute of Modern Art which was less than a city block from her office. She had fallen in love with a small, early Monet titled “Trees Near L’Havre,” and when in love Mary was a person of searching devotion. Almost daily she discovered new voices in the woodland scene, trees and sky reflected in a shimmering pool—with more depths in the

sky, she felt, than in the water.

The more she thought about this observation the more convinced she became that the gallery had hung the picture upside down. She evolved a theory about the signature: it was hastily done by the artist, she decided, long after he had finished the painting and perhaps at a time when the light of day was fading. She would have spoken to a museum authority about it—if she had known a museum authority.

Mary received permission from the Institute to sketch within its halls and often stood before the Monet for an hour, sketchbook in hand. By putting a few strokes on paper she felt herself conspicuously inconspicuous among the transient viewers and the guards. She would not for anything have presumed to copy the painting and she was fiercely resentful of the occasional art student who did.

So deep was Mary in her contemplation of Claude Monet's wooded scene that on the morning of the famous museum fire, when she first smelled the smoke, she thought it came from inside the picture itself. She was instantly furious, and by an old association she indicted a whole genre of people—the careless American tourist in a foreign land. She was not so far away from reality, however, that she did not realize almost at once there was actually a fire in the building.

Voices cried out alarms in the corridors and men suddenly were

running. Guards dragged limp hoses along the floor and dropped them—where they lay like great withered snakes over which people leaped as in some tribal rite. Blue smoke lay-crawled the ceiling and then began to fall in angled swatches—like theatrical scrims gone awry. In the far distance fire sirens wailed.

Mary Gardner watched, rooted and muted, as men and women, visitors like herself, hastened past bearing framed pictures in their arms; and in one case two men carried between them a huge Chagall night scene in which the little creatures seemed to be jumping on and off the canvas, having an uproarious time in transit. A woman took the Rouault from the wall beside the Monet and hurried with it after the bearers of the Chagall.

Still Mary hesitated. That duty should compel her to touch where conscience had so long forbidden it—this conflict increased her confusion. Another thrust of smoke into the room made the issue plainly the picture's survival, if not indeed her own. In desperate haste she tried to lift the Monet from the wall, but it would not yield.

She strove, pulling with her full strength—such strength that when the wire broke, she was catapulted backward and fell over the viewer's bench, crashing her head into the painting. Since the canvas was mounted on board, the only misfortune—aside from her bruised head which mattered not at all—was that

the picture had jarred loose from its frame. By then Mary cared little for the frame. She caught up the painting, hugged it to her, and groped her way to the gallery door.

She reached the smoke-bogged corridor at the instant the water pressure brought the hoses violently to life. Jets of water spurted from every connection. Mary shielded the picture with her body until she could edge it within the raincoat she had worn against the morning drizzle.

She hurried along the corridor, the last apparently of the volunteer rescuers. The guards were sealing off the wing of the building, closing the fire prevention door. They showed little patience with her protests, shunting her down the stairs. By the time she reached the lobby the police had cordoned off civilians. Imperious as well as impervious, a policeman escorted her into the crowd, and in the crowd, having no use of her arms—they were still locked around the picture—she was shoved and jostled toward the door and there pitilessly jettisoned into the street. On the sidewalk she had no hope at all of finding anyone in that surging, gaping mob on whom she could safely bestow her art treasure.

People screamed and shouted that they could see the flames. Mary did not look back. She hastened homeward, walking proud and fierce, thinking that the city was after all a jungle. She hugged the picture to

her, her raincoat its only shield but her life a ready forfeit for its safety.

It had been in her mind to telephone the Institute office at once. But in her own apartment, the painting propped up against cushions on the sofa, she reasoned that until the fire was extinguished she had no hope of talking with anyone there. She called her own office and pleaded a sudden illness—something she had eaten at lunch though she had not had a bite since breakfast.

The walls of her apartment were hung with what she called her "pot-pourri": costume prints and color lithographs—all, she had been proud to say, limited editions or artists' prints. She had sometimes thought of buying paintings, but plainly she could not afford her own tastes. On impulse now, she took down an Italian lithograph and removed the glass and mat from the wooden frame. The Monet fit quite well. And to her particular delight she could now hang it right side up. As though with a will of its own, the painting claimed the place on her wall most favored by the light of day.

There is no way of describing Mary's pleasure in the company she kept that afternoon. She would not have taken her eyes from the picture at all except for the joy that was renewed at each returning. Reluctantly she turned on the radio at five o'clock so that she might learn more of the fire at the Institute. It had been extensive and

destructive—an entire wing of the building was gutted.

She listened with the remote and somewhat smug solicitude that one bestows on other people's tragedies to the enumeration of the paintings which had been destroyed. The mention of "Trees Near L'Havre" startled her. A full moment later she realized the explicit meaning of the announcer's words. She turned off the radio and sat a long time in the flood of silence.

Then she said aloud tentatively, "You are a thief, Mary Gardner," and after a bit repeated, "Oh, yes. You are a thief." But she did not mind at all. Nothing so portentous had ever been said about her before, even by herself.

She ate her dinner from a tray before the painting, having with it a bottle of French wine. Many times that night she went from her bed to the living-room door until she seemed to have slept between so many awakenings. At last she did sleep.

But the first light of morning fell on Mary's conscience as early as upon the painting. After one brief visit to the living room she made her plans with the care of a religious novice well aware of the devil's constancy. She dressed more severely than was her fashion, needing herringbone for backbone—the ridiculous phrase kept running through her mind at breakfast. In final appraisal of herself in the hall mirror she thought she looked like

the headmistress of an English girls' school, which she supposed satisfactory to the task before her.

Just before she left the apartment, she spent one last moment alone with the Monet. Afterward, wherever, however the Institute chose to hang it, she might hope to feel that a little part of it was forever hers.

On the street she bought a newspaper and confirmed the listing of "Trees Near L'Havre." Although that wing of the Institute had been destroyed, many of its paintings had been carried to safety by way of the second-floor corridor.

Part of the street in front of the Institute was still cordoned off when she reached it, congesting the flow of morning traffic. The police on duty were no less brusque than those whom Mary had encountered the day before. She was seized by the impulse to postpone her mission—an almost irresistible temptation, especially when she was barred from entering the museum unless she could show a pass such as had been issued to all authorized personnel.

"Of course I'm not authorized," she exclaimed. "If I were I shouldn't be out here."

The policeman directed her to the sergeant in charge. He was at the moment disputing with the fire insurance representative as to how much of the street could be used for the salvage operation. "The business of this street is business," the sergeant said, "and that's my business."

Mary waited until the insurance

man stalked into the building. He did not need a pass, she noticed. "Excuse me, officer, I have a painting—"

"Lady . . ." He drew the long breath of patience. "Yes, ma'am?"

"Yesterday during the fire a painting was supposedly destroyed—a lovely, small Monet called—"

"Was there now?" the sergeant interrupted. Lovely small Monets really touched him.

Mary was becoming flustered in spite of herself. "It's listed in this morning's paper as having been destroyed. But it wasn't. I have it at home."

The policeman looked at her for the first time with a certain compassion. "On your living-room wall, no doubt," he said with deep knowl- ingness.

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

He took her gently but firmly by the arm. "I tell you what you do. You go along to police headquarters on Fifty-seventh Street. You know where that is, don't you? Just tell them all about it like a good girl." He propelled her into the crowd and there released her. Then he raised his voice: "Keep moving! You'll see it all on the television."

Mary had no intention of going to police headquarters where, she presumed, men concerned with armed robbery, mayhem, and worse were even less likely to understand the subtlety of her problem. She went to her office and throughout the morning tried periodically to reach the

museum curator's office by telephone. On each of her calls either the switchboard was tied up or his line was busy for longer than she could wait.

Finally she hit on the idea of asking for the Institute's Public Relations Department, and to someone there, obviously distracted—Mary could hear parts of three conversations going on at the same time—she explained how during the fire she had saved Monet's "Trees Near L'Havre."

"Near where, madam?" the voice asked.

"L'Havre." Mary spelled it. "By Monet," she added.

"Is that two words or one?" the voice asked.

"Please transfer me to the curator's office," Mary said and ran her fingers up and down the lapel of her herringbone suit.

Mary thought it a wise precaution to meet the Institute's representative in the apartment lobby where she first asked to see his credentials. He identified himself as the man to whom she had given her name and address on the phone. Mary signaled for the elevator and thought about his identification: Robert Attlebury III. She had seen his name on the museum roster: Curator of . . . she could not remember.

He looked every inch the curator, standing erect and remote while the elevator bore them slowly upward.

A curator perhaps, but she would not have called him a connoisseur. One with his face and disposition would always taste and spit out, she thought. She could imagine his scorn of things he found distasteful, and instinctively she knew herself to be distasteful to him.

Not that it really mattered what he felt about her. She was nobody. But how must the young unknown artist feel standing with his work before such superciliousness? Or had he a different mien and manner for people of his own kind? In that case she would have given a great deal for the commonest of his courtesies.

"Everything seems so extraordinary—in retrospect," Mary said to brook the silence of their seemingly endless ascent.

"How fortunate for you," he said, and Mary thought, perhaps it was.

When they reached the door of her apartment, she paused before turning the key. "Shouldn't you have brought a guard—or someone?"

He looked down on her as from Olympus. "I am someone."

Mary resolved to say nothing more. She opened the door and left it open. He preceded her and moved across the foyer into the living room and stood before the Monet. His rude directness oddly comforted her: he did, after all, care about painting. She ought not to judge men, she thought, from her limited experience of them.

He gazed at the Monet for a few moments, then he tilted his head ever so slightly from one side to the other. Mary's heart began to beat erratically. For months she had wanted to discuss with someone who really knew about such things her theory of what was reflection and what was reality in "Trees Near L'Havre." But now that her chance was at hand she could not find the words.

Still, she had to say something—something . . . casual. "The frame is mine," she said, "but for the picture's protection you may take it. I can get it the next time I'm at the museum."

Surprisingly, he laughed. "It may be the better part at that," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

He actually looked at her. "Your story is ingenious, madam, but then it was warranted by the occasion."

"I simply do not understand what you are saying," Mary said.

"I have seen better copies than this one," he said. "It's too bad your ingenuity isn't matched by a better imitation."

Mary was too stunned to speak. He was about to go. "But . . . it's signed," Mary blurted out, and feebly tried to direct his attention to the name in the upper corner.

"Which makes it forgery, doesn't it?" he said almost solicitously.

His preciseness, his imperturbability in the light of the horrendous thing he was saying, etched detail into the nightmare.

"That's not my problem!" Mary cried, giving voice to words she did not mean, saying what amounted to a betrayal of the painting she so loved.

"Oh, but it is. Indeed it is, and I may say a serious problem if I were to pursue it."

"Please do pursue it!" Mary cried.

Again he smiled, just a little. "That is not the Institute's way of dealing with these things."

"You do not *like* Monet," Mary challenged desperately, for he had started toward the door.

"That's rather beside the point, isn't it?"

"You don't *know* Monet. You can't! Not possibly!"

"How could I dislike him if I didn't know him? Let me tell you something about Monet." He turned back to the picture and trailed a finger over one vivid area. "In Monet the purple is everything."

"The purple?" Mary said.

"You're beginning to see it yourself now, aren't you?" His tone verged on the pedagogic.

Mary closed her eyes and said, "I only know how this painting came to be here."

"I infinitely prefer not to be made your confidant in that matter," he said. "Now I have rather more important matters to take care of." And again he started toward the door.

Mary hastened to block his escape. "It doesn't matter what you think of Monet, or of me, or of any-

thing. You've got to take that painting back to the museum."

"And be made a laughingstock when the hoax is discovered?" He set an arm as stiff as a brass rail between them and moved out of the apartment.

Mary followed him to the elevator, now quite beside herself. "I shall go to the newspapers!" she cried.

"I think you might regret it."

"Now I know. I understand!" Mary saw the elevator door open. "You were glad to think the Monet had been destroyed in the fire."

"Savage!" he said.

Then the door closed between them.

In time Mary persuaded—and it wasn't easy—certain experts, even an art critic, to come and examine "her" Monet. It was a more expensive undertaking than she could afford—all of them seemed to expect refreshments, including expensive liquors. Her friends fell in with "Mary's hoax," as they came to call her story, and she was much admired in an ever-widening and increasingly esoteric circle for her unwavering account of how she had come into possession of a "genuine Monet." Despite the virtue of simplicity, a trait since childhood, she found herself using words in symbolic combinations—the language of the company she now kept—and people far wiser than she would say of her: "How perceptive!" or "What in-

sight!"—and then pour themselves another drink.

One day her employer, the great man himself, who prior to her "acquisition" had not known whether she lived in propriety or in sin, arrived at her apartment at cocktail time bringing with him a famous art historian.

The expert smiled happily over his second Scotch while Mary told again the story of the fire at the Institute and how she had simply walked home with the painting because she could not find anyone to whom to give it. While she talked, his knowing eyes wandered from her face to the painting, to his glass, to the painting, and back to her face again.

"Oh, I could believe it," he said when she had finished. "It's the sort of mad adventure that actually could happen." He set his glass down carefully where she could see that it was empty. "I suppose you know that there has never been an officially complete catalogue of Monet's work?"

"No," she said, and refilled his glass.

"It's so, unfortunately. And the sad truth is that quite a number of museums today are hanging paintings under his name that are really unauthenticated."

"And mine?" Mary said, lifting a chin she tried vainly to keep from quivering.

Her guest smiled. "*Must* you know?"

For a time after that Mary tried to avoid looking at the Monet. It was not that she liked it less, but that now she somehow liked herself less in its company. What had happened, she realized, was that, like the experts, she now saw not the painting, but herself.

This was an extraordinary bit of self-discovery for one who had never had to deal severely with her own psyche. Till now, so far as Mary was concerned, the chief function of a mirror had been to determine the angle of a hat. But the discovery of the flaw does not in itself effect a cure; often it aggravates the condition. So with Mary.

She spent less and less time at home, and it was to be said for some of her new-found friends that they thought it only fair to reciprocate for having enjoyed the hospitality of so enigmatically clever a hostess. How often had she as a girl been counseled by parent and teacher to get out more, to see more people. Well, Mary was at last getting out more. And in the homes of people who had felt free to comment on her home and its possessions, she too felt free to comment. The more odd her comment—the nastier, she would once have said of it—the more popular she became. Oh, yes. Mary was seeing more people, lots more people.

In fact, her insurance agent—who was in the habit of just dropping in to make his quarterly collection—had to get up early one

Saturday morning to make sure he caught her at home.

It was a clear sharp day, and the hour at which the Monet was most luminous. The man sat staring at it, fascinated. Mary was amused, remembering how hurt he always was that his clients failed to hang his company calendar in prominence. While she was gone from the room to get her check book, he got up and touched the surface of the painting.

"Ever think of taking out insurance on that picture?" he asked when she returned. "Do you mind if I ask how much it's worth?"

"It cost me . . . a great deal," Mary said, and was at once annoyed with both him and herself.

"I tell you what," the agent said. "I have a friend who appraises these objects of art for some of the big galleries, you know? Do you mind if I bring him round and see what he thinks it's worth?"

"No, I don't mind," Mary said in utter resignation.

And so the appraiser came and looked carefully at the painting. He hedged about putting a value on it. He wasn't the last word on these Nineteenth Century impressionists and he wanted to think it over. But that afternoon he returned just as Mary was about to go out, and with him came a bearded gentleman who spoke not once to Mary or to the appraiser, but chatted constantly with himself while he scrutinized the painting. Then with a "tsk, tsk, tsk," he took the painting from the

wall, examined the back, and re-hung it—but reversing it, top to bottom.

Mary felt the old flutter interrupt her heartbeat, but it passed quickly.

Even walking out of her house the bearded gentleman did not speak to her; she might have been invisible. It was the appraiser who murmured his thanks but not a word of explanation. Since the expert had not drunk her whiskey Mary supposed the amenities were not required of him.

She was prepared to forget him as she had the others—it was easy now to forget them all; but when she came home to change between matinee and cocktails, another visitor was waiting. She noticed him in the lobby and realized, seeing the doorman say a word to him just as the elevator door closed off her view, that his business was with her. The next trip of the elevator brought him to her door.

"I've come about the painting, Miss Gardner," he said, and offered his card. She had opened the door only as far as the latch chain permitted. He was representative of the Continental Assurance Company, Limited.

She slipped off the latch chain.

Courteous and formal behind his double-breasted suit, he waited for Mary to seat herself. He sat down neatly opposite her, facing the painting, for she sat beneath it, erect, and she hoped, formidable.

"Lovely," he said, gazing at the

Monet. Then he wrenched his eyes from it. "But I'm not an expert," he added and gently cleared his throat. He was chagrined, she thought, to have allowed himself even so brief a luxury of the heart.

"But is it authenticated?" She said it much as she would once have thought but not said, *Fie on you!*

"Sufficient to my company's requirements," he said. "But don't misunderstand—we are not proposing to make any inquiries. We are always satisfied in such delicate negotiations just to have the painting back."

Mary did not misunderstand, but she certainly did not understand either.

He took from his inside pocket a piece of paper which he placed on the coffee table and with the tapering fingers of an artist—or a banker—or a pickpocket—he gently maneuvered it to where Mary could see that he was proffering a certified check.

He did not look at her and therefore missed the spasm she felt contorting her mouth. "The day of the fire," she thought, but the words never passed her lips.

She took up the check in her hand: \$20,000.

"May I use your phone, Miss Gardner?"

Mary nodded and went into the kitchen where she again looked at the check. It was a great deal of money, she thought wryly, to be offered in compensation for a few months' care of a friend.

She heard her visitor's voice as he spoke into the telephone—an expert now, to judge by his tone. A few minutes later she heard the front door close. When she went back into the living room both her visitor and the Monet were gone . . .

Some time later Mary attended the opening of the new wing of the Institute. She recognized a number of people she had not known before and whom, she supposed, she was not likely to know much longer.

They had hung the Monet upside down again.

Mary thought of it after she got home, and as though two rights must surely right a possible wrong, she turned the check upside down while she burned it over the kitchen sink.



GENTLEMEN AND PLAYERS

by **ANTHONY BOUCHER**

We all remember the rare instances of perfection, when a film actor has been absolutely and unquestionably *right* as one of our favorite sleuths: Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes, Edna May Oliver as Hildegard Withers, Jean Gabin as Maigret, William Powell as Nick Charles or as Philo Vance. But many notable actors have played these and other roles with less memorable success. Can you match the following detectives with the actors who have interpreted them on the screen?

- | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Father Brown | A. Charles Laughton |
| 2. Sherlock Holmes | B. Walter Connolly |
| 3. Maigret | C. Ricardo Cortez |
| 4. Perry Mason | D. Louis Hayward |
| 5. Pamela North | E. Zasu Pitts |
| 6. Ellery Queen | F. Paul Lukas |
| 7. Sam Spade | G. Raymond Massey |
| 8. Simon Templar (The Saint) | H. Donald Woods |
| 9. Philo Vance | I. Eddie Quillan |
| 10. Hildegard Withers | J. Gracie Allen |

ANSWERS

1 B. 2 G. 3 A. 4 C & H. 5 J. 6 H & I. 7 C. 8 D. 9 F. 10 E.

. . . and so the world learns, with profound gratitude, that Schlock Homes's last bow was not, to mix metaphors, his "swan song," and that, as Dr. Watney so aptly phrased it, the time Homes spent away from London and from his profession has not dulled his analytical ability in the slightest, and that, ominously, Professor Marty is still alive, and that the great detective's new bow has at least two strings, Schlock House and P. G. Wodehomes—or have we mixed monickers as well as metaphors?

THE RETURN OF SCHLOCK HOMES

by ROBERT L. FISH

IT WAS WITH BITTER THOUGHTS that I trudged down the broad stone staircase of St. Barts that late afternoon of a cool September day in '62 and turned my steps in the direction of the modest quarters I had—so long ago, it seemed!—shared with my dear friend Mr. Schlock Homes. The day had gone quite badly: the cardioectomy I had performed that morning had seemed successful and yet the patient had inexplicably died. Far worse, the pretty young nurse I had asked to commiserate with me by sharing an afternoon libation had curtly refused my offer.

It was in a black mood indeed, therefore, that I tramped through the streets, recalling in my memory the last time I had seen Homes, and the vivid scene of that struggle on the rocky cliffs of the Corniche—Professor Marty armed with gleaming sword, and my friend with only a fragile bit of ashwood, and the hungry rocks below reaching up

through the angry surf! And then, when the Professor had lost his balance and gone over the edge, that horrible moment when Homes, his last bow ruined, had gone to fling it to the waves and had also fallen to his death!

Schlock Homes no more!

Even after these many weeks it still seemed impossible. With a deep sigh that owed, perhaps, almost as much to the memory of my friend as to that of the young nurse, I turned at last into Bagel Street, came to our rooms at Number 221B, and clumped up the shadowy stairway.

The room was darkening with the growing evening, but sufficient light still remained for me to make my way to the bookshelf and remove my address-book without the necessity of turning up the lamp. I was in the process of tearing out the page with the young nurse's name on it, ripping it angrily into shreds and flinging the pieces from me, when a

sudden sound gave me pause. Had I not been positive of Mrs. Essex's intense dislike of felines, I could have sworn that a cat was mewing in the room.

Turning, I searched the gloom of one corner, and there, to my utter consternation, sprawled a lanky figure idly drawing a bow across the strings of a violin and producing what was, even to my untutored ear, a reasonable facsimile of Zetzen-bull's Suite Sioux. So grave was the shock that I am afraid my mouth fell open.

"Homes!" I cried, my knees weakening.

"Watney," replied my friend with a dry chuckle, "your mouth is open." He laid aside his instrument and drew himself lazily to his feet. "In addition, you are littering the floor."

"Homes!" I repeated, my eyes widened in shock. "You are alive! How is it possible?"

He eyed me thoughtfully. "When I was so careless as to fall over that parapet in Monaco," he replied after a pause, "I was fortunate in selecting a spot where some night fishermen were preparing to spread their nets for drying, pulling them taut before fastening them down. Professor Marty had already managed to free himself from the cords and was scuttling off down the beach when I arrived. Needless to say, a second tangling of their nets did little to soothe the fishermen, and by the time I could assuage their

anger and climb back to the road, you had already disappeared. Upon arrival at the hotel I found you had taken my effects with you, and I was therefore forced to remain in Europe, although I was not particularly adverse to so remaining."

"And what brings about your return now, Homes?" I asked curiously.

The great detective smiled at me. "What brings about your haste to tear pages from that small morocco notebook, if questions as to motives are being asked? You enter the room and immediately repair to the book-case, take down your address-book, and violently rip out the pages. The only possible conclusion one can draw from your actions is that you are in dire need of the binding. Taking into consideration the season, one can only conclude that you have decided to go hunting and require elbow-patches for your hunting-jacket."

"Homes!" I repeated once again. "You have not changed!" I stared at him carefully. "But what brings you back to London? And are you here to stay?"

My friend walked over and raised the lamp, bringing into sharp focus his familiar and beloved profile.

"Why, as to that, Watney," he replied easily, "only time can tell. Actually, the need of an old friend was communicated to me and I felt it necessary, in his cause, to return."

"Homes!" I said, overwhelmed with emotion at his statement.

"Lord Epsworth," he continued, much as if I had not spoken. "Surely you remember him?"

"Of course," I replied. Lord Epsworth was an old friend of ours whose eccentricity for having all neighbors at a minimum distance of three miles from his estate had brought this measure to be known in those parts as the Epsworth League. "Just what is causing his Lordship concern?"

Homes smiled gravely. "Later," he said quietly. His keen eyes surveyed me. "You appear a bit under the weather, Watney. If you are free to join me in this case I should be much delighted. I suggest that the fresh air of the highlands may be just the prescription you require for the obvious disappointment of missing your hunting."

"I should like that, Homes!" I cried.

"Good. Then I suggest you pack without delay, for in anticipation of your acceptance I have booked us space on the Glasgow Express which leaves Euston within the hour."

I went to my room and began throwing clothes into my old campaign bag, the young nurse now forgotten. The thought of Homes's return, and his request for my help on a case, was like wine to me. Feeling better by the moment, I joined Homes in the living-room and we descended together to take a hansom to the station.

We arrived in good time, and once

seated in our compartment Homes lit a Bulgarian and leaned back, flicking ashes on the floor. I smiled at the well-remembered gesture.

"This is like old times, Homes," I remarked warmly. "It has been some time since a case has taken us above the Scottish border."

"It has indeed," he conceded. "The last time was when we were so fortunate as to prevent warfare among some of the eminent Scottish families, when their tempers got the better of their judgement."

I nodded, recalling the case well. In my notes it still remains waiting to be delineated, bearing the title of *The Adventure of the Steamed Clans*.

"Well do I remember, Homes," I said, and then leaned forward. "But enough of these memories. If you don't mind, please favor me with the details of Lord Epsworth's problem."

A frown crossed my friend's face. He reached forward, crushing his cigarette out against the carriage window-sill, and turned to me in all seriousness.

"The facts are these, Watney. As you know, Lord Epsworth is the owner of a famous pig, known to all fanciers as the Duchess of Bloatings, and winner of countless medals and ribbons. Well, to be blunt, the Duchess of Bloatings is missing. Upon learning of his loss, Lord Epsworth immediately instituted a search, and even managed to engage the services of a wandering band of

gypsies he had allowed to camp on his grounds, as the Duchess of Bloatings seemed particularly partial to the refuse their campsite offered.

"But all to no avail. When, as of last evening, no sign of the missing animal had been noted, he thought to advise the local constabulary, who in turn made contact with Scotland Yard, who got in touch with the Sûreté-Générale, who managed to locate me. It is for the purpose of finding the missing prize-winning pig that we are travelling north."

I nodded my head in understanding. "Tell me, Homes, do you have any theories on the matter?"

"None," he replied honestly. "Until we are upon the actual scene, I fear there is little to do. I suggest we dine and then have the attendant make up our beds. My trip from the Continent was quite tiring, and we shall have need for clear heads to-morrow!"

The following morning we engaged a trap at the station and drove through the sparkling Scottish sunlight to Bloatings, the home of Lord Epsworth and—until recently—his prize pig as well. We found his Lordship puttering in the garden, using an old wood-shafted putterer of a type long out of style below the border. At sight of the two of us he dropped the club and hurried forward, peering at us queringly through his thick spectacles.

"Homes!" he cried at last in recognition. "You have come!" He paused. "But why?"

"The Duchess of Bloatings," Homes replied imperturbably.

"A beautiful animal," his Lordship stated, nodding his head. But then his face fell and he added sadly, "But she is missing."

"I know," Homes said gently. "You asked me to investigate."

"I did? That's right, I did, didn't I? Come, let us repair to the study and I shall give you all the details of this foul kidnapping!" He paused uncertainly, staring about. "Now, where is the study?"

Homes, as usual, was able to supply the answer to the question, and moments later we found ourselves seated in the vast library and being served coffee.

"And now, Lord Epsworth," Homes said calmly, putting down his cup, "the details, if you please."

"Of course," his Lordship said, smiling agreeably. "The details . . . Of what, Homes?"

"The loss of your pig," Homes reminded him.

"Oh! Yes! Well, it seems that about two evenings ago—or it may have been three—or was it four?—the trainer, Jerkins, went to feed the Duchess and she wasn't there. Most unusual, I assure you. She was often late for shows, and occasionally for fairs, but never for meals. Jerkins looked about, of course, but he failed to spot her. Eventually he told me and I also looked for her,

but to tell the truth I'm rather near-sighted. Actually," his Lordship said sadly, "we never did find her."

Homes nodded thoughtfully. "Is there any possibility she may have merely wandered away?"

"The Duchess?" His Lordship shook his head. "She weighed over twenty-two stone. Normally she had trouble standing, let alone wandering."

"I see. Tell me, your Lordship, do you recall anything out of the ordinary that may have occurred that evening? Or any unusual sound that might lend itself as some sort of clue?"

Lord Epsworth thought deeply for several moments. "Possibly the word 'unusual' is too strong," he said at last, "particularly since it happened every day. But I do seem to recall the cook's children singing one of their little nursery rhymes. I had quite a time understanding Jerkins at first, the little ones made so much noise!"

A sudden gleam appeared in my friend's eyes. "Nursery rhyme?" he asked softly. "Very interesting! From the mouths of babes, you know, Lord Epsworth. . . . Can you recall exactly which nursery rhyme they were singing?"

Lord Epsworth frowned. "Let me see . . ." Suddenly he looked up, his eyes bright. "By Jove, Homes, you are amazing! Now that I remember, they were singing some song about pig-stealing!"

"Ah!" Homes said in satisfaction. "And where might I find these children?"

Lord Epsworth's face fell. "In London, I'm afraid. They are off on a holiday to their home in the section of Stepney." His face cleared as one mystery, at least, was resolved for him. "So that's why it's been so quiet here lately!"

Homes disregarded this. "Then we shall have to solve the case without their help," said he, and springing to his feet he began to pace before the library shelves, peering intently at the titles facing him.

Suddenly he withdrew a book and began to study its contents. When he turned to us there was a smile of satisfaction upon his face.

"Can this be the nursery rhyme the children were singing, your Lordship?" he enquired, and began reading aloud:

"Tom, Tom, the piper's son
'Stole a pig and away he run.'"

Lord Epsworth sat up, astounded. "Homes, you are a genius! How you do it I'll never know! That was it exactly!"

"But in what way does it help us, Homes?" I asked, confused by the entire affair.

"That we have yet to determine," replied my friend evenly. He replaced the book on the shelf and turned to Lord Epsworth. "We had best get to work. I shall want a word with Jerkins and a look about. As soon as I have news for you, I shall be back."

"Do that," said his Lordship heartily, and then paused. "And when you are speaking with Jerkins, ask him if he's seen the Duchess of Bloatings about anywhere, will you?"

Without further conversation we left the library and made our way towards the sties that constituted Jerkins' domain. Until now I had held my tongue, but I thought I saw the solution to the mystery and could not refrain from voicing it.

"You know Lord Epsworth as well as I do, Homes," I said simply. "In my opinion he did not lose this pig, he merely misplaced her!"

Homes shook his head. "The thought had also occurred to me, Watney, but a twenty-two stone pig is difficult to misplace. Besides, you are forgetting the nursery rhyme."

"I fail to see what a nursery rhyme could possibly have to do with it," I replied with some exasperation.

"You shall," he answered cryptically, and turned into the pen area.

Jerkins was there, mournfully cleaning the empty pen of his lost champion, but try as he would to help us, the poor fellow had no useful ideas on the subject, although he did recall the children singing that evening.

Homes dismissed the man and turned, studying the surrounding countryside carefully. In the distance the camp of the gypsies could be seen, and with a brief nod in my direction, Homes started off across

the moors with the camp as his destination.

The camp was typical, consisting of ornately painted charabancs drawn in a rude circle about a campfire from which the odor of a succulent barbecue could be discerned. At our approach a tall, swarthy fellow rose from the group beside the fire and made his way hastily towards us, meeting us beyond the circle of the charabancs.

"Yes?" he asked truculently. "What do you want here?"

"Please forgive our intrusion," Homes said placatingly. "We are investigating the disappearance of his Lordship's prize pig, and we thought it possible that you might have noticed some strangers in the vicinity the night of the event."

The dark-faced man opposite us shook his head. "I have been asked before and I have answered!" he said with some anger. "Do you doubt the word of Tomás, King of the Gypsies?"

Homes hastened to reassure him, and with the man glowering at us threateningly we withdrew and headed back in the direction of the main house, although the delicious odor of the meal cooking over the spit made me realize we had scarcely eaten that day.

"You were exceptionally polite to that crude fellow, Homes," I said.

Homes nodded. "You must remember that the gypsies were at their meal," he replied. "It would have been the worst possible form to

interrupt them. Besides, I am beginning to get a solution to this puzzling affair and my time would be better spent in pursuing it."

While he spoke we found we had returned to the pen area, and Homes fell silent, dropping into a brown study, staring about him with a blank expression which might have misled others, but which I recognized as his normal expression when his great brain was busy with an abstruse problem.

I could hear him muttering to himself and suddenly I realized that he was softly repeating the children's nursery rhyme to himself. With a puzzled shake of his head he was about to leave when his eye happened to chance upon a mark in the dust at his feet, and instantly he was a changed man. With a muffled cry he fell to his knees and stared in fascination at the smudge.

"Homes!" I cried. "What is it?"

Without deigning to answer he reached into his pocket and withdrew his magnifying-glass, bending closer to whatever had caught his eye. I could see his thin figure stiffen in barely concealed excitement as he read some significance in what appeared to me to be a mere smudge in the dust. Suddenly he looked up, his eyes gleaming in a manner I well knew.

"This mark!" he cried. "Do you see it?"

I bent closer, but again I could make nothing of the slight smudge before us.

"What is it, Homes?" I asked, mystified. "Certainly it is not a footprint!"

"But it is!" he exclaimed. "It is! Not, it is true, from a conventional boot—but a footprint none the less! As you know, I have made an extensive study of the wooden shapes and forms upon which various Indian tribes mould their moccasins, for each tribe uses a different form. And I tell you, without any doubt, that this mark was made by a moccasin formed on the last of the Mohicans!"

"Indians, Homes?" I cried. "American Indians? Here? In Scotland?"

But my friend was paying me no heed. Once again I could hear him muttering the nursery rhyme, almost as an incantation, while his eyes stared fixedly at the smudge before him. At last he nodded briskly and rose to his feet.

"Of course!" he said softly to himself. "I am a fool! It was all there before me!" He turned to me, his fine dark eyes brooding. "I am afraid we must be the bearers of sad tidings to his Lordship. The Duchess of Bloatings is gone forever. By this time she is undoubtedly aboard a sailing ship bound for the American colonies, stolen by the savages of the Chesapeake region!"

"But, Homes!" I cried. "Certainly you did not come to this conclusion on the basis of that single smudge in the dust?"

"That was but the final proof," he replied. "Remember the nursery

rhyme. And the fact that the cook's children come from Stepney!"

"Really, Homes!" I said with irritation. "You speak in riddles! What brings you to this bizarre conclusion?"

"Later you shall know all," he said grimly. "At the moment we must break the bad news to his Lordship. It will be hard for him to accept, but at least he will not suffer the pangs of uncertainty, not knowing what has happened to his pet pig. At least he will not spend his days in vain hope, waiting endlessly for one that will never return."

Turning, he led the way from the sties and we went back to the garden. There we found Lord Epsworth, and Homes gave him the sad news. His Lordship took it as well as could be expected, even going so far as to thank Homes for his efforts. As he took leave of us he wrung Homes's hand.

"It was good to see you, Homes," he said as we climbed into our trap. "Thank you for coming." He stared up at us through his thick spectacles. "And if you see the Duchess of Bloatings along the road on your way to the station, would you mind pointing her back this way?"

Once in our compartment in the train I could contain myself no longer. "All right, Homes," I said shortly. "You have been mysterious long enough. Please explain yourself, and your rather odd conclusions regarding this case."

"Of course," my friend replied, turning to me with a faint smile. "I should have thought by now you would have seen the answer for yourself, for it was surely simple enough."

He leaned back, lit a Trichinosis, and began his explanation in that pedantic manner I had long since learned to accept.

"The Indian footprint was but the final step in the proof, Watney. The nursery rhyme was the first and most important, and by itself should have given me all the information I required to solve the problem.

"Let us examine the words those children were singing. They went: *Tom, Tom, the piper's son*, and so on. Certainly there can be no doubt of the Indian connotation: What other groups use tom-toms? I saw this fact fairly early, but still the question remained: Which Indians? There are, as you know, many different tribes scattered along the coast of the American colonies.

"The answer, of course, was easily discernible once I remembered that the cook's children were from Stepney, born within the sound of Bow Bells, and therefore Cockney. *Piper*, of course, is the Cockney pronunciation of 'paper', and the *Sun* is a paper published in the village of Baltimore. The discovery of the Mohican moccasin-print merely confirmed what I had long suspected—that this tribe was far more nomadic than their history records."

I started at my friend in awe. "Homes," I exclaimed with admiration, "the time you spent away from London and from your profession has not dulled your analytical ability in the slightest!" A sudden thought occurred to me. "But how were these savages able to spirit the beast all the way to the coast without it making an outcry of some sort?"

"Most probably through the use of one of their many herbs," Homes replied thoughtfully. "The fact that the miscreants were able to silence the Duchess—that by itself should have led me to suspect the native cunning of the American." A faint smile crossed his fine features. "Possibly this very fact should be put to use. If you will allow me to suggest a title for this adventure, Watney, should you ever put it to paper, I would suggest *The Adventure of the Disgruntled Pig*."

I shook my head. "No, Homes," I replied affectionately. "This case, which leads me to hope you will return permanently to Bagel Street and to your profession, can only be titled *The Return of Schlock Homes*!"

It was the following week, and Homes had fallen easily into his old routine, when I came into the

breakfast room one morning just as our page was delivering a large package to my friend, who was seated at table smoking his first after-breakfast pipe.

Homes waved me to a seat while he broke the seal of the bundle and extracted a large pig-skin port-manteau. With raised eyebrows he read the accompanying message and then passed it across the table for my perusal.

Dear Mr. Homes (the message read): Lord Epsworth has told me of your solution to the mysterious disappearance of the Duchess of Bloatings, and in congratulations may I offer this token of my appreciation.

The letter was signed: *Tomás, King of the Gypsies.*

"This is rather odd, Homes," I said staring at the letter.

"I'm not so sure," Homes replied thoughtfully. "Had I not been on the scene, it is possible that suspicion might have fallen upon the poor gypsy." His warm eyes came up to mine. "Do you know, Watney, at times the pleasure of saving the innocent can be even greater than the satisfaction of punishing the guilty."

"Amen to that," I said, and reached for the kippers.



GOOD NIGHT FOR A MURDER

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

(Continued from page 42)

Major Eustace received Chief Inspector Japp and Hercule Poirot with the easy assurance of a man of the world.

His flat was small, a mere *pied-à-terre*, as he explained. He offered the two men a drink and when that was refused he took out his cigarette case.

Both Japp and Poirot accepted cigarettes. A quick glance passed between them.

"You smoke Turkish I see," said Japp as he twirled the cigarette between his fingers.

"Yes. I'm sorry, do you prefer a gasper? I've got one somewhere about."

"No, no, this will do me very well." Then Japp leaned forward and his tone changed. "Perhaps you can guess, Major Eustace, what I came to see you about?"

The other shook his head. His manner was nonchalant. Major Eustace was a tall man, good-looking in a somewhat coarse fashion. There was a puffiness round the eyes—small, crafty eyes that belied the good-humored geniality of his manner.

He said, "No, I've no idea what brings such a big gun as a Chief Inspector to see me. Anything to do with my car?"

"No, it is not your car. I think you knew a Mrs. Barbara Allen, Major Eustace?"

The major leaned back, puffed out a cloud of smoke, and said in an enlightened voice, "Oh, so that's it!

Of course, I should have guessed. Very sad business."

"You know about it?"

"Saw it in the paper last night. Too bad."

"You knew Mrs. Allen out in India, I think."

"Yes, that's some years ago now."

"Did you also know her husband?"

There was a pause—a mere fraction of a second—but during that fraction the little pig eyes flashed a quick look at the faces of the two men.

Then the major answered, "No, as a matter of fact, I never came across Allen."

"But you know something about him?"

"Heard he was by way of being a bad hat. Of course, that was only rumor."

"Mrs. Allen did not say anything?"

"Never talked about him."

"You were on intimate terms with her?"

Major Eustace shrugged. "We were old friends, you know. But we didn't see each other very often."

"But you did see her that last evening? The evening of November fifth?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did."

"You called at her house, I think."

Major Eustace nodded. His voice took on a gentle, regretful note.

"Yes, she asked me to advise her about some investments. Of course, I can see what you're driving at—her state of mind—all that sort of thing. Well, really, it's very difficult to say.

Her manner seemed normal enough and yet she *was* a bit jumpy, come to think of it."

"But she gave you no hint as to what she contemplated doing?"

"Not the least in the world. As a matter of fact, when I said goodbye I said I'd ring her up soon and we'd do a show together."

"You said you'd ring her up. Those were your last words?"

"Yes."

"Curious. I have information that you said something quite different."

Eustace changed color.

"Well, of course, I can't remember the exact words."

"My information is that what you actually said was, '*Well, think it over and let me know.*'"

"Let me see, yes, I believe you're right. Not exactly that. I think I was suggesting she should let me know when she was free."

"Not quite the same thing, is it?" said Japp.

"My dear fellow, you can't expect a man to remember word for word what he said on any given occasion."

"And what did Mrs. Allen reply?"

"She said she'd give me a ring. That is, as near as I can remember."

"And then you said, '*All right. So long.*'"

"Probably. Something of the kind anyway."

Japp said quietly, "You say that Mrs. Allen asked you to advise her about her investments. Did she, by any chance, entrust you with the sum of two hundred pounds in cash to invest for her?"

Eustace's face flushed. He leaned forward and growled, "What the devil do you mean by that?"

"Did she or did she not?"

"That's my business, Mr. Chief Inspector."

Japp said quietly, "Mrs. Allen drew out the sum of two hundred pounds in cash from her bank. Some of the money was in five-pound notes. The numbers of these can, of course, be traced."

"What if she did?"

"*Was* the money for investment—or was it blackmail, Major Eustace?"

"That's a preposterous idea. What will you suggest next?"

Japp said in his most official manner, "I think, Major Eustace, that at this point I must ask you if you are willing to come to Scotland Yard and make a statement. There is, of course, no compulsion, and you can, if you prefer it, have your solicitor present."

"Solicitor? What the devil should I want with a solicitor? And what are you cautioning me for?"

"I am inquiring into the circumstances of the death of Mrs. Allen."

"Good God, man, you don't suppose—Why, that's nonsense! Look here, what happened was this. I called round to see Barbara by appointment—"

"That was at what time?"

"At about half-past nine, I should say. We sat and talked—"

"And smoked?"

"Yes, and smoked. Anything damaging in that?" demanded the major belligerently.

"Where did this conversation take place?"

"In the sitting room. Left of the door as you go in. We talked together quite amicably, as I say. I left a little before half-past ten. I stayed for a minute on the doorstep for a few last words—"

"Last words—precisely," murmured Poirot.

"Who are you, I'd like to know?"

Eustace turned and spat the words at him. "What are *you* butting in for?"

"I am Hercule Poirot," said the little man with dignity.

"I don't care if you are the Achilles statue. As I say, Barbara and I parted quite amicably. I drove straight to the Far East Club. Got there at twenty-five to eleven and went straight up to the card room. Stayed there playing bridge until one thirty. Now then, put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"I do not smoke the pipe," said Poirot. "It is a pretty alibi you have."

"It should be a pretty cast-iron one anyway! Now then, sir,"—he looked at Japp—"are you satisfied?"

"You remained in the sitting room throughout your visit?"

"Yes."

"You did not go upstairs to Mrs. Allen's own boudoir?"

"No, I tell you. We stayed in the one room and didn't leave it."

Japp looked at him thoughtfully for a minute. Then he said, "How many sets of cuff links have you?"

"Cuff links? What's that got to do with it?"

"You are not bound to answer the question, of course."

"Answer it? I don't mind answering it. I've got nothing to hide. And I shall demand an apology. There are these—" he stretched out his arms.

Japp noted the gold and platinum with a nod.

"And I've got these."

He rose, opened a drawer, and taking out a case, he opened it and shoved it rudely under Japp's nose.

"Very nice design," said the Chief Inspector. "I see one is broken—bit of enamel chipped off."

"What of it?"

"You don't remember when that happened, I suppose?"

"A day or two ago, not longer."

"Would you be surprised to hear that it happened when you were visiting Mrs. Allen?"

"Why shouldn't it? I've not denied that I was there." The major spoke haughtily. He continued to bluster, to act the part of the justly indignant man, but his hands were trembling.

Japp leaned forward and said with emphasis, "Yes, but that bit of cuff link *wasn't found in the sitting room*. It was found *upstairs* in Mrs. Allen's boudoir—in the room where she was killed, and where a man sat smoking *the same kind of cigarettes as you smoke*."

The shot told. Eustace fell back into his chair. His eyes went from side to side. The collapse of the bully and the appearance of the craven was not a pretty sight.

"You've got nothing on me." His voice was almost a whine. "You're trying to frame me. But can't do it. I've got an alibi. I never came near the house again that night."

Poirot spoke, "No, you did not come near the house again. *You did not need to*. For perhaps Mrs. Allen was *already dead when you left it*."

"That's impossible—impossible— She was just inside the door—she spoke to me. People must have heard her—seen her."

Poirot said softly, "They heard *you* speaking to her—and pretending to wait for her answer and then speaking again. It is an old trick. People may have *assumed* she was there, but they did not *see* her, because *they could not even say whether she was wearing evening dress or not—nor even mention what color she was wearing*."

"My God—it isn't true—"

He was shaking now, collapsed.

Japp looked at him with disgust. He spoke crisply. "I'll have to ask you, sir, to come with me."

"You're arresting me?"

"Detained for inquiry—we'll put it that way."

The silence was broken with a long shuddering sigh. The despairing voice of the erstwhile blustering Major Eustace said, "I'm sunk."

Hercule Poirot rubbed his hands together and smiled cheerfully. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Pretty the way he went all to pieces," said Japp later that day with professional appreciation.

He and Poirot were driving in a car along the Brompton Road.

"He knew the game was up," said Poirot absently.

"We've got plenty on him," said Japp. "Two or three different aliases, a tricky business over a check, and a very nice affair when he stayed at the Ritz and called himself Colonel de Bathe. Swindled half a dozen Piccadilly tradesmen. We're holding him on that charge for the moment—until we get this affair finally squared up. What's the idea of this rush to the country, old man?"

"My friend, an affair must be rounded off properly. Everything must be explained. I am on the quest of the mystery you suggested—The Mystery of the Missing Attaché Case."

"The Mystery of the *Small* Attaché Case—that's what I called it. It isn't missing that I know of."

"Wait, *mon ami*."

The car turned into the mews. At the door of Number 14, Jane Plenderleith was just alighting from a small

Austin Seven. She was in golfing clothes.

She looked from one to the other of the two men, then produced a key and opened the door.

"Come in, won't you?"

She led the way. Japp followed her into the sitting room. Poirot remained for a minute or two in the hall, muttering something about, "*C'est embêtant*—how difficult to get out of these sleeves."

In a moment or two he also entered the sitting room minus his overcoat; but Japp's lips twitched under his mustache. He had heard the very faint squeak of an opening closet door.

Japp threw Poirot an inquiring glance and the other returned a hardly perceptible nod.

"We won't detain you, Miss Plenderleith," said Japp briskly. "Only came to ask you if you could tell us the name of Mrs. Allen's solicitor."

"Her solicitor?" The girl shook her head. "I don't even know that she had one."

"Well, when she rented this house with you, someone must have drawn up the agreement?"

"No, I don't think so. You see, I took the house—the lease is in my name. Barbara paid me half the rent. It was quite informal."

"I see. It doesn't really matter very much." Japp turned toward the door. "Been playing golf?"

"Yes." She flushed. "I suppose it seems rather heartless to you. But as a matter of fact it got me down rather, being here in this house. I felt I must go out and *do* something—tire myself—or I'd choke!"

Poirot said quickly, "I comprehend, mademoiselle. It is most understand-

able, most natural. To sit in this house and think—no, it would not be pleasant.”

“So long as you understand,” said Japp.

“You belong to a club?”

“Yes, I play at Wentworth.”

“It has been a pleasant day,” said Poirot. “Alas, there are few leaves left on the trees now! A week ago the woods were magnificent.”

“It was quite lovely today.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Plenderleith,” said Japp formally. “I’ll let you know when there’s anything definite. As a matter of fact, we have detained a man on suspicion.”

“What man?”

“Major Eustace.”

She nodded and turned away, stooping down to put a match to the fire.

“Well?” said Japp as the car turned the corner of the mews.

Poirot grinned. “It was quite simple. The key was in the door this time.”

“And—?”

Poirot smiled. “*Eh bien*, the golf clubs had gone—”

“Naturally. The girl isn’t a fool, whatever else she is. Anything else gone?”

Poirot nodded. “Yes, my friend—the little attaché-case!”

The accelerator leaped under Japp’s foot.

“Damnation!” he said. “I knew there was *something*. But what the devil is it? I searched that case pretty thoroughly.”

“My poor Japp, but it is—how do you say, ‘obvious, my dear Watson’?”

Japp threw him an exasperated look.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Poirot consulted his watch.

“It is not yet four o’clock. We could get to Wentworth, I think, before it is dark.”

“Do you think she really went there?”

“I think so—yes. She would know that we might make inquiries. Oh, yes, I think we will find that she has been there.”

Japp grunted. “Oh, well, come on.” He threaded his way dexterously through the traffic. “Though what this attaché case business has to do with the crime I can’t imagine. I can’t see that it’s got anything to do with it.”

“Precisely, my friend, I agree with you—it has nothing to do with it.”

“Then why—No, don’t tell me! Order and method and everything nicely rounded off! Oh, well, it’s a fine day.”

The car was a fast one. They arrived at Wentworth Golf Club a little after half-past four. Poirot went straight to the caddie-master and asked for Miss Plenderleith’s clubs. She would be playing on a different course tomorrow, he explained.

The caddie-master raised his voice and a boy sorted through some golf clubs standing in a corner. He finally produced a bag bearing the initials, J. P.

“Thank you,” said Poirot. He moved away, then turned carelessly and asked, “She did not leave with you a small attaché case also, did she?”

“Not today, sir. May have left it in the clubhouse.”

“She was down here today?”

“Oh, yes, I saw her.”

“Which caddie did she have, do you know? She’s mislaid an attaché case and can’t remember where she had it last.”

“She didn’t take a caddie. She came in here and bought a couple of balls.

Just took out a couple of irons. I rather fancy she had a little case in her hand then."

Poirot turned away with a word of thanks. The two men walked round the clubhouse. Poirot stood a moment admiring the view.

"It is beautiful, is it not, the dark pine trees—and then the lake. Yes, the lake—"

Japp gave him a quick glance.

"That's the idea, is it?"

Poirot smiled. "I think it possible that some one may have seen something. I should set the inquiries in motion if I were you."

Poirot stepped back, his head a little on one side as he surveyed the arrangement of the room. A chair here, another chair there. Yes, that was very nice. And now a ring at the bell—that would be Japp.

The Scotland Yard man came in alertly.

"Quite right, old boy! Straight from the horse's mouth. A young woman was seen to throw something into the lake at Wentworth yesterday. Description answers to Jane Plenderleith. We managed to fish it up without much difficulty. A lot of reeds just there."

"And it was?"

"It was the attaché case all right! But *why*, in heaven's name? Well, it beats me! Nothing inside it—not even the old magazines. Why a presumably sane young woman should want to fling an expensively fitted attaché case into a lake—d'you know, I worried all night because I couldn't get the hang of it."

"*Mon pauvre Japp!* But you need worry no longer. Here is the answer coming. The bell has just rung."

Georges, Poirot's immaculate manservant, opened the door and announced, "Miss Plenderleith."

The girl came into the room with her usual air of complete self-assurance. She greeted the two men.

"I asked you to come here—" explained Poirot, "sit here, will you not, and you here, Japp—because I have certain news to give you."

The girl sat down. She looked from one to the other, pushing aside her hat.

"Well," she said. "Major Eustace has been arrested."

"You saw that, I expect, in the morning paper?"

"Yes."

"He is at the moment charged with a minor offense," went on Poirot. "In the meantime we are gathering evidence in connection with the murder."

"It *was* murder, then?"

Poirot nodded. "Yes, it was murder. The willful destruction of one human being by another human being."

She shivered a little. "Don't," she murmured. "It sounds horrible when you say it like that."

"Yes—but it is horrible!"

He paused, then he said, "Now, Miss Plenderleith, I am going to tell you just how I arrived at the truth in this matter."

She looked from Poirot to Japp. The latter was smiling.

"He has his methods, Miss Plenderleith," Japp said. "I humor him, you know. I think we'll listen to what he has to say."

Poirot began, "As you know, made-moiselle, I arrived with my friend on the scene of the crime on the morning of November the sixth. We went into the room where the body of Mrs. Allen

had been found and I was struck at once by several significant details. There were things, you see, in that room that were decidedly odd.

"To begin with," Poirot went on, "there was the smell of cigarette smoke."

"I think you're exaggerating there, Poirot," interrupted Japp. "I didn't smell anything."

Poirot turned on him in a flash.

"Precisely. *You did not smell any stale smoke. No more did I.* And that was very, very strange—for the door and the window were both closed and on an ashtray there were the stubs of no fewer than ten cigarettes. It was odd, very odd, that the room should smell—as it did, perfectly fresh."

"So *that's* what you were getting at!" Japp sighed. "Always have to get at things in such a tortuous way."

"Your Sherlock Holmes did the same. He drew attention, remember, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time—and the answer to that was there was no curious incident. The dog did nothing in the night-time."

"To proceed: The next thing that attracted my attention was a wrist watch worn by the dead woman."

"What about it?"

"Nothing particular about it, but it was worn on the *right* wrist. Now in my experience it is more usual for a watch to be worn on the left wrist."

Japp shrugged. Before he could speak, Poirot hurried on, "But as you say, there is nothing very definite about *that*. Some people *prefer* to wear one on the right hand."

"And now I come to something really interesting—I come, my friends, to the writing desk."

"Yes, I guessed that," said Japp.

"That was really *very* odd—*very* remarkable! For two reasons. The first reason was that something was missing from that writing desk."

Jane Plenderleith spoke. "What was missing?"

Poirot turned to her.

"*A sheet of blotting paper, mademoiselle.* The blotting-book had on the top a clean, untouched piece of blotting paper."

Jane shrugged. "Really, Mr. Poirot. People do occasionally tear off a very much used sheet."

"Yes, but what do they do with it? Throw it into the wastepaper basket, do they not? *But it was not in the wastepaper basket.* I looked."

Jane Plenderleith seemed impatient.

"Because it had probably been thrown away the day before. The sheet was clean because Barbara hadn't written any letters that day."

"That could hardly be the case, mademoiselle. *For Mrs. Allen was seen going to the mail box that evening. Therefore she must have been writing letters.* She could not write downstairs—there were no writing materials. She would hardly be likely to go to *your* room to write. So, then, what had happened to the sheet of paper on which she had blotted her letters?"

"It is true that people sometimes throw things in the fire instead of the wastepaper basket, but there was only a gas fire in the room. *And the fire downstairs had not been alight the previous day, since you told me it was all laid ready when you set a match to it.*"

He paused. "A curious little problem. I looked everywhere—in the wastepaper baskets, in the dust bin, but I could not find a sheet of used blotting paper—and that seemed to me very

important. It looked as though someone had deliberately taken that sheet of used blotting paper away. Why? Because there was writing on it that could easily have been read by holding it up to a mirror.

"But there was a second curious point about the writing desk. Perhaps, Japp, you remember roughly the arrangement of it? Blotter and inkstand in the center, pen tray to the left, calendar and quill pen to the right. *Eh bien?* You do not see? The quill pen, remember, I examined, it was for show only—it had not been used. Ah, *still* you do not see? I will say it again. Blotter in the center, pen tray to the left—to the *left*, Japp. But is it not usual to find a pen tray *on the right*, convenient to the *right hand*?

"Ah, now it comes to you, does it not? The pen tray on the left—the wrist watch on the *right* wrist—the blotting paper removed—and something else brought *into* the room—the ashtray with the cigarette ends!

"That room was fresh smelling, Japp, a room in which the window had been *open*, not closed all night . . . And I made to myself a picture."

He spun round and faced Jane.

"A picture of you, mademoiselle, driving up in your taxi, paying it off, running up the stairs, calling perhaps, 'Barbara'—and you open the door and find your friend there lying dead with the pistol clasped in her hand—the left hand, naturally, *since she is left-handed*—and therefore, too, the bullet has entered on the *left side of the head*.

"There is a note addressed to you. It tells you what it is that has driven her to take her own life. It was, I fancy, a very moving letter—a young gentle,

unhappy woman driven by blackmail to take her life.

"I think that, almost at once, the idea flashed into your head. This was a certain man's doing. Let him be punished—fully and adequately punished! You take the pistol, wipe it, and place it in the *right* hand. You take the note and tear off the top sheet of the blotting paper on which the note has been blotted. You go down, light the fire, and put them both on the flames.

"Then you carry up the ashtray—to further the illusion that two people sat up there talking—and you also take up a fragment of enamel cuff link that is on the floor. That is a lucky find and you expect it to clinch matters.

"Then you close the window and lock the door. There must be no suspicion that you have tampered with the room. The police must see it exactly as it is—so you do not seek help in the mews but ring up the police straightaway.

"And so it goes on. You play your chosen role with judgment and coolness. You refuse at first to say anything, but cleverly you suggest doubts of suicide. Later you are quite ready to set us on the trail of Major Eustace.

"Yes, mademoiselle, it was clever—a very clever murder—for that is what it is. *The attempted murder of Major Eustace.*"

Jane Plenderleith sprang to her feet.

"It wasn't murder—it was justice. That man *hounded* poor Barbara to her death! She was so sweet and so helpless. You see, she got involved with a man in India when she first went out. She was only seventeen and he was a married man years older than her. Then she had a baby. She could have

put it in a home but she wouldn't hear of that. She went off to some out-of-the-way spot and came back calling herself Mrs. Allen. Later the child died.

"She came back here and fell in love with Charles—that pompous, stuffed owl! She adored him—and he took her adoration very complacently. If he had been a different kind of man I'd have advised her to tell him everything. But as it was, I urged her to hold her tongue. After all, nobody knew anything about that business except me.

"And then that devil Eustace turned up! You know the rest. He began to bleed her systematically, but it wasn't till that last evening that she realized that she was also exposing Charles to the risk of scandal. Once married to Charles, Eustace would have her where he wanted her—married to a rich man with a horror of any scandal!

"When Eustace had gone with the money she had got for him, she sat thinking it over. Then she came up and wrote a letter to me. She said she loved Charles and couldn't live without him but that for his own sake she mustn't marry him. She was taking the best way out, she said."

Jane flung her head back.

"Do you wonder I did what I did? And you stand there calling it *murder!*"

"Because it is murder." Poirot's voice was stern. "Murder can sometimes seem justified, *but it is murder all the same*. You are truthful and clear-minded—face the truth, mademoiselle! Your friend died, in the last resort, *because she had not the courage to live*. We may sympathize with her. We may pity her. But the fact remains—the act was *hers*—not anothers."

He paused. "And you? That man is now in prison, he will serve a long sentence for other matters. Do you really wish, of your own volition, to destroy the life—the *life*, mind—of *any* human being?"

She stared at him. Her eyes darkened. Suddenly she muttered, "No. You're right. I don't."

Then, turning on her heel, she went swiftly from the room. The outer door banged.

Japp gave a long—a very prolonged—whistle.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said.

Poirot sat down and smiled at him amiably. It was quite a long time before the silence was broken.

Then Japp said, "Not murder disguised as suicide—but suicide made to look like murder!"

"Yes, and very cleverly done, too. Nothing over-emphasized."

Japp said suddenly, "But the *attaché* case? Where did that come in?"

"But, my dear friend, I have already told you that *it did not come in*."

"Then why—?"

"The golf clubs. The golf clubs, Japp. *They were the golf clubs of a left-handed person*. Jane Plenderleith kept her clubs at Wentworth. Those were Barbara Allen's clubs. No wonder the girl got, as you say, the wind up when we opened that closet. Her whole plan might have been ruined. But she is quick—she realized that she had, for one short moment, given herself away. *She saw that we saw*.

"So she does the best thing she can think of on the spur of the moment. She tries to focus our attention on the *wrong object*. She says of the *attaché* case: 'That's mine. I—it came back

with me this morning. So there can't be anything there.' And, as she hoped, away we go on the false trail. For the same reason, when she sets out the following day to get rid of the left-handed golf clubs, she continues to use the attaché case as a—what is it—kippered herring?"

"Red herring. Do you mean that her real object was—?"

"Consider, my friend. Where is the best place to get rid of a bag of golf clubs? One cannot burn them or put them in a dust bin. If one leaves them somewhere they may be returned to you. Miss Plenderleith took them to a golf course. She leaves them in the clubhouse while she gets a couple of irons from her own bag, and then she goes round without a caddie.

"Doubtless at judicious intervals she breaks a club in half and throws it into some deep undergrowth, and ends by throwing the empty bag away. If anyone should find a broken golf club here and there, it will not create sur-

prise. People have been known to break and throw away *all* their clubs in a mood of intense exasperation over the game. It is, in fact, that kind of game!

"But since she realizes that her actions may still be a matter of interest, she throws that useful red herring, the attaché case, in a somewhat spectacular manner into the lake—and that, my friend, is the truth of The Mystery of the Attaché Case."

Japp looked at his friend for some moments in silence. Then he rose, clapped him on the shoulder, and burst out laughing.

"Not so bad for an old dog! Upon my word, you take the cake! Come out and have a spot of lunch?"

"With pleasure, my friend, but we will not have the cake. Indeed, an Omelette aux Champignons, Blanquette de Veau, Petits pois à la Française, and—to follow—a Baba au Rhum."

"Lead me to it," said Japp.



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DIRECT HIT

by JOHN BUCHANAN

IROQUOIS AIRLINES FLIGHT 20 FROM Buffalo landed a half hour late at the De Witt County airport. Flying weather was perfect, had been for two days; but Flight 20 was late. Two local businessmen cracked the old jokes as they left the plane.

"Used to be a man was sure of only two things—death and taxes."

"Then Iroquois came along."

"Right!" They both laughed.

The short dumpy man behind the two businessmen was not amused. His round pudgy face puckered into a frown; his small black eyes squinted accusingly at the smiling blonde hostess, as if she were to blame for the late arrival.

It was a hot day and most of the men getting off the plane wore dacron or seersucker suits and thin cotton shirts. But the short dumpy man sweated in a brown sharkskin suit with vest. The collar of his oxford cloth shirt dug into his thick pink neck. A gold watch chain looped over his slightly rounded stomach.

He paused at the head of the gangway and lifted a big gold watch from his vest pocket and checked the time again. He gritted his teeth in exasperation. He jammed the watch back in his pocket, shifted his overnight attaché case to his right hand, tugged his broad-brimmed hat with his

left hand, then trotted down the gangway and hurried across the shimmering cement to the exit gate where he was met by a tall good-looking young man who carried his lightweight sports jacket over his arm. The top button of the young man's short-sleeved shirt was unfastened and his striped tie was loose. His blond hair shone in the sunlight.

"Mr. Dundee?" the young man said.

The short dumpy man squinted and poked his head at the young man.

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently.

The young man smiled and extended his hand. "I'm Simms."

Dundee hung his plump wet hand limply and briefly in Simms's cool fingers.

"All right, all right," Dundee said. "Let's go."

"Okay," Simms said in a relaxed voice.

They walked through the small waiting room and out the front door to the parking lot and got into a cream-colored late-model Buick. Dundee laid the attaché case on the seat between them. Simms put on the ignition. The engine caught immediately and purred smoothly. Simms wheeled out of the lot and drove quickly down the entrance road.

"It's a disgrace," Dundee said, as he tugged at his collar.

"What's that?"

"That airline. Not a cloud in the

sky and we're thirty-two minutes late. How's our time?"

"No sweat, Mr. Dundee. It's eight thirty, and it's only a two and a half hour drive."

"That's cutting it pretty close."

"Gives us a little over an hour to spare—just in case."

Dundee fumbled in his outside breast pocket and brought out a leather case from beneath the drooping tricornered white handkerchief. He opened the case and took out a pair of rimless spectacles, carefully drew the thin metal bars over his small pinkish ears, and settled the bridge on the end of his nose. He leaned toward Simms, thrusting his face close to the steering wheel, and peered at the fuel gauge. It read full. He grunted, took off the spectacles, gently folded and replaced them in the case, and slipped the case behind the wilting handkerchief.

"Car had maintenance lately?" he asked.

"Day before I left New York. It gets checked on the dot." Simms spoke in a slow, pleasant voice.

Dundee took off his hat and laid it on the attaché case. A fringe of gray hair began well back on each temple and horseshoed. A few white wisps curled up from his shiny dome. He took a handkerchief from his hip pocket and mopped his head and face.

"What's the temperature?" he asked.

"Over ninety, I guess. Radio said

a guy in Syracuse fried an egg on the sidewalk." Simms chuckled. "He ate it too."

"I can believe it," Dundee said. "It's too hot to work. I knew it when I left Chicago last night. There wasn't a breath of air stirring."

"Hot in New York too."

"I bet it is. I had heat prostration in New York two years ago—in August."

Simms's eyes flickered from the road to Dundee. "Is that right?"

"Yeah. I hate New York in the summer. I try to stay away from it between June and September."

"You are going to New York with me, aren't you?" Simms asked. "Afterward, I mean."

"Not into the city. You can drop me at La Guardia. I'll stay there until my plane leaves."

They had entered a fine residential section posted at twenty-five miles per hour. Simms obeyed the speed limit. Large gracious homes surrounded by well-kept lawns and wide shade trees sat well back from the road. The modern homes were designed to fit in with the old stone and brick houses. Each home commanded a view of the long slim lake sparkling in the valley far below, and of quilted hills rising from the western shore. Dundee nodded emphatically.

"Now this is where a man should live. No matter how hot it gets, those stone houses stay cool. Nice and cool inside."

"Classy neighborhood," Simms said.

"Not bad," Dundee said. "About fifty thousand and up, I'd say. Tell you one thing, though. I'll lay odds there are too many people living up here who can't afford it. Probably sitting around on second-hand furniture and eating hot dogs so they can have a big house on snob hill."

Simms laughed, and said, "Probably."

"Sure there are. That's the trouble nowadays. People don't practice thrift any more. You take my nephew, for example. His folks were killed in an automobile accident when he was still in high school. He's my sister's kid. Well, I figured the least I could do was put him through college. Now I'm not complaining about him—he's a good kid. Did well in school, had a good Army record. And now he's got a good job with an oil company in Cleveland. Married a fine girl. But the trouble is, he can't wait. He wants a big car, a plush apartment, vacations in Bermuda and Europe. He's twenty-five years old and he wants right now what I've worked all my life for. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah."

Dundee shook his head. "I don't know. The country's living too high on the hog if you ask me."

They left the residential section and followed a deserted side road to State Highway 13 where they joined a nervous flow of traffic going north-

cast. Simms put the needle up to sixty and kept it there. A red station wagon loaded with parents, children, luggage, and a large brown dog zipped alongside them, swayed on the double white line while the driver estimated the speed of a truck roaring toward him, and at the last second ducked back into its own lane. When the truck rumbled by, the station wagon jumped forward again, passing two cars on a blind curve. Dundee yelled.

"Look at that! Just look at that! A carful of kids and driving like a maniac. Where's the cops? Can you tell me where the cops are? By George, a man like that belongs in jail. They ought to lock him up and throw away the key. Look at all the lives he's endangering."

He muttered for a while, then stared out the side window at the low green hills. Simms took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, flipped a cigarette half out, and extended it to Dundee.

"Cigarette?"

Dundee turned his head from the window and looked at the cigarette. He frowned, and said, "Do you mind?"

Simms kept his eyes on the road. "Mind what?"

"Smoke bothers me. Do you mind not smoking?"

Simms glanced at Dundee, who stared gravely at him. Simms sighed and put the cigarettes back in his pocket. He shifted his hand on the wheel, rested his elbow on the rim

of the door, and concentrated on the road. Ten miles farther on they passed through a village and followed Highway 13 north.

"Did you ever think of quitting?" Dundee asked.

"Huh?"

"Did you ever think of quitting?"

"Quitting what?"

"Smoking."

"Oh. Yeah, couple of times. You know how it is. Lasted a week or two."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty."

"How long have you been smoking?"

"I don't know. Sixteen, seventeen years maybe."

"Good way to get lung cancer."

Simms shrugged. "That's what they say."

"It's true. You saw all the publicity the Surgeon General's report on smoking got, didn't you? All the headlines it made?"

"Yes."

"Then you know that the report says smoking causes lung cancer. Now when the government puts its name behind it you can be sure it's true. They wouldn't put out something that hadn't been researched thoroughly. Think of the law suit the tobacco companies could bring if they could prove the government wrong."

Simms shrugged again. "Maybe."

"No maybe about it. I don't smoke or drink."

"That right?"

"It's a waste of money—besides rotting your insides. I don't eat sweets either. Bad for your teeth." He turned his face to Simms and flared his lips back from his teeth. They were strong and even. "See. Good teeth, huh?"

Simms's eyes rested briefly on the gleaming row. "Yeah."

Dundee held up three fingers. "Three cavities. Only three cavities in my whole life."

"You're lucky."

"I was lucky to be born with good teeth, but I'm smart enough to take care of them. I get a check-up every six months, and I stay away from sweets."

Simms raised one arm and drummed his fingernails on top of the wheel. Dundee sat upright, his small feet planted firmly on the floor, and stared straight ahead.

They reached Route 5 at ten thirty and turned east. Both sides of the road were littered with refreshment stands.

"Let's get an ice cream cone," Dundee said.

Simms looked quickly at him. "I thought you didn't eat sweets."

"Once in a while. I can afford to make an exception once in a while."

Simms pulled off the highway and parked next to a glass-enclosed custard stand.

"I don't like custard," Dundee said.

"They've got ice cream too."

"I wonder if they have chocolate chip?"

Simms turned his face away from Dundee and rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't know," he said.

"Do you mind finding out?"

Simms got out of the car, walked to the front of the stand, and read the list. He returned to the car and stuck his head through the open window on the driver's side.

"Everything but," he said.

"Do they have banana flavor?"

Simms stared blankly at Dundee, then said quietly, "No."

Dundee frowned. "You see, this is a custard stand. They specialize in custard. You should have stopped at a regular ice cream place."

"Okay, I will." Simms started to open the door.

"No, we're losing time. What kind of cones do they have?"

"It's a long list."

"Cherry?"

Simms shoved away from the car, went back to the stand, stood with his hands on his hips, and read the list again. He returned to the car.

"Vanilla, chocolate, marshmallow, peppermint, butterscotch, maple walnut, butter pecan, raspberry. I think that's about it."

"No cherry?"

"No cherry."

"Did you say peppermint?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . okay."

"Ten, twenty, or thirty?"

"Ahh, thirty."

When they were back on the highway, Simms licking his one-dip

vanilla cone and Dundee gnawing noisily at his peppermint pyramid, Dundee said, "Did you ever have chocolate chip?"

"No."

"You should try it. It's my favorite. There's a place outside of Chicago that has terrific chocolate chip. I always keep a quart in my freezer."

Simms licked his ice cream and didn't say anything.

They entered the suburb of a medium-sized industrial city at fifteen minutes after eleven. While waiting for a red light, Dundee pointed to a group of teen-age boys lounging on a corner. The boys wore black chino trousers and black jerseys with the sleeves rolled over their shoulders. They had ducktail haircuts and long thin sideburns. Dundee grimaced.

"That's the generation we have to count on for survival . . . Huh? I tell you, if this country doesn't solve the juvenile delinquency problem the streets won't be safe. You know, there are streets in Chicago I wouldn't dare walk on after dark—and some even in daylight. Twenty years ago, yes, but not now. And New York's just as bad—maybe worse. Right?"

"I guess so," Simms said.

Dundee glared at the boys and shook his head. "I don't know what this country's coming to."

The light changed and Simms crossed the intersection. Halfway down the block he turned right

into a supermarket parking lot, drove to a far corner, and parked close to a green Imperial. The two men in the front seat of the Imperial had their coats off and had loosened their ties. One man was fanning himself with a newspaper. The driver spoke to Dundee across the short space between their open windows.

"You're late."

"Plane was late. Is it set?"

"Yes."

"Let's have it?" Dundee said.

The driver handed a bulky 8½ x 11 sealed manila envelope to Dundee who laid it unopened on his lap. He nodded at the man.

"So long," he said, and Simms, who hadn't shut off the Buick's engine, backed up.

The other man in the Imperial put down his newspaper and watched as Simms and Dundee drove off. He looked at the driver, his face puzzled.

"That's him?" he asked.

The driver nodded.

"I'll be damned," the other man said softly.

"He's tops," the driver said. "The best in the business."

The City Club was on the corner of Corn and Market Streets. It faced Market Street. An alley opened on Market Street directly opposite a corner window of the City Club.

At two minutes after twelve o'clock Simms and Dundee drove

down the alley. Simms stopped just as the nose of the Buick poked past the alley entrance. He and Dundee looked across the street into the window of the City Club. A man sat at a table facing the window. He was drinking tomato juice. Simms and Dundee lingered only a few seconds.

"Okay," Dundee said, and Simms inched carefully over the sidewalk and right onto Market. He turned left onto Corn and took another left into the entrance drive to the parking lot behind the City Club. He stopped in the middle of the square lot.

Dundee put the manila envelope under the seat. He took a key from a vest pocket, then unlocked and opened the attaché case. An oxford cloth shirt was folded neatly on top. A pair of black kid leather gloves lay across the shirt. Dundee put on the gloves. Simms watched him.

Dundee's lips pressed tight. He reached under the shirt and drew out a piece of white cloth. He unwrapped the cloth, lifted out the snub-nosed .38, and put it in the left inside breast pocket of his coat.

He folded the cloth and pushed it into a corner of the attaché case. He reached under the shirt again and took out a small rolled object, flipped it open, and drew it over his face. It was a plain rubber mask with wide slits for his eyes and mouth. He closed the case, put on his hat, and got out of the car.

Simms pulled away and bore in a wide semicircle to his right.

Dundee's short legs strode briskly to the rear entrance of the City Club. He opened the screen door and stepped into a short dark hallway filled with cooking smells. He heard the clatter of pots and pans through a closed door to his right. To his left was a large trash barrel half filled with wastepaper.

He went up the three steps and stopped before a closed door. He opened the door a crack and peeked in. The man at the corner table facing the window was diagonal to Dundee. He was alone. His broad back bent a little as he lifted his soup spoon to his mouth.

Dundee looked at the thick black hair curling up the back of the man's neck. He opened the door and walked across the room toward the man at the corner table. The room was crowded with businessmen ordering or eating lunch. They were laughing and talking. Two men were kidding a pretty waitress. No one looked up at the short dumpy man in the rubber mask.

When Dundee was five feet away from the man at the corner table, he reached inside his coat and withdrew the snub-nosed colt .38. At a distance of three feet he stopped, raised the .38, squinted, and shot the man three times in the back of the head. The shots cracked loudly in the room.

The man at the table jerked and pitched forward. Hot pea soup

splattered the clean white tablecloth. Before the man hit the floor Dundee turned and headed for the door, holding the .38 level at his belt line.

The diners gaped and stared. Dundee was almost to the door when the pretty waitress began to scream.

He didn't hurry. He opened the door, stepped through, and closed the door behind him. As he walked down the steps he took off his hat and the rubber mask. He threw the mask and the .38 in the trash barrel, put on his hat, and pushed through the screen door.

A great hubbub rose behind him. The waitress was still screaming. Dundee's short legs strode briskly across the parking lot and around the corner of a small building to the exit drive. Simms was waiting for him. Dundee got in the car.

"Good hit," he said.

Simms drove slowly to the street, waited patiently while a woman wheeling a baby carriage crossed

the sidewalk in front of him, then turned left onto Corn Street.

"Okay with you if I take the Thruway?" Simms asked. "It'll save time."

Dundee frowned. "Do you mind? Thruways, freeways, speedways, turnpikes—I hate 'em all. They make me nervous."

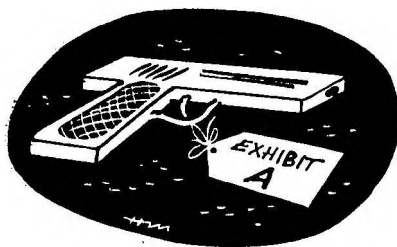
Simms sighed. "Well?"

"Let's go through the Catskills. We can take our time, and it'll be cooler. I know a good place to eat."

"I've got a date tonight," Simms said.

Dundee stripped the gloves from his small white hands, lifted the top of the attaché case, put them inside, then snapped the case shut and took the key from his pocket and locked it. He took off his hat and laid it on top of the case. His bald pate glistened.

"We'll go through the Catskills," he said. "You'll like this place. I ran on to it a few years back. They make the best pot roast I ever tasted."



TEX, THE COWBOY DETECTIVE

by RICHARD HILL WILKINSON

TEX LOBDELL THREW THE MAGAZINE aside. "Trash!" he exclaimed. "Way them writers figure a thing out it ain't no job at all to run down a bunch o' cattle thieves. All the hero has to do is hunt fer a set of hoofmarks which include a broken shoe on the nigh front foot. The villain always has a broken shoe on his hoss. Then the hero finds the hoss's owner, and beats him to the draw. What would them writers do if they come up against a villain whose hoss didn't have no broken shoe?"

Tex looked up sharply as the bunkhouse door opened. "Well, Shorty?"

"Fifty more head gone, Tex. Tracks show there must 'a' been three rustlers. Covered up their trail as usual."

The cowboy foreman swore under his breath. "Shorty, I got me a hunch. Every time a bunch o' cattle is stole it happens on a part of the range where our boys ain't. That means someone workin' fer us must tip 'em off. Right?"

"Right," Shorty agreed.

"Okay. All we gotta do is find a set o' tracks with a broken shoe on the nigh front hoof an' follow it."

Shorty rubbed his chin. "You bin readin' stories ag'in," he accused.

A week passed and the rustlers

were neither identified nor captured. Then they struck again. A hundred head of cattle were whisked off the south range. Rod Pillsbury, the boss, was furious.

"Skip it!" Tex interrupted his tirade. "Saddle your hoss an' I'll lead you to the rustlers' den."

Rod was skeptical, but curious. He accompanied Tex to the south range.

"Now," said Tex, "all we gotta do is look fer the mark of a hoss with a broken shoe." He hunted around on foot. "Ah! Here she is! Now, let's follow it."

Toward noon Tex and Rod dipped down into a hidden valley and came on a good-sized herd of cattle. Two cowboys were heating branding irons.

Tex sneaked down the hill and surprised the rustlers at work. When Pillsbury joined the group the pair were neatly hog-tied. One of them was Shorty!

"Wait a minute!" Rod exclaimed. "How about the broken shoe? That sort of thing only happens in books."

"Sure," Tex grinned. "That's where I read about it. An' that's where I got me my hunch of filing off a hunk of the shoe on Shorty's cayuse one night, jest so's I could foller him around."

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a new FATHER CRUMLISH story

How can you help loving St. Brigid's parish and the kind, gentle pastor who watches over its destiny? . . . Here is another new story about Father Francis Xavier Crumlish, with all the warmth and humanity we have come to expect from Alice Scanlan Reach.

THE HEART OF FATHER CRUMLISH

by ALICE SCANLAN REACH

THE RECTORY DOORBELL'S HARSH cough caught Father Francis Xavier Crumlish with a forkful of Emma Catt's "Irish Stew"—on this occasion, a concoction of last night's leftover pork chops, Tuesday's creamed carrots, a scrap or two of the Sunday roast, and a few other morsels which St. Brigid's housekeeper had redeemed for the eternal Stewpot.

The interruption demanded an immediate decision. The pastor could either consume the remains of his repast, thereby delaying the entrance of whoever stood on the rectory threshold, or he could forego the food, thus risking the danger of its turning up for tomorrow's lunch.

He decided to take no chances. The doorbell coughed twice more before he had cleaned his plate and reached the vestibule. Through the glass pane in the outer door he could see the rotund form of his visitor and his heart stumbled. When "Tubby" McFarland came calling on Father Crumlish it could only

mean trouble. Apprehensively, the priest opened the door.

"Good afternoon, Your Excellency."

"Good afternoon, Father."

In silence Father Crumlish led His Excellency, the Most Reverend Matthew Aloysius McFarland, Bishop of the Diocese of Lake City, into the rectory office, closed the door, and waited respectfully until his superior had settled his bulk before seating himself behind his worn desk.

"Do you have to answer the doorbell yourself, Frank?" the Bishop inquired peevishly, lighting a cigar. "Where's that cantankerous housekeeper of yours?"

"Emma just stepped out," Father replied, hastily calling on the Almighty to forgive the slight inaccuracy. But surely the good Lord would agree it was far better the Bishop remain unaware that, should Gabriel elect to trumpet for Emma Catt at this particular hour of the day, he would be tartly told to hold his horn until the conclusion

of the TV serials, "Bright Tomorrow" and "Secret Life."

"What you need around here is more help," the Bishop said testily.

Concealing his annoyance at this repeated reminder that St. Brigid's should be run with more spit and polish, Father Crumlish recalled the long ago when he left his native Tralee in County Kerry to enter the preparatory seminary in America. A skinny 14-year-old with two-large dark blue eyes and too much carrot-colored hair, he had shared a book locker with "Tubby" McFarland. Even then "Tubby" had a yen to run things.

"I've bad news about that property, Frank. Johnny Valenti owns it and he won't sell."

Dismayed, the pastor sagged in his chair. More than one St. Brigid's parishioner had risked running a drop of rum from the Canadian border to Lake City during the Great Drought. But Johnny Valenti had been smarter than most. He'd been caught only once and he'd used his profits to establish himself as a "real estate investor."

Father knew the fellow had helped himself to more than one piece of parish pie. But why this particular piece? And why wouldn't he sell?

"Just as well," the Bishop said in a softer tone. "You've got enough to do without trying to turn a broken-down warehouse and a patch of weeds into a Recreation Center."

"I'd have less to do if I had some

place to keep my young hooligans off the streets."

"Besides, you're too old to tackle a job like that."

Father stiffened. Old, was he! Why, if it wasn't for the misery plaguing his bones, the occasional shortness of breath (nothing but gas), he could pass for—well, 65 maybe? True, he couldn't say Mass without his bifocals. But his snow-white hair was still thick. Furthermore, *he* only had an upper plate and a partial lower, whereas he knew for a certainty that "Tubby" McFarland hadn't had a tooth of his own in his head for the past 30 years.

Deliberately the pastor studied the Bishop's expansive terrain—the bald dome, the strings of hair straddling the ears, the flabby jowls, the suet shelves girdling the protruding pouch . . .

Under Father's ruthless appraisal the Bishop's face reddened. "How's your arthritis?" he retaliated bluntly.

"Nothing wrong with me," Father responded airily, "that a tot or two of honest Irish whiskey can't cure."

Sighing, Bishop McFarland gave up. Father Crumlish ushered His Excellency to the door, waited until the sleek black car pulled away from the curb, then succumbed to his disappointment.

"Hellfire!"

Threading his way through the shredded sidewalk bordering Poleski

Street, the pastor halted midway in the block in front of one of the dilapidated landmarks which nowadays dominated St. Brigid's waterfront area. What had the Bishop called it? A broken-down warehouse and a patch of weeds? Well, maybe so. But not to Father Crumlish's eye.

The priest had a vision of the weather-warped clapboards newly repaired and freshly painted, of the splintered windows (so grime-coated now that he could not see inside) scrubbed and shining, of the weeds uprooted and making way for a trampoline. Or maybe a handball court? And a sign with the glorious words, *St. Brigid's Recreation Center*, over the worn double doors.

"Bless us!"

Unless his bifocals needed adjusting, one of the doors appeared to be hanging from a broken hinge. Surely, it would do no harm . . .

In an instant he had closed the door behind him and stood waiting for his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom. Many times he had wondered what lay inside this tired wooden shell. Now he gazed about him in disbelief. Except for endless whirls of dust, a muddle of dirt and debris, a few pieces of discarded furniture, and several large cartons huddled in a corner, the warehouse was empty.

Or was it? The muddle appeared to be moving. Father gave a start of astonishment as he recognized the lopsided figure tottering him. There was no mistaking Shoes. The poor

old derelect's hoarse cry identifying himself and his trade had been resounding on every street and alley in the Parish ever since the pastor could remember. But what was the fellow doing here?

"Who's there?" Shoes' rasp rang out.

"Father Crumlish." The priest waited patiently until Shoes' too-large, threadbare trousers flapped in the light of the opened door. From under the drooping visor of his weathered cap, the old shoe-shine man's tired eyes peered at the priest.

"And sure if it ain't!" Shoes exclaimed. "Whatcha doin' here, Father?"

"I was just wondering—" Father began.

"*You* can come in," Shoes said, stretching out a polish-stained hand to clutch the pastor's sleeve. The patched seams in the fabric of his face, which was the color and texture of dried pigskin, gave way, exposing toothless gums. "But I gotta be careful, y'know?"

Father Crumlish knew. On more than one occasion Shoes had been attacked by a pack of young hooligans, to be beaten and robbed of his few miserable quarters.

"Just havin' a bit o' lunch, Father." Shoes held out an opened tin can. "Tain't bad. Stew."

Reminded of his recent encounter with his housekeeper's concoction, the priest's stomach lurched. But astonishment overcame his distress. "Your lunch? Here?"

"Why not?" Shoes tugged at his trousers. "Boss don't care. 'Course he only pays me to keep an eye on things nights."

"Boss?"

"Mr. Valenti."

Father's head reeled as he gazed wonderingly around the dilapidated warehouse. What in the name of Heaven did Johnny Valenti have here that needed a watchful eye?

"Hey, Father." Shoes' visored cap waggled as he pointed at the priest's shoes. "Ya need a spit 'n' polish."

"Another time," Father said hurriedly. "I've sick calls to make—"

But the old man scurried into the murky muddle and in an instant he was straddling his battered shoe-stand at Father Crumlish's feet. Resigned, the pastor relinquished his right foot.

Scooping out thick black polish from a dented container, Shoes kneaded it into the shoe. "This watchman's job comes in handy, I tell ya," he said, snatching at a stained cloth.

"I wouldn't wonder," Father said sympathetically.

"Hey!" Shoes halted his ministrations. "Whatcha got here?"

Glancing downward, shame flooded Father's face at the sight of the untidy knot he'd tied in his shoelace—how many weeks ago? Emma had been after him to buy new laces but he kept forgetting. Was he getting old?

Removing the old shoestrings and

knotting the ends together, Shoes thriftily tucked them into his ancient shoebox, then inserted new laces. "I'd make out okay on shines," he said with a scowl as he vigorously wielded his polishing brush. "'Cept some customers don't pay up." He gave the priest a quick glance. "Keep me waiting two, three months, some of 'em. Tain't right."

Father Crumlish dipped his hand into his pocket. "That's a fine job you've done," he said, handing the old man a quarter.

Embarrassed, Shoes fingered the coin. "Not from you, Father."

"Never you mind." Father Crumlish walked over to the warehouse door and closed it behind him, thankful to be away and about God's work.

St. Brigid's bells were just intoning five o'clock when Father Crumlish, his sick calls completed, stood at Broad Street and Commercial Alley waiting for the traffic light to change. On the opposite corner, a neon-lighted, evil-eyed green bird hovered motionlessly over a doorway, its talons clutching a sign proclaiming the establishment as *The Green Gander Café*.

Catching sight of it, the pastor winced, for the Green Gander was one of the most piercing thorns in his crown. Beyond a doubt, Jake Barker, the renegade rascal who ran the place, did so for the sole purpose of providing the Devil with a handy place to hang his horns.

The light changed. But just as the priest was about to step down from the curb, the door of the café burst open; a young man bounded to the sidewalk, hesitated an instant, then made a hurried dash across the street.

Father Crumlish clicked his tongue against his upper plate. It was Karl Dombrowski, one of his hooligans who gave him more trouble than most. The priest stepped back on the sidewalk and watched the figure hurtling toward him.

He was aware that, in today's lingo, Karl was "cool." Blond hair was brushed over his forehead in a low girlish wave. Muscular arms and chest jutted from a bright pink shirt, opened almost to his slim waist, and somehow the shirt managed to disappear into shamefully tight black pants.

Cool now, was it! Father thought in exasperation as he moved into Karl's path and caught the boy's arm. "Hold on, there."

"Hey, leggo." Startled, Karl whirled, his face whitening at the sight of his pastor. "Oh, Father," he stammered. "I—I didn't see you."

"I warned you the last time that if you ever stepped foot again inside the Green Gander I'd not lift a finger to help you."

"I wasn't—" Karl began.

"None of your lies!" the priest cut him off. "Shame. Your poor mother scrubbing floors at City Hall and you sitting in that filthy den swilling beer. Trying to pick up

information that might put you in the way of a dishonest dollar."

Dombrowski's pallor deepened and he shifted his eyes away from Father's angry gaze.

"I promise you," Father Crumlish said, "the next time you're picked up I'll let you rot in jail. Do you hear me?"

"Okay," Karl muttered. "Okay, okay."

"Get along now and put the kettle on so your mother will have a cup of hot tea when she gets home."

Father Crumlish watched as Karl slunk away. Then the pastor crossed the street, determined to have another stern word with the manager of The Green Gander Café.

The priest's lips tightened as he recognized more than a few of his parishioners lounging against the bar or seated at the café's battered tables scattered around the room. Under other circumstances, the sudden embarrassed hush which descended as the patrons caught sight of St. Brigid's pastor would have given him a certain satisfaction. But now he had more pressing business.

"Hi, Father."

Father Crumlish eyed the husky girl swinging toward him, her green uniform hopelessly stained with the splatterings of a hundred greasy hamburgers, and his exasperation increased. Sophie Kowal, her black eyes as hard as the man-sized muscles of her arms, gave him no reason to fear for her physical safety. But her persistent, unholy alliance with

Jake Barker never ceased to cause him anguish for the safety of her soul.

"I was hoping I'd not find you here, lass," Father said reproachfully.

The response to his reprimand was a tossed head and a bold stare. The priest sighed. "Jake around?"

"He's in back, Father." Sophie took a swipe at a lock of wiry black hair dangling over her forehead and pointed a grease-coated thumb. "Want I should show you?"

"No need," the priest said, striding past the bar in the direction of the doorway leading to the Green Gander storeroom.

Entering a long hallway he was assailed by the odors of yesterday's French fried potatoes and he cast a distasteful glance at the makeshift kitchen as he passed by. At the end of the hall was a closed door.

Father Crumlish gave it a sharp rap, opened it, and walked in.

Cases of liquor, beer, and canned goods occupied every available bit of wall space with the exception of a small area, close by a rear door, which was partitioned off by panels of beaverboard stretching halfway to the ceiling. This was Jake Barker's "office."

"You there, Jake?" Father called out, crossing the uneven floor.

At the "office" doorway he paused, looked inside, and drew a quick breath. The enclosure was as he had seen it on other occasions, with its battered desk, chairs, and file cabinets. Except that now the desk was

in a state of disarray, the drawer of one file cabinet gaped open, a chair was overturned, and—

Jake Barker lay sprawled on the floor, one side of his head resembling a bowl of crushed strawberries.

Quickly Father Crumlish crossed and knelt at the man's side. Then, mindful of his duty to one and all, sinner and saint, he bowed his head, his lips moving silently.

After a moment he rose, picked up the telephone on the desk, and called Lieutenant Thomas Patrick "Big Tom" Madigan of Lake City's police force.

"What do you make of it, Tom?" Father Crumlish asked, sinking tiredly into a chair in a far corner of The Green Gander Café. The big policeman seated opposite him ran a hand through his crisp brown hair.

"Somebody hit him hard enough to crack his skull."

"With what?"

"Not a sign so far of anything that might have been used as a weapon." Madigan frowned. "Nothing heavy enough to inflict the wound that killed him. Or anything with blood on it. But it'll turn up." He consulted some notes on the table.

Father waited.

"The waitress—Sophie Kowal—swears he was alive around four o'clock. Says she went back there to check a meat order and was in the kitchen the rest of the time until just before you came in."

"Anything about Karl Dombrowski?" Father asked.

"Just before she came out of the kitchen, Dombrowski walked past. Toward the barroom. So he was in Jake's office all right. And from what you told me, that time checks."

"I heard the five o'clock bells, Tom."

Madigan nodded. "Sophie doesn't remember anyone else going past the kitchen to the storeroom. Except the old shoe-shine man."

"You mean Shoes?"

"Yeah. My boys are out now with orders to pick up Dombrowski and the old guy, and any inside information that might tie in here—" Madigan broke off as the door burst open.

Father glanced up and recognized the man entering the room, and thought to himself that if Johnny Valenti were wearing a Santa Claus suit, the Lord himself might mistake the fellow for St. Nick. Round and jolly as a bowlful of jelly, hair as snowy as the familiar flowing beard, cheeks as red as apples—except that Father Crumlish knew Valenti's high color was due to a fondness for Chianti.

The ex-rum-runner gave the priest and the policeman a brief but respectful greeting and heaved himself into a chair. "This don't add up, Lieutenant," he said, massaging his pudgy hands. "Who'd want to knock off Jake?"

Madigan eyed him coldly, making no attempt to conceal his dislike. "You got any guesses?"

Valenti shook his head. "I own this place. But Jake managed it."

"He did okay?"

"Good as he could in a joint like this."

Big Tom fingered his notes. "When's the last time you saw him?"

Valenti shrugged. "Couple of days ago, I think." He gave an apologetic half smile. "When you got as many businesses as I have, it's hard to keep track."

Big Tom started to speak, but once more the Green Gander door opened and Karl Dombrowski, flanked by two detectives, was brought into the room.

Valenti rose. "If I can be of any help, Lieutenant—"

Madigan cut him off with a curt nod of dismissal. He waited until Valenti had waddled out the door before turning to the priest. "I have to question Dombrowski, Father."

"Surely, lad," Father Crumlish said mildly. "Let's get on with it."

"Department regulations—" Big Tom began, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

Father knew exactly what Madigan meant to say and he had no intention of letting him say it. "Many's the day—and night—I've listened to the police question my parishioners," he reminded Madigan. "And I can think of more than one of St. Brigid's young hooligans who was mighty thankful to the Lord that I was on hand."

The pointed reference, to his

youthful mistakes brought a flush to Madigan's face. He managed a sheepish half grin. "Okay, Father."

Satisfied, Father sat back while one of the detectives with Karl Dombrowski came over and relayed some information which the Lieutenant quickly jotted down. After a few moments Karl was escorted to the table. He gave the priest an uneasy look as he sat down, then fastened his gaze on his hands.

Despite his knowledge of his parishioner's unsavory record, pity tugged at the priest's heart as he noticed Karl's fingernails, bitten to the quick. The boy was anything but "cool" now. His hair was disheveled and there was a flush on his worried face.

Deliberately Madigan waited, consulting his notes. Then abruptly he hunched forward. "Okay, Dombrowski," he said tightly. "Why did you kill him?"

Karl gasped and half rose from his chair. "I didn't kill him!"

"You were with him. Just before Father found the body. Why?"

As Karl sank back in his chair, the pastor caught the bitter look in his eyes. "I—I heard he needed a bus boy," Dombrowski said shakily.

The policeman snorted. "One thing I know you *weren't* doing here was looking for a job. It's more likely you picked up some information you thought you'd pass on to Jake. For a price, of course."

Karl brought a finger to his mouth and began to gnaw.

"What was it?" Madigan demanded harshly.

"I didn't even—"

"Did he buy it?"

"I didn't even talk to him! The bum was just lying there—"

God help us, Father thought, as Karl's agitated voice stalled under the shock of his unintended admission.

"So you did see him," Madigan said grimly. He leaned across the table. "Now I want some straight answers from you—"

A call from a recently arrived member of his detective squad brought him to a halt. Quickly he rose and walked across the room.

Father waited a moment before he spoke. "Now see here, Karl," he said firmly but not unkindly. "We've had many a troubled time, you and I, and I've never deserted you. But I'll desert you now if you don't tell the Lieutenant all you know." As if Father could . . .

Karl brought his arms across his chest, hugging himself. "Nothing to tell."

Staring at the set young face, Father thought he detected a tremor threaten the boy's mouth. He was about to speak again but Madigan returned to the table, his ordinarily genial face glacier-hard.

"You talk too much in the wrong places, punk," Big Tom said harshly. "What was Johnny Valenti paying you for?"

Father swallowed his astonishment. Valenti and this lad? Was that

why Karl spent so much time at The Green Gander Café?

Dombrowski's hands flicked his hair.

"Talk!" Madigan commanded.

"I—he—Valenti thought Barker was bleeding him. Cutting in on the profits. He knew I hung around here, so he paid me a few bucks to see if I could find out what was going on."

Again Madigan snorted. "What you mean is that *you* thought something was going on here. You tipped off Valenti and he paid you to spy for him." Big Tom leaned back as Dombrowski swabbed perspiration from his upper lip. "Then today," Madigan continued, "you thought you'd play it both ways—that Jake would pay you to shut up. But he didn't buy it, did he? He must have had something on you. Enough to make you kill him—"

"No!" Karl's vehement denial was lost as once more the door opened and Shoes shuffled into the room, his shoe-shine box burdening one shoulder. Like a cross, Father thought.

Madigan motioned to one of his men. "Take this punk in the back room." Then he called Shoes to the table.

Easing the box from his shoulder, the old man snatched his cap from his head and addressed the priest. "Is it true, Father? Mr. Barker's dead?"

"I'll ask the questions, Shoes," Madigan said gently but firmly.

"Yeah. Sure, Lieutenant," Shoes said as he sat down.

"You give Barker a shine today?"

"Naw."

"Why not?"

"Door was closed." He fingered his cap. "I—I figured he was busy."

Madigan leaned forward. "You mean you heard him in there?"

"Uh—yeah."

"Talking to someone?"

"Yeah."

"Who?"

"Gee, Lieutenant. I d'know."

Big Tom brought his hands together and his eyes narrowed. "That's a big room," he said carefully. "Barker was killed in his office which is on the far side—partially partitioned off."

The old man's eyes grew wary and he tore a few threads from his cap.

"If you were outside the door, the voices you heard would have to be pretty loud." Madigan paused. "They were arguing, weren't they?"

"Well—well, mebbe," Shoes admitted reluctantly.

"The other voice you heard. Was it a man's or a woman's?"

Shoes thought a moment. "It coulda been a dame," he said slowly.

"The waitress here? Sophie Kowal?"

"I d'know."

"Maybe it was Karl Dombrowski."

"That kid? Naw."

Big Tom studied his notes for a long moment before glancing up. "Or Johnny Valenti?"

Shoes gave a start and his eyes widened. "Not Mr. Valenti!" His hoarse rasp rose. "Not him. His voice I know."

"What makes you so sure it wasn't Valenti?"

"Not him, I tell ya!"

Madigan's stare was a shaft of steel. "You know more than you're telling me and I'm going to get it out of you if it takes all night."

Night! Father Crumlish looked at his watch in dismay and got to his feet. "I'll be getting along, Tom."

"Sure, Father."

The pastor turned to Shoes. "Tell the Lieutenant what you know."

"Don't know nuthin'."

With a nod to Big Tom, Father crossed the room and closed the entrance door behind him. His knees were stiff from sitting so long and as he limped up the street he could almost feel the chill green glow cast by the evil bird hovering over The Green Gander Café.

It was the top of the ninth inning. The Giants were trailing by two runs, but the bases were loaded. Willie Mays was up to bat, and with the good Lord's help—

"Say a prayer, lad!" Father Crumlish called out—and woke himself up.

He glanced at his bedside clock. Almost midnight. Well, maybe he'd be able to drop off again. But it seemed like no time at all before the telephone rang. Instantly he was alert.

"St. Brigid's."

"Father."

"Yes, Tom," Father Crumlish said, recognizing Madigan's voice.

"The old man—Shoes. He's finally admitted the voice having the argument with Barker was Valenti's."

"Valenti?" Father said bewilderedly.

"Yeah." Madigan gave a snort of disgust. "Seems the old geezer takes care of some property for Valenti and he didn't want to put the finger on his boss."

"What now, Tom?"

"I'm holding Dombrowski and Shoes as material witnesses and I'm picking up Valenti on suspicion of murder."

It was all of another moment before Father Crumlish replaced the telephone receiver. Thoughtfully he sank back on his pillow and stared at the ever-widening stain on his bedroom ceiling. He'd *have* to remember to call in the roofers. But right now . . .

One way or another, Johnny Valenti had managed to stay out of jail for thirty years. What would provoke him now to kill a man? To risk his own life?

Puzzled, the pastor tossed and turned until the early morning light pierced the starch in the curtains at his window. Sighing, he shut off the alarm clock before it rang, eased his legs over the side of the bed, and knelt down to say his morning prayers.

For 22 years Emma Catt had maintained a firm grip on the reins of St. Brigid's Parish and there wasn't a moment of the time that Father Crumlish hadn't felt the bite of the bit. Now she rode into the rectory office—like a Paul Revere, the priest thought guiltily.

"Another load," Emma said, unburdening her arms of the box she was carrying and placing it on the pastor's desk. "I'd say it's high time you preached a sermon on carelessness."

Father knew only too well what she meant. In addition to presiding over the pots and pans, Emma's duties included collecting articles left in the church. That St. Brigid's should maintain a Lost and Found Department for forgetful parishioners was, in Emma's all-too-frequently stated opinion, "a waste of the Lord's time."

Now, with her two steel-gray eyes trained on him, the priest braced himself for another barrage when—God was good!—the telephone at his elbow rang. "St. Brigid's," Father said, chuckling to himself as his housekeeper settled in the saddle and rode away.

His caller was long-winded so that it was nearly twenty minutes before Father replaced the receiver. He was about to rise when his eyes fell on the Lost and Found box.

Idly he fingered the articles: a dog-eared fourth-grade reader, a thumb-worn prayer book, an almost new baseball cap, the usual scarves

and handkerchiefs, and a loosely tied brown-paper parcel.

Father Crumlish picked up the parcel. But it was unexpectedly heavy and slipped from his grasp. The old knotted string broke, the paper came apart, and the contents were revealed: a twelve-inch length of iron pipe.

Startled, Father gazed at it for a moment before he noticed a spattering of something brown on the pipe's surface. Almost like rust—"Bless us!"

Slowly the pastor rose, walked to the window, and gazed out bleakly at the rectory's bit of lawn. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that the object on his desk had been responsible for Jake Barker's death. What better place to conceal a murder weapon than St. Brigid's Lost and Found Department? Even the first-grade tots knew that any article left in the church was held at the rectory for thirty days and then, if not claimed, languished untouched in the school basement until the annual Ladies Aid Society rummage sale.

Well, there was only one thing to do—put the parcel in Big Tom Madigan's hands as quickly as possible.

Father Crumlish returned to his desk and carefully began to replace the wrappings and retie the package. But suddenly his hands stiffened and his dark blue eyes widened in astonishment.

"Glory be to God!"

The brown-paper parcel tucked securely under his arm, Father Crumlish entered Madigan's office, seated himself, and glanced around at the grim gathering: Johnny Valenti, shed of his Santa Claus joviality; Karl Dombrowski, pale and frightened; Sophie Kowal, her wide flat face looking like wet putty; and Shoes. At the sight of Shoes gazing penitently at Valenti, Father was struck with the impression that the old man was on the brink of tears.

Madigan's harsh tones shattered the priest's thoughts.

"Shoes isn't the only one who puts the finger on you, Valenti."

"They made me tell 'em it was you I heard in there, Mr. Valenti!" Shoes' agonized voice pierced the room. "I didn't wanta tell 'em. Honest, I didn't!"

Madigan ignored the outburst. "Dombrowski gave you the information that Jake was holding out on you. And Sophie claims the reason she missed seeing you come in is because you used the rear door—the door next to Barker's office. Why wouldn't you? You're the only person, besides Barker and Sophie, who had a key."

Valenti moved his fat shoulders. Uneasily, Father thought. "I've admitted I saw Jake and we had a— a little argument. But I didn't kill him."

"It wouldn't be the first time a guy has been tucked away for double-crossing his boss."

Valenti's face reddened with anger as he swung his bulk toward Big Tom. "You can't convict an innocent man, Lieutenant! Arrests you've got on me—plenty. But how many convictions?" Without waiting for Madigan's reply, Valenti held up one finger. "Just one. And the Feds never would have nabbed me then in the middle of the lake with a boatful of booze except—" He laughed mirthlessly. "I dropped an oar."

Madigan's lips tightened. "Well, you've dropped another oar this time, Valenti. Now all I want to know is what you used to kill him and where is it."

Unnecessarily, Father Crumlish coughed. "Tom." The policeman turned. Wordlessly Father handed him the brown-paper parcel. Silence thundered in the room as Big Tom unwrapped it and gazed at the length of iron pipe.

"That stain, Tom—"

"It could be blood," Madigan said flatly. "The lab will soon tell us." He pressed a buzzer on his desk. "Where'd you get this, Father?"

"It was in the Lost and Found box at St. Brigids."

The policeman stared at him incredulously. "Somebody left it in the church?"

Father nodded.

"Pretty smart, Valenti," Big Tom said.

"Don't try to frame me!" Valenti cried savagely.

"It figures that an ex-smuggler

would know how to get rid of evidence—”

“Hold on, Tom,” Father said. “If that devilish thing there did away with Jake Barker, Johnny Valenti never left it in St. Brigid’s.”

Madigan frowned. “You don’t know—”

“I know my people,” Father said firmly. He turned to Valenti. “’Tis a sad thing I have to say to prove your innocence. But I know you haven’t stepped foot inside St. Brigid’s since the last time I shamed you into it. That was last Christmas.” At the ex-rum-runner’s guilty flush, Father felt a small sense of satisfaction.

“Now wait a minute, Father,” Madigan started to protest.

“And Jake Barker wasn’t killed because he’d stolen thousands of dollars, Tom,” Father went on hurriedly. “The fellow was murdered for the oldest motive in the world—a few pieces of silver.” The priest paused. “Isn’t that right, Shoes?”

Shoes sat upright in his chair. “Wha—Whatcha sayin’, Father?”

“Jake owed you for shines, didn’t he? How many?”

The old man’s eyes blazed and his stained fingers pawed his chin as he leaned toward the priest. “More’n two months he owed me! Two bits every day for more’n two months!” He clenched his fist and shook it. “An’ yesterday he tossed me a dollar—a measly buck! Said he’d paid me, that I was lyin’—”

Shoes’ voice broke and perspiration glistened on his pigskin face as he shrank into his chair. In the silence Big Tom rose and quietly moved over to the old man.

“You waited outside the door until the argument was over—until Valenti had let himself out the rear door. That’s the way it was, wasn’t it, Shoes?” Madigan said softly. “And when Jake wouldn’t pay you, you took that piece of pipe you’ve been carrying in your shoebox ever since you got that last beating—”

“But I didn’t mean to kill him,” Shoes protested plaintively.

“Sure you didn’t,” Madigan said, easing him to his feet. “But we’d better go downstairs and get all this down on paper.”

“Yeah.” Dazedly Shoes tugged at his sagging trousers and shuffled toward the door. “Get it straight. ’Cause I wouldn’t wantcha to think I’d just kill somebody—” He broke off, puzzled by a sudden thought, and turned his watery eyes on the priest. “Hey, Father! Howja know it was me?”

Father Crumlish walked over to Madigan’s desk. “And why wouldn’t I know, Shoes?” he said gently, picking up the worn length of string, with its untidy knots, which had been used to tie up the brown-paper parcel. “And wouldn’t I know my own shoelaces?”

Just as Father Crumlish was about to sit down and turn to the sports page, the telephone rang. Annoyed,

he threw down the paper, and wincing a little from his arthritis, he limped down the hall to the office.

"St. Brigid's."

"I've just had a call from Johnny Valenti," Bishop McFarland's voice, an ear-shattering boom, came over the wire. "Seems he planned to tear down that old warehouse of his on Poleski Street and build a bowling alley and bar."

Father barely concealed a groan. Didn't the Lord know there was trouble enough in the parish?

"But he's changed his mind. Says he owes you a favor." The Bishop paused. "He's giving it to St. Brigid's—lock, stock, and barrel."

The last time the pastor could remember being rendered speechless was when he'd had a wisdom tooth pulled.

"What was the favor?" Suspicion ran rampant in the Bishop's voice.

Father Crumlish drew a deep breath. "Perhaps the fellow had in mind when I got him into church. Last Christmas, it was."

There were a few moments more of conversation before Father limped back to the sports page. But as he sank back in his easy chair and began to read, the type before his eyes seemed to blur and blend. And for the life of him, all he could see were the glorious words: *St. Brigid's Recreation Center*.

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magic names, magic titles, magic stories . . .

To Sir Swithin Montross, the stranger's face "was as bleak and cold as the surface of the moon," and the stranger's eyes "glowed like the ruins of a burned orphanage" . . .

AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY

by STEPHEN BARR

SIR SWITHIN MONTROSS ARRIVED at the door of his house in a mood of ultimate frustration. He had lost at cards and at the races, he had failed at love, and he was about to fail at business if he didn't watch his step. And his golf was shot to hell.

He went in, walked heavily to his study, and, approaching the decanter tray, resolutely picked up a bottle of whiskey.

"I shouldn't do that if I were you," a voice behind him said.

Sir Swithin put the bottle down automatically and, turning around, saw, sitting in his winged leather chair, a stranger with rather noticeable eyebrows set at different levels.

"Who the devil are you, sir?" he inquired, "and how did you get in?"

"Forgive me for not rising," said the stranger, "I am . . . tired beyond all comprehension. I came to see you, Sir Swithin."

"Well, you see me, and now get out," said Sir Swithin Montross, "or I shall call the police!"

The stranger continued to look at

him—not smiling, not frowning, but almost as though he were weighing him. The confounded blackguard had a little goatee. Some kind of foreigner? Evening clothes, though. Goodish cut. "Did Soames let you in?" said Sir Swithin. "Because if he did—"

"No one let me in," the stranger said. "However, I am here, and you and I might talk business. You have something I want."

"The silver?" sneered Sir Swithin, "or are you here to blackmail me?"

"Now please don't think anything so vulgar," said the stranger, "and *please* don't drink any more whiskey," he added as Sir Swithin reached for a glass and picked up the whiskey again. "It's very bad for you. Not that it's your body I'm interested in . . ."

Sir Swithin poured himself an enormous amount of straight whiskey, and sat down. "Then, sir," he said, "what is it of mine you *are* interested in?"

The stranger smiled for the first time. "I really don't know how to answer you," he said. "Some things

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defy accurate definition." He let his voice stop and it echoed in the distant spheres.

"Sounds like a touch," Sir Swithin said, and drained his glass.

"No, I am not asking you to lend me money," said the stranger. "I am talking about something far less mundane—something you don't even know you have."

"Hah," said Sir Swithin, refilling his glass, "then I probably shan't miss it, eh?" He stood up, taking another glass. "Will you join me?"

"A little brandy, if you please," said the stranger, "neat."

Sir Swithin filled a glass and handed it to him. It went down the stranger's throat as though it had been poured onto a clay pathway. "I think," said Sir Swithin, "that I know who you are."

The stranger nodded but this time he did not smile—his face was as bleak and cold as the surface of the moon.

"But you see," went on Sir Swithin, "you've come to the wrong shop. I have no soul." It was a pleasing thought and Sir Swithin forgot his troubles. "But supposing I had—what have you to offer me for it?"

"The usual things," said the stranger. "Not what you want, but what you think you want. Three things."

"Quite," said Sir Swithin, and refilled their glasses. "But tell me," he asked, "why is it always three wishes?"

"You have three things that trouble you, haven't you?"

"Well . . . Hm." Sir Swithin thought this over. The horses—yes, no one could be as good a judge of horseflesh as he and have such bad luck; and the same with cards—bad hands and worse partners. And his golf—it really came under the same heading, play, but here the trouble was different. He was the second best player in his club, and no effort on his part or variation in luck had ever caused him to beat Pillsbury. When the club champion was off his game so was Sir Swithin, and if Sir Swithin, owing to some vagary of the wind, achieved a three for the seventh hole, Pillsbury got an incredible two. Then Millicent, with her damned, beseeching come-on look that meant nothing. And business—that was worst of all.

"I make this offer to you, Sir Swithin: free and with no strings I will give you your first wish. Will that convince you?"

Montross looked at him narrowly. "Very handsome of you, I'm sure," he said. "Have to think it over for a bit." The first wish . . . which would that be? The race track, or gold? No—ridiculous. Millicent? Again no—anyway, she must do the wishing.

"Business," said the stranger.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Swithin. "You read my mind!"

"Absurd; cupidity was written all over your face. Make your wish."

Sir Swithin's mind spiraled amid

the unpromising possibilities of the stock exchange. He didn't need a wish—he needed information.

"Sell your mining shares," the stranger said. "All of them. Tomorrow morning, the moment the exchange opens."

"Then what do I do?"

"Get it in cash and be ready for the afternoon."

"What do I do in the afternoon?"

"Tomorrow is Derby Day—or had you forgotten?" The stranger's eyes glowed like the ruins of a burned orphanage. "Put the money on Fox Fire—to win," said the stranger.

"But—but Fox Fire is a rank outsider!"

"Precisely," said the stranger, "17 to one. If you're careful and spread it around you shouldn't hurt the odds too much. And now I really must be going. I shall see you tomorrow evening."

The stranger disappeared through the French windows into Sir Swithin's garden, and the sound of some exotic night bird came in from the darkness with the petrol fumes.

Sir Swithin went upstairs to bed.

When he awoke the next morning he looked at his watch and jumped out of bed. Where was Soames? Why had he not wakened him? Where was his early-morning cup of tea?

The answer—pinned to the door of the valet's empty bedroom—was quite explicit. "I cannot work for a

man like you, Sir Swithin Montross," it said in cold type. "You are not a person of whom I should care to have a reference from."

"The man's mad," Sir Swithin muttered, and went down to cope with the kitchen.

Cook was on her day off and he would have to make his own breakfast, but he gave it up when he found that every egg in the larder was addled. After a cup of black coffee—the cream had soured—he started for the city in his little Bentley, but his heart pounded like a triphammer and he went instead to Harley Street. Here he was examined and frowned over.

"Remember what I told you about whiskey?" said the specialist.

"Shchah!" said Sir Swithin; and took the pill he was given.

He drove to the city and his heart was calmer now—no doubt the pill. Selling his mining shares was rather fun, and so was getting the cash: everyone looked shocked.

He was feeling pretty well and decided to ring up Millicent, the dear girl. He went to a telephone booth in Cornhill and called her number. She answered, herself—immediately.

"Hello, Millicent," he said to her, "this is Wuggy . . ."

"Oh!" she replied, "*ugh!*"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"How *dare* you call me!" she said.

"You're the most heartless man I ever *knew!* You're . . . you're *soulless!*"

"But, Millicent!" Sir Swithin said anxiously, "I only wanted to—"

"I won't talk to you!" she said. "I never want to see you again, ever! Don't call me—ever!"

The phone went dead, and so did Sir Swithin's spirit. He staggered out of the phone booth and drove unsteadily to the golf links. When he got to the clubhouse he looked around for Pillsbury and saw a tall, thin figure standing at the bar. He went to him and slapped him on the shoulder.

"How about a game, old bean?" he said.

"Why," said the other, turning around, "I should be simply delighted!"

It wasn't Pillsbury, though. It was the club dud. They looked rather alike from behind, actually.

It was too late to draw back and Sir Swithin got his clubs from the locker room and followed him out to the first tee. Well, if he couldn't have a game with Pillsbury, at least he could give this fool a lesson.

But from the first to the 18th hole every shot he made went wrong. In driving he sliced, in his approach shots he hooked—nothing went right except the putting, but by then it was too late and the club dud beat him.

Back in the clubhouse he had a whiskey and soda, and made one more try at calling Millicent; but as soon as she heard his voice she hung up.

Then it was time for the Derby.

He got into his Bentley and drove to the track. Within half an hour he had placed his bets and the odds had dropped to eight to one. Within another half hour the favorite had run out and Fox Fire had won by three lengths.

Sir Swithin collected his unseemly winnings and drove back to London—but what good was all this money to him now? Without Millicent to share his good fortune? And *what* had happened to his golf?

He drove to the garage to park the car, and the owner on seeing him came out with a piece of paper in his hand. "Your bill, Sir Swithin," he said with repugnance.

"But it's not the first of the month yet!" said Sir Swithin.

"No, sir. But I want no more of your trade," replied the owner, turning away. "Keep your car elsewhere," he added over his shoulder and slammed the door.

Sir Swithin blinked and drove to a parking lot. Then he went to his club on foot—perhaps a game of bridge would soothe him.

As he walked into the noble Georgian hallway the porter looked at him with dismay and disappeared into the office. In a moment he reappeared, accompanied by the club secretary who glared at Sir Swithin as though he were a filterable virus.

"Why have you come here, Montross?" he said coldly.

"Why have I . . . But . . ." Sir Swithin felt dizzy.

"Since you are no longer a member of the club, I think you had better go," said the secretary, and turned away.

Sir Swithin found himself on the pavement outside. He felt crushed and abandoned and his heart was pounding again. Too unsure of himself to hail a cab, he walked miserably home.

The cook was not yet back—instead he found a note for him on the kitchen table when he went in search of her, but he could not bring himself to read it. When he got to his study he made directly for the whiskey decanter.

"Only a short one," said a voice behind him.

He turned and saw the stranger, who looked at him with the compassion of a vivisectionist.

"I see Fox Fire won," said the stranger. "Did you get your bets down all right?"

"Yes," said Sir Swithin Montross, "Fox Fire won—and so have you." He sat down and covered his face with his hands. "I won't go through with it," he said between his fingers. "You must let me off."

"My dear sir," said the stranger, "your first wish was granted, was it not? So let us proceed to business."

"No, no!" cried Sir Swithin, "I won't. You . . . you must cancel it! I don't want any more wishes, I want to go back to the way things were!"

"I think things have gone a little too far for that, don't you?" said

the stranger. "Play the man, Montross; at least now you must be convinced you have a soul."

"I tell you I don't care whether I have or not!" Sir Swithin said. "You said there'd be no strings attached—take back the first wish, and set me free."

"The strings applied to your soul, you know," said the stranger, "and I shan't take that; but I can't very well cancel the past."

"You can, you must!" said Sir Swithin desperately, and, getting up, he drew his swollen wallet from his pocket and threw it on the table between them. "Take it—take back the money and give me back my life as it was! It was bad—it had its little defects, I grant you, but it wasn't as bad as this!"

"Well," the stranger said with reluctance.

"Take it, I beseech you!" Sir Swithin pushed the wallet toward him.

The stranger stood up and shrugged, and his shoulders seemed like those of a bat. He took the wallet and shook his head, then without another word he walked out of the room.

Sir Swithin heard the front door open and close, but there was no sound of footsteps from outside.

"Well, here's the cash," the stranger was saying a few minutes later to two friends. "If I'd only had the capital I'd have done it myself—but I hadn't. Anyway, this

was safer: no risk. All right now—one share for you," he handed a packet of currency to one of the men. "That takes care of fixing his golf clubs. Have any trouble?"

"Nah. I opened the locker with a hairpin. Tilted the heads a little—that's all there was to it. Thanks."

"And one share for you, Joe. I must congratulate you on your ingenuity with the servant problem."

"Thanks, boss. The cook's visiting her married sister in Brixton who's going to turn out not to be sick, and his valet's sleeping it off at a friend's."

"Poor fellow," said the stranger approvingly, "he'll be all right tomorrow morning. And the remaining three shares I will take. Now, gentlemen," he said, as the others looked up with resentment, "take it easy! Who thought up this scheme? Who wrote the notes from Soames and the cook? Who wrote the letter of insulting resignation to his club? Who had the idea of the indecent

phone call to the garageman's wife—and in Sir Swithin's voice? Could either of you have imitated him well enough?"

He looked at his friends, and it was plain they could not have.

"Could either of you have written so convincingly caddish a letter to his girl? Absurd! And the rotten eggs and the spoiled cream? Clever little touches, those. No, my friends, I am not grasping, but I think I have earned my three shares."

He got up and looked at himself in the mirror appraisingly.

"When are you going to shave off that lousy beard?" one of his friends said. "You look like hell in it."

"D'you know, I think I'll keep it," the stranger said, turning this way and that. "I've rather grown to like it."

EDITORS' NOTE: *Well, don't say we didn't warn you in the title . . .*



a new DR. COFFEE novelet

It was a knife job—a bloody one; and when the 64,000,000-to-1 fingerprint angle showed up, Lieutenant Max Ritter turned to his private medical examiner, Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Northbank's Pasteur Hospital . . . a modern medical detective story in the great tradition . . .

THE KILLER WITH NO FINGERPRINTS

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THE PLACE WAS ALMOST A SHAMBLES when Max Ritter, Lieutenant of Detectives, arrived. All the living-room furniture was slashed or overturned. Chair legs and lamps littered the apartment. So many light bulbs had been broken that the police had to work by flashlights until more bulbs could be sent up. The bed was a rat's nest of bloody tatters, and a trail of gore led from the bedroom through the living room into the bathroom.

The dead man was lying in the bathroom in a pretzel-like posture that would have made a Ringling Brothers contortionist green with envy. He had one foot in the toilet bowl, one arm in the wash basin, and his head in the bathtub. The wood-handled long-bladed kitchen knife which had carved hieroglyphics into his torso had been left lying on the bathroom floor. So had a cheap plastic raincoat which the murderer had obviously worn to

protect his clothing, as well as the crumpled bloody towels with which he had wiped his hands and probably his shoes.

The house phone was off the hook and lay on the floor—a fact which led to the early discovery of the crime. The desk clerk of the West-side Residential Hotel had plugged a jack under a signal light that had suddenly flared for Apartment 26. He had said "Office" several times, but got no response. He thought he heard curious sounds in the back-ground and repeated "Office" three more times. When he heard what he thought was the sound of a door closing, he had run up the stairs—the self-service elevator was somewhere in the stratosphere—and had banged on the door of Apartment 26. When there was no response, he ran back down the stairs and called the police. He made no attempt to enter the apartment with his passkey until the squad-car cops arrived. Why should he,

a law-abiding and unarmed citizen, usurp the unquestioned duty of the uniformed forces of the law?

While the print men, photographers, and other technicians were picking their way gingerly through the mess in Apartment 26, Lieutenant Ritter was collecting pertinent data. But the swarthy, lugubrious beanpole of a detective found the desk clerk, the manager, and the neighbors singularly uninformative. It seemed incredible to Ritter that such a desperate life-and-death struggle could have gone on without arousing some auditory interest; yet this appeared to be the case. The man and wife across the hall were addicted to loud television—the wife was rather deaf—and the people in the apartment next door were out for the evening. The girl at the end of the hall had taken a sleeping pill and even slept through five minutes of door pounding by the police.

Neither the desk clerk nor the house manager was of much help at first. The desk clerk, a young man with curly brown hair, long eyelashes, and suspiciously red lips, was terribly, terribly bored and terribly, terribly vague about who had entered and left the lobby during the evening. The manager said that the dead man had registered three weeks previously as Gerald Sampson of New York, although he agreed with the desk clerk that the deceased had a pronounced Southern accent.

Lieutenant Max Ritter was convinced that the dead man's name was not Sampson and that he had not come from New York. In the wastebasket of Apartment 26 the Lieutenant had found an envelope addressed to Mr. Paul Wallace, General Delivery, Northbank, and postmarked Baton Rouge, Louisiana. There was no return address on the envelope and no letter inside the envelope or in the wastebasket.

In a dresser drawer, under a pile of expensive shirts, Ritter found a Social Security card in the name of Paul Wallace and a passbook showing a balance of \$1706 in a Cleveland bank to the credit of P. L. Wallace. In an envelope stuffed into the inside pocket of a Brooks Brothers sports jacket hanging in a closet, the detective found an envelope containing a dozen newspaper clippings about a young singer named Patty Erryl.

Even in the smudged halftone pictures, Patty was a comely lass, apparently not far out of her teens, brimful of that intangible effervescence which is the exclusive property of youth. In most of the poses her eyes glowed with the roscate vision of an unclouded future. Her blonde head was poised with the awareness of her own fresh loveliness. Patty Erryl was quite obviously a personality. Moreover, Lieutenant Ritter concluded as he read through the clippings, Patty had talent.

Patty had been singing in North-bank night clubs for the past year. Just a month before the sudden demise of Mr. Paul Wallace, she had won the regional tryout of the Metropolitan Opera auditions. In a few weeks she would go to New York to compete in the nationally broadcast finals.

Ritter took the clippings downstairs and reopened his questioning of the bored desk clerk.

"Ever see this dame?" He dealt the clippings face up on the reception desk.

"Ah? Well, yes, as a matter of fact I have." The clerk fluttered his eyelashes. "I saw the pictures in the papers, too, even before I saw the girl, but I somehow didn't connect the one with the other. Yes, I've seen her."

"Did she ever come here to see this bird Wallace?"

"Wallace? You mean Mr. Sampson?"

"I mean the man in Twenty-six."

"Ah. Well, yes, as a matter of fact she did."

"Often?"

"That depends upon what you call often. She's been here three or four times, I'd say."

"Do you announce her or does she go right up?"

"Well, the first time she stopped at the desk. Lately she's been going right up."

"What do you mean, lately? Tonight, maybe?"

"I didn't see her tonight."

"If she comes here regular, maybe she could go through the service entrance and take the elevator in the basement without you seeing her?"

"That's possible, yes."

"Does she always come alone?"

"Not always. Last time she came she brought lover boy along."

"Who's lover boy?"

"How should I know?" Again the clerk fluttered his eyelashes. "He's a rather uncouth young man whom for some reason Miss Erryl seems to find not unattractive. She apparently takes great pleasure in gazing into his eyes. And vice versa."

"But you don't know his name?"

"I do not. We don't require birth certificates, passports, or marriage licenses for the purpose of visiting our tenants."

"You're too, too liberal. You let in murderers. Did lover boy ever come here without lover girl?"

"He did indeed. He was here last night raising quite a row with the gentleman in Twenty-six. When he came down he was red-faced and mad as a hornet. Right afterward the gentleman in Twenty-six called the desk and gave orders that if lover boy ever came back, I was not to let him up, and that if he insisted I was to call the police. Lover boy had been threatening him, he said. But I think he came back again tonight."

"You think?"

"Well, I had just finished taking

a phone message for one of our tenants who was out, and I turned my back to put the message in her box when this man went by and got into the elevator. I only had a glimpse of him as the elevator door was closing, but I'm sure it was lover boy. I shouted at him but it was too late. I tried to phone Twenty-six to warn Mr. Sampson—"

"Wallace."

"Wallace. But there was no answer, so I assumed he was out. Then a few minutes later the phone in Twenty-six was knocked off the hook."

"Did you see lover boy come down again?"

"Now that you mention it, no, I didn't—unless he came down while I was up banging on the door of Twenty-six."

"Or took the car down to the basement and went out the service entrance, maybe?"

"You're so right, Lieutenant. Or he could have been picked up by a helicopter on the roof." The clerk giggled.

"Very funny." Ritter advanced his lower lip. "Any other non-tenants come in tonight since you came on duty?"

"Traffic has been quite light this evening. There was the blonde who always comes to see the man in Sixty-three on Wednesdays. There was a boy from the florist's with roses for the sick lady on Nine, and there was an elderly white-haired

gent I assumed to be delivering for the liquor store on the corner."

"Why?"

"Well, he had a package under his arm and it was about time for Miss Benedict's daily fifth of gin, to—"

"What time do you call 'about time'?"

"About an hour ago."

"This was before Wallace's light went up on your switchboard?"

"About twenty minutes before. Now that I think of it, I didn't see him come down either. Of course, with all the excitement—"

"That makes two for your helicopter," the detective said. "Let me know if you think of any more."

Ritter went upstairs again for another look at the dead man and to wait for the coroner who had been summoned from his weekly pinochle game but had not yet arrived. At least this was one case the coroner could not very well attribute to heart failure—"Coroner's Thrombosis," as Dr. Coffee called it—since the cause of death was plainly written in blood.

The dead man had been on the threshold of middle age. His temples were graying and there was gray in his close-cropped beard. The beard, instead of giving him an air of distinction, left him with a hard ruthless face. His features were regular, except perhaps for his earlobes which were thick, pendulous, and slightly discolored as though they had been forcibly twisted.

Whoever killed Mr. Wallace-Samspon must have really hated him to have done such a savage knife job on him. Why, then, would the victim have admitted a man who was such an obvious and determined enemy? Could the murderer have obtained a key from some third party?

Ritter's reverie was interrupted by the approach of Sergeant Foley, the scowling fingerprint expert.

"Lieutenant," he said, "we got something special here. I think we're stuck with a sixty-four-million-dollar question and with no sponsor to slip us the answer."

"You mean you can't make the stiff?"

"Oh, the stiff's a cinch. We haven't made him yet, but we got a perfect set of prints and he's old enough so he must be on file somewhere in the world. But the murderer—no soap!"

"Sergeant, you surprise and grieve me," Ritter said. "With my own little eyes I see five perfect bloody fingermarks on the bathroom door."

"Finger marks yes," said Sergeant Foley, "but prints no."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning no prints. No ridges, no pore patterns, no whorls, no radial loops, no ulnar loops—no nothing."

Ritter frowned. "Gloves?"

"We usually get *some* sort of pattern with gloves, even surgical gloves sometimes, although they're hard to identify. But here, nothing—and I mean *nothing*."

"The knife?"

"Same thing. It wasn't wiped. Bloody finger marks, yes—prints, no. The knife, by the way, comes from the kitchenette here."

Max Ritter scratched his mastoid process. He pursed his lips as though rehearsing for a Police Good Neighbor League baby-kissing bee. Then he asked, "Your boys finished with that phone, Sergeant?"

"Yup. Go ahead and call."

A moment later Ritter was talking to his private medical examiner, Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Northbank's Pasteur Hospital.

"Hi, Doc. Get you out of bed? . . . Look, I got something kind of funny, if you can call homicide funny . . . No, the coroner's a little late, but this one he can't write off as natural causes. A knife job, but good. Like a surgeon, practically . . . No, I don't think there's anything you can do tonight, Doc. I already emptied the medicine chest for you, like always. But if I can talk the coroner into shipping the deceased to your hospital morgue for a P.M. . . . You will? Thanks, Doc. I think you're going to like this one. The killer's got no fingerprints . . . No, I don't mean he left none; he's *got* none. Call you in the morning, Doc."

When Dr. Coffee returned to the pathology laboratory after the au-

topsy next morning, he handed two white enameled pails to his winsome, dark-eyed technician and said, "The usual sections and the usual stains, Doris. Only don't section the heart until I photograph the damage."

Doris Hudson lifted the lids from both pails and peered in without any change of expression on her cover-girl features.

"Lieutenant Ritter is waiting in your office, Doctor, talking to Calcutta's gift to Northbank," she said. "If you agree that Dr. Mookerji is not paid to entertain the Police Department, I could use him out here to help me cut tissue."

Doris's voice apparently had good carrying qualities, for the rotund Hindu resident in pathology immediately appeared in the doorway and waddled into the laboratory.

"Salaam, Doctor Sahib," said Dr. Mookerji. "Lieutenant Ritter is once more involving us in felonious homicide, no?"

Dr. Coffee nodded.

"Hi, Doc," said Ritter. "What did you find?"

"The gross doesn't show much except that the deceased died of shock and hemorrhage due to multiple stab wounds in the cardiac region and lower abdomen. As you know, Max, I won't have the microscopic findings for a day or so."

"Did you shave off the guy's whiskers?"

"That's not routine autopsy procedure, Max. But it's pretty clear

that he grew a beard to hide scars. There's old scar tissues on one cheek, on the chin, and on the upper lip."

"He also grows the bush to hide behind." Max Ritter grinned. "Doc, the guy's a con man and a small-time blackmailer. I wire the Henry classification to the F.B.I. last night and I get the answer first thing this morning. His name's Paul Wallace, with half a dozen aliases. He's got a record: four arrests, two convictions. Two cases dismissed in New York when the plaintiffs, both dames, withdrew their complaints. Last four years are blank, the F.B.I. says, at least as far as Washington knows."

"What about the murderer with no fingerprints?" the pathologist asked.

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Doc. Since this Wallace is a crook, maybe the guy that knifed him is another crook he double-crossed. Maybe the butcher boy had a little plastic surgery on his fingers."

"I don't know, Max." Dr. Coffee shook his head, then with one hand brushed an unruly wisp of straw-colored hair back from his forehead. "I've never seen a first-class job of surgical fingerprint elimination. Did you ever see the prints they took off Dillinger's corpse? His plastic job was a complete botch. No trouble at all to make the identification."

"Then how do you—?"

"Give me another forty-eight

hours, Max. Meanwhile, what progress have you made running down blind leads?"

Ritter told the pathologist about Patty Erryl and her visits to the dead man's apartment with and without "lover boy"; also about the bored and vague desk clerk's recital, and about his own conclusions.

"This white-haired old geezer with the package under his arm is definitely not delivering gin to Miss Benedict in Seven-oh-two for any liquor store within half a mile," said Ritter. "I checked 'em all. Could be that his package was the plastic raincoat I found in the bathroom.

"Anyhow, I just come from talking to this Patty Erryl, the opera hopeful." Ritter brought forth his envelope of clippings and spread them on Dr. Coffee's desk. "Look, Doc. A real dish. Not more than twenty. Born in Texas, she says—some little town near San Antonio. Grew up in the Philippines where her father was a U.S. Air Force pilot. He was killed in Korea. Her mother is dead too, she says. I ain't so sure. Maybe Mama just eased out of the picture, leaving little Patty with a maiden aunt in Northbank—Aunt Minnie Erryl. Anyhow, little Patty studies voice here in Northbank with Sandra Farriston until Sandra is bounced off to join Caruso, Melba, and Schumann-Heink. Remember Sandra? Then Patty goes to New Orleans to study with an old friend of

Sandra's for a few years, she says. Then she comes back to Northbank to live with Auntie Min and sing in night clubs, under Auntie Min's strictly jaundiced eye. Then all of a sudden she wins this Metropolitan Opera audition tryout—"

"What about lover boy?"

"I was just coming to that, Doc. Seems he's a reporter on the Northbank *Tribune*. Covers the Federal Building in the daytime and the night-club beat after dark. Name's Bob Rhodes. He's the one who pushes her into the opera auditions. Quite a feather in his cap, to read his night-club columns. He thinks he discovers another Lily Pons."

"What has he been seeing Wallace about?"

"I don't know yet." Ritter pushed his dark soft hat to the back of his head. "Seems last night's his day off and I can't locate him. I'm on the point of putting out a six-state alarm for him, but little Patty talks me out of it. She guarantees to produce him for me at eleven o'clock this morning. Want to come along?"

"Maybe I'd better. How does the girl explain her visits to Wallace?"

"She don't know he's a crook, she says. Friend of her dad's, she says. Ran into him in New Orleans when she was studying music down there, then lost sight of him for a few years. When he sees her picture in the papers after she wins that opera whoopeddoo, he looks her

up here in Northbank. She goes to see him a few times to talk about her family and maybe drink a glass of sherry or two. That's all. She has no idea who killed him or why."

"What about that stuff you collected from the medicine cabinet in Wallace's bathroom?"

"I got it here." Ritter pulled a plastic bag from his bulging pocket. "It ain't much. Aspirin, toothpaste, bicarb, hair tonic, and this bottle of pills from some drug store in Cleveland."

Dr. Coffee uncorked the last item, sniffed, shook a few of the brightly colored tablets into the palm of his hand, sniffed again, and poured them back. He picked up the phone.

"Get me the Galenic Pharmacy in Cleveland," he told the operator. A moment later he said, "This is Dr. Daniel Coffee at the Pasteur Hospital in Northbank. About a month ago you filled a prescription for a man named Wallace. The number is 335571. Could you read it to me? Yes, I'll wait . . . I see. Diasone. Thank you very much. No, I don't need a refill, thank you."

Dr. Coffee's face was an expressionless mask as he hung up. He pondered a moment, then picked up the phone again. He dialed an inside number.

"Joe? Coffee here. Has the undertaker picked up that body we were working on this morning? . . . Good. Don't release it for another

half hour. Dr. Mookerji will tell you when."

The pathologist took off his white jacket, hung it up carefully, and reached for his coat. He took the detective's arm and marched him out of the office. As he crossed the laboratory, he stopped to tug playfully on the tail of the Hindu resident's pink turban.

"Dr. Mookerji," he said, "I wish you'd go down to the basement and wind up that autopsy I started this morning. I need more tissue. I want a specimen from both the inguinal and femoral lymph nodes, and from each earlobe. When you're through, you may release the body. Doris, when you make sections from this new tissue, I want you to use Fite's fuchsin stain for acid-fast bacilli. Any biopsies scheduled, Doris?"

"Not today, Doctor."

"Then I won't be back until after lunch. Let's go, Max."

The office bistro of the Northbank *Tribune* staff was on the ground floor of the building next door. There reporters and desk men could refuel conveniently and could always be found in an editorial emergency. It was whimsically named "The Slot" because the horseshoe bar was shaped like a copy desk with the bartender dealing fermented and distilled items to the boys on the rim—like an editor meting out the grist of the day's news for soft-pencil surgery.

There was a pleasant beery smell about the place, and the walls were hung with such masculine adornment as yellowing photos of prize-fighters and jockeys, moth-eaten stags' heads, mounted dead fish, a few Civil War muzzle-loaders, and framed *Tribune* front pages reporting such historic events as the sinking of the Titanic, the surrender of Nazi Germany, the dropping of the first atomic bomb, and the winning of the World Series by the Northbank Blue Sox.

The masculine decor was no deterrent, however, to invasion by emancipated womanhood. A series of stiffly uncomfortable booths had been erected at the rear of the bar-room, and from one of them, as Dr. Coffee and Max Ritter entered, emerged a dark-eyed, flaxen-haired cutie who, from the swing of her hips as she advanced toward the two men, might have been a collegiate drum-majorette—except for the set of her jaw, the intelligent determination in her eyes, and the challenge in her stride.

"Hi, Patty," said Lieutenant Ritter. "Where's the fugitive?"

"Fugitive!" The girl flung out the word. "I warn you, I'm not going to let you frame Bob Rhodes. Who is this character you've brought along—a big-shot from the State Police, or just the F.B.I.?"

"Patty," said Ritter, his Adam's apple poised for a seismographic curve, "Dr. Coffee is maybe the only friend you and your lover

boy have in the world—if you're both innocent. Doc, meet Patty Erryl, the girl who's going to make the Met forget Galli-Curci, or whoever they want to forget this year. Where's Bob?"

"He's been delayed."

"Look, Patty baby, if you insist on obstructing justice, I'll have lover boy picked up wherever he is and we'll take him downtown for questioning without your lovely interfering presence."

"Don't you dare. If you—"

"Just a minute, Max," Dr. Coffee cut in. "Remember I've never met Miss Erryl before. I may have a few questions—"

The pathologist was interrupted by a crash near the entrance. A man, sprawled momentarily on all fours, immediately rose to his knees, trying to recapture the bottles that were spinning off in all directions.

Patty Erryl sped to his rescue. She caught him under the armpits, straining to get him to his feet. "Bob, please get up. They're trying to railroad you, and I'm not going to let them."

"Come, my little chickadee, there's no danger." Rhodes had recaptured three of the elusive bottles. "There are no witnesses. There is no evidence. I did not kill Fuzzy Face."

"Bob, you've been drinking."

"No, my little cedar wax-wing. Only beer. My own. If only Mr. Slot would stock my Danish brand. You know I never drink until the

sun is over the yardarm. Which reminds me. We have passed the vernal equinox. The sun must be over—"

"Bob!"

"Rhodes," said Max Ritter, "the desk clerk saw you at the Westside last night."

"That near-sighted pansy!" Rhodes exclaimed. "Don't you ever try to prove anything by his testimony. And don't tell me that anything I say may be used against me, because even if this place is bugged I'll deny everything. You've drugged me. You've beaten me with gocart tires. You've kicked my shins black and blue. I'll swear that you've—"

"Stop it, Bob."

"May I ask a question, Mr. Rhodes? I'm Doctor—"

"Sure, you're the learned successor to Dr. Thorndyke, Dr. Watson, Dr. Sherlock, Dr. Holmes, Dr. . . . Indeed, I've heard about you, Dr. Sanka. Go ahead and ask."

"What were you doing at the Westside Apartment Hotel last night?"

"I was on assignment."

"From whom?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. The highest courts of this state have ruled that a newsman is not required to reveal his sources. Privileged communication."

"This ain't a matter of privileged communication," Ritter said. "This is a matter of murder in the first degree. Look here, Rhodes—"

"Just a minute, Max. Mr. Rhodes, were you inside Apartment Twenty-six last night?"

"No."

"Did you see a man named Paul Wallace last night?"

"No."

"But you know that Paul Wallace was killed in Apartment Twenty-six last night, don't you?"

"Sure. I read the papers even on my day off."

"Did you see anyone go into Apartment Twenty-six last night?"

"No."

"Did you see anyone come out?"

Rhodes hesitated for just the fraction of a second before he said, "No."

"What were you doing on the second floor of the Westside?"

"I was playing a hunch. I'm a great little hunch player."

"You make mincemeat of Wallace's lights and gizzard on a hunch?" Lieutenant Ritter asked.

"Down, Cossack!" said Rhodes. "Down. Roll over. Sit up. Beg . . ."

"Bob, you're not making any sense," the girl broke in. "Lieutenant, I'll tell you why he was at the Westside. He had an awful fight with Paul Wallace the night before last. You see, Bob and I are very much in love, and Bob is terribly jealous. He thought Paul Wallace had designs on my virtue, so Bob told him if he as much as invited me to his apartment again, he would kill him."

"And last night he made good his threat?"

"Of course not. Last night I told Bob he was being silly and he would have to go around and apologize to Paul Wallace. Only he couldn't apologize because nobody answered when he knocked on the door. I guess Mr. Wallace was already dead."

From the expression on Bob Rhodes's face, Dr. Coffee judged that at least part of the girl's story was new and startling to him.

"Patty," said Ritter, "if this guy Wallace was so buddy-buddy with your family, how come your Auntie Min never heard of him?"

"Because I never spoke of him in front of Auntie Min. Auntie is a real spinster. She thinks all men are creatures of the devil. If she ever thought that I went to see Mr. Wallace alone, she'd simply die, even if he is old enough to be my father."

"Is he your father?"

"No, of course not. Lieutenant, why don't you let Bob go home and sober up? You'll never get a straight story out of him in this condition."

Ritter ignored the suggestion. "Getting back to your Auntie Min," he said, "how come she wasn't worried to death about you being alone with that voice coach of yours 'way down south in New Orleans?"

Patty laughed. "He's even older than Mr. Wallace."

"What was his name, Miss Erryl?" Dr. Coffee asked.

The girl hesitated. "You wouldn't recognize it," she said after a moment. "He wasn't very well-known outside of the South. In the French Quarter they used to call him Papa Albert."

"No last name?"

"That was his last name—Albert."

"Address?"

"Well, he used to live on Bourbon Street, but the last I heard he was going to move away."

"To Baton Rouge?"

"I—I don't know where he is now."

"Didn't he write to you from Baton Rouge?"

"No."

"Or to Mr. Wallace?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Do you know of anyone who might have written to Mr. Wallace from Baton Rouge?"

"I . . . I . . ." Patty Erryl suddenly covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

"Lay off the gal, will you, Cos-sack?" Rhodes stood up, swinging a full beer bottle like an Indian club. "If you have to work off your sadistic energy somewhere, call me any day after dark and I'll give you some addresses which I suspect you already know. You can bring your own whips, if you want, and—"

"Sit down, Mr. Rhodes." Dr. Coffee gently removed the bottle from the reporter's hand. "Miss Erryl, I happened to listen to the

broadcast of your operatic audition. I thought you did a first-rate job. I particularly admired the way you sang *Vissi d'Arte*. Do you have any real ambition to sing La Tosca some day?"

The girl's weeping stopped abruptly. She stared at the pathologist for a moment. Then she said, "Why do you ask that?"

"You seemed to have a feeling for the part of Floria Tosca," Dr. Coffee said. "I'm sure you must be familiar with the libretto. You are, aren't you?"

Patty Erryl's lips parted. She closed them again without saying a word.

"Come on, Max," Dr. Coffee said. "Miss Erryl is right. I think you'd better tackle Mr. Rhodes when he's more himself."

"But Doc, he admits—"

"Let's go, Max. Goodbye, Miss Tosca. Goodbye, Mr. Rhodes."

As the police car headed for Raoul's Auberge Française (one flight up) where, since it was Thursday, Dr. Coffee knew they would be regaled with *Quenelles de Brochet* (dumplings of fresh-water pike in shells), Max Ritter said, "Doc, I should'n't have listened to you. I should have taken that wisecracking reporter downtown."

"You won't lose him, Max. I saw some of your most adhesive shadows loitering purposefully outside The Slot."

"You never miss a trick, do you,

Doc?" Ritter chuckled. "Doc, you don't really believe that a guy gets that squiffed so early in the day just because he can't apologize to a dead swindler, do you?"

"Hardly, Max. But a man might get himself thoroughly soused if he realized he was seen heading for the apartment of a man with whom he had quarreled the night before and who had since been murdered. My guess is that he spent the rest of the night ducking from bar to bar, trying to forget either that he killed a man or that he had certainly maneuvered himself into the unenviable position of appearing to have killed a man."

As they waited for a light to change, Ritter asked, "What was that crack of yours about Tosca?"

Dr. Coffee laughed. "Pure whimsy. Probably unimportant. I wanted to watch the girl's reaction."

"You sure got one. What's the angle?"

"Max, why don't you drop in at the Municipal Auditorium when the Metropolitan Opera troupe stops by for a week after the New York season?"

"Doc, you know damned well I never got past the Gershwin grade. Who's the Tosca?"

"Floria Tosca is the tragic heroine of a play by a Frenchman named Sardou which has become a popular opera by Puccini. Tosca is a singer who kills the villain Scarpia to save her lover, an early Nineteenth Century revolutionary named Mario,

and incidentally, to save her honor. As it turns out, her honor is about all that is saved because everybody double-crosses everybody else and there are practically no survivors. But it's a very melodious opera, Max, and I think you might like it. Listen." Dr. Coffee hummed *E Lucevan le Stelle*. "Da da da deeee, da da dum, da dum dummmm . . ."

"You think we got a Patty La Tosca on our hands, Doc?"

"It's too early to tell, Max. Right now, though, I'd say it might be a sort of Wrong-Way Tosca. Instead of Floria Tosca killing Scarpia to save Mario, Mario may have killed Scarpia to save Tosca. Only I'm not sure who Mario might be. I'll know more tomorrow or the next day. I'll call you, Max."

Dr. Coffee was reading the slides from the Wallace autopsy. The Fite stains provided colorful sections. The acid-fast bacteria appeared in a deep ultramarine. The connective-tissue cells were red, and all other elements were stained yellow. He raised his eyes from the binocular microscope and summoned his Hindu resident.

"Dr. Mookerji, I want you to look at this section from the femoral lymph node. You must have seen many like it in India."

Dr. Mookerji adjusted the focus, moved the slide around under the nose of the instrument, grunted, and held out a chubby brown hand.

"You have further sections, no doubt?"

"Try this. From the right ear-lobe."

Dr. Mookerji grunted again, then twisted the knobs of the microscope in silence.

"Hansen's bacillus?" ventured Dr. Coffee.

"Quite," said the Hindu. "However, am of opinion that said bacilli present somewhat fragmented appearance. Observe that outline is somewhat hollowish and organisms enjoy rather puny condition if not frankly deceased. Patient was no doubt arrested case?"

"The patient is dead," said Dr. Coffee, "but I'll go along with you that it wasn't Hansen's bacillus that killed him. It rarely does. In this case it was a knife." He stared into space as he toyed with the slides in the rack before him. After a moment he asked, "Doris, when is that New Orleans convention of clinical pathologists that wanted me to read a paper, and I replied I didn't think I could get away?"

Doris consulted her notebook. "It's tomorrow, Doctor."

"Good. Doris, be an angel and see if you can get me a seat on a plane for New Orleans tonight. Then try to get me Dr. Quentin Quirk, medical officer in charge of the U.S. Public Service Hospital at Carville, Louisiana. Make it person to person. Then get me Mrs. Coffee on the other line."

In five minutes Dr. Coffee had

reservations on the night flight to New Orleans, had instructed his wife to pack a small bag with enough clothes for three days away from home, and was talking to Dr. Quirk in Louisiana.

"This is Dan Coffee, Quent. I'm coming down to your shindig tomorrow after all . . . Sure, I'll read a paper if you want. I don't care whether it's in the proceedings or not. Will you let me ride back to your hospital with you after the show? Fine. I've always wanted to see the place. See you tomorrow then, Quent. 'Bye."

The pathologist had barely replaced the instrument when Max Ritter walked into his office and tossed a pair of very thin rubber gloves to his desk.

"Developments, Doc," the detective said. "I just come from Patty Erryl's Auntie Min's place. She happens to have five pairs of surgeon's gloves in the house. Seconds, she says. Big sale of defective gloves at the five and ten. Forty-nine cents a pair because they're imperfect but still waterproof. She buys six pairs for herself and Patty to wear when they do the dishes. But there's only five pairs there when I find 'em. She can't remember what happened to the missing pair. She thinks Patty threw 'em out because they split."

"So you think old Auntie Min wore the defective surgical gloves to kill Wallace?"

"I don't say that. But this lush

Rhodes is at her house practically every night to sell his bill of goods to Patty. If he should have grabbed that sixth pair of surgeon's gloves one night, it might explain why there ain't any fingerprints."

"Max, have you arrested Rhodes?"

"Not exactly. But the chief is getting impatient. I'm holding Rhodes as a material witness."

"Good lord! Well, at least I won't have to face Patty when she starts raising hell to get lover boy out of custody. I'm going to Louisiana tonight, Max. If it's at all possible, don't prefer charges until after I get back. I have a hunch I may pick up a few threads down there. Do you have that letter with the Baton Rouge postmark?"

"Sure."

"And a photo of Patty Erryl?"

"A cinch."

"Wish me luck, Max. I'll call you the minute I get back—maybe before, if I run into something hot and steaming."

Dr. Coffee savored the applause with which the convention of pathologists greeted his paper on *Determination of the Time of Death by the Study of Bone Marrow*. He also savored two days of gastronomic research: *Pompano en papillote* at Antoine's and *Crab Gumbo chez Galatoire*, among other delights. Then he drove northwest along the Mississippi with his old classmate at medical school, Dr. Quentin Quirk.

Except for an occasional mast which poked up above the levees, Old Man River was carefully concealed from the Old River Road. The drive through the flat delta country was enlivened by the pink-and-gold bravura of the rain trees, the smell of nearby water hanging on the steamy air, and the nostalgic exchange of medical school reminiscences—who among their classmates had died, who had gone to seed, who had traded integrity for social status, who had gone on to be ornaments to the growing structure of the healing sciences.

Dr. Coffee carefully avoided mentioning the real purpose of his visit even after the moss-hung oaks and the antebellum columns and wrought-iron balconies of the entrance and Administration Building loomed ahead.

It was Dr. Coffee's first visit to Carville. In spite of himself, he was surprised to find that the only leprosarium in the continental United States should be such a beautiful place. He knew of course that modern therapy had removed most of the crippling effects of the disease, which was not at all the leprosy of the Bible anyhow, and that even the superstitious dread was fading as it became generally known that the malady was only faintly communicable.

Yet as Dr. Quirk gave him a personally conducted tour of the plantation—the vast quadrangle of pink-stucco dormitories, the sweet-

smelling avenue of magnolias leading up to the airy infirmary, the expensive modern laboratories, the Sisters of Charity in their sweeping white cornettes, the gay parasols in front of the Recreation Hall, the brilliantly colored birds, the private cottages for patients under the tall pecan trees beyond the golf course—Dr. Coffee wondered how it was possible for the old stigma to persist in the second half of the Twentieth Century. When he settled down to a cocktail in Dr. Quirk's bungalow, however, he remembered what he had come for.

"Quent," said Dr. Coffee, "I've seen Hansen's bacillus only twice since we've left medical school, while you've been living with it for years. Didn't we read something in Dermatology 101 about leprosy affecting fingerprints? Some Brazilian leprologist made the discovery, as I remember."

"That's right—Ribeiro, probably, although several other Brazilians have also been working in that field—Liera and Tanner de Abreu among them."

"Am I dreaming, or is it true that the disease can change fingerprint patterns?"

"Definitely true," said Dr. Quirk. "Even in its early stages, the disease may alter papillary design. The papillae flatten out, blurring the ridges and causing areas of smoothness."

"Do the fingerprint patterns ever disappear completely?"

"Oh, yes. In advanced cases the epidermis grows tissue-thin, the interpapillary pegs often disappear, and the skin at the fingertips becomes quite smooth."

Dr. Coffee drained the last of his Sazarac, put down his glass, and gave a rather smug nod.

"Then I've come to the right place," he said. "Quent, you may have a murderer among your patients—or among your ex-patients."

"Murderer? Here?" Dr. Quirk got up and pensively tinkled a handful of ice cubes into a bar glass. "Well, it is possible. Over the years we have had three or four murders at Carville. When did your putative Carvillian commit murder?"

"Last Wednesday night," said Dr. Coffee, "in Northbank. The murderer left bloody finger marks but no distinguishable prints. I suspect the victim might also have been a one-time patient of yours. There was Diasone in his medicine chest, and at autopsy I found fragmented Hansen's bacilli in the lymph nodes and in one earlobe. Did you know a character named Paul Wallace?"

"Wallace? Good lord!" Dr. Quirk shook Peychaud bitters into the bar glass with a savage fist. "That no-good four-flushing ape! Yes, Wallace has been in and out of here several times. Whenever he gets into trouble with the law, he tries to scare the authorities into sending him back here. 'You can't keep me in your jail,' he says. 'I'm a leper. You have to send me to Carville.' But I

wouldn't take him back any more. He's an arrested case. Last time he tried to dodge a conviction, I sent him back to serve time. I knew he'd end up in some bloody mess. Who killed him?"

"Somebody who must have loathed his guts enough to cut them to pieces. It was a real hate job—by a man with no fingerprints."

Dr. Quirk shook his head. "I can't imagine—"

"Quent, did you ever see this girl before?" Dr. Coffee opened his brief case and produced a photo of Patty Erryl.

Dr. Quirk squinted at the picture, held it out at arm's length, turned it at several angles, squinted again, brought it closer, then slowly shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't think—" Suddenly he slapped his hand across the upper part of the photo. "Sorry," he said. "Change signals. Her hair fooled me. I never saw her as a blonde before. That's Patty Erryl."

"An ex-patient?"

Dr. Quirk nodded. "She came to Carville as a kid. Her father was an Air Force officer in the Far East. She was raised out there—Philippines, I think; one of the endemic areas, anyhow. When her father was killed in Korea, her mother brought her back to the States. The girl developed clinical symptoms. Her mother brought her to Carville and then faded out of the picture."

"Did she die, too?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe she remar-

ried. Anyhow, she never once came to Carville to visit Patty. Patty responded very well to sulfones and when she was discharged as bacteriologically and clinically negative, an aunt from somewhere in the Middle West came to get her."

"That would be Auntie Min of Northbank," said Dr. Coffee. "How long ago was Patty discharged?"

"Two or three years ago. Do you want the exact date?"

"I want to know particularly whether Paul Wallace was a patient here while Patty was still in Carville."

"I'm not sure. I'll check with Sister Frances in Records." Dr. Quirk poured fresh Sazaracs.

"No hurry. I suppose you know that Patty is quite a singer."

"Do I! When she sang in the Recreation Hall, radio and television people used to come down from Baton Rouge to tape her concerts."

"How far away is Baton Rouge?"

"Oh, twenty, twenty-five miles."

"Did Patty's voice develop spontaneously, or did she have a coach?"

"Well, I guess you could say she had a coach of sorts."

"Papa Albert?"

Dr. Quirk's teeth clicked against the rim of his cocktail glass. His eyebrows rose. "You come well briefed, Dan."

"Where does Papa Albert live? Baton Rouge?"

Dr. Quirk laughed briefly. "For twenty-five years," he said, "Carville has been home to Albert Bou-

langer. He was a promising young pianist when the thing hit him. This was before we discovered the sulfones, so he was pretty badly crippled before we could help him. Hands are shot. He can play a few chords, though, and he's still a musician to his fingertips."

"Fingertips with papillae and interpapillary pegs obliterated?"

Dr. Quirk looked at the pathologist strangely. He muddled the ice in the bar glass, and squeezed out another half Sazarac for each of them. He took a long sip of his drink before he resumed in a slow, solemn voice.

"Patty Erryl was a forlorn little girl when she came here," he said, "and Albert Boulanger sort of adopted her. He taught her to sing little French songs. When she began to bloom, he fought off the wolves. He would invite her to his cottage out back to listen to opera recordings evening after evening.

"She was an early case. She could have been discharged in three years, except that she wanted to finish her schooling here. I think, too, that she appreciated what Papa Albert was doing to bring out the music in her. He was like a father to her. And since she scarcely knew her own father, she was terribly fond of the old man."

Dr. Coffee drained his glass again. "I suppose your records will show that Albert Boulanger was here at Carville last Wednesday night."

"I'm afraid not." Dr. Quirk frowned. "He had a forty-eight-hour pass to go to New Orleans last Wednesday. He wanted to see his lawyer about a new will. The old man hasn't long to live."

"I thought people didn't die of Hansen's disease," Dr. Coffee said.

"Boulanger has terminal cancer. He found out just two weeks ago that he's going to die in a month or two."

"Could I speak to him?"

"Why not?" Dr. Quirk picked up the phone and dialed the gate. "Willy, has Mr. Boulanger come back from New Orleans? . . . Yesterday? Thanks." He replaced the instrument. "I'll go with you," he said. "Papa Albert has one of those cottages beyond the golf course. We won't move him to the infirmary until he gets really bad."

Albert Boulanger must have been a handsome man in his youth. Tall, white-haired, only slightly stooped, he bore few external signs of his malady. Only the experienced eye would note the thinning eyebrows and the slight thickening of the skin along the rictus folds and at the wings of the nostrils.

As Dr. Coffee shook hands, he saw that Papa Albert had obviously suffered some bone absorption; his fingers were shortened and the skin was smooth and shiny.

"I stopped by to bring you greetings from Patty Erryl in Northbank," Dr. Coffee said, "and to

compliment you on the fine job you did on Patty's musical education."

Papa Albert darted a quick, startled glance at Dr. Quirk. He apparently found reassurance in the MOC's smile. He coughed. "I take no credit," he said. "The girl has a natural talent and she's worked hard to make the best of it."

"I hope she wins the opera finals," the pathologist said. "Did you get to see her when you were in Northbank on Wednesday?"

Papa Albert looked Dr. Coffee squarely in the eyes as he replied without hesitation, "I've never been in Northbank in my life. I was in New Orleans on Wednesday."

"I see. Did you know that Paul Wallace was killed in Northbank last Wednesday night?"

"Paul Wallace is not of the slightest interest to me. He was a blackguard, a swindler, a thoroughly despicable man."

"Do you have a bank account in Baton Rouge, Mr. Boulanger?"

"No."

"But you did have—until you sent about \$1700 to Paul Wallace."

"Why would I send money to a rotter like Wallace?"

"Because you love Patty Erryl as if she were your own daughter. Because you'd do anything to stop someone from wrecking her career just as it's about to start."

"I don't understand you." Papa Albert wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. He coughed again.

"Mr. Boulanger, you and I and and Dr. Quirk know that there are dozens of maladies more dreadful and a thousand times more infectious than Hansen's disease. But we also know that the superstitious horror of the disease is kept alive by ignorance and a mistaken interpretation of Biblical leprosy which equates the disease with sin. Despite the progress of recent years there is still a stigma attached to the diagnosis.

"Suppose, Mr. Boulanger, a blackmailer came to you or wrote to you making threats that suggested a newspaper headline such as 'Girl Leper Barred from Met After Winning Audition.' Wouldn't you dig into your savings to prevent such a headline? And if the blackmailer persisted, if his greed increased, I can even envision—"

"Dr. Coffee, if you want me to say that I'm happy that Wallace is dead, I'll do so gladly and as loudly as I can. But now . . ." Papa Albert had begun to tremble. Perspiration was streaming down his pale cheeks. "Now, if you will excuse me . . . Dr. Quirk has perhaps told you of my condition—that I'm supposed to get lots of rest. May I bid you good evening, Doctor?"

He tottered a little as he walked away.

The drainage ditches were aglitter with the eerie light of fireflies as the two doctors left Papa Albert's cottage.

"What do you want me to do, Dan?" Dr. Quirk asked.

"Nothing," Dr. Coffee replied, "unless you hear from me."

Max Ritter was at the Northbank airport to meet Dr. Coffee's plane.

"News, Doc," he said, as the pathologist stepped off the ramp. "Rhodes has confessed."

Dr. Coffee stopped short. "Who did what?"

"Rhodes, the lush, the lover boy, the star reporter and the talent scout. He signed a statement that he killed Wallace."

Dr. Coffee managed a humorless laugh. "Tell me more," he said as they passed through the gate and headed for the parking lot.

"While you're away I took a gander at the phone company's long-distance records. I find two calls in one week from Patty Erryl's number to the same place in Louisiana. Who makes the calls? Not me, says Auntie Min. Must be a mistake, says Patty. Not two mistakes, says Ritter. Then Rhodes comes clean. *He* makes the calls.

"Patty is terrified of this Wallace character, but she runs to see him every time he raises his little finger. Why? Well, Rhodes phones a newspaper pal in Louisiana to smell around a little, and he finds out Wallace is blackmailing Patty. Seems when she was studying music down there she got mixed up with a crummy bunch and got caught in a narcotics raid. She's let off with a

suspended sentence but the conviction is a matter of record. Wallace finds out about it and starts putting the screws on her, so Rhodes kills him. So I lock him up."

"That poor, love-sick, courageous, gallant liar!" said Dr. Coffee as he climbed into Ritter's car. "Let's go right down to the jail and let him out."

"But Doc, Rhodes confessed!"

"Max, Rhodes is making a noble sacrifice, hoping, I'm sure, that he can beat the rap when he comes up for trial. He's given you a confession he will surely repudiate later if it doesn't endanger Patty. He's confessed so that you will not run down those long-distance phone calls and discover they were from Patty to the Public Health Service Hospital in Carville, Louisiana."

"The phone company didn't say anything about Carville. The number was a Mission number out of Baton Rouge exchange through Saint Gabriel."

"Exactly. All Carville numbers go through Baton Rouge and Saint Gabriel, and the exchange is Mission." And Dr. Coffee told Ritter about Carville, Hansen's disease, and Papa Albert Boulanger.

"I'm positive, Max, that Papa Albert is the white-haired man with the package under his arm—the man the clerk at the Westside saw get into the elevator shortly before Wallace was killed on Wednesday," he said. "I'm also sure that he was paying blackmail to protect Patty."

"When Papa Albert found out two weeks ago that he didn't have long to live, he decided that before he died he would get Wallace out of Patty's life forever. Northbank is only two hours from New Orleans by jet. He could have come up by an early evening plane, killed Wallace, and been back at his New Orleans hotel by midnight. He'll have an alibi, all right. Who wouldn't perjure himself for a man with only a month or two to live."

"But Doc, if he's going to die anyhow, why doesn't he just give himself up, say he did it for Patty, and die a hero?"

"Because that would undo everything he's been willing to commit murder for. That would connect Patty with Carville. And let's face it, Max, the stigma of Carville is still pretty strong poison in too many places."

"Not for Rhodes it ain't. Or don't you think he knows?"

"He knows. But he's an intelligent young man and he's in love with Patty."

"I still don't see what Rhodes was doing at the Westside the night of the murder if he didn't kill Wallace."

"He'll deny this, of course, but I see only one explanation. Papa Albert didn't have Wallace's address—Wallace has been getting his mail at General Delivery. My guess is that Boulanger called Patty, probably from the airport, to get the address."

And Patty, realizing after she had hung up what the old man was intending to do, sent Bob Rhodes out to the Westside to try to stop him. Rhodes got there too late."

"Do you think we can break Boulanger's alibi, Doc?"

"I'm sure you could build a circumstantial case. You could dig up an airline stewardess or two who could identify him as flying to and from New Orleans the night of the murder—he's a striking-looking old gent. You could subpoena bank records in Louisiana to show that he withdrew amounts from his savings account approximating Wallace's deposits in Cleveland. Maybe the desk clerk at the Westside could identify him. But you'll have to work fast, Max. Otherwise you'll

have to bring your man into court on a stretcher."

"You really think he's going to die, Doc?"

"Sooner than he thinks, I'd say. The metastases are pretty general. The lungs are involved—he has a characteristic cough. The lymph nodes in his neck are as big as pigeons' eggs. With luck he may last long enough to hear Patty sing in the finals—La Tosca, I hope. Unless, of course, you start extradition proceedings."

The detective swung his car into the "Official Vehicles Only" parking space behind the county jail.

"I dunno, Doc," he said as he switched off the ignition. "Maybe we ought to let God handle this one."

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