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SEPTEMBER 1943

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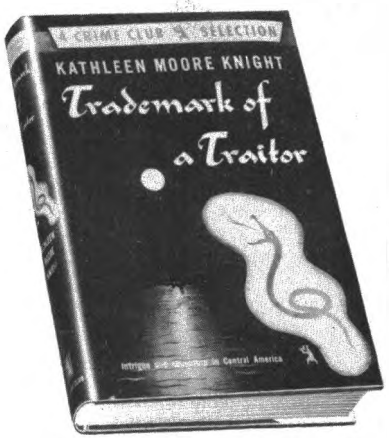

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THE MINISTERING ANGEL

by E. C. BENTLEY

"WHATEVER the meaning of it may be, it's a devilish unpleasant business," Arthur Selby said as he and Philip Trent established themselves on a sofa in the smoking-room of the Lansdowne Club. "We see enough of that sort of business in the law — even firms like ours, that don't have much to do with crime, have plenty of unpleasantness to deal with, and I don't know that some of it isn't worse than the general run of crime. You know what I mean. Crazy spite, that's one thing. You wouldn't believe what some people — people of position and education and all that — you wouldn't believe what they are capable of when they want to do somebody a mischief. Usually it's a blood relation. And then there's constitutional viciousness. We had one client — he died soon after Snow took me into partnership — whose whole life had been one lascivious debauch."

Trent laughed. "That phrase doesn't sound like your own, Arthur. It belongs to an earlier generation."

"Quite true," Selby admitted. "It was Snow told me that about old Sir William Never-mind-who, and it stuck in my memory. But come now — I'm wandering. A good lunch — by the way, I hope it *was* a good lunch."

"One of the very best," Trent said. "You know it was too. Ordering lunches is one of the best things you do, and you're proud of it. That hock was a poem — a villanelle, for choice. What were you going to say about good lunches?"

"Why, I was going to say that a good lunch usually makes me inclined to prattle a bit; because, you see, all I allow myself most days is a couple of apples and a glass of milk in the office. That's the way to appreciate a thing: don't have it too

often, and take a hell of a lot of trouble about it when you do. But that isn't what I wanted to talk to you about, Phil. I was saying just now that we get a lot of unpleasantness in our job. We can usually understand it when we get it, but the affair I want to tell you about is a puzzle to me; and of course you are well known to be good at puzzles. If I tell you the story, will you give me a spot of advice if you can?"

"Of course."

"Well, it's about a client of ours who died a fortnight ago, named Gregory Landell. You wouldn't have heard of him, I dare say; he never did anything much outside his private hobbies, having always had money and never any desire to distinguish himself. He could have done, for he had plenty of brains — a brilliant scholar, always reading Greek. He and my partner had been friends from boyhood; at school and Cambridge together; had tastes in common; both rock-garden enthusiasts, for one thing. Landell's was a famous rock-garden. Other amateurs used to come from all parts to visit it, and of course he loved that. Then they were both Lewis Carroll fans — when they got together, bits from the *Alice* books and the *Snark* were always coming into the conversation — both chess players, both keen cricketers when they were young enough, and never tired of watching first-class games. Snow used often to stay for week-ends at Landell's place at Cholsey Wood, in Berkshire.

"When Landell was over fifty, he married for the first time. The lady was a Miss Mary Archer, daughter of a naval officer, and about twenty years younger than Landell, at a guess. He was infatuated with her, and she seemed to make a great fuss of him, though she didn't strike me as being the warm-hearted type. She was a good-looking wench with plenty of style, and gave you the idea of being fond of her own way. We made his will for him, leaving everything to her if there were no children. Snow and I were both appointed executors. In his previous will he had left all his property to a nephew; and we were sorry the nephew wasn't mentioned in this later will, for he is a very useful citizen — some kind of medical research worker — and he has barely enough to live on."

"Why did he make both of you executors?" Trent wondered.

"Oh, in case anything happened to one of us. And it was just as well, because early this year poor old Snow managed to fracture his thigh, and he's been laid up ever since. But that's getting ahead of the story. After the marriage, Snow still went

down to Landell's place from time to time, as before; but after a year or so he began to notice a great change in the couple. Landell seemed to get more and more under his wife's thumb. Couldn't call his soul his own."

Trent nodded. "After what you told me about the impression she made on you, that isn't surprising."

"No: Snow and I had been expecting it to happen. But the worst of it was, Landell didn't take it easily, as some husbands in that position do. He was obviously very unhappy, though he never said anything about it to Snow. She had quite given up pretending to be affectionate, or to consider him in any way, and Snow got the idea that Landell hated his wife like poison, though never daring to stand up to her. Yet he used to have plenty of character, too."

"I have seen the sort of thing," Trent said. "Unless a man is a bit of a brute himself, he can't bear to see the woman making an exhibition of herself. He'll stand anything rather than have her make a scene."

"Just so. Well, after a time Snow got no more invitations to go there; and as you may suppose, he didn't mind that. It had got to be too uncomfortable, and though he was devilish sorry for Landell, he didn't see that he could do anything for him. For one thing, she wouldn't ever leave them alone together if she could possibly help it. If they were pottering about with the rock-plants, or playing chess, or going for a walk, they always had her company."

Trent made a grimace. "Jolly for the visitor! And now, what was it you didn't understand?"

"I'll tell you. About a month ago a letter for Snow came to the office. I opened it — I was dealing with all his business correspondence. It was from Mrs. Landell, saying that her husband was ill and confined to bed; that he wished to settle some business affairs, and would be most grateful if Snow could find time to come down on the following day.

"Well, Snow couldn't, of course. I got the idea from this letter, naturally, that the matter was more or less urgent. It read as if Landell was right at the end of his tether. So I rang up Mrs. Landell, explained the situation, and said I would come myself that afternoon if it suited her. She said she would be delighted if I would; she was very anxious about her husband, whose heart was in a serious state. I mentioned the train I would come by, and she said their car would meet it.

"When I got there, she took me up to Landell's bedroom at once. He was looking very bad, and seemed to

have hardly strength enough to speak. There was a nurse in the room: Mrs. Landell sent her out and stayed with us all the time I was there — which I had expected, after what I had heard from Snow. Then Landell began to talk, or whisper, about what he wanted done.

"It was a scheme for the rearrangement of his investments, and a shrewd one, too — he had a wonderful flair for that sort of thing, made a study of it. In fact" — Selby leant forward and tapped his friend's knee — "there was absolutely nothing for him to discuss with me. He knew exactly what he wanted done, and he needed no advice; he knew more about such matters than I did, or Snow either. Still, he made quite a show of asking my opinion of this detail and that, and all I could do was to look wise, and hum and haw, and then say that nothing could be better. Then he said that the exertion of writing a business letter was forbidden by his doctor, and would I oblige him by doing it for him? So I took down a letter of instructions to his brokers, which he signed; and his wife had the securities he was going to sell all ready in a long envelope; and that was that. The car took me to the station, and I got back in time for dinner, after an absolutely wasted half-day."

Trent had listened to all this with eager attention. "It was wasted, you say," he observed. "Do you mean he could have dictated such a letter to his wife, without troubling you at all?"

"To his wife, or to anybody who could write. And of course he knew that well enough. I tell you, all that business of consulting me was just camouflage. I knew it, and I could feel that he knew I knew it. But what the devil it was intended to hide is beyond me. I don't think his wife suspected anything queer; Snow always said she was a fool about business matters. She listened intently to everything that was said, and seemed quite satisfied. His instructions were acted upon, and he signed the transfers; I know that, because when I came to making an inventory of the estate, after his death, I found it had all been done. Now then, Phil: what do you make of all that?"

Trent caressed his chin for a few moments. "You're quite sure that there *was* something unreal about the business? His wife, you say, saw nothing suspicious."

"Of course I'm sure. His wife evidently didn't know that he was cleverer about investments than either Snow or me, and that anyhow it wasn't our job. If he *had* wanted advice, he could have had his broker down."

Trent stretched his legs before him

and carefully considered the end of his cigar. "No doubt you are right," he said at length. "And it does sound as if there was something unpleasant below the surface. For that matter, the surface itself was not particularly agreeable, as you describe it. Mrs. Landell, the ministering angel!" He rose to his feet. "I'll turn the thing over in my mind, Arthur, and let you know if anything strikes me."

Trent found the house in Cholsey Wood without much difficulty next morning. The place actually was a tract of woodland of large extent, cleared here and there for a few isolated modern houses and grounds, a row of cottages, an inn called the Magpie and Gate, and a Tudor manor-house standing in a well-tended park. The Grove, the house of which he was in search, lay half a mile beyond the inn on the road that bisected the neighbourhood. A short drive led up to it through the high hedge that bounded the property on this side, and Trent, turning his car into the opening, got out and walked to the house, admiring as he went the flower-bordered lawn on one side, the trim orchard on the other. The two-storied house, too, was a well-kept, well-built place, its porch overgrown by wistaria in full flower.

His ring was answered by a chubby maid-servant, to whom he offered his card. He had been told, he said, that Mr. Landell allowed visitors who were interested in gardening to see his rock-garden, of which Trent had heard so much. Would the maid take his card to Mr. Landell, and ask if it would be convenient — here he paused, as a lady stepped from an open door at the end of the hall. Trent described her to himself as a handsome, brassy blonde with a hard blue eye.

"I am Mrs. Landell," she said, as she took the card from the girl and glanced at it. "I heard what you were saying. I see, Mr. Trent, you have not heard of my bereavement. My dear husband passed away a fortnight ago." Trent began to murmur words of vague condolence and apology. "Oh no," she went on with a sad smile. "You must not think you are disturbing me. You must certainly see the rock-garden now you are here. You have come a long way for the purpose, I dare say, and my husband would not have wished you to go away disappointed."

"It is a famous garden," Trent observed. "I heard of it from someone I think you know — Arthur Selby, the lawyer."

"Yes, he and his partner were my husband's solicitors," the lady said. "I will show you where the garden is, if you will come this way." She turned and went before him through

the house, until they came out through a glass-panelled door into a much larger extent of grounds. "I cannot show it off to you myself," she went on, "I know absolutely nothing about that sort of gardening. My husband was very proud of it, and he was adding to the collection of plants up to the time he was taken ill last month. You see that grove of elms? The house is called after it. If you go along it you will come to a lily-pond, and the rock-garden is to the left of that. I fear I cannot entertain anyone just now, so I will leave you to yourself, and the parlour-maid will wait to let you out when you have seen enough." She bowed her head in answer to his thanks, and retired into the house.

Trent passed down the avenue and found the object of his journey, a tall pile of roughly terraced grey rocks covered with a bewildering variety of plants rooted in the shallow soil provided for them. The lady of the house, he reflected, could hardly know less about rock-gardens than himself, and it was just as well that there was to be no dangerous comparing of ignorances. He did not even know what he was looking for. He believed that the garden had something to tell, and that was all. Pacing slowly up and down, with searching eye, before the stony rampart with its dress of delicate colours, he set himself to divine its secret.

Soon he noted a detail which, as he considered it, became more curious. Here and there among the multitude of plants there was one distinguished by a flat slip of white wood stuck in the soil among the stems, or just beside the growth. There were not many: searching about, he could find no more than seven. Written on each slip in a fair, round hand was a botanical name. Such names meant nothing to Trent; he could but wonder vaguely why they were there. Why were these plants thus distinguished? Possibly they were the latest acquisitions. Possibly Landell had so marked them to draw the attention of his old friend and fellow-enthusiast Snow. Landell had been expecting Snow to come and see him. Trent remembered. Snow had been unable to come, and Arthur Selby had come instead. Another point: the business Landell had wanted done was trifling; anyone could have attended to it. Why had it been so important to Landell that Snow should come?

Had Landell been expecting to have a private talk with Snow about some business matter? No: because on previous occasions, as on this occasion, Mrs. Landell had been present throughout the interview; it was evident, according to Selby, that

she did not intend to leave her husband alone with his legal adviser at any time, and Landell must have realized that. Was this the main point: that the unfortunate Landell had been planning to communicate something to Snow by some means unknown to his wife?

Trent liked the look of this idea. It fitted into the picture, at least. More than that: it gave strong confirmation to the quite indefinite notion he had formed on hearing Selby's story; the notion that had brought him to Cholsey Wood that day. Snow was a keen amateur of rock-gardening. If Snow had come to visit Landell, one thing virtually certain was that Snow would not have gone away without having a look at his friend's collection of rock-plants, if only to see what additions might have been recently made. And such additions — so Mrs. Landell had just been saying — had been made. Mrs. Landell knew nothing about rock-gardening; even if she had wasted a glance on this garden, she would have noticed nothing. Snow would have noticed instantly anything out of the way. And what was there out of the way?

Trent began to whistle faintly.

The wooden slips had now a very interesting look. With notebook and pencil he began to write down the names traced upon them. *Armeria Hallerii.* And *Arcana Nieuwillia.* And *Saponaria Galspitosa* — good! And these delicate little blossoms, it appeared, rejoiced in the formidable name of *Acantholimon Glumaceum.* Then here was *Cartavacua Bellmannii.* Trent's mind began to run on the nonsense botany of Edward Lear: *Nastricreechia Crawluppia* and the rest. This next one was *Veronica Incana.* And here was the last of the slips: *Ludovica Caroli,* quite a pretty name for a shapeless mass of grey-green vegetation that surely was commonly called in the vulgar tongue —

At this point Trent flung his notebook violently to the ground, and followed it with his hat. What a fool he had been! What a triple ass, not to have jumped to the thing at once! He picked up the book and hurriedly scanned the list of names. . . . Yes: it was all there.

Three minutes later he was in his car on the way back to town.

In his room at the offices of Messrs. Snow and Selby the junior partner welcomed Trent on the morning after his expedition to Cholsey Wood.

Selby pushed his cigarette box across the table. "Can you tell it to me in half an hour, do you think? I'd have been glad to come to lunch with you and hear it then, but this

is a very full day, and I shan't get outside the office until seven, if then. What have you been doing?"

"Paying a visit to your late client's rock-garden," Trent informed him. "It made a deep impression on me. Mrs. Landell was very kind about it."

Selby stared at him. "You always had the devil's own cheek," he observed. "How on earth did you manage that? And why?"

"I won't waste time over the how," Trent said. "As to the why, it was because it seemed to me, when I thought it over, that that garden might have a serious meaning underlying all its gaiety. And I thought so all the more when I found that Mary, Mary, quite contrary, hadn't a notion how her garden grew. You see, it was your partner whom Landell had wanted to consult about those investments of his; and it was hardly likely that your rock-gardening partner, once on the spot, would have missed the chance of feasting his eyes on his friend's collection of curiosities. So I went and feasted mine; and I found what I expected."

"The deuce you did!" Selby exclaimed. "And what was it?"

"Seven plants — only seven out of all the lot — marked with their botanical names, clearly written on slips of wood, *à la* Kew Gardens. I won't trouble you with four of the names — they were put there just to make it look more natural, I suppose; they were genuine names; I've looked them up. But you will find the other three interesting — choice Latin, picked phrase, if not exactly Tully's every word."

Trent, as he said this, produced a card and handed it to his friend, who studied the words written upon it with a look of complete incomprehension.

"*Arcana Nieuwillia*," he read aloud. "I can't say that thrills me to the core, anyhow. What's an *Arcana?* Of course, I know no more about botany than a cow. It looks as if it was named after some Dutchman."

"Well, try the next," Trent advised him.

"*Cartavacua Bellmannii*. No, that too fails to move me. Then what about the rest of the nosegay? *Ludovica Caroli*. No, it's no good, Phil. What *is* it all about?"

Trent pointed to the last name. "That one was what gave it away to me. The slip with *Ludovica Caroli* on it was stuck into a clump of saxifrage. I know saxifrage when I see it; and I seemed to remember that the right scientific name for it was practically the same — *Saxifraga*. And then I suddenly remembered another thing: that Ludovicus is the Latin form of the name Louis, which some people choose to spell L-E-

W-I-S."

"What!" Selby jumped to his feet. "Lewis — and Caroli! Lewis Carroll! Oh Lord! The man whose books Snow and Landell both knew by heart. Then it *is* a cryptogram." He referred eagerly to the card. "Well, then — *Cartavacua Bellmannii*. Hm! Would that be the Bellman in *The Hunting of the Snark?* And *Cartavacua?*"

"Translate it," Trent suggested.

Selby frowned. "Let's see. In law, *carta* used to be a charter. And *vacua* means empty. The Bellman's empty charter —"

"Or chart. Don't you remember?

He had bought a large map representing the sea,
Without the least vestige of land:
And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
A map they could all understand.

And in the poem, one of the pages is devoted to the Bellman's empty map."

"Oh! And that tells us —?"

"Why, I believe it tells us to refer to Landell's own copy of the book, and to that blank page."

"Yes, but what for?"

"*Arcana Nieuwillia*, I expect."

"I told you I don't know what *Arcana* means. It isn't law Latin, and I've forgotten most of the other kind."

"This isn't law Latin, as you say. It's the real thing, and it means 'hidden,' Arthur, 'hidden.' "

"Hidden what?" Selby stared at the card again; then suddenly dropped into his chair and turned a pale face to his friend. "My God, Phil! So that's it!"

"It can't be anything else, can it?"

Selby turned to his desk telephone and spoke into the receiver. "I am not to be disturbed on any account till I ring." He turned again to Trent. . . .

"I asked Mr. Trent to drive me down," Selby explained, "because I wanted his help in a matter concerning your husband's estate. He has met you before informally, he tells me."

Mrs. Landell smiled at Trent graciously. "Only the other day he called to see the rock-garden. He mentioned that he was a friend of yours."

She had received them in the morning-room at the Grove, and Trent, who on the occasion of his earlier visit had seen nothing but the hallway running from front to back, was confirmed in his impression that strict discipline ruled in that household. The room was orderly and speckless, the few pictures hung mathematically level, the flowers in a bowl on the table were fresh

and well displayed.

"And what is the business that brings you and Mr. Trent down so unexpectedly?" Mrs. Landell inquired. "Is it some new point about the valuation of the property, perhaps?" She looked from one to the other of them with round blue eyes.

Selby looked at her with an expression that was new in Trent's experience of that genial, rather sybaritic man of law. He was now serious, cool and hard.

"No, Mrs. Landell; nothing to do with that," Selby said. "I am sorry to tell you I have reason to believe that your husband made another will not long ago, and that it is in this house. If there is such a will, and if it is in order legally, it will of course supersede the will made shortly after your marriage."

Mrs. Landell's first emotion on hearing this statement was to be seen in a look of obviously genuine amazement. Her eyes and mouth opened together, and her hands fell on the arms of her chair. The feeling that succeeded, which she did her best to control, was as plainly one of anger and incredulity.

"I don't believe a word of it," she said sharply. "It is quite impossible. My husband certainly did not see his solicitor, or any other lawyer, for a long time before his death. When he did see Mr. Snow, I was always present. If he made another will, I must have known about it. The idea is absurd. Why should he have wanted to make another will?"

Selby shrugged. "That I cannot say, Mrs. Landell. The question does not arise. But if he had wanted to, he could make a will without a lawyer's assistance, and if it complied with the requirements of the law it would be a valid will. The position is that, as his legal adviser and executor of the will of which we know, I am bound to satisfy myself that there is no later will, if I have grounds for thinking that there is one. And I have grounds for thinking so."

Mrs. Landell made a derisive sound. "Have you really? And grounds for thinking it is in this house, too? Well, I can tell you that it isn't. I have been through every single paper in the place, I have looked carefully everywhere, and there is no such thing."

"There was nothing locked up then?" Selby suggested.

"Of course not," Mrs. Landell snapped. "My husband had no secrets from me."

Selby coughed. "It may be so. All the same, Mrs. Landell, I shall have to satisfy myself on the point. The law is very strict about matters of this kind, and I must make a search on my own account."

"And suppose I say I will not al-

low it? This is all my property now, and I am not obliged to let anyone come rummaging about for somethat that isn't there."

Again Selby coughed. "That is not exactly the position, Mrs. Landell. When a person dies, having made a will appointing an executor, his property vests at once in that executor, and it remains entirely in his control until the estate has been distributed as the will directs. The will on which you are relying, and which is the only one at present positively known to exist, appointed my partner and myself executors. We must act in that capacity, unless and until a later will comes to light. I hope that is quite clear."

This information appeared, as Selby put it later, to take the wind completely out of Mrs. Landell's sails. She sat in frowning silence, mastering her feelings, for a few moments, then rose to her feet.

"Very well," she said. "If what you tell me is correct, it seems you can do as you like, and I cannot prevent you wasting your time. Where will you begin your search?"

"I think," Selby said, "the best place to make a start would be the room where he spent most of his time when by himself. There is such a room, I suppose?"

She went to the door. "I will show you the study," she said, not looking at either of them. "Your friend had better come too, as you say you want him to assist you."

She led the way across the hall to another room, with a French window opening on the lawn behind the house. Before this stood a large writing-table, old-fashioned and solid like the rest of the furniture, which included three bookcases of bird's-eye maple. Not wasting time, Selby and Trent went each to one of the bookcases, while Mrs. Landell looked on implacably from the doorway.

"*Annales Thucydidei et Xenophontei*," read Selby in an undertone, glancing up and down the shelves. "*Miscellanea Critica*, by Cobet — give me the *Rural Rides*, for choice. I say, Phil, I seem to have come to the wrong shop. *Palæographia Græca*, by Montfaucon — I had an idea that was a place where they used to break chaps on the wheel in Paris. Greek plays — rows and rows of them. How are you getting on?"

"I am on the trail, I believe," Trent answered. "This is all English poetry — but not arranged in any order. Aha! What do I see?" He pulled out a thin red volume. "One of the best-looking books that was ever printed and bound." He was turning the pages rapidly. "Here we are — the Ocean Chart. But no longer 'a perfect and absolute blank.' "

He handed the book to Selby, who scanned attentively the page at which it was opened. "Beautiful writing, isn't it?" he remarked. "Not much larger than smallish print, and quite as legible. Hm! Hm!" He frowned over the minute script, nodding approval from time to time; then looked up. "Yes, this is all right. Everything clear, and the attestation clause quite in order — that's what gets 'em, very often."

Mrs. Landell, whose existence Selby appeared to have forgotten for the moment, now spoke in a strangled voice. "Do you mean to tell me that there is a will written in that book?"

"I beg your pardon," the lawyer said with studied politeness. "Yes, Mrs. Landell, this is the will for which I was looking. It is very brief, but quite clearly expressed, and properly executed and witnessed. The witnesses are Mabel Catherine Wheeler and Ida Florence Kirkby, both domestic servants, resident in this house."

"They dared to do that behind my back!" Mrs. Landell raged. "It's a conspiracy!"

Selby shook his head. "There is no question here of an agreement to carry out some hurtful purpose," he said. "The witnesses appear to have signed their names at the request of their employer, and they were under no obligation to mention the matter to any other person. Possibly he requested them not to do so; it makes no difference. As for the provisions of the will, it begins by bequeathing the sum of ten thousand pounds, free of legacy duty, to yourself —"

"What!" screamed Mrs. Landell.

"Ten thousand pounds, free of legacy duty," Selby repeated calmly. "It gives fifty pounds each to my partner and myself, in consideration of our acting as executors — that, you may remember, was provided by the previous will. And all the rest of the testator's property goes to his nephew, Robert Spencer Landell, of 27 Longland Road, Blackheath, in the county of Kent."

The last vestige of self-control departed from Mrs. Landell as the words were spoken. Choking with fury and trembling violently, she snatched the book from Selby's hand, ripped out the inscribed page, and tore it across again and again. "Now what are you going to do?" she gasped.

"The question is, what are you going to do," Selby returned with perfect coolness. "If you destroy that will beyond repair, you commit a felony which is punishable by penal servitude. Besides that, the will could still be proved; I am ac-

quainted with its contents, and can swear to them. The witnesses can swear that it was executed. Mr. Trent and I can swear to what has just taken place. If you will take my advice, Mrs. Landell, you will give me back those bits of paper. If they can be pieced together into a legible document, the Court will not refuse to recognize it, and I may be able to save you from being prosecuted — I shall do my best. And there is another thing. As matters stand now, I must ask you to consider your arrangements for the future. There is no hurry, naturally; I shall not press you in any way; but you realize that while you continue living here you do so on sufferance, and that the place must be taken over by Mr. Robert Landell in due course."

Mrs. Landell was sobered at last. Very pale, and staring fixedly at Selby, she flung the pieces of the will on the writing-table and walked rapidly from the room.

"I had no idea you could be such a brute, Arthur," Trent remarked as he drove the car Londonwards through the Berkshire levels.

Selby said nothing.

"The accused made no reply," Trent observed. "Perhaps you didn't notice that you were being brutal, with those icy little legal lectures of yours, and your drawing out the agony in that study until you had her almost at screaming-point even before the blow fell."

Selby glanced at him. "Yes, I noticed all that. I don't think I am a vindictive man, Phil, but she made me see red. In spite of what she said, it's clear to me that she suspected he might have made another will at some time. She looked for it high and low. If she had found it she would undoubtedly have suppressed it. And her husband had no secrets from her! And whenever Snow was there she was always present! Can you imagine what it was like being dominated and bullied by a harpy like that?"

"Ghastly," Trent agreed. "But look here, Arthur; if he could get the two maids to witness the will, and keep quiet about it, why couldn't he have made it on an ordinary sheet of paper and enclosed it in a letter to your firm, and got either Mabel Catherine or Ida Florence to post it secretly?"

Selby shook his head. "I thought of that. Probably he didn't dare take the risk of the girl being caught with the letter by her mistress. If that had happened, the fat *would* have been in the fire. Besides, we should have acknowledged the letter, and she would have opened our reply and read it. Reading all his correspondence would have been part of

the treatment, you may be sure. No, Phil: I liked old Landell, and I meant to hurt. Sorry; but there it is."

"I wasn't objecting to your being brutal," Trent said. "I felt just like you, and you had my unstinted moral support all the time. I particularly liked that passage when you reminded her that she could be slung out on her ear whenever you chose."

"She's devilish lucky, really," Selby said. "She can live fairly comfortably on the income from her legacy if she likes. And she can marry again, God help us all! Landell got back on her in the end; but he did it like a gentleman."

"So did you," Trent said. "A very nice little job of torturing, I should call it."

Selby's smile was bitter. "It only lasted minutes," he said. "Not years."

One of the most amazing crimes ever committed — in the crowded elevator of an office building. And one of the most amazing dinner parties ever staged to hammer a murderer's guilty conscience into confession. . . . By the author of the unforgettable "Dime a Dance."

AFTER-DINNER STORY

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

MacKenzie got on the elevator at the thirteenth floor. He was a water-filter salesman and had stopped in at his home-office to make out his accounts before going home for the day. Later on that night he told his wife, half-laughingly, that that must have been why it happened to *him*, his getting on at the thirteenth floor. A lot of buildings omit them.

The red bulb bloomed and the car stopped for him. It was an express, omitting all floors, both coming and going, below the tenth. There were two other men in it already when he got on, not counting the operator. It was late in the day, and most of the offices had already emptied themselves. One of the passengers was a scholarly looking man with rimless glasses, tall and slightly stooped. The time came when MacKenzie learned all their names. This was Kenshaw. The other was stout and cherubic looking, one of two partners in a struggling concern that was trying to market fountain-pens with tiny light bulbs in their barrels — without much success. He was fiddling with one of his own samples on the way down, clicking it on and off with an air of proud ownership. He turned out to be named Lambert.

The car was very efficient looking, very smooth running, sleek with bronze and chromium. It appeared very safe. It stopped at the next floor down, the twelfth, and a surly looking individual with bushy brows stepped in, Prendergast. Then the number 11 on the operator's call-board lit up, and it stopped there, too. A man about MacKenzie's own age and an older man with a trim white mustache were standing there side by side when the door opened. Only the young man, however, got on; the elder man gripped him by the arm in parting and turned away remarking loudly, "Tell Elinor I was asking for her." The younger answered, " 'By, Dad," and stepped in. Hardecker was his name. Almost

at the same time 10 was flashing.

The entry from 11 had turned to face the door, as all passengers are supposed to do in an elevator for their own safety. MacKenzie happened to glance at the sour-pussed man with the bushy brows at that moment; the latter was directly behind the newest arrival. He was glaring at the back of Hardecker's head with baleful intensity; in fact MacKenzie had never seen such a hundred-watt glower anywhere before except on a movie "heavy." The man's features, it must be admitted, lent themselves to just such an expression admirably; he had a swell headstart even when his face was in repose.

MacKenzie imagined this little by-play was due to the newcomer's having inadvertently trodden on the other's toe in turning to face forward. As a matter of fact, he himself was hardly conscious of analyzing the whole thing thus thoroughly; these were all just disconnected thoughts.

Ten was still another single passenger, a bill collector judging by the sheaf of pink, green, and canary slips he kept riffling through. He hadn't, by the gloomy look he wore, been having much luck today; or maybe his feet hurt him. This one was Megaffin.

There were now seven people in the car, counting the operator, standing in a compact little group facing the door, and no more stops due until it reached street level. Not a very great crowd; certainly far from the maximum the mechanism was able to hold. The framed notice, tacked to the panel just before MacKenzie's eyes, showed that it had been last inspected barely ten days before.

It never stopped at the street floor.

MacKenzie, trying to reconstruct the sequence of events for his wife that night, said that the operator seemed to put on added speed as soon as they had left the tenth floor behind. It was an express, so he didn't think anything of it. He remembered noticing at this point that the operator had a boil on the back of his neck, just above his uniform collar, with a Maltese cross of adhesive over it. He got that peculiar sinking sensation at the pit of his stomach many people get from a too-precipitate drop. The man near him, the young fellow from the eleventh, turned and gave him a half-humorous, half-pained look, so he knew that he must be feeling it too. Somebody farther back whistled slightly to show his discomfort.

The car was a closed one, all metal, so you couldn't see the shaft doors flashing up. They must have been ticking off at a furious rate, just the same. MacKenzie began to get a

peculiar ringing in his ears, like when he took the subway under the East River, and his knee-joints seemed to loosen up, trying to buckle under him.

But what really first told him — and all of them — that something had gone wrong and this was not a normal descent, was the sudden, futile, jerky way the operator was wangling the control-lever to and fro. It traveled the short arc of its orbit readily enough, but the car refused to answer to it. He kept slamming it into the socket at one end of the groove, marked Stop for all eyes to read, and nothing happened. Fractions of seconds, not minutes, were going by.

They heard him say in a muffled voice, "Look out! We're going to hit!" And that was all there was time for.

The whole thing was a matter of instants. The click of a camera-shutter. The velocity of the descent became sickening; MacKenzie felt as if he were going to throw up. Then there was a tremendous bang like a cannon, an explosion of blackness, and of bulb-glass showering down as the light went out.

They all toppled together in a heap, like a bunch of nine-pins. MacKenzie, who had gone over backwards, was the luckiest of the lot; he could feel squirming bodies bedded under him, didn't touch the hard-rubber floor of the car at all. However, his hip and shoulder got a bad wrench, and the sole of his foot went numb, through shoe and all, from the stinging impact it got flying up and slapping the bronze wall of the car.

There was no opportunity to extricate one's self, try to regain one's feet. They were going up again — on springs or something. It was a little sickening too, but not as bad as the coming down had been. It slackened, reversed into a drop, and they banged a second time. Not with the terrific impact of the first, but a sort of cushioned bang that scrambled them up even more than they were already. Somebody's shoe grazed MacKenzie's skull. He couldn't see it but quickly caught it and warded it aside before it kicked him and gave him a fracture.

A voice near him was yelling, "Stop it! Cut it out!" half-hysterically, as though the jockeying up and down could be controlled. Even MacKenzie, badly frightened and shaken up as he was, hadn't lost his head to that extent.

The car finally settled, after a second slight bounce that barely cleared the springs under it at all, and a third and almost unnoticeable jolt. The rest was pitch darkness, a sense of suffocation, a commingling

of threshing bodies like an ant-heap, groans from the badly hurt and an ominous sigh or two from those even beyond groaning.

Somebody directly under MacKenzie was not moving at all. He put his hand on him, felt an upright, stiff collar, and just above it a small swelling, criss-crossed by plaster. The operator was dead. There was an inertness that told MacKenzie, and the rubber matting beneath the operator's skull was sticky.

He felt then for the sleek metal wall of the enclosure that had buried them all alive, reached up it like a fly struggling up glass, with the heels of his hands and the points of his elbows. He squirmed the rest of his body up after these precarious grips. Upright again, he leaned against cold bronze.

The voice, there's always one in every catastrophe or panic, that had been pleading to "Cut it out!" was now begging with childish vehemence: "Get me outa here! For the love of Mike, I've got a wife and kids. Get me outa here!"

MacKenzie had the impression it was the surly looking fellow with the bushy eyebrows. The probabilities, he felt, were all for it. Such visible truculence and toughness are usually all hollow inside, a mask of weakness.

"Shut up," he said, "I've got a wife too. What's that got to do with it?"

The important thing, he recognized, was not the darkness, nor their trapped position at the bottom of a sealed-up shaft, nor even any possible injuries any of them had received. But the least noticeable of all the many corollaries of their predicament was the most dangerous. It was that vague sense of stuffiness, of suffocation. Something had to be done about that at once. The operator had opened the front panel of the car at each floor, simply by latch-motion. There was no reason why that could not be repeated down here, even though there was no accompanying opening in the shaft-wall facing it. Enough air would filter down the crack between the jammed-in car and the wall, narrow though it was, to keep them breathing until help came. They were going to need that air before this was over.

MacKenzie's arms executed interlocking circles against the satiny metal face of the car, groping for the indented grip used to unlatch it. "Match," he ordered. "Somebody light a match, I'm trying to get this thing open. We're practically airtight in here."

The immediate, and expected, reaction was a howl of dismay from the tough-looking bird, like a dog's craven yelp.

Another voice, more self-controlled, said, "Wait a minute." Then

nothing happened.

"Here I am; here, hand 'em to me," said MacKenzie, shovelling his upturned hand in and out through the velvety darkness.

"They won't strike, got all wet. Glass must have cut me." And then an alarmed "My shirt's all covered with blood!"

"All right, it mayn't be yours," said MacKenzie steadyingly. "Feel yourself before you let loose. If it is, hold a handkerchief to it. That bulb glass isn't strong enough to pierce very deep." And then in exasperation he hollered out, "For the love of —! Six men! Haven't any of you got a match to give me?" Which was unfair, considering that he himself had run short just before he left his office, had been meaning to get a folder at the cigar-store when he got off the car. "Hey, you, the guy that was fiddling with that trick fountain-pen coming down, how about that gadget of yours?"

A new voice unfrightened but infinitely crestfallen answered disappointedly: "It — it broke." And then with a sadness that betokened there were other, greater tragedies than what had happened to the car: "It shows you can't drop it without breakage. And that was the chief point of our whole advertising campaign." Then an indistinct mumble: "Fifteen hundred dollars capital! Wait'll Belman hears what a white elephant we've got on our hands." Which, under the circumstances, was far funnier than it was intended.

At least he's not yellow, whoever he is, thought MacKenzie. "Never mind," he exclaimed suddenly. "I've got it." His fingertips had found the slot at the far end of the seamless cast-bronze panel. The thing didn't feel buckled in any way but if the concussion had done that to it, if it refused to open. . . .

He pulled back the latch, leaning over the operator's lifeless body to do so, tugged at the slide. It gave, fell back about a third of its usual orbit along the groove, then stalled unmanageably. That was sufficient for their present needs; there was no question of egress through it. The rough-edged bricks of the shaft-wall were a finger's width beyond the lips of the car's orifice; not even a venturesome cat could have got a paw between without jamming it. What mattered was that they wouldn't asphyxiate now, no matter how long it took to free the mechanism, raise it.

"It's all right, fellows," he called reassuringly to those behind him, "I've got some air into the thing now."

If there was light farther up the shaft, it didn't reach down this far. The shaft wall opposite the opening

was as black as the inside of the car itself.

He said, "They've heard us. They know what's happened. No use yelling at the top of your voice like that, only makes it tougher for the rest of us. They'll get an emergency crew on the job. We'll just have to sit and wait, that's all."

The nerve-tingling bellows for help, probably the tough guy again, were silenced shamefacedly. A groaning still kept up intermittently from someone else. "My arm, Oh, Gawd, it hurts!" The sighing, from an injury that had gone deeper still, had suspiciously quieted some time before. Either the man had fainted, or he, too, was dead.

MacKenzie, matter-of-factly but not callously, reached down for the operator's outflung form, shifted it into the angle between two of the walls, and propped it upright there. Then he sat down himself in the clear floor space provided, tucked up his legs, wrapped his arms around them. He wouldn't have called himself a brave man; he was just a realist.

There was a momentary silence from all of them at once, one of those pauses. Then, because there was also, or seemed to be, a complete stillness from overhead in the shaft, panic stabbed at the tough guy again. "They gonna leave us here all night?" he whimpered. "What you guys sit there like that for? Don't you wanna get out?"

"For Pete's sake, somebody clip that loud-mouth on the chin!" urged MacKenzie truculently.

There was a soundless indrawn whistle. "My arm! Oh, my arm!"

"Must be busted," suggested MacKenzie sympathetically. "Try wrapping your shirt tight around it to kill the pain."

Time seemed to stand still, jog forward a few notches at a time every so often, like something on a belt. The rustle of a restless body, a groan, an exhalation of impatience, an occasional cry from the craven in their midst, whom MacKenzie sat on each time with increasing acidity as his own nerves slowly frayed.

The waiting, the sense of trapped helplessness, began to tell on them, far more than the accident had.

"They may think we're all dead and take their time," someone said.

"They never do in a case like this," MacKenzie answered shortly. "They're doing whatever they're doing as fast as they can. Give 'em time."

A new voice, that he hadn't heard until then, said to no one in particular, "I'm glad my father didn't get on here with me."

Somebody chimed in, "I wish I

hadn't gone back after that damn phone call. It was a wrong number, and I coulda ridden down the trip before this."

MacKenzie sneered, "Ah, you talk like a bunch of ten-year-olds! It's happened; what's the good of wishing about it?"

He had a watch on his wrist with a luminous dial. He wished that he hadn't had, or that it had gone out of commission like the other man's trick fountain-pen. It was too nerve-racking; every minute his eyes sought it, and when it seemed like half-an-hour had gone by, it was only five minutes. He wisely refrained from mentioning it to any of the others; they would have kept asking him, "How long is it now?" until he went screwy.

When they'd been down twenty-two and one-half minutes from the time he'd first looked at it, and were all in a state of nervous instability bordering on frenzy, including himself, there was a sudden unexpected, unannounced thump directly overhead, as though something heavy had landed on the roof of the car.

This time it was MacKenzie who leaped up, pressed his cheek flat against the brick-work outside the open panel, and funnelled up the paper-thin gap: "Hello! Hello!"

"Yeah," a voice came down "we're coming to you, take it easy!"

More thumping for a while, as though somebody were jigging over their heads. Then a sudden metallic din, like a boiler factory going full blast. The whole car seemed to vibrate with it, it became numbing to touch it for long at any one point. The confined space of the shaft magnified the noise into a torrent of sound, drowning out all their remarks. MacKenzie couldn't stand it, finally had to stick his palms up flat against his ears. A blue electric spark shot down the narrow crevice outside the door from above. Then another, then a third. They all went out too quickly to cast any light inside.

Acetylene torches! They were having to cut a hole through the car-roof to get at them. If there was a basement opening in the shaft, and there must have been, the car must have plunged down even beyond that, to sub-basement level, wound up in a dead-end cul-de sac at pit-bottom. There was apparently no other way.

A spark materialized eerily through the ceiling. Then another, then a semi-circular gush of them. A curtain of fire descended half-way into their midst, illuminating their faces wanly for a minute. Luckily it went out before it touched the car floor.

The noise broke off short and the silence in its wake was deafening. A voice shouted just above them:

"Look out for sparks, you guys below, we're coming through. Keep your eyes closed, get back against the walls!"

The noise came on again, nearer at hand, louder than before. MacKenzie's teeth were on edge from the incessant vibration. Being rescued was worse than being stuck down there. He wondered how the others were standing it, especially that poor guy with the broken wing. He thought he heard a voice scream: "Elinor! Elinor!" twice, like that, but you couldn't be sure of anything in that infernal din.

The sparks kept coming down like a dripping waterfall; MacKenzie squinted his eyes cagily, kept one hand shielded up over them to protect his eyesight. He thought he saw one spark shoot across horizontal, instead of down vertical like all the others; it was a different color too, more orange. He thought it must be an optical illusion produced by the alternating glare and darkness they were all being subjected to; either that, or a detached splinter of combusted metal from the roof, ricocheting off the wall. He closed his eyes all the way, just to play safe.

There wasn't much more to it after that. The noise and sparks stopped abruptly. They pried up the crescent-shape flap they had cut in the roof with crowbars, to keep it from toppling inward and crushing those below. The cool, icy beams of torches flickered through. A cop jumped down into their midst and ropes were sent snaking down after him. He said in a brisk, matter-of-fact way: "All right, who's first now? Who's the worst hurt of yez all?"

His torch showed three forms motionless at the feet of the others in the confined space. The operator, huddled in the corner where MacKenzie had propped him; the scholarly looking man with the rimless glasses (minus them now, and a deep gash under one eye to show what had become of them) lying senseless on his side; and the young fellow who had got on at the eleventh, tumbled partly across him, face down.

"The operator's dead," MacKenzie answered as spokesman for the rest, "and these two're out of their pain just now. There's a guy with a busted arm here, take him first."

The cop deftly looped the rope under the armpits of the ashen-faced bill collector, who was knotting the slack of one sleeve tightly in his other hand and sweating away like a fish in the torchlight.

"Haul away!" the cop shouted toward the opening. "And take your time, the guy's hurt."

The bill collector went up through the ceiling, groaning, legs drawn up

under him like a trussed-up fowl.

The scholarly looking man went next, head bobbing down in unconsciousness. When the noose came down empty, the cop bent over to fasten it around the young fellow still on the floor.

MacKenzie saw him change his mind, pry open one eyelid, pass the rope on to the tough-looking mugg who had been such a cry-baby, and who was shaking all over from the nervous reaction to the fright he'd had.

"What's the matter with him?" MacKenzie butted in, pointing to the floor.

"He's dead," the cop answered briefly. "He can wait, the living come first."

"Dead! Why, I heard him say he was glad his father didn't get on with him, long after we hit!"

"I don't care what you heard him say!" the cop answered. "He coulda said it, and still be dead now! Nuts. Are you telling me my business? You seem to be pretty chipper for a guy that's just come through an experience like this!"

"Skip it," said MacKenzie placatingly. He figured it was no business of his anyway, if the guy had seemed all right at first and now was dead. He might have had a weak heart.

He and the disheartened fountain-pen entrepreneur seemed to be the only two out of the lot who were totally unharmed. The latter, however, was so broken-hearted over the failure of his appliance to stand up under an emergency, that he seemed hardly to care whether he went up or stayed down or what became of him. He kept examining the defective gadget even on his way up through the aperture in the car-roof, with the expression of a man who has just bitten into a very sour lemon.

MacKenzie was the last one up the shaft, except the two fatalities. He was pulled in over the lip of the basement opening, from which the sliding doors had been taken down bodily. It was a bare four feet above the roof of the car; in other words the shaft continued on down past it for little more than the height of the car. He couldn't understand why it had been built that way, and not ended flush with the basement, in which case their long imprisonment could have been avoided. It was explained to him later, by the building superintendent, that it was necessary to give the car additional clearance underneath, or else it would have run the risk of jamming each time it came down to the basement.

There were stretchers there in the basement passageway, and the bill collector and the studious looking man were being given first-aid by a

pair of internes. The hard-looking egg was gulping down a large glass of spirits of ammonia between clicking teeth. MacKenzie let one of the internes look him over, at the latter's insistence; was told what he knew already, that he was O.K. He gave his name and address to the lieutenant of police in charge, and walked up a flight of stairs to the street level, thinking, "The old-fashioned way's the best after all."

He found the lobby of the building choked with a milling crowd, warded off a number of ambulance chasers who tried to tell him how badly hurt he was. "There's money in it, buddy, don't be a sucker!" MacKenzie phoned his wife from a near-by booth to shorten her anxiety, then he left the scene for home.

His last fleeting impression was of a forlorn figure standing there in the lobby, a man with a trim white mustache, the father of the young fellow lying dead below, buttonholing every cop within reach, asking over and over again, "Where's my son? Why haven't they brought my son up yet?" And not getting any answer from any of them — which was an answer in itself. MacKenzie pushed out into the street.

Friday, that was four days later, the doorbell rang right after supper and he had a visitor. "MacKenzie? You were in that elevator Monday night, weren't you, sir?"

"Yes," MacKenzie grinned, he sure was.

"I'm from Police Headquarters. Mind if I ask you a few questions? I've been going around to all of 'em checking up."

"Come in and sit down," said MacKenzie interestedly. His first guess was that they were trying to track down labor sabotage, or some violation of the building laws. "Matter, anything phony about it?"

"Not for our money," said the dick, evidently because this was the last leg of what was simply a routine questioning of all the survivors, and he refused to differ from his superiors. "The young fellow that was lying dead there in the bottom of the car — not the operator but young Wesley Hardecker — was found by the examiner to have a bullet imbedded in his heart."

MacKenzie jolted, gave a long-drawn whistle that brought his Scotty to the door questioningly. "Whew! You mean somebody shot him while we were all cooped up down there in that two-by-four?"

The dick showed, without being too pugnacious about it, that he was there to ask the questions, not answer them. "Did you know him at all?"

"Never saw him in my life before, until he got on the car that night. I know his name by now, because I read it in the papers next day; I didn't at the time."

The visitor nodded, as though this was the answer he'd got from all the others too. "Well, did you hear anything like a shot while you were down there?"

"No, not before they started the blow-torches. And after that, you couldn't have heard one anyway. Matter of fact, I had my hands over my ears at one time. I did see a flash, though," he went on eagerly. "Or at least, I remember seeing one of the sparks shoot *across* instead of dropping down, and it was more orange in color."

Again the dick nodded. "Yeah, a couple of others saw that too. That was probably it, right there. Did it light up anyone's face behind it, anything like that?"

"No," MacKenzie admitted, "my eyes were all pinwheels, between the coal-blackness and these flashing sparks coming down through the roof; we'd been warned, anyway, to keep them shut a minute before." He paused thoughtfully, went on: "It doesn't seem to hang together, does it? Why should anyone pick such a time and place to —"

"It hangs together beautifully," contradicted the dick. "It's his old man, the elder Hardecker, that's raising a stink, trying to read something phony into it. It's suicide while of unsound mind, and has been all along; and that's what the findings of the coroner's inquest are going to be too. We haven't turned up anything that throws a doubt on that. Old man Hardecker himself hasn't been able to identify a single one of you as having ever known or seen his son — or himself — before six o'clock last Monday evening. The gun was the fellow's own, and he had a license for it. He had it with him when he got in the car. It was under his body when it was picked up. The only fingerprints brought out on it were his. The examininer finds the wound a contact wound, powder burns all around it."

"The way we were crowded together down there, any kind of a shot at anyone would have been a contact," MacKenzie tried to object.

The dick waved this aside. "The nitrate test shows that his fingers fired the shot. It's true that we neglected to give it to anyone else at the time, but since there'd been only one shot fired out of the gun, and no other gun was found, that don't stack up to much. The bullet, of course, was from that gun and no other, ballistics has told us. The guy was a nervous, high-strung young fel-

low. He went hysterical down there, cracked up, and when he couldn't stand it any more, took himself out of it. And against this, his old man is beefing that he was happy, he had a lovely wife, they were expecting a kid and he had everything to live for.

"Well, all right," objected MacKenzie mildly, "but why should he do it when they were already working on the roof over us, and it was just a matter of minutes before they got to us. Why not before? That don't sound logical. Matter of fact, his voice sounded calm and unfrightened enough while we were waiting."

The detective got up, as though the discussion were ended, but condescended to enlighten him, on his way to the door: "People don't crack up at a minute's notice; it was after he'd been down there twenty minutes, half an hour, it got him. When you heard him say that, he was probably trying to hold himself together, kid himself he was brave or something. Any psychiatrist will tell you what noise'll do to someone already under a strain or tension. The noise of the blow-torches gave him the finishing touch; that's why he did it then, couldn't think straight any more. As far as having a wife and expecting a kid is concerned, that would only make him lose his head all the quicker. A man without ties or responsibilities is always more cold-blooded in an emergency."

"It's a new one on me, but maybe you're right. I only know water-filters."

"It's my job to be right about things like that. Good-night, Mr. MacKenzie."

The voice on the wire said, "Mr. MacKenzie? Is this the Mr. Stephen MacKenzie who was in an elevator accident a year ago last August? The newspapers gave —"

"Yes, I was."

"Well, I'd like you to come to dinner at my house next Saturday evening, at exactly seven o'clock."

MacKenzie cocked his brows at himself in the wall mirror. "Hadn't you better tell me who you are, first?"

"Sorry," said the voice crisply. "I thought I had. I've been doing this for the past hour or so, and it's beginning to tell on me. This is Harold Hardecker; I'm head of the Hardecker Import and Export Company."

"Well, I still don't place you, Mr. Hardecker," MacKenzie said levelly. "Are you one of the men who was on that elevator with me?"

"No, my son was. He lost his life."

"Oh," said MacKenzie. He remembered now. A man with a trim

white mustache, standing in the milling crowd, buttonholing the cops as they hurried by. . . .

"Can I expect you then at seven next Saturday, Mr. MacKenzie? I'm at —— Park Avenue."

"Frankly," said MacKenzie, who was a plain soul not much given to social hypocrisy, "I don't see any point to it. I don't believe we've ever spoken to one another before. Why do you single me out?"

Hardecker explained patiently, even good-naturedly, "I'm not singling you out, Mr. MacKenzie. I've already contacted each of the others who were on the car that night with my son, and they've all agreed to be there. I don't wish to disclose what I have in mind beforehand; I'm giving this dinner for that purpose. However, I might mention that my son died intestate, and his poor wife passed away in childbirth in the early hours of the following morning. His estate reverted to me, and I am a lonely old man, without friends or relatives, and with more money already than I know what to do with. It occurred to me to bring together five perfect strangers, who shared a common hazard with my son, who were with him during the last few moments of his life." The voice paused insinuatingly, to let this sink in. Then it resumed, "If you'll be at my house for dinner Saturday at seven, I'll have an announcement of considerable importance to make. It's to your interest to be present when I do."

MacKenzie scanned his water-filter-salesman's salary with his mind's eye, and found it altogether unsatisfactory, as he had done not once but many times before. "All right," he agreed, after a moment's consideration. . . .

Saturday at six he was still saying, "You can't tell me. The guy isn't in his right mind, to do a thing like this. Five people that he don't know from Adam, and that don't know each other. I wonder if it's a practical joke?"

"Well, if you feel that way, why didn't you refuse him?" said his wife, brushing out his dark blue coat.

"I'm curious to find out what it's all about. I want to see what the gag is." Curiosity is one of the strongest human traits. It's almost irresistible. The expectation of getting something for nothing is no slouch either. MacKenzie was a good guy, but he was a guy after all, not an image on a stained-glass window.

At the door she said with belated anxiety, "Steve, I know you can take care of yourself and all that, but if you don't like the looks of things, I mean if none of the others show up, don't stay there alone."

He laughed. He'd made up his

mind by now, had even spent the windfall ahead of time, already. "You make me feel like one of those innocents in the old silent pictures, that were always being invited to a big blow-out and when they got there they were alone with the villain and just supper for two. Don't worry, Toots, if there's no one else there, I turn around and come back."

The building had a Park Avenue address, but was actually on one of the exclusive side-streets just off that thoroughfare. A small ultra-ultra cooperative, with only one apartment to a floor. "Mr. Harold Hardecker?" asked Mr. MacKenzie in the lobby. "Stephen MacKenzie."

He saw the hallman take out a small typed list of five names, four of which had already been penciled out; cross out the last one. "Go right up, Mr. MacKenzie. Third floor."

A butler opened the single door in the elevator foyer for him, greeted him by name and took his hat. A single glance at the money this place spelled would have been enough to restore anyone's confidence. People that lived like this were perfectly capable of having five strangers in to dinner, subdividing a dead son's estate among them, and chalking it off as just that evening's little whimsey. The sense of proportion alters above a certain yearly income.

He remembered Hardecker readily enough as soon as he saw him coming toward him along the central gallery that seemed to bisect the place like a bowling-alley. It took him about three and a half minutes to get up to him, at that. The man had aged appreciably from the visual snapshot that was all he'd had of him at the scene of the accident. He was slightly stooped, very thin at the waist, looked as though he'd suffered. But the white mustache was as trim and needle-pointed as ever, and he had on one of the new turned-over soft collars under his dinner jacket, which gave him a peculiarly boyish look in spite of the almost blinding white of his undiminished hair, cropped close as a Prussian's.

Hardecker held out his hand, said with just the right mixture of dignity and warmth, "How do you do, Mr. MacKenzie, I'm very glad to know you. Come in and meet the others and have a pick-up."

There were no women present in the living-room, just the four men sitting around at ease. There was no sense of strain, of stiffness; an advantage that stag gatherings are apt to have over mixed parties anyway, not through the fault of women, but through men's consciousness of them.

Kenshaw, the scholarly looking man, had a white scar still visible

under his left eye where his glasses had broken. The cherubic Lambert had deserted the illuminated fountain-pen business, he hurriedly confided unasked to MacKenzie, for the ladies' foundation-girdle business. No more mechanical gadgets for him. Or as he put it, unarguably, "A brassiere they gotta have, or else. But who needs a fountain-pen?" The hard-bitten mugg was introduced as Prendergast, occupation undisclosed. Megaffin, the bill collector, was no longer a bill collector. "I send out my own now," he explained, swiveling a synthetic diamond around on his pinky.

MacKenzie selected Scotch, and when he'd caught up with the rest, the butler came to the door, almost as though he'd been timing him through a knot-hole. He just looked in, then went away again.

"Let's go and get down to business now, gentlemen, shall we?" Hardecker grinned. He had the happy faculty, MacKenzie said to himself, of making you feel perfectly at home, without overdoing it, getting in your hair. Which looks easier than it is.

No flowers, candles, fripperies like that were on the table set for six; just a good substantial man's board. Hardecker said, "Just sit down anywhere you choose, only keep the head for me." Lambert and Kenshaw took one side, Prendergast and Megaffin on the other. MacKenzie sat down at the foot. It was obvious that whatever announcement their host intended making was being kept for the end of the meal, as was only fitting.

The butler had closed a pair of sliding doors beyond them after they were all in, and he stayed outside. The waiting was done by a man. It was a typical bachelor's repast, plain, marvelously cooked, without dainty or frivolous accessories to detract from it, salads, vegetables, things like that. Each course had its vintage corollary. And at the end no cloying sweets. Roquefort cheese, coffee with the blue flame of Courvoisier flickering above each glass. It was a masterpiece. And each one, as it ended, relaxed in his chair in a haze of golden day-dreams. They anticipated coming into money, money they hadn't had to work for, maybe more money than they'd ever had before. It wasn't such a bad world after all.

One thing had struck MacKenzie, but since he'd never been waited on by servants in a private home before, only in restaurants, he couldn't determine whether it was unusual or customary. There was an expensive mahogany buffet running across one side of the dining-room, but the

waiter had done no serving or carving on it, had brought in each portion separately, always individually. Even the roast. The coffee and the wines, too, had been poured behind the scenes, the glasses and the cups brought in already filled. It gave the man a lot more work and slowed the meal somewhat, but if that was the way it was done in Hardecker's house, that was the way it was done.

When they were already luxuriating with their cigars and cigarettes, and the cloth had been cleared of all but the emptied coffee cups, an additional dish was brought in. It was a silver chalice, a sort of stemmed bowl, holding a thick yellowish substance that looked like mayonnaise. The waiter placed it in the exact geometrical center of the table, even measuring with his eye its distance from both sides, and from the head and foot, and shifting its position to conform. Then he took the lid off and left it open. Threads of steam rose sluggishly from it. Every eye was on it interestedly.

"Is it well mixed?" they heard Hardecker ask.

"Yes sir," said the waiter.

"That will be all; don't come in again."

The man left by the pantry door he had been using, and it clicked slightly after it had closed behind him.

Somebody — Megaffin — asked cozily: "What's *that* got in it?" evidently on the look-out for still more treats.

"Oh, quite a number of things," Hardecker answered carelessly, "whites of eggs, mustard, as well as certain other ingredients all beaten up together."

MacKenzie, trying to be funny, said, "Sounds like an antidote."

"It is an antidote," Hardecker answered, looking steadily down the table at him. He must have pushed a call button or something under the table. The butler opened the sliding doors and stood between them, without coming in.

Hardecker didn't turn his head. "You have that gun I gave you? Stand there, please, on the other side of those doors and see that no one comes out of here. If they try it, you know what to do."

The doors slipped to again, effaced him, but not before MacKenzie, facing that way, had seen something glimmer in his hand.

Tension was slow in coming on, the change was too abrupt, they had been too steeped in the rosy afterglow of the meal and their own imminent good fortune. Then too, not all of them were equally alert mentally — particularly Megaffin, who had been on such a fourth dimensional plane of unaccustomedness all

evening he couldn't tell menace from hospitality, even when a gun was mentioned.

Its first focal point was Hardecker's own face — that went slowly white, grim, remorseless. From there it darted out to MacKenzie and Lambert, caught at them, paled them too. The rest grew allergic to it one by one, until there was complete silence at the table.

Hardecker spoke. Not loudly, not angrily, but in a steely, pitiless voice. "Gentlemen, there's a murderer in our midst."

Five breaths were sharply indrawn together, making a fearful "Ffff!" sound around the table. Not so much aghast at the statement itself, as aghast at the implication of retribution that lurked just behind it. And behind that was the shadowy suspicion that it had already been exacted.

No one said anything.

The hard, remorseless cores of Hardecker's eyes shot from face to face. He was smoking a long slim cigar, cigarette-thin. He pointed it straight out before him, indicated them all with it without moving it much, like a dark finger of doom. "Gentlemen, one of you killed my son." Pause. "On August 30, 1936." Pause. "And hasn't paid for it yet."

The words were like a stone going down into a deep pool of transparent water, and the ripples spreading out from them spelled fear.

MacKenzie said slowly, "You setting yourself above the properly constituted authorities? The findings of the coroner's inquest were suicide while of unsound mind. Why do you hold them incompe —"

Hardecker cut him short like a whip. "This isn't a discussion. It's — " a long pause, then very low but very audible: "an execution."

There was another of those strangling silences. They took it in a variety of ways, each according to his temperament. MacKenzie just kept staring at him, startled, apprehensive. Apprehensive, but not inordinately frightened, any more than he had been that night on the elevator. The scholarly-looking Kenshaw had a rebuking look on his face, that of a teacher for an unruly pupil, and the scar on his cheek stood out whitely. Megaffin looked shifty, like some small weasel at bay, planning its next move. The pugnacious-looking guy was going to cave in again in a minute, judging by the wavering of his facial lines. Lambert pinched the bridge of his nose momentarily, dropped his hand, mumbled something that sounded like, "*Oy*, I give up my pinochle club to come here, yet!"

Hardecker resumed, as though he hadn't said anything unusual just

now. "I know who the man is. I know which one among you the man is. It's taken me a year to find out, but now I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt." He was looking at his cigar now, watching the ash drop off of its own weight onto his coffee saucer. "The police wouldn't listen to me, they insisted it was suicide. The evidence was insufficient to convince them the first time, and for all I know it still may be." He raised his eyes. "But I demand justice for the taking of my son's life." He took an expensive, dime-thin, octagonal watch out of his pocket, placed it face up on the table before him. "Gentlemen, it's now nine o'clock. In half an hour, at the most, one of you will be dead. Did you notice that you were all served separately just now? One dish, and one alone out of all of them, was deadly. It's putting in its slow, sure work right as we sit here." He pointed to the silver tureen, equi-distant from all of them. "There's the answer. There's the antidote. I have no wish to set myself up as executioner above the law. Let the murderer be the chooser. Let him reach out and save his life and stand convicted before all of you. Or let him keep silent and go down to his death without confessing, privately executed for what can't be publicly proved. In twenty-five minutes collapse will come without warning. Then it will be too late."

It was Lambert who voiced the question in all their minds. "But are you sure you did this to the right —"

"I haven't made any mistake, the waiter was carefully rehearsed, you are all perfectly unharmed but the killer."

Lambert didn't seem to derive much consolation from this. "Now he tells us! A fine way to digest a meal," he brooded aloud. "Why didn't you serve the murderer first, so then the rest of us could eat in peace at least?"

"Shut up," somebody said terrifiedly.

"Twenty minutes to go," Hardecker said, tonelessly as a chime signal over the radio.

MacKenzie said, without heat, "You can't be sane, you know, to do a thing like this."

"Did you ever have a son?" was the answer.

Something seemed to snap in Megaffin. His chair jolted back. "I'm gettin' out of here," he said hoarsely.

The doors parted about two inches, silently as water, and a black metal cylinder peered through. "That man there," directed Hardecker. "Shoot him where he stands if he doesn't sit down."

Megaffin shrank down in his seat

again like a whipped cur, tried to shelter himself behind Prendergast's shoulder. The doors slipped together again into a hair-line crack.

"I couldn't," sighed the cherubic-faced Lambert, "feel more at home if I was in the Brown House at Munich!"

"Eighteen minutes," was the comment from the head of the table.

Prendergast suddenly grimaced uncontrollably, flattened his forearms on the table, and ducked his head onto them. He sniveled aloud. "I can't stand it! Lemme out of here! *I* didn't do it!"

A wave of revulsion went around the table. It was not because he'd broken down, analyzed MacKenzie, it was just that he didn't have the face for it. It should have been Lambert with his kewpie physiognomy, if anyone. The latter, however, was having other troubles. He touched the side of his head, tapped himself on the chest. "Whoof!" he murmured, "What heartburn! He should live so long, I don't take this up with my lawyer!"

"This is no way," said MacKenzie surlily. "If you had any kind of a case —"

"This is my way," was Hardecker's crackling answer. "I've given the man his choice. He needn't have it this way; he has his alternative. Fourteen minutes. Let me remind you, the longer the antidote's delayed, the more doubtful its efficiency will be. If it's postponed too long, it may miss altogether."

Conscious of a sticking sensation in his stomach, as though a mass of concrete had lodged there, MacKenzie felt a burning sensation shoot out from it. There is such a thing as nervous indigestion, he knew, but. . . . He eyed the silver goblet reflectively.

But they were all doing that almost incessantly. Prendergast had raised his head again, but it remained a woebegone mask of infantile fretfulness. Megaffin was green in the face and kept moistening his lips. Kenshaw was the most self-controlled of the lot; he had folded his arms and just sat there, as though waiting to see which one of the others would reach for the salvation in the silver container.

MacKenzie could feel a painful pulsing under his solar plexus now, he was in acute discomfort that verged on cramp. The thought of what this might be was bringing out sweat on his forehead.

Lambert reached out abruptly, and they all quit breathing for a minute. But his hand dodged the silver tureen, plunged into a box of perfectos to one side of it. He grabbed up two, stuck one in his breast-

pocket, the other between his teeth. "On you," he remarked resentfully to Hardecker.

Somebody gave a strained laugh at the fase alarm they had all had. Kenshaw took off his glasses, wiped them ruefully, as though disappointed it hadn't been the pay-off after all.

MacKenzie said, "You're alienating whatever sympathy's due you, by pulling a stunt like this."

"I'm not asking for sympathy," was Hardecker's coldly ferocious answer. "It's atonement I want. Three lives were taken from me: My only son, my daughter-in-law, their prematurely born child. I demand payment for that!"

Lambert said aloud, for his own benefit, "Jennie wouldn't believe this when I tell her."

Prendergast clutched his throat all at once, whimpered: "I can't breathe! He's done it to *me*, so help me!"

MacKenzie, hostile now to Hardecker, tried to steady him just on general principle. "Gas around the heart, maybe. Don't fall for it if you're not sure."

"Don't fall for it," was the ungrateful yelp, "and if I drop dead are *you* gonna bring me back?"

"He ought to be arrested for this," said Kenshaw, displaying emotion for the first time. His glasses had clouded over, giving him a peculiar sightless look.

"Arrested?" snapped Lambert. He wagged his head from side to side. "He's going to be sued like no one was ever sued before! When I get through with him he'll go on relief."

Hardecker threw him a contemptuous look. "About ten minutes," he said. "He seems to prefer the more certain way. Stubborn, eh? He'd rather die than admit it."

MacKenzie gripped the seat of his chair, his churning insides heaved. He thought, "If this is the McCoy that I'm feeling now, I'm going to bash his head in with a chair before I go. I'll give him something to poison innocent people about!"

Megaffin was starting to swear at their tormentor, in a whining, guttery sing-song.

"*Mazzeltov*," seconded Lambert, with a formal nod of approval. "Your breath, but my ideas."

"Five minutes. It will almost certainly fail if it's not downed within the next thirty seconds." Hardecker pocketed his watch, as though there were no further need for consulting it.

MacKenzie gagged, hauled at the knot of his tie, undid his collar-button. A needle of suffocating pain had just splintered into his heart.

Only the whites of Prendergast's eyes showed, he was going off into some fit or fainting spell. Even Lambert quit pulling at his cigar, as

though it sickened him. Kenshaw took off his glasses for the third time in five minutes, to clear them.

A pair of arms suddenly shot out, grasped the silver bowl, swung it. It was uptilted over someone's face and there was a hollow, metallic groaning coming from behind it, infinitely gruesome to hear. It had happened so quickly, MacKenzie couldn't be sure who it was for a minute, long as he had been sitting at the macabre table with all of them. He had to do it by a quick process of elimination. Man sitting beside Lambert — Kenshaw, the scholarly-looking one, the man who had had least to say since the ordeal had begun! He was gulping with a convulsive rising and falling of his Adam's apple, visible in the shadow just below the lower rim of the bowl.

Then suddenly he flung it aside, his face was visible again, the drained receptacle clanged against the wall where he'd cast it, dropped heavily to the floor. He couldn't talk for a minute or two, and neither could anyone else, except possibly Hardecker, and he didn't. Just sat staring at the self-confessed culprit with pitiless eyes.

Finally Kenshaw panted, cheeks twitching, "Will it — will it — save me?"

Hardecker folded his arms, said to the others, but without taking his eyes off Kenshaw: "So now you know. So now you see whether I was right or not."

Kenshaw was holding his hands pressed tightly to the sides of his head. A sudden flood of words was unloosed from him, as though he found it a relief to talk now, after the long unbearable tension he'd been through. "Sure you were right, and I'd do it over again! I'm glad he's gone. The rich man's son, that had everything. But that wasn't enough for him, was it? He had to show off how good he was — Horatio Alger stuff, paddle your own canoe from riches to more riches! He couldn't take a job with your own firm, could he? No, people might say you were helping him. He had to come to the place *I* worked and ask for a job. Not just anonymously. No, he had to mention whose son he was, to swing the scales in his favor! They were afraid to offend you, they thought maybe they'd get a pull with you, through him. It didn't count that I'd been with them all the best years of my life, that I had someone home too, just like he had, that I couldn't go anywhere else and mention the name of an influential father! They fired me."

His voice rose shrilly. "D'you know what happened to me? D'you know or care how I tramped the streets in the rain, at my age, looking

for work? D'you know my wife had to get down on her knees and scrub dirty office corridors? D'you know how I washed dishes, carried sandwich-boards through the streets, slept on park benches, all on account of a smart-aleck with Rover Boy ideas? Yes, it preyed on my mind, why wouldn't it? I suppose you found the threatening letters I wrote him, that's how you knew."

Hardecker just shook his head slightly in denial.

"Then he got on the elevator that day. He didn't see me, probably wouldn't have known me if he had, but I saw him. I knew him. Then we fell — and I hoped he was dead, I hoped he was dead! But he wasn't. The idea took hold of me slowly, waiting down there in the dark. The torches started making noise, and I grabbed him, I was going to choke him. But he wrenched himself free and took out his gun to defend himself against what I guess he thought was a fear-crazed man. I wasn't fear-crazed, I was revenge-crazed, I knew what I was doing!

"I grabbed his hand. Not the gun, but the hand that was holding it. I turned it around the other way, into his own heart. He said 'Elinor, Elinor!' but that didn't save him; that was the wrong name, that was *his* wife not mine. I squeezed the finger he had on the trigger with my own, and he fired his own weapon. So the police were right, it was suicide in a way.

"He leaned against me, there wasn't room enough in there to fall. I flung myself down first under him, so they'd find us that way, and eased him down on top of me. He bled on me a little while and then he quit. And when they came through I pretended I'd fainted."

Hardecker said, "Murderer. Murderer." Like drops of ice-water. "He didn't *know* he'd done all that to you; oh, why didn't you give him a chance at least, why weren't you a man? Murderer! Murderer!"

Kenshaw started reaching downward to the floor, where he'd dropped his glasses when he had seized the antidote. His face was on a level with the table-top. He scowled: "No matter what they've all heard me say just now, you'll never be able to prove I did it. Nobody saw me. Only the dark."

A whisper sounded: "And that's where you're going. Into the dark."

Kenshaw's head vanished suddenly below the table. The empty back of his chair whirled over sidewise, cracked against the floor.

They were all on their feet now, bending over him. All but Hardecker. MacKenzie got up from his knees. "He's dead!" he said. "The antidote didn't work in time!"

Hardecker said, "That wasn't the antidote, that was the poison itself. He hadn't been given any until he gulped that down. He convicted himself and carried out sentence upon himself with one and the same gesture. I hadn't known which one of you it was until then. I'd only known it hadn't been my son's own doing, because, you see, the noise of those torches wouldn't have affected him much, he was partly deaf from birth."

He pushed his chair back and stood up. "I didn't summon you here under false pretenses; his estate will be divided in equal parts among the four of you that are left. And now I'm ready to take my own medicine. Call the police, let them and their prosecutors and their courts of law decide whether I killed him or his own guilty conscience did!"

Here is the second Georges Simenon short story of detection to be published in America — translated again by Mr. Anthony Boucher from the original French text, the only way this story has occurred until now. Your Editor is grateful to Mr. Boucher (Tony) for a translation that captures the exact spirit of Simenon's hard, unadorned, almost merciless style.

In "The Three Rembrandts" you will meet that unearthly sleuth, Joseph Leborgne, who is the perfect and complete Armchair Detective. As Mr. Boucher himself reminds us: "Mycroft Holmes once functioned as a cabby; Prince Zaleski left his subterranean haunts to destroy the S. S.; Nero Wolfe attended a chefs' convention; but only The Old Man in the Corner can compare with Joseph Leborgne for sheer physical inactivity."

Your Editor might add that even The Old Man in the Corner once strayed from the narrow path of complete and utter sedentariness — so that Simenon's Leborgne must now be acclaimed the new champion.

THE THREE REMBRANDTS

by GEORGES SIMENON

(Translated from the original French by Anthony Boucher)

JOSEPH LEBORGNE was stretched out in his armchair in front of the electric radiator. His eyes were closed.

He was a man of about thirty-five, short and slender and extremely well-groomed. He hated the complications of life so deeply that he persisted, since he was a bachelor, in living in a hotel, where he even took all of his meals in his room.

Though this room was centrally heated like the rest of the building, he had insisted on the installation of an electric radiator, and he would spend hours contemplating its glowing red disk. His windows were always tightly closed, and I was strictly forbidden to smoke my pipe. It suffocated him, he would explain, as he lit another of his rose-tipped cigarettes.

"Do you know the Hôtel Drouot?" he asked, opening his eyes.

"Of course; everyone does. The Drouot is to the auction trade what the Bourse de Paris is to finance."

"Then listen to a story that will give you quite a new light on it:

"One fine day there's the announcement of a sensational sale — nothing more nor less than an unknown Rembrandt. An old collector named Wahl has been keeping it

jealously hidden in his lair for fifteen years and has finally decided to sell it.

"It's a masterly portrait, and what gives it an inestimable value is that it's not only signed, but dated 1669, the year of the painter's death. There are no other Rembrandt portraits extant from this period. Wahl has invited several art critics to admire the masterpiece; they all swear it's authentic. All the same, the skeptics are murmuring, 'Wait till the experts get at it.'

"Then suddenly the rumor spreads of an unbelievable event. Saturday afternoon a well-dressed young man appears at the Salle Drouot with the picture under his arm and presents it to the director on behalf of Wahl, adding that a detective will arrive the next day to stand guard in the gallery where the precious canvas is to hang.

"This canvas is only sixty centimeters by seventy. It is framed in dark oak, uncarved.

"The young man has hardly left when a commissionaire arrives, hands over to the director a parcel of exactly the same dimensions, and promptly vanishes.

"Finally, at five that evening, Wahl himself appears, all aglow, a parcel under his arm, and before the startled eyes of the director he lays bare his famous picture.

"I need hardly describe the scene to you, do I? There is no longer one Rembrandt, but three identical Rembrandts, framed so precisely alike that once the three are set side by side, Wahl himself can't tell his from the others.

"The police are called in. There's a search for the young man who brought the first canvas; there's a search for the commissionaire who delivered the second. The little world of the Hôtel Drouot is all abubble.

"Meanwhile there's been a mix-up. They've moved the pictures around several times to get a better light for examining them, and now the owner of the Rembrandt swears that it's impossible for him to say that any one is the original rather than another.

"For three days there's a procession of critics, plus the most famous dealers. Their opinions are divided. For convenience in discussion, there are placards on each frame: No. 1, No. 2, No. 3. Some hold out for No. 1, others for 2. But 3 has few champions.

"The sale, of course, is postponed to a later date. The investigation continues. Neither the young man nor the commissionaire is ever found. . . ."

And Joseph Leborgne smiled and pushed over to me the photographic

enlargements of the signatures on the three pictures.

"Surely the experts —" I began.

He burst out laughing. "How innocent you still are! Haven't you ever followed an affair like this? Recently there was that scandal of the fake Van Goghs in Germany. There were ten experts mixed up in it; they never could agree. . . . Two years ago in America there was another fake business. This time it was a Raphael. At the owner's expense the experts came from London, Berlin, Paris, Rome — it wasn't a consultation; it was a convention. And the American press, which isn't quite so respectful as ours, revealed that it wound up with umbrellas at ten paces."

"Nevertheless, certainly with X-rays they could —"

"Just one more ground for argument. In this case, X-rays gave the same results for all three pictures."

"Microscopic examination of the canvas . . . ?"

". . . proved nothing."

"Technical study of the three signatures?"

"Look at them yourself, and see how far one could get. They're identical — precisely, minutely so. Of course that means that only one of them could be genuine, but it leaves the essential question, *which?*"

"Where had the picture been before it was brought to the Drouot?"

"Which picture?"

"The one Wahl brought, of course. The real one."

"In Wahl's flat in the Avenue de Suffren. It hadn't even been hung on the wall, but was locked up in a small closet opening off Wahl's office."

"For how long?"

"Some fifteen years, ever since Wahl dug up his masterpiece at God knows what provincial auction. At that time the picture was so soiled and smoke-stained that you could barely make out the subject and couldn't see the signature at all. But Wahl had a flair; he had the picture restored. . . . But he never spoke of his find save to a few intimate friends. Very few indeed were the people who'd ever been allowed to admire it. He used to say, 'I'll eat dry bread before I ever sell it!' "

"What was Wahl's profession?"

"Officially, none. He hung out at the Hôtel Drouot, but worked only on a small scale. Bought a little, resold a little. . . ."

"And he finally decided to get rid of his Rembrandt?"

"To furnish his daughter with a dowry, it seems."

"So he was married?"

"A widower. One daughter, twenty-two. Engaged to a certain Golfinger, nationality undetermined,

traveler in precious stones."

"Wahl is rich?"

"He lives modestly enough. Two servants. A 15,000 franc flat. According to him, his only real fortune was this Rembrandt which he was so loath to part with. So naturally he stirred up quite a fuss. When he saw the three canvases, he swore that he was a ruined man. He even attempted suicide. . . ."

"How?"

"Veronal. But at the first symptoms his daughter called a doctor who pulled him through all right."

"And the auction never came off?"

"Indeed it did, but three weeks later. For those three weeks everybody discussed and expertized and counter-expertized. Contradictory conclusions were published, and the specialists launched polemics at each other. There were suspicions of Golfinger, as the only man who could have got at the picture, but he managed to clear himself of any connection with the affair. The police investigated two or three innocent commissionaires. . . ."

"And the two servants?"

"One of them is an old Polish woman. Speaks only a mixture of Polish and bad French. Very dull about answering questions. Her only concern was the kitchen; she gave the impression of being a simple soul. . . . The other servant is a young girl from Luxembourg. The investigation established that she'd been entertaining in her room on the sixth floor quite a collection of lovers, ranging from a fireman and a policeman to a bartender from the Champs-Elysées. But she didn't even know the picture existed. Besides, she'd never let one of her lovers into the flat itself."

"How did the affair come out?"

"The auction finally took place, as I told you. One of the most memorable sessions in the history of the Rue Drouot. All the regular crowd was there. Connoisseurs came from Berlin and Amsterdam. The three pictures were exhibited side by side — a maddening spectacle, since they were so exactly alike down to their least details. Wahl was present, much dejected. At least ten times he must have intruded on a group with his sad tale. 'I'm a ruined man,' he kept saying. 'It's my poor Judith's dowry that the bandits stole! And still the picture is there. . . . It's there, and I can't recognize it myself . . . !'"

"The connoisseurs were interested?"

"The bids were wild! The oddest thing was that, among the three canvases, there were two which hadn't the least value. It was something like a lottery. Number 1 went up to no less than 210,000 francs, plus expenses, which created a general dumbfoundedness — all the

more so since the buyer was recognized as the agent of one of the great American collectors.

"This acted as a whiplash to start things off. Number 2 reached 300,000 francs. But it was understandable because it was still the same buyer. Obviously he had decided to corner all three pictures and thus make sure of getting the real one.

"This cost him dear. On the Rue Drouot they aren't given to showing much consideration for each other. They realized that at these prices the American was going to bring off, all in all, a pretty fair bargain. They fought back. Two of the pictures were absolutely valueless. He had to have all three, at no matter what price.

"The bidding became dizzy. The third picture soared on to 400,000 francs, to half a million, on past that crucial point, and up finally to 700,000. The American's agent got it, but he was dripping sweat. The three canvases, only one of which was worth a sou, had cost him one million, two hundred and ten thousand francs!"

"And did they finally discover which of the three was authentic?"

"Not in the least. The three Rembrandts are hanging side by side, at this very moment, in the private gallery of a rich New Yorker, who's more than a little proud of his treasure."

"So the mystery is still a total mystery?"

"Save for two persons . . ."

"Who?"

"First off, of course, the man who created the mystery. Then myself . . ."

"You saw the pictures?"

"No. All I did was have those photographs made which you're holding."

I looked again at the identical signatures. "Show me which is the real one."

* * *

Joseph Leborgne pulled closer to his armchair the little table with the pot of his revolting Chinese jam, made from God knows what strange herbs. He lit another of his rose-tipped cigarettes, savoring the warmth of the electric radiator.

"There isn't any real one," he said leisurely. "Each of those three pictures is as thorough a fake as the other."

And as I gaped, he went on: "Imagine a man who has decided to bring off one great stroke. He's only a small-scale broker; he wants to net a million in one coup.

"He's not afraid of putting over a fake, and one fine day he has the Rembrandt in question manufactured for him. Or rather he has three of them manufactured at once. He

wants them strictly identical.

"He shows them to no one. He merely talks about them — or rather, about it. He exhibits one of the pictures to a few intimates in the half-light of his closet.

"Thus he creates the legend of an exceedingly rare Rembrandt *which is not for sale.* People talk about it, precisely because it is not for sale. Wahl even goes so far as to refuse to show it to connoisseurs who hunt him out.

"Time passes. The picture has, in a way, come to life through these hundreds of conversations.

"Wahl announces that he has consented at last to sell it for a dowry for his daughter. But he groans. There is death in his soul. The dangerous hour has struck. For the experts are going to have a field-day with this unknown canvas. Can they fail to recognize that it's a fake?

"Wahl forestalls these accusations. He himself drags in, not one, but two fakes. So that the question presented to the experts is no longer, 'Is this picture genuine?', but '*Which of these pictures* is the Rembrandt?'

"The experts fell for it. All of them. And it's only human; they were bound to fall. They took up arms for number 1, for number 2 — yes, even for number 3, which had, after all, its few champions."

Do you like your crime stories subtle? Here's one that is extremely so — with its subtlety not revealed until the final moment.

"The Verdict" is a brilliant character study, beautifully written, by one of England's best-known novelists who achieved an international reputation more than a quarter of a century ago with his famous book, NOCTURNE.

Eavesdrop on three gossiping English ladies — the cat, the mouse, and the mother hen — as they eat lunch at their club and talk about — murder . . .

THE VERDICT

by FRANK SWINNERTON

I WAS late, that day, for lunch. My excuse was good, for George, my husband, had caught a chill, and I always worry over his doubtful lung; but what really delayed me was a sickness of horror at the morning's news about Muriel Santoval. That news was appalling. I shrank from meeting two women to whom it would be merely a matter for excited curiosity.

We always lunched at our club. Agnes, by this time a complete country mouse, escaped once a month from her antediluvian vicar to pick up crumbs of priceless gossip. The club's potato soup and raw cutlets, which she washed down with a dreadful sweet white wine, made her feel adventurously gay. She had grown ignorant and avid, very unlike the jolly rattlepate of girlhood, and already brought from her vicarage an aura of mothballs.

I speak harshly, because present distastes make old enthusiasms seem so bogus, and if you can't believe in your own past sagacity you have nowhere to put your feet. I am fond of Agnes. But I don't respect her. In another ten years she will be a fat old woman with a flabby white face. Clara, my sister, is different. George says bluntly that she is superficial and malicious, which is not true; but when I see her with Agnes I resent her too justifiable amusement at our old friend. She feeds her with slightly scandalous news. Agnes gapes. Clara jumps to deliver spice. Then Agnes looks down her nose. Clara, of course, is enchanted. I daren't protest; her line is: "Agnes is a red flannel petticoat to my tongue. She makes me irresistible." I object: "Irresponsible." Clara answers: "Not at all. I lift her high above every tabby in Stuck-in-the-Mud."

I was sick at heart over Muriel. They, I immediately saw, were deep in her tragic story. Their heads, over

the luncheon table, were conspiratorially close. Their faces were long with the relish of pretended grief. Clara had known Muriel very slightly; Agnes not at all; an ideal state of affairs for Clara, whose invention developed wings. I almost ran away again, intending to telephone an excuse for not joining them. Clara, however, saw me: she is one of those people who are never too immersed in a conversation to miss a face anywhere in the room. She waved smiling, complacently. I knew that she had recognized the dress I wore. Her own, which must have made poor Agnes stare moonily with envy, was new.

There being no escape, I marched up as boldly as I could. Ordinarily I'm not conspicuous; Clara would make *anybody* feel that her hands were bony and her feet enormous; she has those rather globular greeny-blue eyes that express remorseless ridicule, especially of those she loves. Today they were cast aloft in triumphant sorrow.

"We were just speaking —" she sighed. "Of course it was an accident?"

"Of course," said I.

"People will say it wasn't. Blast people." She was quite sincere.

"*We* shan't," I said.

"Poor woman!" exclaimed Agnes. "When she'd got everything to live for. I'd no idea you both knew her so well."

"Oh, Grace knew her better than I did," corrected Clara, quickly. I saw the flick of her glance. She'd been embroidering. "Grace, what will happen to *him?* I mean, it's absolute tragedy."

"Yes," I agreed. I didn't want to talk about it.

"Poor man!" murmured Agnes. "One feels so . . . As if one would like, somehow, to comfort him."

"Come off it, Aggie." Agnes's tone had been too saccharine for even Clara to enjoy in silence. "Nobody ever held Wilfred's hand. Except Muriel. Poor Muriel! She stuck by him all right. It was wonderful. All the same, he's had frightful bad luck. What *will* he do, Grace?"

I had no idea what Wilfred would do. I no longer imagined myself capable of penetrating that extraordinary — that *hooded* — mind. At one time I had been half in love with him — indeed, in some moods, I wondered after my marriage whether George had cut in upon a great romance or caught me on the inevitable rebound. George had been a good bargain.

Muriel and I were fellow-students at the R.A.D.A. I had no gift; she was a natural actress. It didn't matter what part she played; in the wings and in secret she played all

parts in any show. Afterwards, for my entertainment, she would go through the play in miniature, with just the exact, damnable twist of burlesque which turned one's serious tears to weeping laughter. And she was not only clever; she was good and kind. An extraordinary creature. Seeing that I was much too terrified to do myself justice, she spread a sort of many-coloured mantle over me, a mantle of fun, encouragement, stern rebuke, and diversion, from under which I saw the audience as no more than a collection of fond parents and no less than an assembly of gods. She herself gaily treated them as a concourse of small birds, to be fed with scraps from her genius.

I should have been too timid in those days to seek her friendship. It was given to me, not carelessly, but with an attentive wealth which I remember now to an accompaniment of catching breath. She was rather taller than I, and darker. Instead of my broad cheekbones and emphatic teeth she had a profile that made young men quarrel as to whether her nose was perfect or a sixteenth of an inch too short for perfection. Her mouth was beautiful; in repose quietly divine, in animation so merry that I never knew anybody who could resist it. I once, later on, after their marriage, saw Wilfred staring at her as she smiled, saw a smile start to his rigid face, and heard him groan. I didn't know why he groaned. I don't, now. Perhaps from despair of ever conquering her sun-illumined spirit.

Thereafter my lot was to play small parts in repertory; hers to walk straight into high comedy, first as an ingenue whose ridiculous speeches — I remember one of them, "I'm only a straight, clean young English gairl" — she somehow subdued into acceptability, and then, by degrees, to Juliet, Beatrice, and less noteworthy modern heroines. She was a star at eight-and-twenty. Within a year of her greatest success she married Wilfred Roose. George and I, not long married, went to the wedding, at St. Martin's in the Fields; and George, always suspicious of my feeling for Wilfred, was protective. He almost called me "little woman." He was afraid I should break down, whereas I saw the bride's radiance with joy and the bridegroom's perfections with calm. Dear George; they say he's a grand advocate, but I always see him as full of heart as a cauliflower, with a stiff upper lip and the soul of a gent.

Muriel left the stage. We never knew why. There was no child, and her popularity was terrific. I think Wilfred was as jealous as a grandee. I didn't see her, then, until the

scandal burst. It was of the scandal, naturally, that Clara now talked into the receptive ear of Agnes.

"You see it's not so common for a pukka sahib to be accused of murdering an old woman," she said. "Pukka sahibs don't murder; they pay. Murders are committed for money or respectability."

"Or revenge," twittered Agnes. Oh, there was no doubt that she was on tiptoe. But Clara pursed her lips.

"Very few. This is a cold climate. In Wilfred's case one felt revenge was something he'd never heard of. We were indignant, ourselves, weren't we, Grace!"

I didn't answer. It was painful to me to hear that tone of detached gloating.

"Well, he *didn't* do it!" cried Agnes, eagerly. The wine had mottled her broad white cheeks. She hung, round-shouldered, over the table.

"Touch and go, darling. The prosecution was horrible. It raked into his whole life. My dear, lurid! But I always thought him *much* too pukka . . ."

My mind had gone back, not to the shocking story, of which not every detail had been printed, but to my sensations, and a series of dissolving pictures. Clara said:

"Grace was there every day. George was junior counsel for Wilfred."

"How thrilling!"

"I went because of Muriel," I said.

"And Wilfred, of course," added my sister. "Not *just* for excitement."

I said nothing. I was remembering. George had told me that the defence were on tenterhooks about several things that didn't come out. Murgatroyd, who led, had wanted to plead guilty but insane, to get Wilfred fifteen years at Broadmoor. But the letters were too sane; so he was ready for the worst. George said Wilfred was a natural killer who ought to be destroyed before he murdered Muriel. A horrible thought! I saw the whole scene — Wilfred, allowed a seat, sitting rigidly in the dock; Muriel, day after day, sitting near the front of the court, absolutely calm, absolutely confident, smiling at him as he was brought in and taken away, her smile like a benison.

"She was marvellous!" declared my sister. "The jury looked at *her*. They said 'Not nobody what was married to such a lydy couldn't possibly have done a ole girl in.' "

The jury couldn't have been like that at all, needless to say. No jury could have been; but this one was mixed, and very anxious. It was true that it looked affectionately at Muriel. She never once showed the smallest faltering. She saw nobody. She said nothing. She sat unflinchingly through the vilest revelations

and even through a reading of that old woman's worst insinuations against her. The trial took a week; and the strain was frightful. I had never realized before why judges are said to cry at sentencing a man to death. There was a ghastly sense of fascinating repugnance. There was this superbly handsome, inscrutable man, who in my experience had always shown absolute self-control, accused of killing a rich woman, fifteen years older than himself, who had been his mistress. She had threatened the most revolting disclosures — which were made in court. And she had been battered by a great brass candlestick until she was unrecognizable.

"But what I can't understand," breathed Agnes (the ideal listener for Clara, because she feeds my sister with all the right cues), "is why the police ever *arrested* him —"

"Ah, well," answered Clara. "They found burnt letters. And they *weren't* burnt, if you know what I mean. Surely you remember?"

"It must have been when Sebastian and I went to Jamaica," sighed Agnes. "To think I missed it all!"

"Our poor clergy!" exclaimed Clara. "And the wicked old thing had kept his letters, and copies of her own, in a box at the bank. What a hag! Eh, Grace?"

"I don't know," said I.

"But you were *there*." Agnes looked at me with a new and hungry admiration. "Fancy *seeing* it all!"

"I was very upset. It was like a nightmare."

"How wonderful of Muriel to believe in him!"

"She was crazy about him!" interrupted Clara. Yes, that had been true when they married. He had intense magnetism. I wondered if it lasted. "The papers were full of her. They described how she took her place every day, divinely serene, and how she looked up with shining eyes and a loving smile when he was brought into the dock. Everybody waited for it. They said you could *hear* the sigh —"

"Rubbish!" I cried, impatiently. "Muriel didn't give a show at all. She was loyal. He was her husband —"

"Would *you* do it, if *George* —" begged Agnes.

Clara laughed; it really was a malicious laugh, a witch's cackle. She said:

"Poor old George would never have the courage to crack a skull."

So I knew that his dislike of her was reciprocated.

"I live in hopes," said I.

"Oh, no; too dangerous!" said Clara. "Besides, that was the biggest part Muriel ever had. Imagine, every eye on her! Priceless advertisement."

"You don't think she really —"

"Clara wasn't there," I said. "She only pretends that Muriel saw loyalty as a great stunt. Don't you see, if she hadn't turned up when the evidence was all against him it would have had a frightful effect. She saved him. It was literally she who got him the verdict. Even so, the jury were away three hours."

"How did they look when they —"

"Exhausted. Everybody was exhausted."

"And then, 'Not guilty'?"

"And then, 'Not guilty'!"

"Cheering?"

"No. Dead silence. Then a bit of a bustle. George almost fainted; Murgatroyd turned to Muriel and shook her hand, I remember."

"How did she look? Happy? Smiling? Did she cry?"

I said nothing. Agnes asked:

"And then they went away together?"

"I don't know," said I.

"He went out East," said Clara.

"And she?"

"Disappeared."

"It's a year ago." Agnes sighed. "Must be, if I was in Jamaica. Has he been back long?"

"I haven't seen him since that day," said I.

"I was just wondering. You know. I mean, driving her car at night into the river."

Fortunately Clara had a moment's generosity.

"Don't forget she was cracked about him," she protested. "Besides, she was returning to the stage next month."

"Was she?" I was startled. How carefully Muriel must have planned it! Or how overwhelming the impulse must have been! "I didn't know that."

Clara's eyes goggled at me. She was triumphant. She was saying, in effect: "Yes, darling. There are so many things you don't know."

Quite true. But there are some things I do know. I would never tell them to Clara. One, which George had dropped the previous day, was that after a year's absence Wilfred was due home this week. The other, which I have never told anybody until now, is that when the verdict was given I stared, not, as others were doing, at the foreman of the jury or at Wilfred or the Judge, but at Muriel. I was three feet away, almost facing her. I can't be mistaken. This was really why she never spoke to me again. She had extraordinary self-command. In that fatal instant, however, I saw her jaw drop in amazement. She grew pale as death. The expression in her eyes was one of black consternation.

In our March 1943 issue we recalled from the past the first Correspondence-School Detective in mystery fiction — Philo Gubb, created by Ellis Parker Butler. Here is today's model of the Correspondence-School sleuth — P. Moran.

If you have read INQUEST *or* TINSLEY'S BONES, *you will welcome any short story by the gifted Percival Wilde. But "P. Moran, Shadow" is more than any short story — it is that rara avis of detective literature, the tale of a comic detective. Read hearty!*

Published here for the first time anywhere.

P. MORAN, SHADOW

by PERCIVAL WILDE

From: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, South Kingston, New York,
To: Operative P. Moran, c/o Mr. R. B. McRae, Surrey, Conn.

. . . If you have studied the foregoing lesson carefully, you now realize that shadowing is one of the most important accomplishments of the full-fledged detective. You must study your man. You must familiarize yourself with his peculiarities, remembering how the Italian criminal, for example, differs from others. You must study yourself, dressing so quietly and so inconspicuously that you will always seem to melt into a crowd.

If you think you have mastered everything in this lesson, shadow one of your friends or relatives, first asking his permission, and make a complete record of his actions during an evening.

J. J. O'B.

P.S. Please buy a dictionary, and if any word you use when writing me is longer than one syllable, look up its spelling. Should you use your favorite word, "fingerprince," when applying for a job, you would not get the job.

J. J. O'B.

From: Operative P. Moran, c/o Mr. R. B. McRae, Surrey, Conn.,
To: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, South Kingston, New York.

Well, I bought a dictionery, to look up spellings, like you said, and I couldn't shadow my relatives, because they live in Pawtucket, which is too far away, so I shadowed a Italian, and here's what happened.

The only Italian in this town is Tony, the cobbler, and he's got nine children, not counting the twins, and he never goes out nights. So I went to Torrington Thursday night, that

being my night off, and the missus says, "Peter, you may use the coop if you don't burn more than five gallons."

I didn't wear my chauffeur's uniform because I would not have been dressing so quietly and inconspicuously in my uniform.

I drove to Torrington, and around the center square where Cliff Adams, which is short for "Clifford," was directing traffic, and I said, "Hello, Cliff," and he said, "Hello, Pete," and I drove down a side street, and I parked the coop. It was a funny coincidence, because right in back of where I parked the coop was Cliff Adams' car where he parked it while he was on duty, and I knew it was Cliff Adams' car partly because I knew his old boat when I saw it, and partly because I knew Cliff's license number, which is X 3, which is short and easy to remember, like they are in Connecticut where you can have a short plate with Z 1 or D 2 or maybe your initials if you have the drag. So when I saw the license plate on Cliff Adams' car, I knew it was Cliff Adams' car.

And then I walked around shadowing, and I would have melted into the crowd only there wasn't any crowd, and I hadn't walked more than a block or two when I saw two Italians talking Italian and I ducked in a alley and shadowed them. I could hear what they were saying all right, but it was Italian and I couldn't understand them. And soon they seperated, and one Italian walked back to the place where he had parked his car, which was on East Main Street, and he got in and drove off, and I couldn't get the number of the license because I forgot until it was too late.

So I walked back to the place where he had been talking Italian with the other Italian, and he wasn't there, but by and by he came out of a store and started walking, and I shadowed him along Franklin Street to East Albert Street, and then along Franklin Street some more until he began to get out near the country near half a mile, I guess.

And then he got on to it, and he started to run, and I ran after him, and he stopped and said, "Vy are you following me?"

He didn't say "Why?" He said "Vy."

I said, "Chief's orders," and I flashed a badje I bought in a drug store, and it says "G Man" on bottom and "Junior" on top, but I didn't let him see the top.

He took one look, and he said, "Mine gat!"

I said, "Give it to me."

He said, "Vot I shall give it to you?"

"What you said. The gat."

He looked at me funny, and he said, "I don't ferstay. I ain't got no gat."

So I frisked him, and he was telling the truth, because all he had in his pockets was hundreds of cigarettes.

He said, "You see?" and he looked around, and there was nobody in sight, and he said, "Please, Mr. Officer, maybe we could fix it up."

I said, "What do you mean?"

"Like this."

He shook hands with me, and I felt something in the palm of my hand, and it felt like folding money, so I lit a match and looked at it, and it was a twenty-case note, and you could have knocked me flat.

He said, "Okey dokey, hey?" and "If you want more, chust come in and see me some time."

"Where are you going now?" I said, and he said, "Back to the store. I chust went out for a little walk," and I said, "If you don't mind, I will shadow you back to the store," and he said "Yah wole," and he did it, and I did it, and then I went home in the coop.

And next Thursday night, which is my night off, I am going to shadow some more Italians, because I like shadowing Italians.

From: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, South Kingston, New York,
To: Operative P. Moran, c/o Mr. R. B. McRae, Surrey, Conn.

Please be advised that you are liable to get into trouble flashing a "badje." Accepting money makes you an accomplice if a crime is contemplated. You have no right to shadow anyone — unless it is a friend or a relative — and then only with their permission. You are merely a student, not a full-fledged detective. J. J. O'B.

From: Operative P. Moran, c/o Mr. R. B. McRae, Surrey, Conn.
To: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, South Kingston, New York.

Well, the boss was mad, too.

When I called for him at the Amenia railroad station to meet the six fourteen, I told him, "Boss, I am in trouble," and he said, "What is it this time, Peter?"

So I made a clean breast of it, like I always do, and I told him what you wrote while he was sitting next to me while I was driving him home along U. S. 343.

He said, "Peter, this is serious," and he stuck out his jaw just like he did the time he said a bear got loose in Wall Street.

"Yes, sir."

"Peter, I want you to go to Torrington tonight, and I don't want

you to come back until you've fixed things up with that storekeeper."

I said, "Excuse me, Mr. McRae, I can't go to Torrington tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because I have got to drive you and Mrs. McRae to the Simmons dance."

He stuck his jaw out like he did before, and he said, "Peter, we will get along without a chauffeur tonight. We will go in the station wagon, and I will drive myself, and you can go to Torrington in the coop."

I said, "Yes, sir."

He said, "I want you to fix things right, or else."

I knew what he meant when he said "or else," so I said, "Yes, sir," and "I will fix things right."

So I drove to Torrington again, and I passed Cliff Adams, and I said "Hello, Cliff," and he said, "Hello, Pete," and I parked in the same place as before, just in front of Cliff Adams' car, which was where he had parked it, and I walked around until I found the store, and I went in.

I remember the lesson on observation, and now I will tell you what I observed.

It was a small store, and it said "Sporting Goods, Cigarettes, and Tobacco," outside, and there was a counter down one side inside, and some shelves down the other side inside. In back were some table and chairs where they had been drinking strawberry ice-cream soda. I could deduct what they had been drinking, because there was some left in the glasses.

Standing at the counter were a boy and two girls.

In back of the counter was the same Italian I shadowed last Thursday.

At the end of the counter was another girl.

So there were two men and three girls in the store, and I will describe them.

The Italian was about 45 and medium.

The boy was about 19 and medium.

One of the girls was about 18 and dark.

The other girl was about 18 and dark.

The girl at the end of the counter was about 21, and she was a gorjous blond. She had blue eyes and long lashes and beautiful teeth. She was wearing tricky shoes, and silk stockings, though you had to look close to see they were stockings, because their color was the same as her skin. She was also wearing bangles with big diamonds in them. She was wearing three on one arm, and four on the other.

The other customers were talking, but she was just leaning on the counter, picking her teeth in a refined manner.

Just as I came in, I heard one of the girls in front of the counter say, "Reefers, reefers, we want reefers."

The Italian behind the counter gave her some cigarettes, which I thought was funny when it was reefers she wanted, and then he saw me, and he snatched the cigarettes back, and said, "In this store we don't sell nothing except soft drinks and sporting goods," and then he said to me, "Hello, mine friend."

I said, "Hello, cutie," because I was talking to the gorjous blond, "Where have you been all my life?"

She gave me a dirty look, but the Italian took her arm, and said, "No, no, Mable. You must be nice to him because he is mine goot friend," and he said to me, "She wants I should interduce her to you proper, but I can't because you ain't never told me your name."

So I told him my name, which is Pete Moran, and he said, "Mable, this is mine goot friend, Pete," and Mable said, "Any friend of Owgust is a friend of mine. Put it there, Pete."

I shook hands with her, and I said, "Owgust, I got to talk to you. Did you mean it when you said we were friends?"

"Did I mean it? Sure ve is friends."

He said "Shoo!" to the two girls and the boy, and they beat it out of the store, and then he shook hands with me again like before, and this time it's a ten-case note.

I said, "Owgust, I am serious. Is everything all right between us?"

He laughed. "Vot a question. Ridiculous. Pete, ve are like two hands vit but a single glove. Hear that, Mable?"

Mable was a smart girl. She said, "Got you the first time, Gus," and then she said quick in Italian, "Eevlay isthay unkpay ootay eemay."

I remembered every word because her voice was so low and beautiful.

Owgust said, "Yah wole," like he did the other night, and he turned around and started fixing up the shelves, and Mable, who was standing near me, leaned up against my shoulder in a friendly way, and I could smell her perfume, and it was lovely.

I was feeling good because everything was all right, so I reached down, and there was her little hand, and I squeezed it, and she squeezed back, and gave me a beautiful smile.

I said, "Mable, do you like Torrington?"

She shifted the toothpick she was chewing to the other side of her face, and she said, "I would like it better

if I could meet some swell fellows like you."

I gave her hand another squeeze. "Mable, I've got to report back to the boss now, but Thursday night is my night off."

"That's a funny coincidence, Pete, because Thursday night is my night off, too."

"Mable, would you like to go for a little ride with me Thursday night?"

"And see the night life of Torrington? I would love it dearly."

So we arranged to meet on Church Street, outside the high school that is on Church Street, and I beat it home, and I waited in the garage until the boss came in, and when he said, "Well, Peter, is everything all right?" I said, "Sure thing, boss," and he said, "Well, I am certainly glad to hear that, because I would have fired you if it wasn't."

But I didn't ask Owgust's permission to shadow him because you forgot he gave me his permission the first night I did it. But if you are set on it, I will ask him next Thursday night if his store is open after I leave Mable.

TELEGRAM.
PETER MORAN, C/O MR. R. B. McRAE, SURREY, CONN.
YOUR WIFE IS IN DANGER STOP REEFERS ARE MARIHUANA CIGARETTES STOP WIRE ME ADDRESS AT WHICH OWGUST IS OPERATING AND YOU WILL RECEIVE PART OF REWARD.

CHIEF INSPECTOR, ACME INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL.

From: Operative P. Moran,
To: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, West Kingston, New York.

Well, if you hadn't said, "Your wife is in danger," which is ridiculous because I never had a wife, your telegram would have reached me sooner. The telegraph operator telephoned from Lakeville she had a telegram for me, but I was out driving Mrs. McRae to the A. & P. store, and Rosie, the maid, said she would take the telegram, but the operator wouldn't give it to her because it was about my wife and personal. So Rosie got mad, because she thinks I flirt with her, though I don't mean anything by it, and a married man hadn't ought to do that, and she forgot to tell me to call Lakeville, and the telegram didn't come until the boss brought it to me this morning after I kept my date with Mable last night.

The boss read the telegram, and he said even if you said "wife," you meant "life," but I can't understand why you didn't say "life" if that was what you meant.

Well, I drove over to Torrington,

and I observed that Cliff Adams was directing traffic in the center square, and talking to a motor cop, and I said, "Hello, Cliff," and he said, "Hello, Pete," and then I drove on to the high school which is at the corner of Church Street and Prospect Street.

There wasn't any sign of Mable, but that didn't bother me any because I was half an hour ahead of time, and I didn't expect her so soon.

So I drove on to Water Street, and around the center square again, and up Franklin Street, and to Owgust's store, and I drove along Owgust's street slow so I could look in, and I observed Owgust, and he was talking with a couple of Italians, and they had their heads close together over the counter, and I didn't see Mable.

I deducted she was upstairs, putting on her glad rags. I mean if she lived there.

I drove along the street slow, and near the end of the street I observed a big, shiny car, and it looked funny to me, and I didn't know what was funny about it, so I drove around the corner to East Main Street, and stopped and walked back and looked again. And I observed that the funny thing was that it had Cliff Adams' license plates on it, which are X 3 Connecticut.

I knew Cliff hadn't bought a new car, because if he had he would have stopped me and bragged about it when I drove past him twice, and besides Cliff is honest, just like me, and it would take more than he could save out of his pay to buy a car like that, and if he had the coin he wouldn't buy a car, because he would buy the clapboard house on Migeon Avenue which his missus has been after him to buy only he can't afford it.

I observed the license plates were clean, and when I looked close I observed the brackets had dust on them all except a couple of inches on each side of the plates. So I deducted that the plates had no business on that car, which had had other plates from some state where the plates are longer than they are in Connecticut when it came to Torrington, and somebody had swiped Cliff's plates to play a dirty joke on him.

Whoever tightened the wing nuts which fastened the plates did a bum job, because they weren't tight at all; so I took off the back plate and put it in my inside breast pocket to give it back to Cliff. I would have taken off the front plate, too, but I observed the two Italians coming out of the store, so I ducked in an alley to let them go by.

But they didn't go by.

They got in the car quick, and they gave it the gas, and they passed me so quick that I couldn't yell at them they were making a mistake, and they hadn't ought to play dirty jokes on a good cop like Cliff.

So I walked back to the coop and got in, and I would have gone back to the center square to give Cliff one of his plates anyhow, only when I looked at my watch it was late, and I went straight to the high school.

Mable was waiting on Church Street just like she promised, and I could see her gorjous blond hair in the light of my headlamps long before I was near enough to recognize her.

"Hello," I said.

She said, "Hello, big boy."

"Been waiting long, cutie?"

"It seemed long, honey," she came back snappy.

I opened the door, and she jumped right in. I observed her eyes were blue, and she was wearing a dress which russeled, and it had some fir at the neck.

I turned the bus around, and we started down Prospect Street real slow.

She had a lot of perfume on her, and it smelled sweet, and I said, "Gee, Mable, you smell sweet."

She said, "The name of my perfume is dangerous night."

I said, "Is it?"

She said, "What did you think it was?"

"It smelled to me like lilly of the valet."

She said, "No, they wouldn't name a perfume after a flower these days."

I said, "Gee, I didn't know that," and then I said, "Gee, cutie, you look swell."

She said, "Gee," and then she laughed, and said, "Gee, I forgot you're a regular G man. Let me see your badje."

Well, I hadn't forgotten what you wrote, and I said, "No, Mable, I cannot flash that there badje any more."

"Why can't you flash it? Have you been fired?"

She was so sweet and pretty I wouldn't lie to her. "No, Mable," I said. "I haven't been fired, though I was afraid the Chief Inspector was going to expel me."

"Expel you, Pete? What do you mean by that?"

I didn't try to explain because I knew she wouldn't understand.

But she cuddled up to me close, and she said, "If we are going to be friends, we mustn't have secrets from each other. Is this your badje in your pocket?"

She had put her hand right against my breast pocket, but I pushed it away. "No, Mable, this isn't my

badje. This is a plate."

"A plate? What kind of a plate?"

"This is a police plate," I said. "They come small in Connecticut," and that seemed to hush her up, because she just said, "Oh," like that, and then she said, "I see," and then she said, "I guess Owgust was right after all."

I said, "What was he right about?"

"Just a matter of business."

Well, I couldn't make head or tail out of that, and I said, "Mable, have you lived in Torrington long?"

She pulled away from me quick like she was insulted. "Do I look like a girl that would live in this burg long? I came up from the big city less than a week ago."

"Why did you come up, cutie?"

"Because Owgust phoned for me, of course."

We were passing a street lamp, and I could see she was looking at me hard. "Pete, honest, I hate to do it. Tell me the truth: are you or aren't you a G man?"

I thought that one over because I didn't want to get you mad again, and finally I said, "Mable, I can't answer that question without the permission of the Chief Inspector."

"Then that settles it," she said, and her voice was hard.

"Settles what?"

"That you're my new boy friend, and we're going to go for a ride together. Pete, honey, where were you planning to take me?"

I had saved money out of my last month's wages, and besides Owgust had slipped me thirty bucks, so I had nearly thirty-two dollars in my pocket. "How would you like to go to some roadhouse where we can have a couple of drinks and dance?"

She said "No," and I said "No?"

"No. I am wearing my walking shoes tonight, and I don't like to dance in my walking shoes, because there's a corn on my little toe that hurts like nobody's business."

So I said, "Sometimes I get corns, too, when I am breaking in new shoes. Mable, what would you like to do?"

She snuggled up to me real close. "There's a moon tonight."

I had noticed that myself while coming across U. S. 4.

She acted coy like. "Pete, honey, let's drive around a while, and then let's park somewhere where we can look at the moon for hours and hours!"

That sounded swell to me, and I said, "Mable, cutie, do you prefer any preticular preference?"

"Yes, honey: the north shore of Besse's Pond. You go out on East Main Street to Torringford Avenue, and then you turn left on Torringford Avenue when you see the pond."

I said, "For a girl that hasn't been in Torrington a week, you know your way about real good."

She pulled away a little, and stared at me, and then she squeezed my arm and said, "After I made this date with you, honey, I asked one of my girl friends where there was a good place to park, and she said that was where she always did it."

The nurse says I can't write any more now, because I got to sleep, but she will mail this for me, and then I can dream how pretty Mable looked in the moonlight at the north end of Besse's Pond.

TELEGRAM.
PETER MORAN, C/O MR. R. B. McRAE, SURREY, CONN.
HAVE HAD NO REPLY TO MY TELEGRAM STOP GIVE ME FULL INFORMATION AND I WILL SPLIT THE REWARD WITH YOU STOP FIFTY WORD REPLY IS PREPAID.
CHIEF INSPECTOR, ACME INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL.

From: Operative P. Moran, Torrington General Hospital, Torrington, Conn.,

To: Chief Inspector, Acme International Detective Correspondence School, West Kingston, New York.

Well, I had a good sleep, and when I woke up the first thing I remembered I forgot was your telegram in which you wrote "Your wife is in danger," and which I didn't take serious because I didn't receive it until the boss brought it to me this morning at the hospital. And now he has brought your second telegram, and he has told me to say that if there is a reward, I will get my share of it, never fear, so you needn't worry, though I didn't know there was any contest going on with Marihuana Cigarettes like there has been with all the other kinds, and I didn't even know I was entered in it.

Well, we didn't drive much longer after Mable said she wanted to go to Besse's Pond, because we would have burned more than five gallons of gas, and I would have had to buy some myself. So we turned around, and we drove around the center square again, because almost anywhere you drive in Torrington, you got to drive around the center square; and Cliff Adams was still on duty, though the motor-cycle cop was gone, and I said, "Hello, Cliff," and he said, "Hello, Pete," and Mable was resting her head against my shoulder, and I felt her stiffen.

She said, "Is he a friend of yours?" and I said, "Certainly. He is a good cop," and she said, "Oh," but I didn't stop to give Cliff his license plate because he would have kidded me about Mable.

So we went out East Main Street to Torringford Avenue, and we turned left on it when we saw the pond, and we parked.

It was a hot night, but there was a moon, and I could see some benches near the pond, so I said, "Mable, wouldn't you like to get out and sit on some of those benches?"

She said, "Pete, honey, I was just going to suggest it."

So we got out, and I locked the coop, and we walked right up to the edge of the pond, and she sat on one of the benches, and I sat on the same one. And we looked at the moonlight reflected in the water, and I guess I got pretty mushy, because when they brought me here somebody said, "Good Heavens! Will you look at the wound on his face!" and when they washed it, it turned out to be nothing but lipstick.

Mable said a lot of things, and I don't remember what they were; and I said a lot of things, and I guess she doesn't remember them either. But we hadn't been sitting there more than five or ten minutes or so when I observed two men walking, and they walked right up to us and one of them said, "As I live, my own friend Mable!"

Mable said, "Hello, boys! What a funny coincidence meeting you here," and she interduced one of them to me, and his name was Monk, and the other one said his name was Mr. Smith, so she interduced him to me, also, and they sat right down on the bench with us.

I didn't like that at all, and I guess Mable knew it, because she said, "Pete, honey, you don't mind if they sit and pass the time of day. They are very dear friends," and Mr. Smith says "Sure," and he spits in the water.

I was thinking, and I says, "This here is a funny coincidence, because Monk and Mr. Smith are two of Owgust's customers."

Mr. Smith jumps up. "How did you know that?"

"I observed you talking with him tonight."

"So what?" he says, real nasty, and I says, "Nothing, only it says in Lesson Two it pays to be observing."

By and by Mable says, "This is a fine place, boys."

I says, "Yes. It is called Besse's Pond."

Mable says, "We're all agreed, aren't we?" and she gives a funny laugh.

Monk says, "How deep is it?"

I says, "Not very deep. You can wade nearly all the way across."

Monk says, "It ain't deep enough," and he looks at Mr. Smith, and Mr. Smith shakes his head mournful, and

says, "No, it ain't. You should have found out about it first."

I says, "What do you care if the water ain't deep?"

Mable laughs. "Pete, honey, don't you know that the moon don't reflect good excepting in deep water?"

I says, "No, I didn't know that," because I never heard that before, and I says, "If you are looking for a lake that is real deep, there's Bantam Lake, which is near Litchfield."

Monk says, "Did you hear that, Mr. Smith?" and Mr. Smith says, "Sure, but where the hell is Bantam Lake?"

I wouldn't stand for that. I says, "Mr. Smith, I wish you wouldn't swear in the presence of a lady, and Bantam Lake is only 11 or 13 miles from here, and I will direct you."

Mable claps her hands. "Oh, won't that be fun? Can we all four squeeze in Pete's car?"

Monk says "No," though I didn't mean to go along. I only meant to direct them; and he says, "We won't go in Pete's car because we don't want to get marks or fingerprints on it," and I thought that was very thoughtful of him, because the missus wouldn't like it if they got marks on the coop; and he says, "I got a little boat of my own. Come on, Pete; come on, Mable."

Well, we walked over, and there was a shiny car like the big, shiny one I observed before, and I guessed it was the same, though I couldn't be sure because I was walking between Monk and Mr. Smith, and I didn't have a chance to go around in back and see if the license plate which wasn't there was the same one as the one I had in my inside breast pocket.

Mable got in, and I was going to sit next to her, but Monk says, "You got to direct, Pete. Sit next to me," so I sat next to him in the front seat, and Mr. Smith got in back with Mable.

I says, "You don't have to go back on Torringford Avenue. There's a much shorter way."

Mr. Smith says, "The shorter the better. I want to get through," and I says, "Same here. That's what I always say myself."

Well, I showed Monk the short way on Winthrop Street to Main Street, and we went south and around the center square, and there was Cliff Adams, and he was talking to the motor-cycle cop again. I said, "Hello, Cliff," and he said "Hello, Pete," though he was surprised to see me in another car; and I was thinking about Cliff's plate, and he would need it when he went off duty pretty soon, and I had it ready in my hand, and I said, "Here you are, Cliff," and I shied it out so it landed right at his feet.

Mr. Smith, who was sitting in back of me grabbed me by the neck, and says, "Hey, punk, what are you doing?" but Mable pulls him off and says, "It's all right. The cop is one of his friends."

I says, "Sure it's all right, and I wish you wouldn't grab my neck like that because it hurts, and now we will turn south on South Main Street," and then I hear a police siren howling, and Monk steps on the exilerator so sudden that my neck is near broke a second time.

I says, "Don't get excited, Monk. He is not after you, because I am prepared to swear you weren't doing more than twenty miles an hour," but Monk says, "Shut up!" and he says it mean and dirty; and I look in the mirror, and I see Mr. Smith kneeling on the back seat, and stick-a gat out through the glass in the back window.

I says, "Don't shoot!" but he goes "Bang!" and then I hear another "Bang!" and I feel one of those big police bullets hit the car.

I says, "Monk, it's all a mistake!"

"Mistake? For cripes sake, won't somebody croak this punk?"

Mr. Smith is shooting through the window. He says, "I would, but I ain't got no bullets to waste." He keeps right on shooting, and when the gat is empty, he pulls another out of a pocket in the car and shoots with that.

I says, "Mable, crouch down low so you won't get hit."

I look at the speedometer.

It says sixty, and it's going up.

We are going so fast we miss the turn for Litchfield.

I says, "Monk, you should have turned right at the last corner, and if you don't slow up now, you will go right through the traffic light at the corner of Albert Street, which is red."

He screams, "If somebody don't croak him, I'll do it myself!"

Mr. Smith don't answer.

I look back, and Mr. Smith is slumped down in a corner of the seat, and his mouth is open.

The traffic light is red, but Monk only steps on the gas; and then one of those big police bullets hits a front tire, and we go "Blong!" into a tree.

It knocked me out for a couple of seconds, I guess, because when I come to, the street is jammed solid with cars, and it looks like the whole police force is there.

Clifford Adams is looking down at me, where I am laying on the sidewalk, and he says, "Pete, it was mighty clever of you dropping my own license plate at my feet when you passed me. I took one look, and I seen there wasn't no rear plate on that car, so I says to Shorty, 'Go get 'em!' "

I was feeling dizzy, and I didn't say anything.

"Pete, what was you doing in that car?"

Well, Cliff is my friend, even if he doesn't talk good English, and he has got to be put in his place. "Clifford," I says, dignified, "I was shadowing those punks."

Cliff whistles. "How did you get on to them, Pete? Gosh, I never thought you had it in you!"

I tried to stand up, but I couldn't, because there was something funny with one of my legs. "I left the coop at Besse's Pond."

"Right. I will telephone Mr. McRae."

"How is Mable?"

"Okay."

"How is Mr. Smith?"

"Which one is he?"

"The punk who did the shooting."

"Is that Mr. Smith? Well, he's a good Indian."

I didn't let on that at first I thought he was a Italian. I just says, "Oh! And how is Monk?"

"The other guy? He wasn't hurt a bit. We are just going to take him to the station house and massage him."

I says, "Okay," because by then I was beginning to be suspicious of Monk, and he had it coming to him, anyway, for driving through a red light; and I says, "Don't forget his friend, Owgust."

"Who is Owgust?"

It was another guy talking to me, and when I looked at him, he flashed a gold badje. "Who is Owgust?" he says, and he says, "I am from Washington, and I know Monk is connected with the Marihuana racket."

I was feeling very tired, and I wouldn't waste words on him. "My good man," I says, "I am Operative P. Moran, and I will receive you after I have consulted with the Chief Inspector."

And then I guess I passed out again, because I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I was in a bed, and they told me the bed was in a hospital.

The boss was there, and he brought your telegrams, and by and by the missus came, and she says, "Peter, we're all so proud of you!"

So now it's evening, and the boss has just been here with your other telegram, "Please inform all reporters that Operative P. Moran is an honor student at the Acme International Detective Correspondence School," and I think that's mighty nice of you.

And now the day nurse has gone, and the night nurse has just come on duty; and I will close hastily because I observed her like it says in Lesson Two, and I observed she is a gorjous blond.

The story of a "dumb guy" and a "wise guy" and the bottleneck of fate . . .

BOTTLENECK

by HUGH MacNAIR KAHLER

FOR THE time being it suited Skinner fairly well to let Big Ed travel with him. Dumb as he was about everything else, Ed could handle a car like nobody's business, and he had a queer knack, too, of picking out the right roads, almost as if he carried a map inside his thick head. It would be easy enough to get rid of him later on, but meanwhile, out here on the wet fringe of the Everglades, on this empty back road between the brimming canals he didn't add much to the chance of being recognized, and his instinct for finding his way might be important. Skinner had almost forgotten about him, in fact, when the car skidded to a sharp turn eastward.

"What's the big idea, stupe?" Skinner sat up, snarling. "Don't you know you're heading straight back for the main road?"

"Uh-huh," Big Ed said. "That road we was on stops at a big canal, a little ways north. This here's the only one that'll get us over to the highway so's we can use the bridge."

"Mean to say there's only one bridge?" Skinner's voice rose and sharpened. "That's what I get for thinking you could think! Driving a bus so hot it smokes, and you head for a bottleneck where half the bulls in Florida'll be waiting for us!"

"Maybe they won't be." Big Ed's dumbness always looked at the brighter side of things. "Maybe they didn't spot the license number on us. Or if they did, maybe they won't figure we could've got this far north so quick. Anyhow, there's a town a little ways ahead. It's only a kind of wide place in the road but maybe we can switch cars there."

Skinner made an angry, rasping noise in his throat. It always irritated him when a thickhead like Big Ed offered him a suggestion, especially when it was one that Skinner might have to adopt. He got a sour satisfaction, though, out of the thought that if the scheme worked it wouldn't do Big Ed any good. Skinner leaned back, grinning, as he remembered that there hadn't been a chance to split the loot of that plundered Miami poolroom.

The town came in sight. Skinner sat up.

"Stop before you get to the lights."

Big Ed nodded. The car nosed in toward the curb in the deep shadow of a mango tree. Skinner climbed out.

"You wait here, Ed. I'll take a quick gander around and come back."

"Hokay." Big Ed lighted a cigarette and slid down till his head rested on the back of the seat. Skinner grinned. Shaking the big lollop would be easy if there was a loose car in reach. He walked down the street past a row of dejected stores. There were a few cars parked before them, but none of them promised speed enough to justify the risk of trying to steal it. Skinner crossed the street and came back, with no better luck. Just as he was nearing the mango tree, though, a new sedan turned the corner and parked a few steps ahead. Skinner's hopes came to life. He walked on slowly, pretending not to notice the man who was climbing out of the sedan, a fat man in a baggy linen suit. He waddled past Skinner, one hand in the pocket of the wrinkled white coat. Skinner went on into the shadow, turned and darted back, stooping to keep under cover of the car in case the fat man happened to look behind him. His hand reached in eagerly to fumble at the ignition switch. He jerked it back, cursing under his breath. There was a step behind him and he heard Big Ed's husky whisper:

"Locked, huh?"

Skinner didn't bother to answer him. He was watching the fat man, just turning in at one of the lighted doorways, and his wits were working fast. Maybe, after all —

"Look, Skinner. I got an idea. Le's just —"

"Skip it," Skinner said impatiently. "I'm trying to think."

"But listen, will you?" Bid Ed's voice was eager. "All we got to do is —"

"All you got to do is take orders, see? Go on back to the other bus and stay there till I get back."

"But if you'd just lemme tell you —"

"Get moving, sap." Skinner's whisper was flat, ugly, and Big Ed had the habit of obedience. He lifted his shoulders and spread his hands and turned away. Skinner hurried back toward the row of stores. He chuckled under his breath as he came to the one he'd been watching. Talk about a break! A barbershop, with the fat man overflowing the single chair and the baggy linen coat dangling from a peg in the hall!

The barber's scissors waved a welcome. "Only a coupla minutes, mister."

Skinner nodded carelessly. He

took off his coat and hung it up. Even if the barber had been watching him he wouldn't have guessed that Skinner's hand had dipped swiftly into a pocket of the linen coat.

"Rats! Must have left my cigarettes in the car." Skinner put his jacket back on. "Save my seat, buddy. I'll be right back."

He managed to walk slowly past the row of stores. Nobody was anywhere near the sedan when he came to it. Across the street, barely visible in the black shadow under the mango tree, Big Ed was stooping over to fiddle with something at the rear of the other car. Skinner couldn't see what he was doing, but he wasn't curious. Big Ed hadn't seen him coming. There wouldn't be any trouble about leaving him behind.

He slid in behind the wheel and tried the key in the locked switch. It fitted. The engine started at the first pressure on the starter. As he made his turn the headlights gave him a brief glimpse of Big Ed's face, comically blank. Shifting gears, he heard a shout behind him.

"Hi, Skinner! Wait! Wai —"

Skinner laughed as he stepped on the gas. In the windshield mirror he had another glimpse of Big Ed, standing in the middle of the street, waving his arms. Then he had turned the corner. The bottleneck bridge was only five or six miles ahead. Any bulls who might be watching would be looking for a car with a different license number, a car with two men in it.

Every turn of the wheels made Skinner feel a little more comfortably sure of his smartness and his safety. Even when he came to the bridge and found that the draw was lifted he wasn't worried. There were a few cars and trucks strung out in single file ahead of him, but no sign of any bulls. He leaned back and lighted a cigarette. His hands were cupped about the match when somebody came around behind the car, a gun barrel poked through the window and a mild Southern drawl invited him almost amiably to keep 'em up.

Skinner kept them up. He kept them up even after he turned his head and found that the lantern-jawed young state trooper was regarding him with unmistakable good will. He continued to keep them up as, under instruction, he slid out from behind the wheel. Another lean young trooper probed his pockets, withdrawing much money and a gun. Tardily, as steel fastened on his wrist, Skinner found speech, warm and fluent and wholly futile. The two young troopers were polite but stubborn. As he traveled briskly southward in their cheerful company

toward Miami and its skyscraper jail, their talk presently told Skinner why it hadn't done him any good to switch cars. Also, he couldn't help feeling a little sorry about the way he'd treated Big Ed, although penitence wasn't among his habits. He could see, now, that it would have been a lot better if he'd waited and let Big Ed tell him that instead of bothering to switch cars he had just switched license plates.

SERGEANT BOND AND THE HORSE-DEALER

"I once," Sergeant Bond used to relate, "bought a horse of a horse-dealer, warranted sound in all his points. I thought I had got a treasure, but still wished to find out if he had *any* fault. I therefore, when I had paid for him, said to the seller, 'Now, my friend, you have got your money, and I the horse; so that the bargain is closed; but do, like an honest fellow, tell me fairly of any fault that he has.' 'Why, sir,' says he, 'you have dealt with me like a gentleman, and as you ask me to be frank with you, I must tell you that the horse has one fault.' I pricked up my ears: 'What is it, my friend?' 'Why, sir,' says he, 'it is that he will not go into the yard of the Crown Inn, at Uxbridge.' 'Pooh! pooh!' said I, 'if that's all, I'm not likely to put him to the trial, as I have nothing to lead me to the Uxbridge-road.'

"It, however, so happened that I had occasion to go to Uxbridge, and I determined to try if my horse retained his dislike to the yard of the Crown Inn. I accordingly rode up the street until I came opposite to the inn-yard of the Crown. I faced about and seated myself firmly in my stirrups; expecting a plunge from my horse, I struck my spurs into his sides, and pushed him forward into the yard; but what was my surprise to find him enter the yard as quietly as a cow that had just gone in before him. But I was not long in doubt as to what appeared to be the cause in this change of his antipathies, by the landlord coming up to him, and tapping him on the shoulder, 'Ha! Jack,' says he, 'I am glad to see you again; I thought I had lost you!' 'What do you mean, Mr. Landlord?' 'Sir,' says he, 'this horse was stolen from me about six months ago, and I have never seen him since.' 'I did not much relish this piece of information,' rejoined the Sergeant, 'but I could not help laughing at the conceit of the horse-dealer, to prevent me from going to a place where his theft of the horse would be discovered.' "

Curiosities In Deception

NUMBER 1

In this issue we change our department title slightly — from Curiosities in Detection *to* Curiosities in Deception — *but still, as you note, our own favorite C.I.D.*

Just before and just after 1900, one of the popular all-fiction magazines of the day was "The Black Cat." It was a curious periodical — 6" x 9" in size, printed on slick paper, 40-odd pages in bulk, and 5 cents per copy (imagine — a year's subscription for the magnificent sum of 50 cents!). Many famous writers contributed to "The Black Cat," including O. Henry, Jack London, Cleveland Moffett, and others. Today copies in the original wrappers are extremely difficult to find.

Your Editor is fortunate to possess a fairly complete run of this magazine. While browsing through its still-fascinating pages, we came upon a story called "The Gold Goose Scientist," by Harry Irving Greene; and after reading it, we promptly decided to pass it on to you.

It concerns one Pete Norton — confidence-man, bunco-artist, and double-dyed deceiver. Surely Pete Norton is one of our earliest short-story crooks. We found him in the issue of June 1903 — which gives Pete a five-year's head start on O. Henry's more famous gentle grafters, Jeff Peters and Andy Tucker. While Pete Norton's "incunabular" status is interesting historically, we think you'll find his methods even more interesting. Here is a "gorjus" yarn in the grand tradition of Mark Twain, Artemus Ward, and Bret Harte — big names? well, just read Mr. Greene's story! Although more than 40 years old, it's as fresh and diverting a tale of flimflam as contemporaries are producing today.

THE GOLD GOOSE SCIENTIST

by HARRY IRVING GREENE

"NEVER heard of Pete Norton?" drawled old man Pegleg Simpson. "Thort not. Pete was riz down in Coshocton County, Ohier, a good many year ago, him bein' the offspring of old Tuck Norton, who drowndid himself on a speculation of five dollars that he could abide under water for three minutes consecutive. He done it all right, and somethin' extry, but after the buryin', when his widder went around allowin' to collect the money from Jim Fifer, who had bet on t'other side of the proposition, Jim wouldn't loosen hold on the cash. Said he had made the bargain with old Tuck pussonelly, and so long as Tuck seemed satisfied and hadn't dunned him for it he reckoned it wasn't no one else's perticaler business. So that settled *that*, and the widder lost her old man

without gettin' full and adequate compensation. Course there was a pint in Jim's argyment, technicolly speakin', but pussonelly I allers thort he otter given her a couple of dollars, anyway, to ease her sorrer, if not two-fifty.

"Well, old Tuck left behind him, amongst his other wuthless truck, this here young Pete, and he suttenly was the most wuthless yooth that ever lived and had his bein'. The specifications he was built by called for a critter about six foot one way and one foot t'other, and so dern lazy he would let Jenkin's prize ram butt him over the fence rather than take the trouble to climb it — and Pete exceeded his specifications considerable. Didn't do nothin' from early spring to late fall that year but set with his feet histed up and brag about a snow shovelin' contrivance he had figured out which would clear all the roads in the State durin' the winter as slick and clean as a whistle; then, when cold weather come along, he got switched off unto a preparation to attract pertater bugs, allowin' they'd leave their business and come in from twenty miles around to waller in it. Course it would have been a good thing, and the people got interested, but about the time the danderlions was a-bustin' into bloom and our hopes was towerin', he got hold of a book on Nateral Science, and after that he allowed nothin' would appease his hankerin's but bein' able to have familiar doin's with lightnin' and other nateral phenominy. So he set with his nose arubbin' back and forth across that printin' for more'n two weeks, and then riz up allowin' that the Almighty might as well take in his sign because he, Pete Norton, scientist, wouldn't need no help in runnin' the firmament after that.

"About a week later he was settin' on his shoulder blades and ruminatin', when everybody noticed that a new idee was percolatin' gradual through his system. At first he only stropped up the sides of his nose with the paam of his hand and looked uncommon thoughtful; then he chuckled for a bit and fell to scratchin' himself; later on strugglin' to his feet and draggin' them away after him by main strength. For some little time followin' his chair was vacant at our councils; then one day he crawled into Si Hopkins's rest parlor — Si bein' the old one-hoss trust that doled out the groceries, drugs and coffins for the community — and fell exhausted into a chair. About ninety per cent of us prominent citizens of the Corners was aggregated there, gabbin' and waitin' for a day to come along when it wasn't neither too hot nor too cold to work, and after restin' up for

a bit Pete stretched himself like an injy rubber band, aroze to his feet and straddled over to the counter behind which Si was presidin'. Then he dug down in his jeans and pulled out a dozen or fifteen little pieces of some kind of yeller stuff, about the size of buckshot, but rough like, and tossed them onto the counter before Si.

" 'What's your notion about them?' he asks, indifferent as a cow a-chewin' her cud.

"Well, Si picked one up, hefted it, held it at arm's length, cocked his head and aimed his eye at it. Next he took a bottil of some kind of testin' licker and rubbed a few of them all over with it; looked again — clusser this time — said, 'H'm,' and let them rattle betwixt his fingers onto the boards. 'If they ain't little solid gold nuggits,' he answers, twistin' his goat whiskers around his finger, 'then I'm as big a fool, almost, as you be.'

" 'Thort so,' Pete goes on, gatherin' them into a pile. Then he holds them clus under Si's nose. 'What'll you give me for the lot?'

"For a minute Si meditated with a fur-away, spiritool expression on his old rat countynence, then took and dumped them onto one pan of a little pair of scales that was balanced so ticklish that a hoss fly and a grasshopper was usin' them for a teeter-teeter. 'I'm jest out of gold nuggits,' he answers, puttin' a little brass weight on t'other side, 'but I'm expectin' a carload in to-morrer. Howsoever, pendin' their arrival' — and here he commences to figger on a piece of paper — 'I'll jest make it ten dollars for the fifteen of them, if I lose a forchin by the transaction.'

"Now, there wasn't a citizen of that rizin' community but would have bet his dollars against the holes in t'other feller's britches that Si was the most propinquitos old reptyle in money matters that had ever stood perpendicular on the American continent. Remember well when his wife died with about two dollars' wuth of gold fillin' in her molers the old skinflint had it dug out before he would let them plant her. Said he never did believe in burnin' up money, meanin' it in a figerative sense, of course. So we spectaters all knowed that whenever he offered ten dollars for somethin', the other feller was gettin' a powerful bad opportunity. Pete knowed it too, and they haggled and jawed backwards and forwards for a considerable time, and then agreed on twelve dollars and forty-two cents. Si counted out the money slow, squeezin' each piece as he let go of it, like he allers did Ike Thompson's wife's fingers, and Pete shoved them in his pocket, bought himself a

fust-class, five-cent Cuby seegar and strolled out looking tolerable satisfied.

"Of course, we gathered around them nuggits immediate and began to speculate on how he come by them. Everybody knowed there wasn't as much gold in that black prairie muck in twenty mile around as there was left on the stud in Si's shirt buzzum, and even if there had been Pete was too lazy to have dug it out; so for the first time in the history of the Corners we run across a subject that was too ponderous for us heavy thinkers to handle. And then when about a week later Pete come in with another handful of the stuff and went through the same performance again, politics and religion was forked out onto the dump heap mighty suddin. And the news spread like the dipthery too, and the next day the people commenced to come in from the surroundin' country to buy a pound of sand out of Si's sugar barrel and examine them nuggits, meanwhile askin' questions which nobody but Pete and the Almighty could answer, neither of which was doin' any talkin'. And then a little later he brings in another batch.

" 'This here thing is a gettin' powerful tedjus,' says Eph Eggleston, as Pete pocketed the greenbacks. 'And it's my 'pinion them nuggits ain't nothin' more'n little gobs of copper melted off a kettle. Couldn't possible be nothin' else, and besides our copper biler which t'old woman left in the back yard has disappeared most mysterious.' At that innooendo Pete, who had previous only smiled supercilious at our speculatins, flared up like a salune that's got belted by a streak of lightnin'.

" 'You'r an idjut,' he hollers, lookin' as mad as a pup with the hydrofoby. 'What do you prehistoric old fossyles know about 'lectricity and other nateral phenominy? An angle wum has a college education beside sech critters as you, what I could scrape the ignorance off of with a hoe. Gold is like sin — it's omnipresent. It's lurkin' in the air, in the water, in your stummiks — everywhere except your pockets. All you need is the nateral intellect and acquired learnin' to seggregate it out of solution and conglomerate it. For generations the world has been cavortin' around in space waitin' the advent of a scientist that could do it, and now he has arrove and is standin' upright on his hind legs before you. It's easier for me to perform sech things than it is for you to sneak a jack from the bottom of the deck, playin' seven up.'

"Well, of course we all slapped our legs and cackled pretty loud at that,

his braggin' soundin' so preposterous. And that makes Pete madder'n a hornet with a sore ear, and we seen that mebby, if we could aggryvate him fur enough, he'd up and 'criminate himself; so we kept proddin' him with sarcastic and cute remarks until bimeby he commenced makin' little hops up and down like a toad. 'Bet you two dollars I can prove it. You'r a herd of petryfied, benighted, hay-headed, goat-whiskered old crawfish, who wouldn't dast bet a chew of terbacker your brains wasn't made out of sawdust,' he stutters, shakin' the money at us.

"That was jest the opportunity we had been prayin' for, and so four or five of us chipped in and made up a puss of two dollars, and Pete went out a-cussin' us, returnin' in about ten minutes with a goose under his arm. Course someone made a comic remark about their bein' two of a kind, but Pete didn't notice it, jest set us to work creatin' a coop out of a drygoods box. Then, when we had got it finished, Si was appointed the fowl's guardeen, to see that no one tampered with her, and Pete said he must first starve the critter three days to get her stummik puckered up and in prime order before he could work his miracle.

"Needless to mention, we were all as curious as a sewin' society in wonderin' what sort of a fool performance he had rigged up, and on the day appinted the consolodated brains and wealth of the Corners was massed in Si's institution. Then the prisoner was fetched forth and Pete took a little box with wires hitched to it and elervated it aloft. 'This here's my patent gold conglomeratin' machine, feller citizens,' he says, puffin' out his chest. 'I harnesses it to the fowl's anatermy, starts it up, and behold! The patent 'lectric flooid begins immediate to oxify and carbonize the infinertesimal particles of preshus metal what is a-hidin' in all livin' organisms, and out of nothin' I gets gold nuggits to sell dirt cheap to Si Hopkins.'

"With that he grabbed for the bird, but the latter, bein' a fool by natur and not carin' a cuss about science, flopped around pretty lively until Pete pulled half an ear of corn from his pocket and threw it on the floor. Then, when the fowl was peckin' the kernels off the ear, Pete got his machine adjusted and started her up.

"For a minute the gold factory squawked and hopped around most curious and then squatted down resignful in a heap. Pete kept a struttin' around for some time with one eyelid pulled down like a winder shade, lookin' wiser than a superintendent of schools; then removed his invention. 'It's goin' to be a

gorjus success,' says he, puckerin' up his lips. 'But I got to put the polishin' touches on them nuggits yet. Come around this afternoon at four, prepared to gaze upon the slickest miracle that was ever pulled off.'

"Well, we put the bird back in the box and hung ourselves up on the counter and other handy places and swapped lies until the time came. Prompt to the second Pete come in, and after givin' his confed'rit a drink of water allowed that the deed was did. Pursooent to his bossin', we all adjourned to the back yard and Si wrung the fowl's neck and opened her up with a jack knife, and, sure as retribution, there in her stummik was a dozen little gold nuggits, same as the others. There wasn't any gettin' away from evidence like that, and Parson Haskins walked off shakin' his head and allowin' that nothin' but misery could come from usurpin' the perogatives of the Creator and convertin' a lowly fowl, what was only meant to lay goose eggs, into a distillery of preshus metal. But old Eph Eggleston, who was allers a braggin' that he didn't have no more soul than a dried apple, and who didn't believe in nothin' from hell to holy water, only cussed.

" 'He had that there goose salted all the time! Can't fool me with no sech ridiculous circus doin's,' he squeaked, and Si allowed he opined similar. Well, the upshot of it all was that Pete said he'd be derned if he'd have his scientific reputation smeared up by sech old turtils as them, and we appinted a committee of three old sledge perfessers for further experimentin'. So they went out in the country, kidnapped the first goose they laid eyes upon and we incarcerated her in the coop and incarcerated the coop in a back room, afterwards lockin' the door with three different padlocks and givin' each of the Committee on Scientific Research and Occult Investigation a key.

" 'There,' squeals old Eph, stuffin' a bundil of fine cut terbacker into the yawnin' orifice under his nose. 'If that dern long-legged Pete Norton can get any nuggits out of the innerds of that there goose, I'll bargin to attend next camp meetin' and vote the Demmycratic ticket presidential 'lection' — camp meetin's and Demmycrats being the two institutions Eph never could abide. But when, at the end of three days, we fetched her out, and Pete had gone through the same motions, there lay another batch of nuggits, nateral as life and no possible way of accusin' him of prestidiggitation. That settled it beyond all argyment, and instead of lookin' upon Pete

merely as one hundred and forty pounds of spiled dog meat, as we had done previous, we began to talk of runnin' him for the Legislature.

"But of course Si, who didn't think of nothin' all day nor dream of nothin' all night but how to skin somebody out of another nickel, seen the gorjus posserbilities of the invention and began to figger immediate on how to get in on the basement floor. Instead of runnin' a little one-goose nuggit factory and makin' livin' expenses, he allowed the thing otter be financed and worked to the limit while geese was cheap. He used up a half a lead pencil and a couple of yards of wrappin' paper figgerin' on it, then, gettin' scairt at his extravagance, he borrowed a slate and kept on until he had got it ciphered out that by investin' a few thousand dollars in geese and machines they could clear up enough money in one year to buy the Empire of Turkey. So he begun makin' propositions, Pete not appearin' specially anxious to dicker at first, but eventually they made a whack and drew up papers whereby Pete gave Si the gold goose rights for the State of Ohier for the sum and consideration of two thousand dollars, in hand paid. And the next day Pete got on the caboose, allowin' he was goin' up to Washington to see the President about his patents, which was the last we ever seen of his carkiss around the Corners.

"Well, the days kept a loafin' by and pretty soon Si commenced to get as fidgity as an old maid with the toothache. At the end of about a week he up and allowed he couldn't stand it no longer, so he rigged the machine that Pete had left behind him and said he'd get back them two thousand dollars or bust his galluses. But though he follered the directions powerful scrupulous, when he come to do his dissectin' the goose's stummik was as empty as a contribution box — not the least sign of a nuggit could he discover, even by analyzin' her whole anatermy with a magnifyin' glass. And so he went on experimentin' and spilin' geese, meanwhile gettin' haggarder and shrivelin' up more and more at every disappintment until at last he got to usin' himself for a weight in measurin' out groceries. Finally his customers tumbled to the fact that he was cheatin' them, even at that, and then, to crown his sorrer, another feller started up a rival institution, and one day when Eph went into the old place to get trusted for a bushel of fine cut, all he could find of Si didn't weigh more'n a bunch o' starvin' snow birds. So that was the end of *him*, and we stuck him on the pint of a toothpick and buried him with befittin' orgies.

"But, long afterwards, we got news of Pete. Jim Robinson was down in St. Looy attendin' a fair, and he run across a side show which advertized they had on exhibition a heifer that could speak anything from the Doxolergy to a politercal speech. Nacherly enough, Jim's curiosity riz up, and after resistin' temptation until he was fagged out, he unwound a couple of yards of yarn from his wallet, fished out a dime that he had plugged up tolerable skilful, and went in, and sure enough, there was a heifer with a bump on her neck — kind of goitre — and from her mouth was comin' words, plain and distinct — but they missed bein' Doxolergy words by more'n a mile. She wasn't no stuffed critter, with a human bein' inside of her neither, and Jim was scratchin' his head and tryin' to figger out the combination, when all of a suddin Pete comes a crawlin' in — that is as near all of a suddin as Pete could do anything — and commenced exhortin'. Course he recognized Jim, and in the evenin' they hit the flowin' bowl together and got uncommon confidential.

" 'How did you do it?' finally asks Jim, jerkin' his thumb over his shoulder towards the heifer.

" 'Oh, that wasn't perticular difficult,' said Pete, pintin' the bottil up and lettin' the contents guggle down. 'She had a swellin' on her neck to begin with, so I jest cut that out, put in a little fonygraf and connected it up to her mouth with a rubber hose.'

"Then he inquired about Si, listenin' interested until Jim got through, when he began to laugh.

" 'Served the dern old skinflint right,' says he, chucklin' all over. 'Wanter know how I did it? Well, seein' it's outlawed by now, I don't mind tellin'. First I starved them geese for three days, to empty their stummiks and make them hungry as a herd of cannibals. Then, when I was hitchin' the patent 'lectric machine on to their necks, I throwed down part of an ear of corn, ostensible to attract their attention, but reely to skin Si. That corn wasn't as innercent as it looked, for I'd picked out about a dozen kernels, scooped 'em holler from the inside end where they are white, plugged 'em with little pieces of gold, stuffed up the openings with dough and stuck 'em back on the cob. Course the fowls gobbled 'em down goose style, and a few hours later, when we hacked 'em open, the corn was all digested and nothin' was left but the nuggits.' "

If you have read the two previous stories about Nick Noble — the wine-blooded habitué of the third booth on the left, Chula Negra Café — you know what to expect: a fascinating plot, cunningly unfolded, with ingenious surprises up to and including the end. Your Editor sincerely hopes that Mr. Boucher continues to write these excellent examples of the modern detective story; and when Mr. Boucher has written a dozen of them, your Editor will be the first to sign a petition respectfully demanding that the deductive investigations of Nick Noble be permanently collected in book form. (If Mr. Boucher's own publisher demurs, "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" will go into the book publishing business!)

BLACK MURDER

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

IN PEACETIME the whole Shaw case could never have happened. As Officer Mulroon said later: the first attack would have been passed off as natural illness, and besides there never would have been a first attack.

But police work in the spring of 1943 was full of cases that could never have happened in peacetime. Detective Lieutenant Donald MacDonald (Homicide, L.A.P.D.) was slowly becoming reconciled to the recruiting officer who had dissuaded him from joining the Navy. He was necessary here on his job, even though he sometimes wished that he were back in a patrolman's uniform. His plain clothes did draw occasional sardonic stares.

Even the stripe and a half of Lieutenant (j.g.) Warren Humphreys made him uniform-conscious and reminded him of his frustrated enlistment. But the slight bitterness was effaced by the knowledge that in this case the Navy had had to turn to him because he was a trained specialist who knew about murderers.

"We don't believe in coincidence in the Navy," Lieutenant Humphreys had barked over the phone. "When I'm sent out here to pick up specifications on a sub detector, and find the inventor's suddenly come down with an attack having all the symptoms of arsenic poisoning, I want police action. And quick."

Lieutenant MacDonald remembered when Warren Humphreys had been his favorite political commentator, and hoped that he diagnosed poisonings more accurately than he had the strength of the Red Army.

Apparently he did. At least the police doctor made the same snap diagnosis after an examination of the

comatose inventor, and commended the naval officer for his prompt administration of a mustard emetic followed by milk of magnesia.

"Best I could do with what's in an ordinary house," Lieutenant Humphreys said with gruff modesty. "Got to know a thing or two about poison treatment in Naval Intelligence. You never know . . ."

"You've made a good start; he ought to pull through. Keep him quiet and give him lots of milk. I'll send out a male nurse. You can call the lab about six, MacDonald. I'll try to have a full report on these specimens by then."

It was now one forty-five. Humphreys had arrived at one and phoned the police almost immediately. The attack, which the household had taken for ordinary digestive trouble, had struck Harrison Shaw at twelve-thirty, after his usual lunch: a tartar sandwich and a bottle of beer.

"The dietetics boys'd say he had it coming to him," MacDonald observed.

"But it was what he always ate, Lieutenant," the blind man said. "And it seemed to sustain his energy admirably — enough at least to interest the Navy, if not to bring in any marked practical rewards."

The slight note of bitterness toward the — professional habit made him think "deceased" — toward the victim caused MacDonald to look at the blind man more closely. He saw a tall, lean man of fifty, with a marked resemblance to the poisoned inventor save for the sightless stare and the one-sided smile that never left his face. He wore a gray suit of unusually fine tailoring and unusually great age.

The suit was like the house. One of those old family mansions in the West Adams district near U.S.C. You saw it from the outside and expected sumptuous furnishings and a flock of servants. You came in and found a barn, and not a servant in sight.

"Let me get the picture straight," MacDonald said. "The medical report was the first essential. Now that that's given us something to sink our teeth into, pending the lab analysis, there's plenty more to cover. I gather you're Mr. Shaw's cousin?"

The blind man went on smiling. "Second cousin, yes. Ira Beaumont, at your service, Lieutenant."

"You've been living with Mr. Shaw for how long?"

"Mr. Shaw has been living with me for some three years. Ever since I inherited this house from a distant relative of ours. He felt, and with some justice, that he had as great a right to the inheritance as I, and I was glad to give him some of the

space I could not possibly use up in this white elephant."

"And the rest of the household?"

"First my cousin's mother came to look after him. Then his laboratory assistant joined our happy household. I began to feel a trifle like the old woman who is so horribly moved in on in the play *Kind Lady*."

"That's all in the house?"

"There was a couple who cooked and kept house, but we could not compete with Lockheed and Vega in wage scales. Mrs. Shaw now takes their place." He rose and crossed the room to a humidor. "Do you gentlemen care for cigars?"

"No thanks, not now." MacDonald noted admiringly the ease with which the blind man moved unaided about his own house. There's something splendid about the overcoming of handicaps . . . a splendor, he reflected, that we'll have many chances to watch in the years to come. . . . "Then Mrs. Shaw prepared your cousin's lunch today?"

"As usual. I believe you'll find her in the kitchen now; I know she'll be thinking that the family must eat tonight, whatever has happened."

Lieutenant Humphreys tagged along. The prospect of a Watson from Naval Intelligence somewhat awed the police detective.

"There can be only one motive," the Naval Watson muttered. "Somebody had to keep him from delivering those specifications to me. And if you can find them, officer, I'd almost be willing to write off the murder as unsolved."

"We don't even know yet that they're lost," MacDonald pointed out. "When Shaw's himself again, he may hand them straight over."

But Humphreys shook his head. "They're good," he said cryptically. "They wouldn't slip up on that."

There was a sudden slam of a door as they entered the kitchen. Mrs. Shaw, MacDonald thought, was almost too good to be true. Aged housedress, apron, white hair and all, she was the casting director's dream of Somebody's Mother. But at the moment she was nervous, flustered — almost guilty-looking.

Wordlessly the Lieutenant crossed the kitchen and opened a pantry door. He saw, at a rough count, a good hundred cans of rationed goods. He laughed. "You needn't worry, Mrs. Shaw. This isn't my brand of snooping; I shan't report you for hoarding."

Mrs. Shaw straightened her apron, poked at her escapist hair, and looked relieved. "It's really all for the good of the war," she explained. "My boy's doing important work that'll save thousands of lives, and he's going to get what he wants

to eat whether somebody in Washington says so or not. Why, if he was a Russian inventor they'd be making him take it."

"We didn't see a thing, did we, Lieutenant?"

Humphreys made a gruff noise. It was obviously hard for him to resist a brief official lecture.

"Now about this attack of your son's, Mrs. Shaw . . ."

"I just can't understand that, Lieutenant. I simply can't. Harry never was a one to complain about his food. He liked lots of it, but it always set right fine."

"Mr. Beaumont said he always ate this same lunch?"

"Yes, sir. A white bread sandwich with raw ground round, with a little salt and Worcestershire sauce, and some slices of raw onion. And he drank beer with it. I can't say I'd cotton to it myself, but it's what Harry liked."

"Where was the beer kept?"

"In a little icebox in his laboratory. He always opened it himself. All I did was fix the sandwich."

"And bring a glass for the beer?"

"No. He liked it out of the bottle, just like his father before him."

"And where did you keep the meat, Mrs. Shaw?"

"I didn't. I mean not today. It didn't get kept anyplace. I didn't get out to shop till late and I bought it down at the little market on the corner and brought it right back here and made the sandwich."

"And the onion?"

"I peeled a fresh one, of course."

"And the salt and the sauce?"

MacDonald impounded the shaker and bottle indicated. "We'll analyze these, of course. Although no one would take the chance of leaving them here in the kitchen where anybody might. . . . And what did you do with the sandwich after you made it?"

"What should I do, officer? I took it right up to Harry and now he's . . . Oh, officer, he is going to be all right, isn't he?"

"He will be. And you can thank Lieutenant Humphreys here that he will."

"Oh I do thank you, Lieutenant. I didn't know what to think at first with Harry so sick and you running around here and wanting mustard and things, but now I see the good Lord sent you to save my Harry."

Humphreys looked relieved when MacDonald cut through her embarrassing gratitude. "Thank you very much, Mrs. Shaw. Now do you know where we'd find your son's assistant?"

As they walked down the long empty hall to a crudely improvised laboratory, MacDonald said, "Did you ever see such deliberate suicide before?"

"Suicide? But great Scott, man, you don't mean that Shaw —"

"Lord no! I mean Mrs. Shaw. She's told a specific, detailed story that doesn't leave a single loophole. Unless analysis turns up something in those seasonings, there's only one person who could conceivably have poisoned Shaw. And that, by her own admission, is his mother."

The assistant, so far nameless, introduced himself as John Firebrook. He was a little man with a thick neck and a round, worried face. "I don't believe it, Lieutenant," he began flatly. "Nobody could want to kill a fine man like Mr. Shaw. It must have been something he ate."

"Sure. It was with Mrs. Crippen too."

"And there are too many people at large in this world," the naval officer added, "who think killing fine men is just what the doctor ordered. Especially fine men who invent sub detectors. And how much do you know about that detector, Firebrook?"

"I know the principles, of course, sir. I helped to work them out, though Mr. Shaw didn't trust even me with the final details. You remember the man recently who made a seventy-nine cent bombsight out of junk? Well, ours is not perhaps quite in that class, but comparable. It consists of

(censored)

Humphreys nodded happily. "Brilliant, Firebrook. Brilliant. What we need is men like Shaw who can make something out of apparently nothing. If this lives up to expectations, I think the Navy can promise him plenty more jobs."

"If the Navy will promise us a decent laboratory and materials, we will be happy. It's fine to make something out of nothing, Lieutenant, but it is nice to work with something too. We have kept hoping that Mr. Shaw would receive a large sum of money from a great-uncle; but the old gentleman has defied all the statistics of life-expectancy. If this detector is a failure . . . I do not know what will become of us," he added simply.

"Do you know where these specifications are?" MacDonald asked.

"I do not. We could not afford a safe that would be any real protection. Mr. Shaw had his own plans which even I did not know."

"It'll be simple," said Humphreys. "Call your men, Lieutenant, and we'll search the whole place, starting with this lab."

"No!" said Firebrook sharply.

"And why not?"

"You see this laboratory? It is cheap, it is insufficient. But it is in perfect working order. I keep it so.

I will not have hordes of police trampling through it and destroying that order."

"Even with warrants?" MacDonald murmured.

"Even with warrants." Firebrook's little eyes flashed. "Gentlemen, you will not search this laboratory."

The officers stared at him for a moment, but his defiant gaze was steady. "My, my!" Lieutenant Humphreys said at last. "The racial passion for order . . . Very well. You'll be seeing me again — Herr Feuerbach."

And that was the end of the first phase of the Shaw case.

There was nothing more that Lieutenant MacDonald could accomplish at the rundown mansion of Ira Beaumont until he had the report from the laboratory and could talk to the inventor himself. He stationed Mulroon to watch the sickroom pending the arrival of the police nurse, and Shurman and Avila to guard the outside of the house. Lieutenant Humphreys appointed himself part of the guard too.

"I'm not leaving this house till I hear from Shaw's own lips where the specifications are. And I'm keeping an eye on that German."

MacDonald drove slowly back to headquarters. He didn't like this Shaw business. It was too wrongly simple. There was only one possible suspect, and that one was impossible.

Greed can do strange things to people (was there a lead in that legacy expected from the great-uncle?), and perverted political fanaticism can do even stranger; but could a mother kill her son even from such motives? Worse yet, psychologically, could she kill him by means of her own food, while she calmly broke all rationing regulations to provide him with that food?

He didn't like it. And he found, as he mused, that he had overshot headquarters. He was driving out North Main Street. He was, in fact, just about opposite the Chula Negra Café.

Lieutenant MacDonald grinned at himself. It *was* that kind of a case, wasn't it?

The Noble scandal had been long before MacDonald's time on the force. He'd gathered it piecemeal from the older men: a crooked captain who had connections, and a brilliantly promising detective lieutenant who'd taken the rap for him when things broke, losing his job just when his wife needed money for an operation . . .

Nick Noble had been devoted to his wife and his profession. When both were gone, there was nothing left. Nothing but cheap sherry that

dulled the sharpness of reality enough to make it bearable. Nothing but that and the curious infallible machine that was Nick Noble's mind.

That couldn't stop working, even when Noble's profession no longer needed it. Present it with a problem, and the gears meshed into action behind those pale blue eyes. A few of the oldtimers on the force were wise enough to know how invariably right the answers were. Twice MacDonald himself had seen the Noble mind trace pattern in chaos. And this was just what Noble would like: only one possibility, and that impossible. The screwier the better.

Screwball Division, L.A.P.D., they called him.

He was in the third booth on the left, as usual. So far as MacDonald had ever learned, he lived, ate, and slept there . . . if indeed he did ever eat or sleep. There was a water glass of sherry in front of him. His hair and his skin were white as things that live in caves. A white hand swatted at the sharp thin nose. Then the pale blue eyes slowly focused on the detective and he smiled a little.

"MacDonald," he said softly. "Sit down. Trouble?"

"Right up your alley, Mr. Noble. A screwball set-up from way back."

"They happen to you." He swallowed some sherry and took another swipe at his nose. "Fly," he said apologetically.

MacDonald remembered that fly. It wasn't there. It never had been. He slipped into the seat across the booth and began his story. Once the Mexican waitress came up and was waved away. Once the invisible fly returned to interrupt. The rest of the time Nick Noble listened and drank and listened. When MacDonald had finished, he leaned back and let his eyes glaze over.

"Questions?" MacDonald asked.

"Why?" Nick Noble said.

"The motive, you mean? Humphreys thinks spy work. He must be right, but a mother . . ."

"Uh uh." Noble shook his head. "Why questions? All clear. Let Humphreys hocus you. Awed by the gold braid you wanted, MacDonald."

The detective shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe. But what do you mean? What's clear?"

Nick Noble turned sideways and slid his pipestem legs from under the table. "Come on," he said. "Take me out there."

He didn't say a word on the drive out Figueroa. His eyes were shut: not glazed over, as they were when he worked on a problem, but simply shut, as though he were done with it.

He opened them as they turned off the boulevard. In a moment he said, "Almost there?"

"Yes. We turn again at the next, then we're there."

"Stop here," Nick Noble said.

MacDonald was beginning to wonder what he'd let himself in for. Conferences at the Chula Negra were one thing, but . . . He pulled up in front of the small market and said, "What goes?"

"Need some meat," Noble said. "Supper. Come on in."

MacDonald followed, frowning. At least this was a clue as to how Noble lived outside the Chula Negra . . . The butcher's counter was sparsely filled. Not so bad as before rationing, but still not overflowing.

Nick Noble said, "I wanted about a pound of ground round."

The butcher had red hair and a redder face. "Don't know's I've got any left to grind, but I'll see. Got your red stamps?"

Noble's face fell as he groped in his pocket. He muttered something about his other suit.

The butcher said, "Sorry, brother."

Nick Noble said, "It's what the doctor said the baby ought to have . . . " He took out a wallet and held it open. It was far from empty.

The butcher said, "Hold on, brother. With a baby . . ." He went into the refrigerating room.

MacDonald stared at the greenbacks in the wallet. It wasn't possible that Nick Noble should flash such a roll.

The butcher came back with a package in heavy paper. He didn't weigh it. He said, "One pound. That'll be ninety cents."

Noble's pale eyes rested on the posted list of ceiling prices. "Kind of high," he said.

"Take it or leave it, brother."

Nick Noble took it. As he turned to go, a woman came in with a heavy shopping bag. She said, "Frank, I'd like to ask you about that meat I got in here yesterday. My husband's been . . ."

Frank began talking loudly about the meat quota problem. Nick Noble went on out. On his way he stopped at the grocery department and picked up a quart of sherry.

Back in the car he handed the meat to MacDonald. "Lab," he said. Then he went to work on the seal of the bottle, and broke off to swat at the fly.

MacDonald grinned. "The Noble touch! So you've done it again. Black market, huh?"

Noble nodded. "Food poisoning symptoms pretty much like arsenic." The bottle glurked and its contents diminished. "Mother hoards for son. She'd buy on black market for him too. But she poisoned him. Same like

woman's husband."

" 'All clear,' " MacDonald quoted. "I guess it is. Humphreys' profession gives him a naturally melodramatic outlook, and it sucked in the doctor and me. We expected poisoning, so we saw it. The lab tests'll be the final check. All clear but one thing: how come you have all that folding money?"

"Oh," said Nick Noble. "Sorry." He handed over the wallet.

MacDonald felt in his own empty pocket and swore goodhumoredly. "In a good cause," he said.

He was still grinning when they drove up to Ira Beaumont's mansion. Shurman wasn't in front of the house as he should have been. Instead he answered the door. His broad face lit up. "Jeez, Loot, we been tryna get you everywheres."

"It's all O.K., Shurman. All cleared up. There never was an attempt at murder."

"Maybe there wasn't no attempt. But somebody sure's hell did murder Mr. Shaw about fifteen minutes ago."

It was the first time MacDonald had ever seen Nick Noble surprised.

This was the most daring murder that MacDonald had ever encountered or heard of. The murderer had slipped up behind Mulroon, on guard before the sickroom, and slugged him with a heavy vase. Then he had entered the sickroom and slit the throat of the sleeping invalid, leaving the heavy butcher knife (printless, MacDonald knew even before dusting it) beside the bed.

It was a crime as risky as it was simple, but it had succeeded. Harrison Shaw would contrive no more somethings out of nothing for the Navy.

"The method doesn't even eliminate anybody," MacDonald complained. "The knife was sharp enough and the vase heavy enough for even a woman to have succeeded. And that damned wheeze Mulroon has from his cold could've guided the blind man. Method means nothing."

"Motive," said Nick Noble.

The motive seemed indicated by the scrawl on the plaster near the bed. At first glance it looked like blood. A closer examination showed it was red ink. The bottle and a pastry brush (taken from the same drawer as the butcher knife) lay under the bed. The scrawl read:

So sterben alle Feinde des Reiches!

Firebrook had translated this as, *Thus may all enemies of the Reich perish!* The mere fact of his knowing the language had caused Lieutenant Humphreys to glower on him with fresh suspicion.

"And so what?" MacDonald complained when he and Noble were alone again with the body of Harrison Shaw. "So he is a German and his name used to be Feuerbach. That doesn't convict him."

Nick Noble said nothing. His pale blue eyes studied the room.

"What have we got?" MacDonald recapitulated. "Nobody in this house alibies anybody else. And it must be one of them. Avila and Shurman swear nobody came in. One of three people is a Nazi agent who took advantage of Shaw's illness and the confusion to steal his plans and now to kill him so he can't reproduce them. Mrs. Shaw, the assistant Firebrook, the blind cousin Beaumont: one of these three . . ."

"Four," said Nick Noble. He stood teetering on his thin legs. One hand swiped at the fly. Then his eyes fixed on the wall inscription and slowly glazed over.

He rocked back and forth while his last word echoed in MacDonald's mind. Four . . . That was true. There was a fourth suspect. And who had planted the notion of murder in the first place? Who had forcibly established himself in this house? Who had created the very confusion by which —

"Lieutenant!" It was Firebrook in the doorway, and his round face was aglow. "Lieutenant . . . !" And he thrust a set of papers into MacDonald's hands. "I did not wish your men to search, but myself I can search and respect the order of things. I have searched . . . and found!"

MacDonald's eyes lit up. "Then at least the killing was in vain. We've got the detector! Humphreys will have to see these," he decided, his momentary suspicions rejected as absurd. "Come on, Noble."

Nick Noble took a swig from his bottle before he followed. His eyes had come unglazed now.

"In this room," Lieutenant MacDonald announced, "is a traitor."

He looked around the shabby room. The naval officer was happily absorbed in contemplating the recovered plans. Firebrook looked as though his pleasure in the discovery was fading at the realization of the death of the man he had worked with. Mrs. Shaw was crying quietly and paying no heed to anything. It was impossible to read the sightless eyes and permanent half-smile of Ira Beaumont.

But it was Beaumont who spoke. "Isn't it obvious who the traitor must be, Lieutenant? Mrs. Shaw is a dear sweet woman who knows nothing of the world beyond her kitchen and her family. Lieutenant Humphreys is an officer of Naval

Intelligence. I lost my sight in the Argonne; that does not predispose me toward our country's enemies."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Beaumont, we need some proof beyond what you think obvious. We have a traitor here, and he is a traitor who failed. He killed Shaw, and to that potential extent harmed our war effort. But the plans of Shaw's detector he has failed to find."

"Did he?" Beaumont insisted. "Is Lieutenant Humphreys certain that those plans which he holds —?"

"Well, Lieutenant?" MacDonald asked.

Humphreys grunted. "Can't be positive till they've been checked by experts. Seem damned plausible, just the same."

"Beaumont's right," said Nick abruptly.

No one had been paying any attention to him, beyond the first obvious glance of wonder as to why the detective lieutenant should drag along such a companion. Now all the faces turned to him. The blind man's smile widened with gratification. He said, "Thank you."

"Beaumont's right," Noble went on. "Obvious who's traitor: Nobody."

The room gasped. Lieutenant Humphreys snorted.

"Private murder. Clear pattern: Humphreys started spy scare; murderer took advantage."

"But the scrawl on the plaster . . . ?" It was Firebrook's question.

"Proves it. Clumsy trick to mislead. Swastika wrong."

"*Ach so* . . . !" Firebrook made a click of belated realization.

"Wrong?" MacDonald asked.

"Pencil," Nick Noble said.

The officer handed him pencil and notebook. He drew for a minute, then showed the results as he spoke. "Old Indian swastika was straight. So's swastika on wall. Like so:

alle Feinde

Nazi swastika slants. Always slants. See any pictures. If Nazi made wall scribble, it'd have to be:

alle Feinde

So fake."

"You're right," Humphreys said grudgingly. "Should've seen it myself. They always slant like that."

Beaumont, unable to see the illustrations, looked puzzled.

"So who'd go wrong?" Nick Noble went on. "Who but man who's never seen Nazi swastika. Heard

about swastika, naturally thought it same as old Indian. Man who hasn't seen anything since long before there were Nazis . . . since Argonne."

Even the half-smile was gone from Ira Beaumont's face. He said, "Nonsense! My cousin was, I confess, a burden to me, but I was willing to tolerate him for the work he was doing. Why should I kill him?"

"Check," said Nick Noble to MacDonald. "Great-uncle Shaw was expecting fortune from. See if Beaumont's next of kin."

MacDonald knew he wouldn't have to check. The momentary twist of Beaumont's lips, the little choking cry of realization from Mrs. Shaw were enough.

"If not spy, who else but Beaumont?" Noble went on. "Only possible pattern. Humphreys total stranger. Mrs. Shaw devoted to son. Firebrook too likely to know right swastika; besides wouldn't pull German fake pointing straight at him. Who else?"

Ira Beaumont regained his smile. "Lieutenant, your drunken friend is amusing enough, but you surely must realize what pure tosh he is babbling."

"Must I?" said MacDonald.

"Of course. I defy you to arrest me."

As MacDonald hesitated, Nick Noble spoke. "O.K. Don't. Withdraw police. Leave him here."

MacDonald's eyes opened in amazement at the advice. Then he looked at the faces in the tense room.

They were all fixed on Beaumont. Humphreys was thinking, *He killed a man who could help the Navy.* Firebrook was thinking, *He killed my friend and tried to frame me for it.* Mrs. Shaw was thinking, *He killed my son.*

Ira Beaumont could not see the faces, but he could feel them. He could think of a blind man left helpless and alone with those faces when the police guard was withdrawn.

He rose slowly to his feet. "Shall we go, Lieutenant?"

As the wagon took away Beaumont, with the aching-headed Mulroon and the rest, MacDonald and Noble climbed into the Lieutenant's car.

On the seat lay a package wrapped in heavy butcher's paper. Nick Noble pointed at it. "Another murderer for you."

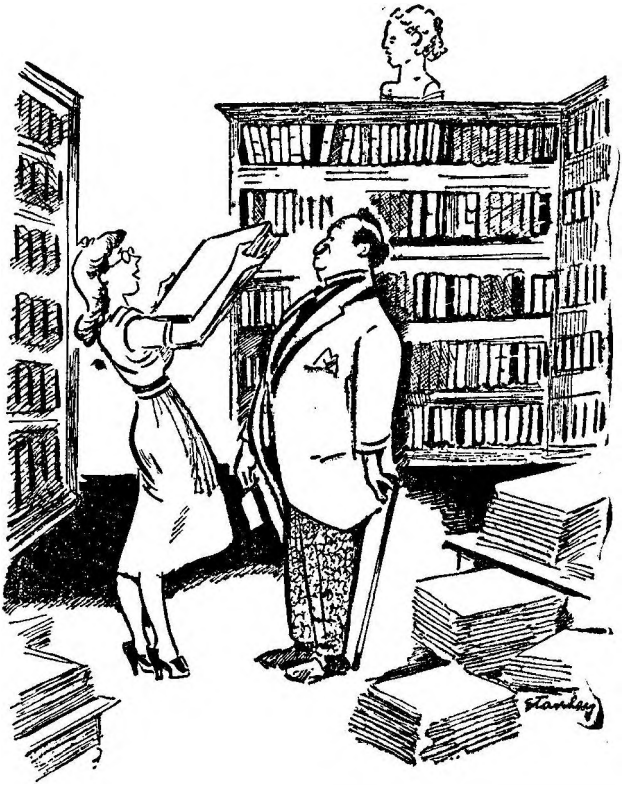
MacDonald nodded. "That butcher, plus Humphreys' suspicions, set the stage for this murder all right. And God knows what else the black market and the racketeers behind it are responsible for. Black market? Black murder . . ."

He held the butcher's parcel in his hand and stared at it as though it

were a prize exhibit in the Black Museum. "I may not have had the heart to report Mrs. Shaw's hoarding, but it'll be a pleasure to turn in that market. And to see that the first part of this case gets enough publicity to cut some ice with the meat-buying public."

Nick Noble uptilted his bottle. "I'll stick to this," he said. "Safer."

His pale blue eyes closed as MacDonald drove off.



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THE BUNCH OF VIOLETS

by ERNEST BRAMAH

WHEN Mr. J. Beringer Hulse, in the course of one of his periodical calls at the War Office, had been introduced to Max Carrados he attached no particular significance to the meeting. His own business there lay with Mr. Flinders, one of the quite inconspicuous departmental powers so lavishly produced by a few years of intensive warfare: business that was more confidential than exacting at that stage and hitherto carried on *à deux*. The presence on this occasion of a third, this quiet, suave, personable stranger, was not out of line with Mr. Hulse's open-minded generalities on British methods: "A little singular, perhaps, but not remarkable," would have been the extent of his private comment. He favoured Max with a hard, entirely friendly, American stare, said, "Vurry pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carrados," as they shook hands, and went on with his own affair.

Of course Hulse was not to know that Carrados had been brought in especially to genialize with him. Most of the blind man's activities during that period came within the "Q-class" order. No one ever heard of them, very often they would have seemed quite meaningless under description, and generally they were things that he alone could do — or do as effectively at all events. In the obsolete phraseology of the day,

they were his "bit."

"There's this man Hulse," Flinders had proceeded, when it came to the business on which Carrados had been asked to call at Whitehall. "Needless to say, he's no fool or Jonathan wouldn't have sent him on the ticket he carries. If anything, he's too keen — wants to see everything, do anything and go everywhere. In the meanwhile he's kicking up his heels here in London with endless time on his hands and the Lord only knows who mayn't have a go at him."

"You mean for information — or does he carry papers?" asked Carrados.

"Well, at present, information chiefly. He necessarily knows a lot of things that would be priceless to the Huns, and a clever man or woman might find it profitable to nurse him."

"Still, he must be on his guard if, as you say, he is — No one imagines that London in 1917 is a snakeless Eden or expects that German agents to-day are elderly professors who say, 'How vos you?' and 'Ja, ja!' "

"My dear fellow," said Flinders sapiently, "every American who came to London before the war was on his guard against a pleasant-spoken gentleman who would accost him with, 'Say, stranger, does this happen to be your wallet lying around here on the sidewalk?' and yet an unending procession of astute, long-headed citizens met him, exactly as described, year after year, and handed over their five hundred or five thousand pounds on a tale that would have made a common or Michaelmas goose blush to be caught listening to."

"It's a curious fact," admitted Carrados thoughtfully. "And this Hulse?"

"On, he's quite an agreeable chap, you'll find. He may know a trifle more than you and be a little wider awake and see further through a brick wall and so on, but he won't hurt your feelings about it. Well, will you do it for us?"

"Certainly," replied Carrados. "What is it, by the way?"

Flinders laughed his apologies and explained more precisely.

"Hulse has been over here a month now, and it may be another month before the details come through which he will take on to Paris. Then he will certainly have documents of very special importance that he must carry about with him. Well, in the meanwhile, of course, he is entertained and may pal up with anyone or get himself into Lord knows what. We can't keep him here under lock and key or expect him to make a report of every fellow he has a drink with or

every girl he meets."

"Quite so," nodded the blind man.

"Actually, we have been asked to take precautions. It isn't quite a case for the C.I.D. — not at this stage, that is to say. So if I introduce him to you and you fix up an evening for him or something of the sort and find out where his tastes lie, and — and, in fact, keep a general shepherding eye upon him —" He broke off abruptly, and Carrados divined that he had reddened furiously and was kicking himself in spirit. The blind man raised a deprecating hand.

"Why should you think that so neat a compliment would pain me, Flinders?" he asked quietly. "Now, if you had questioned the genuineness of some of my favorite tetradrachms I might have had reason to be annoyed. As it is, yes, I will gladly keep a general shepherding ear on J. Beringer as long as may be needful."

"That's curious," said Flinders, looking up quickly. "I didn't think that I had mentioned his front name."

"I don't think that you have," agreed Carrados.

"Then how — Had you heard of him before?"

"You don't give an amateur conjurer much chance," replied the other whimsically. "When you brought me to this chair I found a table by me, and happening to rest a hand on it my fingers had 'read' a line of writing before I realized it — just as your glance might as unconsciously do," and he held up an envelope addressed to Hulse.

"That is about the limit," exclaimed Flinders with some emphasis. "Do you know, Carrados, if I hadn't always led a very blameless life I should be afraid to have you around the place."

Thus it came about that the introduction was made and in due course the two callers left together.

"You'll see Mr. Carrados down, won't you?" Flinders had asked, and, slightly puzzled but not disposed to question English ways, Hulse had assented. In the passage Carrados laid a light hand on his companion's arm. Through some subtle perception he read Hulse's mild surprise.

"By the way, I don't think that Flinders mentioned my infirmity," he remarked. "This part of the building is new to me and I happen to be quite blind."

"You astonish me," declared Hulse, and he had to be assured that the statement was literally exact. "You don't seem to miss much by it, Mr. Carrados. Ever happen to hear of Laura Bridgman?"

"Oh, yes," replied Carrados. "She

was one of your star cases. But Laura Bridgman's attainments really were wonderful. She was also deaf and dumb, if you remember."

"That is so," assented Hulse. "My people come from New Hampshire not far from Laura's home, and my mother had some of her needlework framed as though it was a picture. That's how I come to know of her, I reckon."

They had reached the street meanwhile and Carrados heard the door of his waiting car open to receive him.

"I'm going on to my club now to lunch," he remarked with his hand still on his companion's arm. "Of course we only have a wartime menu, but if you would keep me company you would be acting the Good Samaritan," and Beringer Hulse, who was out to see as much as possible of England, France and Berlin within the time — perhaps, also, not uninfluenced by the appearance of the rather sumptuous vehicle — did not refuse.

"Vurry kind of you to put it in that way, Mr. Carrados," he said, in his slightly business-like, easy style. "Why, certainly I will."

During the following weeks Carrados continued to make himself very useful to the visitor, and Hulse did not find his stay in London any less agreeably varied thereby. He had a few other friends — acquaintances rather — he had occasion now and then to mention, but they, one might infer, were either not quite so expansive in their range of hospitality or so pressing for his company. The only one for whom he had ever to excuse himself was a Mr. Darragh, who appeared to have a house in Densham Gardens (he was a little shrewdly curious as to what might be inferred of the status of a man who lived in Densham Gardens), and, well, yes, there was Darragh's sister, Violet. Carrados began to take a private interest in the Darragh household, but there was little to be learned beyond the fact that the house was let furnished to the occupant from month to month. Even during the complexities of war that fact alone could not be regarded as particularly incriminating.

There came an evening when Hulse, having an appointment to dine with Carrados and to escort him to a theatre afterwards, presented himself in a mixed state of elation and remorse. His number had come through at last, he explained, and he was to leave for Paris in the morning. Carrados had been most awfully, most frightfully — Hulse became quite touchingly incoherent in his anxiety to impress upon the blind man the fullness of the gratitude he felt, but, all the

same, he had come to ask whether he might cry off for the evening. There was no need to inquire the cause. Carrados raised an accusing finger and pointed to the little bunch of violets with which the impressionable young man had adorned his button-hole.

"Why, yes, to some extent," admitted Hulse, with a facile return to his ingenuous, easy way. "I happened to see Miss Darragh downtown this afternoon. There's a man they know whom I've been crazy to meet for weeks, a Jap who has the whole ju-jitsu business at his fingerends. Best ju-jitsuist out of Japan, Darragh says. Mighty useful thing, ju-jitsu, nowadays, Carrados."

"At any time, indeed," conceded Carrados. "And he will be there tonight?"

"Certain. They've tried to fix it up for me half-a-dozen times before, but this Kuromi could never fit it in. Of course this will be the only chance."

"True," agreed the blind man, rather absent-mindedly. "Your last night here."

"I don't say that in any case I should not have liked to see Violet — Miss Darragh — again before I went, but I wouldn't have gone back on an arranged thing for that," continued Hulse virtuously. "Now this ju-jitsu I look on more in the light of business."

"Rather a rough-and-tumble business one would think," suggested Carrados. "Nothing likely to drop out of your pockets in the process and get lost?"

Hulse's face displayed a rather more superior smile than he would have permitted himself had his friend been liable to see it and be snubbed thereby.

"I know what you mean, of course," he replied, getting up and going to the blind man's chair, "but don't you worry about me, Father William. Just put your hand to my breast pocket."

"Sewn up," commented Carrados, touching the indicated spot on his guest's jacket.

"Sewn up — that's it; and since I've had any important papers on me it always has been sewn up, no matter how often I change. No fear of anything dropping out now — or being lifted out, eh? No, *sir;* if what I carry there chanced to vanish, I guess no excuses would be taken and J. B. H. would automatically drop down to the very bottom of the class. As it is, if it's missing I shall be missing too, so that won't trouble me."

"What time do you want to get there?"

"Darragh's? Well, I left that open. Of course I couldn't promise until I had seen you. Anyway, not until

after dinner, I said."

"That makes it quite simple, then," declared Carrados. "Stay and have dinner here, and afterwards we will go on to Darragh's together instead of going to the theatre."

"That's most terribly kind of you," replied Hulse. "But won't it be rather a pity — the tickets, I mean, and so forth?"

"There are no tickets as it happens," said Carrados. "I left that over until to-night. And I have always wanted to meet a ju-jitsu champion. Quite providential, isn't it?"

* * *

It was nearly nine o'clock, and seated in the drawing-room of his furnished house in Densham Gardens, affecting to read an evening paper, Mr. Darragh was plainly ill at ease. The strokes of the hour, sounded by the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece, seemed to mark the limit of his patience. A muttered word escaped him and he looked up with a frown.

"It was nine that Hulse was to be here by, wasn't it, Violet?" he asked.

Miss Darragh, who had been regarding him for some time in furtive anxiety, almost jumped at the simple question.

"Oh, yes, Hugh — about nine, that is. Of course he had to —"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Darragh irritably; "we've heard all that. And Sims," he continued, more for the satisfaction of voicing his annoyance than to engage in conversation, "swore by everything that we should have that coat by eight at the very latest. My God! what rotten tools one has to depend on!"

"Perhaps —" began Violet timidly, and stopped at his deepening scowl.

"Yes?" said Darragh, with a deadly smoothness in his voice. "Yes, Violet; pray continue. You were about to say —"

"It was really nothing, Hugh," she pleaded. "Nothing at all."

"Oh, yes, Violet, I am sure that you have some helpful little suggestion to make," he went on in the same silky, deliberate way. Even when he was silent his unspoken thoughts seemed to be lashing her with bitterness, and she turned painfully away to pick up the paper he had flung aside. "The situation, Kato," resumed Darragh, addressing himself to the third occupant of the room, "is bluntly this: If Sims isn't here with that coat before young Hulse arrives, all our carefully-thought-out plan, a month's patient work, and about the last both of our cash and credit, simply go to the devil! . . . and Violet wants to say that perhaps Mr. Sims forgot to wind his watch last night

or poor Mrs. Sims's cough is worse. . . . Proceed, Violet; don't be diffident."

The man addressed as "Kato" knocked a piece off the chessboard he was studying and stooped to pick it up again before he replied. Then he looked from one to the other with a face singularly devoid of expression.

"Perhaps. Who says?" he replied in his quaintly-ordered phrases. "If it is to be, my friend, it will be."

"Besides, Hugh," put in Violet, with a faint dash of spirit, "it isn't really quite so touch-and-go as that. If Sims comes before Hulse has left, Kato can easily slip out and change coats then."

Darragh was already on his restless way towards the door. Apparently he did not think it worth while to reply to either of the speakers, but his expression, especially when his eyes turned to Violet, was one of active contempt. As the door closed after him, Kato sprang to his feet and his impassive look gave place to one almost of menace. His hands clenched unconsciously and with slow footsteps he seemed to be drawn on in pursuit. A little laugh, mirthless and bitter, from the couch, where Violet had seated herself, recalled him.

"Is it true, Katie," she asked idly, "that you are really the greatest jujitsuist outside Japan?"

"Polite other people say so," replied the Japanese, his voice at once gentle and deprecating.

"And yet you cannot keep down even your little temper!"

Kato thought this over for a moment; then he crossed to the couch and stood regarding the girl with his usual impenetrable gravity.

"On contrary, I can keep down my temper very well," he said seriously. "I can keep it so admirably that I, whose ancestors were Samurai and very high nobles, have been able to become thief and swindler and" — his moving hand seemed to beat the air for a phrase — "and low-down dog and still to live. What does anything it matter that is connected with me alone? But there are three things that do matter — three that I do not allow myself to be insulted and still to live: my emperor, my country, and — you. And so," concluded Kato Kuromi, in a somewhat lighter vein, "now and then, as you say, my temper gets the better of me slightly."

"Poor Katie," said Violet, by no means disconcerted at this delicate avowal. "I really think that I am sorrier for you than I am for Hugh, or even for myself. But it's no good becoming romantic at this time of day, my dear man." The lines of her still quite young and attractive face

hardened in keeping with her thoughts. "I suppose I've had my chance. We're all of a pattern and I'm as crooked as any of you now."

"No, no," protested Kato loyally; "not you of yourself. It is we bad fellows round you. Darragh ought never to have brought you into these things, and then to despise you for your troubles — that is why my temper now and then ju-jitsues me. This time it is the worst of all — the young man Hulse, for whose benefit you pass yourself as the sister of your husband. How any mortal man possessing you —"

"Another cigarette, Katie, please," interrupted Violet, for the monotonous voice had become slightly more penetrating than was prudent. "That's all in the way of business, my friend. We aren't a firm of family solicitors. Jack Hulse had to be fascinated and I — well, if there is any hitch I don't think that it can be called my fault," and she demonstrated for his benefit the bewitching smile that had so effectually enslaved the ardent Beringer.

"Fascinated!" retorted Kato, fixing on the word jealously, and refusing to be pacified by the bribery of the smile. "Yes, so infatuated has become this very susceptible young man that you lead him about like pet lamb at the end of blue ribbon. Business? Perhaps. But *how* have you been able to do this, Violet? And your husband — Darragh — to him simply business, very good business — and he forces you to do this full of shame thing and mocks at you for reward."

"Kato, Kato —" urged Violet, breaking through his scornful laughter.

"I am what your people call yellow man," continued Kato relentlessly, "and you are the one white woman of my dreams — dreams that I would not lift finger to spoil by trying to make real. But if I should have been Darragh not ten thousand times the ten thousand pounds that Hulse carries would tempt me to lend you to another man's arms."

"Oh, Katie, how horrid you can be!"

"Horrid for me to say, but 'business' for you to do! How have you discovered so much, Violet — what Hulse carries, where he carries it, the size and shape the packet makes, even the way he so securely keeps it? 'Business' eh? Your husband cares not so long as we succeed. But I, Kato Kuromi, care." He went nearer so that his mere attitude was menacing as he stood over her, and his usually smooth voice changed to a tone she had never heard there before. "*How* have you learned all this? How, unless you and Hulse —"

"'Sssh!" she exclaimed in sharp

dismay as her ear caught a sound beyond.

"— oh yes," continued Kato easily, his voice instantly as soft and unconcerned as ever, "it will be there, you mean. The views in the valley of Kedu are considered very fine and the river itself —"

It was Darragh whom Violet had heard approaching, and he entered the room in a much better temper than he had left it. At the door he paused a moment to encourage someone forward — a seedy, diffident man of more than middle age, who carried a brown-paper parcel.

"Come on, Sims; hurry up, man!" urged Darragh impatiently, but without the sting of contempt that had poisoned his speech before. "And, oh, Phillips" — looking back and dropping his voice — "when Mr. Hulse arrives show him into the morning-room at first. Not up here, you understand? Now, Sims."

After a rather helpless look round for something suitable on which to lay his parcel, the woebegone-looking individual was attempting to untie it on an upraised knee.

"Yes, sir," he replied, endeavouring to impart a modicum of briskness into his manner. "I'm sorry to be a bit late, sir; I was delayed."

"Oh, well, never mind that now," said Darragh magnanimously. "Thing quite all right?"

"Mrs. Sims isn't worse?" asked Violet kindly.

Mr. Sims managed to get his back to the group before he ventured to reply.

"No, miss," he said huskily; "she's better now. She's dead: died an hour ago. That's why I wasn't quite able to get here by eight."

From each of his hearers this tragedy drew a characteristic response. Violet gave a little moan of sympathy and turned away. Kato regarded Sims, and continued to regard him, with the tranquil incuriosity of the unpitying East. Darragh — Darragh alone spoke, and his tone was almost genial.

"Devilish lucky that you were able to get here by now in the circumstances, Sims," he said.

"Well, sir," replied Sims practically, "you see, I shall need the money just as much now — though not quite for the same purpose as I had planned." He took the garment from the paper and shook it out before displaying it for Darragh's approval. "I think you will find that quite satisfactory, sir."

"Exactly the same as the one your people made for Mr. Hulse a week ago?" asked Darragh, glancing at the jacket and then passing it on to Violet for her verdict.

"To a stitch, sir. A friend of mine up at the shop got the measurements

and the cloth is a length from the same piece."

"But the cut, Sims," persisted his patron keenly; "the cut is the most important thing about it. It makes all the difference in the world."

"Yes, sir," acquiesced Sims dispassionately; "you can rely on that. I used to be a first-class cutter myself before I took to drink. I am yet, when I'm steady. And I machined both coats myself."

"That should do then," said Darragh complacently. "Now you were to have —"

"Ten guineas and the cost of the cloth you promised, sir. Of course it's a very big price, and I won't deny that I've been a bit uneasy about it from time to time when I —"

"That's all right." Darragh had no wish to keep Mr. Sims in evidence a minute longer than was necessary.

"I shouldn't like to be doing anything wrong, sir," persisted the poor creature; "and when you stipulated that it wasn't to be mentioned —"

"Well, well, man; it's a bet, didn't I tell you? I stand to win a clear hundred if I can fool Hulse over this coat. That's the long and short of it."

"I'm sure I hope it is, sir. I've never been in trouble for anything yet, and it would break my wife's 'art —" He stopped suddenly and his weak face changed to a recollection of his loss; then without another word he turned and made shakily for the door.

"See him safely away, Kato, and pay him down below," said Darragh. "I'll settle with you later," and the Japanese, with a careless "All right-o," followed.

"Now, Violet, slip into it," continued her husband briskly. "We don't want to keep Hulse waiting when he comes." From a drawer in a cabinet near at hand he took a paper packet, prepared in readiness, and passed it to her. "You have the right cotton?"

"Yes, Hugh," said Violet, opening a little work-basket. She had already satisfied herself that the coat was a replica of the one the young American would wear, and she now transferred the dummy package to the corresponding pocket and with a few deft stitches secured it in the same way as she had already learned that the real contents were safeguarded. "And, Hugh —"

"Well, well?" responded Darragh, with a return of his old impatience.

"I don't wish to know all your plans, Hugh," continued Violet meekly, "but I do want to warn you. You are running a most tremendous risk with Kato."

"Oh, Kato!"

"It is really serious, Hugh. You don't believe in patriotism, I know,

but Kato happens to. When he learns that it isn't ten thousand pounds at all, but confidential war plans, that this scoop consists of, something terrible may happen."

"It might, Violet. Therefore I haven't told him, and I am so arranging things that he will never know. Cheer up, my girl, there will be no tragedy. All the same, thanks for the hint. It shows a proper regard for your husband's welfare."

"Oh, Hugh, Hugh," murmured Violet, "if only you were more often —"

Whatever might have been the result — if indeed there was yet hope in an appeal to another and a better nature that he might once have possessed — it came too late. The words were interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Kato, his business with Sims completed. He opened and closed the door quietly but very quickly, and at a glance both the Darraghs saw that something unforeseen had happened.

"Here's pretty go," reported the Japanese. "Hulse just come and brought someone with him!"

For a moment all the conspirators stood aghast at the unexpected complication. Hugh Darragh was the first to speak.

"Damnation!" he exclaimed, with a terrible look in his wife's direction; "that may upset everything. What ghastly muddle have you made now?"

"I — I don't know," pleaded Violet weakly. "I never dreamt of such a thing. Are you sure?"

"Slow man," amplified Kato with a nod. "Fellow who walk —" He made a few steps with studied deliberation.

"Blind! It's Max Carrados," exclaimed Violet, in a flash of enlightenment. "They have been great friends lately and Jack has often spoken of him. He's most awfully clever in his way, but stone blind. Hugh, Kato, don't you see? It's rather unfortunate his being here, but it can't really make any difference."

"True, if he is quite blind," admitted Kato.

"I'll look into it," said Darragh briskly. "Coat's all ready for you, Kato."

"I think no, yet," soliloquized the Japanese, critically examining it. "Keep door, 'alf-a-mo', Violet, if please." His own contribution to the coat's appearance was simple but practical — a gentle tension here and there, a general rumple, a dust on the floor and a final shake. "One week wear," he announced gravely as he changed into it and hid his own away.

"Take your time, Mr. Carrados," Darragh's voice was heard insisting on the stairs outside, and the next

moment he stood just inside the room, and before Hulse had quite guided Carrados into view, drew Violet's attention to the necessity of removing the boutonnière that the American still wore by a significant movement to the lapel of his own coat. It required no great finesse on the girl's part to effect the transfer of the little bunch of flowers to her own person within five minutes of the guests' arrival.

"A new friend to see you, Violet — Mr. Carrados," announced Darragh most graciously. "Mr. Carrados, my sister."

"Not to *see* you exactly, Miss Darragh," qualified Carrados. "But none the less to know you as well as if I did, I hope."

"I wanted you to meet Max before I went, Miss Darragh," explained Hulse; "so I took the liberty of bringing him round."

"You really *are* going then?" she asked.

"Yes. There seems no doubt about it this time. Twelve hours from now I hope to be in Paris. I should say," amended the ingenuous young man, "I *dread* to be in Paris, for it may mean a long absence. That's where I rely on Carrados to become what is called a 'connecting file' between us — to cheer my solitude by letting me know when he has met you, or heard of you, or, well, anything."

"Take care, Mr. Hulse," she said. "Gallantry by proxy is a dangerous game."

"That's just it," retorted Hulse. "Max is the only man I shouldn't be jealous of — because he can't see you!"

While these amiable exchanges were being carried on between the two young people, with Max Carrados standing benignly by, Darragh found an opportunity to lower his voice for Kato's benefit.

"It's all right about him," he declared. "We carry on."

"As we arranged?" asked Kato.

"Yes; exactly. Come across now." He raised his voice as he led Kato towards the other group. "I don't think that either of you has met Mr. Kuromi yet — Mr. Hulse, Mr. Carrados."

"I have been pining to meet you for weeks, sir," responded Hulse with enthusiasm. "Mr. Darragh tells me what a wonderful master of jujitsu you are."

"Oh, well; little knack, you know," replied Kato modestly. "You are interested?"

"Yes, indeed. I regard it as a most useful accomplishment at any time and particularly now. I only wish I'd taken it up when I had the leisure."

"Let me find you an easy-chair, Mr. Carrados," said Violet atten-

tively. "I am sure that *you* won't be interested in so strenuous a subject as ju-jitsu."

"Oh, yes, I am, though," protested the blind man. "I am interested in everything."

"But surely —"

"I can't actually see the ju-jitsuing, you would say? Quite true, but do you know, Miss Darragh, that makes a great deal less difference than you might imagine. I have my sense of touch, my sense of taste, my hearing — even my unromantic nose — and you would hardly believe how they have rallied to my assistance since sight went. For instance —"

They had reached the chair to which Miss Darragh had piloted him. To guide him into it she had taken both his hands, but now Carrados had gently disengaged himself and was lightly holding her left hand between both of his.

"For instance, Hulse and I were speaking of you the other day — forgive our impertinence — and he happened to mention that you disliked rings of any sort and had never worn one. His eyes, you see, and perhaps a careless remark on your part. Now I *know* that until quite recently you continually wore a ring upon this finger."

Silence had fallen upon the other men as they followed Carrados's exposition. Into the moment of embarrassment that succeeded this definite pronouncement Mr. Hulse threw a cheerful note.

"Oh ho, Max, you've come a cropper this time," he exclaimed. "Miss Darragh has never worn a ring. Have you?"

"N-o," replied Violet, a little uncertain of her ground, as the blind man continued to smile benevolently upon her.

"A smooth and rather broad one," he continued persuasively. "Possibly a wedding ring?"

"Wait a minute, Violet, wait a minute," interposed Darragh, endeavouring to look judicially wise with head bent to one side. He was doubtful if Violet could carry the point without incurring some suspicion, and he decided to give her a lead out of it. "Didn't I see you wearing some sort of plain ring a little time ago? You have forgotten, but I really believe Mr. Carrados may be right. Think again."

"Of course!" responded Violet readily; "how stupid of me! It was my mother's wedding ring. I found it in an old desk and wore it to keep it safe. That was really how I found out that I could not bear the feel of one and I soon gave it up."

"What did I say?" claimed Darragh genially. "I thought that we should be right."

"This is really much interesting," said Kato. "I very greatly like your system, Mr. Carrados."

"Oh, it's scarcely a system," deprecated Max good-naturedly; "it's almost second nature with me now. I don't have to consider, say, 'Where is the window?' if I want it. I know with certainty that the window lies over here." He had not yet taken the chair provided, and suiting the action to the word he now took a few steps towards the wall where the windows were. "Am I not right?" And to assure himself he stretched out a hand and encountered the heavy curtains.

"Yes, yes," admitted Violet hurriedly, "but, oh, please do be careful, Mr. Carrados. They are most awfully particular about the light here since the last raid. We go in fear and trembling lest a glimmer should escape."

Carrados smiled and nodded and withdrew from the dangerous area. He faced the room again.

"Then there is the electric light — heat at a certain height of course."

"True," assented Kato, "but why *electric* light?"

"Because no other is noiseless and entirely without smell; think — gas, oil, candles, all betray their composition yards away. Then" — indicating the fireplace — "I suppose you can only smell soot in damp weather? The mantelpiece" — touching it — "inlaid marble. The wallpaper" — brushing his hand over its surface — "arrangement of pansies on a criss-cross background"; lifting one finger to his lips — "colour scheme largely green and gold."

Possibly Mr. Hulse thought that his friend had demonstrated his qualities quite enough. Possibly — at any rate he now created a diversion:

"Engraving of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, suspended two feet seven inches from the ceiling on a brass-headed nail supplied by a one-legged ironmonger whose Aunt Jane —"

All contributed a sufficiently appreciative laugh — Carrados's not the least hearty — except Kato, whose Asiatic dignity was proof against the form of jesting.

"You see what contempt familiarity breeds, Miss Darragh," remarked the blind man. "I look to you, Mr. Kuromi, to avenge me by putting Hulse in a variety of undignified attitudes on the floor."

"Oh, I shan't mind that if at the same time you put me up to a trick or two," said Hulse, turning to the Japanese.

"You wish?"

"Indeed I do. I've seen the use of it. It's good; it's scientific. When I was crossing, one of the passengers

held up a bully twice his weight in the neatest way possible. It looked quite simple, something like this, if I may?" Kato nodded his grave assent and submitted himself to Mr. Hulse's vigorous grasp. "'Now,' said the man I'm speaking of, 'struggle and your right arm's broken.' But I expect you know the grip?"

"Oh, yes," replied Kato, veiling his private amusement, "and therefore foolish to struggle. Expert does not struggle; gives way." He appeared to do so, to be falling helplessly in fact, but the assailant found himself compelled to follow, and the next moment he was lying on his back with Kato politely extending a hand to assist him up again.

"I must remember that," said Hulse thoughtfully. "Let me see, it goes — do you mind putting me wise on that again, Mr. Kuromi? The motion picture just one iota slower this time, please."

For the next ten or twenty minutes the demonstration went on in admirable good humour, and could Max Carrados have seen he would certainly have witnessed his revenge. At the end of the lesson both men were warm and dusty — so dusty that Miss Darragh felt called upon to apologize laughingly for the condition of the rug. But if clothes were dusty, hands were positively dirty — there was no other word for it.

"No, really, the poor mat can't be so awful as that," declared the girl. "Wherever have you been, Mr. Kuromi? and, oh, Mr. Hulse, you are just as bad."

"I do not know," declared Kato, regarding his grimy fingers seriously. "Nowhere of myself. Yes, I think it must be your London atmosphere among the rug after all."

"At all events you can't — Oh, Hugh, take them to the bathroom, will you? And I'll try to entertain Mr. Carrados meanwhile — only he will entertain me instead, I know."

It was well and simply done throughout — nothing forced, and the sequence of development quite natural. Indeed, it was not until Hulse saw Kuromi take off his coat in the bathroom that he even thought of what he carried. "Well, Carrados," he afterwards pleaded to his friend, "now could I wash my hands before those fellows like a guy who isn't used to washing? It isn't natural. It isn't human." So for those few minutes the two coats hung side by side, and Darragh kindly brushed them. When Hulse put on his own again his hand instinctively felt for the hidden packet; his fingers reassured themselves among the familiar objects of his pockets, and his mind was perfectly at ease.

"You old scoundrel, Max," he said, when he returned to the draw-

ing room. "You told Kuromi to wipe the floor with me and, by crumbs, he did! Have a cigarette all the same."

Miss Darragh laughed pleasantly and took the opportunity to move away to learn from her accomplices if all had gone well. Carrados was on the point of passing over the proffered olive branch when he changed his mind. He leaned forward and with slow deliberation chose a cigarette from the American's case. Exactly when the first subtle monition of treachery reached him — by what sense it was conveyed — Hulse never learned, for there were experiences among the finer perceptions that the blind man did not willingly discuss. Not by voice or outward manner in that arresting moment did he betray an inkling of his suspicion, yet by some responsive telephony Hulse at once, though scarcely conscious of it then, grew uneasy and alert.

"Thanks; I'll take a light from yours," remarked Carrados, ignoring the lit match, and he rose to avail himself. His back was towards the others, who still had a word of instruction to exchange. With cool precision he handled the cloth on Hulse's outstretched arm, critically touched the pocket he was already familiar with, and then deliberately drew the lapel to his face.

"You wore some violets?" he said beneath his breath.

"Yes," replied Hulse, "but I — Miss Darragh —"

"But there never have been any *here!* By heavens, Hulse, we're in it! You had your coat off just now?"

"Yes, for a minute —"

"Quietly. Keep your cigarette going. You'll have to leave this to me. Back me up — discreetly — whatever I do."

"Can't we challenge it and insist —"

"Not in this world. They have at least one other man downstairs — in Cairo, a Turk by the way, before I was blind, of course. Not up to Mr. Kuromi, I expect —"

"Cool again?" asked Miss Darragh sociably. It was her approach that had sent Carrados off into irrelevancies. "Was the experience up to anticipation?"

"Yes, I think I may say it was," admitted Hulse guardedly. "There is certainly a lot to learn here. I expect you've seen it all before?"

"Oh, no. It is a great honour to get Mr. Kuromi to 'show it off,' as he quaintly calls it."

"Yes, I should say so," replied the disillusioned young man with deadly simplicity. "I quite feel that."

"J. B. H. is getting strung up," thought Carrados. "He may say something unfortunate presently."

So he deftly insinuated himself into the conversation and for a few minutes the commonplaces of the topic were rigidly maintained.

"Care for a hand at auction?" suggested Darragh, joining the group. He had no desire to keep his guests a minute longer than he need, but at the same time it was his line to behave quite naturally until they left. "Oh, but I forgot — Mr. Carrados —"

"I am well content to sit and listen," Carrados assured him. "Consider how often I have to do that without the entertainment of a game to listen to! And you are four without me."

"It really hardly seems —" began Violet.

"I'm sure Max will feel it if he thinks that he is depriving us," put in Hulse loyally, so with some more polite protestation it was arranged and the game began, Carrados remaining where he was. In the circumstances a very high standard of bridge could not be looked for; the calling was a little wild; the play more than a little loose; the laughter rather shrill or rather flat; the conversation between the hands forced and spasmodic. All were playing for time in their several interpretations of it; the blind man alone was thinking beyond the immediate moment.

Presently there was a more genuine burst of laughter than any hitherto. Kato had revoked, and, confronted with it, had made a naïve excuse. Carrados rose with the intention of going nearer when a distressing thing occurred. Half-way across the room he seemed to slip, plunged forward helplessly, and came to the floor, involved in a light table as he fell. All the players were on their feet in an instant. Darragh assisted his guest to rise; Violet took an arm; Kato looked about the floor curiously, and Hulse — Hulse stared hard at Max and wondered what the thunder this portended.

"Clumsy, clumsy," murmured Carrados beneath his breath. "Forgive me, Miss Darragh."

"Oh, Mr. Carrados!" she exclaimed in genuine distress. "Aren't you really hurt?"

"Not a bit of it," he declared lightly. "Or at all events," he amended, bearing rather more heavily upon her support as he took a step, "nothing to speak of."

"Here is pencil," said Kuromi, picking one up from the polished floor. "You must have slipped on this."

"Stepping on a pencil is like that," contributed Hulse wisely. "It acts as a kind of roller-skate."

"Please don't interrupt the game any more," pleaded the victim. "At the most, at the very worst, it is

only — oh! — a negligible strain."

"I don't know that any strain, especially of the ankle, is negligible, Mr. Carrados," said Darragh with cunning foresight. "I think it perhaps ought to be seen to."

"A compress when I get back will be all that is required," maintained Carrados. "I should hate to break up the evening."

"Don't consider that for a moment," urged the host hospitably. "If you really think that it would be wiser in the end —"

"Well, perhaps —" assented the other, weakening in his resolution.

"Shall I 'phone up a taxi?" asked Violet.

"Thank you, if you would be so kind — or, no; perhaps my own car would be rather easier in the circumstances. My man will be about, so that it will take very little longer."

"I'll get through for you," volunteered Darragh. "What's your number?"

The telephone was in a corner of the room. The connection was soon obtained and Darragh turned to his guest for the message.

"I'd better speak," said Carrados — he had limped across on Hulse's arm — taking over the receiver. "Excellent fellow, but he'd probably conclude that I'd been killed. . . . That you, Parkinson? . . . Yes, at 155 Densham Gardens. I'm held up here by a slight accident. . . . No, no, nothing serious, but I might have some difficulty in getting back without assistance. Tell Harris I shall need him after all, as soon as he can get here — the car that's handiest. That's — oh, and, Parkinson, bring along a couple of substantial walking-sticks with you. Any time now. That's all. . . . Yes . . . yes." He put up the receiver with a thrill of satisfaction that he had got his message safely through. "Held up" — a phrase at once harmless and significant — was the arranged shift-key into code. It was easy for a blind man to receive some hurt that held him up. Once or twice Carrados's investigations had got him into tight places, but in one way or another he had invariably got out again.

"How far is your place away?" someone asked, and out of the reply a time-marking conversation on the subject of getting about London's darkened streets and locomotion in general arose. Under cover of this Kato drew Darragh aside to the deserted card-table.

"Not your pencil, Darragh?" he said quietly, displaying the one he had picked up.

"No; why?"

"I not altogether like this, is why," replied the Japanese. "I think it Carrados' own pencil. That man have too many ways of doing things,

Darragh. It was mistake to let him 'phone."

"Oh, nonsense; you heard what he said. Don't get jumpy, man. The thing has gone like clockwork."

"So far, yes. But I think I better go now and come back in one hour or so, safer for all much."

Darragh, for very good reasons, had the strongest objections to allowing his accomplice an opportunity of examining the spoil alone. "Look here, Katty," he said with decision, "I must have you in case there does come a scrimmage. I'll tell Phillips to fasten the front door well, and then we can see that it's all right before anyone comes in. If it is, there's no need for you to run away; if there's the least doubt we can knock these two out and have plenty of time to clear by the back way we've got." Without giving Kato any chance of raising further objection he turned to his guests again.

"I think I remember your tastes, Hulse," he said suavely. "I hope that you have no objection to Scotch whisky, Mr. Carrados? We still have a few bottles left. Or perhaps you prefer champagne?"

Carrados had very little intention of drinking anything in that house, nor did he think that with ordinary procrastination it would be necessary.

"You are very kind," he replied tentatively. "Should you permit the invalid either, Miss Darragh?"

"Oh, yes, in moderation," she smiled. "I think I hear your car," she added, and stepping to the window ventured to peep out.

It was true. Mr. Darragh had run it a shade too fine for once. For a moment he hesitated which course to take — to see who was arriving or to convey a warning to his henchman down below. He had turned towards the door when Violet's startled voice recalled him to the window.

"Hugh!" she called sharply. "Here, Hugh," and as he reached her, in a breathless whisper, "There are men inside the car — two more at least."

Darragh had to decide very quickly this time. His choice was not without its element of fineness. "Go down and see about it, Katty," he said, looking Kato straight in the eyes. "And tell Phillips about the whisky."

"Door locked," said the Japanese tersely. "Key other side."

"The key was on this side," exclaimed Darragh fiercely. "Hulse —"

"Hell!" retorted Beringer expressively. "That jacket doesn't go out of the room without me this journey."

Darragh had him covered before he had finished speaking.

"Quick," he rapped out. "I'll give you up to three, and if the key isn't

out then, by God, I'll plug you, Hulse! One, two —"

The little "ping!" that followed was not the automatic speaking, but the release of the electric light switch as Carrados, unmarked among this climax, pressed it up. In the absolute blackness that followed Darragh spun round to face the direction of this new opponent.

"Shoot by all means, Mr. Darragh, if you are used to firing in the dark," said Carrados's imperturbable voice. "But in any case remember that I am. As I am a dead shot by sound, perhaps everyone had better remain exactly where he — or she, I regret to have to add, Miss Darragh — now is."

"You dog!" spat out Darragh.

"I should not even talk," advised the blind man. "I am listening for my friends and I might easily mistake your motive among the hum of conversation."

He had not long to wait. In all innocence Phillips had opened the door to Parkinson, and immeasurably to his surprise two formidable-looking men of official type had followed in from somewhere. By instinct — or possibly a momentary ray of light had been their guide — they came direct to the locked door.

"Parkinson," called Carrados.

"Yes, sir," replied that model attendant.

"We are all in here; Mr. Hulse and myself, and three — I am afraid that I can make no exception — three unfriendlies. At the moment the electric light is out of action, the key of the locked door has been mislaid, and firearms are being promiscuously flourished in the dark. That is the position. Now if you have the key, Hulse —"

"I have," replied Hulse grimly, "but for a fact I dropped it down my neck out of harm's way and where the plague it's got to —"

As it happened the key was not required. The heavier of the officers outside, believing in the element of surprise, stood upon one foot and shot the other forward with the force of an engine piston-rod. The shattered door swung inward and the three men rushed into the room.

Darragh had made up his mind, and as the door crashed he raised his hand to fire into the thick. But at the moment the light flashed on again and almost instantly was gone. Before his dazzled eyes and startled mind could adjust themselves to this he was borne down. When he rose again his hands were manacled.

"So," he breathed laboriously, bending a vindictive eye upon his outwitter. "When next we meet it will be my turn, I think."

"We shall never meet again," replied Carrados impassively. "There

is no other turn for you, Darragh."

"But where the blazes has Kuromi got to?" demanded Hulse with sharp concern. "He can't have quit?"

One of the policemen walked to a table in the farthest corner of the room, looked down beyond it, and silently raised a beckoning hand. They joined him there.

"Rum way these foreigners have of doing things," remarked the other disapprovingly. "Now who the Hanover would ever think of a job like that?"

"I suppose," mused the blind man, as he waited for the official arrangements to go through, "that presently I shall have to live up to Hulse's overwhelming bewonderment. And yet if I pointed out to him that the button-hole of the coat he is now wearing still has a stitch in it to keep it in shape and could not by any possibility . . . Well, well, perhaps better not. It is a mistake for the conjurer to explain."

The Adventure of
THE BLIND BULLET

by ELLERY QUEEN

The Characters

ELLERY QUEEN	*the detective*
NIKKI PORTER	*his secretary*
INSPECTOR QUEEN	*his father*
SERGEANT VELIE	*of Inspector Queen's staff*
KIP FARNUM	*multimillionaire railroad magnate*
BROCCO	*his bodyguard*
MAX	*his valet*
JOANNA FARNUM	*his niece and heiress*
DICK HAWLEY	*Joanna's fiancé*
CONDUCTOR	*on the Maine express*

Scene

A Town House — The Queen Apartment — A Private Railroad Car

SCENE 1: *Farnum's Town House*

(*Brocco is oiling Farnum's guns in Farnum's quarters. Farnum is a bluff, masterful, middle-aged giant. He is talking into a telephone.*)

FARNUM: That's his hard luck. He's standing in my way, Hollis. Sell him out . . . Yes. And tell Struthers to phone me at my hunting lodge in Maine tomorrow morning. I'll be there then. (*He hangs up.*) Well, that's that. How are you coming with those guns, Brocco?

BROCCO: (*He is a tough, uncouth Italian*) It's-a fine, Boss. (*He works the breech of the gun a few times.*)

FARNUM: (*Chuckling*) Old Betsy here — true-blue! Wonderful weapon. Hand me the gun-oil, Brocco.

BROCCO: Yeah, Boss. How much you wanna bet I getta bigger bag than you this-a trip, Boss?

FARNUM: Your week's salary, Brocco! (*He laughs.*) I'll outshoot you once before I die.

BROCCO: It's a bet. But don' talk about "die," Mr. Farnum. You die, I lost-a my job!

FARNUM: I'll admit you can't "guard" my "body" past a burial service. . . . There now, Betsy old girl — your barrel's shining like Joanna's eyes. (*The door opens off. Sharply*) Yes, Max? What is it?

MAX: (*He is a foreigner, a Viennese — cold and efficient.*) Here is a letter, Mr. Farnum. It is just now left under the front door of the servants' quarters.

FARNUM: Service entrance! Let's have it, Max.

MAX: Yes, sir. (*Farnum rips open the envelope.*)

FARNUM: (*As he removes letter*) And Max. (MAX: "*Yes, sir?*") Don't forget to pack my new hunting jacket.

MAX: Yes, Mr. Farnum. (*He exits.*)

FARNUM: Now what's this mysterious letter? (*He utters a slight exclamation as he reads, then laughs.*) Brocco — read this!

BROCCO: Huh? (*Brocco reads.*) What's-a so funny, Boss?

FARNUM: (*Chuckling*) Probably five million crackpots in this country, and they all write to me!

BROCCO: (*Grimly*) Mr. Farnum, I don' like it.

FARNUM: Oh, give me that, Brocco! (*He crumples the letter.*) Wastebasket's the only place for stuff like this. (*The door opens off.*)

JOANNA: (*She is a young society girl.*) Uncle Kip! Are you decent?

FARNUM: Joanna honey! Come in, come in.

JOANNA: In with you, Dick. . . . Mind if my handsome beau enters your sanctum, too, Uncle Kip?

HAWLEY: (*He is a Back Bay product.*) Hi, Mr. Farnum.

FARNUM: (*Sourly*) 'Lo, Hawley. When'd *you* get into town?

HAWLEY: Just flew my ship down from Boston. Joanna tells me you decided this morning to go on a hunting trip, sir.

JOANNA: You don't mind Dick's coming along, do you, Uncle?

FARNUM: (*Briefly*) Glad to have you. Almost finished with those guns, Brocco? (*Brocco grunts.*)

JOANNA: Uncle Kip, what's all this about somebody slipping a letter for you under the side door? Max told me —

FARNUM: (*Quickly*) Nothing, Joanna. Nothing at all.

JOANNA: You're sure there's nothing wrong?

FARNUM: (*Laughing*) Fuss-budget! Brocco, bring those guns into my den! (*He exits.*)

JOANNA: Brocco! What was in that letter to Uncle?

BROCCO: You better look, Miss Farnum. Wastebasket.

JOANNA: Fish it out, Dick! (*Hawley obeys.*)

BROCCO: It's a cock-eye one, Miss Farnum. I don' like it.

FARNUM: (*From the den*) Brocco! Fetch those guns, I said!

BROCCO: (*Hastily*) Comin', Boss! (*Low*) You do somepin' 'bout it, Miss Farnum! (*Brocco exits.*)

HAWLEY: Here's the letter, Joanna.

JOANNA: Give it to me, Dick! (*Reading*) "Dear . . . Mister . . . Farnum . . ." Dick! It's —

HAWLEY: (*Bored*) The usual stupid twaddle. Let's go somewhere, Jo, and . . . talk. It's been a whole week . . .

JOANNA: Twaddle! Dick Hawley, sometimes you're as — as near-sighted as Uncle Kip! (*She begins to cry.*)

HAWLEY: But Joanna, it isn't as if this were something new! People in your uncle's position are always getting letters like this. *He's* received hundreds —

JOANNA: This one frightens me. (*Abruptly*) Dick, I'm going to call in a detective.

HAWLEY: Detective! (*Laughs.*) Isn't Brocco enough?

JOANNA: Oh, Brocco's all right as a bodyguard, but . . . this is going to take finesse, Dick. Stand by Uncle's door! I don't want him to hear me telephone.

HAWLEY: All right, Joanna, but whom are you going to call?

JOANNA: The best detective in New York. (*She picks up the phone.*) Information? Give me the phone-number of Mr. Ellery Queen!

SCENE 2: *The Queen Apartment*

JOANNA: Yes, Mr. Hawley is my fiancé, Mr. Queen.

HAWLEY: Sort of silly, this business. I'm sure you'll agree with me, Queen.

ELLERY QUEEN: We'll see, Mr. Hawley. Nikki, notes.

NIKKI PORTER: (*Sighing*) All ready, Mr. Queen. Fire away.

INSPECTOR QUEEN: One minute. Miss Farnum — this uncle you're so concerned about — is he the railroad Farnum?

JOANNA: Yes, Inspector Queen.

SERGEANT VELIE: (*Awed*) The multi-millionaire typhoon!

NIKKI: Then you must be the Joanna Farnum who's always being called "the richest heiress in America"!

JOANNA: (*Wearily*) That's me. Being Uncle Kip's niece and only heir is sometimes an awful pain in the neck.

VELIE: I could stand a stiff neck like that myself.

ELLERY: About the message you mentioned, Miss Farnum. May I see it, please?

JOANNA: Here, Mr. Queen. It's scared the daylights out of me.

ELLERY: Mmm. Usual cheap paper, pencilled printing . . . no stamp, no clue on the envelope. . . .

INSPECTOR: Read it out loud, son.

ELLERY: (*Slowly*) "Dear Mr. Farnum: You will die today, this Saturday afternoon, at exactly 5.59."

NIKKI: At — *what?*

HAWLEY: (*Yawning*) What's there about women that makes them take emotional bird-seed like this seriously?

INSPECTOR: One moment, Mr. Hawley! Anything else, son?

ELLERY: A P.S. It says — Eastern Daylight Saving Time.

VELIE: A gag-man! Any signature, Mr. Queen?

ELLERY: No, Sergeant. 5.59 P.M. Eastern Daylight Saving Time! What d'ye think, Dad?

INSPECTOR: (*Slowly*) I'd say it was a nut letter, except for that 5.59. That's *so* nutty it might be sane.

JOANNA: What did I tell you, Dick?

ELLERY: (*Thoughtfully*) Just where will your uncle be at 5.59 this afternoon, Miss Farnum?

JOANNA: We'll all be in Uncle's private railroad car. It's being hooked onto the 1.40 Maine express.

HAWLEY: We're going up to Mr. Farnum's lodge in Maine for a few days' shooting, Queen.

VELIE: Who's in this party, anyway?

JOANNA: Uncle Kip, Mr. Hawley and I, Uncle's bodyguard, Brocco, and Uncle's valet, Max.

ELLERY: Mmm. This message is undoubtedly the work of a disordered mind, Miss Farnum, but it's dangerous just the same. There's a calm boastfulness, a deadly confidence, in the tone that carries conviction.

NIKKI: Exactly 5.59 . . . Sounds like somebody who knows just what he's doing.

INSPECTOR (*Grimly*) If I were you, Miss Farnum, I'd get your uncle to call off this hunting trip.

JOANNA: Impossible. Uncle Kip would just laugh and call me a baby.

ELLERY: (*Grimly*) Then I think we'd better go along, Miss Farnum!

JOANNA: Would you? That's so kind of you, Mr. Queen!

HAWLEY: If he knew Joanna'd consulted the police, the old boy would be quite angry.

ELLERY: Then we'll act as your fiancée's *guests*, Mr. Hawley. Miss Farnum, we'll meet you at the train.

JOANNA: I don't know how to thank you. Dick — come on. I don't want Uncle to be suspicious. You know how *he* is. See you all this afternoon. . . .

ELLERY: Yes. See Miss Farnum and Mr. Hawley out, Nikki. (*Nikki does so.*)

INSPECTOR: Velie! Make arrangements to have Farnum's private railroad car searched before train-time.

VELIE: Time-bomb, huh? I gotcha, Inspector.

INSPECTOR: And see that a squad of plain-clothes men guards the car till the train leaves the station.

ELLERY: How about checking the route, Dad?

VELIE: Yeah, this *might* be a train-wreck idea.

INSPECTOR: (*Grimly*) Notify the General Superintendent of the railroad to have the main express track examined all along the line for explosives or tampering with the rails.

ELLERY: He's to be especially careful, Sergeant, about the section of track over which the train's scheduled to pass at 5.59 this afternoon. (*Velie grunts.*)

NIKKI: (*Returning breathless*) Isn't she *beautiful?* Isn't he *awful?* What's happening? Have I missed anything?

INSPECTOR: We're taking a few elementary precautions, Nikki.

VELIE: They certainly oughta do the trick.

ELLERY: They should. And yet . . . Get busy, Sergeant! I won't breathe easily till after 5.59 tonight!

SCENE 3: *Private Car on Maine Express, Grand Central Station*

(*There is the usual bustle of passengers on the station platform.*)

DETECTIVE: Sorry, lady. Coaches up ahead. This is a private car. (OTHER MAN: "Keep moving, please!")

ELLERY: (*Approaching*) Well, Dad?

NIKKI: (*Same*) Anything exciting happen, Inspector?

INSPECTOR: Nah. Car's been checked. Everything's okay.

ELLERY: Mr. Farnum aboard yet?

INSPECTOR: They're all here. There's the girl now, with Velie.

NIKKI: Hi, there, Joanna! (*Joanna greets her.*) It's all right to call you Joanna, isn't it, Miss Farnum? If we're supposed to be friends of yours —

JOANNA: Please do, Nikki. Inspector! Mr. Queen! I'm so glad.

VELIE: The little lady was gettin' anxious.

INSPECTOR: Nothing to worry about, Miss Farnum. Everything is taken care of.

ELLERY: We'd better get into the car. Train's about ready to leave.

INSPECTOR: (*Low*) Velie, you stay out here till the last second!

VELIE: Yeah. Flint's on the observation platform, so the rear's covered, too. He'll hop off when she starts.

JOANNA: In here, please. (*She opens the car door, and closes it.*) Uncle Kip's in his room.

NIKKI: Is this a *railroad* car?

INSPECTOR: (*Chuckling*) Looks more like Valhalla. (*Joanna knocks on*

her uncle's door.)

JOANNA: (*Calling*) Uncle Kip!

FARNUM: Come in, Joanna. (*She opens the door.*) Get through, Max, will you?

MAX: I have just to wax your mustache, Mr. Farnum.

JOANNA: Oh, I'm sorry, Uncle Kip! We'll come back later.

FARNUM: (*Heartily*) Nonsense! Max is finished shaving and barbering me. These your friends, Joanna?

JOANNA: (*Nervously*) Yes, Uncle. May I present — Miss Porter . . . Mr. Queen . . . senior and junior . . . my uncle . . . (*They murmur polite greetings.*)

INSPECTOR: Mighty nice of you, Mr. Farnum. I've been looking forward to a little shooting.

FARNUM: (*Slyly*) Know how to handle guns, do you . . . *Mr.* Queen?

JOANNA: (*Dismayed*) Uncle Kip! You *know!*

FARNUM: 'Course I know, you little conniver! (*He laughs heartily.*)

MAX: (*Reproachfully*) How can I wax the mustache, Mr. Farnum, when you say ho-ho?

FARNUM: Sorry, Max! Why, I keep my eyes open, chickadee. All these "innocent-looking" plug-uglies on the platform! (*Chuckles.*) And of course I've heard of Inspector Richard Queen.

JOANNA: It's only because I've been so frantic, Uncle.

ELLERY: Miss Farnum came to us, Mr. Farnum — told us all about that threatening letter you received —

FARNUM: You're *Ellery* Queen, aren't you?

ELLERY: (*Amused*) Guilty, Mr. Farnum.

NIKKI: Here goes our hunting trip!

FARNUM: Not at all. Now you're here, you stay. One condition, though. (*Laughs.*) We forget all this nonsense about somebody killing me at 5.59.

HAWLEY: (*Off somewhere*) Joanna! Where are you?

FARNUM: (*Laughing*) There's your love-sick Boston tomcat yowling for you, darlin'. Put him out of his misery.

JOANNA: Is that a nice thing to say, Uncle? Nikki, come with me — I'll show you the rest of the car.

NIKKI: I'm dying to see it, Joanna. (*They exit.*)

MAX: I am finished, Mr. Farnum.

FARNUM: Get out, Max! And shut the door behind you!

MAX: Yes, Mr. Farnum. (*He leaves.*)

FARNUM: (*Very serious*) Now, gentlemen, we can talk!

ELLERY: (*Quietly*) I thought there was something spurious in the ring of your laugh, Mr. Farnum.

INSPECTOR: Putting on an act for your niece's sake, eh?

FARNUM: (*Very nervous*) Yes. Yes.

I must admit — this thing's made me — nervous. Death at 5.59! Wish I'd had the courage to call you myself. Too proud. . . . Or call the trip off. But I'm stubborn. Fool, eh?

INSPECTOR: It's your life, Mr. Farnum. Any idea who's behind it?

FARNUM: It might be one of a thousand people. I've — well, business is business, and the men who've gone on the rocks through business dealings with me . . .

ELLERY: (*Crisply*) I think we understand, Mr. Farnum. Every possible precaution's been taken.

FARNUM: I'm ever so grateful, gentlemen.

INSPECTOR: I want to make sure there's no slip-up at the last minute. Come on, Ellery. (*They leave Farnum's room. The train lurches.*) Here we go!

CONDUCTOR: (*Off*) 'Boooooooard!

ELLERY: For a modern Viking — six feet tall, two hundred pounds, iron jaw . . . a blue-eyed, yellow-haired giant . . . our millionaire friend seems awfully scared, Dad!

INSPECTOR: Guilty conscience. (*Grimly*) Ellery, something tells me this trip's going to be no picnic! (*The train pulls out of the station.*)

SCENE 4: *Same, En Route*

(*The click of rails accompanies this scene.*)

NIKKI: (*Nervous*) What time is it now, Ellery?

ELLERY: (*Same*) 5.56. Three minutes to go!

NIKKI: (*Whisper*) So soon? Ellery, I know I'm being a fool, but I have the . . . funniest feeling. . . .

ELLERY: I know. I have it, too. And yet — what can go wrong? This car is impregnable. Only Farnum, his niece, her fiancé, and the valet and bodyguard are in the car besides ourselves. Dad's sitting just behind Farnum, so close he can touch the man. Velie's guarding the observation platform at the rear of the car. *We're* guarding the door at the front of the car, where it connects with the rest of the train. Windows all sealed tight. Nikki, a moth couldn't get in here!

Nikki: (*Wearily*) I guess I'm just crazy. (*The doorknob rattles.*) Oh! Who's that?

ELLERY: Relax, Nikki. It's the conductor. (*Opens door.*) What is it, Conductor?

CONDUCTOR: (*Off*) Sorry, sir, but you'll have to let me in.

ELLERY: (*Sharply*) What for?

CONDUCTOR: I've got to get to that control-box just behind you. (*Closes door.*) I won't be a minute.

NIKKI: (*Whisper*) Ellery, maybe he's disguised or something!

ELLERY: Nikki . . . ! Control-box?

What's that for, Conductor?

CONDUCTOR: I have to switch the lights on in this car.

NIKKI: Lights! It's broad daylight! Ellery, it's a trick — (*Opens control-box with click.*)

ELLERY: What do you need lights for, Conductor?

CONDUCTOR: We'll be in the Stafford Tunnel in a minute —

ELLERY: Tunnel! (*Tensely*) At 5.59 we'll be in a *tunnel?*

CONDUCTOR: Yes, sir. Three-mile stretch right under a mountain. (*Click. Surprised.*) Uh-uh. Lights don't work! I'll have to try the emergency switch. (*Click.*)

NIKKI: That doesn't work, either! Ellery —

ELLERY: (*Quickly*) Someone's short-circuited the lighting system in this car — probably before the train left the station. Stop the train!

CONDUCTOR: (*Stupidly*) What for? I'll have this fixed in a minute —

ELLERY: (*Shouting*) You idiot! Where's the emergency cord?

NIKKI: (*Screaming*) It's too late! *We're in the tunnel!* Ellery, where are you? *It's pitch-dark!*

ELLERY: Here, hold on to me! Conductor, get a lantern, quick! (*He and Nikki run into the private car.*) Dad! Mr. Farnum! Drop to the floor! *Duck!*

NIKKI: (*Panting*) I can't see. This ought to be the main part of the car. . . . (*There is a very loud revolver shot in the confined space of the car. Nikki screams.*) That flash of fire! (*There is confusion ahead.*) A revolver — someone just shot off a revolver in the middle of the car!

ELLERY: (*Shouting*) Flash came from about here — He's gone, blast him! (*Joanna is screaming in the darkness.*)

INSPECTOR: Stop that screaming! Mr. Farnum — where are you?

HAWLEY: *Joanna!* Are you all right?

MAX: The lights who put out?

BROCCO: Boss! It's-a me, Brocco! You okay?

VELIE: (*Arriving from the rear*) What happened? Put a light on!

NIKKI: (*Screaming*) Sergeant Velie! Someone fired a shot —

INSPECTOR: Mr. Farnum. Mr. Farnum!

ELLERY: Hurry with that lantern, Conductor!

CONDUCTOR: (*Entering*) Here's the lantern! Here I am! What — (*Hoarsely*) *Look!* (*All gasp. Nikki whimpers. Joanna screams:* "Uncle Kip!" *and begins to sob hysterically.*)

INSPECTOR: (*Shocked*) Farnum's — *dead.* Dead!

VELIE: Shot through the mouth.

ELLERY: At 5.59. (*Tensely*) *At exactly 5.59!*

SCENE 5: *Same, on a Siding, Later*

(*The car is on a siding, there is an engine puffing off. There is a group on the car platform.*)

INSPECTOR: All right, we'll handle it, Chief. It's really a New York case, anyway.

LOCAL POLICE CHIEF: Thanks, Inspector Queen! (*He leaves, and other police:* "Glad it's your baby, Inspector!" etc.)

INSPECTOR: (*Grimly*) The fine old art of passing the buck. (*Shouting*) Conductor! How long is the private car going to stay on this siding?

CONDUCTOR: We're hooking an engine on now, Inspector!

INSPECTOR: Well, let's go back into the car, son.

ELLERY: Remarkable crime. (*They enter the car.*) Remarkable!

INSPECTOR: Screwy! Here we find a revolver in the middle of the car, about where the flash came from — killer just dropped the gun and sat down somewhere in the dark.

ELLERY: Any chance of identifying the weapon, Dad?

INSPECTOR: Not much. An old baby bought in some hockshop.

ELLERY: (*Thoughtfully*) Brilliant plan. Painstakingly worked out by a warped and criminal mind. (*They find Nikki and Hawley inside and Joanna crying*) Well, Nikki. (*Gently*) Miss Farnum . . .

NIKKI: She's a little better now, Ellery. Just keep your head on my shoulder, Joanna. Don't think.

JOANNA: (*Crying*) Uncle Kip — he was alive — now he's . . . he's . . .

INSPECTOR: We'll be on our way back to New York in a few minutes, Miss Farnum. (*The train lurches as it is hitched onto another train.*)

VELIE: (*Off — grimly*) Come on, you two. Get in here!

MAX: (*Off — cold*) You will please keep off me your hands.

BROCCO: (*Off*) It's-a the right dope, Sarge. Max done it!

INSPECTOR: (*Sharply*) What's this, Velie?

VELIE: (*Fading on*) I been doin' a little detectin' on my own, Inspector. Tell the Inspector, Brocco.

BROCCO: I got my eye on this-a guy a long time, Inspector. He ain't no valet! He's a *phony*.

INSPECTOR: (*Sharply*) Phony!

VELIE: Brocco says he checked Max's papers. Seems like this smooth lad who's been valayin' for Farnum is really the son of an Austrian big muck who was ruined by Farnum in a business deal a few years back.

BROCCO: Yeah, an' Max's ol' man — he shot himself!

ELLERY: (*Softly*) Is this true, Max?

INSPECTOR: (*Same*) Farnum didn't know who you really were, did he? False references, huh?

MAX: I suppose you can find out.

Yes.

VELIE: You wouldn't-a bumped Farnum off 'cause he ruined your father and drove him to suicide, now, would ya?

BROCCO: Yeah, an' this Max — he useta be a captain in the Austrian army! He got-a lotta medals for shootin'!

INSPECTOR: Anything to contribute to the conversation, Max?

MAX: (*Coldly*) The fact is, I had every intention to shoot this animal Farnum. The world is better off without him. (*Joanna cries.*) They make me talk, Miss Farnum. You I have nothing against.

ELLERY: Then you admit to having shot Mr. Farnum?

MAX: I am sorry, Mr. Queen. I cannot oblige you. But there are here others who had equal motive. For example, Miss Farnum's fiancé!

HAWLEY: Of all the — (*Furious*) The fellow's trying to spread suspicion to cover himself up!

MAX: (*Contemptuously*) In your case, Mr. Hawley, one need not spread very hard. You are a mere fortune-hunter. Now that Farnum is dead, his niece inherits the *kolossal* Farnum fortune. When you marry Miss Farnum —

HAWLEY: Do I have to sit here and listen to this drivel?

JOANNA: (*Dully*) Dick. Please. It doesn't matter.

NIKKI: (*Low*) Let them talk, Mr. Hawley. Don't interrupt.

INSPECTOR: (*Softly*) And who else wanted to kill Farnum, Max?

MAX: (*Venomously*) This gentleman here — Brocco, the bodyguard!

BROCCO: *Me!* (*He snarls.*) Take-a that back, Max. Take it back!

MAX: You spy on me, Brocco, I spy on you. You are a hired assassin for Farnum's worst business enemy. I followed you one night. I saw you meet the man. Deny it!

BROCCO: (*Nervous*) Well . . . all-a right. I meet this guy. He make-a me an offer. I say nuts! I don't do things like that. That's all. (*Low*) For this-a, Max, I'll get you good some day!

MAX: (*Pleasantly*) Swine.

ELLERY: Dad. One moment. (*Pause.* *INSPECTOR:* "Yes, son?" *in low tone.*) We're on the wrong track!

INSPECTOR: We've got to establish their *motives*, Ellery.

ELLERY: Yes, but motive isn't the important element of this case. I want to know, not *why* this crime was committed, but *how*.

INSPECTOR: (*Puzzled*) How? (*The train starts to move off.*)

NIKKI: We're moving.

VELIE: Goin' back to New York. Nice huntin'!

ELLERY: Yes, *how* the crime was committed, Dad. And when we

reach the Stafford Tunnel on our return trip, I'll explain why this is the most baffling crime in my experience!

SCENE 6: *Same, in the Stafford Tunnel* (*The train is running fast. All are in the car, bewildered.*)

VELIE: We're comin' to the tunnel, Mr. Queen.

ELLERY: Then I'll begin. Please remain seated exactly where you are. In a moment we'll plunge back into the tunnel. Just be very quiet. (*There is a roar as the train enters the tunnel.*) Close that observation-platform door, Sergeant!

VELIE: (*Shouting*) Right! (*He closes the car door.*)

ELLERY: We are now in total darkness, exactly as we were when Mr. Farnum was shot. Can anyone see anything? (*They cannot.*) Yet, *in this darkness*, the murderer stood at a distance of *twenty feet* from where Mr. Farnum was sitting, drew a revolver, and *still* in darkness, mind you, *fired a single accurate bullet into a vital spot in Farnum's body!* (*Quietly*) I ask: *How did the murderer find his mark?*

NIKKI: But Ellery, they're all crack shots.

ELLERY: The best marksman in the world, Nikki, *has to have light to shoot by* — and *this* marksman found his mark in total darkness! Well, let's see how it *might* have been done. Did the murderer throw a light of some sort on Farnum's figure?

INSPECTOR: Only light we saw from the killer's direction was the flash of his gun going off.

ELLERY: And the flash naturally came *after* the marksman aimed and fired. Well, then, did he aim by *sound?*

NIKKI: How could he, Ellery? Any sound would have been drowned out in the racket of the train!

INSPECTOR: Besides, I was sitting right behind Farnum, and I can testify there *was* no such sound.

ELLERY: Hmm. Farnum might have lit a match, or a lighter. . . .

INSPECTOR: He didn't.

MAX: Mr. Farnum did not smoke, Mr. Queen.

VELIE: Anyway, we didn't find any matches or lighter or flashlight on Farnum when we examined his body!

ELLERY: (*Muttering*) Extraordinary! We know the *murderer* had no light of his own to shoot by. We know *Farnum* gave the murderer no light to shoot by. How then did the murderer find his target with a single shot in the dark? That's the point. We *must* solve it! (*There is a time interlude . . . and the train emerges from the tunnel.*)

NIKKI: We're out of the tunnel.

VELIE: That's a relief. I was expectin' one o' those blind bullets in my back!

ELLERY: Blind bullet. . . . Wait! Can it be that — (*He begins to laugh.*)

INSPECTOR: What's the matter, son?

ELLERY: I *was* as blind as that bullet! Of course! There *is* one way it could have been done . . . so it *must* be the way the murderer did it!

NIKKI: Then you know how, Ellery?

ELLERY: Not only how, Nikki — but who!

ELLERY QUEEN *has just said that he knows the identity of the murderer of* KIP FARNUM, *and exactly how the murder was committed. Do you? You can have some additional fun by stopping here and trying to solve the double mystery before* ELLERY *reveals the solution. Naming the criminal and method of crime is not sufficient, if you play the game fairly. You must get the correct reasoning, too. . . . Now go ahead and read* ELLERY QUEEN'S *own solution to "The Adventure of the Blind Bullet."*

The Solution

SCENE 7: *Same, Returning to New York*

ELLERY: Before I name the murderer, I'll tell you how I know. We know the murderer *himself* used no light to shoot by. Yet he simply had to *have* light. Therefore there must have *been* light, and it could only have emanated from his target, Farnum!

NIKKI: But Ellery, Mr. Farnum didn't strike a match, or use a lighter or flashlight — that's a fact —

ELLERY: True, Farnum was not the source of light *consciously.* So he must have been the source of light *unconsciously.* That is, he gave forth light and didn't know it!

INSPECTOR: But how's that possible, son?

ELLERY: It's possible if the murderer *planted a source of light on Farnum's person beforehand* . . . before we entered the tunnel, before the crime. What could this have been? Well, it would have to be something that *in daylight* wouldn't be noticed — would not be visible — whereas *in darkness* it *would* be visible!

VELIE: (*Puzzled*) Somepin' that shines only in the dark?

NIKKI: I know! *Phosphorus!*

ELLERY: Yes, phosphorus! — The murderer planted some phosphorus on Farnum's person, the luminescence of which in darkness gave him his target! Now where on Farnum's person did the murderer put the phosphorus? Obviously, on the spot at which he later

fired. And where was that spot?

INSPECTOR: At Farnum's *mouth!* That's where he was shot!

ELLERY: Right. What's the color of common luminescent phosphorus?

VELIE: Yellowish, ain't it?

ELLERY: Yellowish. Now what feature in the immediate vicinity of Farnum's mouth is yellowish in color — so that the presence of yellow phosphorus on it wouldn't be noticed in daylight, before we entered the tunnel?

NIKKI: Mr. Farnum's *mustache! His blond mustache!*

ELLERY: Yes, we know he had a mustache. I even described its color when I said he was a "yellow-haired giant."

INSPECTOR: So someone planted phosphorus on Farnum's mustache, and we didn't notice the glow in the dark because the killer fired as soon as he spied it and we all naturally looked in the direction of the *shot*, not at Farnum.

NIKKI: But who could have applied phosphorus to Mr. Farnum's mustache? Surely he would have known it if someone started fooling around with his mustache, Ellery!

ELLERY: Yes, Farnum would have been suspicious if anyone in the world had touched his mustache *except one person.* But that person could have done it quite openly. And Farnum would never have suspected anything was wrong. In fact, the phosphorus was applied in front of *our* eyes, too! Who could this miracle-worker be? (*Pause.*) Come. Don't you see? *A barber.* A barber who trims and *waxes* a mustache! And who was Farnum's barber?

NIKKI: Max! It was *Max*, the valet.

ELLERY: Yes, it was Max — who used on Farnum's yellow mustache a special preparation of yellow phosphorus instead of mustache wax and thereby made Farnum himself carry to his death the light which Max had to have in order to commit his crime of revenge!

(*The music comes up.*)

S. O. S.

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(— Continued from other side)

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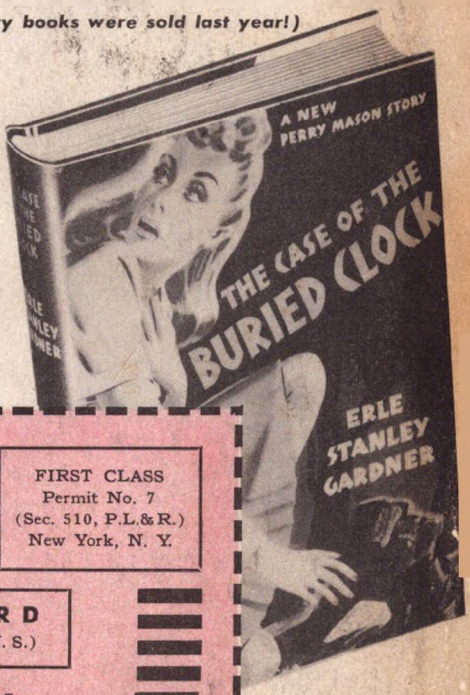

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