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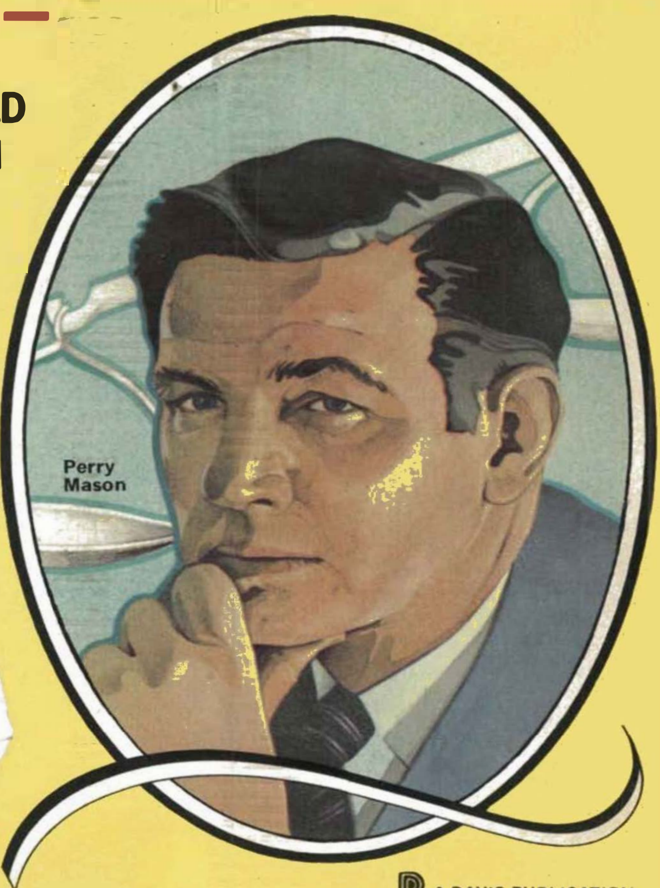

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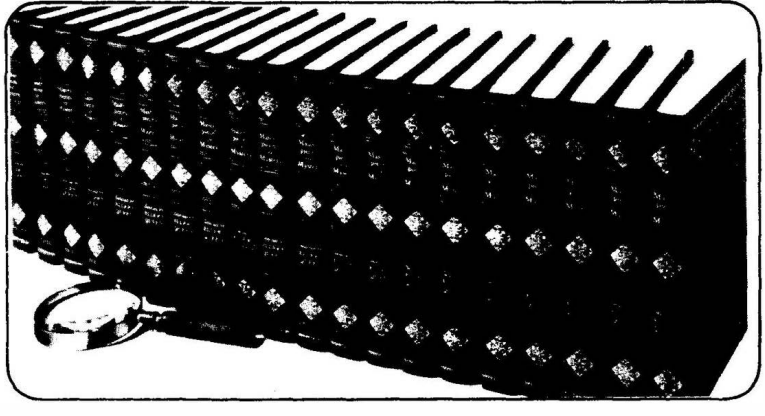

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a *NEW* Ehrengraf story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

Lawyer Martin Ehrengraf, a contemporary version of the early Randolph Mason created by Melville Davisson Post, had a simple philosophy as to the moral status of his clients: every Ehrengraf client was innocent, regardless of all evidence to the contrary. The dapper little lawyer also had another belief: whereas most people considered the opposite of innocence to be guilt, Ehrengraf's antonym for innocence was experience--in the William Blake sense . . .

THE EHRENGRAF EXPERIENCE

by *LAWRENCE BLOCK*

"Innocence," said Martin Ehrengraf. "There's the problem in a nutshell."

"Innocence is a problem?"

The little lawyer glanced around the prison cell, then turned to regard his client. "Precisely," he said. "If you weren't innocent you wouldn't be here."

"Oh, really?" Grantham Beale smiled, and while it was hardly worthy of inclusion in a toothpaste commercial, it was the first smile he'd managed since his conviction of first-degree murder charges just two weeks and four days earlier. "Then you're saying that innocent men go to prison while guilty men walk free."

"It happens that way more than you might care to believe," Ehrengraf said softly. "But no, that is not what I am saying."

"Oh?"

"I am not contrasting innocence and guilt, Mr. Beale. I know you are innocent of murder. That is almost beside the point. I work on the principle that all clients of Martin Ehrengraf are innocent of the crimes with which they have been charged, and this

innocence always emerges in due course. Indeed, this is more than an assumption on my part. It is the manner in which I make my living. I set high fees, Mr. Beale, but I collect them only when the innocence of my clients becomes a matter of public record. If my client goes to or remains in prison I collect nothing whatsoever, not even the expenses I incur on his behalf. So my clients are always innocent, Mr. Beale, just as you are innocent, in the sense that they are not guilty."

"Then why is my innocence a problem?"

"Ah, *your* innocence." Martin Ehrengraf smoothed the ends of his neatly trimmed mustache. His thin lips drew back in a smile, but the smile did not reach his deeply set dark eyes. He was, Grantham Beale noted, a superbly well-dressed little man, almost a dandy. He wore a Dartmouth green blazer with pearl buttons over a cream shirt with a tab collar. His slacks were flannel, modishly cuffed and pleated and the identical color of the shirt. His silk tie was a darker green than his jacket and sported a below-the-knot design in silver and bronze thread, a lion battling a unicorn. His cuff links matched his pearl blazer buttons. On his aristocratically small feet he wore highly polished seamless cordovan loafers, unadorned with tassels or braid, quite simple and quite elegant. Almost a dandy, Beale thought, but from what he'd heard, the man had the skill to carry it off. He wasn't all front. He had the reputation of getting results.

"*Your* innocence," Ehrengraf said again. "Your innocence is not merely the innocence that is the opposite of guilt. It is the innocence that is the opposite of experience. Do you know Blake?"

"Blake?"

"William Blake, the poet. You wouldn't know him personally, of course. He's been dead for over a century. He wrote two groups of poems early in his career, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience.* Each poem in the one book had a counterpart in the other. 'Tiger! tiger! burning bright In the forests of the night, What immortal hand or eye Could frame thy fearful symmetry?' Perhaps that poem is familiar to you, Mr. Beale?"

"I think I studied it in school."

"It's not unlikely. Well, you don't need a poetry lesson from me, sir, not in these depressing surroundings. Let me move a little more directly to the point. Innocence versus experience, Mr. Beale. You found yourself accused of a murder, sir, and you knew only that you had not committed it. And being innocent not only

of the murder itself but in Blake's sense of the word, you simply engaged a competent attorney and assumed things would work themselves out in short order. We live in an enlightened democracy, Mr. Beale, and we grow up knowing that courts exist to free the innocent and punish the guilty, that no one gets away with murder."

"And that's all nonsense, eh?" Grantham Beale smiled his second smile since hearing the jury's verdict. If nothing else, he thought, the spiffy little lawyer improved a man's spirits.

"I wouldn't call it nonsense," Ehrengraf said. "But after all is said and done, you're in prison and the real murderer is not."

"Walker Murchison."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The real murderer," Beale said. "I'm in prison and Walker Gladstone Murchison is free."

"Precisely. Because it is not enough to be guiltless, Mr. Beale. One must also be able to convince a jury of one's guiltlessness. In short, had you been less innocent and more experienced, you could have taken steps early on to assure you would not find yourself in your present condition."

"And what could I have done?"

"What you *have* done, at long last," said Martin Ehrengraf. "You could have called me immediately."

"Albert Speldron," Ehrengraf said. "The murder victim, shot three times in the heart at close range. The murder weapon was an unregistered handgun, a .38 revolver. It was subsequently located in the spare-tire well of your automobile."

"It wasn't my gun. I never saw it in my life until the police showed it to me."

"Of course you didn't," Ehrengraf said soothingly. "To continue. Albert Speldron was a loan shark. Not, however, the sort of gruff-voiced neckless thug who lends ten or twenty dollars at a time to longshoremen and factory hands and breaks their legs with a baseball bat if they're late paying the vig."

"Paying the what?"

"Ah, sweet innocence," Ehrengraf said. "The vig. Short for vigorish. It's a term used by the criminal element to describe the ongoing interest payments which a debtor must make to maintain his status."

"I never heard the term," Beale said, "but I paid it well enough.

I paid Speldron one thousand dollars a week and that didn't touch the principal."

"And you had borrowed how much?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"The jury apparently considered that a satisfactory motive for murder."

"Well, that's crazy," Beale said. "Why on earth would I want to kill Speldron? I didn't hate the man. He'd done me a service by lending me that money. I had a chance to buy a valuable stamp collection. That's my business, I buy and sell stamps, and I had an opportunity to get hold of an extraordinary collection, mostly U.S. and British Empire but a really exceptional lot of early German States as well, and there were also—well, before I get carried away, are you interested in postage stamps at all?"

"Only when I have a letter to mail."

"Oh. Well, this was a fine collection, let me say that much and leave it at that. The seller had to have all cash and the transaction had to go unrecorded. Taxes, you understand."

"Indeed I do. The system of taxation makes criminals of us all."

"I don't really think of it as criminal," Beale said.

"Few people do. But go on, sir."

"What more is there to say? I had to raise fifty thousand dollars on the quiet to buy the collection. By dealing with Speldron I was able to borrow the money without filling out a lot of forms or giving him anything but my word. I was quite confident I would triple my money by the time I broke up the collection and sold it in lots to a variety of dealers and collectors. I'll probably take in a total of fifty thousand out of the U.S. issues alone, and I know a buyer who will salivate when he gets a look at the German States issues."

"So it didn't bother you to pay Speldron his thousand a week."

"Not a bit. I figured to have half of the stamps sold within a couple of months, and the first thing I'd do would be to repay the fifty thousand dollars principal and close out the loan. I'd have paid eight or ten thousand dollars in interest, say, but what's that compared to a profit of fifty or a hundred thousand dollars? Speldron was doing me a favor and I appreciated it. Oh, he was doing himself a favor too—two percent interest per week didn't put him in the hardship category; but it was just good business for both of us, no question about it."

"You've dealt with him before?"

"Maybe a dozen times over the years. I've borrowed sums ranging between ten and seventy thousand dollars. I never heard the interest payments called vigorish before, but I always paid them promptly. And no one ever threatened to break my legs. We did business together, Speldron and I. And it always worked out very well for both of us."

"The prosecution argued that by killing Speldron you erased your debt to him. That's certainly a motive a jury can understand, Mr. Beale. In a world where men are commonly killed for the price of a bottle of whiskey, fifty thousand dollars does seem enough of a motive to kill a man."

"But I'd be crazy to kill for that sum. I'm not a pauper. If I was having trouble paying Speldron, all I had to do was sell the stamps."

"Suppose you had trouble selling them?"

"Then I could have liquidated other merchandise from my stock. I could have mortgaged my home. Why, I could have raised enough on the house alone to pay Speldron off three times over. That car they found the gun in, that's an Antonelli Scorpion. The car alone is worth half of what I owed Speldron."

"Indeed," Martin Ehrengraf said. "But this Walker Murchison. How does he come into the picture?"

"He killed Speldron."

"How do we know this, Mr. Beale?"

Beale got to his feet. He'd been sitting on his iron cot, leaving the cell's one chair for the lawyer. Now he stood up, stretched, and walked to the rear of the cell. For a moment he stood regarding some graffiti on the cell wall. Then he turned and looked at Ehrengraf

"Speldron and Murchison were partners," he said. "I only dealt with Speldron because he was the only one who dealt in unsecured loans. And Murchison had an insurance business in which Speldron did not participate. Their joint ventures included real estate, investments, and other activities where large sums of money moved around quickly with few records kept of exactly what took place."

"Shady operations," Ehrengraf said.

"For the most part. Not always illegal, not *entirely* illegal, but, yes, I like your word. Shady."

"So they were partners, and it is not unheard of for one to kill one's partner. To dissolve a partnership by the most direct means

available, as it were. Why should Murchison have killed Speldron?"

Beale shrugged. "Money," he suggested. "With all that cash floating around, you can bet Murchison made out handsomely on Speldron's death. I'll bet he put a lot more than fifty thousand unrecorded dollars into his pocket."

"That's your only reason for suspecting him?"

Beale shook his head. "The partnership had a secretary," he said. "Her name's Felicia. Young, long dark hair, flashing dark eyes, a body like a magazine centerfold and a face like a Chanel ad. Both partners were sleeping with her."

"Perhaps this was not a source of enmity."

"But it was. You see, Murchison's married to her."

"Ah."

"But there's an important reason why I know that Murchison killed Speldron." Beale stepped forward, stood over the seated attorney. "The gun was found in the trunk of my car," he said. "Wrapped in a filthy towel and stuffed in the spare-tire well. There were no fingerprints on the gun and it wasn't registered to me, but there it was in my car." Beale frowned momentarily, then drew a breath and plunged ahead. "It was put there to frame me."

"So it would seem."

"It had to be put there by somebody who knew I owed Speldron money. Somebody with inside information. The two of them were partners. I met Murchison any number of times when I went to the office to pay the interest, or vigorish as you called it. Why do they call it that?"

"I've no idea."

"Murchison knew I owed money. And Murchison and I never liked each other."

"Why?"

"We just didn't get along. The reason's not important. And there's more—I'm not just grasping at straws. It was Murchison who suggested I might have killed Speldron. A lot of men owed Speldron money and there were probably several of them who were in much stickier shape financially than I, but Murchison told the police I'd had a loud and bitter argument with Speldron two days before he was killed!"

"And had you?"

"No! Why, I never in my life argued with Speldron."

"Interesting." The little lawyer raised his hand to his mustache,

smoothing its tips delicately. His nails were manicured, Grantham Beale noted, and was there colorless nail polish on them? No, he observed, there was not. The little man might be something of a dandy but he was evidently not a fop.

"Did you meet Mr. Speldron on the day in question?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I made the interest payment and we exchanged pleasantries. There was nothing anyone could mistake for an argument."

"Ah."

"And even if there had been, Murchison wouldn't have known about it. He wasn't even in the office."

"Still more interesting," Ehrengraf said thoughtfully.

"It certainly is. But how can you possibly prove that he murdered his partner and framed me for it? You can't trap him into confessing, can you?"

"Murderers do confess."

"Not Murchison. You could try tracing the gun to him, I suppose, but the police tried to trace it to me and they couldn't do it. I just don't see—"

"Mr. Beale."

"Yes?"

"Why don't you sit down, Mr. Beale. Here, take this chair, I'm sure it's more comfortable than the edge of the bed. I'll stand for a moment. Mr. Beale, do you have a dollar?"

"They don't let us have money here."

"Then take this. It's a dollar I'm lending you." The lawyer's dark eyes glinted. "No interest, Mr. Beale. A personal loan, not a business transaction. Now, sir, please give me the dollar I've just lent you."

"Give it to you?"

"That's right. Thank you. You have now retained me, Mr. Beale, to look after your interests. The day you are released unconditionally from this prison you will owe me a fee of ninety thousand dollars. The fee will be all-inclusive. Any expenses will be mine to bear. Should I fail to secure your release you will owe me nothing."

"But—"

"Is that agreeable, sir?"

"But what are you going to do? Hire detectives? File an appeal? Try to get the case reopened?"

"When a man engages to save your life, Mr. Beale, do you re-

quire that he first outline his plans for you?"

"No, but—"

"Ninety thousand dollars. Payable only if I succeed. Are the terms agreeable?"

"Yes, but—"

"Mr. Beale, when next we meet you will owe me ninety thousand dollars plus whatever emotional gratitude comes naturally to you. Until then, sir, you owe me one dollar." The thin lips curled in a shadowy smile. "'The cut worm forgives the plow,' Mr. Beale. William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* 'The cut worm forgives the plow.' You might think about that, sir, until we meet again."

The second meeting of Martin Ehrengraf and Grantham Beale took place five weeks and four days later. On this occasion the lawyer wore a navy two-button suit with a subtle vertical stripe. His shoes were highly polished black wingtips, his shirt a pale blue broadcloth with contrasting white collar and cuffs. His necktie bore a half-inch-wide band of royal blue flanked by two narrower bands, one gold and the other a rather bright green, all on a navy field.

And this time Ehrengraf's client was also rather nicely turned out, although his tweed jacket and baggy flannels were hardly a match for the lawyer's suit. But Beale's attire was a great improvement over the shapeless gray prison garb he had worn previously, just as his office, a room filled with jumbled books and boxes, a desk covered with albums and stamps in and out of glassine envelopes, two worn leather chairs and a matching sagging sofa—just as all this comfortable disarray was a vast improvement over the spartan prison cell which had been the site of their earlier meeting.

Beale, seated behind his desk, gazed thoughtfully at Ehrengraf, who stood ramrod-straight, one hand on the desk top, the other at his side. "Ninety thousand dollars," Beale said levelly. "You must admit that's a bit rich, Mr. Ehrengraf."

"We agreed on the price."

"No argument. We did agree, and I'm a firm believer in the sanctity of verbal agreements. But it was my understanding that your fee would be payable if my liberty came about as a result of your efforts."

"You are free today."

"I am indeed, and I'll be free tomorrow, but I can't see how it was any of your doing."

"Ah," Ehrengraf said. His face bore an expression of infinite disappointment, a disappointment felt not so much with this particular client as with the entire human race. "You feel I did nothing for you?"

"I wouldn't say that. Perhaps you were taking steps to file an appeal. Perhaps you engaged detectives or did some detective work of your own. Perhaps in due course you would have found a way to get me out of prison, but in the meantime the unexpected happened and your services turned out to be unnecessary."

"The unexpected happened?"

"Well, who could have possibly anticipated it?" Beale shook his head in wonder. "Just think of it. Murchison went and got an attack of conscience. The scoundrel didn't have enough of a conscience to step forward and admit what he'd done, but he got to wondering what would happen if he died suddenly and I had to go on serving a life sentence for a crime he had committed. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his liberty while he lived but he wanted to be able to make amends if and when he died."

"Yes."

"So he prepared a letter," Beale went on. "Typed out a long letter explaining just why he had wanted his partner dead and how the unregistered gun had actually belonged to Speldron in the first place, and how he'd shot him and wrapped the gun in a towel and planted it in my car. Then he'd made up a story about my having had a fight with Albert Speldron, and of course that got the police looking in my direction, and the next thing I knew I was in jail. I saw the letter Murchison wrote. The police let me look at it. He went into complete detail."

"Considerate of him."

"And then he did the usual thing. Gave the letter to a lawyer with instructions that it be kept in his safe and opened only in the event of his death." Beale fiddled with a pair of stamp tongs, then set it down and looked directly at Martin Ehrengraf. "Do you suppose he had a premonition? For God's sake, Murchison was a young man, his health was good, and why should he anticipate dying? Maybe he did have a premonition."

"I doubt it."

"Then it's certainly a remarkable coincidence. A matter of weeks after turning this letter over to a lawyer, Murchison lost

control of his car on a curve. The car smashed right through the guard rail, plunged a couple hundred feet, and exploded on impact. I don't suppose the man knew what had happened to him."

"I suspect you're right."

"He was always a careful driver," Beale mused. "Perhaps he'd been drinking."

"Perhaps."

"And if he hadn't been decent enough to write that letter, I might be spending the rest of my life behind bars."

"How fortunate for you things turned out the way they did."

"Exactly," said Beale. "And so, although I truly appreciate what you've done on my behalf, whatever that may be, and although I don't doubt you could have secured my liberty in due course, although I'm sure I don't know how you might have managed it, nevertheless as far as your fee is concerned—"

"Mr. Beale."

"Yes?"

"Do you really believe that a detestable troll like W. G. Murchison would take pains to arrange for your liberty in the event of his death?"

"Well, perhaps I misjudged the man. Perhaps—"

"Murchison hated you, Mr. Beale. If he found he was dying, his one source of satisfaction would have been the knowledge that you were in prison for a crime you hadn't committed. I told you that you were an innocent, Mr. Beale, and a few weeks in prison has not dented or dulled your innocence. You actually think Murchison wrote that note?"

"You mean he didn't?"

"It was typed on a machine in his office," the lawyer said. "His own stationery was used, and the signature at the bottom is one many an expert would swear is Murchison's own."

"But he didn't write it?"

"Of course not." Martin Ehrengraf's hands hovered in the air before him. They might have been poised over an invisible typewriter or they might merely be looming as the talons of a bird of prey.

Grantham Beale stared at the little lawyer's hands in fascination. "*You* typed that letter," he said.

Ehrengraf shrugged.

"You—but Murchison left it with a lawyer!"

"The lawyer was not one Murchison had used in the past. Mur-

chison evidently selected a stranger from the Yellow Pages, as far as one can determine, and made contact with him over the telephone, explaining what he wanted the man to do for him. He then mailed the letter along with a postal money order to cover the attorney's fee and a covering note confirming the telephone conversation. It seems he did not use his own name in his discussions with the lawyer, and he signed an alias to his covering note and to the money order. The signature he wrote, though, does seem to be in his own handwriting."

Ehrengraf paused, and his right hand went to finger the knot of his necktie. This particular tie, rather more colorful than his usual choice, was that of the Caedmon Society of Oxford University, an organization to which Martin Ehrengraf did not belong. The tie was a souvenir of an earlier case and he tended to wear it on particularly happy occasions, moments of personal triumph.

"Murchison left specific instructions," he went on. "He would call the lawyer every Thursday, merely repeating the alias he had used. If ever a Thursday passed without a call, and if there was no call on Friday either, the lawyer was to open the letter and follow its instructions. For four Thursdays in a row the lawyer received a phone call, presumably from Murchison."

"Presumably," Beale said heavily.

"Indeed. On the Tuesday following the fourth Thursday, Murchison's car went off a cliff and he was killed instantly. The lawyer read of Walker Murchison's death but had no idea that was his client's true identity. Then Thursday came and went without a call, and when there was no telephone call on Friday either, why, the lawyer opened the letter and went forthwith to the police." Ehrengraf spread his hands, smiled broadly. "The rest," he said, "you know as well as I."

"Great Scott," Beale said.

"Now if you feel I've done nothing to earn my money—"

"I'll have to liquidate some stock." Beale said. "It won't be a problem and there shouldn't be much time involved. I'll bring a check to your office in a week. Say ten days at the outside. Unless you'd prefer cash?"

"A check will be fine, Mr. Beale. So long as it's a good check." And he smiled with his lips to show he was joking.

A week later Grantham Beale remembered that smile when he passed a check across Martin Ehrengraf's heroically disorganized

desk. "A *good* check," he said. "I'd never give *you* a bad check, Mr. Ehrengraf. You typed that letter, you made all those phone calls, you forged Murchison's false name to the money order, and then when the opportunity presented itself you sent his car hurtling off the cliff with him in it."

"One believes what one wishes," Ehrengraf said quietly.

"I've been thinking about all this the entire week. Murchison framed me for a murder he committed, then paid for the crime himself and liberated me in the process without knowing what he was doing. 'The cut worm forgives the plow.'"

"Indeed."

"Meaning that the end justifies the means."

"Is that what Blake meant by that line? I've long wondered."

"The end justifies the means. I'm innocent, and now I'm free, and Murchison's guilty, and now he's dead—and you've got the money. But that's all right, because I made out fine on those stamps, and of course I don't have to repay Speldron, poor man, because death did cancel that particular debt, and—"

"Mr. Beale."

"Yes?"

"I don't know if I should tell you this, but I fear I must. You are more of an innocent than you realize. You've paid me handsomely for my services, as indeed we agreed that you would, and I think perhaps I'll offer you a lagniappe in the form of some experience to offset your colossal innocence. I'll begin with some advice. Do not resume your affair with Felicia Murchison."

Beale stared.

"You should have told me that was why you and Murchison didn't get along," Ehrengraf said gently. "I had to discover it for myself. No matter. More to the point, one should not share a pillow with a woman who has so little regard for one as to frame one for murder. Mrs. Murchison—"

"Felicia framed me? *Felicia?*"

"Of course, Mr. Beale. Mrs. Murchison had nothing against you. It was sufficient that she had nothing *for* you. She murdered Mr. Speldron, you see, for reasons which need hardly concern us. Then having done so, she needed someone to be cast as the murderer.

"Her husband could hardly have told the police about your purported argument with Speldron. He wasn't around at the time. He didn't know the two of you had met, and if he went out on a limb and told them, and then you had an alibi for the time in question,

why he'd wind up looking silly, wouldn't he? But *Mrs.* Murchison knew you'd met Speldron, and she told her husband the two of you argued, and so he told the police in perfectly good faith what she had told him, and then they went and found the murder gun in your very own Antonelli Scorpion. A stunning automobile, incidentally, and it's to your credit to own such a vehicle, Mr. Beale."

"Felicia killed Speldron."

"Yes."

"And framed me."

"Yes."

"But—why did you frame Murchison?"

"Did you expect me to try to convince the powers that be that *she* did it? And had pangs of conscience and left a letter with a lawyer? Women don't leave letters with lawyers, Mr. Beale. One must deal with the materials at hand."

"But—"

"And the woman is young, with long dark hair, flashing dark eyes, a body like a magazine centerfold, and a face like a Chanel ad. She's also an excellent typist and most cooperative in any number of ways which we needn't discuss at the moment. Mr. Beale, would you like me to get you a glass of water?"

"I'm all right."

"I'm sure you'll be all right, Mr. Beale. I'm sure you will. Mr. Beale, I'm going to make a suggestion. I think you should seriously consider marrying and settling down. I think you'd be much happier that way. You're an innocent, Mr. Beale, and you've had the Ehrengraf Experience now, and it's rendered you considerably more experienced than you were; but your innocence is not the sort to be readily vanquished. Give the widow Murchison and all her tribe a wide berth, Mr. Beale. They're not for you. Find yourself an old-fashioned girl and lead a proper old-fashioned life. Buy and sell stamps. Cultivate a garden. Raise terriers. The West Highland White might be a good breed for you but that's your decision. Mr. Beale? Are you *sure* you won't have a glass of water?"

"I'm all right."

"Quite. I'll leave you with another thought, Mr. Beale—this one by Shakespeare. 'Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.' Perhaps some day you'll be able to interpret it for me. In any event, remember Blake. Innocence and experience, Mr. Beale. That's the ticket, isn't it? Innocence and experience."

a *NEW* Charlie Dark story by

BRIAN GARFIELD

This time Charlie Dark, the egotistic counterspy with the "predilection for cuisine," "the nomadic troubleshooter," has a personal stake in the "dirty job"—but Charlie, as you know, is an expert puller-outer of hot chestnuts . . . beware the counterspy who becomes a con man . . .

CHARLIE'S VIGORISH

by BRIAN GARFIELD

When I saw the phone's red message-light flashing I had a premonition—it had to be Rice; no one else knew I was in New York.

I rang the switchboard. "This is Mr. Dark in 1511. There's a message light." I tossed the folded Playbill on the coffee table and jerked my tie loose.

"Yes, sir, here it is. Please call Mr. Rice. He didn't leave a number, sir."

"That's all right, I know the number. Thanks." I cradled it before I emitted an oath. Childishly I found ways to postpone making the call: stripped, showered, counted my travelers' cheques, switched the television on and went around the dial, and switched it off. Finally I made a face and rang through to Rice's home number in Georgetown.

"Charlie?"

I said, "I'm on vacation. I didn't want to hear from you."

"How was the play?"

"Dreary. Why don't they write plays with real people in them any more?"

"Charlie, those *are* real people. You're out of touch."

"Thank God. What do you want?" I made it cold and rude.

"Oh, I just thought you might be lonesome for my voice."

"Has hell frozen over?" He's my boss but I will not call him my superior; I loathe him as much as he does me. I said, "If it's an assignment you can shove it somewhere with a hot poker. You've already postponed my vacation once this year."

"Actually I've been thinking of posting you to Reykjavik to spend a few years monitoring Russian submarine signals. You're designed for the climate—all that blubber insulation."

"The difference between us," I told him, "my blubber's not between my ears. You called me in the middle of my vacation to throw stale insults at me?"

"Actually I wish there were some terrible crisis because it might give me the pleasure of shipping you off to some God-forsaken desert to get stung by sandflies and machine-gun slugs, but the fact is I'm only passing on a message out of the kindness of my heart. Your sister-in-law telephoned the company this afternoon. Something's happened to your brother. It sounded a bit urgent. I said I'd pass the word to you."

"All right." Then I added grudgingly, "Thanks." And rang off. I looked at the time—short of midnight—and because of the time zones it was only about nine in Arizona, so I looked up the number and rang it.

When Margaret came on the line her voice seemed calm enough. "Hi, Charlie, thanks for calling."

"What's happened?"

"Eddie's hurt."

"How bad?"

She cleared her throat. "He was on the critical list earlier but they've taken him off. Demoted him to 'serious.'" Her abrupt laugh was off-key. I suspected they might have doped her with something to calm her down. She said, "He was beaten. Deliberately. Nearly beaten to death."

Eddie isn't as fat as I am, or as old—by six years—but he's a big man with chins and a belly; his hair, unlike mine, is still cordovan but then unlike me he's going bald on top. The last time I'd seen him—a quick airport drink four years earlier, between planes—the capillaries in his nose had given evidence of his increasing devotion to Kentucky bourbon. His predilection was for booze while mine was for cuisine.

This time his nose and part of his skull were concealed under

neat white bandages and both his legs were in plaster casts. He was breathing in short bursts because they'd taped him tight to protect the cracked ribs. They were still running tests to find out if any of his internal organs had been injured.

He looked a sorry sight on the hospital bed and did not attempt to smile. Margaret, plump and worried, hovered by him. He seemed more angry than pained—his eyes flashed bitterly. His voice was stuffed up as if he had a terrible head cold; that was the result of the broken nose.

He said, "Been a long time since I asked you for anything."

"Ask away."

"I want you to get the guy who did this."

"What's wrong with the cops?"

"They can't touch him."

The hospital room had a nice view of the Santa Catalina mountains and the desert foothills. There was only one chair; Margaret seemed disinclined to use it, so I sat down. "Who did it?"

"Three guys. Border toughs. The cops have them—they were stupid enough to let me see their car when they cornered me and I had the presence of mind to get the license number. They don't matter—they've been arraigned and I'll testify. They're just buttons."

"Hired?"

"Ten-cent toughs. You can rent them by the hour. Somebody briefed them on my habits—they knew I'd stop at Paco's bar on my way home. They were waiting for me in the parking lot."

Margaret said, "They're in custody but of course they claim they don't know who hired them."

"They probably don't," Eddie said. "A voice on the phone, a few hundred dollars in cash in an unmarked envelope. That's the way it's usually done. It makes certain the cops can't trace back to the guy who hired them."

I said, "The Mob."

"Sure."

"You know who he is, then?"

"Sure. I know." Then his lids drooped.

Margaret said, "You're a sort of cop, Charlie. We thought you might tell us how to handle it."

"I'm not a cop." Around the fourth floor in Langley they call us loose stringers, meaning we're nomadic troubleshooters—no fixed territorial station—but I'm by no means any kind of cop. Mar-

garet and Eddie didn't know my actual occupation; they knew I worked for the government and they assumed I was with the C.I.A. but for all they knew I was a message clerk. I found their faith touching but misplaced.

Eddie said, "If you were a cop you couldn't do me any good. I don't want somebody to read the scum his rights—I want somebody to nail him."

"I'm not a hit man, Eddie. I don't kill people."

"I don't want him killed. He didn't kill me, did he?" His eyes glittered. "I just want him to hurt."

"Who is he?"

"Calls himself Clay Foran. I doubt it's the name he was born with. What he does, he lends money to people who can't get it from the bank."

"Loan shark."

"Yeah."

"Eddie, Eddie." I shook my head at him. "You haven't grown up at all."

"Okay, I can't move, I'm a captive audience if you want to deliver yourself of a lecture."

"No lecture. What happened?"

"An apartment-house construction deal. I ran into cost overrides—rising prices on building materials. I had to come up with another fifty thousand or forfeit to the bank that holds the construction mortgage. I figured to clear a four hundred kay profit if I could complete the job and sell it for the capital gain, and of course there's a whopping tax-shelter deduction in that kind of construction. So I figured I could afford to borrow the fifty thousand even if the interest rate was exorbitant."

"Vigorish."

"Yeah. Usury. Whatever. Trouble is, I was already stretched past my limit with the banks and the building-and-loans. Hell, I was kiting checks over the weekend as it was, but I was in too deep to quit. I had to get the building completed so I could sell it. Otherwise the bank was set to foreclose. So I asked around. Sooner or later somebody steered me to Clay Foran."

"And?"

"Very respectable businessman, Foran. Calls himself an investment broker. Of course he's connected with the Mob. Arizona's crawling with them nowadays, they all moved out here. For their health," he added drily.

"How big is he?"

"Compared to what?"

"Nickel and dime, or million-dollar loans?"

"In the middle. It didn't pinch his coffers to come up with my fifty kay but he only did it after I offered him a little extra vigorish on the side. Mostly I imagine he spreads it around, five thousand here, ten thousand there—you know, minimize the risks. But hell, those guys get five percent a week; he's rich enough."

"Two hundred and sixty percent annual interest?"

"You got it. I know, I know. But I was in a bind, Charlie, I had nowhere else to turn. And I figured to sell the project inside of a month. I figured I could handle it—ten grand interest."

"But?"

"You see what they did to me. Obviously I came up short. It wasn't my fault. The building next door caught fire. My building didn't burn but the heat set off the automatic sprinkler system and it ruined the place. Seventy thousand damage—carpets, paint, doors, the works. The insurance barely covered half of it, and the damage set me back more than two months behind schedule. I had to bail out, Charlie. What choice did I have? My construction company went into Chapter Eleven.

"It's not my first bankruptcy and maybe it won't be my last—you know me—but I'd have paid them back. I tried to keep up the payments. I was a few days late a couple of times and we got threatening phone calls, so forth—you know how it goes. Then it wasn't a week any more, it was three weeks, and you see what happened. They took out their vigorish in blood. I guess they wrote me off as a bad debt but they figure to leave me crippled as an example to other borrowers who think about welshing. Nothing personal, you understand." His lip curled.

Margaret took his hand between hers. Margaret was always there to cushion Eddie's falls: good-humored, fun-loving, careless of her appearance. She had endured all his failures; she loved the real Eddie, not the man he ought to have been. If I ever find a woman like Margaret I'll have won the grand prize.

Eddie said, "I know the ropes, I had my eyes open. I'm not naive. But they've crippled me for life, Charlie. Both kneecaps. They'll be replaced with plastic prosthetics but I'll spend the rest of my life walking like a marionette. Two canes. I almost died. Maybe I still will. We don't know what's bleeding inside me."

"You knew those guys played rough, Eddie. You knew it going in."

It sounded lame and self-righteous even as I said it. Eddie's eyes only smiled at me. He knew I'd pick up the baton.

My long-distance call to Rice was lengthy and exasperating. He kept coming back to the same sore point. "You're asking me to commit Agency facilities to your private vengeance scheme. I can't do it."

"The Agency's got no use for it. Never will have. The press blew its cover in 1969 and it's been sitting there ever since, gathering dust. They're carrying it on the books as a dead loss—they'll be tickled to unload and get some money out of it. From your end it's a legitimate transaction and the profit ought to look pretty good on your efficiency report.

"And one other thing. If you don't authorize it I'll have to apply for a leave of absence to help my brother out. The Agency will grant it with pleasure—you know how eager they are to get rid of me. And of course that would leave you without anybody to pull your chestnuts out. You haven't got anybody else in the division who can handle the dirty jobs. You'd get fired, you know."

"You damn fat—" I didn't hear the rest.

Foran was slight and neat. The word dapper is out of fashion but it fits. He had wavy black hair and a swimming-pool tan and the look of a night-club maitre-d' who'd made good.

It took me a week to get the appointment with him, a week of meeting people and letting a word drop here and a hint there, softly and with discretion. I'm good at establishing the bona fides of a phony-cover identity and in this case it was dead easy because the only untruth in the cover story was my name: I didn't want him to know I had any family relationship with Eddie.

His office on the top floor of a nine-story high-rise had a lot of expensive wood, chrome, and leather. The picture windows gave views of the city like aerial postcard photographs. It was cool inside—the air-conditioning thrummed gently—but you could see heat waves shimmering in the thin smog above the flat sprawling city: the stuff thinned out the view of the towering mountain ranges to the north and east. I felt a bit wilted, having come in from that.

Foran had a polished desk a bit smaller than the deck of an es-

cort carrier; it had a litter of papers and an assortment of gewgaws made of ebony and petrified wood. He stood up and came affably around this display to shake my hand. His smile was cool, professional; behind it was a ruthlessness he didn't bother to conceal.

He had a deep confident voice. "Tell me about the proposition."

"I'm looking to borrow some money. I'm not offering a prospectus."

"If my firm authorizes a loan we have to know what it's being used for." He settled into his swivel chair and waited.

"What you want to know," I said, "is whether you'll get your money back and whether I'll make the interest payments on time."

"I don't know you, Mr. Ballantyne. Why should I lend you money?"

"I'm not being cute," I said. "If I lay out the details to you, what's to keep you from buying into the deal in my place while I'm still out scrounging for capital?"

"That's a risk you have to take. You'd take the same chance with anybody else, unless you've got a rich uncle. At least give me the outlines of the deal—it'll give us a basis for discussion."

I brooded at him as if making up my mind. I gave it a little time before I spoke. "All right. Let's assume the government owns a small private company with certain tangible assets that are of limited value to any domestic buyer, but might be of enormous value to certain foreign buyers to whom the present owner is not empowered to sell. You get my drift?"

"An arms deal?"

"In a way. Not guns, nothing that bald. The way this is set up, I'll be breaking no laws."

"Go on."

"You've had a few days to check me out," I said. "I assume you know I work for the government?"

"Yes."

"I'm about to retire. This deal will set me up for it. I need money to swing it, and it's got to come from somebody like you. But let me make it clear that if you try any odd footwork on me you'll find yourself in more trouble than you want to deal with."

His smile was as cold as Rice's. "Did you come here to threaten me or to borrow money?"

I sat back. "The C.I.A. founded, or bought, a number of private

aviation companies fifteen or twenty years ago. They were used for various purposes. Cover fronts for all sorts of operations. They used some of them to supply revolutionary forces, some of them to run bombing missions against unfriendly countries, some of them to train Cuban exiles, and that sort of thing. It was broken by the press several years ago, so you know the story."

"Yes."

"All right. A few of those companies happened to be here in Arizona. I'm interested in one of those. Ostensibly it was a private air service, one of those shoestring jobs that did everything from private executive charters to cropdusting. After the C.I.A. bought it the facilities were expanded to accommodate air-crew training for student pilots and gunners from Cuba, Haiti, South Vietnam, and a couple of African countries. Then the lid blew off and the Agency got a black eye because we're not supposed to run covert operations inside the United States. After the publicity we were forced to close down the operation."

"Go on." He was interested.

I said, "The facility's still there. Planes, ammunition, bombs, radar, Link Trainers, the whole battery of military training equipment."

"And?"

"And it's on the market. Been on the market for seven or eight years. So far, no buyers. Because the only people who have a use for those facilities are governments that we can't be seen dealing with. Some of those governments would pay through the nose for the equipment—far above its actual value."

"You figure to be a go-between?"

"I know those countries. I've got the contacts. And I've recently chartered a little shell corporation in Nassau that I set up for this deal. The way it goes, I buy the Arizona Charter Air Company and its assets from the government. I turn around and sell it to the Nassau shell corporation. The shell corporation sells the stuff wherever it wants—it's in the Bahamas, it's outside the jurisdiction of American laws.

"When we make the sale, the shell corporation crates up the assets in Arizona and ships them out of the country on a Bahamian bill of lading, and then they're re-shipped out of Nassau on a new ticket so that there's no evidence in this country of the final destination. As I said, the buyers are lined up—they'll be bidding against one another and I'll take the high bid."

He was flicking his upper lip with his fingernail. He looked deceptively sleepy. With quiet brevity he said, "How much?"

"To buy the aviation company and pay the packing and shipping and incidental costs I figure one million nine hundred thousand. I'd rather call it two million in case I run into a snag somewhere—it's better to have a cushion. It's a bargain actually—the government paid upwards of fifteen million for that stuff."

"Maybe. But what condition is it in now? It could be rusty or obsolete or both."

"Obsolete for the U.S. Air Force, maybe, but not for a South American country. And it's all serviceable. It needs a good dusting, that's all. I've had it checked out."

"How much profit do you expect to realize?"

"That's classified. Let's just say I intend to put a floor under the bidding of three million five."

"Suppose you can't get that much? Suppose you don't get any bids at all?"

"I'm not going into this as a speculation. I've already made the contacts. The deal's ready to go down. All I have to do is name the time and place for the auction—but I've got to own the facilities before I can deliver them."

"Suppose we made you a loan, Mr. Ballantyne. And suppose you put the money in your pocket and skipped out to Tahiti."

"All right. Suppose we draw up contracts. If I don't pay the interest and principal you foreclose the company. The assets will remain right here in Arizona until I've sold them and received the cash down-payment, which will be enough to repay your loan. If I skip out with the money you'll have the assets—and with them a list of the interested governments. Fair enough?"

"We'll see. Two million is a great deal of money."

"Did I ask you for two million? I've got my own sources of private capital who want to buy in for small shares. I've raised six hundred thousand on my own. The loan I need is for one million four." That was elementary psychology: scare him with a big amount, then reduce it attractively.

Then I dropped the clincher on him. I said, "I'll need the money for no more than six weeks. I'll pay one percent a day, no holidays, for six weeks. That works out to just short of six hundred thousand dollars interest. You lend me one million four, you get back two million."

"I'll have to check this out first."

I knew I had him.

Margaret looked tired but she covered the strain with her smile. She set out cheese and biscuits in the living room while I mixed the drinks.

She said, "They haven't found any internal bleeding. He's going to be all right." She cut me a wedge of cheddar. "He's a foolish man sometimes but he didn't deserve this. Money's only money. Eddie—he's like a kid playing games. The money's just a counter, it's the way you keep score. If you lose a game you don't kill your opponent—you just set up the board and start another game."

"Foran doesn't play by those rules, Margaret. Eddie knew that."

She drank; I heard the ice cubes click against her teeth. "Did Foran go for it?"

"I won't know for a while. He's checking things out. But I think he'll buy it. He's too greedy to pass it up. The easiest mark for a con man is another crook."

"If he's checking things out, is there anything for him to find?"

"I doubt it. Most of what I told him was true. My boss set up the Nassau shell corporation for me. It'll be there when Foran looks for it. The Arizona Charter Air Company exists, it's on the government's books just as I told him it was, and the assets and facilities are exactly as I described them to him."

"If you pull it off, Charlie, they'll come after you."

"I don't think they'll find me. And I don't think I'll lose any sleep over it." I smiled to reassure her. People have been trying to kill me for more than 30 years and many of them are far more adept at it than the brand of thugs that Foran and his kind employ.

I knew one thing. If Foran didn't fall for this scam I'd just get at him another way. In any case Foran was finished. Eddie and Margaret didn't know it, but they had pitted the most formidable antagonist of all against Foran. I'm Charlie Dark. I'm the best there is.

The results of his investigations seemed to satisfy Foran. His lawyers drew up the most ironclad contracts I'd ever seen. Not a single item of Arizona Charter Air Company equipment was to be moved off its present airfield location until every penny of the loan had been paid back. The only thing the contract didn't in-

clude was the vigorish—the actual usurious interest rate; on paper we had an aboveboard agreement at 12% annual interest with a foreclosure date six weeks from the date of signatures.

The money was in the form of a bank cashier's check and I endorsed it over to the government in exchange for the deed to all outstanding stock in the Arizona Charter Air Company. I flew back from Washington to Tucson with the deed and stock certificates in an attaché case chained to my wrist. Twelve hours later they were in a safe-deposit box to which Foran had the second key, so that if I skipped out without paying, he would have possession of the documents and stock certificates. If I didn't repay him within 42 days he would be the legal owner of the company and all its assets.

We shook hands at the bank and I departed for the airport, whence I flew to Phoenix and rented a car. By midnight I was on the desert airfield that belonged to me. I dismissed the night watchman and took over the premises. As soon as I was alone I began setting the demolition charges.

There was nobody to prevent my destroying the equipment. I had canceled all the insurance policies the day before, so that I was perpetrating no fraud. It was my own property; I was free to do whatever I pleased with it.

The explosions would have thrilled any 12-year-old war movie fan. When the debris settled I drove to the hospital to say goodbye to Eddie and Margaret.

Eddie's eyes twinkled. "Mainly I regret he'll never know I had anything to do with it."

"Keep it that way. If he ever found out he'd finish you."

"I know. I'm not that much of a twit—not any more."

Margaret said, "What will happen to Foran?"

"Nothing pleasant," I said. "It can't have been his own money, not all of it. He's not that rich. He must have laid off a good part of the loan on his Mob associates. At least a million dollars, I'd guess. When he doesn't pay them back they'll go after Foran the way he went after Eddie."

Then I smiled. "And that, you know, is what they call justice."

"Q"

a *NEW* detective story by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

It was a "missing boy case" that dropped into Thomas' lap just when his private-investigator license was about to be revoked . . . A not entirely hardboiled private-eye job, told straightforwardly, without frills, to go with Thomas' detective method: he kept pushing, kept slogging away, never content to leave well enough alone; and as one of the participants said, "Once these things start there's only one way to go" . . .

ONLY ONE WAY TO GO

by *ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS*

A uniformed maid with a face as sharp and shiny as a new ax led me back through the cool entrance corridor and up a short flight of stairs to a second-floor sitting room. "Mr. Howard will be with you in a moment," she said. Then she was gone. There were a number of chairs scattered about, but not wanting Howard to find me sitting, I walked over to the wall that was mostly windows and looked out. A vast expanse of well trimmed lawn sloped down to the screen of trees that marked the end of the property.

Unless you liked grass it wasn't much of a view. Off to my left, though, a blonde girl in a white tennis dress was practising serves on a clay court. She worked with single-minded intensity, smashing her supply of balls into the far corner, then walking around to retrieve them and smash them back. I was still watching her when Howard came in.

"Mr. Thomas," he said without preamble. "Good of you to come on such short notice." He was a short, slightly built man in his mid to late sixties, with glasses that looked too big for his narrow triangular face. He was bald except for a close-clipped fringe around the ears and a few scattered wisps across the crown.

I wasn't put off by the unprepossessing appearance, because I'd taken the trouble to look him up in *Who's Who* before coming out. It was a short entry with the usual biographical trivia: Wendell Howard, born 1920, married Elizabeth Bolton Wainwright (deceased).

The important thing was occupation: Chairman of the Board and Chief Operating Officer, Wainwright Pharmaceuticals.

I'd also looked up Wainwright Pharmaceuticals. It had started out as a patent-medicine company in the thirties, expanding into true pharmaceuticals with the War, but like so many essentially one-man operations it barely managed to survive the almost simultaneous deaths of its founder and his only child, a son. It had been almost bankrupt when Howard had come along to marry the son's widow, take charge, and build it up to where it once again controlled a respectable share of the legitimate drug market. And since the older Wainwright had held most of the stock and it was still largely family-owned, most of the money had stayed home too.

A taller, younger man had come in behind him. Now he closed the door and came over to take a position just to his employer's left as Howard sat down and leaned back to eye me speculatively.

"You come very highly recommended," he said.

"Thank you."

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Howard's mouth. "That was a statement, Mr. Thomas," he said, "not a compliment. However, there's no point wasting your time or mine on nonessentials." He glanced up at the man beside him. "I believe you've already met Mr. Lawson, my attorney."

Lawson looked at me impassively. He was about my age, with a round pug-nosed face and pitted cheeks.

"I understand your boy is missing," I said matter-of-factly.

Howard smiled again. "You don't waste time on nonessentials either, do you, Mr. Thomas? That's good. I like that in a man. In any case, you're right. The boy left the house six weeks ago, ostensibly to join some friends backpacking in the Rockies. The problem is, the others returned two days ago. Billy wasn't with them. He had, in fact, never been with them. He'd lied from the start about where he was going and what he intended to do."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty. He'll be twenty-one in March."

"Was he unhappy at home?"

"He had no reason to be," Howard said sharply. "But whether he was or not, he's a minor and I want him found and brought home. When he's of age he can do as he pleases, but now he's my responsibility and I intend to exercise that responsibility."

"Have you notified the police?"

"No, I have not. I saw no reason to expose myself and the rest of the family to that kind of scandal and publicity when he has so obviously run off to 'find' himself in some long-haired hippie commune or something equally foolish. If I had reason to be concerned about his health or safety it would be a different matter, but under the circumstances I much prefer one man, working alone and sensitive to my concerns for privacy. That's why I had Lawson contact you. And, as I say, you were highly recommended."

"You can only go so far on recommendations," I said. "After six weeks he could be very hard to find."

"Possibly," Howard said. "But we won't know until you've tried. And I'm not a poor man. You'll be well paid for your efforts."

He looked at me unblinkingly. I shrugged. "It's your money," I said.

"So it is," Howard said. He put his hands on the arms of his chair and pushed himself up. "Well, now that that's settled I'll leave you and Lawson to work out the details." He went to the door, then paused with his hand on the knob. "By the way," he said, "I understand you've been having some difficulty with the state licensing board. Over a shooting, I believe."

I looked away, but not before I caught a glimpse of Lawson's eyes glinting with silent amusement. "It'll work itself out," I said.

Howard nodded soberly. "Yes, Mr. Thomas," he said, "it will." He smiled. "I'm not in any sense a 'public' man but I'm not without influence—or above the will to use it when I choose. Good day, Mr. Thomas," he said. "And good luck in your search."

He went out. Lawson closed the door after him, then turned back to me. His eyes were impersonal again. "You'll need some money for a retainer," he said, "and to cover your expenses. Mr. Howard asked me to give you this. If and when you need more you can let me know."

I took the check he held out. It was for $1000. I put it in my pocket. "You'll want an accounting, of course," I said.

Lawson shrugged. "As far as Mr. Howard is concerned, success is the best accounting. However, yes, you should keep a rec-

ord—in case one is needed. Now, what else do you need?"

"A picture would be helpful."

Lawson nodded. "There's one in his room. I'll get it."

"I'd also like to talk to whoever saw him last."

Lawson smiled faintly. "Oddly enough," he said, "that was me. I'd come by quite late that evening with some papers for Mr. Howard to sign and as I came in Billy was going up to his room. He said he'd just seen his father and he'd tell me goodbye now as well because he planned to leave early the next morning. I have no idea what time he actually did leave, but he was gone when the first servants arrived at six."

"How did he seem?"

"As you might expect. Excited. Almost exuberant. At the time I put it down to the prospect of the trip. But now, of course—" He shrugged.

"Where do you think he might have gone?"

Lawson shook his head. "I'd have to agree with Mr. Howard, but beyond that it's impossible to say. He was a very withdrawn, almost secretive boy." He smiled wryly. "That's why Mr. Howard was so pleased when he brought up the backpacking trip. One of the leaders of the group—Brian Mercer—is the son of one of Mr. Howard's closest business associates and Mr. Howard thought it might mean that Billy was opening up, becoming part of the team."

"I see," I said.

"I hope so," Lawson said. He rubbed his hands together briskly. "Now let's get you that photograph."

After I'd gotten the photo—a standard studio portrait of a good-looking boy with dreamer's eyes and a still unformed face—the same hatchet-faced maid who'd brought me in escorted me out. My car was parked at the head of the looping drive, but on impulse I left it there and walked around the house to the tennis court I'd seen from the window. The blonde girl was still there, still smashing away at the opposite corner.

She kept at it for several minutes after she became aware of my presence, then carefully put her racquet down, and tossing her head to free her hair, came over to where I stood. She was a tall girl, in her mid to late twenties at the most, and only the strong jaw and concentration lines above her eyes kept her from being beautiful.

"They said you'd be coming this morning," she said. She gave her head a final toss. "You're the detective they hired to find my brother, aren't you?"

"That's right, Miss Howard."

"Wainwright." Her voice was sharp. "And I prefer Pat to Miss."

"Billy's your half brother then?"

She shook her head. "No, we're full brother and sister. When Mother married Wendell Howard, she wanted us to stay one family. So she asked us to use his name. Billy still does. I don't. Not that it matters. The important question is whether you have any realistic hope of finding him."

"That depends on whether he wants to be found or not," I said. "Fortunately, most runaways do. It's the whole point of their running away."

"I see," Pat said. She looked off, beyond me. "If you do find him—or rather, when you find him—what happens then?"

"I'm not a social agency," I said. "I just make my report, and that's it."

"How nice for you. Unfortunately, it's not so easy for the rest of us who have to live with the problem." She looked away again. "I might have prevented all this if I'd been here. But I was in Europe and Billy had already gone when I got back. Even so, I'm not going to let everything we've planned for be ruined by an impulsive act—or my stepfather's preconceptions." Her eyes swung back to hold mine. "When you find him," she said, "I want to know it first. Before you tell anybody else."

"Even before your stepfather?"

"Especially before my stepfather," she said. She smiled cynically. "He wouldn't have to know," she said. "And I'd make it worth your while, of course."

"Of course," I said. "Mind telling me why?"

She looked up sharply. "Does it matter?"

"It might," I said. When she still hesitated, I shrugged. "You've gone this far," I said, "you might as well go the rest of the way. If I can't be trusted, the mistake's already been made."

"Yes," she said, "I suppose it has." She was silent another moment, then looked up at me again. "Do you know what a spendthrift trust is?"

"Basically," I said, "it's a provision put in a will when there's a large amount of money involved and some question about the ability of the heir to handle it. The principal is put in trust and

the heir is given an allowance from the income either forever or until his competence is proved or disproved."

"Exactly," Pat said. "So you can understand the situation here. When Grandfather died, he left the bulk of his estate to Billy in trust until he was twenty-one—unless since Billy was only a baby at the time he turned out to be incapable of handling money, in which case the trust would continue indefinitely." Her eyes held mine steadily now. "Howard's been Billy's guardian under the trust ever since Mother died and I know he's going to claim Billy's disappearance proves he's incapable of handling the money and stock. But if I can reach Billy first, together we can work out a defense to counter that so that Billy won't be denied his inheritance."

"Unless," I said, "the facts prove he is incapable."

"Let me worry about that," she said. "You just tell me where he is."

I shook my head. "I don't think so," I said.

Pat's eyes blazed. "I knew you couldn't be trusted!"

"As far as it goes, I can," I said. "I'm not going to tell your stepfather what you've asked me to do. On the other hand, I'm not going to step into the middle of a family squabble either."

She looked at me for a long moment, then nodded soberly, the anger gone from her eyes and manner. "Very wise," she said. "Except that like it or not you're already in the middle. Think about it." And with that she turned on her heel and marched back to pick up her racquet. It flashed suddenly and the ball slammed down with more than usual force on the chalk lines across the net. I watched for several minutes, then walked back to my car.

There was a pile of mail waiting for me when I got back to my office. Six months earlier there would have been a fair amount of incoming cash mixed with the bills, some of them now second notices. But then Continental Bank had hired me to stop a series of break-ins at a warehouse they were holding in trust. It started out nice and clean cut. I staked the place out and caught the punk climbing in an unlocked window the first night. Unfortunately, when I challenged him he made the bad mistake of reaching under his jacket. A mistake for him because I shot him twice before he could bring his hand out again. A mistake for me because there was no gun under the jacket, only a handkerchief, and no witnesses to back up my side of it.

The State's Attorney waffled for most of a month, then declined prosecution. The State licensing board was a lot less charitable and on the basis that what happened was less important than what might happen, raised questions about my judgment and fitness to continue to operate. They didn't pull my license but they were well on their way to it. Which, of course, was one more reason, family squabble or not, I couldn't afford to turn down Howard's $1000. I marked his check for deposit and dropped it in an envelope to my bank.

First thing the next morning I looked up Brian Mercer.

"I don't know what it's got to do with me," he said. He was a stocky boy, Billy's age or a little older, dressed in the uniform of the day: faded jeans and jacket. "What I mean is, I knew Billy from school and, you know, around, but we weren't really what you'd call close."

"Close enough, though, for him supposed to be going along with you on a camping trip," I said.

Mercer shook his head. "That's what he told his old man," he said. "He never said anything to the rest of us going. To tell you the truth, I would have been surprised if he had. Physical activity wasn't particularly his thing."

"What was?"

Mercer hesitated, then shook his head again. "Look, man," he said, "I really don't want to get involved with this. I figure if somebody wants to take off and live his own life, that's his business. Why not let him?"

"If that's what he wanted," I said, "he could have saved himself and everybody else a whole lot of trouble by waiting until he was twenty-one."

"Or maybe he figured it was better to take off while the going was good," Mercer said. "Look, man, I don't know what you know about the family, but they had Billy's life planned out for him from the day he was born. He was the male heir and that meant some day he was going to step in and take over where Grampa left off. That's why the old man left him all that stock. If he'd been smart, he'd have given it to Billy's sister. She's the real take-over kind."

"And Billy isn't."

Mercer shrugged. "Guess not, or he wouldn't have taken off."

"You know," I said, "for somebody who wasn't close you seem to know a lot."

Mercer shrugged again. "You know how it is," he said. "You hear things."

"Maybe you heard something else."

He shook his head. "I told you, man," he said. "I don't want to get involved."

"Sure," I said. "But if you know something and you don't tell, you're just as involved as if you did. More even, because you've made a judgment and taken sides, which means if things don't work out the way you think they ought to, then maybe you have to share some of the guilt too."

Mercer looked at me for a long time. "You really dig in, don't you?"

I shrugged and rose. "I think the phrase is 'telling it like it is,' " I said. He didn't rise to show me out, and I didn't make any move to leave on my own. Finally he said, "Look, maybe this is a mistake, but I can tell you this. Billy used to have a pad over on Auburn. I was there once for a party with some other guys. It wasn't all that much, but he acted like he thought it was some kind of big deal."

"You remember the address?"

"Sure," Mercer said. "3650 West. If he really wants to lose himself, though, he won't be there. It was supposed to be a big secret, but everybody knew."

"It's something to check out anyway," I said. "Thanks."

Mercer smiled wryly. "For nothing," he said. "I hope."

The address wasn't hard to find. It was half of a duplex on a street that had just started to turn shabby. Nobody was home the first time I called, but when I went back that evening, lights were on inside and two cars were parked in the short side drive. A tall dark-haired girl opened the door to my ring.

"Billy home?" I said.

The girl looked at me curiously, then shook her head.

"That's funny," I said. "He said he'd meet me here."

The girl continued to shake her head. "The hell he did," she said.

I shrugged and handed her one of my cards. "It was worth a try," I said.

"Sure," she said and stepped back to let me enter. The room was small and overfurnished. Along the far wall a cabinet-sized TV flickered its bluish images. Just beyond it was a door, closed

now, leading back into the rest of the house. The girl moved past me to turn off the TV.

"What do you want Billy for?" she said. "Not that it'll make any difference. I'm the last person who'd know where he is."

"You're living in his house, though."

"Sure," she said, "why not? I'm his wife."

The girl's name was Myra Dawn and according to the leatherette-bound certificate she dug out she and Billy Howard had been married four days after he had ostensibly left for the camping trip.

"I guess it was kind of dumb," she said. We sat facing each other across the width of the room. "I knew he was only marrying me because I was pregnant, but I thought, you know, maybe it would work out anyway. And at first it looked like maybe it would. We drove over to Indiana and spent the three days' waiting period in a Holiday Inn—almost like a honeymoon, you know? Then I don't know whether it got through to him at last that he was stuck with me or what, but after the ceremony Billy got real uptight and I couldn't do anything to please him. I mean, not anything.

"Finally I told him that since the kid was going to have a name it didn't matter to me whether we stayed together or not. As far as I cared, he could do what he pleased. He gave me a real funny look then and said, 'That shows what you know.' The next morning, though, he was gone."

"And you haven't seen him or made any effort to get in touch with him since?"

Myra shrugged. "What would be the point? If he wants me, he knows where I am. I figure, though, he's gone back home for good."

"Not quite," I said.

"What's that mean?"

I told her.

Both cars were still in the drive when I left. There could be any number of different explanations, but I wasn't paid to make assumptions. So as soon as I was far enough down the block to be out of sight, I cut my lights and motor and pulled over to the curb.

Forty-five minutes later Myra's door opened again and a man

came out and trotted across the lawn to the rear car. It was too dark and I was too far away to make out his features, but I'd already gotten a good long look at his license plate.

Howard sat quietly for a long moment after I finished my report. We were back in that same second-floor sitting room, he, Lawson, and I. It might have been the day before repeating itself except that now Pat Wainwright sat, grim-faced and silent, with her back to the windows. Finally Howard stirred, the corners of his mouth curving down even more markedly.

"A fine mess," he said.

"But not irremedial," Lawson said. He looked down his nose at me as if somehow that made it my fault. "Billy's a minor. The marriage can be set aside."

"And the child?" Howard said. "Can you set that aside too?"

Lawson didn't reply. Howard continued to look up at him for another long moment, then turned back to me and sighed. "Well, Mr. Thomas, I can't say I particularly care for the news you bring. But you have done your job and done it well. Send me your bill. I'll pay whatever you ask."

"If that's what you want," I said.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

I shrugged. "You did hire me to find him," I said.

Howard smiled grimly. "I don't think we need worry too much about Billy now," he said. "This isn't the first time he's run off and left someone else to clean up after him. Once the heat is off, he'll be back soon enough"—he glanced over at Pat—"just like before."

"He was only thirteen then," Pat flashed, "and still upset because—"

"And he's twenty now," Howard snapped back, "and upset because he got some tramp pregnant and was damn fool enough to marry her. When he's thirty it'll be something else. He hasn't changed and despite what you say it's obvious he never will."

"And neither will you, will you?" Pat turned to me. "If you were going to continue to look for Billy," she said, "what would be your next step?"

"The obvious one," I said. "Track down Myra's visitor last night and see where he led."

"Do it then. Or is there still some reason you wouldn't want to work for me?"

Howard's face crimsoned, but before he could explode Lawson put a restraining hand on the back of his chair. "I shouldn't think it need come to that," Lawson said. "How long do you think it would take to find this person?"

He was asking me. I shrugged. "A couple of days," I said. "A week at the most."

"I think we can go with that," he said to Howard. "Having gone as far as we have already, it would be foolish not to take another step." He smiled faintly. "And even if Thomas finds nothing, we're no worse off."

"All right," Howard said. The corners of his mouth turned down again and he looked straight at me. "You have until the end of the week," he said. "Then we'll decide what we do next." He glanced at his stepdaughter. "Fair enough?"

She nodded.

Nobody said anything more about paying me, but there was more than enough of Howard's $1000 left to cover my time. So as soon as I got back to my office I put in a call to the Department of Motor Vehicles. I had to talk to four clerks in three different offices but in the end I got what I wanted. The car in Myra's drive was registered to a Charles Michaels, 1832 S. Beeler.

It was a big old house long since gone down in the world and cut up into single-occupancy rooms. According to the row of mail slots just inside the doorway, Charles's was number 2C. It was empty, but on my third knock a birdlike old woman stuck her head out of the door across the hall.

"You just missed him," she said. "He left early this morning."

"You know when he'll be back?"

"He won't," she said. "Not any more. He moved out." She twisted her neck to cast a long conspiratorial look up and down the hallway. "It was none of my business," she said, "but there was a big row about it on the stairs. You're supposed to give notice and the manager wouldn't let him take his suitcase because he owed two weeks' rent."

"I see," I said. I went back downstairs to the apartment marked *Manager* and told the woman who answered that Charles Michaels had asked me to pay his rent and pick up his things.

It was even later than usual when I got back to my office and

the building was dark. I let myself in with my key and took Charles's suitcase inside where I could go through it undisturbed.

There wasn't much—just a jumble of clothes and shaving gear, all of it as essentially characterless as a YMCA towel, and I was just about to write it off as $76 wasted when I found the photograph apparently overlooked and left in an inside jacket pocket. It was an unframed Polaroid print of a man and woman standing on an old-fashioned front porch. The man I assumed to be Charles. The woman, glowering into the camera and holding a small bunch of nondescript flowers, was Myra Dawn. I put the picture in my pocket, then shoved the rest of Charles's things back into the suitcase even more carelessly than he had, and leaving the bag behind, left the building.

I was halfway across the lot to my car when I heard somebody coming up fast behind me. Instinct said turn, but before I could even start, I was caught from behind and pulled back. Something hard smashed down against the side of my head and I fell into complete darkness . . .

When I came to, I was still on my back on the pavement and a woman was bending over me. It took a full minute for my eyes to focus and recognize Myra.

"Thank God," she said. "I thought you were dead."

It took several tries but finally I managed to sit up. Myra looked at me anxiously. "Are you all right?" she said.

"As much as I will be," I said. I had a good-sized lump where I'd been hit but no blurring or double vision. No nausea either, and with Myra's help I got the rest of the way up and went back inside.

My office was a shambles—furniture overturned and smashed and what had been the contents of file drawers scattered everywhere. Charles's suitcase was gone, of course. Even worse, though, the one locked drawer had been forced and the gun inside taken too.

Myra stood just inside the door, looking dismayed. "My God," she said, "what *happened*?"

"I thought maybe you could tell me."

"No," she said. "No, honest. All I know is that Billy told me to come here tonight to see if I couldn't find you. He wants to talk to you."

"Why didn't he come himself?"

"Because he's afraid," she said. She shrugged helplessly. "What

I told you last night," she said, "wasn't all the truth. After we were married, Billy and I didn't really split. He had some business he said he had to take care of down in Florida. I wanted to go along with him and make it, you know, kind of a real honeymoon. But he said it wasn't that kind of business and that I'd be better off waiting at home. The next time I heard from him was last week.

"I don't know what happened and maybe I don't want to. But he's in trouble and he's scared. Right after that, too, Charles Michaels showed up, looking for him. The only good thing Charles ever did in his life was introduce me to Billy. So I made up that story to get rid of him. I don't think he bought it, though, because he keeps hanging around. He was the one you saw leaving my house the other night."

"I know," I said. "Where's Billy now?"

"At the St. Clair Hotel," Myra said, "registered under the name of Brown. I don't know for how long, though. Like I say, he's really scared."

What I should have done, by all the rules, was call the police and report the mugging and the theft of my pistol. What I did, of course, was take Myra home, then drive back across town to the St. Clair.

It was a second-rate commercial hotel at the wrong end of Michigan Avenue and at this time of night the lobby was deserted except for an elderly clerk in shirt sleeves nodding behind the desk. He woke up long enough to give me Billy's room number, then was dozing off again even before I had punched the button to call the elevator down.

The number he gave me was on the third floor and at the end of a corridor. There was no answer to my knock, but the latch hadn't quite caught and the door moved slightly under my hand. After a moment's hesitation I pushed it all the way open. Charles Michaels—or at least the man in Charles's photograph—sprawled in a chair facing me. Blood still oozed from his chest.

I fought down the impulse to run, took a deep breath, stepped into the room, and pressed the back of my hand down along the side of his neck. He was still warm but there wasn't a trace of the carotid pulse. He had been shot twice close enough to where the physiology books say the heart is to make no difference. The gun that apparently had done it lay on the floor beside his outflung

left foot where the killer might have dropped it in his haste. Beautiful. Because even despite the unfamiliar silencer I had no difficulty recognizing it as the one stolen from my desk.

There was nothing else in the room—not even clothes—and I backed out carefully, resisting the second idiot urge of the evening—to take the gun with me—and closed the door behind me just as I had found it. The only thing I did was wipe my fingerprints from the knob. Then I went back down to the lobby. The clerk was still asleep behind the desk. I went out without disturbing him.

There was a phone booth on the corner that somehow hadn't been vandalized, and I used it to call Myra at her home. She answered on the second ring, but I put the receiver back without speaking. A black and white patrol car had swung around the other end of the street, blinker lights flashing, and now it pulled to a halt in front of the St. Clair. Two blue caps piled out and dashed inside. In a very short time there were going to be a whole lot more police around, and I wanted to get the hell away from there before they had a chance to arrive.

Without traffic, it was less than ten minutes to Lawson's apartment but it was very definitely at the right end of Michigan Avenue, not quite on the lake but high enough to overlook its neighbors for a view almost as good as if it had been. Lawson himself answered the door. He was wearing a plum-colored dressing gown and his hair was rumpled.

"Couldn't this have waited?" he said.

"Not this time," I said. "I think I've found Myra's visitor."

"You *think?*"

"He was dead," I said. "So I couldn't ask him to be sure."

Lawson looked at me for a long moment, then opened the door wider. "Perhaps you'd better come in," he said.

The room was furnished simply but expensively. Lawson sat down in the one chair with arms and faced me. "Now," he said, "what's this all about?"

"It's a pretty straightforward story," I said, "on the surface. Myra gave me what may or may not be a cock-and-bull story about Billy being on the run from the consequences of some shady deal he was involved in and sent me off to meet him. The trouble is when I got where he was supposed to be I found a corpse waiting for me with my own gun on the floor beside him. If I'm right

he was a punk named Charles Michaels, who may or may not have been involved with Billy in that so-called shady deal but who definitely was Myra's visitor the other night."

"You think she killed him and set you up to take the blame?"

"Not by herself," I said. "Charles had been dead only a matter of minutes when I found him and I called Myra right afterwards. She couldn't possibly have killed him and gotten back across town in time to answer her phone. But there she was."

"I see," Lawson said. He was silent for another long moment. "Have you decided what you're going to tell the police yet?"

"What's wrong with the truth?"

Lawson smiled cynically. "You know the answer to that," he said, "or you wouldn't be here." He sighed. "You can't help being involved, of course. If nothing else, the desk clerk will identify you as having been where you were, and I think you can rest assured that once the police identify the gun as yours they'll make sure the clerk gets a chance to see you again. Coupled with the attack on you earlier, it adds up to a very damning case. On the other hand, you shouldn't have too much difficulty copping a plea. Self-defense might be a little much this time, but I think the State's Attorney would buy manslaughter." He nodded as if pleased with himself. "Yes, that should work out very well."

"For whom?"

"For everybody, Mr. Thomas. For you as well as for Mr. Howard and Billy. After all, what would you serve? A few years at the most. With Mr. Howard's influence behind you, you might even draw a suspended sentence. But whatever the penalty, there would be a place for you when you came out. Mr. Howard takes good care of his employees—particularly those who put his interests first."

I let my eyes drift around the room. "I can see that," I said.

"I'm sure you can," Lawson said, unruffled. He rose and went to the door. "Let me know your decision," he said. "Soon."

I was pretty sure the police couldn't have managed to trace the gun back to me yet, but I spent the night in a motel anyway rather than risk finding them waiting when I got home. Then first thing the next morning I drove down to Headquarters and asked for Dave Minor. Minor was Robbery-Burglary and not likely to be up on a homicide investigation. But on the other hand he was the closest friend I had left on the force and considering

what I had to say, a little sympathy up front wouldn't hurt.

"Well," Minor said, "this is a surprise." He was a burly man with pale reddish hair and a fleshy strong-chinned face suffused with the subcutaneous flush that seems to go with fair skin and overweight. "Somebody did tell me you were back in business."

"Maybe more than I'd like to be," I said. "Suppose I told you I killed a man last night."

Minor's face lost its friendliness. "You damn fool," he said.

I spent the rest of the day going over my story to successive sets of police onlookers both in uniform and out. Finally Minor told me I could use the phone on his desk to make my call. Two hours later, after Lawson had had time to make *his* calls, Minor told me I could go.

Myra didn't seem particularly happy to see me, leaving the door on the chain and peering out through the narrow gap. I held up my hands to show they were empty. "No hard feelings, Myra," I said. "You only did what you were told. I know that."

She continued to regard me suspiciously. "Is that what you came to say?"

"Partly, but mostly that it's past time you met your in-laws."

"Why?"

"There's a lot of money there, Myra," I said. "More than enough for both of us if we play it right."

"How much?"

"A half million," I said. "Maybe more."

Myra released the chain. "What would I have to do?" she said.

"Like I said. Come out and meet your in-laws."

Howard sat back and looked around at the four of us: Lawson, Pat Wainwright, Myra, and myself. It was later that same evening. The servants had been dismissed for the night and we were assembled in what I took to be Howard's study—at least, it was furnished with a massive desk. On closer inspection, though, what I had taken for a bookcase on the opposite wall turned out actually to be a dry sink and bar.

"I'm not sure I understand why you felt it necessary to have this meeting," he said. He might have been addressing a recalcitrant board of directors. "I thought you and Lawson had agreed on how this matter was to be handled."

"We discussed it," I said. "We didn't agree."

"I see," Howard said. He looked at me unblinkingly. "It's your decision," he said. "Obviously, I can't force you to do anything you don't want to. However, if you act against what I consider my interest you do it at your own risk. You get no support here." He broke off to glance over at Pat and was apparently satisfied with what he saw. "No support at all," he added.

"Even if I could prove Billy wasn't involved?"

Howard shook his head. "Unfortunately," he said, "you can't. The facts are against you."

"Not the facts," I said. "Only what Myra *says* are the facts, and Myra's a liar."

"Why, you—" Myra burst out. She turned to Howard. "You know what he's after? Money. He told me we could rip you off for a half million between us."

Howard looked at me. I shrugged. "I had to tell her something to get her out here," I said.

"Of course," Howard said drily. "But go on. Let's hear what you have to tell the rest of us."

"All right," I said. "Let's work on the theory that Myra is lying. She needed a partner, and you can almost sense his—or her—presence the way astronomers do with planets by the way the visible objects behave—in this case the visible objects are Myra and Charles. It's a little much that Charles should have gone on the run just as I started looking for him. Then later, when she was selling me the bill of goods about Billy, Myra identified Charles as the one I had seen leaving her house. The trouble is I was careful not to be seen staking out the house. So how did she know I'd seen anybody?"

I looked around. No one offered an answer. "Of course," I said, "it's not the sort of proof that would stand up in court. But this just might." I tossed the photograph I'd found in Charles's suitcase onto Howard's desk. "It could have been taken any time, of course, and Myra never denied she knew Charles before she met Billy. But the bouquet in the picture suggests some kind of occasion. A wedding maybe? It just might be interesting to backtrack Myra to see if she wasn't married before. Or better still, show the picture to the J.P. she says married her and Billy to see how many of the participants he recognizes."

Lawson brought the gun out from under his jacket. "You had to keep pushing, didn't you?" he said. "You couldn't just leave well enough alone."

"Neither could you," I said, "although when you come right down to it, you really gave yourself away last night when you pointed out that the desk clerk could identify me. I hadn't said anything about a desk clerk—or a hotel, for that matter."

"Then the more fool you."

"Or you," I said. "You ought to take your own advice and quit while you're ahead."

Lawson shook his head. "I can't," he said. "None of us can. Once these things start there's only one way to go."

He was facing me but he wasn't really addressing me, and after a long moment Howard pushed himself up out of his chair. "Do what you have to," he said. He sounded old and tired, and he left the room, moving as if 100 years had hit him all at once.

Pat jerked around nervously in her chair. "I don't understand this," she said. "What's going on here?"

"It's very simple," I said. "Your brother never married Myra. It was Charles impersonating Billy—and your stepfather and his attorney set it up."

"But where's Billy then?"

"The only place he could be," I said. "He's dead. He's been dead all along. The whole idea was to set up Myra and her baby as Billy's heirs so his share of your grandfather's estate wouldn't pass to you and leave Howard and Lawson out in the cold. I'll bet Howard doesn't have much stock in his own name and it's quite a comedown to find yourself suddenly dependent on the good will of somebody who's hated your guts all along. Right, Lawson?"

"What does it matter?" he said. "It's not going to help you." He gestured with the gun. "Get up."

"No," Myra said. "There's a better way." She crossed over to the bar and came back with a bottle and glass. "Nobody's going to get too worked up about a couple of drunks killed in a smash-up. Just one of those things." She set the bottle and glass down where I could reach them. "Go ahead," she said. "Pour yourself a drink unless you'd prefer a bullet right now."

I shrugged and picked up the bottle. "It's not going to work, Lawson," I said. "There's a squad car waiting outside now. I just convinced them to let me go to it alone until we were sure if it was only you and Myra or whether Howard was in it too."

Lawson smiled bleakly. "You keep trying, don't you?" he said. "But nobody believes you any more." He gestured again with the gun. I poured a hefty drink into the glass, drank it down, and on

order followed it with a second and third. Lawson moved over to stand behind Pat.

"All right," he said. "Now the girl."

I got up, a little unsteadily, and carried the bottle and glass across to Pat. At the moment the whiskey I'd drunk was still concentrated in my stomach but it wouldn't be long before it sped through my bloodstream to the motor centers of my brain. And all the police in the world wouldn't help me then.

Pat took the glass I poured for her and held it stubbornly clenched in her hand. Lawson nudged her shoulder with the gun. "Drink," he said.

With a swift unhesitating motion she threw the whiskey back into his face. He recoiled instinctively and before he could recover I swung the bottle as hard as I could, catching him square across the bridge of the nose. He went down like a stone, the gun skittering off somewhere behind him.

Myra started for the gun, then when she saw that Pat was going to beat her to it, turned and dashed for the door. I let her go. I was in no condition to catch her and the police really were outside anyway. With one final effort I heaved the bottle out through the window. It wasn't the agreed-on signal, but it would bring them charging in just the same.

Minor was waiting for me when I came down the stairs. I was still feeling the effects of the whiskey.

"You don't look so good," he said.

"I don't feel so good," I said. "If you were a gentleman instead of a cop, you'd let me sleep it off."

"If I was a gentleman instead of a cop, I wouldn't have to worry about whether I was going to need a statement from you or not." He shrugged. "The way it turned out, though, Myra's already maneuvering for a deal to turn State's evidence—although it's a good question how she's going to feel once the high-powered lawyers start getting to her."

"That's your problem," I said. "All I wanted was to come out of this with my neck and my license intact."

Minor nodded. "You've done that," he said.

Pat Wainwright came out of one of the side rooms and crossed the hallway, looking grim and efficient. She reminded me of somebody. It took me a minute to realize it was her stepfather. "Yeah," I said. "The good guys always win."

Muldoon, the out-of-work bricklayer, had a riddle to solve—a numbers mystery. If he solved it he'd be fixed for life—a prospect infinitely "better than a fall off a high scaffold onto a low sidewalk" . . .

MULDOON AND THE NUMBERS GAME

by ROBERT L. FISH

A few of those who believed in the powers of old Miss Gilhooley said she did it with ESP, but the majority claimed she had to be a witch, she having come originally from Salem, which she never denied. The ones who scoffed, of course, said it was either the percentages, or just plain luck. But the fact was, she could see things—in cloud formations, or in baseball cards, or in the throwing of bottle caps, among other things—that were truly amazing.

Muldoon was one of those who believed in old Miss Gilhooley implicitly. Once, shortly after his Kathleen had passed away three years before, old Miss Gilhooley, reading the foam left in his beer glass, told him to beware of a tall dark woman, and it wasn't two days later that Mrs. Johnson, who did his laundry, tried to give him back a puce-striped shirt as one of his own that Muldoon wouldn't have worn to a Chinese water torture. And not long after, old Miss Gilhooley, reading the lumps on his skull after a brawl at Maverick Station, said he'd be taking a long voyage over water, and the very next day didn't his boss send him over to Nantasket on a job, and that at least halfway across the bay?

So, naturally, being out of work and running into old Miss Gilhooley having a last brew at Casey's Bar & Grill before taking the bus to her sister's in Framingham for a week's visit, Muldoon wondered why he had never thought of it before. He therefore took his beer and sat down in the booth across from the shawled old Miss Gilhooley and put his problem directly to her.

"The unemployment insurance about to run out, and it looks like nobody wants no bricks laid no more, at least not by me," he said simply. "I need money. How do I get some?"

Old Miss Gilhooley dipped her finger in his beer and traced a pattern across her forehead. Then she closed her eyes for fully a minute by the clock before she opened them.

"How old's your mother-in-law?" she asked in her quavering voice, fixing Muldoon with her steady eyes.

Muldoon stared. "Seventy-four," he said, surprised. "Just last month. Why?"

"I don't rightly know," old Miss Gilhooley said slowly. "All I know is I closed me eyes and asked meself, 'How can Muldoon come up with some money?' And right away, like in letters of fire across the insides of me eyeballs, I see, 'How old is Vera Callahan?' It's got to mean something."

"Yeah," Muldoon said glumly. "But what?"

"I'll miss me bus," said old Miss Gilhooley, and came to her feet, picking up her ancient haversack. "It'll come to you, don't worry." And with a smile she was through the door.

Seventy-four, Muldoon mused as he walked slowly toward the small house he now shared with his mother-in-law. You'd think old Miss Gilhooley might have been a little more lavish with her clues. She'd never been that cryptic before. Seventy-four! Suddenly Muldoon stopped dead in his tracks. There was only one logical solution, and the more he thought about it, the better it looked. Old Miss Gilhooley and Vera Callahan had been lifelong enemies. And his mother-in-law had certainly mentioned her life-insurance policy often enough when she first used it ten years before as her passport into the relative security of the Muldoon ménage. And, after all, 74 was a ripe old age, four years past the biblical threescore and ten, not to mention being even further beyond the actuarial probabilities.

Muldoon smiled at his own brilliance in solving the enigma so quickly. Doing away with his mother-in-law would be no chore. By Muldoon's figuring, she had to weigh in at about a hundred pounds dripping wet and carrying an anvil in each hand. Nor, he conceded, would her passing be much of a loss. She did little except creep between bed and kitchen and seemed to live on tea. Actually, since the poor soul suffered such a wide variety of voiced ailments, the oblivion offered by the grave would undoubtedly prove welcome.

He thought for a moment of checking with the insurance company as to the exact dollar value of his anticipated inheritance, but then concluded it might smack of greediness. It might also

look a bit peculiar when the old lady suffered a fatal attack of something-or-other so soon after the inquiry. Still, he felt sure it would be a substantial amount; old Miss Gilhooley had never failed him before.

When he entered the house, the old lady was stretched out on the couch, taking her afternoon nap (she slept more than a cat, Muldoon thought) and all he had to do was to put one of the small embroidered pillows over her face and lean his 200 pounds on it for a matter of several minutes, and that was that. She barely wriggled during the process.

Muldoon straightened up, removed the pillow, and gazed down. He had been right; he was sure he detected a grateful expression on the dead face. He fluffed the pillow up again, placed it in its accustomed location, and went to call the undertaker.

It was only after all decent arrangements had been made, all hard bargaining concluded, and all the proper papers signed, that Muldoon called the insurance company—and got more than a slight shock. His mother-in-law's insurance was for $400, doubtless a princely sum when her doting parents had taken it out a matter of sixty years before, but rather inadequate in this inflationary age. Muldoon tried to cancel the funeral, but the undertaker threatened suit, not to mention a visit from his nephew, acknowledged dirty-fight champion of all South Boston. The additional amount of money Muldoon had to get up to finally get Vera Callahan underground completely wiped out his meager savings.

So that, obviously, was not what old Miss Gilhooley had been hinting at, Muldoon figured. He was not bitter, nor was his faith impaired; the fault had to be his own. So there he was with the numbers again. 74 . . . 74 . . . Could they refer to the mathematical possibilities? Four from seven left three—but three what? Three little pigs? Three blind mice? Three blind pigs? He gave it up. On the other hand, four plus seven equaled . . .

He smote himself on the head for his previous stupidity and quickly rubbed the injured spot, for Muldoon was a strong man with a hand like the bumper on a gravel truck. Of course! *Seven and four added up to eleven. ELEVEN!* And—Muldoon told himself with authority—if that wasn't a hint to get into the floating crap game that took place daily, then his grandfather came from Warsaw.

So Muldoon took out a second mortgage on his small house, which netted him eight hundred dollars plus change, added to

that the two hundred he got for his three-and-a-half-year-old, secondhand-to-begin with car, and with $1000 in big bills in his pocket, made his way to Casey's Bar & Grill.

"Casey!" he asked in his ringing voice, "Where's the floating game today?"

"Callahan Hotel," Casey said, rinsing glasses. "Been there all week. Room Seventy-four."

Muldoon barely refrained from smiting himself on the head again. How dumb could one guy be? If only he'd asked before, he would not have had to deal with that thief of an undertaker, not to mention the savings he'd squandered—although in truth he had to admit the small house was less crowded with the old lady gone.

"Thanks," he said to Casey, and hurried from the bar.

The group standing around the large dismountable regulation crap table in Room 74 of the Callahan Hotel, was big and tough, but Muldoon was far from intimidated. With $1000 in his pocket and his fortune about to be made, Muldoon felt confidence flowing through him like a fourth beer. He nodded to one of the gamblers he knew and turned to the man next to him, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Got room for one more?" he asked.

"Hunnert dollars minimum," the man said without looking up from the table. "No credit."

Muldoon nodded. It was precisely the game he wanted. "Who's the last man?" he asked.

"Me," the man said, and clamped his lips shut.

Muldoon took the money from his pocket and folded the bills lengthwise, gambler-fashion, wrapping them around one finger, awaiting his turn. When at last the dice finally made their way to him, Muldoon laid a hundred-dollar bill on the table, picked up the dice, and shook them next to one ear. They made a pleasant ivory sound. A large smile appeared on Muldoon's face.

"Seven and four are me lucky numbers," he announced. "Same as them that's on the door of this room, here. Now, if a guy could only roll an eleven *that* way!"

"He'd end up in a ditch," the back man said expressionlessly. "You're faded—roll them dice. Don't wear 'em out."

Muldoon did not wear out the dice. In fact, he had his hands on them exactly ten times, managing to throw ten consecutive craps, equally divided between snake-eyes and boxcars. They still speak

of it at the floating crap game; it seems the previous record was only five and the man who held it took the elevator to the roof—they were playing at some hotel up in Copley Square that day—and jumped off. Muldoon turned the dice over to the man to his right and wandered disconsolately out of the hotel.

Out in the street Muldoon ambled along a bit aimlessly, scuffing his heavy work brogans against anything that managed to get in his way—a tin can, a broken piece of brick he considered with affectionate memory before he kicked it violently, a crushed cigarette pack. He tried for an empty candy wrapper but with his luck missed. 74! What in the bleary name of Eustace Q. Peabody could the blaggety numbers mean? (The Sisters had raised Muldoon strictly; no obscenity passed his lips.) He tired to consider the matter logically, forcing his temper under control. Old Miss Gilhooley had never failed him, nor would she this time. He was simply missing the boat.

Seventy-four? Seventy-*four?* The figures began to take on a certain rhythm, like the *Punch, brother, punch with care* of Mark Twain. Muldoon found himself trying to march to it. Seventy-four-zero! Seventy-four-zero-*hup!* Almost it but not quite. Seventy-four-zero-hup! Seventy-four-zero, *hup!* Got it! Muldoon said to himself, deriving what little satisfaction he could from the cadence, and marched along swinging. Seventy-four-zero, *hup!*

And found himself in front of Casey's Bar & Grill, so he went inside and pulled a stool up to the deserted bar. "Beer," he said.

"How'd you do in the game?" Casey asked.

"Better give me a shot with that beer," Muldoon said by way of an answer. He slugged the shot down, took about half of his beer for a chaser, and considered Casey as he wiped his mouth. "Casey," he said earnestly, really wanting to know, "what do the numbers seven and four mean to you?"

"Nothing," Casey said.

"How about seven, four, and zero?"

"Nothing," Casey said. "Maybe even less."

"How about backwards?" Muldoon asked in desperation, but Casey had gone to the small kitchen in the rear to make himself a sandwich during the slack time, and Muldoon found himself addressing thin air. He tossed the proper amount of change on the counter and started for the door. Where he ran into a small man named O'Leary, who ran numbers for the mob. It wasn't what he preferred, but it was a living.

"Wanna number today, Mr. Muldoon?" O'Leary asked.

Muldoon was about to pass on with a shake of his head, when he suddenly stopped. A thrill went through him from head to foot. Had he been in a cartoon a light bulb would have lit up in a small circle over his head. Not being in a cartoon, he kicked himself, his heavy brogan leaving a bruise that caused him to limp painfully for the next three weeks.

Good Geoffrey T. Soppingham! He must have been blind! Blind? Insane! What possible meaning could numbers have, if not *that they were numbers?* Just thinking about it made Muldoon groan. If he hadn't killed the old lady and gotten into that stupid crap game, at this moment he could be putting down roughly fifteen hundred bucks on Seven-Four-Zero. $1500 at five-hundred-to-one odds! Still, if he hadn't smothered the old lady, he'd never have come up with the zero, so it wasn't a total loss. But the floating crap game had been completely unnecessary.

Because now Muldoon didn't have the slightest doubt as to what the numbers meant.

"Somethin' wrong, Mr. Muldoon?" O'Leary asked, concerned with the expression on Muldoon's face.

"No!" Muldoon said, and grasped the runner by the arm, drawing him back into Casey's Bar & Grill, his hand like the clamshell bucket of a steam shovel on the smaller man's bicep. He raised his voice, bellowing. *"Casey!"*

Casey appeared from the kitchen, wiping mayonnaise from his chin. "Don't shout," he said. "What do you want?"

Muldoon was prying his wedding ring from his finger. He laid it down on the bar. "What'll you give me for this?"

Casey looked at Muldoon as if the other man had suddenly gone mad. "This ain't no hockshop, Muldoon," he said.

But Muldoon was paying no attention. He was slipping his wristwatch and its accompanying stretch band over his thick fingers. He placed the watch down on the bar next to the ring.

"One hundred bucks for the lot," he said simply. "A loan is all. I'll pay it back tonight." As Casey continued to look at him with fishy eyes, Muldoon added in a quiet, desperate voice, "I paid sixty bucks each for them rings; me and Kathleen had matching ones. And that watch set me back better than a bill-and-a-half all by itself, not to mention the band, which is pure Speidel. How about it?" A touch of pleading entered his voice. "Come on; we been friends a long time."

"Acquaintances," Casey said, differentiating, and continued to eye Muldoon coldly. "I ain't got that much cash in the cash register right now."

"Jefferson J. Billingsly the cash register," Muldoon said, irked. "You got that much and more in your pants pocket."

Casey studied the other a moment longer, then casually swept the ring and the watch from the counter into his palm, and pocketed them. From another pocket he brought out a wallet that looked like it was suffering from mumps. He began counting out bills.

"Ninety-five bucks," he said. "Five percent off the top, just like the Morris Plan."

Muldoon was about to object, but time was running out.

"Someday we'll discuss this transaction in greater detail, Casey," he said. "Out in the alley," and he turned to O'Leary, grasping both of the smaller man's arms for emphasis. "O'Leary, I want ninety-five bucks on number seven-four-zero. Got it? *Seven-Four-Zero!* Today!"

"*Ninety-five bucks?*" O'Leary was stunned. "I never wrote no slip bigger than a deuce in my life, Mr. Muldoon," he said. He thought a moment. "No, a fin," he said brightly, but then his face fell. "No, a deuce. I remember now, the fin was counterfeit . . . ."

"You're wasting time," Muldoon said in a dangerous voice. He suddenly realized he was holding the smaller man several inches from the floor, and lowered him. "Will they pay off? That's the question," he said in a quieter voice, prepared for hesitation.

"Sure they pay off, Mr. Muldoon," O'Leary said, straightening his sleeves into a semblance of their former shape. "How long you figure they stay alive, they start welching?"

"So long as they know it," Muldoon said, and handed over the ninety-five bucks. He took his receipt in return, checked the number carefully to make sure O'Leary had made no mistake, and slipped the paper into his pocket. Then he turned to Casey.

"A beer," he said in a voice that indicated their friendship had suffered damage. "And that is out of that five bucks you just stole!"

Muldoon was waiting in a booth at Casey's Bar & Grill at seven o'clock p.m., which was the time the runners normally had the final three figures of the national treasury balance—which was the Gospel that week. Muldoon knew that straight cash in hand

would not be forthcoming; after all he was due a matter of over $47,000. Still, he'd take a check. If he hadn't gotten into that crap game, he'd have been rich—or, more probably, in a ditch like the man had mentioned this afternoon.

Who was going to pay off that kind of loot? No mob in Boston, that was sure. Better this way, Muldoon thought. Forty-seven grand was big enough to be the year's best advertisement for the racket, but still small enough by their standards for the mob to loosen up.

It was a nice feeling being financially secure after the problems of the past few years, and Muldoon had no intention of splurging. His honest debts would be cleared up, of course, and he'd have to buy himself some wheels—a compact, nothing fancy—but the rest would go into the bank. At five percent it wouldn't earn no fortune, he knew, but it would still be better than a fall off a high scaffold onto a low sidewalk.

He reached for his beer and saw old Miss Gilhooley walking through the door. Had a week passed so quickly? He supposed it must have; what with the funeral, and one thing and another, the time had flown. He waved her over and called out to Casey to bring old Miss Gilhooley anything her heart desired.

Old Miss Gilhooley settled herself in the booth across from him and noted the expression on his face. "So you figured it out, Muldoon," she said.

"Not right off," Muldoon admitted. "To be honest, it just come to me this afternoon. But better late than never; at least it come." He leaned over the table confidentially. "It was the numbers, see? The seven and the four for her age, plus the zero at the end, because whether you heard or not, that's what the poor soul is now."

Old Miss Gilhooley sipped the beer Casey had brought, and nodded. "That's what I figured," she said, "especially after seeing O'Leary in me dreams three nights running, and me old enough to be his mother."

"And I can't thank you enough—" Muldoon started to say, and then paused, for O'Leary had just burst through the door of the bar like a Roman candle, and was hurrying over to them, brushing people aside. His eyes were shining.

"Mr. Muldoon! Mr. Muldoon!" O'Leary cried excitedly. "I never seen nothin' like it in all me born days! And on a ninety-five dollar bet!"

Muldoon grinned happily.

"Only one number away!" O'Leary cried, still astounded at the closeness of his brush with fame and fortune.

Muldoon's world fell with a crash. "One number away?"

"Yeah!" O'Leary said, still marveling. "You bet Seven-Four-Zero. It come out Seven-Five-Zero. Tough!" O'Leary sighed, and then put the matter from his mind. After all, life had to go on. "Wanna number for tomorrow, Mr. Muldoon?"

"No," Muldoon said in a dazed tone, and turned to old Miss Gilhooley who was making strange noises. But they were not lamentations for Muldoon; to Muldoon's surprise the old lady was cackling like a fiend.

"That Vera Callahan!" she said triumphantly. "I always *knew* she lied about her age!"

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This is the 501st "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . . a clever first story, and as a tribute to EQ, an interesting concept. . .

The author, Robert Lawrence (a pseudonym), is in his early forties, married (wife: Barbara), and has two sons (Robert Junior and George). He has lived most of his life in Elmira, New York, "the adopted hometown of Mark Twain and the childhood hometown of one-half of Ellery Queen." He holds a Masters degree in Education (Elmira College) and a B.A. in political science (Bucknell University).

His work background has been diversified: high-school English teacher, home-planning consultant, radio-time salesman, and intelligence research analyst at the National Security Agency in Fort George Meade. His hobbies include tennis, gardening, and reading. Writing used to be one of his hobbies—but now it is something more. . .

THE DYING MESSAGES

by ROBERT LAWRENCE

When the last of them had answered my questions and finally left, I sent down for the old lady's butler. He had been in such a highly nervous state after discovering her body that I'd allowed him to remain downstairs to pull himself together.

Besides, I needed some extra time to survey the death scene. It was incredible, simply incredible. Yet things speak for themselves, don't they? All those mystery novels on the shelves—they could have given her the idea.

"Ah, Wright," I said, motioning the butler to sit down. He stood anyway.

"I'm all right now, sir," he said stiffly. "I'm frightfully sorry I went to pieces like that. Quite shattered, wasn't I, sir?"

"Yes, yes," I assured him. After all, it had been a frightful scene—Miss Hester Tremaine's head stove in like that, the bloody poker and everything. "Please sit down, Wright. This shouldn't take long, but I do need your help. I'm Lieutenant Kerry Denton." I left out "Homicide Department"—no need to upset him further.

He agreed to sit, and related again how he had last served his employer her "brunch" of salad greens and a cocktail, was told to take the afternoon off, and returned about four o'clock to find her bludgeoned on the sun porch, just off her bedroom. He couldn't remember every gory detail, or the unusual scattering of food, books, and artificial flowers.

I resisted the impulse to pour some of the old lady's liquor. Both Wright and I could have used a drink. Instead, I plunged ahead.

"Wright, did Miss Tremaine actually read all these books?" The shelves were sagging under the massed weight of the volumes—biographies, memoirs, how-to-do-its, and novels, particularly mysteries.

"I believe so, sir—er, Lieutenant Denton. Yes, I think she managed to read most of them, perhaps all."

I nodded and strode toward one shelf where my fingers darted across the spines of my own favorites, read during a lengthy convalescence years before.

"That was probably her inspiration," I said.

"Sir?"

I didn't answer him, knowing he wouldn't believe it. I'm not sure I believed it myself.

"Wright, what about yourself? Read much?"

"A little, Lieutenant Denton, but I don't see how—"

"No, no, of course you don't." I removed some books from the shelf, mulled over their titles. "Ever read *The Tragedy of X?* By Barnaby Ross—er, Ellery Queen. Have you?"

He shook his head, puzzlement spreading across his face.

"How about Queen's *The Scarlet Letters?* Or *The Last Woman in His Life?*" His patrician head shook again.

I slid them back on the shelf carefully and turned. "Let me explain. Those particular Queen novels featured an interesting detection device. It's called the dying message. Each of the victims in those stories left the detective a clue to his killer's identity."

Wright continued to frown, so I roughly filled him in on the plots, then threw in examples from "The Glass Domed Clock," "A Lump of Sugar," and "GI Story." By then he understood.

"Pardon me, Lieutenant Denton, but it seems rather odd to be discussing mystery novels at a time like this."

I could see that just being on the scene of the crime unnerved him. "You've put your finger on it, Wright. That's fiction, but what's happened here today is reality—brutal reality. Dying clues happen in novels, yes, but not in real life." I strode to the French doors leading onto the sun porch, paused, turned. "At least, not normally. But Miss Tremaine was an extraordinary woman, a woman with unusual imagination and insight. Correct?"

"Why, yes. She had a marvelous mind, a wonderful memory."

I nodded. "Exactly. That's why she did what she did."

Wright frowned.

"I don't put much truck in the idea of dying messages as clues, Wright. I've considered such ideas poppycock—grist for fiction, nothing more. Until today, here. You see, Miss Tremaine—apparently influenced by detective fiction—has actually left us such clues to her killer's identity."

As I expected, he was amazed. "Lieutenant Denton, you can't be serious!"

"I'm afraid I am, Wright. Here, let me show you."

I led him onto the sun porch, past the blood-soaked chaise longue, to the small white-metal table to the left of the chaise. On it were a wooden salad bowl, a china dish, another bowl of mixed vegetables, and various eating utensils. Glistening on the floor were particles of glass, the remains of a cocktail glass.

"Wright, what kind of drink did Miss Tremaine usually take with her brunch?"

"Oh, I can't say exactly. Sometimes she'd ask for a daiquiri, other times she'd insist on a Tom Collins or a martini or a Manhattan—"

"So it varied. What was it today, Wright?"

"It was—yes, a martini. I'm sure of it, Lieutenant."

Quickly I pointed to the remains of the martini under the table. "Now isn't it strange that only her martini ended up smashed on the floor? Of all the things on the table, *only the martini?*"

Wright rubbed his jaw. "Well, perhaps. I don't know. It could have just slipped off the table, I suppose, or slipped from her hand when she—" He stopped, looking suddenly green.

"Easy, Wright," I said. "There's another possibility. She could have deliberately smashed it as she was dying, to indicate her assailant."

"Who, Lieutenant Denton?" But I think he was beginning to see.

"A spilled martini could have been meant to indicate *Martin* Tremaine, her nephew. I understand that she recently threatened to disinherit him for bringing so much disgrace to the family name. He's quite a notorious womanizer, as we all know from the papers."

Wright nodded absently. "Yes, he is. And, yes, I suppose Miss Tremaine might have meant him. Did you arrest him?"

"No so fast, Wright. I'll make a detective of you yet." I peered into the vegetable bowl and motioned him to do the same. "What do you see?"

Wright squinted. "Vegetables. You know, tomatoes, radishes, lettuce, that sort of thing."

"A tossed salad?"

He looked horrified. "Oh, no. Any large tossed-salad bowl always remained in the kitchen, usually until supper, when Miss Tremaine finished the salad or it was thrown out."

"Then this is—?"

"Purely a bowl of assorted vegetables, as I've said. Miss Tremaine is—was a nibbler."

"And this is?" I was holding a small round onion.

"Why, an onion, Lieutenant."

I chuckled. It was falling into place now. "Yes, an onion. And what is that on the floor?"

He peered down. "Why, what's left of the martini."

"Are you sure, Wright? Look again."

He looked again, and nodded. "Yes, the martini."

"But is it, Wright?" I asked sharply. "Do you see an olive? No, you don't—and there isn't an olive anywhere on the floor. I've checked."

Wright protested. "I put an olive in her martini, I'm positive! What happened to it?"

"Maybe she ate it," I said. "At least, she disposed of it. Why do you think she'd want to be rid of the olive?"

"I—I really don't know, Lieutenant Denton."

"Because," I explained, "she was preparing to change her drink. At least, the *name* of her drink. By removing the olive from gin and vermouth, and then dropping in one of these little onions, gives you what, Wright?"

"Oh, dear," he stammered. "It's a—a Gibson."

I nodded. "Yes, a Gibson. Indicating Miss Tremaine's niece, Sally *Gibson*. Another heir to 'too much, too soon.' Glamorous and, from what I've read and observed, spoiled rotten. Did Miss Tremaine ever threaten to disinherit her?"

His head bobbed assent. "Many times." He seemed confused. "Lieutenant Denton, which was the real dying clue? Did Miss Tremaine mean it was Miss Sally or Mr. Martin?"

"Easy, Wright," I replied. "The martini or the Gibson? Martin Tremaine or Sally Gibson? Wright, I honestly don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No. How can I be sure the martini was smashed deliberately? Or, for that matter, that Miss Tremaine was making a Gibson? Didn't Miss Tremaine *eat* onions?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Well, there you are." I lit a cigarette. "We're dealing with a dying message, I'm sure, but which one? The clue is buried in the confusion of the murder scene. I'd hoped maybe you could help me sort it out."

"Me, Lieutenant? Why me?"

"Mainly because you mixed the drinks, so you'd know what the drink was originally."

"That doesn't help."

"No, it doesn't. So how about the murder scene itself. Notice anything unusual? Anything changed?"

Wright shook his head. "I got right out—as soon as I found her. Sorry I'm such a coward, Lieutenant Denton."

So was I. He wasn't helping much. But I pressed him. "Did you happen to notice what Miss Tremaine clutched in her hand?"

"No, I—why, it must have been the *real* dying clue! What was it?"

"It was—an olive. Most likely, the missing olive from the martini."

"Olive? Olive? I don't understand. You think she meant the olive itself as a clue?"

"Possibly," I said. "To indicate Mr. Crandall, her attorney, whom she recently threatened with arrest for embezzling funds from the estate."

"Gordon Crandall?"

"*Oliver* Gordon Crandall," I corrected. "Dropped his first name a long time back. But surely Miss Tremaine knew about it."

"Yes, yes. Imagine that! 'Olive' for 'Oliver'—clever, in a way."

For a moment Wright's eyes shone with discovery, then clouded. "Er—it is Mr. Crandall, Lieutenant?"

I was getting impatient. "If I knew, Wright, would I be examining everything like this? I don't know—which is driving me nuts."

"I'm really glad to hear you say that, Lieutenant, because my head is spinning, too. I'd say you have three prime suspects."

I didn't answer. I simply walked around the chaise to the large square oak table which had been Miss Tremaine's book table. Several items had been swept from the right side of the table, including some pink artificial flowers and a thick book.

"Did you see this?" I asked, cocking my head sideways. He hurried around the chaise.

"What is it?" He was perspiring profusely and I felt bad putting him through such a grueling session. Yet I needed help.

"Strange that so many things were swept off the table like that," I observed. "Looks deliberate to me. What do you think, Wright?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Denton, I think you've got something now. What's that book there?"

I knelt and turned it over. "Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* . . . And those artificial flowers, aren't they—of course, they are:—mountain laurel!"

Wright was quite pale now. "Did you say 'mountain laurel'?"

"Affirmative. And the heroine of Mrs. Mitchell's novel was—"

"Scarlet O'Hara!" He gasped, then leaned back against the wall. "Oh, no. Oh, no!"

I straightened up. "Yes, Wright, maybe we've got it. Yes, this O'Hara may be a scarlet one, too—*Laurel* O'Hara, Miss Tremaine's maid!"

"I don't believe it!" Wright exclaimed. "Oh, I can see how we have more clues pointing to Laurel, but I don't believe it!"

I shook my head sadly. "Sorry, but the clues are strongest here, as you've noted. You just don't want to see it, Wright. The flowers are laurel, and Scarlet O'Hara dominated the novel. You can't refute it."

"But I do refute it! Lieutenant Denton, she's a young sweet girl. What reason would she have for—for—"

"For murder? Didn't Miss Tremaine plan to close up this place and move into a high-rise apartment? Didn't she plan to fire everyone—including Laurel O'Hara?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"I've questioned Miss O'Hara. Lovely, but she's got one hell of an Irish temper, I can tell you! Probably did it on impulse—"

Wright shook. He really liked the girl.

"Lieutenant Denton, isn't there—an alibi?"

"Oh, she's the one, I'm sure of it."

"No!" He was growing stubborn now. "She's innocent, I tell you! She—she was with me at the time of the murder!" He calmed down some, licked his lips nervously. "She was with me all afternoon."

"Come off it, Wright. You don't have to provide her with an alibi."

"I do and I will. And you can't break it, Lieutenant. Nobody can prove she wasn't with me."

I sighed. After a while I lit another cigarette and walked to the edge of the sun porch. It was growing dark and for several minutes I watched the city traffic flow across the bridge. Finally I turned and found him ashen-faced.

"She had an alibi, anyway," I said. "She claimed she was with her boy friend till four-fifteen . . . Say, what's this?"

I bent over the scattered things on the floor, scrutinizing them. "Do you suppose—yes, she might have meant that."

"What, sir?" His tongue wet his parched lips. "What is it?"

"Wright, did you notice that everything swept off the table was swept from the *right* side? Did you, Wright? The *right* side: And say, that book—*Gone with the Wind*—who was Scarlet O'Hara's lover? Wasn't it Rhett *Butler*?"

He screamed. As I knew he would, sooner or later. "Stop it, blast you!" he shouted, over and over. "You're driving me crazy with your clues! I'll tell you everything—just stop it!"

And he did. He finally confessed to having killed Miss Tremaine in a blind rage on learning of his dismissal after so many years and not even with a promise of severance pay. His insistence on protecting Laurel O'Hara only proved he had no alibi of his own.

Of course, his guilt was obvious from the start. Fear and guilt have a look and smell you can't miss. And, yes, all those clues—martini, Gibson, onion, olive, artificial flowers (actually, begonias), the true first name of Crandall, and Margaret Mitchell's book—all were rigged. By me.

After all, as I told poor Wright, I don't hold much with dying messages. I leave that stuff to Ellery Queen.

CHRISTIANNA BRAND'S "FIRST STORY"

first publication in the United States

Christianna Brand's first story, under the title of "The Rose" as by Mary Brand, was published in October 1939 in an English "society magazine" called "The Tattler." It is as refreshing a short-short today as it was almost forty years ago! (By the way, the author recalls that she "got three or four dollars for it—a fortune" to her in those days.)

Christianna Brand regards "the first words [she] ever wrote into a story" as an "extraordinarily un-amateur little thing; [she] had never been a journalist or done anything except work in shops and so on, nor had [she] any literary background." It is fascinating to go back and read the first trial in words by a writer so well-known to readers of EQMM and to fans all over the world—and this is an invitation to other established writers in the mystery field to let us publish their first noble experiments in the art of literary deception . . .

THE EASIEST THING IN THE WORLD

by *CHRISTIANNA BRAND*

Mr. de Silva kissed his wife good morning, accepted a cup of coffee from her pudgy hand, and sat down behind the newspaper to think out how best he could murder her. It was two years now since their marriage and surely the old girl had had a good enough run for her money. Besides, his Lulu was getting impatient.

"There's a rose growing just underneath our balcony," said Mrs. de Silva, coming in from the strong Riviera sunshine. "Isn't that charming? Quite like our own little garden. It will be full blown

by this evening and I shall wear it in my hair for our little party—our second anniversary."

The plan seemed to develop all in that one moment in Mr. de Silva's mind. He would take her out that evening and make her lean over the balcony to point out the rose—it must be the blossom of a climber from the balcony below. Then a hoist and a shove . . . He could see in his mind's eye a small and shapeless heap among the gay umbrellas and tables far below, could hear himself, the distracted young widower, repeating it over and over again, "She must have leaned too far over the balcony to look at the rose—"

Of course he would come into the money and therefore be open to suspicion; but they were not overlooked and from the street it would be impossible for anyone to say what had happened. He didn't care what anybody thought as long as nobody knew.

Lulu was living in cheap lodgings in a back street of Cannes; the old girl was generous enough with her presents and readily paid his bills, but she was a bit tight with his spending money and he had not been able to spare much for the true lady of his heart. Lulu was expecting him at eleven and he must heave himself up and make a lot of excuses about the barber and new shirts and a little shopping expedition which was to be kept a secret until that evening. Mrs. de Silva assured him that the morning was all his own; she was not even certain she would be back for lunch, since she had promised to go to the Hotel D'Or and then immediately afterward to her dancing lesson.

"You and your dancing lessons!" said de Silva, patting her roguishly. "I do believe you're falling in love with that gigolo, Pierre. You're always dancing with him now."

"Well, I used to dance only with you, dear, but you seem to have quite given up dancing since you became a married man."

"Do you remember that night at Juan when we danced to 'The Blue Danube' together?"

She wouldn't be with him much longer and he could afford to be sentimental.

"That was the night you refused to take your tip, because you said you couldn't bear the thought of money coming between us. I gave you a gold watch the next day to make up for it—do you remember?"

They sighed deliciously and went about their various businesses.

De Silva sprawled in a chair and outlined the plan to his Lulu; Mrs. de Silva lumbered round in the arms of Pierre, nodding her auburn-rinsed head in time to the music and humming with maddening inaccuracy into his ear.

"Naughty little girl!" said Pierre, tightening his arm around her waist. "Keep your mind on your steps and never mind the music. Think about your feet."

"How can you expect me to, Pierre, while I'm dancing with you? And how can you be so silly as to call me a little girl?"

"Well, so you are," said Pierre. "A naughty little redheaded girl who won't pay attention to her lessons. But come and sit down and tell me you're not offended because I wouldn't accept your generous *pourboire* last night. It was only because I do so hate the thought of money coming into our—friendship."

Mrs. de Silva was not in the least offended. She had brought Pierre a dear little platinum watch, to make up for the tip he had refused.

De Silva arrived home with a beautiful (second-hand) diamond clip for her to wear in her hair. It had gone a little against the grain to spend so much money, but he could always give the clip to Lulu afterward, and surely no one would suspect a man of murdering his wife, who had just bought her an anniversary present of diamonds.

She was delighted with the gift; all that was wanting now was the rose to tuck into it, and then she would be ready to go down to dinner. Mr. de Silva began to think that really murder was the easiest thing in the world. They went out on to the balcony and leaned over.

A push, a heave—a terrible cry. Far, far below, little people detached themselves from beneath the midget umbrellas and ran toward the crumpled form. *Hélas, hélas! Quel horreur!* Fetch the ambulance, inform the police, throw over it the tablecloth of the hotel . . .

The police burst into the suite. There, sure enough, was the distracted figure on the couch with clenched hands and disordered hair, in a storm of crocodile tears. Amid wild sobbing they extracted the terrible story.

"He must have leaned over the balcony to look at the rose," began Mrs. de Silva.

a *NEW* short story by

BILL PRONZINI

An ingenious crime story whose unfolding will be one step ahead of your anticipations—because of a protagonist who is a master of improvisation . . .

BANK JOB

by BILL PRONZINI

I was standing beside the tellers' cages, in the railed-off section where the branch manager's desk was located, when the knocking began on the bank's rear door.

Frowning, I looked over in that direction. Now who the devil could that be? It was four o'clock and the Fairfield branch of the Midland National Bank had been closed for an hour; it seemed unlikely that a customer would arrive at this late time.

The knocking continued—a rather curious sort of summons, I thought. It was both urgent and hesitant, alternately loud and soft in an odd spasmodic way. I glanced a bit uneasily at the suitcase on the floor beside the desk. But I could not just ignore the rapping. Judging from its insistence, whoever it was seemed to know that the bank was still occupied.

I went out through the gate in the rail divider and walked slowly down the short corridor to the door. The shade was drawn over the glass there—I had drawn it myself earlier—and I could not see out into the private parking area at the rear. The knocking, I realized as I stepped up to the door, was coming from down low on the wood panel, beneath the glass. A child? Still frowning, I drew back the edge of the shade and peered out.

The person out there was a man, not a child—a medium-sized man wearing a mustache, modishly styled hair, and a business suit and tie. He was down on one knee, with his right hand stretched out to the door; his left hand was pressed against the

side of his head, and his temple and the tips of his fingers were stained with what appeared to be blood.

He saw me looking out at about the same time I saw him. We blinked at each other. He made an effort to rise, sank back onto his knee again, and said in a pained voice that barely carried through the door, "Accident . . . over in the driveway . . . I need a doctor."

I peered past him. As much of the parking area as I could see was deserted, but from my vantage point I could not make out the driveway on the south side of the bank. I hesitated, but when the man said plaintively, "Please . . . I need help," I reacted on impulse: I reached down, unlocked the door, and started to pull it open.

The man came upright in one fluid motion, drove a shoulder against the door, and crowded inside. The door edge cracked into my forehead and threw me backward, off-balance. My vision blurred for a moment, and when it cleared and I had my equilibrium again, I was looking not at one man but at two.

I was also looking at a gun, held competently in the hand of the first man.

The second one, who seemed to have materialized out of nowhere, closed and relocked the door. Then he too produced a handgun and pointed it at me. He looked enough like the first man to be his brother—medium-size, mustache, modishly styled hair, business suit and tie. The only appreciable difference between them was that One was wearing a blue shirt and Two a white shirt.

I stared at them incredulously. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Unnecessary questions," One said. He had a soft, well modulated voice, calm and reasonable. "It should be obvious who we are and what we want."

"My God," I said, "bank robbers."

"Bingo," Two said. His voice was scratchy, like sand rubbing on glass.

One took a handkerchief from his coat pocket and wiped the blood—or whatever the crimson stuff was—off his fingers and his temple. I realized as he did so that his mustache and hair, and those of the other man, were of the theatrical-makeup variety.

"You just do what you're told," One said, "and everything will be fine. Turn around, walk up the hall."

I did that. By the time I stopped again in front of the rail divider, the incredulity had vanished and I had regained my composure. I turned once more to face them.

"I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed," I said.

"Is that right?" One said. "Why?"

"You're not going to be able to rob this bank."

"Why aren't we?"

"Because all the money has been put inside the vault for the weekend," I said. "And I've already set the time locks; the vault doors can't be opened by hand and the time locks won't release until nine o'clock Monday morning."

They exchanged a look. Their faces were expressionless, but their eyes, I saw, were narrowed and cold. One said to Two, "Check out the tellers' cages."

Two nodded and hurried through the divider gate.

One looked at me again. "What's your name?"

"Luther Baysinger," I said.

"You do what here, Luther?"

"I'm the Fairfield branch manager."

"You lock up the money this early every Friday?"

"Yes."

"How come you don't stay open until six o'clock?"

I gestured at the cramped old-fashioned room. "We're a small branch bank in a rural community," I said. "We do a limited business; there has been no need for us to expand our hours."

"Where're the other employees now?"

"I gave them permission to leave early for the weekend."

From inside the second of the two tellers' cages Two called, "Cash drawers are empty."

One said to me, "Let's go back to the vault."

I pivoted immediately, stepped through the gate, entered the cages and led the two of them down the walkway to the outer vault door. One examined it, tugged on the wheel. When it failed to yield he turned back to me.

"No way to open this door before Monday morning?"

"None at all."

"You're *sure* of that?"

"Of course I'm sure. As I told you, I've set the time locks—here, and on the door to the inner vault as well. The inner vault is where all the bank's assets are kept."

Two said, "Damn. I knew we should have waited when we saw

the place closed up. Now what do we do?"

One ignored him. "How much is in that inner vault?" he asked me. "Round numbers."

"A few thousand, that's all," I said carefully.

"Come on, Luther. How much is in there?"

His voice was still calm and reasonable, but he managed nonetheless to imply a threat to the words. If I continued to lie to him, he was saying tacitly, he would do unpleasant things to me.

I sighed. "Around twenty thousand," I said. "We have no need for more than that on hand. We're—"

"I know," One said, "you're a small branch bank in a rural community. How many other people work here?"

"Just two."

"Both tellers?"

"Yes."

"What time do they come in on Monday morning?"

"Nine o'clock."

"Just when the vault locks release."

"Yes. But—"

"Suppose you were to call up those two tellers and tell them to come in at nine-thirty on Monday, instead of nine o'clock. Make up some kind of excuse. They wouldn't question that, would they?"

It came to me then, all too clearly, what he was getting at. A coldness settled on my neck and melted down along my back. "It won't work," I said.

He raised an eyebrow. "What won't work?"

"Kidnaping me and holding me for hostage for the weekend."

"No? Why not?"

"The tellers *would* know something was wrong if I asked them to come in late on Monday."

"I doubt that."

"Besides," I lied, "I have a wife, three children, and a mother-in-law living in my house. You couldn't control all of them for an entire weekend."

"So we won't take you to your house. We'll take you somewhere else and have you call your family and tell them you've been called out of town unexpectedly."

"They wouldn't believe it—"

"I think they would. Look, Luther, we don't want to hurt you. All we're interested in is that twenty thousand. We're a little

short of cash right now; we need operating capital." He shrugged and looked at Two. "How about it?"

"Sure," Two said. "Okay by me."

"Let's go out front again, Luther."

A bit numbly I led them away from the vault. When we passed out of the tellers' cages, my eyes went to the suitcase beside the desk and lingered on it for a couple of seconds. I pulled my gaze away then—but not soon enough.

One said, "Hold up right there."

I stopped, half turning, and when I saw him looking past me at the suitcase I grimaced.

One noticed that too. "Planning a trip somewhere?" he asked.

"Ah . . . yes," I said. "A trip, yes. To the state capital—a bankers' convention. I'm expected there tonight and if I don't show up people will know something is wrong—"

"Nuts," One said. He glanced at Two. "Take a look inside that suitcase."

"Wait," I said, "I—"

"Shut up, Luther."

I shut up and watched Two lift the suitcase to the top of the desk, next to the nameplate there that read *Luther Baysinger, Branch Manager*. He snapped open the catches and swung up the lid.

Surprise registered on his face. "Hey," he said, "money. It's filled with *money*."

One stepped away from me and went over to stand beside Two, who was rifling through the packets of currency inside the suitcase. A moment later Two hesitated, then said, "What the hell?" and lifted out my .22 Colt Woodsman which was also inside the case.

Both of them looked at me. I stared back defiantly. For several seconds it was very quiet in there; then, because there was nothing else to be done, I lowered my gaze and leaned against the divider.

"All right," I said, "the masquerade is over."

One said, "Masquerade? What's that supposed to mean, Luther?"

"My name isn't Luther," I said.

"What?"

"The real Luther Baysinger is locked inside the vault."

"What?"

"Along with both tellers."

Two said it this time, "What?"

"There's around eight thousand dollars in the suitcase," I said. "I cleaned it out of the cash room in the outer vault not long before you showed up."

"What the hell are you telling us?" One said. "Are you saying you're—"

"The same thing you are, that's right. I'm a bank robber."

They looked at each other. Both of them appeared confused now, no longer quite so sure of themselves.

One said, "I don't believe it."

I shrugged. "It's the truth. We both seem to have picked the same day to knock over the same bank, only I got here first. I've been casing this place for a week; I doubt if you cased it at all. A spur-of-the-moment job, am I right?"

"Hell," Two said to One, "he *is* right. We only just—"

"Be quiet," One said, "let me think." He gave me a long searching look. "What's your name?"

"John Smith."

"Yeah, sure."

"Look," I said, "I'm not going to give you my right name. Why should I? You're not going to tell me yours."

One gestured to Two. "Frisk him," he said. "See if he's carrying any identification."

Two came over to me and ran his hands over my clothing, checked inside all the pockets of my suit. "No wallet," he said.

"Of course not," I said. "I'm a professional, same as you are. I'm not stupid enough to carry identification on a job."

Two went back to where One was standing and they held a whispered conference, giving me sidewise looks all the while. At the end of two minutes One faced me again.

"Let's get this straight," he said. "When did you come in here?"

"Just before three o'clock."

"And then what?"

"I waited until I was the last person in the place except for Baysinger and the two tellers. Then I threw down on them with the Woodsman. The inner vault was already time-locked, so I cleaned out the tellers' drawers and the cash room, and locked them in the outer vault."

"All of that took you an hour, huh?"

"Not quite. It was almost quarter past three before the last cus-

tomer left, and I spent some time talking to Baysinger about the inner vault before I was convinced he couldn't open it. I was just getting ready to leave when you got here." I gave him a rueful smile. "It was a damned foolish move, going to the door without the gun and then opening up for you. But you caught me off-guard. That accident ploy is pretty clever."

"It's a good thing for you that you didn't have the gun," Two said. "You'd be dead now."

"Or you'd be," I said.

We exchanged more silent stares.

"Anyhow," I said at length, "I thought I could bluff you into leaving by pretending to be Baysinger and telling you about the time locks. But then you started that kidnaping business. I didn't want you to take me out of here because it meant leaving the suitcase; and if you did kidnap me, and I was forced to tell you the truth, you'd dump me somewhere and come back for the money yourselves. Now you've got it anyway—the game's up."

"That's for sure," One said.

I cleared my throat. "Tell you what," I said. "I'll split the eight thousand with you, half and half. That way, we all come out of this with something."

"I've got a better idea."

I knew what was coming, but I said, "What's that?"

"We take the whole boodle."

"Now wait a minute—"

"We've got the guns, and that means we make the rules. You're out of luck, Smith, or whatever your name is. You may have gotten here first, but we got here at the right time."

"Honor among thieves," I said. "Hah."

"Easy come, easy go," Two said. "You know how it is."

"All right, you're taking all the money. What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Do I get to walk out of here?"

"Well, we're sure as hell not going to call the cops on you."

"You did us sort of a favor," One said, "taking care of all the details before we got here. So we'll do you one. We'll tie you up in one of these chairs—not too tight, just tight enough to keep you here for ten or fifteen minutes. When you work yourself loose you're on your own."

"Why can't I just leave when you do?"

One gave me a faint smile. "Because you might get a bright

idea to follow us and try to take the money back. We wouldn't like that."

I shook my head resignedly. "Some bank job this turned out to be."

They tied me up in the chair behind the desk, using my necktie and my belt to bind my hands and feet. After which they took the suitcase, and my Colt Woodsman, and went out through the rear door and left me alone.

It took me almost twenty minutes to work my hands loose. When they were free I leaned over to untie my feet and stood up wearily to work the kinks out of my arms and legs. Then I sat down again, pulled the phone over in front of me, and dialed a number.

A moment later a familiar voice said, "Police Chief Roberts speaking."

"This is Luther Baysinger, George," I said. "You'd better get over here to the bank right away. I've just been held up."

Chief Roberts was a tall wiry man in his early sixties, a competent law officer in his own ponderous way; I had known him for nearly 30 years. While his two underlings, Burt Young and Frank Dawes—the sum total of Fairfield's police force—hurried in and out, making radio calls and looking for fingerprints or clues or whatever, Roberts listened intently to my account of what had happened with the two bank robbers. When I finished he leaned back in the chair across the desk from me and wagged his head in an admiring way.

"Luther," he said, "you always did have more gall than any man in the county. But this business sure does take the cake for pure nerve."

"Am I to take that as a compliment, George?" I said a bit stiffly.

"Sure," he said. "Don't get your back up."

"The fact of the matter is, I had little choice. It was either pretend to be a bank robber myself or spend the weekend at the mercy of those two men. And have them steal all the money inside the vault on Monday morning—approximately forty thousand dollars, not twenty thousand as I told them."

"Lucky thing you had that Woodsman of yours along. That was probably the clincher."

"That, and the fact that I wasn't carrying my wallet. I was in

such a hurry this morning that I left it on my dresser at home."

"How come you happened to have the .22?"

"It has been jamming on me in target practice lately," I said. "I intended to drop it off at Ben Ogilvie's gunsmith shop tonight for repairs."

"How'd you know those two hadn't cased the bank beforehand?"

"It was a simple deduction. If they had cased the bank, they would have known who I was; they wouldn't have had to ask."

Roberts wagged his head again. "You're something else, Luther. You really are."

"Mmm," I said. "Do you think you'll be able to apprehend them?"

"Oh, we'll get them, all right. The descriptions you gave us are pretty detailed; Burt's already sent them out to the county and state people and to the F.B.I."

"Fine." I massaged my temples. "I had better begin making an exact count of how much money they got away with. I've called the main branch in the capital and they're sending an official over as soon as possible. I imagine he'll be coming with the local F.B.I. agent."

Roberts rose ponderously. "We'll leave you to it, then." He gathered Young and Dawes and prepared to leave. At the door he paused to grin at me. "Yes, sir," he said, "more damned gall—and more damned luck—than any man in this county."

I returned to my desk after they were gone and allowed myself a cigar. I felt vastly relieved. Fate, for once, had chosen to smile on me; I had, indeed, been lucky.

But for more reasons than Roberts thought.

I recalled his assurance that the bank robbers would soon be apprehended. Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on the point of view—I did not believe they would be apprehended at all. Mainly because the description of them I had given Roberts was totally inaccurate.

I had also altered my story in a number of other ways. I had told him the outer vault door had not only been unlocked—which was the truth; despite my lie to the two robbers, I had not set any of the time locks—but that it had been open and the money they'd stolen was from the cash room. I had said the robbers brought the suitcase with them, not that it belonged to me, and that the

Woodsman had been in my overcoat pocket when they discovered it. I had omitted mention of the fact that I'd purposely called their attention to the suitcase in order to carry out my bank-robber ruse.

And I had also lied about the reasons why I was not carrying my wallet and why I had the Woodsman with me. In truth. I had willfully left the wallet at home and put the gun into the suitcase because of an impulsive, foolish, and half-formed idea that, later tonight, I *would* attempt to hold up a business establishment or two somewhere in the next county.

I would almost certainly *not* have gone through with that scheme, but the point was that I had got myself into a rather desperate situation. The bank examiners were due on Monday for their annual audit—a month earlier than usual in a surprise announcement—and I had not been able to replace all of the $14,425.00 which I had "borrowed" during the past ten months to support my regrettable penchant for betting on losing horses.

I had, however, managed on short notice to raise $8,370.00 by selling my car and my small boat and disposing of certain semi-valuable heirlooms. The very same $8,370.00 which had been in the suitcase, and which I had been about to *put back* into the cash room when the two robbers arrived.

As things had turned out, I no longer had to worry about replacing the money or about the bank examiners discovering my peccadillo. Of course, I would have to be considerably more prudent in the future where my predilection for the Sport of Kings was concerned. And I would be; I am not one to make the same mistake twice. I may have a lot of gall, as Roberts had phrased it, and I may be something of a rogue, but for all that I'm neither a bad nor an unwise fellow. After all, I *had* saved most of the bank's money, hadn't I?

I relaxed with my cigar. Because I had done my "borrowing" from the vault assets without falsifying bank records, I had nothing to do now except to wait patiently for the official and the F.B.I. agent to arrive from the state capital. And when they did, I would tell them the literal truth.

"The exact total of the theft," I would say, "is $14,425.00."

"Q"

"Behind the ominous green door sat the equally ominous Stromberg" . . .

THE BELL TOLLS

by ISAK ROMUN

I'm standing here on the stairwell, waiting. He comes by here every evening, usually the last one out of the office. He takes this stairwell because it lets him out into that part of the parking lot where his car stands alone.

Not tonight, though. He'll never make it to the lot. The steps are sharp, angular. And hard, made of unyielding metal. When he comes down, I'll be waiting, a hello on my lips, an arm raised in greeting. A strong arm, an arm that will send him bouncing and bruising down the stairs. If that doesn't kill him, I'll simply finish the job by smashing his head against the angle of a step. An accident. That's what it will look like. Something that could happen to anyone hurrying down these stairs.

It started early this morning with the forlorn shape of Yuddic—an old Gaelic name, he told me one time—with Yuddic McGill slouching against my desk. Mac isn't a pushy sort and it took me a few moments to become aware of his presence and a few more to note the worried look on his face.

"Talmage, I've got bad news."

"Bad news?" I remarked unconcernedly. Mac was always blowing things out of proportion, so I rather pointedly kept on with my job of sorting and posting vouchers.

"Yes. Stromberg just fired me."

Now, this gave me a turn, caused me to look up, perhaps feel a twinge of fear—you know, don't ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee, and that sort of thing. Always believed in it. Well, I thought, who diminishes old Yuddic diminishes me. If Stromberg could get away with this arbitrary action, then the old domino theory might come into play and who knew who'd topple next?

Besides, the figure Mac cut was one to invite compassion. He was a diminutive, retiring, almost ridiculous man. Atop his slop-

ing shoulders resided a head on which was impressed a face of such undistinguished features as to foster the belief that the die of character had been applied too lightly, or had been nudged at the precise moment of contact. Around this was arranged a head of listless, squirrel-gray hair allowed, mod fashion, to grow to his jawline, intimating a spirit to which the remaining cut of his Establishment jib lent the lie.

Mac's news, matched with the sympathy that the image of Mac himself always evoked, goaded me. I jumped from my seat and said to him earnestly, "He can't do that to you, Mac! You're one of the key men in this outfit. Have you gotten the formal notice?"

"I'll get written notice later today. The old pink slip. He called me into his office for a little oral preview so I wouldn't faint dead away later on."

"Well, that's good. It's not official until you receive the slip. You can't let him get away with it, Mac. You've got to do something."

"What's to do?" He shrugged and stood there, a pitiable, defeated sight.

"March right back in there and let him know what'll happen if he lets you go. Give him a picture of the impact that the loss of your expertise will have on this organization."

"Oh, Tal, I can't do that. I can't blow my own horn," he said despairingly. "He wouldn't believe me as much as he would someone else."

"By God, then I'll do it!" I exclaimed, not unaware of the admiring attention I was receiving from the other workers sitting nearby. "I'll go in and lay it out for Stromberg. Don't worry, Mac, you'll still have your job at the end of the day."

Then to the silent huzzas of the people in the outer office, I marched down the long aisle formed by two rows of identical desks to the ominous green door behind which sat the equally ominous Stromberg. I tell you it took nerve and I won't say I didn't look back. I did once and was confirmed in my resolve when I saw the glimmer of hope spreading across the face of my little buddy, Yuddic McGill.

I pushed myself forward, ignoring the protest of Miss Frisby, Stromberg's secretary, and threw open the door. Stromberg looked up from a pink form in front of him and smiled inquiringly as if he had been expecting me (the man has spies everywhere). I recognized the form and noticed it was still blank. Talk about timing!

I moved into the office, slammed the door, and before Stromberg could say one word, was all over him.

"Mr. Stromberg, if you fill in that pink slip you're getting rid of one of the best men we have. McGill's a man of unquestioned ability. Firing him will be like slicing off your right arm. Accounts Receivable will pile up a week's backlog in two or three days. He's the real strength in this department."

And I went on with much more of the same puffery, but that gives you the idea. All the time Stromberg just sat there silently and smilingly taking it in. When I paused to catch my breath, he said crisply, "Thanks. Appreciate it." Then he picked up the phone and pressed an intercom button.

Miss Frisby came on and Stromberg barked, "Ring McGill's desk!" A pause during which he smiled some more at me. "That you, Mac? Forget what I told you earlier. Right, you're not fired. Good God, man, stop blubbering and get back to work!"

He slammed down the instrument and looked at me. I'm sure my face showed real gratitude as I said, "You won't regret it, sir. McGill will give you a fair shake. Nine for every eight you pay him, I'm sure."

"Took a lot of courage coming in here," Stromberg said briefly and then went back to the pink form in front of him and began filling in the spaces.

What's this? I thought. Was it all some sort of unfeeling joke played on poor Mac?

I was wrong. Stromberg handed me a copy of the completed form. *My* name was on it. There I had it, my two weeks' notice. *I was fired!* I could hardly keep myself from strangling the man right there at his desk.

"It was either McGill or you," Stromberg explained. "It was McGill until you barged in here and did a good selling job on him."

"Oh, sir," I whined, all the starch gone from my voice, "won't you please reconsider?"

"Sure, if you can get McGill to quit," Stromberg said and cackled cruelly.

In the outer office I joined the others in congratulating Mac on his deliverance and in accepting accolades for my part in it. I didn't tell anyone that I'd gotten the ax, particularly not Mac. I couldn't spoil his good news with my bad; nor could I make the ridiculous request that he decline Stromberg's benevolence so that I'd be kept on.

Instead, I put on a good face and only let it slip when my eye chanced on the green door at the end of the aisle. Then and there I devised a course of action that, while precipitate, would be extremely satisfying.

That's why I am waiting now on this stairwell. My character is repulsed at what I have resolved to do, but a spirit of survival possesses me. I've finally learned that, these days, the bell tolls only for the guy going to his own funeral. A bystander's got to close his ears to the ding-dong.

He's up there in the office, concluding the conscientious extra hour he always puts in. Stromberg left some time ago. Only Mac and I are in the building.

Sorry, little buddy.

"O"

a *NEW* Raffles novelet by

BARRY PEROWNE

A. J. Raffles, the amateur cricketer and professional cracksman, and his chronicler of crime, Bunny Manders, are back in a longer than usual story—but you will love every word of it, and all its lovely details. Through his younger sister, the elegant Raffles (once called by Christopher Morley "the gentleman crook") becomes involved in as strange an affair as he and Bunny have ever encountered—a Stevensonian tale that might be titled "The Extraordinary Adventure of the Two Theologians and the Gourmet's Bequest" . . .

RAFFLES AND THE UNIQUE BEQUEST

by BARRY PEROWNE

As it happened, I was with A. J. Raffles when he had occasion, one hot day in London, to call at a hotel in the aristocratic Mayfair neighbourhood.

Grey-toppered and equipped with binoculars, we were on our way to Ascot Races, a fashionable event in the summer social calendar, and at the hotel reception desk we chanced to find the manager himself.

"Good morning," said Raffles. "Will you please have Miss Dinah Raffles informed that Mr. Manders and I are here to take her to Ascot?"

Immaculately frockcoated, the manager drew himself up with unexpected hauteur.

"I feel obliged to notify you, Mr. Raffles," he said, "that Miss Raffles has a person with her in her apartment."

"A person?" said Raffles.

"As you are Miss Raffles' brother," the manager said stiffly, "it

were perhaps better that Miss Raffles herself account to you for the company she is keeping."

"Very well," Raffles said, with a frown, "we'll go up." He turned to me. "Come on, Bunny."

Not liking the hotel manager's tone, I felt rather uneasy as I accompanied Raffles upstairs. His sister Dinah had only been in London a week, and we knew as yet little about her. Seven years his junior, she had grown up under guardianship far apart from him, owing to their parents' early demise. Now 21, and seeing her brother's name often in the newspapers, as he was currently England's cricket captain, she had grown so curious about him that she suddenly had taken it into her head to come to London and share his life.

There being a side to his life which she must not know about, let alone share, her unforeseen advent had been disturbing for him, and I knew that he planned to amass a dowry for her so that he could get her safely married into some good European family, well away from England, before he should be exposed as a criminal and the consequent scandal should damage Dinah's prospects. Meantime, as women were ineligible for residence in the Albany, where Raffles had his bachelor chambers, he had engaged a suite for Dinah in this irreproachable Mayfair hotel.

The suite was on the third floor and, being at the rear, was free of the constant harness-jingle of passing cabs and carriages.

Raffles knocked on the door. There was no answer. He tried the door-handle. The door was not locked. I followed him into Dinah's sitting-room. It was flooded with sunshine from the wide-open casement window. Dinah was not in the room. The door to the bedroom was closed. Raffles gave it a hard look.

"Dinah?" he called.

I heard movements in the bedroom. The door opened and Dinah emerged. Closing the door carefully, she turned to us. She was wearing a delightful dress that Raffles had bought her for the races at Ascot. Now that he felt himself responsible for her, nothing was too good for his young sister—and indeed, with her fair hair and grey eyes, she did him much credit. She moved to the window, beckoned us to join her.

"You see that little garden down there?" she said.

Open to the public, yet seldom frequented, the garden was one of those sylvan corners that abound in Mayfair. Butterflies were flickering in the noonday heatshine over the vivid flowerbeds.

"This morning, at about eight o'clock," Dinah told us, "as I was having my coffee at this table by the window, I noticed a young lady all alone in that garden. She was sitting on a seat near that camellia tree down there. It still has a few blossoms left on it, and she'd evidently picked one. She was elegantly dressed, and so lovely, with her dark hair and pale, exquisite profile, that she fascinated me. She seemed so alone, sitting there holding the flower loosely in her lap, and she sat so awfully still that I had a feeling she'd been there all night. And—she reminded me of someone."

"Who?" said Raffles.

"It didn't come to me," Dinah said, "until I went into my bedroom to dress. I kept thinking about her. And it dawned on me that what I was beginning to remember, because of the flower she was holding, was a novel I'd read. It was about a lady who had many lovers, but died young, all alone in a garden—with a flower in her hands."

"*La dame aux camélias,*" Raffles said quietly, "by Alexandre Dumas *fils*."

"When I remembered the novel," Dinah said, "I felt rather worried. I came back to this window and looked out. She hadn't moved. I hurried downstairs and went round to the garden gate, which is in a side turning. I sat down beside her on the seat and said, 'Good morning.' She didn't move or answer, so I—touched her hands."

"Did you now," Raffles said softly.

"She opened her eyes," said Dinah. "Oh, I was *so* relieved! But she was so pale and she looked at me so vaguely that I said I was afraid she was unwell and if she'd like to lie down for a while, I lived nearby. She murmured something about 'dinner,' so I thought she might be hungry. I asked her. She smiled faintly and said something about dinner waiting for her in London every evening at eight, or eighty-eight, or eight-to-eight—something like that, but she has a slight foreign accent, and she was so vague and weak, her mind seemed to be wandering. But I'm sure she *had* been on that seat all night—and her weakness *was* from hunger."

"How can you be sure?" Raffles asked.

"Because I brought her here," said Dinah. "I had to help her up the stairs. My breakfast-tray was still here, with some *croissants* on it. The coffee and the milk were still warm, and she was so glad of them that I could tell she was simply *starving*!"

"And now?" Raffles said.

"I made her lie down on my bed, and she's sound asleep," said Dinah. "This little purse and these white lace gloves on the table are hers. I brought them up from the garden seat. She's Russian, her name's Lydia, and she's a ballerina."

"A ballerina?" Raffles and I exclaimed.

"I thought she wouldn't mind," Dinah said, "if I looked in her purse to see if I could find her address, in case somebody waiting anxiously there should be informed where she is."

"Sound thinking," said Raffles.

"But you see?" Dinah showed us the contents of the dainty little purse. "There are just her *maquillage* things, her handkerchief embroidered with the name *Lydia,* this cardboard ticket—"

"A pawnticket," said Raffles, examining it, "for an article pledged in Nice."

"And there's this lovely photograph of her," Dinah said. "From the photographer's stamp on the back, it must have been taken in Moscow."

The small photograph was of a young ballerina held gracefully in mid-air by a handsome male dance partner strikingly virile in skin-fitting tights.

"I must stay and look after her, of course," said Dinah, "so I'm afraid I can't come to Ascot with you. But I insist that you two go. There's nothing *you* can do here."

"Except mollify the hotel manager," said Raffles. "He must have seen you helping the ballerina upstairs and he probably thought she was the worse for liquor. Never mind, Dinah, I'll have a word with him, book a room here for your guest to move into, and Bunny and I'll return this evening to see how she is."

When we dropped in at the hotel that evening, Dinah reported that her guest had wakened, taken a little nourishment, and gone to sleep again. Dinah had decided to stay at the bedside and have her own dinner sent up on a tray.

"She seems fascinated by her guest," Raffles said as we emerged from the hotel. "And Dinah may well be right in saying that somebody may be waiting for Lydia—waiting anxiously somewhere."

"Yes," I said, "but where?"

"Lydia made a strange remark, Bunny. She was near collapse from hunger," Raffles said, "yet she seems to have implied that every evening, somewhere in London, there's a dinner awaiting

her—dinner at eight or something to that approximate effect. A mere hunger fantasy? Maybe. But if she really *has* such an appointment, doesn't it usually take two persons to make a dinner date? In which case, might not the other party to the nightly appointment be faithfully keeping it—and growing more and more anxious? So wouldn't the logical place for us to look for that anxious person be—the appointed rendezvous?"

"But we haven't a clue where it is."

"I wouldn't say that, Bunny. As a matter of fact, I always carry a number of cards in my wallet—cards that come my way, from time to time, from persons of influence. One never knows," Raffles said, giving me a wicked look, "when the right card, presented at the right place, may come in useful." He hailed a passing hansom. "Cab!"

The destination at which Raffles presently paid off the cabbie proved to be a tall, rather dilapidated house in one of those run-down old streets that huddle in the vicinity of Drury Lane Theatre and Covent Garden fruit-and-flower market. The cab jingled away along the otherwise deserted street, and from the nearby market an aroma of wilting blossoms was tainting the warm, mauve twilight as I followed Raffles up two worn stone steps to the door of the dilapidated house.

He beat a rat-a-tat with the iron knocker. Echoes clapped away along the narrow street. Peering at the shabby door, I made out on it the tarnished brass numeral: 88.

The door opened. Framed against gaslight from within stood an impeccably liveried footman.

"Good evening," said Raffles. "I have here the card of a gentleman known to you. He's kindly written a note of introduction on it."

"This gentleman," replied the footman, scrutinizing the card, "is certainly well-known here at Eighty-Eight. If you care to step in, I will inquire if it is feasible to accommodate you at such short notice."

Thus invited, we stepped into a narrow hallway, oak-panelled and richly carpeted. To the left was a row of tall-backed, carven chairs. Indicating them to us, the footman went off, taking the card Raffles had presented, and disappeared between heavy curtains of crimson velvet that flanked a carpeted staircase leading up from the back of the hallway.

Two other men, who like ourselves appeared to be waiting, were

standing before a Louis XVI marquetry table to the right. They were studying a large, gilt-framed painting on the panelled wall there.

"*Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe,*" the shorter of the men said. A platter-hatted priest, of sturdy stature, he had a large, napkin-covered basket on his arm. "I'm told, Gilbert, that this painting is esteemed, by competent critics, a masterpiece of the modern 'naturalistic' school."

"The fallacy of modern 'naturalism,'" objected the other man, who, though much younger than the priest, towered over him in height and conspicuously outdid him in girth, "is that it is highly unnatural."

Wearing a bohemian black cloak, and with a black slouch hat in one hand and a stout walking-stick hooked on his arm, the younger man had bushy hair of a chestnut hue. Studying the painting through ribboned eyeglasses held at a distance from his eyes, he pursed his lips disparagingly under the eaves of his moustache.

"Admittedly," he said, "the subject of this painting—this woodland picnic, with naked ladies seated on grass—is quite appropriate to Eighty-Eight here, where you tell me that gourmets foregather. But let me venture the modest suggestion that this alleged 'masterpiece' flouts plausibility. These ladies in the buff—saving your presence, Father—would not be, as depicted, tranquilly picnicking. Far from it! In reality, they would be tormented to the point of hysteria by the attentions of wasps, spiders, and hairy centipedes."

"I'm afraid, Gilbert," said the priest, with a smile, "that you have a tendency to disputation. I've often noticed it in our discussions of theology."

"As a mere amateur in that subject, Father," said the large bohemian, "I seek light from you. But art is another matter. Tchah, I snap my fingers at this decadent daub!"

He did so—with such scorn that the gesture dislodged the walking-stick from his arm. Raffles, in his courteous way, picked up the stick, and restoring it to its owner, was rewarded with expostulations of gratitude—which were curtailed by the arrival of a footman who, liveried like the one who had admitted us, descended the staircase and addressed himself respectfully to the priest.

"The *patron,*" said the footman, "presents his apologies for keep-

ing you waiting, Father. His gout is troublesome to-night, but he would appreciate a word with you in his bureau abovestairs. Allow me to relieve you of your basket."

"Have you told the *patron*," asked the priest, "that I have a friend, a rising poet and journalist, with me this evening?"

"The *patron*," said the footman reassuringly, "will be charmed to make your friend's acquaintance."

"Come, then, Gilbert," said the priest, "and remember that I have your word to write nothing about the matter that brings me to this place."

"In London literary salons," declared the poet, plodding massively upstairs at the priest's heels, "my word is warranted sterling—I hope!"

The footman having made off somewhere with the priest's basket, the departure upstairs of the two theologians left Raffles and myself alone in the hallway, and Raffles murmured, "Bunny, does that huge, cloaked poet remind you of someone?"

"Porthos," I said, "in *The Three Musketeers,* by Alexandre Dumas *père*."

"Exactly," said Raffles, "and, oddly enough, that walking-stick of his weighs heavy in the hand. It's a swordstick!"

Just then the footman who had admitted us reappeared from between the crimson curtains and said he was pleased to announce that Monsieur Kash found it feasible to accommodate us. Bidding us leave our toppers on the marquetry table, where he said they would be seen to, the footman piloted us between the curtains, along a carpeted corridor, into a panelled dining-room.

Here its supervisor, Monsieur Kash, who was of a square shape and had black hair cut *en brosse,* conducted us to a table, where he would have placed menus in our hands, but Raffles said that, this being our first visit to 88, we felt we would do well to leave the selection of our repast to Monsieur Kash himself.

"I shall hope, then," Monsieur Kash said, with a gratified twinkle, "to prove worthy of your compliment."

As he withdrew, I scanned the dining-room. The diners at the other tables seemed for the most part to be in affluent middle age, the gentlemen expansive of shirtfront and rubicund of complexion, their ladies elaborately coiffured and graciously ample of flesh. Mastication largely precluded the flow of conversation, the diners seeming wholly absorbed in their enjoyment of a succulent gastronomy.

Nowhere among the dedicated *bon viveurs* could I see anybody dining alone with a worried expression and anxious glances toward the door. But Raffles touched me on the arm, murmuring, "The flowers on the table in the corner to your left are different from those on the other tables. Take a look."

I saw his point in a flash.

"Camellias," I breathed.

"Note the significant proceedings," said Raffles.

An uncanny performance was in progress at the corner table, which was set for one person. Though no person occupied the chair at the table, dinner was being served there. A waiter was pouring wine reverently from a cobwebbed bottle reclining in a wicker cradle. Beside the table stood a naperied trolley. At this a *sous-chef* in starched white tunic and yard-high hat was cooking a delicacy in a chafing-dish over the pulsating flame of a spirit-lamp.

The *sous-chef* exhibited the contents of the chafing-dish to the empty chair, for approval, then transferred the delicacy to a plate. His colleague, the waiter, took up the plate and placed it before the invisible diner. After a moment the waiter took up the plate again, its contents in no way disturbed, and replaced it on the trolley, which was wheeled away by the *sous-chef*.

It was deftly done.

"Don't stare, Bunny," Raffles murmured.

Notwithstanding his admonition, I could not keep myself from watching, sidelong, the faultless service of successive courses and wines at the table with no visible diner. It haunted me. I was quite unable to give our own dinner the attention it merited—but when Monsieur Kash came to inquire if everything was satisfactory, I tactfully echoed Raffles' commendations.

"Though we must admit, Monsieur Kash," Raffles added, "to a curiosity about what's been taking place at that corner table with the camellias on it."

"Ah, Table Twelve," said Monsieur Kash. "Our regular diners have been long accustomed to the sight you mention. In fact, they have seen it seven-hundred and twenty-nine times—counting this, the penultimate evening for it."

"Penultimate?" Raffles said.

Monsieur Kash seemed pleased by our interest.

"At a time," he told us, "when the Royal Nevsky Ballet, from Moscow, was visiting London, it played a limited season at Drury

Lane Theatre, just around the corner. One of our regular diners, a well-known London stockbroker, a bachelor of mature years and a notable gourmet, conceived an infatuation for a young dancer in the *corps-de-ballet*."

Raffles and I exchanged a glance.

"He married her," said Monsieur Kash, "and one night, not long afterward, he brought her here to dine. I was not on duty that night, but I knew that the gentleman had taken great pains about the dinner, specifying the dishes in advance—*his* favourite table to be reserved, *her* favourite floral decoration for it. Gentlemen, he had a purpose."

"Indeed?" said Raffles.

"It was to awaken her," Monsieur Kash explained, "to the importance of proper dining. His purpose was evident, I was told, in the detail with which he enumerated to her the courses they were about to eat, with particulars of the ingredients and preparation of the various dishes, and the provenance of the wines that would accompany them."

"Fascinating," said Raffles.

"Unfortunately," said Monsieur Kash, "the young ballerina seemed more fascinated by our regular diners. Accustomed as she was to the airy, twinkle-toed companionship of ballet persons, she seemed to feel herself out of place among solid, serious citizens dining substantially. She gazed around at them, I was told, with a kind of aloof wonder—and her husband noticed her inattention to his culinary discourse. He flushed with anger."

"Not unnaturally," said Raffles.

"He reproached her," said Monsieur Kash. "He was heard to say he was deeply disappointed in her for making no effort to share his interests in life. She murmured something to the effect that 'it was all so *bourgeois*.' This infuriated him. He retorted that all she cared about was squandering the generous pocket-money he allowed her on her ruinous Russian passion for gambling. Gentlemen, it was a fatal remark."

"Fatal?" Raffles said.

"Her eyes flashed," said Monsieur Kash. "She took off a necklace and bracelet she was wearing—obviously gifts he had lavished on her in his infatuation. She removed even her diamond earrings. She placed the jewels on the table before him. The first course of their dinner was about to be served. She turned her back on it and walked out of this room—and out of his life."

"Good Lord!" said Raffles.

"A few months later," said Monsieur Kash, "he departed it himself—from natural causes. He left her a species of bequest. He seems to have been convinced that her passion for gambling would be her ruin, and that, within a year or two, she would be humbly glad to eat such a dinner as the one she had scorned. Hence the late gourmet's bequest, which imposed upon our *patron* here at Eighty-Eight the obligation and necessary funds to serve nightly for the ballerina, for a period of two years, a dinner at Table Twelve identical with the dinner so carefully arranged for her on the night of her proud defection."

"Extraordinary," said Raffles. "So the bequest dinners are, in a sense, a repeated service of funeral baked meats—with the late gourmet lurking spectrally, as it were, every night at Table Twelve, with the conviction that sooner or later, inevitably, he would have the posthumous satisfaction of seeing the improvident ballerina obliged at last to consume the charming repast."

I glanced uneasily at the corner table.

"To-morrow night's service of the dinner," said Monsieur Kash, "will be the last. The young lady has never yet come to claim her dinners. Only the priest has come for them."

"The priest?" Raffles and I said.

"By arrangement with our *patron* here at Eighty-Eight," Monsieur Kash explained, "the parish priest, who officiated at the gourmet's melancholy interment—which our whole staff attended as a mark of respect—collects the bequest dinners if unconsumed by the ballerina. The priest now has a slum parish of London's dockland, where he maintains a soup kitchen for the destitute. Every evening he either sends an urchin or comes in person with a basket to collect the Table Twelve dinner."

Monsieur Kash chuckled. "The priest drolly refers to the unconsumed dinners as 'the manna,' and he tells me," said Monsieur Kash, "that food and wine for one person, as served here at Eighty-Eight, can be stretched considerably when added to a gruel and then distributed to the needy on the principle of the miraculous loaves and fishes—a Biblical reference, gentlemen."

"I recall it from my schooldays," said Raffles.

The platter-hatted priest and the large, cloaked poet were not in evidence when we left the deceptive premises of 88, so shabby externally, so sybaritic within.

"To a proud, sensitive young artiste of the ballet, and Russian

at that," Raffles said to me thoughtfully, as we walked away, "the necrophilic aspect of those dinners bequeathed to her may well seem morbid and repulsive. One can understand why she might prefer to starve rather than have anything to do with them. I look forward to meeting her to-morrow."

But when we called at the Mayfair hotel, toward noon the next day, we were told at the reception desk that Miss Raffles' guest had fully recovered from her indisposition and that the young ladies had gone out shopping.

"Miss Raffles left this note for you, sir."

"Very well," said Raffles, when he had read the note. "Please tell Miss Raffles that Mr. Manders and I will call again later in the day."

"Dinah and her guest," Raffles said outside, "seem to have arrived at terms of mutual confidence, Bunny. I infer from Dinah's note that Lydia, when she walked out of the gourmet's life, must have rejoined the Royal Nevsky Ballet—and subsequently, on the gourmet's demise, have married the Nevsky's leading dancer. Dinah says that his name's Igor Koslov and that he's the graceful, virile fellow who appears with Lydia in that photograph we saw, the one taken in Moscow."

"Temperamentally," I said, "he's no doubt much more congenial to her than the gourmet ever was. But how did she come to be in the plight in which Dinah found her?"

"It was her own fault, Bunny. Dinah says that Mr. Koslov's been touring North America recently with the Nevsky Ballet. Lydia had no role in the repertoire, so she stayed in Europe, living at a hotel in Nice. Mr. Koslov left her with ample money for her expenses during his absence, but, according to Dinah, 'Lydia was tempted by the roulette tables at Monte Carlo and had very bad luck.' "

"So she *is* an incorrigible gambler!"

"Aren't all Russians?" said Raffles. "Anyway, she'd got herself into a fix—penniless and with a big unpaid bill at the Nice hotel. But she knew that Mr. Koslov and the Nevsky Ballet were on the way back from Canada in the liner *Laurentian,* due to dock at Liverpool to-day, so she decided to come to London and be at the station to join Mr. Koslov when he arrives here this evening on the boat-train from the liner."

"She'd kept at least enough money, then, for her fare from Nice?"

"Apparently not, Bunny. Dinah says that Lydia had to pawn a ring she was wearing. It brought just enough for her fare, with nothing over for food on her journey. So she arrived in London, day before yesterday, in a famished condition—and as she hadn't dared ask the Nice hotel to release her luggage with her bill unpaid, she couldn't very well, devoid of money and luggage, expect a hotel here to take her in. But she'd lived in Mayfair when she was married to the gourmet, so she knew of the little garden—and as these June nights are pleasantly warm, she decided just to sit it out in the garden until it came time to go to the station to meet Mr. Koslov."

"But she arrived the day before yesterday, and *he's* not due till this evening!"

"She doesn't impress one, Bunny, as being an eminently practical person. If it hadn't been for Dinah, some gardener or constable would certainly have found Lydia in a hunger coma and had her removed to the nearest Workhouse Infirmary for admission to the ward for indigent females."

"What a fate!" I exclaimed, appalled.

"Instead, she's Dinah's guest," said Raffles, "and Dinah's taken her shopping for 'some necessary millinery, as Lydia has only the clothes she is wearing.'" He smiled a shade wryly. "As the bills for Dinah's kindly purchases will certainly come to me, and I'm overdrawn at the bank, we'd better go to Ascot again, Bunny, and see if we can back a winner or two."

In this we were unsuccessful. Our minds were not really on it. We were out-of-pocket when in the evening we returned to London and called again at the Mayfair hotel—only to be told that the young ladies had been in but had gone out again.

"I heard some mention between them, Mr. Raffles," said the reception desk attendant, "of having a hairdressing appointment."

"We'll wait for them, then," Raffles said. "Let us know when they come in. Mr. Manders and I will be in the Billiard Room."

We had a whisky-and-soda or two and played a hundred-up on the hotel's excellent billiard table. Raffles seemed restless. Every time he chalked his cue, he took out his gold half-hunter for a glance at it.

"Perhaps, Raffles," I ventured to suggest, as we finished the game and racked our cues, "the girls have gone on from the hairdresser's to meet Mr. Koslov and the Nevsky Ballet off the boat-train."

"I wonder," said Raffles. A thought seemed to strike him. He stood for a moment in frowning abstraction, then said abruptly, "Come on, Bunny."

"Where to?" I said.

"To Eighty-Eight," said Raffles.

Alighting presently from a hansom in the ill-lit old street near Drury Lane Theatre, we were admitted to 88 by the same sleek footman who had opened the door to us on the previous night. After only a brief wait, we were told that Monsieur Kash would be able to accommodate us.

"You are later this evening, gentlemen," he said, as he welcomed us in the dining-room, "but a table fell vacant about half an hour ago."

"But this," said Raffles, seeing to which table Monsieur Kash was ushering us, "*this* is Table Twelve!"

"Madame," said Monsieur Kash, "has dined."

My scalp suddenly tingled.

"Yes, gentlemen," Monsieur Kash said, with an air of suppressed excitement, "finally, on the very last night of the bequest, the long awaited ballerina has appeared, dined at this appointed table, and has gone her way."

"Was she alone?" Raffles said.

"Quite alone," said Monsieur Kash. "Would you care this evening, gentlemen, to select from the menu?"

"We're content," Raffles said, "to leave it to you."

As Monsieur Kash went off, I glanced questioningly at Raffles.

"What in the world," I said, "can have made her change her mind?"

"It just could be, Bunny," he said, "that it was the visit to the hairdresser's."

His brows knitted and he said no more. I was frankly baffled. At the tables around us, the *bon viveurs,* napkinned to their double chins, were devoting themselves with a minimum of irrelevant conversation to their absorbed enjoyment of a cleverly conceived and impeccably served alimentation.

For our part, we again failed to give our own dinner the undivided attention it deserved. Raffles, gazing absently at the delicate pink and creamy pale camellias in the cut-glass bowl on the table, was pursuing some train of thought which I strove in vain to divine. "Eat up, Bunny," he said suddenly, "and let's get a cab back to the hotel."

When we reached the Mayfair hotel, we were told by the reception desk attendant that, yes, the young ladies were in Miss Raffles' suite.

"We'll go up," said Raffles.

As we turned away from the desk, a small man was coming at a run down the carpeted staircase. Though he was wearing a smart suit, light travelling ulster, and corduroy cap, so that his lithe figure and masculine virility were not now emphasized by skin-fitting tights, he was instantly recognisable from the Moscow photograph. From the pallor of his handsome face, the hectic glitter of his dark eyes, he seemed to be in a shaking rage as he raced across the lobby and out into the street, shouting for a cab.

"Koslov the dancer," said Raffles.

He started upstairs at the double, myself at his heels. He knocked on the door of Dinah's sitting-room. The door was opened by a *svelte*, elegantly dressed young woman with raven hair parted in the centre and swept softly back to a knot at her nape. Her lips a shade over-rouged, she gazed at us with wide grey eyes, mascara-shadowed and startled.

Raffles said coldly, "I prefer less *maquillage* and your hair its natural colour—fair. What have you been up to, Dinah?"

I followed Raffles into the sitting-room, closed the door, and turned, staring stupefied at his young sister, so subtly changed in appearance.

"You're going to be furious with me," she said to him. "I've caused an awful row between Lydia and Igor Koslov. You remember Lydia said something about a dinner being served for her every evening? Well, it's true. She's told me all about it. The dinners are a queer bequest from her first husband, a kind of food addict. Lydia would rather die than touch them. She said they'd been hanging over her, dragging at her like a kind of fate, for two whole years, and she was thankful that to-night would be the end of them. Well, I suddenly thought it'd be rather fun if she sent *somebody else* to eat the dinner! It would sort of turn the tables on the gourmet—and Lydia would have the last word, after all, d'you see?"

"In a way," said Raffles.

"Lydia was horrified when I first suggested it," Dinah told us, "but then she got as excited as I was. She said that the people at the dinner place had only seen her once, and that was nearly three years ago—but, to be on the safe side, we went to a famous

hairdresser's salon in Mayfair and asked him to make me look as much like Lydia as possible. He went to great pains to do it."

"Evidently," said Raffles.

"It was quite late when we came out of the hairdresser's," Dinah went on. "So Lydia went off in a cab to the station to meet Mr. Koslov and the Nevsky Ballet off the boat-train, and I got a cab and went to the dinner place. It's called Eighty-Eight and only gourmets know of it."

"Is that so?" said Raffles, expressionless.

"It looked rather dilapidated," Dinah said, "but a proper footman opened the door to me. I put on a slight foreign accent, like Lydia's, and showed him the little Moscow photograph and said I understood that Table Twelve was reserved for me. He said he'd inquire and went off with the photograph, leaving me in a little hallway, then he came back and said that Monsieur Kash found it feasible, and took me to a dining-room, where this Monsieur Kash seemed quite excited to see me. He said he had despaired of ever doing so."

"Did he indeed?" said Raffles dryly.

"He was awfully kind," Dinah told us. "He took me to Table Twelve and made a great fuss over me. So did the waiters. They couldn't do too much. Even the *chefs* in the kitchen peered out at me through the service hatch, and they were all smiles. Only the diners at the other tables paid no attention; they just went on stuffing themselves, but the staff were wonderful, so delighted to see me at last and make me feel important. And the food was delicious, though I couldn't really eat much. I felt too excited—most of all when I finished dinner and Monsieur Kash escorted me to the little hallway and, as he helped me on with my mantle, told me that he had a cab waiting outside and the cabman had instructions to take me to an address where I'd find that I was expected."

"And you went off in that strange cab?" Raffles said, with a shock I fully shared.

"Oh, it was quite all right," Dinah assured us. "Monsieur Kash helped me into the cab, and shook hands with me, and said I needn't feel the least disquiet, as the address in Thamescourt Street, where the cabman would take me, was the house of a priest."

"A priest?" Raffles and I exclaimed.

"Yes," said Dinah, "and it was just as Monsieur Kash had told

me. When I got to the house, and pulled the chain of the doorbell, it was a priest in a cassock who opened the door to me. He was awfully kind. He invited me into his study, where the window was wide open and the walls were lined with books, and he introduced a friend of his who was there, an enormous person who wore a cloak and ribboned eyeglasses but seemed quite nice. The priest asked me if I had enjoyed my dinner at Eighty-Eight. I said I had. He said he knew all about the bequest dinners, had come to regard them as 'manna,' and had been in the habit of collecting it, most evenings, to help feed the poor of his parish. But he said that when he'd called at Eighty-Eight this evening with his friend, to collect the last of the manna, they'd been told that I was in the act of eating it all—and, from the doorway of the dining-room, they'd seen me doing it. I felt terribly embarrassed."

"As well you might," Raffles said grimly.

"But the priest and his friend just laughed," Dinah told us, "and the priest said he was delighted to meet me at last. He said he'd heard that I was fond of gambling, and he asked what game of hazard especially interested me. So, remembering what Lydia had told me, I said I had a passion for roulette. Then the priest and his friend talked to me about roulette for a while, and it was all quite pleasant—until suddenly an awful thing happened. The priest opened a drawer in his desk and took out a little package. He said it was for me—and that he knew he spoke for his ex-parishioner, the late gourmet, in expressing the hope that I would think very seriously about what I found in the package, and take it to heart."

"Good Lord!" said Raffles.

"I felt simply dreadful," Dinah confessed. "The package was meant for Lydia, of course, not for me. But all I could do was accept the package, say good night to the priest and his friend, and hurry back here to the hotel to give Lydia her mysterious package. But when I rushed into my sitting-room here, I found both Lydia *and* Igor Koslov waiting for me, and they were having a fearful quarrel—because apparently Lydia had told Igor that she'd let me go to Eighty-Eight in her place, and he was furious with her for having anything to do, even indirectly, with the wretched bequest."

"A woman's second husband," Raffles said, "is understandably sensitive on the subject of her first husband—whether he's been disposed of by death, as in this case, or merely by legislation."

"Oh, I know," said Dinah. "Both Lydia and Igor are terribly Russian and sensitive—and Igor demanded to know everything that had happened. I had to tell him, just as I've told you and Bunny. And Igor snatched the package from me and demanded of Lydia what was in it. She said she hadn't the faintest idea. He ordered her to open it immediately, in his presence. She said she'd have nothing to do with it, in or out of his presence, and she rushed off to her own room—the one you booked for her—and locked herself in. And Igor Koslov tore open the package himself."

"What was in the package?" Raffles asked.

"A little cardboard box," said Dinah, "but there was nothing in it!"

"*Nothing?*" Raffles said.

"Well, nothing," said Dinah, "except a few words written on a half-sheet of notepaper. I didn't *see* what the words were, but Igor Koslov went absolutely livid when he read them. He said, 'By God, I'll get to the bottom of this!' He could hardly speak for rage. He crammed the paper into his ulster pocket and rushed out."

"Very well," Raffles said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow about your imprudent escapade, Dinah. Meantime, do something about your hair. Come on, Bunny."

We went down the hotel stairs at a run.

"There's not much doubt where Koslov's going," Raffles said, as we emerged from the hotel. He hailed the first cab that hove in view and asked the cabbie if he knew where Thamescourt Street was.

"I works out of a yard just around the corner from it," said the cabbie. "It's out by the docks—North Quay."

"Drop us at your yard, and there's a fiver for you if you ginger your nag up," Raffles said, adding grimly, as we jingled off in the hansom, "Koslov the dancer has about five minutes start on us, Bunny, and in the mood he's in, he's capable of anything!"

It was quite a long ride out to the maze of dark, depressing streets of the dockland slums, where the cabbie reined his horse at last to a standstill outside a yard where hansoms and four-wheelers stood around haphazard with upflung shafts.

"Thankee, guv'," said the cabbie, as Raffles tipped him. "Thamescourt Street's a 'undred yards on down—first turn to yer right—you can't mistake it, there's a bleedin' church on the corner. Us 'ackies often gives the priest a free lift when 'e goes up west, Drury Lane way, wiv 'is basket of an evenin'."

Walking on quickly, we turned to the right, around the railings of the corner churchyard. The stifling midnight air reeked of tidal flotsam. A silent flash of heat lightning momentarily illumined the modest spire of the old stone church. Its lychgate faced, across the narrow street, the endless, smoke-blackened brick wall of a riverside warehouse. Fifty yards or so beyond the church stood a stationary fourwheeler cab, its back to us.

"Koslov's cab," Raffles said. "It's standing in front of a house—almost certainly the priest's house. There's a lighted ground-floor window at the side of the house. That's probably the priest's study. Let's see if we can make our way to it through the churchyard and get a look in at what's happening."

The lychgate creaked slightly as Raffles opened it. Our eyes on that square of lighted window, we groped towards it through the churchyard of gravestones, tomb-slabs, weeds, laurel bushes. A ship's siren bayed distantly. The church clock sounded a single mellow chime. Heat lightning, silent, flashed again over the sky. Raffles jerked me down, crouching, into the shelter of a laurel bush. We were within a few yards of the wide open window, could see right into the gaslit, book-lined room.

"The answer to your questions is affirmative, Mr. Koslov," the priest was saying. His voice clearly audible to us, he was standing, cassocked but hatless now, a slightly rustic figure with his round, ruddy face, behind a desk on which a breviary lay open with a rosary on it. "I didn't, as it happened, officiate at my late parishioner's marriage to Lydia, the young dancer of the Royal Nevsky *corps-de-ballet.* But yes, I knew the man reasonably well. And yes, I'm fully aware of the terms of his bequest to her."

"Bequest?" Koslov said harshly. Trim, well-knit, capped and ulstered, his handsome face white to the lips with anger, he stood facing the priest across the flat-topped desk. "Seven hundred and thirty calculated slaps of her face, *that* was the rejected man's bequest to Lydia! And now this—these words on this paper! You knew the man. Do you know, then, the motive for this message from his grave? I insist that you answer!"

"Certainly," said the priest.

He ignored the half-sheet of notepaper held out to him by Koslov. The priest's student in theology, the bushy-haired, Porthos-like poet, stick hooked on his arm, ribboned eyeglasses held to his eyes, towered cloaked and huge over both the priest and the dancer and looked thoughtfully from one to the other.

"I've never had the pleasure," the priest was continuing, "of meeting the young ballerina who's now your wife, Mr. Koslov. But you must be aware, or you would not be here questioning me, that there came forward this evening a charming claimant to the last—the very last—of the bequest dinners."

"I learned of this—this claimant," Koslov said angrily, "when I arrived in London this evening!"

"You know, of course," said the priest, "that she was a false claimant. But when she was sent on to me from Eighty-Eight, as I'd instructed should be done, I had an open mind about her, though I needed to be quite sure that she was indeed Lydia. I couldn't test the claimant's knowledge of Russian, my own linguistic range being more or less limited to liturgical Latin. Nor did I consider it altogether politic to invite the claimant to prove herself a ballerina by performing here in my study, before my friend and myself."

"The conventions," said the large poet regretfully, "rob me of many simple pleasures."

"But I knew, Mr. Koslov," continued the priest, ignoring the interjection, "that the real Lydia is an incorrigible gambler, with a particular passion for roulette. So my friend and I engaged the claimant in a conversation about that costly pastime."

"Of which her knowledge," said the poet, "proved suspiciously flimsy."

"Poor Dinah," Raffles whispered in my ear, "she lacks worldly experience."

"Now, Mr. Koslov," the priest was saying, "many people know of the bequest dinners. There's always been a possibility that some mischievous young woman might think it quite a lark to present herself at Eighty-Eight, one night, as the missing ballerina, and eat the late gourmet's mysterious dinner. I've long been prepared for such a possibility. True, the claimant who presented herself here this evening failed the roulette test. But it was not conclusive. There remained a slight chance that she might nevertheless be the real Lydia. I therefore put the claimant to a further test. I gave her a small package. I'd prepared it nearly two years ago—placing a message on it."

The priest's voice rang suddenly loud and clear from the gaslit study.

"'*I will make darkness light before you, and crooked things straight.*' Are there not, in those eleven words from the Book of

the Prophet Isaiah," said the priest, "both a promise and a warning?"

"A paradox!" exclaimed his huge student in theology.

"Paradox, Gilbert, is in the eye of the beholder," said the priest. "That is the point. If the claimant were genuine, would she not read the promise implicit in the *first* seven words of that message? Would she not be likely to come back here and ask me if I could explain why my late parishioner, the gourmet, had sent her such a promise?"

Heat lightning flashed silently, blinding bright over the churchyard.

"On the other hand," I heard the priest saying, "if the claimant were false, would she not read the warning implicit in the *last* four words of that message? Would she not wonder, pondering uneasily on the word 'crooked,' if her imposture had been detected? And wouldn't she, therefore, take very good care *not* to come back here?"

"So this," said the cloaked poet, "is why you said to me, 'Wait a while, Gilbert, let's see if she returns.' Father, you are a subtle man!"

"Not I," said the priest, "but Isaiah. *I* am merely surprised—for the message has brought the unexpected." He looked at Koslov the dancer. "It's brought *you*, Mr. Koslov. And you've adequately identified yourself as Lydia's husband. I accept that. You imply a right to speak on her behalf. Very well, I accept that, too. But, Mr. Koslov, you've come a little late."

Koslov said, with icy anger, "What do you mean by that?"

"In terms of the gourmet's bequest," said the priest, "I was entrusted with a small package which I was to give to Lydia if, in consequence of her availing herself of any one of the dinners served for her nightly at Eighty-Eight, she should appear before me. The last of the bequest dinners was served for her at Table Twelve this evening. As you are well aware, Lydia did *not* eat that dinner. And at midnight to-night the bequest, as far as Lydia is concerned, became null and void."

In the gaslit study the priest opened a drawer in his desk. He took out a small, brown paper package tied with string, the knot sealed with blue wax.

"The late gourmet's alternative instructions regarding this package," said the priest, "became applicable as from midnight. Just now, the clock of my church chimed. The clock is accurate by the

chronometers of Greenwich, just across the Thames there. The chime you heard, Mr. Koslov, marked the quarter after midnight."

"For two years," Koslov said tautly, "her first husband's damnable bequest has haunted Lydia's imagination. I am determined to exorcise his ghost from her life—*and* from mine!"

"Exorcism, Mr. Koslov," said the huge poet, "is a matter for an ordained priest."

But Koslov, ignoring the poet, said harshly to the priest, "Open that package!"

"You cannot," the priest said mildly, "demand that as a *right*, Mr. Koslov—although—"

"*This* is my right!" said Koslov, and suddenly, in his hand, was a small revolver.

Involuntarily, Raffles and I started half up from our crouch among the laurels, but there in the gaslit study a swordblade flashed from the walking-stick of Porthos the poet and he would have struck violently at the levelled revolver had not the priest's shout of "Stop!" rung out with an authority that held both poet and dancer momentarily immobile.

"Gilbert," the priest said, "sheathe your romantic sword. Your pen becomes you better. Mr. Koslov, put away your firearm. These wild gestures are quite uncalled for. You cannot demand, as a right, that I open this package, Mr. Koslov, *although*—as I was about to say when I was so immoderately interrupted—I have no objection whatever to opening it. In fact, the late gourmet's instructions entitle me—since midnight—to do precisely that."

Raffles' grip on my arm had drawn me down again and my heart was thumping as I saw the priest don a pair of small-lensed, steel-rimmed spectacles and take from a drawer of his desk a pair of scissors.

"Mr. Koslov," he said, "while I'm opening this package, let me ask you a question. What is your wife's favourite flower?"

"Camellias," said the dancer, perplexed.

"And when a man uses a woman's favourite flower to speak to her for him," said the priest, "what is he probably trying to tell her?"

Koslov did not answer.

"By the expressed desire of the testator," said the priest, looking over his lenses at Koslov, "camellias have appeared nightly on the table reserved for Lydia."

Koslov stood rigid.

"In hearing confessions," said the priest, "one comes to realise that almost every human action of seeming irrationality is prompted by confused motives. Lydia deserted her first husband, and his dinner bequest to her was the act of an emotionally disturbed man. We can't know all that he felt of bitterness, regret, self-blame—for he was more than twice her age, yet had rushed her into marriage—but no doubt something of all this is implicit in his bequest. Yet, surely, the camellias on Table Twelve cry aloud the strongest of his motives—his very real concern for her, believing as he did that her passion for gambling would soon so reduce her circumstances that a time would come when she would be glad to eat the dinner she had scorned."

Raffles' grip was iron-hard on my arm as we saw the priest, unwrapping the package, disclose a small cardboard box.

"And if that time should indeed come," the priest continued, "then it might well be that Lydia would have learned the folly of her gambling and would be grateful, at last, not only for the dinner, but for something else she had scorned to accept from him that now might provide her with the means to make a fresh start."

Lifting the lid from the box, the priest removed from it a wad of cotton-wool, then took out and laid on his desk a gold bracelet set with gems, a necklace of sapphires, a pair of diamond earrings.

"When she left him, she left behind not only his dinner, but these, his other gifts to her. Mr. Koslov, Lydia took *nothing* from her first husband—nothing," the priest said quietly, "but his heart."

Mellowly, the clock of the adjoining church chimed twice.

"At midnight," said the priest, "the disposal of these articles became a matter for my discretion. I could use the proceeds of them to help subsidize a soup kitchen and night refuge for the needy of many nationalities who teem in this polyglot dockside parish. But these jewels were originally gifts to Lydia. I therefore, in the spirit if not in the letter of the gourmet's bequest, exercise my discretion when I say to you now, Mr. Koslov—take them to her."

"Never!" said Igor Koslov. "Even if she would accept them, which is unthinkable, she would merely gamble them away! No, no! One experience of hunger has no more cured Lydia of gambling than ruin at the card tables of Homburg Spa and exile to the tundras of Siberia cured our great Russian novelist Dostoievski! It's in the blood."

He drew in his breath, deeply.

"For me," he said to the priest, "you have exorcised the ghost of Lydia's first husband. But—for Lydia herself? I wonder! Father, what should I tell her?"

"As a celibate," said the priest, with a smile, "I am no more an authority on the feminine than the late gourmet seems to have been when he imagined there was anything on earth that could make a woman eat a dinner she had set her mind against. So I can only say to you, Mr. Koslov, tell Lydia what your heart tells you to tell her."

"Sound advice, Mr. Koslov," said the priest's companion, the huge, cloaked poet. "By the way, if you're going in the West End direction, may I share your cab? I'd like to hear more about the novelist Dostoievski you mentioned. I don't think his works have been translated into English yet."

"I'll see you out, gentlemen," said the priest.

The two theologians and Koslov left the study. In the booklined room, now unoccupied, the jewels on the priest's desk glittered invitingly in the gaslight. The window stood wide open. To have nipped into the room, seized the jewels, and slipped away unseen through the churchyard would have been so easy that, knowing Raffles' intention of amassing a dowry for his young sister Dinah, I was seized by a terrible surmise. My heart pounded, the hair stirred on my scalp, as I peered at his keen profile, here in the darkling shrubbery.

But I should have known him better.

"No, Bunny," he muttered, as though he had sensed my fear, "theft has its limits. Those jewels are not for us. They're strictly the priest's swag now—the last of the manna."

His grip tightened on my arm.

"Listen!" he said.

Out of sight at the front door of the house, the theologians were talking. Their voices were clearly audible.

"You know, Father," I heard his friend Chesterton saying, "I feel in my bones that one day I shall write about a priest-detective. I shall base the character on what I know of you and on things I've learned from you. I shall call the tales—hah!—*The Father Brown Stories*."

"Go home," said the priest. "That poor cabbie's been waiting a long time. Good night, Mr. Koslov. Good night, Gilbert."

"Good night, Father O'Connor," said the poet.

I heard the cab rumble away. The hoofbeats of the horse, receding, echoed from the bleak warehouse walls of Thamescourt Street. I heard the front door of the priest's house close.

He came slowly into his study. He was taking off his spectacles. His expression thoughtful, he put them into their case, pocketed it under his cassock.

Thunder clapped across the midnight sky. Raindrops began to tap on the leaves of the laurels. The priest came to the window, stood for a moment looking out, then closed and latched it and drew together the curtains, shutting in the light and the sparkle of the dead man's jewels.

"Let's go, Bunny," said Raffles.

As we stole away empty-handed through the churchyard, a tugboat hooted vibrantly, not far off, surging down London river on the tide.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mr. Manders' narrative, found recently among his clandestine records of criminal experience, inevitably raises the question of his credibility factor. In this connection, the following points, established by latter-day research, may perhaps be of interest:

Mr. G. K. Chesterton did indeed state, when later he wrote his great series of tales of a priest-detective, that he had based the character on certain attributes of his friend, the late Father O'Connor.

Biographers of Mr. Chesterton are agreed that for many years he carried a swordstick. He is known to have set great store by it, though research has failed to discover any occasion—other than that allegedly observed by Mr. Manders—when the blade was bared in anger.

Mr. Manders mentions in his narrative a promise made by Mr. Chesterton to write nothing about the affair of the gourmet's bequest. Possibly corroborative of Mr. Manders' account of the matter is the fact that there is no mention whatever of it in Mr. Chesterton's monumental and most enduring literary achievement, *The Father Brown Stories.*

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME DOSSIER

by OTTO PENZLER

The continuing acceptability of mystery fiction as significant literature and the consequent appreciation of its most distinguished practitioners has had a twofold result. One is the satisfying pleasure we feel when our heroes are sufficiently honored by the rest of the world. The other is the more tangible appearance of major biographies.

Of prime significance is *Erle Stanley Gardner: The Case of the Real Perry Mason* (Morrow, $15) by Dorothy B. Hughes, recent winner of the Mystery Writers of America's ultimate Edgar, a Grand Master Award for lifetime achievement. Her first book in 15 years is a massive tome, meticulously researched and written with the same perceptive sensitivity and gracious style that lifted her fiction to mountaintops. While the biography may be a trifle generous to Gardner's literary accomplishments, one would like to believe (as all the evidence indicates) that he was as wonderful a human being as Mrs. Hughes portrays him. No one can reasonably argue that Perry Mason is the most famous American lawyer of the Twentieth Century, or that Gardner is the most read American writer of all time (it is estimated that 330 million copies of his books, in all languages, have been published), so the subject clearly deserved a biography. He could not have been more fortunate in a biographer had he personally commissioned the work. An invaluable bibliography of the prolific Gardner by Ruth Moore serves as a welcome appendix.

Less essential, although nicely done, is still another biography of the creator of Sherlock Holmes (according to some dubious sources), *Conan Doyle: A Biographical Solution* by Ronald Pearsall (St. Martin's, $10). Originally published in England, this smoothly written biography examines much more than the connection between the detective and the author, discussing many of Doyle's literary efforts, his devotion to spiritualism, and his patriotic efforts in the Boer War (which indirectly earned him his knight-

hood) and World War I.

Previously mentioned, but worth another notice, is John J. McAleer's excellent contribution to scholarship in the world of mystery, *Rex Stout: A Biography* (Little, Brown, $15), the deserving winner of an Edgar earlier this year.

For a broader range, a couple of nice additions to the reference shelf are *Who's Who in Spy Fiction* by Donald McCormick and *Who's Who in Horror and Fantasy Fiction* by Mike Ashley (each published by Taplinger at $10.95). Included are hundreds of brief biographies of writers who have worked in the loosely defined genre of mystery fiction.

BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

The dark and brooding mystery films of Curtis Harrington have not always been to everyone's taste, but his work belongs squarely in our genre and deserves our attention. Recently in his home in the Hollywood hills, the director—now in his forties—reviewed his career for *EQMM*.

After an apprenticeship working for producer Jerry Wald and making surrealist experimental shorts (one is now in the permanent archives of the Museum of Modern Art), Harrington wrote and directed an impressive first feature, the dreamlike *Night Tide* (1963)—an homage to the subtle, under-the-surface terror films of Val Lewton and to this day a cult favorite. In it young sailor Dennis Hopper falls under the destructive sea-spell of a beautiful woman at an ocean amusement park. As in all of Harrington's work, the atmosphere of doom is almost suffocating in its persuasiveness.

His next important film (a science-fiction effort was in between), the impressive *Games* (1967), was conceived by him as a vehicle for Marlene Dietrich but was ultimately dazzlingly acted by Simone Signoret, Katharine Ross, and James Caan, a deftly plotted, claustrophobic murder charade that springs a few surprises. It tells of a bored young urban couple who with an older stranger (Signoret) engage in a cat-and-mouse game of death. In 1971 Harrington directed *What's the Matter with Helen?*, scripted by Henry Farrell, about two women (Debbie Reynolds and Shelley Winters), the mothers of teenagers imprisoned for murder, who join forces against the lurking terrors outside. Set in the 1930s with a heavy sense of period (Agnes Moorehead's voice as a radio evangelist is heard throughout), it is a strange, moody exploration of character and madness.

The Killing Kind in 1975 presented a mother (Ann Sothern), deeply fond of her son, who realizes he is a young psychopathic murderer who must be stopped. *Whoever Slew Auntie Roo?* has a theme perhaps only Harrington could pull off well: a bizarre reworking of Hansel and Gretel in which two children plot against a pathetic old woman (Shelley Winters). Filmed in England, with a heavy Edwardian flavor, it is quiet but interesting. His most recent theatrical release is last year's occult thriller, *Ruby,* which was reworked after it left his hands; he considers it "a travesty."

Harrington has done several impressive television movies, including the superb *How Awful About Allan* in which a young blind man is the victim of strange torments; Tony Perkins and Julie Harris are in the cast. He directed *The Cat Creature* and *The Dead Don't Die* from scripts by good friend Robert Bloch. He is currently preparing *The Hound of Hell,* about a demonic dog spirit of Celtic legend, for fall TV release.

Several projects are ahead for Harrington. He hopes to direct in England a major production of Iris Murdoch's chilling Gothic melodrama, *The Unicorn*—for which he has already co-written the screenplay. He is currently wrestling with an adaptation of H. P. Lovecraft's *Weird Shadow Over Innsmouth,* but that tale of terrors underground may be hard to film. Curtis Harrington perhaps may yet do it, though—a director-writer whose cinematic heroes are Val Lewton and James Whale, and for whom "the mystery has been a great passion since early age." It shows.

INTERVIEW: CHRISTIANNA BRAND

Anthony Boucher once wrote of Christianna Brand: "You have to reach for the greatest of the Great Names (Agatha Christie, John Dickson Carr, Ellery Queen) to find Brand's rivals in the subtleties of the trade." The author of *Green for Danger* (perceptively selected by Eric Routley as one of the 12 greatest detective novels) is finishing her first pure mystery novel in nearly a quarter of a century.

EQMM: How, and why, did you become a writer of detective fiction?

BRAND: I hated a girl I worked with in a shop, and it was sublimation, I suppose (now that we use these grand words), of my anything *but* subconscious wish to murder her. I had been a total amateur, never written a single word, until this book, *Death in High Heels.* It was turned down by 15 publishers, then published at last by prestigious old Bodley Head without a word altered, and proved something of a small best seller.

EQMM: What came next?

BRAND: *Heads You Lose,* which was twice consumed in flames during the bombings [London in World War II—ed.], rewritten yet a third time, and published. And then *Green for Danger.*

EQMM: Since *Green for Danger* has been the most remembered and highly honored of your books, and the source for a brilliant film, can you point to anything specific that resulted in its success? Did you take special pains with it?

BRAND: I met a man in a pub, very drunk—I mean, *he* was very drunk—and he said that a motive for murder would be . . . [no give-aways here]. Another time I was chatting with a surgeon friend and he said that a way to murder a patient in an operating theater would be . . . So I put the two together, and a lot of the book wrote itself in that one had, of necessity, exactly the right number of suspects gathered in one place, and they had only to be sorted out and given characters. The little matter of constructing the story followed, but it was not the most difficult book I've ever done, though perhaps the most intricately plotted in as far as both motive *and* method were part of the mystery.

EQMM: Is there a single essential ingredient in all your mysteries?

BRAND: It's all a matter of sleight of hand—of distracting the reader's attention while you subtly put the relevant clue under his nose and nip it away again. But you must put it there; you must play fair.

EQMM: And do you construct all your detective novels in the same way?

BRAND: More or less. You get an idea—the germ of your plot. You think about it, more ideas come, some fit, some won't. You are like a mechanic trying to design something, sitting at a table with all sorts of bits and pieces scattered about, sorting them out with a forefinger: pushing one to one side, ousting another altogether, bringing the first one back, finding that it doesn't match with some more you've meanwhile chosen—deciding perhaps that it's so good you must consider abandoning all the rest and starting over again with this as the main component.

A jigsaw puzzle? No, because in a jigsaw puzzle all the pieces belong. To assemble a detective story such as *Green for Danger* takes first an enormous amount of thought: thinking up ideas, building on them, assembling, sorting, discarding, matching up, finally eliminating all that won't fit into your design. Only then do you begin to tell the story, and now your troubles start all over again. Dorothy Sayers used to say that the main difficulty was to decide when to tell the reader what, and that just about describes it. And *how* to tell him so that he won't recognize the implications of what you're telling him—and yet playing absolutely fair.

THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Among current authors of historical detective stories, Peter Lovesey must rank either first or a close second behind the less prolific Francis Selwyn. Lovesey's first novel, *Wobble to Death* (1970), had the background of a Victorian walking race, and his second, *The Detective Wore Silk Drawers* (1971), concerned bare-knuckle prize-fighting. Readers who were ready to pigeonhole Lovesey as a specialist in sports mysteries proved premature, however. He has not used a sports background since.

Lovesey has continued to be a hard writer to categorize. Although he has stuck to a setting of Victorian England and has featured the same detective, Sergeant Cribb, in all his novels, his books have varied widely—sometimes realistic, sometimes fanciful; sometimes humorous, sometimes grim. They have ranged from a wild adventure thriller, *The Tick of Death* (1974), to a closed-circle whodunit, *A Case of Spirits* (1975). Has any writer managed such variety while sticking to the same time, place, and central character? I can think of a few, but not many.

**** Peter Lovesey: *Waxwork*, Pantheon, $7.95. The eighth Cribb novel has less humor than others in the series—Cribb is older and more embittered and his associate of years past, Constable Thackeray, does not appear. Still, it is one of the best, primarily because of two memorable characters: a woman condemned to die and the public hangman whose job it is to dispatch her. The plot is tricky and the evocation of Nineteenth Century London is as vivid as ever.

**** Tony Hillerman: *Listening Woman*, Harper and Row, $7.95. Navajo cop Joe Leaphorn's first case since the Edgar-winning *Dance Hall of the Dead* (1973) is another fine one, though the emphasis is more on action than deduction this time. Hillerman's knowledgeable depiction of Native American society and customs is as commendable as his mastery of plot, suspense, and character.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *Killed in the Ratings*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $7.95. A strong first mystery with an intriguing background of network television. The author has much fun with similes and metaphors, quotes from old TV shows as epigraphs to the chapters, and a satisfying old-fashioned gathering-of-the-suspects finale. There are good clues and plot gimmicks, but traditionalists may find one aspect of the solution a little untidy.

*** Gore Vidal: *Kalki*, Random House, $10.00. Though Vidal

hasn't written a straightforward mystery novel since his days as Edgar Box, many of his books have at least some mystery elements. This one has crime, espionage, horror, even detection, and it is as a mystery that the book works, not as a somewhat stale and heavy-handed satire on contemporary life. One word on the plot: the crime is on the largest scale imaginable.

*** Barbara and Dwight Steward: *Evermore,* Morrow, $7.95. In the first of a promised series, Edgar Allan Poe, who now calls himself Henri Le Rennet and, of necessity, did *not* die in 1849, looks into the Mayerling affair. The tale is narrated by Wilmot Rufus Griswold, an ugly American of 1880s vintage and a Watson even more comically dense than Poirot's Hastings. Though there is some good detection, the story doesn't quite take off, perhaps because the mystery plot is so much offstage.

*** Robert Barnard: *Blood Brotherhood,* Walker, $7.95. An amusing variety of clerical types are among the suspects as murder strikes a conference of clergy at an Anglican monastery in Yorkshire. Witty style, pointed satire, old-fashioned pure detection.

*** Anna Clarke: *The Lady in Black,* McKay-Washburn, $6.95. Set in the London literary world of the 1880s, with publisher's reader George Meredith as a central character, this pleasant Victorian melodrama has a formal, somewhat stilted narrative and dialogue that truly seem to belong to another time.

*** Richard Neely: *Lies,* Putnam, $8.95. Though nothing like Agatha Christie in style or milieu, Neely shares with her a determination to set up the reader for a startling trick ending. Though this novel, starting with a Mansonlike mass murder in Santa Barbara, is not one of his best, partly because of a shortage of sympathetic characters, he delivers on schedule in the end.

*** Joe Gores: *Gone, No Forwarding,* Random House, $6.95. The staff of Daniel Kearny Associates, the private enterprise 87th Precinct, fight to save the firm's license in their third book-length case. The DKA novels—solid, skillful, and neat—suffer only in comparison with Gores' extraordinary and adventurous non-series mysteries, like *Hammett* and *Interface.*

** Eugene Fitzmaurice: *Circumstantial Evidence,* Jove, $1.95. Though it's good to see that old standby *curare* make a comeback as murder weapon, this "blockbuster"-type novel proves inflated and pretentious. At half the length, it might have made a pretty good medical-legal detective story, though the murderer comes out of a hat.

"Q"

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REVIEWS OF NEW BOOKS

UNDER ORION, by Janice Law. Houghton Mifflin Company, $7.95

Anna Peters and a company scientist fly to Germany to buy an oil formula that spells big profits for New World Oil. Anna must determine if the scientist, his go-between, and a purported genius in oil chemistry are on the level. The beauty of Germany takes on an ominous cast as Anna faces her most chilling assignment yet. She's on her own in trying to outmaneuver a tough, street-wise adversary and to protect a foolish but gifted scientist. The bottom line of New World's latest venture is murder. *Under Orion* marks Anna's third appearance, following *The Big Payoff* and *Gemini Trip*.

THE SHATTERED RAVEN, by Edward D. Hoch. Dale Books, $1.75

This classic tale by one of the most popular mystery writers in America is set at the annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards Dinner. One of the winners is Ross Craigthorn—successful, handsome, popular—and possessed of a terrible secret. While accepting his award, a bullet from an unseen assassin strikes him down. What did he know, and who needed to silence him? The suspense builds as sleuths who previously worked only on paper now find themselves tackling a real mystery and pursuing a very real and dangerous killer. This ingeniously plotted thriller holds the reader right up to its surprising climax.

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	RETAIL PRICE	DISCOUNTED PRICE
Clarke, Anna	THE LADY IN BLACK	McKay-Washburn	$6.95	$5.50
DeAndrea, William L.	KILLED IN THE RATINGS	Harcourt Brace Jovanovich	7.95	6.35
Gores, Joe	GONE, NO FORWARDING	Random House	10.00	8.00
Hillerman, Tony	LISTENING WOMAN	Harper & Row	7.95	6.35
Law, Janice	UNDER ORION	Houghton Mifflin	7.95	6.35
Lovesey, Peter	WAXWORK	Pantheon	7.95	6 35
McAleer, John J.	REX STOUT: A BIOGRAPHY	Little, Brown	15.00	12.00
Neely, Richard	LIES	Putnam	8.95	6.95
Pearsall, Ronald	CONAN DOYLE: A BIOGRAPHICAL SOLUTION	St. Martin's	10.00	8.00
Steward, Barbara and Dwight	EVERMORE	Morrow	7.95	6.35
Vidal, Gore	KALKI	Random House	10.00	8.00

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"I'm disinclined to let them get away with murder"—and besides, two can play at dirty pool . . .

TWO-WAY STREET

by JOHN IVES

The body was found along Route 783 just outside the town of Aravaipa. The woman who found it was a Navajo lady; I learned that she and her dogs had been herding a flock of sheep across the road at dawn to beat the morning traffic. She'd roused a dairy rancher and the phone call had been logged in at the Sheriff's office at 5:44 A.M. I was brought in around noon when one of the Undersheriffs picked me up in a county car; he filled me in on the way to Pete Kyber's office. "We've got a corpse and a witness. Or at least we think he's a witness."

"Who's the victim?"

"Name of Philip Keam. Thirty-something. Reporter for one of the Tucson newspapers."

"You notified next of kin?"

"Divorced, no children. The parents may be alive—we're trying to find out."

Officially the temperature went to 103° Fahrenheit that day, which meant that down along the surface of the plain it was near 140°. The asphalt of the Sheriff's parking lot was soft underfoot, sucking at my shoes, and I hurried into the air-conditioned saltbox before I might melt. Slipping off the sunglasses I made my way back to the Sheriff's private office.

Pete Kyber was long-jointed and Gary Cooperish: slow-moving and slow-talking but not particularly slow-thinking. His most noticeable feature was his Adam's apple. Pete was no relation to the redneck stereotype; he was by instinct a conservationist rather than a conservative. How he and I ever got elected to our offices in that rural county still mystified me.

He watched me sit down; he was gloomy. "We got a bloody one, Mike."

"I'll have a look on my way out. What's the story?"

"Bludgeoned to death. With a rock."

"No fingerprints?"

"On a rock?"

"Who's this witness you've got?"

"Larry Stowe. Just a kid."

"Would that be Edgar Stowe's son?"

"Yes."

Edgar Stowe ran the drugstore in Aravaipa. He didn't own it—it was a chain store—but he was the manager. His son Larry would be about 22, I calculated; one of my kids had been in the same high-school class. I remembered the Stowe boy coming around the house now and then, but that was five years ago. He'd struck me as an unremarkable kid, towhead and a bit vacuous.

"What's Larry got to say?"

"We're having a hard time getting a straight story out of him. You'd better talk to him yourself."

"All right. First tell me what you've got."

"Well, Keam was robbed. His wallet's gone. We called the paper in Tucson to find out what he was doing over here. The city desk man got lathered up and I had to calm him down. But I'm afraid we'll be knee-deep in newspapermen by this afternoon. Keam was up here investigating a story about land frauds. Digging into the Inca Land Company developments."

"Ron Owens."

"Yes." Pete Kyber made a face to indicate his opinion of Ron Owens—real-estate tycoon, despoiler of the wilderness. I knew Owens, not intimately, and disliked the man as much as Pete did. Usually Owens could be found sporting around in his Lear Jet, flying his pet Congressman to Las Vegas, or partying with his Oklahoma oil chums and expatriate Detroit gangster buddies. The "desert estates" he sold were rickety instant-slum dwellings encrusted on drearily bulldozed scrub acres.

Dozens of lawsuits were outstanding against Owens, brought by home buyers who attested that the Inca Land Company had failed to make good on its advertising and had defrauded them in multifarious ways. Naturally Owens had a phalanx of lawyers, some of whom had practiced in Washington and all of whom were adept at delaying cases until hell froze over. Owens was as slippery as a watermelon seed.

Pete Kyber took me back to the interrogation room where Larry Stowe sat picking his fingernails. Pete said, "Larry, you

know the prosecutor here, Mike Valdez."

"Yes, sir." Larry was still towhead, still vacuous—his mouth hung open most of the time—and, at the moment, uptight.

"Sure we know each other." I shook hands with Larry. "How are you, son?"

The kid's handshake was perfunctory, his palm damp; he had trouble meeting my eye. "How's Mike Junior doing, sir?"

"Fine, just fine. Finishing up at the University this year."

"That's, uh, that's great, sir."

"Pete, you want to leave us a while?"

"Sure thing." The Sheriff retreated and shut us in.

I sat down facing the youth across the chrome-and-vinyl table. "Okay, Larry, would you like to go through it with me?"

He was reluctant but I kept at him with gentle persuasion and finally it came out, sheepish: he'd spent the night with a girl at her parents' ranch a few miles up the highway and that was why he'd been walking back into town so early in the morning. He didn't want to involve the girl, didn't want her parents to know he'd spent the night—he admitted with a nervous laugh that he'd left by the bedroom window with his shoes in his hand.

Once we got past that obstacle he told a straightforward story. He'd been walking along the highway shoulder; it wasn't yet dawn but it was a clear night. Down along Mule Deer Creek he'd walked under the cottonwoods where the big corrugated culvert funneled the creek under the road and he'd heard voices raised in argument. Curious and cautious, Larry made his way past the trees into the brush beside the road. He saw a big car parked in the dust—a Cadillac. Larry didn't know much but he did know cars and he described that one in fabulous detail, right down to the license number, and I made notes as he talked.

Three men stood out on the slickrock and Larry recognized two of them—cowboys he'd seen around Tooner's Bar, drinking beer and pawing at the waitresses. The third man was a stranger to Larry; of course that was Philip Keam, the reporter from Tucson.

The cowboys were arguing about what to do with Keam. Larry said, "Bud Baker kept saying they ought to beat the guy up and dump him. The other guy, Sammy Calhoun, he was scared, I guess. He kept grabbing at Bud's arm and saying they better turn the guy loose or they'd get in trouble with the Sheriff. And then I heard Bud say that was what they were getting paid for, to put a good scare into this guy so's he'd quit nosing around. Then this

guy between them, he interrupted the two of them and said, 'You two have only got two choices. You got to kill me or let me go, because if you start dumping on me I'll sign a complaint for forcible kidnaping and assault and battery."

Larry swallowed; I saw sweat on his forehead. "So old Bud Baker just says, real calm-like, he says, 'All right, if that's how you want it,' and I seen him reach down and pick something up and hit this guy over the head with it. He hit him three-four times while he was falling.

"Then Bud and Sammy, they went through the guy's pockets, and I guess they taken his wallet, and after that they run over to that Cadillac and I watched them drive away. It was starting to get light and this Indian woman come along with some sheep, and I stayed hid-up there in the brush till I seen her run for help, and then I run on home. I figured she'd give the alarm, you know, but then I kept, you know, thinking on it, and finally I come down here to see the Sheriff."

I obtained warrants on Baker and Calhoun; Peter Kyber's men went out to arrest them. Pete and I picked at Larry Stowe in several sessions, trying to nail down evidential details; his testimony was direct, his memory clear, and I knew we had a first-class witness in him.

We tried to sweat Baker and Calhoun but they'd been coached. They stood mute, refused to answer any questions without their lawyer, admitting nothing. The lawyer was a skinny fellow from Phoenix who drove up in an air-conditioned Corvette. He wore a sharkskin suit and aviator sunglasses. His name was William Farquhart and he had a white toothy smile—"Just call me Bill"—and I loathed him on sight.

We were obliged by the rules of disclosure to give him the outlines of our case; we had to tell him we had an eyewitness and we had to tell him the substance of the witness' testimony. Before the trial we would have to show him a transcript of Larry's formal statement, at which time we knew the lid would blow off because the bad guys would know the identity of our witness and they would also know we had a positive make on the car driven by the two killers: Ron Owens' Cadillac.

We forestalled the latter problem by impounding Owens' car on a bench warrant but this only alerted Owens & Company to their jeopardy and within 24 hours lawyer Farquhart had been rein-

forced by the importation of three powerhouse lawyers from Tucson and Phoenix.

And later that day Larry Stowe came into my office, scared white. "I got to talk to you. They want me to change my story."

He'd never seen the two men before. They'd hustled him into the back seat of their car. "It was a two-tone green '73 Chevy Suburban." They told him to shut up and just listen.

"This guy says in the first place they've got five respectable witnesses to testify Bud and Sammy was over to the Sonoita rodeo grounds that morning, so they couldn't possibly of been up here beatin' Keam to death with a rock. Then they told me they got a witness who'll swear he seen me throw something over the fence behind Tooner's Bar, and this witness went and picked it up and it turned out to be Keam's wallet.

"They told me I'd be accused of the murder myself unless I change my testimony and say it was too dark to see the two guys that killed Keam. They say if I don't identify Bud and Sammy in court they'll leave me alone."

"Thanks for coming forward, Larry. You've got guts."

I said to Pete Kyber, "It's dismally effective. At least we can see the defense tactics now. They intend to make it look as if Larry killed Keam himself—to rob him—and then tried to shift the blame onto the two cowboys."

"It's possible that's what actually happened, Mike."

"No. I know the kid. Larry's got a feeble imagination. He could never have dreamed up that story and kept to it so faithfully. He's not a killer—he never even goes hunting with the other kids—and I don't believe he's ever stolen anything in his life."

"Dumb but honest," the Sheriff said. "But we're still in a bind here. If they produce a gang of witnesses to impeach his testimony, we won't get a conviction. Reasonable doubt."

I said, "I'm disinclined to let them get away with murder, Pete."

"Sure, but I don't know what we can do about it."

I got up to leave. "Two can play at dirty pool, you know."

"Larry, if you took that wallet off the body after they killed him, you'd better tell me now."

"No, sir. I'd admit it if I'd done it. I didn't do that."

"All right."

Bill Farquhart, the oily lawyer, agreed happily to a private meeting with me. Of course he expected me to offer a deal and I didn't disabuse him of that misapprehension until we met over a lunch table in a poorly lit booth in Corddry's Steak House.

Farquhart's dark hair fluffed around his ears Hollywood style; in the sharkskin suit he was all points and sharp angles. But he was reputed to be a splendidly effective courtroom lawyer.

He ordered a dry martini and talked about the hot drought but I cut him off because I hadn't the patience for small talk. I said, "Ron Owens thinks he's got this thing framed up perfectly, doesn't he? Let's not waste each other's time—we both understand the situation."

"I guess we do, Mr. Valdez. Defense wins, prosecution loses. That's the score." He laughed gently at me, very sure of himself.

I said, "As far as I'm concerned you're an errand boy for Ron Owens. I've got a message for you to carry back to him. You just listen to it and carry it to him. Understood?"

He gave me a pitying look. "Valdez, I don't take that kind of talk from two-bit Mexican civil servants."

That elicited my hard smile. "I'm the elected prosecuting attorney of Ocotillo County, Mr. Farquhart. As for the other, I'm not Mexican, I'm American. It's my country here, not yours. My ancestors were right here in this county while yours were still burning witches in Scotland. But the key point on the table right now is this. I'm the County Attorney in a county where Ron Owens has eighty-three percent of his assets tied up. Does that suggest anything to you?"

He smiled slowly; he thought he understood. "Okay," he said, "what's the deal?"

"This time I'll settle for Baker and Calhoun. I want their heads in a basket. And I want Ron Owens out of this county, lock, stock, and barrel. Right out."

"I guess you know better, really."

"No. I'll tell you something, this isn't Phoenix where everybody's got his hand out for graft and things are big enough to provide anonymity for men like Ron Owens. You're in a small town now and we tend to be unimpressed by Sy Devore suits and Hollywood sunglasses and Corvettes and big-city methods of extortion and intimidation. You don't realize it but these are tough people out here. They have to be, to survive in this desert. They chew up clowns like Ron Owens and spit them out."

His eyes were hooded; he feigned boredom. "What's the message, Mr. Valdez? I'm getting tired of this small-town boosterism."

"You've listed six defense witnesses who may be called during the trial to impeach Larry Stowe's testimony and to alibi the defendants. Of course you won't bother to call those six witnesses if Larry fails to identify Baker and Calhoun, correct?"

"You're doing the talking."

"Here's the message, counselor. Commit it and pass it on. One. Larry Stowe is under police protection. You won't find him until he appears in court, so you may as well forget any further attempts to threaten him or assault him. Two—"

"Are you accusing me of—?"

"Shut up. Two: Larry will testify to what he saw—the deliberate and unprovoked murder of Philip Keam.

"Three: you will fail to call the six perjurious witnesses. The trial will take its course on the basis of the truth, and we'll take our chances on getting an honest conviction.

"Four: should you or Ron Owens disregard my warning, and should you bring forward your six witnesses to give false testimony, then certain things will begin to happen in this county. Ron Owens will find himself up to here in property-tax auditors and land reappraisals. He will find every application for a building permit held up for months, perhaps years. He will find his heavy construction equipment impounded by the County for violations of safety and pollution regulations. He will find his car ticketed incessantly for violations of vehicular codes, and he'll find his home, his office and other real property cited for every conceivable violation of the building codes. He will find himself and his executives subjected to an endless barrage of bureaucratic foul-ups, lost applications, misplaced documents—a nightmare of red tape, a systematic campaign of official harassment that will bring all his businesses to a total standstill and result in the across-the-board bankruptcy of every enterprise controlled by Ronald Baylor Owens.

"And one more thing," I added in the same quiet voice. "It's conceivable that some fatal accident might just happen to befall me if I began to put such a campaign into action. You and Owens should be aware that this is a rural county and that my family is one of the oldest here. We've known one another for generations around here. Some of these old boys—friends of mine, I play poker and hunt deer with them—some of these gents can shoot the flea

off a coon-dog's ear at six hundred yards. They're not above settling their grievances in the old-fashioned frontier manner. I'd like you and Owens to understand that if anything happens to me, it happens to Owens. I doubt it's much fun spending the hours wondering when to expect the bullet out of the darkness."

I got up and left him then; I'd said all I had to say.

Part of it was a bluff. I don't number any killers among my friends. But Farquhart and Owens were city boys and they didn't know that for sure; we had a redneck reputation up our way.

The rest of it had been quite true. I was fully prepared to drown Owens' companies in bureaucratic obstructionism and it would have been perfectly legal to do so: if you actually enforce every ludicrous regulation in the law you can cripple anyone. The reason it hadn't already been done in Owens' case was that he'd been pouring a great deal of money into the economy of the county. Folks are willing to put up with all sorts of shenanigans if prosperity comes with them. But people up in Ocotillo County are still a bit old-fashioned: they don't condone willful murder as an acceptable way of doing business. I'd have had no trouble getting the cooperation of the other county officials.

Coercion is a two-way street. Owens and Farquhart were dealers in fear; I'd given them their own medicine.

Farquhart and his supporting battery of big-town attorneys put up a good defense but they didn't produce the six lying witnesses; Baker and Calhoun were convicted on the steadfast testimony of Larry Stowe and the evidence of bootprints and a few other tangibles left at the scene. The killers were sentenced to twenty-year-to-life terms in the State Penitentiary at Florence. Rumor has it that Ron Owens had to pay both of them enormous sums to insure that they wouldn't implicate him in the murder. The presence of his Cadillac at the crime meant nothing; Owens simply gave out the story that he'd lent the car to the two cowboys but had no idea what they meant to do with it.

But Owens pulled out of the county with satisfying alacrity. It took him a while to liquidate his properties but by Christmas he was gone, his offices closed, his residence sold.

He wasn't really very tough. I'd been looking forward to squaring off against him but evidently he didn't enjoy playing a game against people who played harder than he did.

The law doesn't protect people unless people protect the law.

a *NEW* detective story by

STEPHEN WASYLYK

Milo Masterman was a New York City detective, a big-city cop, vacationing in Fox River---at least, that's what he first told the sheriff of Fox River. Now, when a detective goes on vacation, especially from the city to the country, what do you usually expect? A "busman's holiday," of course. But Masterman's vacation didn't turn out that way at all . . .

FISHING CAN BE FATAL

by *STEPHEN WASYLYK*

The man who came into the sheriff's office in Fox River was a little over six feet tall, with a hewn-from-granite face above a short neck, wide shoulders, and a big chest that strained the buttons of his short-sleeved plaid shirt.

He stopped just inside the door, spread his arms wide, and grinned. "How is this Mickey Mouse police force doing?"

With the feeling that his jocularity was a little forced, I motioned to Julio. "You're the chief deputy, Julio. Arrest Mr. Masterman for disturbing the peace."

Julio's teeth showed white below his black mustache. "You're the sheriff. You arrest him."

"Hold it," said Masterman. "You are dealing with a handsome, intelligent, law-abiding New York City detective with a legitimate complaint." The good humor gave way to a puzzlement edged with anger. "I was out this morning fishing in the Little Stoney when someone took a shot at me. Three shots, as a matter of fact."

Julio knew Masterman as well as I did. "This isn't one of your jokes, is it?"

"Shooting is one thing I never joke about."

I motioned toward a chair. "Let's have it, Milo."

He grinned wryly. "Getting shot at while I'm on duty in New York is something I can expect, but up here, on vacation, I put away my gun and forget all that. I've always been a little envious of you, Gates. I've seriously considered giving up and moving to a place like this many times." He shook his head. "But I guess it's the same all over.

"At seven this morning I was ten or fifteen yards out in that pool below the rapids about a mile south of Cooper's place, casting upstream and minding my own business, when *bam*, the first shot hit about a foot in front of me. I didn't spend any time wondering what it was all about. I hauled for the bank as fast as I could, which wasn't very fast because I was wearing waders. The second one cut water alongside me, then the third.

"I dove for cover below the lip of the bank, crawled to where the trees grew close to the creek, and came up running, heading uphill toward where I thought the shots had come from. If I could have put my hands on the guy, I would have killed him, but he was gone when I got there. Found the place he fired from, though. Weeds matted down behind a fallen oak, three empty rifle shells on the ground."

Julio and I glanced at each other. The summer had been quiet so far, a situation we appreciated because we'd been working one man short since winter. Our annual influx of visitors had been exceptionally well behaved, and the year-round residents had been too busy taking care of them and counting money to get into trouble. Someone shooting at Masterman was the first violence we'd had since spring, when Fergo Pyrum had chased his young wife and her lover through town, intent on carving them up with the machete he had brought back from the South Pacific during World War II.

Now the thought of an unknown sniper on the loose among all the vacationers chilled me. If the news got out, a great many of them would pack up and go home, but that didn't concern me as much as the vision of innocent people dying.

"Did you bring the shells in?" I asked.

"I touched nothing. I'm a city boy. I figured you were the Daniel Boone type who could study the scene, pick up a bent twig, and give me the name and address of the guy so I could go punch his face in."

"Don't joke, Milo," I said. "This is damned serious."

"I'm not joking," he said quietly. "If the guy wasn't a bad shot, I'd be floating down that creek face down, and I wouldn't have even known why I was suddenly dead."

"No one from around here would have reason to shoot at you," I said slowly. "How about your New York acquaintances? Could one of them have followed you up here?"

"The people I know prefer handguns and dark alleys. It has to be some sort of local flake."

"It might be, but if someone has come unglued, you were his first target and we had better put a stop to it right now before his aim improves. Let's go. Show me where it happened so I can pick up those shells."

I spun the four-wheel drive toward the street on screaming tires.

"Let's get a cup of coffee first," said Masterman. "I was up at six and haven't had breakfast yet and I could use something to settle me down."

I hoped the half-hour delay wouldn't matter and swung into the parking lot behind the old hotel, which aside from the diner, was the most popular eating place in town in spite of the Nineteenth Century décor and the elderly waiters. Beyond those two you hit the highways for the better restaurants and the fast-food places.

We found a table and I impatiently watched Masterman go to work on a double order of ham and eggs he couldn't resist once he sat down.

This was his third summer visit to Fox River. I had first met him at Cooper's Lodge, which was located about ten miles out of town along the Little Stoney Creek. Cooper catered to fishermen, many of whom came not so much to fish as to sit in his recreation room in the evening and play poker while they argued over the merits of assorted gear and told lies about the fish they had caught.

While I knew Masterman was a detective, I knew little else about him because, like everyone else, he considered a vacation his annual opportunity to leave his daily life behind.

He finished his breakfast and we stepped out of the door of the dining room just as three men approached across the lobby.

I knew the one in the lead. He was slender and middle-aged with thinning, stringy hair and a hawknose. His name was Schuyler and he had made quite a name and a great deal of money as a criminal attorney, some of which he had spent for a

luxurious private lodge about two miles below Cooper's on Little Stoney Creek.

One of the men with him was heavy-set, his body leaning toward fat rather than muscle, his features coarse like an unfinished sculpture. The other was short and thin, with a face so pale it looked as though it had not only never been exposed to sunlight but had been hidden from light itself.

The heavy man stopped and grinned at Masterman.

"You, detective," he said. "Why aren't you in New York beating up innocent people?"

Masterman pushed by without a word.

As I pulled out of the parking lot, Masterman sat beside me, his arms folded, his jaw clamped shut, staring ahead.

I drove for a few miles before I said, "What was that all about?"

"I guess I should have told you up front," he said slowly. "I'm not here on vacation. I'm here because I drew a ten-day suspension for slugging that guy back there."

"Who is he?"

"His name is Pomp. He's one of those bad guys we like to think we will put away some day but never do because no connection ever leads directly back to him. I guess he has a piece of everything rotten in my precinct but we can't touch him. The white-faced creep with him is Lonnie, his bodyguard."

"Did you slug him on general principles or for a specific reason?"

"A little of both. A year ago he took a fancy to one of the young waitresses in a bar he owns and set her up in an apartment. She was a nice kid and she should have known better because when guys like Pomp get tired of them, they send these women down the ladder and in a few years the women are either hustling or dead. I guess she wouldn't go, or else she saw or heard something she shouldn't have, because about a month ago she turned up in the gutter beaten to death.

"The street talk was that Pomp was responsible, so we brought him in for questioning. It was a waste of time, of course, but as he was walking out, Pomp and I had a few words. He laughed at me and I hit him. They pulled me off the case and a couple of weeks later the suspension came down."

"You said no one had any reason to shoot at you."

"You mean Pomp? If that was what he wanted, he would have had it done weeks ago. Besides, he would have given the job to a

professional and no pro would miss three times. He'd rather have it this way, so he can needle me. It also helps his image because he can claim he got me suspended. What he's doing here, I don't know."

"He's probably staying at Schuyler's lodge. Schuyler has brought clients here before to do some fishing, but it's the first time for Pomp."

"The bum does like to fish. I've heard him talk about it."

"Still, could he have known you were coming here?"

"The whole precinct knew. The lieutenant even suggested it."

"Fishing could be a cover for his real reason, namely, to have you knocked off."

"Forget it. No one, including Pomp, has any big reason to see me dead. I can't say the same for him. Plenty of people would like to blow him away."

I thought for a moment. "Maybe that's the answer. The two of you are built along the same lines. Schuyler's lodge is downstream of Cooper's place. If someone was expecting to see Pomp in that creek this morning, he could have mistaken you for him."

I could feel Masterman staring at me.

"You just might have something." He grinned a little. "Maybe you better not look too hard for the man who fired those shots. Give him a chance to try again. He could be luckier next time."

"Not in my county," I said as I turned into the road leading to Cooper's Lodge. I used Cooper's phone to call Schuyler at the hotel dining room.

"Would you mind telling me if your guest was out fishing this morning?" I asked.

"I see no reason—"

"You might. Was he?"

"Yes. The both of us went out early."

"About seven?"

"About that time."

"Did you hear any rifle fire?"

"We heard three shots. What is this all about?"

"Those shots could have been intended for him."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I, but just in case they were, and the man intends to try again, keep Pomp inside until I get back to you." I dropped the phone on his response.

I followed Masterman to a spot where the creek swirled slowly in wide pools below a rough stretch of water. Behind us a natural meadow sloped upward.

Masterman pointed. "I was out there. Like I told you, the first shot was in front of me, the other two on either side." He turned. "He fired from that fallen tree you see up there."

Halfway up the slope the trees began again, widely spaced and scattered. Masterman stopped beside one that had lost its battle with a storm. "Here," he said.

I knelt and studied the ground. Some of the grass that had been trampled had started to spring up again, but enough had been permanently bruised and damaged to indicate a body had pressed it down. Lying almost side by side were three empty brass shells. I pulled a ballpoint pen from my pocket, slipped it into one of them, and held it up so I could read the numbers stamped into the base.

.243.

The caliber of the rifle worried me. A .243 was fine for small game and with a 100-grain bullet could be used for a deer; but even with the heavier load it couldn't be considered an ideal hitman's weapon. A professional out to eliminate Pomp or Masterman would want something with more knockdown power and, as Masterman had said, would not miss three times. If anything, the shells indicated that the shooter was a local man.

I measured the distance to the creek with my eyes. About 200 yards. Almost any rifleman should have been able to hit Masterman at least once, especially with the fallen tree serving as a rest.

I placed the shells in an envelope and stood up. "What I'd like to know is, was he shooting at you specifically, or imagining he was shooting at Pomp, or was he just shooting at any fisherman he saw?"

"If you think I have the answer, you're nuts," said Masterman.

"This bodyguard of Pomp's, Lonnie—"

"Forget him. He's the type to wait in the bushes, then shoot me in the back after I walked by."

I looked out over the small valley. Talk of murder sounded out of place in these peaceful surroundings and the crisp clean air somehow seemed dirtier now.

"Have you told anyone about this?" I asked Masterman.

"I saw no reason to."

I thought for a moment. It had been necessary to mention the shooting to Schuyler to protect Pomp. Should I tell Cooper to keep the fishermen out of the creek for the rest of the day—and why? That would panic some, anger others, and be ignored by most. I decided to gamble that the rifleman was through for the day. If someone was shot, I would have to live with my conscience, but I had the feeling that he wasn't running around sniping at people just for the hell of it.

"You'd better stay inside," I told Masterman. "You could be the target again."

"Nuts to that. If someone is out to get me, I'd just as soon as be killed doing something I like rather than sitting around waiting for it to happen. I'll be out again this evening. You know that's a good time for smallmouth bass."

"You'll stay inside," I said coldly. "Drink beer. Watch television. Play poker with Cooper. I don't care which, but keep out of sight. Now, let's go."

I sped into town, dropped Masterman off at his car, and double parked in front of Avery's Sporting Goods. Avery himself was behind the counter. He was a small, thin, wiry man with half spectacles hanging on the tip of his nose, an expert on everything he sold, and noted for the excellent free advice that went with each sale, whether the purchaser wanted it or not. He peered at me above his spectacles.

"How many people do you know who own a .243 rifle?" I asked.

He frowned. "Maybe a half dozen. Why?"

I didn't answer. "Check your sales of .243 ammunition for the past twelve months and see how many names you can find."

"That's a big job."

"Not so big. I'll wait."

"If I knew why—"

"Avery," I said, "I'm in a hurry. Look up the names and do it now."

Twenty minutes later he handed me a slip with eight names.

"These are all local people?" I asked.

"Every one."

I drove to the office and handed the names to Julio. "They own .243 rifles," I said. "Find out where those rifles were at seven this morning. Do it fast."

"This is the Masterman thing?"

"Yeah, and don't tell anyone why you're asking."

After Julio had gone, I shook the three brass shells out on my desk and carefully brushed them for fingerprints. I found nothing but smudges. I propped one up and examined it through a magnifying glass.

The distinctive scratches every rifle leaves on a casing were sharp and clear, especially the ejector marks, which indicated a new rifle or one that had been little used. I put the shells away in my desk drawer. If Julio found one of those rifles had been out this morning, I'd be able to run a shell through it and see if it matched. In the meantime all I could do was hope the sniper didn't try again.

Time stretched into early evening and the streets of the town filled with summer vacationers who, for something to do, came in from the cabins and the motels to poke around in the shops.

Julio had checked in twice by radio, the last time to tell me five of the rifles had been hanging on walls or standing in closets at seven that morning.

The phone rang. I picked it up. Schuyler's voice was flat and emotionless, as if he were reporting something routine.

"In view of your earlier warning," he said, "you will be interested to learn Pomp has been shot and killed."

I felt my throat grow tight.

"You damned fool. I told you to keep him inside. Didn't you believe me?"

"I did, he didn't. To quote him, he said, 'What does a hick sheriff know?' He wanted to fish, so he went. He took his bodyguard with him this time. Lonnie stayed on the bank. Pomp was a few yards into the stream just north of the house. There was one shot. Lonnie brought the body back."

"Leave everything the way it is," I snapped. "I'll be right out."

I arranged for an ambulance to meet me at Schuyler's lodge, called Julio on the radio while en route, and skidded to a halt in Schuyler's driveway 20 siren-screaming minutes later.

From the patio at the rear of the house a smooth lawn sloped to the creek. At the foot of the slope Schuyler and Lonnie were standing near a crumpled figure.

I went down the slope and knelt by the body. The clothes were soaked, the hair matted. The bullet had hit Pomp in the right side of the chest and a slight trickle of blood from his mouth showed it had torn him up inside.

"All right," I said. "How did it happen?"

Lonnie stared at me without expression. Like Pomp, his clothes were dripping wet.

"Tell him," said Schuyler.

"The boss wanted to go out," he said slowly. "Schuyler told him not to go. He laughed. Lonnie will take care of me, he said. He put on his boots and we walked along the creek that way." He pointed north. "He found a spot he liked and walked out into the creek. I stayed on the bank. We were out for maybe half an hour when the shot came from the trees behind me.

"The boss went down into the water. In those shadows under the trees I couldn't see a damned thing to shoot at, but I threw a couple of shots in there anyway. I couldn't go looking because I had to get Mr. Pomp out of the water. For all I knew he was still alive and could drown out there, but when I reached him he was dead. He was too heavy for me to carry, so I sort of floated him down the creek to here and called Schuyler."

"Did you hear the shot?" I asked Schuyler.

"No. I was in the house. The first I knew of it was when I heard Lonnie yelling for me. I think it's obvious who killed him."

"Masterman," Lonnie spat the name out. "It had to be that pig cop. He said he would get the boss."

"I can testify to that," said Schuyler. "I heard him threaten Pomp."

"Someone shot at Masterman this morning," I said.

"Do you have only his word?" asked Schuyler.

"There were no witnesses."

"He probably lied to throw suspicion off himself," said Schuyler.

Two men in tan uniforms came down the slope, carrying a stretcher.

"Anything to be done?" asked one.

I shook my head. "Ask Dr. Blenheim to recover the slug immediately and call me when he has it. The full autopsy can come later."

On the way up the slope they passed Julio jogging toward me.

"All those rifles on the list are out of it," he said. "What's the story here?"

"It looks like the guy who fired at Masterman didn't miss this time."

"Damn. Anything I can do?"

"Call the county attorney when you get back to the office. I'll need him tomorrow at nine."

I went back to Lonnie and Schuyler.

"You going to pick up Masterman?" asked Lonnie.

"I'll see him," I said.

He shrugged. "Don't matter. I know how you cops stick together. I'll take care of him myself."

I held out my hand. "Let's have it."

"He has a permit," said Schuyler.

"I'm sure," I said. "I still want it."

Lonnie's eyes locked with mine, then he lifted his loose shirt. Tucked inside his belt was a small holster. He pulled the weapon loose and handed me a .38 special. I checked the cylinder.

"I told you I fired into the trees," he said.

"You told me." I slid the revolver under my belt.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "You can't—"

"Sure, I can," I said. "Besides, you don't need it. You no longer have anyone to guard. I'll expect you both in the office at nine tomorrow morning. If either of you doesn't show up, I'll have a warrant issued, find you, and drag you back by the heels."

"Is that a threat?" asked Schuyler coldly.

"It certainly is," I said.

"I tell you Masterman did it!" screamed Lonnie.

"Then there is no reason for you not to show up tomorrow morning," I said.

I drove slowly to Cooper's. Whatever daylight remained was high in the sky and would soon fade; the creases of the valleys were already purple. By the time I reached Cooper's driveway, night had caught up to me.

Cooper was a wide-shouldered man with a flat stomach, tanned weatherbeaten skin, and a full head of snowy hair.

"Where's Masterman?" I asked.

He pointed. "Head of the hall upstairs. He came in fifteen minutes ago."

I tapped at Masterman's door.

He opened it, a can of beer in his hand. He held it up. "Want one?"

I shook my head. "I told you to stay inside. Where were you?"

"Out in the creek, fishing. I told you I would go."

"North or south?"

"South."

"Toward Schuyler's place?"

"If that's south."

"Anyone see you?"

"No. Why?"

"Someone shot and killed Pomp."

He rubbed the top of the can thoughtfully. "I thought I heard a shot, but I wasn't sure. It looks like you were right about this morning. Someone thought I was Pomp, missed, and tried again."

"Maybe," I said. "But you're the only one in the area I know who would want Pomp dead and you were in the vicinity."

He pointed to the fishing rod standing in the corner. "I could hardly shoot him with that."

"Come off it, Milo," I said. "If you killed Pomp, I wouldn't expect you to be walking around with the rifle in your hand."

He studied me for a moment. "You really think I could have done it, don't you?"

"Sure," I said. "You *could* have done it."

"You want to question me, go ahead."

"What for? If you did it, you'll have the answers. I stopped by to tell you to be in my office at nine tomorrow morning."

"The answers will be the same then."

"The questions may be different. Nine tomorrow."

I left him staring after me.

Through the office window I watched Julio drive away toward home and dinner, to be back the following morning at six. The shopping crowds had thinned out and the stores would be closing shortly.

The phone rang. It was Blenheim at the hospital.

"Now that I have your slug, what do I do with it?"

"Weigh it," I said.

"I already have. Call it about a hundred and fifty grains."

I sat upright. "Are you sure?"

"My scale doesn't lie."

"What about the angle of penetration?"

"Level."

"Not as if the man was standing in a creek and the shooter was on the bank?"

"I can tell you it didn't happen that way, even though the man's clothes were soaked. Death was quick but not instantaneous. If the man had been standing in water when he was shot, he would certainly have taken water into the lungs. There was none. He was dead when he entered the water."

"Listen," I said. "If your secretary's typewriter has a red ribbon, I want that part in caps, underlined, and in red."

"It's that important?"

"It gives me the killer."

I hung up, strapped on the gunbelt I wore only when necessary, and called Julio to tell him I would need him for an hour.

There was no jocularity in Masterman when he came into the office at nine the following morning. His face was impassive, almost cold.

"I'm here," he said. "Where are the others?"

"What others?" I asked innocently.

"Schuyler and Lonnie."

"I guess Schuyler is on his way to New York." I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "Lonnie is in a cell back there. He'll have a preliminary hearing later this morning, but he's not going anywhere after that."

"He killed Pomp?"

I poured two cups of coffee and handed one to him. "Sit down."

I placed the coffee on my desk to cool a little. "Lonnie is like a great many people who are born and grow up in big cities. They seem to have the idea that intelligence and common sense disappear once you cross the city limits. I told Schuyler that there was a possibility that an unknown rifleman might take a shot at Pomp, so Lonnie decided to take advantage of the situation and try to hang it on you. I don't know why he killed him. He won't say. But kill him he did.

"He thought all he had to do was shoot him, dunk the body in the creek, and come up with a story that an unseen rifleman had done it. What he didn't know was that I had the empty shells that came out of the .243 caliber rifle that fired at you and the slug had to be either eighty or a hundred grain. Pomp was killed with one that weighs a hundred and fifty grains. Lonnie was carrying a .38 special which normally takes a slug of that weight, so the rifle that fired at you couldn't have killed Pomp, but Lonnie's gun could have. The state police ballistics lab will probably prove that it did. And then, of course, he had no way of knowing Dr. Blenheim, who performs the autopsies for the coroner, could very easily prove that he lied about how it happened."

I sipped the coffee. "So you can go enjoy your fishing and not worry about a thing."

"Like hell," said Masterman. "You still haven't found the man who shot at me."

I took the time to finish the coffee. "I really worried about that after I put Lonnie away, but now I think I have the answer. Come with me. We'll talk with an expert."

We walked down the street to Avery's sporting-goods store and found Avery behind the gun counter at the rear. He looked up over his glasses and blinked.

"You looking for more names?" he asked.

"One more," I said. I nodded at Masterman. "This is Milo Masterman. He was out in Little Stoney Creek yesterday morning when someone shot at him with a .243 rifle. Luckily the man missed."

"Probably the same man who killed that fellow Pomp last night," said Avery.

"Well, no, it wasn't," I said. "Although there is a connection. Masterman is a New York City detective. He's here because he was suspended for slugging Pomp. He slugged him because he felt Pomp was responsible for the death of a young woman a month ago."

Avery's eyes flicked to Masterman and back to me. "Should have given him a medal," he grunted. "But I can't see how I can do more for you than I already have."

"Sure you can," I said. "The caliber of that rifle bothered me from the beginning. It just had to be a local gun, even though the names you gave me were no help. Then I remembered there is one man who could use all the ammunition he wanted and his name would never appear on the records."

He drew himself up. "I comply with the law. When someone buys ammunition the purchase goes into the book."

"I said *use*, not *buy*, Avery. You own the store. Who would know if you took a few shells?"

He blinked at me coldly. "What reason would I have to shoot at this man? I don't even know him."

"That was the part I couldn't understand until I made a few phone calls last night. One was to Masterman's precinct. The sergeant there told me that when the young woman was killed, an ex-husband in Chicago was notified as next of kin. He never showed up, but he must have called the woman's parents. They claimed the body. Masterman didn't know because he was off the case."

Avery stared at me, his eyes expressionless and dark.

"How is *your* daughter, Avery?" I asked softly. "The one who married three years ago and moved to Chicago?"

His eyes suddenly became misty, his voice soft. "Damn you, Gates. Can't anyone in this town keep a secret from you?"

"As long as no one is hurt and no law is broken, you can have all the secrets you want," I said.

He placed his elbows on the glass-topped case and lowered his face into his hands.

"But you learned about Pomp in New York when you claimed your daughter's body," I continued, "and you recognized Pomp when he walked in the other day with Schuyler to pick up a new rod. Schuyler told me you gave Pomp some of your free advice. Get out on the creek early in that pool below Cooper's place. He said he would. That was when you made it my business, because the next morning you took a .243 off the rack and went out there and thought you saw him, but your eyes aren't what they used to be and you missed, which was a damned good thing because you would have killed the wrong man. I just couldn't figure out why you used something as light as a .243." I waved at his gun rack. "You have rifles here that will blow a man apart."

He lifted his head. "Following my own advice," he said dully. "I always tell people, use the rifle you feel most comfortable with." His eyes held an appeal. "What will happen to me, Gates?"

"Tell me, Avery," I said. "After you missed yesterday morning, would you have tried again?"

He shook his head. "It was the one insane moment of my life. When I heard someone else had killed him I wasn't sorry, but I was happy it hadn't been me."

I turned to Masterman. "It's up to you."

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "You know, Avery, I've been out in that pool below Cooper's twice now with zero results, yet everyone says it is a great place."

Avery straightened, his eyes bright above the half spectacles. "Well, a great deal depends on the rig you're using." He came around the counter and took Masterman's arm. "Come down here and I'll show you what you should have."

They walked away from me, Avery talking about water temperature and deep holes and rocks.

I went back to the office.

a *NEW* Selena Mead story by

PATRICIA McGERR

According to available data there have been 24 short stories, 2 novelets, and one novel about Selena Mead whom "The Wall Street Journal" once called (quite inaccurately) "the female James Bond." Here is the 25th short story about Selena—a clever code story. Can you solve the code? The solution is both surprising and satisfying—always a happy combination . . .

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

by *PATRICIA McGERR*

"You're good at puzzles." Hugh joined Selena at a corner table in the teashop and placed a slip of paper in front of her. "Maybe you can solve this one."

On the paper, which appeared to have been torn from a notebook, was a series of numbers separated by slanted lines:

81/61/10/26 50/62/13/63 25/137 183/3/5/200

6/17/7 141/8/30 74/65/20/78

"We're on holiday." She glanced at the paper, then looked across at her husband, her tone reproachful. "You told me this trip to England was purely for pleasure, that it had no connection with any intelligence operations."

"It doesn't. Darling, you shouldn't jump to conclusions."

"It's a very short jump from a coded message—that's what this is, isn't it?" She tapped the paper. "—to a job for Section Q. If you're not working, where did you get it?"

"You left me on my own while you went shopping," he explained. "So I dropped in on our local representative. Purely a social call, you understand. I didn't even ask him about current cases."

"But he told you anyway. Ah, Hugh, I was so looking forward to

two weeks when we could just enjoy being together."

"That's what we'll have," he assured her. "The message has nothing to do with us, or with Section Q either. It's evidence in a routine homicide, probably a gang killing, and Scotland Yard is in charge. The numbers are circulating through the intelligence network because we're supposed to be experts on hard-to-crack codes. And I jotted them down to show you. Thought it would be more of a challenge than the *Times* crosswords. It's already stumped everyone else, including the computers."

"Where's the person who wrote it?"

"Dead. This morning the police were called to a third-rate hotel near the river. The maid had gone into one of the rooms and found a man strangled with his own necktie. He was registered as John Smith and he hasn't yet been identified. But the hotel employees said he had an American accent, so his prints were flashed to the F.B.I."

"And these numbers?"

"They were written in ink on the wall behind his bed. That's the only bizarre element in a pretty sordid case. The clerk told the police that Smith, or whatever his real name was, had been in the hotel for five days. The last time he was seen alive was late yesterday afternoon. The man at the desk said he was in a great hurry and looked scared. He ran up the stairs to his room on the second floor and was followed a couple of minutes later by two men described as big and rough-looking. They banged on the door but got no answer. After a short while they gave up and left. That's all the hotel people know—or are willing to tell—until the finding of the body."

"Presumably the men came back during the night."

"Right," Hugh agreed. "Or sent an executioner. The police theory is that he was a small-time crook from the States who got involved with some local villains and then quarreled with them. Once he was locked in his room, he knew how slim his chances were of getting out alive. So he used the time to compose a message and write it on the wall. It may give the names or a description of his murderers, but it's of no use unless it can be translated."

"It's not a simple substitution code, that's clear." Selena studied the paper. "The lowest number is 3 and the highest is 200. Not a single number is repeated."

"That's what makes it so difficult."

"Unless he belonged to an organization that had its own cipher, the chances are he used whatever materials were at hand. The easiest way to devise an extemporaneous code is to open a book, number the letters from the top, then use the numbers to replace the corresponding letters in the message."

"We're almost certain that's what Smith did. Unfortunately, there's no way to read his message without his book."

"I suppose the killers took that away."

"They took everything. It's clear they didn't want us to know who he was or anything about him. The room was stripped of all his belongings. You can be sure that when the police found the writing on the wall, they made a thorough search for even the smallest piece of printed matter."

"But they found nothing?"

"Not a book, not a magazine, not a newspaper. Even the wastebasket was empty."

"In that case," Selena said, "it's impossible."

"That's why I brought it to you, love." He grinned at her. "In times past I've seen you do the impossible. There's no need to work a miracle on this one, though." He folded the paper and put it in his wallet. "In due course Scotland Yard will solve the murder by its usual methods. Meantime, it's no concern of ours."

The next day, however, Hugh's detachment was abruptly ended. Selena was in the bedroom of their suite changing for a luncheon engagement when he switched on a news program for the weather report. Coming into the parlor, she saw on his face a look of consternation that must have been caused by the news.

"What is it, Hugh? Has something happened?"

"Not yet. But they've identified the murder victim. He was Clarence McKettrick of Newark, New Jersey."

"You recognize the name?"

"Yes, I've heard it a few times in connection with subversive groups and terrorist activities. He hadn't been convicted, but unofficially he's credited with making the bombs that killed two people in a California bus station and blinded a teller in a Michigan bank."

"Then we don't have to be sorry he's dead," Selena said.

In the background the announcer was continuing to give the news. ". . . the United States vice president, who arrived in London last night, told a news conference that Anglo-American rela-

tions have never—" Hugh turned a knob, cutting him off.

"An American terrorist in London," Selena said slowly. "You think his murder is related to the vice president's visit?"

"It's a strong possibility. There are several groups who'd be glad to strike at the United States and embarrass the British with one blow. If they hired McKettrick, then broke with him, and he decided to betray them—"

"Then his message will tell us what they were going to do."

"Yes—My God, Selena, we've got to break his code and do it fast." He pulled the paper from his wallet and stared at it fiercely. When he raised his eyes to hers, they held an expression of defeat. "It's no use. This is meaningless without McKettrick's book. And that's probably at the bottom of the Thames."

"He was a professional, Hugh. And he had several hours to think while he waited for them to come to him. So he must have foreseen that they'd clear the room of all his books and papers. That's why he wrote the numbers on the wall. He wanted to make sure the authorities got his message. And there was no point in doing that unless he believed someone would be able to read it. You said they took everything belonging to him, but what about the items that came with the room? He might have used a phone book. Or a menu. Even a laundry list."

"It's a very seedy establishment," he told her. "No phones. No other services."

"Were there any notices posted on the wall? Things like turning out the lights or what to do in case of fire."

"Not a thing. I hate to shoot down all your ideas, Selena, but there was not a single written or printed word in the entire place. Not even a sign he could see from his window."

"The man was in deep trouble." Selena frowned, thinking aloud. "He expected to die and he decided to leave a message. A warning probably. He intended it to be found by the police and he wanted them to figure out its meaning. So there has to be a key and it must be available."

"Good logic," Hugh conceded, "but it doesn't change the numbers into letters. This isn't a parlor game any more. With every hour that passes, the danger increases."

"Perhaps it's something he knew by heart. A favorite poem or quotation. Can they trace his close friends, find one who can tell them if there was anything he used to sing or recite? Like 'Mary had a little lamb' or 'To be or not to be'."

"It's a cinch it won't be the Star-Spangled Banner." He started toward the phone. "It's a long shot, but it's worth checking. Trouble is, it will take time, something we probably haven't got."

"Then it's not the answer. He wouldn't let his warning hang by so weak a thread. The key must be in our hands now. That's how he planned it. Wait, Hugh!"

The note of excitement in her voice stopped him with his hand on the instrument. "You've thought of something?" he asked.

"What you said—about the Star-Spangled Banner—"

"I only meant that McKettrick's record doesn't give him a high score for patriotism."

"I think I have it." She took the paper from his hand and started toward the bedroom. "I'll check it out and be right back."

It was less than three minutes before she returned and gave the paper to Hugh. A letter was printed above each number:

P L A N B L O W U P V E E P

81/61/10/26 50/62/13/63 25/137 183/3/5/200

C A R W E D N O O N

6/17/7 141/8/30 74/65/20/78

"Wednesday noon!" Hugh exclaimed. "That's—" He checked his watch. "That's eighteen minutes away. Are you sure—But of course you are." He lifted the phone and gave the operator a number, adding, "Hurry, please, it's an emergency." In a few seconds he was connected. "QA," he identified himself. "Where's the vice president?" He listened, nodded his satisfaction. "Good. Don't let him leave the Embassy until there's an all clear. McKetterick's message says, PLAN BLOW UP VEEP CAR WEDNESDAY NOON. Get the chauffeur out, block the street, and notify the bomb squad. Understood?"

He put down the phone and took a long slow breath.

"It will be all right," he answered Selena's unspoken question. "The limousine is waiting at the door and the vice president is scheduled to leave at 11:55 for lunch at Ten Downing. He'll be a little late, that's all. Come on, let's go see what's happening."

They could not discuss what was uppermost in both their minds in the taxi and they were too tense to talk trivia. So they rode the short distance in silence. The driver came to a stop near Grosvenor Square.

"This is as far as I can take you, sir." He gestured toward a policeman who was diverting traffic to a side street. "There must be some kind of demonstration at your embassy."

"This is fine." Hugh paid him and they got out. Suddenly there was a loud explosion followed by the crash and clang of falling metal. They hurried forward and got close enough to see the demolished embassy car before being stopped by another policeman.

"Sorry, sir, this street is temporarily closed. The orders are not to let anyone through except on official business." He spoke to them and, over their heads, to a crowd converging from several directions. "Move along, please. Everybody please keep moving."

"Was anyone hurt?" Selena asked him.

"No, the vehicle was unoccupied." He answered politely, then raised his voice again. "Ladies and gentlemen, will you please go about your ordinary business. There is nothing to see but a damaged motor car. No casualties. Please don't block the passage."

Obediently the onlookers turned away. For Londoners a bomb was no longer a novelty.

"Let's go." Hugh tucked Selena's hand inside his arm. "We curious tourists shouldn't interfere with the police in the performance of their duties."

They walked across the Square and stopped near the statue of F.D.R. "And now," Hugh said, "you can tell me how you found the key to McKettrick's code."

"It suddenly struck me when you mentioned the national anthem," she answered. "As an American in a foreign country, there was one document he had to have. And even if it was burned to ashes, he counted on our guessing he had had it."

"And that was—"

"A passport, of course." She took her own from her bag and handed it to him. Opening the dark blue cover, he saw that she had lightly penciled, in sequence from 1 to 209, a number above each letter of the statement on page one:

The Secretary of State
of The
United States of America
hereby requests all whom it
may concern to permit the
citizen(s)/national(s) of
the United States named
herein to pass without delay
or hindrance and in case of
need to give all lawful aid
and protection.

a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

An unusual assignment for Nick Velvet, to whom unusual assignments are a way of life—and of dangerous living. This time Nick agrees to steal for the C.I.A., but again only an article of little or no value. Now, Nick called himself "just a plain ordinary thief," but anyone who is paid a minimum fee of $20,000 to steal worthless or near-worthless objects is hardly "a plain ordinary thief"; and when a person in Nick's line of work is constantly facing surprise developments, always finding himself confronted with unexpected twists and turns of events, it takes more than a "plain ordinary thief" to devise new strategies on the spot . . .

THE THEFT OF THE TURQUOISE TELEPHONE

by *EDWARD D. HOCH*

Nick Velvet was not really much of a poker player, but it still gave him a thrill to turn over three queens and rake in the pot at the Sailing Club. A summer storm on Long Island Sound had brought him in early, and while Gloria was busy gossiping in the ladies' room he'd taken an empty chair at the game. He knew most of the men at the table—all, in fact, except the darkly handsome fellow seated next to Cas Melrose. They all played to win, especially Cas, and the challenge of it exhilarated Nick.

"The weather's breaking," Melrose remarked after that hand. "You going back out on the boat, Nick?"

Nick smiled as he stood up. "Might as well quit while I'm ahead."

Cas Melrose turned to the stranger seated next to him. "That's Nick Velvet. Guess I didn't introduce you when he sat down.

Nick, this here's Mitch Younger. This is his first time at the Club."

Nick smiled and shook hands across the table. "I'm dropping out too," Younger said. "If you'll wait a second, Mr. Velvet, I'll walk down to the dock with you."

"Sure."

Outside the air was crisp and fresh from the rain. Nick glanced at the fluffy white clouds moving in after the storm and decided the sun would be out in another half hour. "This is a nice yacht basin," Mitch Younger remarked. "I'm scouting the area for a place to anchor my ketch."

"Fine place," Nick agreed. "Good crowd of sailors too."

"I understand you do free-lance work."

"Of a sort," Nick answered cautiously.

Younger dropped his voice a bit without changing his expression. "Like to do a little work for me?"

"Who are you?"

Younger took out a pack of cigarettes and offered Nick one. On the side of the pack, beneath the cellophane wrapper, was an identification card with the man's color photo and thumbprint. At the top, in fancy lettering, it said *Central Intelligence Agency.*

"I didn't know you fellows carried I.D. cards," Nick said. "Or is this part of your new image?"

"It's an employee pass to get me into the building," Mitch Younger explained. "I just wanted you to know who you're dealing with."

Nick smiled. "I deal with anyone who hires me. Even the C.I.A."

"We checked you out. We know you steal unusual things for a price."

"Unusual *valueless* things," Nick emphasized.

"How about a telephone? I suppose it has some value, but I doubt if anyone would steal it for its value."

They'd reached the dock and were strolling out over the wooden planks, seeming to study the bobbing crafts moored on either side. "Just where is this telephone?" Nick asked.

"On the desk of the American Ambassador to Japan."

Nick waited for the C.I.A. man to continue.

"Next week is the Fourth of July. Many of our embassies have parties and open house on that day. It would be an excellent opportunity for you."

"Why me? Why not some of your own people?"

"I can't explain it. Let's just say we know you can be trusted in a very delicate matter. I believe your fee is twenty thousand dollars?"

"Correct."

Younger nodded. "You'll find a down payment in your locker at the Sailing Club. The rest will be delivered to you in exchange for the telephone. Shall we say the night of the Fourth, in Tokyo, at the Okura Hotel?"

"I'm sure you've already reserved a room for me," Nick said. "What does the telephone look like? An ambassador might have more than one on his desk."

"Quite correct. The one we want is greenish-blue—a sort of turquoise. And it would be best if no one knows it's stolen."

"I see."

"Does that present difficulties?"

"No."

"Very well. I'll look for you in Tokyo." He turned with a smile and walked back toward the Sailing Club.

Nick was still watching the man's back when Gloria found him. "Nicky, I've been looking all over for you! Why'd you leave the poker game?"

"I got tired of winning."

"Did you win? Really?"

He gave her a wad of bills. "Tomorrow go get those new drapes you've been wanting. Surprise me when I get back."

"Where are you going, Nicky?"

"Tokyo, on government business."

"Government business! You always tell me that!"

He grinned and gave her a pat. "This time it happens to be true."

One of the first things Nick saw on his ride in from Tokyo International Airport was a giant red telephone on the roof of the Tamura Electric Works. He had the taxi wait while he went inside and spoke to one of the salesmen. He produced a page torn from a six-month-old issue of *Newsweek,* showing the American ambassador at his desk.

"I want a telephone like that," he told the man. "In turquoise."

The man spoke reasonably good English, and he understood at once. He disappeared into the stockroom and returned after a few

moments with the phone in the correct color.

"It needs four buttons," Nick said, pointing again to the picture.

The Japanese smiled and disappeared again, returning quickly with the correct model. Nick paid him and returned to the waiting taxi.

Following Younger's instructions he checked into the 980-room Okura Hotel, the closest to the American embassy. From his window he could see the Tokyo Tower, a radio and television mast that belied the Japanese reputation for miniaturization. It was actually 59 feet taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris, on which it was modeled.

In the morning he went to the embassy, a modern building nestled close to one of the city's expressways. The driveway passed beneath a portico at the entrance and Nick went in, telling the Marine guard on duty that he had business with the passport office. He easily determined the layout of the ground-floor offices, even looking in on the auditorium where preparations were under way for the Independence Day reception the following afternoon. The chairs were being removed, though the speakers' rostrum remained on the stage at the far end, before a huge reproduction of the seal of the United States that covered most of one wall.

A dark-haired young woman, quite pretty, hovered over the proceedings, directing the placement of tables and occasionally speaking to a Japanese youth by her side. Since the youth took no part in the preparations, Nick guessed him to be a visitor rather than an embassy employee.

After leaving the embassy Nick did a bit of sightseeing, stopping to watch some children flying colorful Japanese kites near the moat around the Imperial Palace. Then he bought Gloria a gift at the big Mitsukoshi department store and returned to the hotel for dinner. He retired early and woke early to have breakfast in his room. He'd almost finished when there was a knock at the door. He opened it, expecting an impatient waiter for the breakfast table, and froze in surprise.

Cas Melrose was standing there—Cas Melrose from the Sailing Club back home. And he was pointing a small automatic pistol at Nick's chest.

"Step back inside, Nick," he said quietly. "We've got some things to talk about."

Nick sat down on the bed, ignoring the gun and making no ef-

fort to raise his hands. "What brings you to Tokyo, Cas?"

"The same thing that brings you. Mitch Younger."

Nick grunted and made a motion toward the weapon. "You can put that away, Cas. You're not going to shoot me, are you?"

"No, of course not." He rested the gun on the table next to his chair, but kept his hand close to it.

"What's Mitch Younger to you?" Nick asked.

"We worked together a long time ago."

"You were in the C.I.A.?"

"I did some work with my yacht at the time of the Cuban affair. Now I want to get back in, but Younger's not interested. He says the political climate's not right for my talents. I figured I'd come here and show him different."

"I see." Nick watched him light a cigarette with a folder of matches from the Tokyo Bay Yacht Club. "So what brought Mitch to the Sailing Club?"

"He wanted to meet you and I arranged it. You know I never pried into the sort of work you do, Nick, but I figured Mitch hired you for a specialty the way he hired me."

"What's your specialty?"

"Yachts and information. I know how to obtain both, and use them."

"So if I hadn't been in that poker game you'd have found another excuse to introduce us. But why did you follow me here?"

"He told me a little of what he was hiring you for. More than he should have, as it turns out. I want you to steal that telephone for me, Nick."

"A valuable piece of equipment. And the more valuable it gets the more doubtful I am that I should be stealing it at all."

Cas Melrose smiled. "Yes, I know about your standards. Mitch told me that too. You only steal valueless objects—but why?"

Nick shrugged. "There's less hassle from the police that way. And I've found it to be quite profitable over the years. You'd be amazed at the number of people who'll pay to have something as commonplace as a telephone stolen."

"And speaking of a telephone—"

"And speaking of a telephone, what's inside it—diamonds, drugs?"

"Neither. Merely an electronic listening device capable of transmitting any conversations taking place in the ambassador's office."

"Don't they check for such things?"

"A good one can be difficult to spot unless the searcher is well trained. They're very small. It seems that Younger intercepted a transcript of a conversation while on another assignment. It's important that he get the bug itself before it's removed."

"Why important?"

"Because with the listening device in hand, the C.I.A. laboratory can determine its country of origin. The design, even the metal it's made from, can be analyzed. In this case they need to know if the bug was planted by the Russians, the Chinese, the North or South Koreans, the Japanese—or even a dissident faction of the C.I.A. itself."

"Is there such a faction?"

"Damn right there is! That's why Younger can't go through regular channels to have the bug removed. The C.I.A. agent on the embassy staff may be the man who planted it."

"I don't like the sound of this," Nick admitted. "I'm no spy—just a plain ordinary thief."

"Then come in with me instead of Younger. I'll make us both rich."

"How?"

"Never mind that right now. Just get the telephone and deliver it to me instead of to Younger."

"And if I don't, you shoot me. Is that what you're implying?"

"Oh, hardly! The gun was just for my protection. I didn't know what you might do when you saw me."

Nick rose from the bed, keeping his eye on the weapon. "I think you'd better work out your schemes with Younger. I'll have the telephone tonight, back here, for whichever one of you wants to pay me."

Cas Melrose considered it for a moment, then said, "Fair enough." He picked up the gun and pocketed it. "I'll see you tonight."

Nick let him out of the room and waited ten minutes before leaving himself. By that time there was no sign of Melrose.

The embassy was crowded with Americans and a few Japanese, all with glasses of punch in hand, smiling and looking pleased with themselves. The Americans, especially, seemed to be celebrating an event which might have been spent at home as a camping trip or a day at the beach.

Nick moved easily past the Marine guard at the door. There was no way he could have got the package inside without inspection, but that didn't bother him. He mingled with the guests for a time, then managed to slip off toward the ambassador's office.

"Looking for the men's room," he told the Marine guard he encountered in the hall.

"It's back that way, sir."

"Thank you." Nick retreated quickly, not wanting to rouse suspicion.

"Can I help you find your way?" a sweet feminine voice asked. Nick turned and recognized the dark-haired young woman he'd noticed the day before.

"I think I'm set now, thanks. Looking for the men's room." He managed an embarrassed smile.

"Let me show you the way."

"That's not—" But she was already leading him down the corridor, away from the chatter of party guests. "You seem to know your way around. Do you work here?"

She glanced back over her shoulder. "Irene Donovan. I'm the public information officer. It's part of my job to direct gentlemen to the washroom."

She pushed open a door and Nick entered. "This isn't the men's room."

"No, it's my office." She followed him in.

He turned in time to see her bolt the door. "A little privacy?"

"You're Nick Velvet, aren't you?"

"My fame has preceded me."

She brushed back the long hair from her face. "What are you after here, Mr. Velvet?"

"I was in Tokyo and thought I'd drop in for the party."

She kicked at something with her foot and he recognized the box containing his recently purchased telephone. "A Marine guard found this where you left it, outside the ambassador's window. He thought it was a bomb."

"No bomb," Nick said, and there was a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"I noticed you yesterday when you were here, and I did a computer check with Washington. You're on file there, you know. A free-lance thief who can be hired to steal valueless items. Like the telephone from the ambassador's desk, which looks remarkably like this one?"

Nick decided Irene Donovan was one step ahead of him all the way, and now the truth seemed to be his only way out. "There's no need to get uptight," he told her. "We're both on the same side. I'm on a government assignment."

"I'll bet!"

"Really. I'm merely replacing the ambassador's phone with this one. It's not even stealing."

"What's in this? A bug?"

"The bug is in his present phone. They want to examine it to determine who put it there. I have to steal the phone without tipping off your resident C.I.A. agent."

Irene Donovan smiled. "That might be difficult. You see, I'm the resident C.I.A. agent at this embassy."

Right about then Nick Velvet decided that spying wasn't his game. So far he'd managed to do everything wrong, and he was nowhere near stealing the turquoise telephone from the ambassador's desk. He already had Younger and Melrose on his back, and now this attractive young woman to contend with.

"I guess I've been talking too much," he suggested.

"Not at all. It's interesting. Can you tell me who hired you?"

"No more free information," Nick said with a shake of his head. "If you're going to stand me against the wall and shoot me, you'd better get on with it."

"On the contrary," Irene Donovan decided. "I'm going to help you steal that telephone."

He picked up the box and followed her down the hall, past the Marine guard who nodded casually. The ambassador's office door was unlocked and she crossed at once to the big desk where the telephone of the proper color rested. Nick closed the door carefully behind them.

"Is this the phone?" she asked, picking up the greenish-blue instrument. When he nodded she went to work on the bottom of it with a small screwdriver.

"What are you doing?"

"I figure I'm entitled to a look at this bug before I help you steal the phone. They can be planted anywhere in an office, of course, but a telephone is likely because then they can be activated by a call from outside. Let's see, they're usually about here, under the four on the dial. Yes, here it is! Your client made a smart guess."

To Nick the small metal box looked like part of the phone. "Can you tell who made it?"

She scrutinized it a few moments without removing it. "Japanese. I've seen the make before."

"Why would the Japanese—?"

"Anyone could have bought it here, of course. But a Russian or Chinese agent would likely bring his own make, to avoid the necessity of making the purchase in enemy territory."

"Which means?"

"That it was probably placed here by a Japanese faction. I said I'd seen the make before. It's a very special modification, used by a secret Japanese group about whom we know very little. You may have noticed me with a Japanese youth yesterday. His name is Shinju, and he—"

There was a polite knock at the door and the Marine guard stuck his head inside. "Everything all right, Miss Donovan?"

"Fine, thank *you*." When the door closed again, she said, "We'd better go. Do you work fast?"

"Fast enough. I spent the entire flight over here reading telephone repair manuals." He took the instrument from her and quickly replaced its base. Then he bent to the wall terminal and set to work disconnecting the wire. In five minutes the new phone was in place and operative. Even the little white identification strip beneath the four push-buttons had been transferred . . .

That evening, back at the Okura Hotel, the meeting took place exactly as planned. "Did you have any trouble?" Younger asked.

"Nothing to speak of. Here's your telephone."

The C.I.A. man opened the box and removed the instrument. "This looks like the phone."

"It *is* the phone. Do you have the rest of the money?"

"Right here." But as he reached for it there was a knock on the door. Nick cursed silently, knowing it would be Cas Melrose. Well, he'd have to let the two of them work out the problem between them.

He opened the door and Cas came in. His smile froze for a moment when he saw Younger. Then he tried to relax. "Guess you beat me here, Mitch. You always were fast at this sort of thing."

"I heard you were in Tokyo, Cas. It's a small world."

"I guess we're both after the same thing."

Younger's eyes hardened. "What do you want with this telephone, Cas?"

"Same as you. The bug was planted by the Si-Fan, wasn't it?"

"I don't know anything about the Si-Fan. I haven't even examined the bug yet. If it's even there."

"It's there," Nick assured him. "Now how about my money?"

Both of them were staring at him. "How do you know it's there?" Cas Melrose wanted to know.

"And how do you know we're even looking for a bug?" Younger asked. "I didn't mention a bug when I hired you."

"The word gets around. Cas mentioned the bug, and we looked at it while we were stealing the thing."

"*We?*"

"I had some help. Nice girl named Irene, from the embassy."

Mitch Younger blanched. "Not Irene Donovan!"

"I guess that was her name."

"She's our C.I.A. man in Tokyo!"

"Hardly a man!" Nick protested.

"Nevertheless, bringing her into this is a disaster!"

Cas Melrose merely smiled. "What difference does it make, really? She didn't plant the bug."

"Maybe I deserve an explanation along with my money," Nick suggested.

"The Si-Fan is a Japanese secret society," Melrose began before Younger could stop him. "The Si-Fan part is just a C.I.A. nickname, really, from the name of Fu Manchu's secret society."

"Fu Manchu was Chinese," Nick pointed out.

"What the hell difference does it make?" Younger stormed. "It's just our code name for it. The damned group's so secret we don't even know its real name."

"Or its purpose," Melrose added.

"A group without a name or purpose? It certainly *is* a secret society. How'd you ever hear of it?"

"We have ways," Younger said. "Their listening devices are distinctively made modifications of commercial models. That's why I'm especially anxious to see this one." He was already unscrewing the metal base plate. In a moment he had the electronic bug in his hand. "Yes, it's another of the Si-Fan's beauties."

"Is this a militaristic group?"

"Not as far as we know. But they're closely-knit and very secretive."

"And you think Irene Donovan may be a double-agent working with them."

"I didn't say that," Younger insisted.

"But you obviously believe it. Otherwise there'd be no point in hiring me."

Younger sighed and gave a nod. "She's been seen dating a young Japanese named Shinju. He could be part of it."

"Why do you suspect him?"

But the C.I.A. man had reached the limit of his patience. "Look here, Velvet, you were hired to do a job and you did it. I have the balance of your money and you can get a taxi to the airport right downstairs. Question time is over."

"Very well." Nick held out his hand and accepted the money. "It's been a pleasure dealing with you. But since this is my room maybe you two should be the ones to leave."

He saw them to the door and closed it firmly after them. He didn't know just what he was going to do next, but he didn't think he'd be going home just yet.

In the morning Nick phoned Irene at the embassy. "I think we should meet for lunch," he suggested, "if you've got the time."

"All right. Things are always slow around here the day after a party. Where shall we meet?"

"Somewhere conspicuous. I'm sure they'll be watching us anyway."

"Do you know where the Okura Fine Art Museum is? Right near your hotel? There's a restaurant next to it with dishes of plastic food in the window."

"I'll find it. Let's meet at 12:30."

He found the restaurant with its realistic plastic meals advertising the culinary pleasures inside. When he entered he saw that Irene Donovan was already waiting for him. "How did it go last night?" she asked when they were settled at a table.

"Not well. I had to tell them of your involvement, and that upset Younger. He thinks you're involved with this Si-Fan group."

"He would think something like that."

"Are you involved? He says you've been seen with a young Japanese named Shinju. He's the one I saw you with, isn't he?"

"Shinju is hardly more than a child!"

"Younger's implication was more political. Is Shinju involved with this secret society?"

She took out a long cigarette, tapping it thoughtfully against

the table before deciding on her reply. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this, except that somehow I'd rather tell it to you than to the people like Younger who sit back in Washington with their cipher machines and electronic bugs. I'm not out to corrupt any governments or assassinate any foreign rulers. I merely want to help gather information that can assist our government in making the wisest foreign-policy decisions. I've never made it a secret that I'm with the C.I.A. and I've never made it a secret that I'd quit in a minute if they asked me to do anything more than gather information."

"Which is why Younger doesn't fully trust you."

"I suppose so. But you shouldn't complain. He paid you good money for that telephone, and I'd have given him the bug for nothing."

"Did Shinju plant the bug?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think he might have, but I have no proof. He's often at the embassy to see me, and the ambassador's office is frequently empty. It wouldn't have been difficult for him."

"Then I'll ask my original question again. Is Shinju involved with this secret society?"

"If there really is such a thing, he could be involved. His grandfather was a Japanese war criminal."

"Oh?"

"A general named Shinju killed a number of prisoners near Hong Kong. He was here at home, nursing a badly injured arm, when the war ended. He knew he faced trial, so he committed hara-kiri on the day General MacArthur landed in Japan to accept the surrender."

"I've heard of closely knit family societies in Japan. Is it possible there's such a group, keeping alive the memory of General Shinju?"

She thought about that. "His brother entered a Buddhist monastery after the war. His son—young Shinju's father—is a minor government official. There may be a few cousins. No one else."

"Hardly the sort of thing to worry the C.I.A."

"The unknown always worries them. The person or group they call Si-Fan is the unknown."

"But there have been no acts of violence as I understand it, no bombings or stabbings in dark alleys?"

"Nothing but a few bugs—listening devices in key locations."

"Younger told me he'd intercepted a transcript of conversations from the ambassador's phone."

"I suppose even the Si-Fan might find it useful to make money through the sale of such conversations. I'm certain it's not their main purpose, though."

Their food arrived and Nick plunged in to a very American-looking dish. For a time they didn't speak, then he commented, "I have the feeling all the people involved in this know more than they're saying."

"Including me?"

"Why did you help me steal that telephone?"

She looked at him fondly, as if remembering something from long ago. "Because I like you, Nick. I like you very much. When I see you I dream about how life could have been for me." She paused, then continued. "Leave Tokyo, Nick. Now! Melrose and Younger will kill each other, and either one of them might kill you too."

"Why?" he asked simply. "I'm not a danger to anyone."

"By having lunch with me you've become a danger to them. If they believe I'm a double agent of some sort, they'll believe the worst of you too. Get out while you can, Nick."

"Thanks for the advice."

"I mean it, Nick! On the way out of here you'll notice Cas Melrose at a table against the wall. He followed you just as you expected."

"I've known Cas for years, back home."

"This isn't back home."

No, he agreed silently, and this wasn't the Cas he'd known so well. This man who had confronted him with a gun might have been a stranger encountered in a dark alley. Perhaps it was time for him to head home with his money.

"It's been a pleasure," he told Irene as they parted on the street. "If I don't see you again before I go back, take care of yourself."

"You too." She smiled, seemed about to add something, then turned away.

Back at his hotel room Nick found Mitch Younger waiting for him. "Did the chambermaid let you in?" Nick asked.

Younger ignored the question. "You had lunch with her, didn't you?"

"Melrose really keeps you informed."

"Melrose and I aren't working together. I don't know what that fool is up to. What I do know is that you're getting in too deep, Velvet. Your job here is finished."

"So I've been told. Miss Donovan advised me to go home at once."

"That's the first smart thing she's done."

"I think you've covered her with a cloud of false suspicion. She seems to be doing her job, though just what the job entails is a bit beyond me, I'll admit."

"Doing her job! Did she tell you about Shinju?"

"She told me about Shinju. You're all the most talkative bunch of spies I ever heard of!"

"Shinju planted that bug in the telephone and she knows it. She's the one who allowed him access to the embassy!"

He would have said more, but the ringing of the telephone interrupted him. Nick answered it and heard Irene at the other end. "Is Younger there?"

"Yes," Nick said.

"Put him on. I've got troubles."

"What kind?" He wasn't one to be left out.

"Cas Melrose just grabbed Shinju."

"Grabbed?"

"Kidnaped. Put Younger on."

Nick handed the phone to Younger without comment, then listened while the C.I.A. man asked a series of sharp questions. When he hung up he said simply, "I must go."

"What happened?"

"It doesn't concern you."

"She told me Melrose kidnaped Shinju. You might as well tell me the rest of it."

Mitch Younger sighed, looking suddenly tired. "Shinju was waiting in a car outside the embassy when she returned. He honked at her, but as she started across the street she saw Melrose open the door of the car, point a gun at Shinju, and get into the back seat. Then they drove off. It just happened—minutes ago."

"What are you going to do?"

"Stop him, of course. He's trying to score a coup on his own to get back in our good graces, but all he's really doing is alerting the entire Si-Fan network."

"If there really is such a thing."

Younger ignored him and started for the door. That was when

Nick added, "I might know where he's gone."

"What?"

"When he came here the first time he had a folder of matches from the Tokyo Bay Yacht Club. It's one of several around the world that has reciprocal arrangements with our sailing club back home."

"Can you get us in on your membership card?" Younger asked.

"Of course."

"He wouldn't be foolish enough to take Shinju there, would he?"

"What other place does he know in Tokyo?"

Younger suddenly gave a nod. "Come on."

The Tokyo Bay Yacht Club was a group of buildings and boathouses on the west side of the harbor, not far from the airport. They drove through the gate with a flick of Nick's membership card and began searching the parking spaces for the car that Irene had described to Younger on the phone. They found it without much trouble, in a far corner of the lot where no one was likely to notice a man being led at gunpoint to one of the nearby boathouses.

"All right," Younger said. He reached into the back seat for a small airline flight bag. "Which one you figure he's in?"

"Close to the car. Let's try the end one and work our way down the line."

They found Cas Melrose in the second boathouse. The Japanese youth, Shinju, was tied to a chair, half unconscious and bleeding from the mouth. Cas sighed when he saw them and raised the little automatic pistol. "Five minutes more, Mitch," he pleaded, "and he'll tell me everything!"

"You crazy fool!" Younger snarled. He shoved Nick aside, pulling a long, thick-barreled handgun from his flight bag. Before Cas could fire there was a burst of sound like the chatter of an electric typewriter and Cas spun around, toppled, and lay still.

"What was that?" Nick asked, staring at the weapon.

"An Ingram M-11," Younger said, stowing the weapon away as quickly as it had appeared. "The sound didn't carry outside this building."

"Did you have to kill him?" Nick asked.

"He was on his own. He wasn't working for us."

"What about the body?"

"Tokyo Bay is just outside that door."

While Younger tended to the body, Nick worked over the half-conscious Shinju, freeing him from his bonds. The Japanese peered at him through swelling eyelids and muttered, "You have saved my life. How can I repay you?"

Nick Velvet had an answer for that one. "Take me to see your granduncle at the monastery."

The Buddhist monastery at Fussa was nestled in among the hills west of Tokyo—a great rambling estate which had once belonged to a wealthy Japanese banker. Now the grounds were serene and well-manicured, with numerous paths and wooden bridges over shallow ponds. The monks walked often in the gardens, especially in July, and it was there that young Shinju found his granduncle taking the sun. He was an old man, somewhere close to 80, and Nick could imagine the gauntness of his body beneath the flowing saffron robe.

"This American saved my life, Granduncle," Shinju said, speaking English after a ritual greeting in Japanese. "His one wish was to speak to you before returning to his country."

The old eyes sought out Nick's, but the hands stayed hidden in their wide sleeves. Perhaps monks didn't shake hands, Nick decided. "I have come to ask about your brother," he said.

The expression never changed. "My brother is dead."

"I know that. I know he died by his own hand, back in 1945. Were you there?"

Old Shinju nodded. "I was in the house at the time. After all that had gone before, with the war and with his sins, it was truly more than I could face. I have been here, with the community, ever since."

"More than thirty years."

"Yes."

"And have you found peace here?"

"Yes."

Nick gazed out across the ponds, watching for a moment as a long-necked bird dipped low over the water. It might have been a portrait painted by some Japanese artist of long ago. "That is all I wished to ask," Nick said. "I will go back now."

The old head bowed.

"But first may I have your blessing?"

Old Shinju's eyes met Nick's, and for just a moment the universe seemed to pause. "You are a wise man, Mr. Velvet," the

monk said, and raised his arm over Nick's head. "A wise man deserves my blessing."

"Now I can return home in peace."

He turned away without another word, and young Shinju followed him. Nick did not speak until they were back to the car, then he said only, "Your granduncle is a very holy man."

"Yes, he is."

Nick took a deep breath. "You must end this foolishness before anyone else dies," he said.

"What foolishness?"

"The Shinju family society. What Younger calls the Si-Fan. Your secret is safe with me, and the old man will not live many more years."

"I do not know—" he began, but Nick cut him short.

"You were a society seemingly without purpose, gathering information without motive, and doing nothing with it. Except for an occasional sale to interested buyers. I could only assume that Younger's Si-Fan was not trying to unearth a secret, like most spies, but to *guard* one. The ambassador's telephone was bugged and the conversations in his office monitored to make certain the name of Shinju was never spoken. The general—your grandfather—was recuperating from a bad arm injury when he was said to have committed hara-kiri. An injury bad enough to send him home at that crucial moment of the war. And I asked myself if a man with only one good arm could have committed hara-kiri in the traditional manner?—with *both* hands clutched around the dagger for the ritual ripping of the abdomen."

"It could be done," young Shinju assured him, "by a strong man."

"Perhaps so. But it got me thinking about the brother Shinju, thirty-odd years in a Buddhist monastery. And now I have met him."

"And so?"

"He hid his hands from me as we talked, but when I asked for his blessing he could not refuse it. He knew that I suspected the truth, but he gave me the blessing anyway. That told me two things—that he is truly a holy man, and that he is really your grandfather, the war criminal Shinju."

The young man's face was impassive. Presently he said, "The scar tissue on the arm has never healed properly. He always feared someone from outside would see it."

"He need fear no longer. I'm not in the business of bringing war criminals to justice. I think he's been atoning for thirty years, which is more time than most people have for it. But did he kill his brother?"

"No, no. His brother made the sacrifice for him, to save him. He dressed in the general's uniform and even bandaged his good right arm. It was the day of surrender, and no one asked too many questions."

"And the family has known, and protected him down through the generations."

"It seemed the right thing to do."

"Throw away the bugs, Shinju. Disband the Si-Fan. I may not be around to save you from the next Cas Melrose who comes to beat the answers out of you."

"Thank you," the young man said, and that was all.

Nick Velvet knew that Irene and Younger were waiting for him back at the embassy, but he left Tokyo without seeing them again.

"Q"

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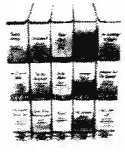

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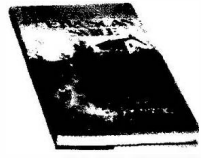

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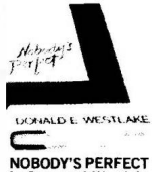

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