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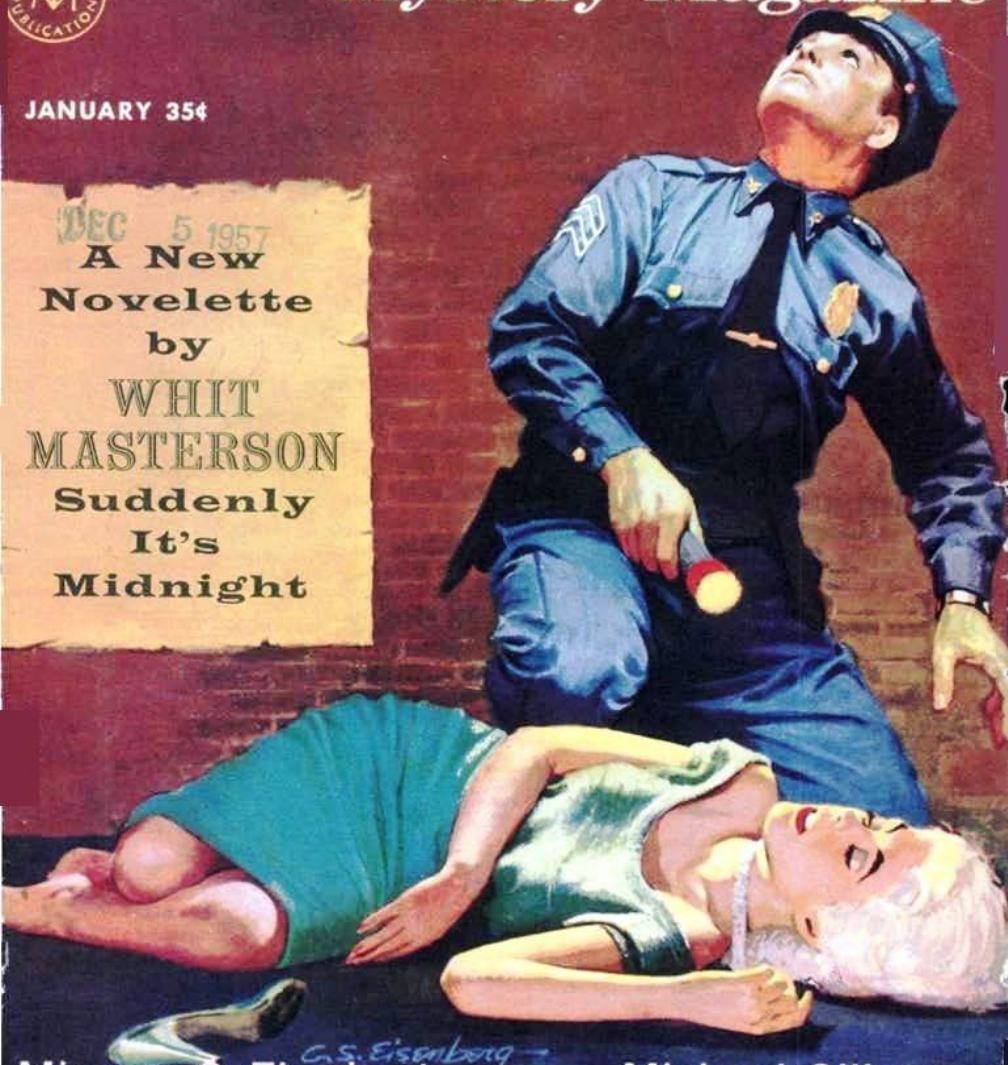
A New Novelette by WHIT MASTERSON

Suddenly It's Midnight



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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE — *NEW!*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WHIT MASTERSON**

TITLE: ***Suddenly It's Midnight***

TYPE: Detection and Suspense

LOCALE: Southern California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A novelette that explores the world of big business—a gripping story compounded of anonymous letters, blackmail, murder, and guilt by accusation. Fast, dovetailed action.*

THE THREATENING LETTER ARRIVED in the Monday morning mail. It was addressed to James Penn and, despite its odd printing and lack of return address, attracted no particular attention. During the night it was processed and sorted in the plant post office at Vulcan Aircraft. About dawn a uniformed plant messenger bore it in a sack of more usual correspondence into the Administration Building, an aloof tower of steel and glass that was known familiarly as the Fishbowl. He delivered the mail in hierarchical order, beginning with the Old Man's domain on the top floor, then the executive vice-president's suite on the fifth floor, then the offices of division heads on the fourth floor, working gradually toward the earth again. The letter thus found its way to Contracts Division.

At nine o'clock Jim Penn arrived whistling. He was a vigorous, rangy young executive of thirty-five, sunburned, his sandy hair cropped short. The dark, hard planes of his face were relieved only by his devil-may-care grin, a buccaneer look that sometimes seemed out of place in the paneled office. As usual, he felt on top of the world. At this high level of the Fishbowl it was an easy sensation to maintain. His secretary had opened the drapes on the exterior wall of softly tinted glass and he could see the blue slopes of the Southern California city basking in the sunny spring haze. On a really clear day he could see as far as the fashionable suburb where he and Bev had built

their home two years before, right after he had moved up to take over Contracts.

In this exultant mood Penn reached for the morning mail. He extracted the single sheet from the top envelope. The knuckles on his big hands whitened. He read the letter again with growing incredulity, still grinning slightly as if it were a joke to which he might get the point at any moment.

The message was brief. It was neither typed nor handwritten but stamped out in uneven lines of block capitals such as are found in a toy printing set. But there was nothing childlike or playful about the contents. Penn looked again at the envelope. It had been postmarked in the city at midnight.

He buzzed on the intercom for his secretary. She appeared, notebook in hand. He held up the envelope. "You opened this, Nora. Did you happen to read it?"

"Of course not, Mr. Penn. Is there anything the matter?"

"No," Penn said, dismissing her. Alone, he read the letter through once more, half forming the strange words with his lips as if to impress them on his mind. I KNOW WHO YOU REALLY ARE. THEY ARE STILL LOOKING FOR YOU TO KILL YOU. PAY UP OR I WILL TELL THEM WHERE TO FIND YOU. NO COPS. And that was all; the letter contained neither salutation nor signature.

Not five minutes before, Jim Penn had seated himself at his desk, the confident young executive, sure of himself and the life he had built. But now, staring at the crude threat, he had a premonition of earthquakes that could shake his world with brutal indifference. He glanced around his office, then out at the city. Nothing had changed. His life was the same—except for the letter on his desk.

. . . who you really are . . . still looking for you to kill you . . .

Slowly, his eyes still fixed on the uneven printing, Penn reached for his telephone.

Beverly Penn heard the telephone ring downstairs. A flicker of distraction shadowed her piquant face, then she bent her brunette head even more intently over her scribbled notes. She had remembered that the maid would answer. It was taking her a little time to get accustomed to the idea of a servant—an outsider—in her house but it had been expected of them when Jim was promoted to division head. With a huge company like Vulcan, how the executives lived seemed sometimes as important as what they did during working hours. The Penns didn't actually need a maid, any more than they needed this big five-bedroom house since they had no children. Not yet, Bev reminded herself—no children *yet*.

Right now, she had a full-time job simply being a young execu-

tive's wife. There was so much rightness involved, seeing that they moved in the right circles, entertained the right people at the right times, and generally demonstrated that her husband was the right man —socially as well as professionally —for that mysterious process called "advancement." So she chewed her pencil and drew anguished doodles on her notepad and labored over next Saturday night's menu, trying to remember everything that had been served by other executive wives in the past three months so as not to duplicate.

Bev became aware that the maid was hovering in the bedroom doorway. "Mr. Penn's on the telephone. Do you want to take the call up here?"

"Thanks, Louella." Bev picked up the extension. "Jim?"

Her husband's voice sounded guarded. "Bev, you alone?"

"I hope so." Bev smiled. "If I'm ever called on to entertain at this hour, I'll resign." He didn't chuckle as she expected. "Jim, is anything wrong?"

"No, everything's fine. At least . . . well, something funny's happened. There was this letter waiting for me here. Hold tight, I'll read it to you." Bev's lips parted as she listened. "And what do you make of that?"

"But what's it all about? Who could have sent you a letter like that?"

"I don't know," Penn admitted. She heard him force a laugh. "I guess we're getting up in the world. I thought only people like the president or movie stars got crank letters. Maybe I should be flattered."

"Surely nobody at the plant would do this as a practical joke, would they?"

"Who knows what goes on inside people? I assure you I haven't any deep dark secrets in my past."

"Of course not." Bev frowned. An unwanted thought had shadowed her mind briefly—that she had only known her husband since he had come from the East five years before. I didn't mean to think that, she told herself. Why did that have to pop into my head? "No. And I'm positive you're not hiding any other woman anywhere. But what do you do about an anonymous letter?"

"Turn it over to the police."

"The police?"

"It's work they're trained for. I thought you'd better know what it's all about in case you have any callers with badges. Nothing to get upset about."

"I'm sure you're doing the right thing," Bev murmured. "Jim, call me back as soon as you can."

Nothing to get upset about . . . She wondered as she hung up. Jim was worried enough to call the police, but she was supposed to dismiss the threat without another thought. Sometimes Jim didn't make sense. Sometimes he seemed almost like . . . a stranger.

Well, aren't we all? she argued. As much as I love him, there are things he'll never understand about me, either. Just as I never understand his terrible silent moods when he's been under pressure at work. The way he'll sit and think, eyes blank, with his fists clenched on his knees, all the blood gone from his knuckles. Then he'll solve his problem and I'll know him inside-out for another six months. Even after five years Bev remained a little surprised at her husband's hands, surprised that such big powerful instruments could remain so controlled and tender . . .

As Penn wrote down the police number, his eyes fell again on the anonymous letter and its concluding phrase. NO COPS . . . He drew a deep breath and dialed. There was no responsive faraway ringing. Frowning, he jiggled the cutoff bar. His telephone was dead.

"It was all right a minute ago—" He leaned forward to summon his secretary over the intercom. At the same instant there was a soft knock on his door and Nora herself entered.

"Mr. Conover wants you to come up to his office right away."

"Oh? He say what he wanted?"

"Mr. Conover said for you to bring the letter. He said you'd understand."

"Yeah," said Penn grimly. He looked at his dead telephone. "I guess I do. . . ."

"Have Personnel dig out Mr. Penn's file and send it up."

"Yes, sir. I'll bring it in to you as soon as it gets here."

"No, I'd rather you hold it till I call for it. But send Mr. Penn in as soon as he gets here." Ernest Conover released the intercom switch and leaned back in his throne-like chair, his usual neat smile on his patrician lips. He was an impeccable man who secretly fancied that his seamed features were classical and his sweep of gray hair leonine; nobody knew that he kept it retouched. As executive vice-president of Vulcan, Conover was in charge of the smooth operation of the huge aircraft factory. Only the highest policy decisions went to the Old Man upstairs.

On organizational charts, the executive function appeared to be a team operation of the three top floors of the Fishbowl, and Conover cultivated this fiction. But he pictured it differently, with the Old Man as the ruling brain and himself as the ruling hand. He prided himself that the iron fist never showed, and when Penn was announced, Conover met him at the door with a warm handshake. "Sit down, Jim. Did you bring the letter?"

"Here it is." Penn appeared edgy. "I'd like to know—"

"Hold on a minute till I've read it." Conover took the letter and sat down behind his desk. "I think I

prevented you from making a big mistake."

Penn sat stiffly on a facing chair and didn't reply.

"Hm," murmured Conover when he had finished. "Very unusual. What's behind all this, Jim?"

"Do you mind telling me just how you found out about it, Mr. Conover?"

"Actually, it was just an accident, a fortunate one. I think you know that as a matter of company policy, spot taps are made on all executive telephones. Today it happened to be yours."

"I'd heard rumors."

"Well, it's no secret exactly. Nor is it unusual these days. When a corporation reaches the size of Vulcan, it can't be too careful. This is an age of signal stealing, Jim, particularly in the aircraft industry where we're up against cutthroat competition. I don't mean just our fellow manufacturers, either. We're dealing with extremely sensitive material, government contracts, research —all that sort of thing. We really don't have any choice."

"If you don't trust the people who work for you—"

"We employ nearly thirty thousand men and women. We can't know any of them well enough. That's an unfortunate penalty of bigness. Please don't think this is anything personal, Jim." Conover's neat smile widened. "Now I'll let you run with the ball for a while. What's this letter all about?"

"I haven't the faintest notion." Penn met Conover's gaze squarely. "Don't think I haven't been racking my brain the past half hour. You can't help do a little soul searching even though . . . I haven't done anything wrong, particularly anything that anyone would want to kill me for."

"You mean as far as you know?"

"Of course." Penn frowned. "The way you put it, it sounds to me like you're assuming there must be something to this crackpot letter."

"I'm not assuming that at all. I'm thinking only of the company."

"I don't see what Vulcan has to do with it. It's a personal matter."

"You're a Vulcan division head. If you get yourself smeared, no matter how unfounded the smear may be, the company suffers. Surely, Jim, you can appreciate the delicate position we're all in. Those upcoming rocket contracts with the Air Force are balanced on a hair. You know that, you're handling them yourself. Any little thing, a breath of scandal, might lose them for us —and if it should come out that one of Vulcan's top men was mixed up in a blackmail case . . ." Conover shook his head in exaggerated distress.

"I don't consider myself mixed up in anything," said Penn flatly. "If I'm willing to go to the police, it's obvious I have nothing to hide."

"Obvious," agreed Conover. "But think back a week or two to our equally innocent friends over at

Briscoe Aircraft. They're still in the papers, every day. That's my point—the bad publicity risk. So you see why I had your phone cut off before you could call the police." He eyed Penn questioningly. "I suppose you think that was a bit high-handed of me."

"I was a little surprised."

"It was my feeling that it would be wisest not to make this a matter of official record—especially if there's nothing to it. However, I don't intend to call the play on my own. Suppose we set up an executive meeting this afternoon and kick the matter around a bit. Without bringing the Old Man into it, at least not yet. That all right with you, Jim?"

"I suppose so." There was nothing else he could say.

"Good." Conover stood up, signaling that the discussion was over. "In the meantime keep this strictly to yourself. I wouldn't even call your wife if I were you." He sensed Penn's hesitation. "I know. That's one of the drawbacks of a top-level job. Even your private life isn't really your own."

"Yes, sir."

"I think I'll hold onto this for the time being." Conover indicated the letter. "That is, if you don't mind."

"Yes, sir," Penn said again, woodenly. Conover walked with him to the door, watched him stride off down the corridor. Handsome youngster, thought Conover, noticing how his secretary's gaze automatically followed Penn's broad shoulders. Perhaps a bit too virile-looking, though, with that reckless air that often got a man into trouble. I wonder how he got those two little scars on his left temple. Conover crooked a finger at his secretary.

She brought him a manila folder. "Here's the Penn file, Mr. Conover."

"Now I want you to give Plant Security a ring, have Mr. Shawley come up here on the double. And when you've done that, start notifying all the division heads of an executive meeting this afternoon in my office at three."

As she departed, Conover picked up his telephone. He dialed the number of the city's largest bank and asked to speak to the president. "Dave? Ernie Conover. I believe one of our executives here has an account with you. James Penn. I'd like to know what his balance is. And more important, keep me advised if his account shows any sizeable withdrawals in the near future. Confidential, of course. Can do? Swell."

Conover hung up, satisfied. Rank had its drawbacks, as he had told Penn a few moments ago; but it also had its advantages. He opened the thick manila folder and began to read, his slight smile unchanged.

Shawley was a lanky untidy man who headed the Plant Security sec-

tion, Vulcan's private police force that maintained order and safety within the factory. He slouched in the chair opposite Conover and read the anonymous letter with a sardonic grin. "Okay, where do I come in?"

"I want you to run this thing down, starting with the letter itself."

"Not much to work on. Ordinary typewriter paper, ordinary envelope—the kind you can buy in any dime store. Printing was done with a kid's hand set which is easier than cutting the words out of a newspaper and even harder to trace. But I'll give it to the lab just in case."

"There's the man himself. How much do we really know about him?"

"Probably more than his wife does," said Shawley. "Our dossiers are pretty complete, Mr. Conover. I assembled his myself."

"Penn's wife has only known him five years. We've got to do better than that."

"I have." Shawley opened Penn's file and read from it. "James Penn, no middle initial. Born Chicago Heights, Illinois. Both parents deceased. Went to grade and high school in Chicago, graduated University of Illinois. Bachelor degree in business administration. Three years active duty with the Air Force, holds reserve rank of first lieutenant. Worked for Bendix handling contract termination with the government, then with MacDonnell as a production analyst. Came out to California five years ago—"

I've read all that for myself," interrupted Conover impatiently. "But I want the information double checked. Without revealing the purpose to anyone, of course. While you're at it, what would you think of keeping an eye on Penn? Nothing too formal, naturally, just a sort of general surveillance till we're sure of our position. Do we understand each other?"

Shawley rose. "Except for one thing. Am I supposed to clear Penn —or pin something on him? I missed that part of the instructions."

Conover said with dignity. "You're supposed to find out the truth."

"That may make it harder," Shawley replied ironically.

By the time the meeting convened at three o'clock, Jim Penn could scarcely remember the feeling of well-being with which he had started the day. With a sense of apprehension he joined the six other division heads in the executive vice-president's office.

Conover opened the meeting in a somewhat dramatic manner by holding up the front page of the morning newspaper. One of the smaller headlines stated: NO PROGRESS IN GAMBLER SLAYING. "You've all been following this story, gentlemen, but

I want to impress it on your memories. It's the tragedy of the innocent bystander. In the third paragraph you find the name of Briscoe Aircraft. Why? Simply because Wayne Alexander, the training director over there, entertained a house guest and the guest was murdered a week ago Friday. So Briscoe pays the penalty every day in the paper, although the company itself certainly wasn't consorting with the underworld."

"Neither was Alexander," Penn objected. "I know him, most of us here belong to the same country club. The murdered man wasn't a gangster, simply a professional gambler from Nevada, where it's legal business. And I happen to know that Alexander wasn't even aware of his guest's occupation. They were discussing real estate."

"Unfortunately, that isn't emphasized every day in the press," said Conover. He cast the newspaper aside. "My point is that we can't let this sort of bad publicity happen to Vulcan. With that in mind I want you to read this letter that Jim here received this morning."

Although he had known this would happen, Penn felt an acute embarrassment as he watched the letter pass from hand to hand around the circle. Here was a fragment of his private life being disclosed to men who were actually not much more than strangers to him. He felt almost naked.

His feeling of awkwardness was shared by the others. After reading the letter, they gave Penn uncomfortable grins or carefully avoided looking at him at all.

"I'd like to say something," Penn said, more loudly than was necessary. "Since the letter has been put on the record, I want to put something else there. Namely, that I don't know what this is all about. I'm as much in the dark as the rest of you."

One of the men muttered, "We know that, Jim."

"Well, I just wanted to say it." Penn looked around the circle. "It's funny what a letter like this can do to you. I'll admit that I've been feeling guilty ever since I got the damn thing—simply because I've been accused. I've been going over my past all day, trying to think of something I might have done. But there is absolutely nothing anyone could wish to kill me for. I swear to it."

"Then your marriage is happier than mine," said Woodrow, the plant engineer.

Conover didn't allow the tension to ease more than a moment. "I think I speak for everyone in assuring you, Jim, that we believe you one hundred per cent. However, that doesn't change the problem. Which is, how do we deal with this?"

"Have the police been notified?"

"They have not," said Conover flatly. "Jim and I thought that call-

ing the police meant automatic notoriety that would do the company no good in our present negotiations with the government. Of course, if you gentlemen feel otherwise . . ."

The rest of them looked to Penn for confirmation. Penn nodded reluctantly. By passing it off as a joint decision, Conover had made it impossible for him to disagree without calling the executive vice-president a liar.

"I'd suggest that we turn it over to Plant Security," Conover said. "Shawley's competent to deal with this sort of thing—he's a former police officer himself—and without running the risk of undue publicity. How does that sound?"

No one had any objections.

"Then I guess we're all agreed," Conover said briskly. "I'll call in Shawley immediately and drop the whole matter in his lap. Thank you, gentlemen, for your cooperation."

The division heads rode down in the elevator together. As they scattered to their various offices, Woodrow lingered to talk with Penn in the corridor.

"I'd write it off as some psycho who isn't worth your worry. The only mystery to me is why you ever told Conover about it in the first place."

Penn gave him a wry look. "I didn't. He happened to 'overhear' it."

"Oh." Woodrow glanced up and down the empty hall. Casually, he said, "I got a good offer over the week end from one of the plants up north."

"Going to take it?"

Woodrow smiled. "Under the circumstances, I guess I wouldn't dare say, would I?"

The orchestra at the country club played for dancing only on week ends, but dinner was served every evening and afterward there was a jukebox in the Sans Souci room for any of the members who cared to use it. Bev and Jim Penn were one of about a dozen couples on the floor that evening.

"Why don't you admit it?" she asked as they returned to their table. "You're still brooding over that letter."

"There's nothing to say. It'd be easier if I did have something to confess to you—that I'm really a bank robber or that I murdered my first wife. But I've told you everything I know. Most of it against Conover's wishes, incidentally."

"Then why are you worried?"

"I'm not, exactly. Uneasy is more like it. I feel I've made a wrong move, that I should've spit in Conover's eye and taken the whole business straight to the police."

"Still, the fewer people who know, the better for the company," Bev said. "And Plant Security is working on it already, isn't it? Who are you staring at, anyway?"

Penn nodded toward the other side of the room where another couple of their own age was seated. They seemed to clash with the gay atmosphere of the lounge, toying somberly with their cocktails. "Wayne Alexander and his wife. I can imagine what's he's going through down at Briscoe—if it's anything like Vulcan." He grimaced. "I guess we're both in the same boat."

"Not quite," said Bev. "Imagine having a friend murdered."

"Acquaintance," Penn corrected her automatically. "I think this is the first time we've seen them out since then." He was remembering Conover's display of the newspaper that afternoon. The police still reported no progress, although the murder had occurred a week ago Friday. Probably when a rich gambler died, there were too many motives to track down. Not that Alexander had known Vincent Gamil was a gambler by occuption. It simply happened that both men owned adjoining ranches in Nevada, and Wayne Alexander had wanted to buy a strip of land from his neighbor. Hence, the presence of Gamil as a dinner guest in Alexander's house . . . and Alexander's resulting troubles.

"They're leaving early," Bev reported. Across the room the other couple had risen. Penn waved but Alexander didn't appear to see.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Penn," a new voice chimed in. A slim suntanned man in a dinner jacket was standing over them, flashing his teeth in a cordial smile. "I believe you're on your way toward becoming our most faithful members."

Penn nodded. "Evening, Holladay. Pull up a chair and have one of your drinks."

"Thanks, no," Holladay replied. He had brazen dark eyes that roved restlessly about his surroundings as if searching for something wrong. As the club's resident manager, he occupied a social niche midway between the members and his staff. In addition to his regular duties, Holladay could always be counted on to fill a foursome—bridge, golf, or tennis—as the need arose. A dexterous opponent, he was popular with nearly everyone.

"I'm glad I happened to see you," Holladay said. "I've got a good tip on Santa Anita tomorrow and thought you might be interested, Mr. Penn."

Penn shook his head. "Not this time." Holladay was not a bookie but like many club managers he had good connections and Penn occasionally took advantage of them. Most of the members did. But right now he felt he owed it to himself to be extremely circumspect, even in such trivial matters. "Thanks, anyway."

"Don't mention it. I—" At this moment one of the waiters appeared to summon Holladay to the telephone and the manager excused himself.

Bev watched him go. "Now how do you suppose a man as charming as that hasn't ever gotten married?

"He's not only got charm, he's got brains." Penn pushed back his chair. "What do you say we go home?"

As she took his arm, Bev said, "Jim, you're not building up to one of your deathly silent moods, are you? You know they frighten me a little."

"There was one peculiar thing about that letter. It told me to pay —but it didn't say when, where, or how much. What does that sound like to you?"

Bev said slowly, "That there might be a second letter."

"Yeah," Penn agreed. "That's what I've been thinking about all evening. When do I get Number Two?"

Cleve Holladay locked the door to his private office before he answered the telephone. "Holladay speaking."

On the other end of the wire a man said, "You know who this is. I just got into town. When can we get together?"

"I can't get away from here before midnight." Holladay hesitated. "The man you're interested in meeting is here at the club now. I just spoke with him. I don't think he suspects he's been recognized."

The man at the other end chuckled drily. "It doesn't matter much. He's had five years to run. Now his time's up."

"What about the woman? The one who knows him?"

"She's due in on the plane from Frisco in a couple of hours."

Holladay said sharply, "You understand I'm not to get involved in this. I'm merely doing your employers a favor."

"I know what my orders are."

"Just don't make any mistakes, that's all."

"I never make mistakes," said the other man. "In my business, I can't afford to."

While Penn put the station wagon in the garage, Bev went ahead of him to unlock the front door, since the maid retired early. He heard her call to him as he was lowering the garage door. There was such a strange quality to her voice that Penn ran around the house to join her.

The fear thrust into him again as he saw what she held. It was an envelope, and Penn knew what it was.

"It was stuck under the door," Bev said tensely. "Do you suppose—"

"Give it to me," he demanded. The same cheap envelope, the same uneven printing, the same name—his—on the outside. The only difference was the absence of stamp and postmark. The second letter

had been delivered personally. Penn peered up and down the quiet residential street, almost dark with the approach of midnight. He saw nothing unusual. Yet he had a weird feeling of being watched, of hostile eyes peering at him from the darkness. "Let's get inside."

"Aren't you going to open it?" Bev asked, as she watched him hasten around the living room, closing the drapes.

"Of course, but privacy comes first." Penn tore open the envelope. Like its predecessor, it contained a single sheet of paper. But the message was even shorter. BE AT THE CORKSCREW AT 1 A.M. DON'T BRING OUTSIDERS IF YOU WANT TO LIVE.

Bev's fingers dug into his arm. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know."

"But what's the corkscrew?"

"I said I don't know," Penn snapped. "It doesn't mean any more to me than it does to you."

"I didn't mean that it did," Bev murmured. "But the way it's put—"

"Yeah. As if I did know." Penn studied the note. "Sounds like a bar." He strode into the hall to the telephone table and opened the directory to the yellow pages. After a moment he silently pointed out an entry to Bev.

She read the address. "But that's all the way across town."

"Yes." Penn looked at his wrist watch. "I guess I've got time."

"But it might be dangerous!"

"It might be more dangerous not to go." Penn put his arms around his wife. "Bev, I've got to give it a try. Otherwise I'm going to be a candidate for a strait jacket."

"Then I'm going with you."

"I'd like nothing better," Penn said slowly, "but the letter says not to bring outsiders. Lord knows you're not an outsider to me—but you might be to whoever wrote it. I've got to go alone."

He arrived at The Corkscrew at 12:45. He walked around the block once, hoping to see something—or someone—he might recognize. He did not. The Corkscrew was merely a nondescript bar in a nondescript block of shabby business establishments. Most of them were dark and shuttered for the night. At precisely one o'clock he entered the cocktail lounge, half angrily, half fearfully.

The dim-lit room was nearly empty. Three men and a woman sat on stools at the bar and the bartender was lackadaisically polishing glasses behind it. Penn had never seen any of them before.

He ordered a highball and sat down in the last booth next to the jukebox. Half concealed in the shadows he fixed his gaze on the door and waited.

"Are you sure you don't want to write this down?" Holladay asked.

"I can remember it," said the

other man. Since Holladay occupied the only chair in the small hotel room, the other man sat on the bed, his legs folded under him like a Buddha. There were other resemblances. He was short and squat with a round fleshy face. But Buddha did not wear a thin mustache and Buddha's eyes did not glitter like bits of broken glass. George B. Turgeon was the name under which he had registered and was one of several he used when on business. "Tell me all about him."

"Well, Rayho calls himself James Penn now. He's got a good job at Vulcan Aircraft, pretty wife, and a nice home. He's done a fine job of hiding himself."

"You recognized him," Turgeon pointed out.

"Not exactly. I've known Penn ever since I took over the club five years ago and it never occurred to me that he wasn't genuine. I never expected to run into Rayho out here, of course. But when Gamil was killed, I tumbled to what was going on. So I phoned this friend of mine in Las Vegas and told him to tip off the right people." Holladay smiled. "I believe in doing favors because eventually they're returned."

Turgeon grunted. "My employers already knew that Rayho was here. Gamil phoned them that much the night he got eliminated, so they'd have sent me out here, anyway. But Gamil didn't take time to pin down Rayho's new identity. Your being able to finger Rayho makes my assignment a lot easier."

"I'm not going to finger anybody," Holladay objected nervously. "Understand, I never knew Rayho except by sight, back in Chicago. And that was eight years ago. I wouldn't want you to go ahead on my word alone."

"You sound like you're backing out," Turgeon's voice was mild but there was an edge of menace to it. "We don't like welshers. That's why I'm here."

"I just don't want to take the responsibility," Holladay muttered.

"You mean you're not sure about Penn being Rayho?"

"I'm not positive, that's all. He's done something to change his face a little, maybe altered his hairline. I said I didn't know him personally."

"That's why we're bringing the woman down here from Frisco. Ilene Menke."

"She knew Rayho personally?"

"Very personally. She was his girl friend, the one he ran out on." Turgeon moved his thick lips in what might have been intended as a smile. "She'll remember Rayho, all right. You can't fool a woman on something like that."

"She get here yet?"

Turgeon took a watch from a pocket of his vest and studied it. "Her plane got in twenty minutes ago. She'll be phoning soon. What

we've got to do is set up some situation where she can see Mr. Penn without his knowing it."

"That shouldn't be too hard. You've got his address—"

"Without his knowing it," Turgeon emphasized. "If Rayho sees the Menke woman, he'll get panicky all over again. I want him to think that he hasn't anything to worry about, that he got to Gamil before Gamil could tip anyone off." He stared at Holladay for a moment. "I think I'll leave that part of it to you. You haven't talked to anybody else about this?"

"Lord, no!" exclaimed Holladay. "I'm not asking for what happened to Gamil."

The telephone rang, making him jump. Turgeon rose heavily from the bed and answered it. The person on the other end of the line did most of the talking, Turgeon replying only in monosyllables. When he had completed the conversation, he turned to Holladay. "That was Ilene Menke. She's at the Ridgway under an alias. She's ready to go to work as soon as you can set it up."

Holladay nodded and rose. "Okay, I'll do my best." He licked his lips. "If she says that Penn is Rayho, what happens then?"

"Don't be funny. My employers wanted Rayho bad enough before he killed Gamil. How do you think they feel now?"

"Yeah," muttered Holladay. "I guess I meant how—and when."

"I'll have to study him first, see what his habits are. I generally prefer 'accidents'."

At two thirty, I'll call the police and tell them everything, Bev thought. I can't stand this wondering any longer.

At that moment she heard the car turn into their driveway. She ran outdoors to greet her husband. He looked haggard. "Nothing happened," he said despondently. "It was a false alarm." As they walked toward the house, he said, "I sat in that crummy bar till it closed. Nobody showed up. Nobody spoke to me. I didn't see anybody I knew."

"Are you sure? The note said—"

Penn shrugged wearily. "Maybe whoever it was got scared off. Or maybe I was being watched. You tell me."

"Can I fix you a drink? You look worn out."

"All I want to do is sleep. I'm tired of thinking about it."

So was Bev, but in bed she lay sleepless, staring shame-faced at the ceiling. In the mysterious dark it wasn't as easy to evade nagging suspicions as it had been in matter-of-fact daylight. What if Jim hadn't told her the whole truth about his visit to The Corkscrew tonight? He had been gone so very long. Had he met someone out of his past, after all?

Beside her, Penn tossed restlessly in his sleep. . . .

Penn arrived at his office early the next morning, grim and apprehensive, steeling himself against what he expected to find there. To his surprise his desk was bare. He buzzed Nora on the intercom. "Hasn't the mail come in yet?"

"No," she answered. "I mean yes. There just wasn't anything important and—" She broke off and an instant later appeared at the door. She looked pale. "Mr. Penn, I have to talk to you."

"Okay, talk."

Nora shut the door, leaned against it, and then—to Penn's consternation—burst into tears. "I can't go through with it," she sobbed. "I've always tried to do my work, but when it comes to *spying* on my own boss—I don't care what Mr. Conover says!"

Penn asked through tight lips, "Is that what Mr. Conover told you to do?"

She nodded and from her skirt pocket produced a packet of letters. "I was supposed to take these to Mr. Conover before you saw them. He said it was for the good of the company."

Penn took the package from her shaking fingers. The letter he had dreaded was right on top. It had been mailed in the downtown post office and was postmarked 1:25 A.M. He tore it open.

I TOLD YOU NO OUTSIDERS. YOU'RE PLAYING WITH YOUR LIFE.

Nora was watching him anxiously. "I didn't even open it, Mr. Penn."

He patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Thank you for telling me about all this. I think I'd better have a little talk with Mr. Conover."

As he rode up in the elevator to the fifth floor, Penn shook off his first seething urge to take Conover by the throat. Physical violence would settle nothing. He could make his point in subtler ways. He opened the door into Conover's private office and went in without knocking. He halted in surprise.

Conover was standing behind his desk, replacing the cover on a small oblong box. On its top were the words Handy Andy Printing Set and a gaily colored illustration of an industrious child working on a miniature newspaper.

Conover blinked. "Jim, you startled me."

"I guess that makes us even." Penn came forward slowly. "Just where did you get that thing?"

"Plant Security bought it. We've been comparing the type with the letter you got." Conover put the box away in a desk drawer. "It seems identical but I'm afraid it won't help us much. These sets can be bought all over town. Now, what brings you up here so early?"

Penn produced the second anonymous letter. Conover read it, still standing. His frown deepened as Penn explained the circumstances. "Jim, I don't like this at all. Why

did you go to this rendezvous last night without notifying any of us? It was a very foolish thing to do."

"I'm inclined to agree with you—but perhaps for different reasons." Then Penn gave Conover the third letter, the one which had arrived this morning. "The most interesting thing about it to me is the postmark. Notice the time. I don't think it's possible that whoever wrote the letter ever came near The Corkscrew last night. He wouldn't have time to get there, be scared away, print the note, and have it mailed by half-past one."

"That doesn't make good sense," objected Conover.

"It does if the real purpose of these letters is not blackmail at all but just to terrorize me. Do you know what it's like to sit in a strange place for a whole hour at that time of night, waiting and worrying?"

"You shouldn't have gone," Conover said emphatically. "You jeopardized a good deal more than your peace of mind."

"I've got to get to the bottom of this. Isn't that what we all want?"

"Of course. But delicately and properly." Conover cocked his head, regarding Penn intently. "I never noticed those scars on your face before, Jim."

"I got them in the war," Penn said shortly. "An explosion. You can check with Washington if you want. It'll be in my service record."

Conover chuckled. "That'll hardly be necessary. Don't get touchy, Jim."

"I'm trying." On his way to the door, Penn turned back. "Oh, by the way, I'm putting through a raise for my secretary. She's been working awfully hard. Would you believe it, when I got here this morning she was already on duty, sorting the mail."

The two men eyed each other for a long moment. Then Conover murmured, "Of course. It's always wise to reward such loyalty."

"I counted on that reaction from you," said Penn with a comradely grin. "I wanted you to be the first to know."

His small victory over Conover made Penn feel better. He plunged into his work on the government rocket contracts as if he had nothing else on his mind. Yet, in the middle of the morning, when his telephone buzzed, apprehension returned in a chill eruption. Slowly, he picked up the receiver.

Penn relaxed; it was Cleve Holladay. "A question has come up about the condition of the fourteenth green."

"What about it?"

"Well, some of the members seem to feel it may need resodding. The annual tournament is coming up in a month or so and I see that you're down as the chairman. The point is that if anything needs to be done, it should be inspected

now so it'll be in playing shape by tournament time."

Penn started to say that he was too busy, then he hesitated. As chairman of the golf tournament, the club's biggest competitive event of the season, he couldn't brush aside his responsibility so lightly. "Well, I guess so. I could drive over on my lunch hour. About one o'clock okay?"

"Fine with me." Holladay added, "If you're pressed for time, you might leave your car on Rose Boulevard and cut across the rough to the fourteenth hole. Save you making the long walk from the club."

"Good thought. I'll be there at one o'clock."

"I'll be expecting you."

Turgeon found a parking place a block from the Ridgway Hotel and left his car there. It was now a few minutes past noon.

He had rented the car that morning, making the deposit in cash and using a name different from the one in his hotel registration. Nor had he been satisfied with the immaculate appearance of the automobile as it had been turned over to him. There was mud on the bumpers and chrome work now, and some more mud had been smeared on the license plates. Not enough to make them illegible—that would have been foolish—but sufficient to turn a 4 into a 1 and an E into an F, at least on casual inspection.

Turgeon left as little to chance as possible.

Ilene Menke occupied Room 319. He knocked softly on the door. A woman's voice inquired cautiously who he was. Turgeon replied merely, "Las Vegas," and the door was opened for him.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," said Ilene Menke with a bit of irritation in her voice. "I've been calling you all morning."

"I told you I'd let you know," Turgeon said, studying her. Ilene Menke was a tall leggy woman with a close-cropped mane of platinum blonde hair. Facially, she was past her youthful prime but there was nothing wrong with her figure which was attractively swathed in the gossamer folds of a negligee. On a stage or in the soft lighting of a night club floor, Ilene would be beautiful enough for any man's taste. "Getting impatient to go to work?" Turgeon asked.

"After five years I've had being patient up to here. I can hardly wait another minute for Rayho to get what's coming to him."

"You sound bitter," commented Turgeon.

"I got a right. How'd you like to have a big talker skip out on you, leave you holding the sack?"

"He's done pretty well for a talker. Got a nice home out in the suburbs, a nice-paying job, belongs to a country club. Real pillar of the community." Then Turgeon

added idly, "Got a beautiful wife, too. A brunette."

Between her teeth Ilene said, "Swell. I hope he's enjoyed himself while I've been playing the sticks, not able to get a decent booking anywhere just because I was his girl. I hope he's had a real good time."

Turgeon consulted his pocket watch. "You can get it all out of your system in forty minutes. Penn —that's the name Rayho's been using—is going to be at the fourteenth hole of his club's golf course at one. You can see him then."

"Huh?" said Ilene blankly. "You crazy or something? What am I supposed to do—walk up to him and ask how's tricks? You want to get me killed like Gamil?"

Turgeon took a map from his coat pocket and unfolded it on the bed. "Here's the golf course. This street, Rose Boulevard, runs right alongside it and the fourteenth hole is about here. There's some trees and bushes between it and the road. That's where you'll be. Rayho won't even know you're around."

"That's what you say. I don't like the sound of it."

"No one asked you to like it"—and the way Turgeon said it made Ilene Menke step backward. From his other coat pocket Turgeon then produced a small pair of opera glasses. "You can use these if you're worried about getting too close to your old boy friend."

"Okay," she murmured. "Okay, if that's the way it has to be. I guess you'd better leave now so I can get dressed."

"I'll wait here." Turgeon smiled coldly. "I don't have anything to do until you identify Rayho."

Penn completed his scrutiny of the fourteenth green and headed back across the rough to Rose Boulevard. He was fumbling with his car keys when the angry blare of an automobile horn made him swing around. He saw Bev's station wagon parked a half block away, his wife behind the wheel. Penn ambled toward her, grinning.

"Hi, honey," he greeted her, opening the curbside door. "This is a surprise."

She was smiling, too, in a small strained way. "No doubt, my dear."

He knew it meant trouble when she called him that. He slid in beside her. "What's happened?"

"That's what I want to know." She didn't meet his eyes but concentrated on tracing nervous designs on the dashboard. "We've always been smart people, haven't we? Trustworthy, sure of each other, and all that? Now, I feel perfectly confident that you wouldn't carry on with another woman behind my—"

"Bev, would you mind making sense?"

"Don't interrupt me. On the other hand, if you're going to meet

an old girl friend in the bushes—"

Penn blinked. "Old girl friend—what do you mean by that?" He took hold of her tense shoulders, made her face him. "Look, I don't know what you think I've been up to but I was merely over on the golf course, looking over one of the greens and—"

"Oh, sure." Bev shook her head ruefully. "And she was doing the same."

"She?" Penn repeated, bewildered.

"The platinum blonde in the fur coat, my dear, the one who came out of the bushes right ahead of you. Oh, don't bother to look for her now. She's gone. She left in the taxi that was parked next to your car. Let go of my shoulders, please."

"Don't play games," Penn said emphatically. "I swear this is the first I've heard of any blonde."

Bev nodded politely and looked at her wrist watch. "Excuse me. I have a Junior League meeting in ten minutes."

He said harshly, "You don't believe me?"

"Am I supposed to?"

"I think it's in the rules you mentioned. You're my wife, aren't you?"

She met his eyes and her cool mask began to melt. Her mouth turned down unhappily as she slid her arms around his neck. "Of course I love you, Jim. I don't know why I can't think straight these days. Those anonymous letters—"

He kissed her. "It's all right. I understand."

"Do you?" Bev raised her head. "I'm so ashamed of myself. Do you know why I happen to be here at all? I followed you. I was coming over to the plant to have lunch with you, a sort of surprise. Then I saw you leaving and—well, I guess I wanted to see where you were going. How's that for a low thing to do?"

"I guess neither one of us is acting normally right now." Penn stared thoughtfully at the golf course. "Funny, how you can be living your everyday life, with everything bright and plain and familiar—then suddenly it's midnight and nothing looks the same any more."

She snuggled against him. "Just don't feel alone."

Bev hadn't noted the taxi number. Penn considered. "I can't understand why anyone would bother to follow me. I wish I'd seen her. There wasn't any platinum blonde at The Corkscrew last night. But maybe this woman is the one our letter-writing friend was talking about . . ." He told her of the letter he had received this morning accusing him of not coming to the rendezvous alone.

"Jim, we've got to do something. I'm—I'm afraid."

"Don't be afraid." He squeezed her compulsively. "Maybe we need

a little trouble now and then, simply to make us take stock. I've been taking stock all day, kind of like making a will, and I've discovered all I've really got is you. The only person vitally important to me. Then I began wishing I had more, so I got to wondering about a family. Bev, don't you think it's time we started one?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Okay." They grinned at each other self-consciously and both felt better. "Now that we've settled the future, shall we make it a date tonight? Dinner at the club, dancing and . . . well, who knows what else?"

They kissed goodbye hungrily. "Meet you at the club about six. I'll be the guy with the dangerous look."

Turgeon was lying on the bed when Ilene Menke used her key to let herself into the hotel room. He didn't get up. He commented, "Didn't he show?"

"He showed. I stopped for a drink downstairs." Ilene crossed to the bureau and put her purse on it. She didn't look at the pudgy man on the bed. "I needed one."

"Well?" asked Turgeon sharply. "Is he or isn't he?"

Ilene turned to face him. "He is," she said softly. "I don't know why it gave me such a jolt, seeing him again. But it did."

"No chance of your being mistaken?"

"No chance. Oh, he's changed hair color and I think he's had a nose bob too—but it was Rayho, all right. I couldn't forget that face."

Turgeon swung off the bed and rubbed his hands together. "That's all I wanted to hear," he said, with almost a purr.

"It was kind of creepy," Ilene said, her eyes withdrawn. "I was close enough to hit him with a rock—after all these years—and there he was, not knowing I was within a million miles of him."

"He didn't see you, did he?"

Ilene shook her head. "What are you going to do now?"

"It won't be dark till about six o'clock." Turgeon strode up and down. "Four hours to kill—and then . . ." The index finger of Turgeon's right hand crooked slowly, ominously . . .

(Continued on page 110)

a new story by

MIGNON G. EBERHART

Murder at the Dog Show

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	MIGNON G. EBERHART
TITLE:	*Murder at the Dog Show*
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Dr. Richard Marly
LOCALE:	A city in the United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Someone wanted to prevent Jean's Kerry Blue from possibly winning Best in Show, someone who was even willing to commit murder . . .*

THE P.A. SYSTEM WARBLED, DR. Marrer—Dr. Marrem—Dr. Richard Marrry, through the hospital corridors; I translated it to Dr. Richard Marly and went to the charge desk where I was referred to a telephone. It was Jean calling. "Richard—I was shot at just now in the park."

"That's funny. It sounded as if you said somebody shot at you."

"I did. In the park. But I think he was aiming at Skipper. I had him out for an airing. And you know the finals in the show are tonight—"

"Who shot at you?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see, there was shrubbery. I ran to the avenue, dragging Skipper, and got a taxi. I think somebody is trying to keep Skipper out of the show."

"Call the police—"

"What could I tell them?" she asked reasonably. "Richard, will you come to the show and—well, keep an eye on things? I'll leave a ticket at the box office for you."

There had been a slight coolness between us, owing to the Dog Show and to Jean's kind but firm observations that my own dog, Butch, a Kerry Blue terrier, was not likely ever to take any ribbons.

"You can get somebody else to fault him," she had said mysteri-

ously; but in her opinion Butch's legs were too much or too little like stove pipes and his coat was too black or too blue—in short, he was not a show dog. Jean confidently expected that Skipper, the Kerry Blue she had trained, would walk away with Best in Show.

Right now I swallowed my pride and said I would be there. Jean hung up, and I finished my round of patients as hurriedly as I could and drove home.

Jean was not the type to get the wind up over nothing. On the other hand, a murderous attack on Jean—or on Skipper—seemed very unlikely.

Dogs had brought us together and had very nearly separated us. She had come to me as a patient following a battle between one of the dogs she was training and a beloved old cat; as sometimes happens with a peacemaker, Jean had received the only wounds. Perhaps I prolonged the treatment; in any event we began to see each other frequently. Her father had died when she was a child and had left Jean and her mother with little money. Jean's only talent, she told me, was a kind of understanding and love for cats, dogs, and all small creatures. As she grew older, this talent turned into a profession: she and her mother started a small kennel at their country cottage. They prospered moderately at first, and more noticeably after Jean had undertaken the training of dogs, as well as their handling in various dog shows. She had the infinite patience required and Skipper was the first dog she had trained and steered successfully through the requisite shows and ribbons to what promised to be a peak of his, and Jean's, career. If he won Best in Show tonight it would be a very bright feather in Jean's little professional cap, for the Heather Dog Show was one of the big, important shows of the year.

Skipper, I knew, belonged to a Mrs. Florrie Carrister who lived in the country near Jean and was in affluent circumstances; she was divorced from her husband Reginald Carrister, a stock broker in the city, who had inherited a considerable fortune. Beyond that—and the fact that Jean considered Skipper a far finer dog than my own Butch—I knew nothing of Skipper, and certainly nothing that could account for anyone taking a pot shot at Jean—or at Skipper. While I could believe that rivalries in a dog show do become fervent, still I did not believe that any rival dog owner would go to such lengths.

Arriving at my apartment I told Suki, who cooks, valets, and answers the telephone for me, where I was going, patted Butch consolingly, told him he was better than any dog at the show, and departed again, this time for the Armory where the dog show was being held.

The whole vicinity of the Armory was a bedlam—taxis arriving, taxis departing, the flash of photographers' bulbs as jeweled and furred ladies and their escorts (or a dog, groomed to the last hair and led along as carefully as if it were the Bank of England on a leash) passed through the foyer. My ticket was waiting for me at the box office and I entered the Armory which I found jammed, confirming my suspicion that all the world loves a dog.

I bought a program. An usher directed me and I went upstairs and came out in a box. It was an end box, a choice one, and sparsely occupied. Two women sat in the front row talking with remarkable volubility and watching some dogs marching sedately around the ring; a man sat in the front row too but at the other end of the box, next to the wall, and leaned intently over the railing.

One of the women in the front row turned, saw me, broke off her flood of talk, and spoke to me. "Dr. Marly? I'm Mrs. Carrister. Jean asked me to leave a ticket for you." She was a large woman, with heavy shoulders that slumped down shapelessly in her seat. The woman in the aisle seat turned and she introduced us. "Miss Runcewell—Dr. Marly. You know—Jean's friend." Mrs. Carrister turned back to me. "I bought Skipper from Miss Runcewell's kennels when he was only six weeks old."

Miss Runcewell, very doggy in a tweed suit and leather hat and gloves, looked modest and Mrs. Carrister glanced back to the ring. "Oh, there's Jean!"

I sat down two rows behind them and watched Jean. She was worth watching—tall and slim and pretty with her short dark hair and level blue eyes; she was wearing a blue skirt, a neatly tailored white coat, and a red scarf, and was putting a lovely blue merle Collie through his paces deftly and precisely. But I didn't see how I was going to keep an eye on things as Jean had so confidently asked me to do. There was too much and at the same time too little to keep an eye on.

So I shifted to the dogs entering the ring and going through their prescribed routine, and decided that in the full view of so many thousands of people nothing in the way of violence was likely to happen. The two women ahead of me talked steadily—indeed, Mrs. Carrister never stopped. The man at the end of the box also watched the dogs. After the second event Miss Runcewell left the box and came back with two orange drinks, one of which she gave to Mrs. Carrister. And just before the next event a man came down the steps, took a seat in the row below and in front of me, and touched Mrs. Carrister on the shoulder. "Hello, Florrie," he said amiably.

He was handsome, as she cer-

tainly was not, in his mid-forties, and very elegantly turned out. She turned and said, "Oh, Reginald." Miss Runcewell turned and said how-do-you-do and Mrs. Carrister introduced me. "This is Dr. Marly —my former husband, Mr. Carrister."

We nodded. Mrs. Carrister said, "The Field Trials are coming up. Everything is right on time tonight because the show is on television." She turned absorbedly back to watch the ring and resume the steady talk to which Miss Runcewell contributed only rarely. Mr. Carrister folded his coat over his knees and I felt a twinge of uneasiness. Field Trials—or as the program more accurately put it, Gun Dogs in Action—that meant guns, didn't it?

Jean, however, would not be showing in the Field Trials. And, really, nothing *could* happen. Corn shocks and brush began to move into the ring. It was like Birnam Wood moving upon high Dunsinane Hill except that the corn shocks and brush were mounted on wood and carried by attendants who placed them at strategic intervals over the green ground-cloth. A brace of setters turned up, straining at a leash held by a man in a hunter's red shirt, a gun was fired, and the so-called "Field Trials" began. The gun shot was obviously a blank.

I leaned back and before I knew it was caught up in the color and drama and magificent performance of the hunting dogs. Even Mrs. Carrister stopped talking and if Mr. Carrister ahead of me moved at all I was not aware of it. It was indeed so stunning a show that nobody in the box said a word when it ended.

The man at the end of the box rose and avoided Mrs. Carrister's bulk between him and the aisle by neatly stepping back over the rows of seats and out of the box. His face seemed suddenly but vaguely familiar to me, yet something about him seemed wrong and unfamiliar. His clothes? But he wore an ordinary dark coat and hat. He vanished at once, attendants appeared and cleared the ring, and I decided I must have seen him, sometime, at the hospital.

The show went smoothly on and all at once I became aware of a kind of tension in the air. Mrs. Carrister seemed to have slumped down even more absorbedly in her seat, Miss Runcewell sat upright even more rigidly, and Mr. Carrister said over his shoulder, "It's coming up now. The Best in Show."

My own pulse quickened. I leaned forward to watch the dogs enter the ring which they shortly did, stepping very proudly, every one of them, and then Jean entered with Skipper. I had to admit that he was a beautiful dog, moving with incredible grace and ease, his square muzzle lifted so he could

watch Jean for commands. Mr. Carrister turned briefly to me again. "It's amazing what Jean has done with that dog. A Kerry Blue is not easy to train—unless you use a two-by-four."

"You are quite mistaken," I said. "My own Kerry Blue understands everything."

He gave me an indulgent smile. "Look at Skipper stand like that! What he really wants to do is take on the lot of them and have a rousing good fight."

It is true there was a kind of quivering intensity about the Kerry Blue. It is also true that a magnificent Doberman was eyeing a Chesapeake next to him in a deeply brooding manner. Jean leaned over to make some invisible adjustment to the Kerry Blue's whiskers—and did not so much as count her fingers afterward which, in view of Skipper's extremely adequate teeth, astounded me—and the judging began with a long, slow parade around the ring. It was about then that I became aware of a curious mass murmur rising in the Armory. And then I saw it.

Now I am reliably informed that this cannot happen at any dog show; I can only say that it did happen. Another Kerry Blue, unattended by a handler, had mysteriously joined the parade and was marching jauntily along. He was perhaps darker than Skipper, perhaps not as stylish and certainly a little shaggy, but full of *joie de vivre*. I rose in sudden panic. It was my own dog—Butch!

Did he really understand everything? Was he determined to enter the show and compete with Skipper? In that dazed second it seemed possible. But then he found Jean and leaped on her with glee. Skipper rightly resented this and leaped on Butch, a liberty not wisely taken. Butch has a generous nature—until he is annoyed. In the fraction of a second wild contagion blazed around the ring. I had a flashing vision of the Doberman's handler, who imprudently clung to the Doberman's leash, being dragged across the floor. The Armory rose like a tidal wave and roared. Handlers and judges ran and shouted, whistles blew, some cops came at the double from the main entrance under the correct impression that a riot had broken out, Miss Runcewell jumped up and made for the stairs, and I ran after her.

She knew the way, so she had the best of it through passages that echoed with a truly Gargantuan dog fight to the runway that led to the ring. It was a photo finish, however, for I was frightened. While Butch is remarkably intelligent he could not have induced a taxi driver to bring him to the Armory. And his entrance at that time was not an accident. Once at the runway Miss Runcewell dove into the ring.

I was blocked by a frenzied attendant who was wielding a broom over Coonhound's back with no perceptible effect. I felt a sharp nip on my ankle, detached a tiny pug who was merely a victim of the contagion and desisted quite amiably, and was seized by Suki, in a dashing Homburg. He also had a walking stick and a wild gleam in his eyes. "I only did what you told me to do! Somebody phoned and said you wanted me to bring Butch to this runway, at exactly this time, and just let him off the leash and—ahhh—" Then Suki dashed into the fray himself, his Oriental calm completely deserting him. His hat flew off, and with his walking stick he flailed at every moving object around him including one of the judges who forgot himself and flailed back—striking, as it happened, one of the handlers who absently struck back also, but instead got a policeman squarely on the chin. This second chain reaction might have gone on and on had not the policeman collared me but then released me with a sharp cry and turned to disengage himself from a large and determined Chow.

Suddenly, magically, people and dogs began to sort themselves out. I do not say that order was instantly restored but it is a fact that judges and handlers of dogs are made of stern stuff. Dogs began to be pulled out of the melee; a doctor and some girls in Red Cross uniform set up a hasty emergency table at the edge of the ring. Their first customer was the policeman who had collared me and he had some difficulty rolling up his trouser leg but valiantly refused to remove his trousers.

I emerged at what was still the focus of a certain amount of activity just as Suki, Jean, Miss Runcewell, and a number of other people succeeded in separating Butch and Skipper. The dogs, surprisingly, took a long look at each other and while I cannot say they exchanged a mutual wink they did look all at once mightily pleased with themselves. Jean's cheeks were pink but she gave me a reassuring wave. Somebody shouted, "Get that dog out of here," and Suki and I complied—although with some difficulty—since Butch obviously wished to remain. However, we finally got him to the runway, put his leash on him, and I told Suki to take him home. Butch gave me a deeply reproachful look but disappeared in Suki's wake and by that time—incredibly!—every dog in the ring was back at his place and looking extremely and mysteriously smug.

A loud-speaker announced in shocked tones that the judging would be resumed, and I made for Mrs. Carrister's box. Once there I paused, panted, and looked around. Little had changed in the box. Miss Runcewell was perched, also panting, on the arm of a seat

in the last row. Mr. Carrister was standing, looking down at the ring. Mrs. Carrister was slumped even further down in the first row. The fourth occupant of the box had not returned. The Armory still seethed with a sort of uninhibited joy, but suddenly became quiet as the judging began once more. Jean looked up to find me and I waved encouragement—and then saw her eyes travel downward.

I moved without knowing it. Jean was still staring, her face white and fixed, when I reached Mrs. Carrister's side and saw what Jean had observed from the ring. Mrs. Carrister was still slumped down—too far down.

She was dead.

Suddenly Mr. Carrister and Miss Runcewell were beside me. We all saw the dreadful blotch of wet redness on Mrs. Carrister's white blouse, under her suit jacket. And in a moment I knew that there was nothing I could do for her. I sent Carrister for the police. Mainly, just then, I was afraid of starting a mass panic. I remember telling Miss Runcewell to shut up and that she gulped and did so. I was dimly aware that the judging was proceeding; I had a glimpse of Jean, white but controlled, taking Skipper through his paces. Then a group of policemen arrived and made a blue wall around the box.

One of them said the lady had been stabbed. They tried to find the knife and couldn't, as applause suddenly roared through the Armory, flash bulbs popped, and there was Jean taking the trophy. So Skipper had won Best in Show, Mrs. Carrister had been murdered —and I knew who had murdered her.

But I didn't know how to prove it.

Some time later the situation remained much the same and Jean and I were permitted to gather up Skipper, who was yawning almost as cavernously as the by then empty Armory, and we took a taxi to my apartment. Jean thought it was all over and told me I was wonderful—which was very nice except that the investigation had barely begun and I knew it. The police were still casting about with antennae in the hope of picking up a lead. And the police have remarkably sensitive antennae.

The knife had not been found and it was the considered opinion of a police matron who had retired briefly with Jean and Miss Runcewell, and of the sergeant who had searched me and Mr. Carrister, that none of us had it. There was some muttered talk about the angle of the knife wound from which I gathered that anyone in the box could have killed Mrs. Carrister.

Nevertheless, a few facts did emerge. No one knew, or admitted knowing, the identity of the fourth occupant of the box and all

I could say was that his face had seemed familiar to me, but not his clothing—which quite comprehensibly drew skeptical looks from the police.

Mr. Carrister protested that he was on good terms with his former wife, denied killing her, but admitted frankly that he paid her an extremely large alimony. He admitted with equal frankness that he—and only he—had not left the box at any time.

Jean's story of having been shot at in the park elicited the facts that both Miss Runcewell and Mr. Carrister owned guns and that neither of them had an alibi for the time when Jean had given Skipper his run in the park—but then neither of them had a conceivable motive for taking a pot shot at Jean, or at Skipper.

I brought up the problem of Butch's little frolic in the ring and the mysterious telephone call that had led to it, but the lieutenant in charge merely gave me a long look and said something about practical jokes and that young people would be young people. Since I could not possibly prove anything at all, I repressed a desire to tell him that doctors who wish to rise in their profession do not make a hobby of provoking dog fights. It was shortly after that Jean and I were permitted—I do not say asked—to leave.

Suki had heard the news over the radio and was waiting for us, with hot milk and sandwiches for Jean and a highball which he slid into my thankful hand. There was a moment of tension when the two dogs met but now, strangely enough, they seemed to regard each other as old and tried friends. Suki's fuller report of the telephone message was not illuminating. He could not be sure whether it was a woman, or a man imitating a woman's voice. "But orders are orders, Doctor," he said. "I took Butch to the side-street entrance and then to the runway, at exactly eleven o'clock as I was told to do, and just—well, let him off the leash. Nobody stopped me. When Butch saw all those dogs—" He shrugged fatalistically.

I reflected that anyone who had a program for the show knew that the final event was scheduled for eleven—which would include some thousands of people. I did not know what to do and Jean's eyes were clearly expecting something in the nature of a full-fledged miracle. So I told Suki to get my revolver.

I felt it was rather impressive; Jean's eyes widened. But Suki said with insufferable calm that he thought I might require it and pulled it from his pocket. "Load it," I said, trying to regain lost ground.

"Oh, I've already done that, Doctor," and he put the revolver on the desk beside me.

But Jean's eyes still demanded

action of some sort and indeed a few questions seemed indicated. I said, "Jean, did Mrs. Carrister ever talk of her husband?"

"Oh, yes. She talked about everything really. She talked all the time. I got so I didn't really listen. But honestly, there wasn't a thing that could be—evidence. She was on good terms with him. And with Miss Runcewell, too. They drove up to my kennels often to see how Skipper was shaping up. Mrs. Carrister had her heart set on Skipper winning. She was going to start a kennel of her own, if he won."

"Mrs. Carrister? Did her husband or Miss Runcewell know of this?"

"I don't know about her husband. But she often spoke of it to Miss Runcewell. You see, if Skipper won the big championship, he'd be—he is—a very valuable dog. The fees as sire alone would be considerable."

"So she would then be a rival—at least, a competitor—of Miss Runcewell's."

"Oh, Miss Runcewell didn't mind. I heard her say something about Mrs. Carrister taking over her kennels. So I think she intends to go out of business. I suppose she was going to sell out to Mrs. Carrister."

After a moment I said, "Did they ever ask questions about—say, me? Or Butch?"

"Oh, yes. They asked all sorts of questions. I told them about Butch and—well, that he isn't a show dog. But he is sweet." Butch heard his name and put his great head on Jean's knee with infuriating complacence. Butch is many things—but he is not sweet.

The telephone rang and I picked it up. "Doctor," said a voice with a heavy French accent. "This is Henri."

"Henri," I said, and light broke upon me. "Henri! You were in the box tonight!"

A flood of English and French burst upon my ear. "My heart, she is not so good. *Le docteur* say no excitement. *Il faut que je parts toute de suite—*"

"Why did you part—I mean, leave?"

He told me at some length. "Thank you," I said at last. "No, I'm sure the police will understand. Give me your telephone number."

He did and I hung up. Jean's eyes were round with questions. I said, "That was Henri. He is headwaiter at—" and I named a famous restaurant downtown. "Mrs. Carrister gave him a ticket to her box for the show tonight. He left after the Field Trials."

I went to my bedroom for my book of special telephone numbers. It seemed to me that there was now enough evidence on which to proceed, so I started to dial the number of a former patient of mine who is a high official in the police department when—if I may

speak frankly—all hell broke loose in the front hall.

I felt for my gun, remembered that it was still on my desk, and ran for the hall amid an ear-splitting tumult of barks. Mr. Carrister was just disappearing into my study, Suki and Jean were tugging at Butch, and Miss Runcewell was efficiently scooping up Skipper's leash. Since the dogs were merely in high spirits and meant nothing really serious in the way of mayhem, we soon assembled in the study where we found Mr. Carrister crouching on top of my desk looking extremely indignant.

Miss Runcewell said, "I was worried about you, Jean. You were not at your hotel, so we thought you might be here," and she held a firm grip on Skipper's leash.

Mr. Carrister eyed Butch coldly and said, "I'll put it to you frankly, Doctor. You were in the box tonight. If you have any idea at all about the murder I want to know what it is."

"Why, certainly," I said. "I'll call the police at once and ask them to make the arrest."

His eyes bulged, Jean gave me an admiring glance, and I picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Hello—" my official friend said sleepily.

"This is Doctor Marly. You may send the police to my house to arrest the person who murdered Mrs. Carrister . . . Yes, I have proof."

Something moved behind me. The dogs burst out in full cry, I seized my gun, and my friend on the phone cried out, "Where's the dog fight?"

"Hurry," I shouted and dropped the telephone but unfortunately dropped my gun at the same time.

Miss Runcewell was already at the front door. So it was the dogs that backed Miss Runcewell into the coat closet, assisted in a hurly-burly way by the rest of us. Suki then neatly locked the door of the closet. Mr. Carrister glanced at Butch, took to the top of the desk again, and said, "Do you mean *she* murdered Florrie? But why?"

"Because you were going to be in the box tonight and Miss Runcewell knew it. She also knew that you had an excellent reason for killing your wife."

Mr. Carrister said, "Huh?"

"It was a pattern of diversionary tactics," I explained. "Your wife appears to have been an exceedingly talkative woman." Carrister nodded unhappily. "I feel sure that Miss Runcewell was told of your expected presence in the box. Certainly at some time she was told of me and my dog. She shot at Jean—not to hurt Jean or Skipper—but merely to induce Jean to ask me to come to the Armory tonight. Then later, on the excuse of getting orange drinks, she left the box and phoned Suki, telling him to bring my dog to the Armory—"

"But he's the dog that started the fight!"

"That was exactly Miss Runcewell's intention. The police would believe that Mrs. Carrister was murdered while everyone's attention was diverted by the—er—confusion attending Butch's entrance in the ring. She saw to it that she was well away from the box during that time. You remained, as she hoped, in the box and consequently became a choice suspect. But your wife was actually murdered during the Field Trials. That's why the police could not find the knife. It was tossed down into the nearest corn shock and carried off when the attendants cleared the ring."

"But how do you know that?"

"Henri—a friend of mine—was in the box. He left after the Field Trials, stepping over the seats behind him rather than disturb Mrs. Carrister to get to the aisle. As you know, we were in an end box. He told me a short time ago that he saw the knife flung down into the corn shock."

"But *why* did she kill my wife?" said Mr. Carrister.

There was clearly only one explanation. I said, "I think you'll find that Mrs. Carrister has loaned Miss Runcewell enough money to keep her kennels going. Possibly the understanding was supposed to be a friendly one and Miss Runcewell did not, in writing, use her kennels as collateral. But Mrs. Carrister was intending to take over Miss Runcewell's kennels and means of livelihood—and Miss Runcewell knew that. She kept up a pretense of friendliness, until the time came when Mrs. Carrister decided to act. Then Miss Runcewell acted first."

Jean linked her arm in mine. "But, Richard, I know that you knew who killed her even *before* Henri phoned! How did you know?"

"Oh," I said. "That. Well—it was during the Field Trials that *both women stopped talking*—Mrs. Carrister for an obvious reason, Miss Runcewell because she knew Mrs. Carrister was dead."

That night Mr. Carrister, handsomely in one way but regrettably in another, presented Skipper to Jean.

After he had gone Jean looked thoughtfully at the two dogs. "They do seem friendly," she said.

Friendly, yes. But two Kerry Blues in the same household? "Butch," I said finally, "may not be a show dog but—"

"But he's your dog," Jean smiled, "and he *is* sweet."

We are happy to welcome Christianna Brand to the pages of EQMM. So far as we know, "Rabbit Out of a Hat" is Miss Brand's first short story about her cocky little Inspector Cockrill, and thus is a detectival debut of considerable importance.

It was Dorothy B. Hughes who said of Miss Brand's work in the detective novel, "She is a stylist, one of the few in mystery." And it was Anthony Boucher, reviewing Miss Brand's FOG OF DOUBT, *who wrote: "Scarce though the detective story proper has become, there are still, I trust, a few other enthusiasts who rejoice in the pure tour de force of construction, in the classic Christie-Carr-Queen manner; and it's to them in particular that I commend [the work of] Christianna Brand."*

Mr. Boucher's statement might be repeated word for word to entice you to read "Rabbit Out of a Hat." For Miss Brand is a brilliant juggler of clues and deductions, and within its own framework—"the pure tour de force of construction"—this story is a remarkable performance. We can only suggest (more and more diffidently with the passing years) that you savor "Rabbit Out of a Hat" slowly; we think you will find it rewarding and satisfying—indeed, you may be both amused and (in the sense of becoming absorbed) bemused . . .

RABBIT OUT OF A HAT

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

"YES, I THINK I MAY CLAIM," SAID the Grand Old Man (of Detection) complacently, "that in all my career I never failed to solve a murder case. In the end," he added hurriedly, having caught Inspector Cockrill's beady eye.

Inspector Cockrill had for the past hour found himself in the position of the small boy at a party who knows how the conjuror does his tricks. He suggested, "The Othello case?" and sat back and twiddled his thumbs.

"As in the Othello case," said the Great Detective, as if he had not been interrupted at all. "Which, as I say, I solved. In the end," he added again, looking defiantly at Inspector Cockrill.

"But too late?" suggested Cockrill regretfully.

The Great One bowed. "In so far as certain evidence had—shall

we say, faded?—yes. Too late. But I did unmask the murderer; I built up a watertight case against him; and I saw him brought triumphantly to trial. In other words, I think I may fairly say that I solved the case."

"Except—the jury failed to convict," said Inspector Cockrill.

The Grand Old Man waved it aside with magnificence. A mere detail. "As it happened, yes—they *failed* to convict."

"And quite right too," said Cockrill who was having a splendid time with his baiting tactics.

"People round me were remarking, that second time I saw him play Othello," the Great Detective went on patiently, "that James Dragon had aged twenty years in as many days. And so he may well have done; for in those three weeks he played, night after night, to packed audiences—night after night strangling his new Desdemona, in the knowledge that his own wife had been so strangled but a few weeks before; and that every manjack in the audience believed it was he who had strangled her—believed he was a murderer."

"Which, however, he was not," said the Inspector, his bright elderly eyes shining with impish glee.

"Which he was—*and* was not," said the Old Man rather heavily. He was something of an actor himself but he had not hitherto encountered the modern penchant for audience participation and he was not enjoying it at all. "If I might be permitted to continue without interruption . . .

"Some of you may have seen James Dragon on the stage, though the company all migrated to Hollywood in the end. But none of you will have seen him as Othello—after that season Dragon Productions dropped *Othello* from their repertoire. The Dragons were a great theatrical family—still are, come to that, although James and Leila, his sister, are the only ones left nowadays; and as for James—he's getting passé, very passé indeed," the Great Detective added pityingly, shaking his senile head.

"But at the time of the murder he was in his prime—not quite thirty and at the very top of his form. And he *was* splendid. I see him now as I saw him that night, the very night she died—towering over her as she lay on the great stage bed, tricked out in his tremendous costume of black and gold, with the padded chest and shoulders concealing his slenderness and the great padded, jewel-studded sleeves, like cantaloupe melons, raised above his head, then bringing them down, slowly, slowly, until suddenly he swooped like a hawk and closed his dark-stained hands on her white throat. And I hear again Emilia's heart-break cry in the lovely Dragon family voice: 'Oh, thou has killed the sweetest innocent/That e'er did lift up eye . . .'"

But she had not been an innocent—not James Dragon's Desdemona, his wife Glenda Croy. She had been a thoroughly nasty piece of work. An aspiring young actress, she had blackmailed him into marriage for the sake of her career; and that had been all of a piece with her conduct throughout. A great theatrical family was extremely sensitive to blackmail even in those more easy-going days of the late nineteen twenties, and in the first rush of the Dragons' spectacular rise to fame there had been more than one unfortunate episode. But by the time of the murder, the Dragons were an international byword for a sort of magnificent untouchability. Glenda Croy, without ever unearthing more than a grubby little scandal here and there, could yet be the means of dragging them all into the mud of notoriety.

James Dragon had been born backstage, in the classic manner and at the turn of the century, in a provincial theater. He had lustily wailed from his property basket while Romeo whispered through the mazes of Juliet's ball-dance—"Just before curtain—both doing splendidly—it's a boy!" He had been carried on at the age of three weeks, and at the age of ten years had formed with his sister such a precious pair of thespian prodigies that the parents gave up their own careers to devote themselves to the management of their children's affairs. By the time James married, Dragon Productions had three touring companies always on the road and a regular London Shakespeare season, with James and his sister Leila playing the leads. That is, until James married.

From the day of the marriage, Glenda took over the feminine leads. They fought against it—all of them, the family, the whole company, James himself; but Glenda used her blackmail with subtlety—little hints here, little threats there—and none of them were proof against it. James Dragon was their box-office "draw"—with him the whole troupe stood or fell. So Leila stepped back and accepted second leads, and for the good of them all, Arthur Dragon, the father, who was the producer for the company as well as its manager, did his honest best with the new recruit—and so got her through her Juliet, her Lady Macbeth, her Desdemona, and at the time of her death was breaking his heart rehearsing her as Rosalind, preparatory to the company's first American tour.

Rosalind was Leila Dragon's pet part. "But, Dad, she's hopeless! We *can't* have her prancing her way across America grinning like a coy hyena. *Please* speak to James."

"James can't do anything, my dear."

"Surely by this time . . . It's three years now—we were all so certain it wouldn't last a year."

"She knows where her bread is buttered," said the lady's father-in-law, grimly.

"But now, having played with *us,* couldn't she strike out on her own?"

"Why should she? With us, she's safe—and she automatically plays all the leads."

"If only she'd fall for some man . . ."

"She won't do that—she's far too canny," said Arthur Dragon. "That would be playing into our hands. And she's interested in nothing but getting on—she doesn't bother with men." And oddly enough, after a pass or two, men did not bother with her.

A row blew up over the Rosalind part, which rose to its climax just before the curtain went up on *Venice. A street,* the night Glenda Croy died. It rambled through odd moments off-stage and through the intermissions, spilled over into hissed asides between Will Shakespeare's lines, culminated in a threat spat out with the venom of a viper as she lay on the bed, James's great arms raised above her, ready to pounce and close hands about her throat. Something about "jail." Something about the American tour.

It was an angry and a badly frightened man who faced her, twenty minutes later, in her dressing room. "What did you mean, Glenda, by what you said on stage during the death scene?"

She had thrown on a dressing gown at his knock and now sat calmly on the divan, peeling off her stage stockings. "I meant that I am playing Rosalind in America —or the company is not going to America."

"I don't see the connection," he said.

"You will," said Glenda.

"But, Glenda, be sensible. Rosalind just isn't your part."

"No," said Glenda. "It's dear Leila's part. But I am playing Rosalind—or the company is not going to America."

"Don't *you* want to go to America?"

"I can go any day I like. But you can't. Without me Dragon Productions stay home."

"I have accepted the American offer," he said steadily. "I am taking the company out. Come if you like—playing Celia."

She took off one stocking and tossed it over her shoulder, then bent to slide the other down, over a round white knee. "No one is welcomed into America who has been a jailbird," she said.

"Oh, that's it?" he said. "Well, if you mean me . . ." He wavered. "Good God, it was years ago! And anyway, it was all rubbish, a bit of bravado—we were all wild and silly in those days before the war."

"Explain all that to the Americans," she said.

"I've no doubt I'd be able to," he said, still steadily. "If they found

out, which I doubt they ever would." But his mind swung round on itself. "This is a new mischief of yours, Glenda. How did you find out?"

"I came across a newspaper cutting." She gave an involuntary glance over her shoulder; it told him without words that the paper was here in the room. He caught at her wrist. "Give that cutting to me!"

She did not even struggle to free her hand—just sat looking up at him with her insolent little smile. She was that sure of herself. "Help yourself. It's in my handbag. But the information's still at the newspaper office, you know, and here in my head—facts, dates, all the rest of it. Plus any little embellishments I may care to add." He had relaxed his grip and she freed her hand without effort and sat gently massaging the wrist. "It's wonderful," she said, "what lies people will believe, if you base them on a hard core of truth."

He called her a filthy name and, standing there, blind with mounting disgust and fury, he added filth to filth. She struck out at him then like a wildcat, slapping him violently across the face with the flat of her hand. At the sharp sting of the slap his control gave way. He raised his arms above his head and brought them down —slowly, slowly, with a menace infinitely terrible—then closed his hands around her throat and shook her like a rag doll. When he flung her back on the bed, he started across the room in search of the newspaper clipping. It was in her handbag, just as she had said. He stuffed it into his pocket, went back, and stood triumphantly over her.

And saw that she was dead.

"After seeing the performance I had gone to a restaurant across the street from the theater," said the Great Detective, "and they reached me there. When I got back to the theater, I found her lying on the couch, her arms flung over her head, the backs of her hands with their pointed nails brushing the floor—very much as I had seen her, earlier in the evening, lying in a pretense of death. But she no longer wore Desdemona's elaborate robes—she wore only the rather solid undies of those days, camiknickers and a petticoat, under a silk dressing gown. She seemed to have put up very little struggle, although there was a red mark round her right wrist and a faint pink stain across the palm of her hand.

"I left most of the company and the technicians to my assistants, and they proved later to have nothing of interest to tell us. The stage-doorkeeper, however, an ancient retired actor, testified to having seen 'shadows against her lighted window. Mr. James was in there with her. They were going through

the strangling scene. Then the light went out, and that's all I know.'

"'How did you know it was Mr. Dragon in there?'

"'Well, they were rehearsing the strangling scene,' the doorkeeper repeated, reasonably.

"'Now, however, you realize that she was actually being strangled?'

"'Well, yes.' He looked troubled. The Dragon family in their affluence were good to old theatrical castoffs like himself.

"'Very well. So now you can say definitely that it was Mr. Dragon?'

"'I'm sure it was. You see, he was speaking the lines.'

"'You mean, you heard his voice? You heard what he was saying?'

"'A word here and there. He raised his voice, just as he does those lines on the stage—the death lines, you know.' Suddenly he looked hopeful. 'So it *was* just a run-through.'

"They were all sitting in the greenroom—James Dragon himself; his father who, besides producing, played the small part of Othello's servant, the Clown; his mother who was also wardrobe mistress and had a small walk-on part; Leila Dragon who played Emilia; and three actors who, of course, were not members of the family and who played, respectively, Iago, Cassio, and Cassio's mistress, Bianca. I think," said the Grand Old Man, beaming round the circle of eagerly listening faces, "that it will be less muddling to refer to them from now on by their stage names."

"Do you really?" asked Inspector Cockrill.

"Do I really what?"

"Think it will be less muddling?" said Cockrill, twiddling his thumbs again.

The Great Man ignored him. "They were still in stage make-up and costume, and they sat about, or stood, in attitudes of horror, grief, dismay, or despair—which seemed to me very much like stage attitudes too.

"They gave me their story—I use the expression advisedly, as you will see—of the past half hour.

"The leading lady's dressing room at the Dragon Theatre juts out from the main building, so angled, as it happens, that the windows can be seen from the greenroom, as they can from the doorkeeper's cubby. As I talked, I could see my men moving about in there, silhouettes against the drawn blind.

"They had been gathered, they said, the seven of them, here in the greenroom, for twenty minutes after the curtain came down, all discussing 'something.' During that time, they insisted, no one had left the room. Their eyes turned to James Dragon, then shifted away again.

"He seemed to feel the need to say something—anything to distract attention from that involuntary,

shifting glance. He blurted out, 'And if you want to know what we were discussing, we were discussing my wife.'

"'She had been Carrying On,' said Mrs. Dragon in a voice of theatrical doom.

"'She had for some time been carrying on a love affair, as my mother says. We were afraid the affair would develop, get out of hand, that she wouldn't want to come away on our American tour and that it would upset our arrangements. We were taking out *As You Like It.* She was to have played Rosalind.'

"'And then?'

"'We heard footsteps along the corridor. Someone knocked at her door. We thought nothing of it till one of us glanced up and saw the shadows on her blind. There was a man with her in there. We supposed it was her lover.'

"'Who was this lover?' I asked.

"But none of them, they said, knew who he was. 'She was too clever for that,' explained Mrs. Dragon in her tragedy voice.

"'How could he have got into the theater? The stage doorman didn't see him.'

"They did not know. No doubt there had been some earlier arrangement between them . . .

"And that was not the only 'arrangement' that had been come to that night. They began a sort of point counterpoint recital which I could have sworn had been carefully rehearsed. *Iago:* 'Then we saw that they were quarreling.' *Emilia:* 'To our great satisfaction!' *Clown:* 'That would have solved all our problems, you see.' *Othello:* 'Not all our problems. It would not have solved mine.' *Emilia,* quoting: '"Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, Made to write 'whore' upon . . . ?"' *Mrs. Dragon:* 'Leila, James (*sotto voce,* and glancing at me), be careful.' *Clown,* hastily as though to cover up: 'And then, sir, he seemed to pounce down upon her as far as, from the distorted shadows, we could see. A moment later he moved across the room and then suddenly the lights went out and we heard the sound of a window violently thrown up. My son, James, came to his senses first. He rushed into her room and we saw the lights come on again. We followed. He was bending over her.'

"'She was dead,' said James; and struck an attitude against the green-room mantelpiece, his dark-stained face heavy with grief, resting his forehead on his dark-stained hand. People said later, as I've told you, that he aged twenty years in as many days; I remember thinking at the time that he had aged twenty years in as many minutes—and that was *not* an act.

"A window had been found open, giving onto a narrow lane behind the theater. I did not need to ask how the lover was supposed to have made his getaway. 'And all

this time,' I said, 'none of you left the greenroom?'

"'No one,' they repeated; and this time they were careful not to glance at James.

"You must appreciate," said the Great Detective, pouring himself another glass of port, "that I did not then know all I have explained to you. If I was to believe what I was told, I knew only this: that the doorkeeper had seen a man strangling the woman, repeating the words of the Othello death-scene—which, however, amount largely to calling the lady a strumpet; that apparently the lady was a strumpet, in so far as she had been entertaining a lover; and that six people, of whom three were merely members of his company, agreed that they had seen the murder committed *while James Dragon was sitting innocently in the room with them.*

"I had to take the story of the lover at its face value. I could not know then, as I knew later, that Glenda Croy had avoided such entanglements. But it raised, nevertheless, certain questions in my mind." It was Old Man's custom to pause at such a moment, smile benignly on his audience, and invite them to guess what those questions had been.

No one seemed ready with suggestions. The Great Detective was relaxing complacently in his chair when, having civilly waited for the laymen to speak first, Inspector Cockrill raised his unwelcome voice. "You reflected, no doubt, that the lover was rather too good to be true. A 'murderer,' seen by seven highly interested parties and by nobody else, whose existence, however, could never be disproved, and who was so designed as to throw no shadow of guilt onto any real man."

"It is always easy to be wise after the event," said the Old Man huffily.

At this point the host asked somewhat hastily what the Great Man had done next. The Great Man replied gloomily that since his fellow guest, Inspector Cockrill, seemed so full of ideas, perhaps he had better say what *he* would have done.

"Sent for the doorkeeper and checked the stories together," said Cockrill promptly.

This was, to the Great Detective's chagrin, precisely what he had done. The stories, however, proved to coincide exactly, even to the moment when the light had gone out. "Then I heard footsteps from the direction of the greenroom, sir. About twenty minutes later, you arrived. That's the first I knew she was dead."

What to do next?

To ask oneself, said Inspector Cockrill promptly, why there had been a delay of fifteen minutes in sending for the police.

"Why should you think there had been a fifteen-minute delay?"

"The man said it was twenty minutes before you arrived. But you told us earlier that you were just across the street."

"No doubt," said the Grand Old Man, crossly, "as you have guessed my question, you would like to—"

"Answer it," finished Inspector Cockrill. "Yes, certainly. The answer is: because the cast wanted time to change back into stage costume. We know they had changed out of it, or at least begun to change . . ."

"*I* knew it. The ladies were not properly laced up, Iago had on an everyday shirt under his doublet—they had all obviously hurriedly redressed and as hurriedly made up again. But how could you . . .?"

"Deduce it? Glenda Croy had had time to get back into her underclothes. The rest of them said they had been in the greenroom discussing the threat of her 'affair.' But the affair had been going on for some time—it couldn't have become suddenly so pressing that they had to discuss it before they even got out of their stage costumes—which, by instinct and training, is the first thing an actor does after the final curtain. And besides, you *knew* that Othello, at least, had changed and then changed back."

"I knew?"

"You believed it was Othello—that is to say, James Dragon—who had been in the room with her. And the doorman had virtually told you that at that time he was *not* wearing his stage costume."

"I fear that until this moment," said the Great Man, heavily sarcastic, "the doorman's virtual statement to that effect has escaped me."

Cockrill was astonished. "Why, it's quite simple. You asked the doorman how, having seen the silhouette on the window blind, he had 'known' it was James Dragon. And he answered, after reflection, that he knew by his voice and by what the voice was saying. He did not say," said Cockrill, sweetly reasonable, "'I knew by the *shape* on the window blind—the raised arms in those huge, padded, cantaloupe-melon sleeves.'"

There was an embarrassing little silence. The host started the port on its round again with a positive whizz and the guests pressed walnuts upon one another with abandon. It was disconcerting, to say the least, for Cockrill to keep pulling rabbits out of his conjuror's top hat.

Then Inspector Cockrill tuned his voice to an ingratiating respect. "So, tell us, sir, what did you do next?"

What the Great Man had done, standing there in the greenroom muttering to himself, had been to conduct a hurried review in his own mind of all the relevant times. "Ten thirty: the curtain falls. Ten fifty: having changed from their

stage costumes, they do or do not meet in here for a council of war. At any rate, by eleven o'clock the woman is dead, and then there is a council of war indeed. Ten minutes, perhaps, for frantic discussion, five or ten minutes more to get back into costume again, ready to receive the police . . ." But why? His eyes roved over them: the silks and velvets; the rounded bosoms thrust up by laced bodices, low-cut; the tight-stretched hose; the jeweled doublets; the melon sleeves . . . *why?*

The sleeves.

The Great Detective remembered the laxly curved hands hanging over the head of the divan, the pointed nails. There had been no evidence of a struggle, but one never knew. He said, slowly, "May I ask now why all of you have put your stage dress and make-up back on?"

Was there, somewhere in the room, a sharp intake of breath? Perhaps; but for the most part they retained their stagey calm. Emilia and Iago, point counterpoint, again explained. They had all been halfway, as it were, between stage dress and street dress; it had been somehow simpler to scramble back into costume when the alarm arose.

Apart from the effect of a rehearsed routine, it rang with casual truth. "Except that you told me that 'when the alarm arose' you were all here in the greenroom having a discussion."

"Yes, but only half changed—we were changing as we talked," said Cassio, quickly. Stage people, he added, were not fussy about the conventional modesties.

"Very well. You will, however, oblige me by reverting to street clothes now. But before you all do so . . ." He put his head out into the corridor and a couple of men moved in unobtrusively and stood just inside the door. "Mr. James Dragon, would you please remove those sleeves and let me see your wrists?"

It was the girl, Bianca, who cried out on a high note of terror, "No!"

"Hush, be quiet," said James Dragon, commandingly but soothingly.

"But James, he thinks . . . It isn't true," she cried out frantically. "It was the other man! We saw him in there—Mr. Dragon was in here with us!"

"Then Mr. Dragon will have no objection to showing me his arms."

"But why?" she cried out, violently. "How could his arms be . . . ? He had that costume on, he was wearing it at the very moment he . . ." There was a sharp hiss from someone in the room and she stopped, appalled, her hand across her mouth. But then she rushed on. "He hasn't changed, he's had on that costume, those sleeves, all the time. Nothing could have happened to his wrists. Haven't you, James? Hasn't he, every-

one? We know, we all saw him—he was wearing it when he came back . . ."

Again there was that hiss of thrilled horror; but Leila Dragon said, quickly, "When he came back from finding the body, she means," and went across and took the girl roughly by the arm. The girl opened her mouth and gave one piercing scream like the whistle of a train. Then suddenly, losing control of herself, Leila Dragon slapped Bianca across the face.

The effect was extraordinary. The scream broke short, diminished into a sort of yelp of terrified astonishment. Mrs. Dragon cried out sharply, "Oh, no!" and James Dragon said, "Leila, you *fool!*" They all stood staring, utterly in dismay. And Leila Dragon blurted out, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to. It was because she screamed. It was—a sort of reaction—a sort of reaction to hysteria." It was curious that she seemed to plead with them, and not with the girl.

James Dragon broke through the icy wall of their dismay. He said uncertainly, "It's just that . . . we don't want to make—well, enemies of people," and the girl broke out wildly, "How dare you touch me? How dare you?"

It was as though an act had broken down for a few moments, reducing the cast to *ad libbing*, and then had received a cue from the prompter and got going again. Leila Dragon said, "You were hysterical, you were losing control."

"How dare you?" screamed the girl. Her pretty face was waspish with spite. "All I've done is to try to protect him, like the rest of you."

"Be quiet," said Mrs. Dragon, in The Voice.

"Let her say what she has to say," the detective said. She was silent. "Come now. 'He was wearing it when he came back'—the Othello costume. *'When he came back.'* From finding the body, Miss Leila Dragon now says. But he didn't 'come back.' You all followed him into the dressing room —you said so."

She remained silent, however, and he decided that he could deal with her later—time was passing and other clues were growing cold. "Very well then, Mr. Dragon, let us get on with it. I want to see your wrists and arms."

"But why me?" said James Dragon, almost petulantly; and once again there was that strange effect of an unreal act being staged for some undisclosed purpose; once again there was the stark reality of a face grown haggard and old, all in a moment, beneath the dark stain of the Moor.

"It's not only you. I may come to the rest, in good time."

"But me first?"

"Get on with it, please," he said impatiently.

But when at last, fighting every inch of the way and with ill grace, James slowly divested himself of the great sleeves, there was nothing to be seen—nothing but a brown-stained hand whose color ended abruptly at the wrist, giving place to forearms startling white above the brown—but completely innocent of scratches or marks of any kind.

"Nor did Iago, I may add in passing, nor Cassio nor the Clown nor anyone else in the room have marks of any kind on their wrists or arms. So there I was—precious minutes wasted and nothing to show for it."

"Well, hardly," said Inspector Cockrill, passing walnuts to his neighbor.

"I beg your pardon? Did Mr. Cockrill say something again?"

"I just murmured that there was, after all, something to show for it—for the minutes wasted."

Minutes wasted. Yes. They had been working for it, they had been playing for time. Waiting for something. Or postponing something? "And of course, meanwhile, there had been the scene with the girl," said Cockrill. "That wasn't a waste of time. That told you a lot. I mean—losing control and screaming out that he had been wearing Othello's costume 'at the very moment' and 'when he came back.' 'Losing control'—and yet what she screamed out had contained at least one careful lie. Because he *hadn't* been wearing the costume—that we know for certain." And Cockrill added significantly that they had to remember at all times that these were acting folk.

But that had not been the end of the scene with the girl. As the detective perfunctorily examined her arms—for surely no woman had had any part in the murder—she had whispered that she wanted to speak to him—alone and outside. And, darting looks of poison at the others and holding her hand to her slapped face, she had gone out with him to the corridor. "I stood with her there while she talked," the Great Man said. "Her face, of course, was heavily made up; and yet under the make-up I could see the weal where Leila Dragon had slapped her. She was no longer hysterical, she was cool and clear; but she was afraid and for the first time it seemed to be not all play acting. She seemed genuinely afraid—afraid at what she was about to say to me. But she said it. It was a solution—a suggestion of how the crime had been done, even though she unsaid nothing she had already said.

"I went back into the greenroom. They were all standing about, white-faced, looking at her as she followed me in; and with them, also, there seemed now to be an air of genuine horror, genuine dread, as if the need for histrionics had passed. Leila Dragon was holding the wrist of her right hand

in her left. I said to James Dragon, 'I think at this point it would be best if you came down to the police station with me, for further questioning.'

"I expected an uproar and there was an uproar. More waste of time. But now, you see," said the Old Man, looking cunningly round the table, "I knew, didn't I? Waiting for something? Or postponing something? Now I knew."

"At any rate, you took him down to the station?" said Cockrill, obviously annoyed by all this gratuitous mystification. "On the strength of what the girl had suggested?"

"What that was is, of course, quite clear to *you?*"

"Well, of course."

"Of course," said the Old Man angrily. He shrugged. "At any rate, it served as an excuse. It meant that I could take him and probably hold him there. It did him out of his alibi, you see. So off he went with a couple of my men, and after a moment I followed. But before I went, I collected something—something from his dressing room." Another of the Great Detective's moments had come; but this time he addressed himself only to Cockrill. "No doubt it is all perfectly clear to you?"

"Well, a pot of theatrical cleansing cream, I suppose," said Cockrill, almost apologetically.

The Grand Old Man, as has been said, was something of an actor himself. He affected to give up. "As you know it all so well, Inspector, you had better explain to our audience and save me my breath." He gave to the words *"our* audience" an ironic emphasis quite shattering in its effect and hugged to himself a secret rabbit to be pulled out, to the undoing of this tiresome upstart, when all seemed over.

Inspector Cockrill in his turn affected surprise, then diffidence, then reluctant acceptance. "Oh, well, all right. It was the slap across the girl, Bianca's, face. Our friend, no doubt, will tell you that he paid very little attention to what she said to him in the corridor. He was looking, instead, at the weal on her face, glancing in through the door, perhaps, to where Leila Dragon sat unconsciously clasping her stinging right hand with her left. He was thinking of another hand he had recently seen, with a pink mark across its palm. He knew now, as he says. He knew why the others had been so appalled when Leila, forgetting herself, had slapped Bianca's face: *because it might suggest to his mind that there had been another such incident that night.*

"Yes, our friend knew. He knew what they had all been waiting for, why they had been marking time. He knew why they had scrambled back into stage costume. They had done it so that there might be no obvious incongruity if James

Dragon appeared in the dark make-up of Othello the Moor. They were waiting till under that stain another stain should fade—*the mark of Glenda Croy's hand across her murderer's face.*" Cockrill looked into the Great Detective's face. "I think that's the way your mind worked?"

The Great One bowed. "Very neatly thought out. Very creditable." He shrugged. "Yes, that's how it was. So we took him down to the station and without more delay we cleaned the dark paint off his face. And under the stain—what do you think we found?"

"Nothing," said Inspector Cockrill.

"Exactly," said the Old Man, irritably.

"You couldn't have found anything because, after all, he was free to play Othello for the next three weeks," said Cockrill, simply. "You couldn't detain him—there was nothing to detain him on. The girl's story wasn't enough to stand alone—not without the mark of the slap to confirm it; by then, if it had ever been there, the mark had faded. Their delaying tactics had worked. You had to let him go."

"For the time being," said the Grand Old Man. The rabbit had poked its ears above the rim of the hat, but he poked them down again. "No doubt you will also recall that at the end of the three weeks James Dragon was arrested and duly came up for trial?" Hand over hat, keeping the rabbit down, the Great Detective gave his adversary a jab. "What do you suggest, sir, happened in the meantime?—to bring that change about."

Cockrill considered, his splendid head bowed over a couple of walnuts which he was trying to crack together. "I can only suggest that what happened, sir, was that you went to the theater."

"To the theater?"

"Well, to The Theater," said Cockrill. "To the Dragon Theater. And there, for the second time, you saw James Dragon play Othello."

"A great performance. A great performance," said the Old Man, uneasily. The rabbit had poked his whole head over the brim of the hat and was winking at the audience.

"Was it?" the Inspector asked. "The first time you saw him—yes. But that second time? I mean, you were telling us that people all round you were saying how much he had aged." Cockrill stopped. "I beg your pardon, sir. I keep forgetting that this is your story."

It had been the Old Man's story—for years it had been his best story, the pet rabbit out of the conjuror's mystery hat; and now it was spoiled by an insufferable man who apparently knew how the trick was done. "That's all there is to it," he said sulkily. "Glenda

made this threat about exposing the prison sentence—as we learned later on. They all went back to their dressing rooms and changed into everyday clothes. James Dragon, as soon as he was dressed, went round to his wife's room. Five minutes later he assembled his colleagues in the greenroom: Glenda Croy was dead and he bore across his face the mark where she had hit him, just before she died.

"They were all in it together—they had to be, for the company stood or fell with James Dragon. They all agreed to protect him. They knew that the doorkeeper, from where he sat, might well have seen the shadow-show on her dressing-room blind, perhaps even the blow across the face. They knew that James Dragon would come under immediate suspicion. They knew that at all costs they must prevent anyone from seeing the mark of his wife's blow. They could not estimate how long it would take for the mark to fade.

"You know what they did. They scrambled back into costume again, they made up their faces—and beneath the thick grease paint the fatal mark was buried. I arrived. There was nothing for it now but to play for time.

"They did play for time—oh, very cleverly! They built up the story of the lover—who, in fact, eventually bore the burden of guilt, for, as you know, no one was ever convicted and the lover could never be disproved. But still only a few minutes had passed and now I was asking them to change back into street dress. James created a further delay by refusing to have his arms examined. Another few moments gone by. Then they gave the signal to the girl to go into her prearranged act."

The Old Man thought back across the long years. "It was a very good act—she's done well since but I don't suppose she ever excelled the act she put on that night. But she was battling against hopeless odds, poor girl. You see, I did know one other thing by then, didn't I?"

"You knew they were playing for time," said Inspector Cockrill. "Or why should James Dragon have refused to show you his arms? There was nothing incriminating about his arms."

"Exactly. And so I was wary of her. But she put on a good performance. It was easier for her, because by now she was really afraid. They were all afraid—afraid that this desperate last step they were taking to gain time should prove to be one step too far—that their 'solution' should prove so good that they could not go back on it."

"This solution, however, you had already considered and dismissed?"

"Mr. Cockrill, no doubt, will be delighted to tell you what the solution was."

"If you like," said Cockrill. "But it could only be one possible 'solution,' couldn't it?—especially as you said that she stuck to what she had said earlier. She'd given him an alibi—they'd all given him an alibi—for the time up to the moment the light went out. She dragged you out into the corridor and she said . . ."

"Yes, she said?"

"Well, nothing really new," Cockrill continued. "She just repeated—only with a special significance—something that someone else had said."

"The clown, yes."

"When he was describing what they were supposed to have seen against the lighted blind. He said that they saw the man pounce down upon the woman, that the light went out, and then they heard the noise of the window being thrown open. That James, his son, rushed into the room and when they followed, he was bending over her. I suppose the girl repeated with direful significance, *'He was bending over her.'* "

"A ridiculous implication, of course."

"Of course," said Inspector Cockrill, readily. "If the pounce had been a pounce of love, followed by an extinction of the lights, it seemed hardly likely that the gentleman concerned would immediately leave the lady and bound out of the nearest window—since she was reputedly complacent. But supposing that he had; supposing that the infuriated husband, rushing in and finding her thus deserted, had bent over and impulsively strangled her where, disappointed, she reclined. Is it likely that his own father would have been the first to call your attention to this fact? Why mention, 'He was bending over her'?"

"Precisely. Excellent," said the Great Man. Kindly patronization was the only card left in the old conjuror's hand.

"Her story had the desired effect, however," said Cockrill.

"It created further delay, before I demanded that they remove their make-up. It was beyond their dreams that I should create even more delay by taking James Dragon to the police station."

"You were justified," said Cockrill, indulging in a little kindly patronization of his own. "Believing what you did. And having received that broad hint—which they certainly had never intended to give you—when Leila Dragon lost her head and slapped Bianca's face."

"And then sat unconsciously holding her stinging hand."

"So you decided to have him charged. But it would be much more convenient to do the whole thing tidily down at the station, cleaning him up and all . . ."

"We weren't a set of actor-fellers down there," said the Old Man defensively. "We cleaned away the

grease paint enough to see that there was no mark of the blow. But I daresay we left him to do the rest—and I daresay he saw to it that a lot of the grease paint remained about his forehead and eyes. I remember thinking that he looked old and haggard, but under the circumstances that would not be surprising. And when at last I got back to the theater, no doubt the same thing went on with 'Arthur' Dragon; perhaps I registered that he looked surprisingly young for his years—but I have forgotten that." He sighed. "By then, of course, it was too late. The mark was gone." He sighed again. "A man of thirty with a red mark to conceal. The family likeness, the famous voice, both actors, both familiar with Othello, since the father had produced it; and both with perhaps the most effective disguises that fate could possibly have designed for two men."

"The Moor of Venice," said Inspector Cockrill.

"And a Clown," said the Great Detective. The rabbit leaped out of the hat and bowed right and left to the audience.

"Whether, as I say, he continued to play his son's part," said the Great Detective, "I shall never know. But I think he did. I think they would hardly dare to change again before my very eyes. I think that, backed up by a loyal company, they played Cox and Box with me. I said to you earlier that while his audiences believed their Othello to be, in fact, a murderer, he was—*and* he was not. I think that Othello was a murderer; but I think that *the wrong man was playing Othello's part.*"

"And you," said Inspector Cockrill encouragingly, "went back to see him play?"

"And heard someone say that he seemed to have aged twenty years . . . And so," said the Great Detective, "we brought him to trial, as you know. We thought we had a case: the business about the prison sentence, of course, came to light; we did much to discredit the existence of any lover; we had the evidence of the stage-doorkeeper, and the evidence of the company was not disinterested. But alas!—the one tangible clue, the mark of that slap, had long since vanished. I had unmasked him; I had built up a case against him; I brought him to trial. The jury failed to convict."

"And quite right too," said Inspector Cockrill.

"And quite right too," agreed the Grand Old Man, graciously. "A British jury is always right. Lack of concrete evidence, lack of unbiased witnesses, lack of demonstrable proof . . ."

"Lack of a murderer," said Inspector Cockrill.

"Are you suggesting," said the Great Detective after a little while,

"that Arthur Dragon did *not* impersonate his son at the police station? And if so, will you permit me to ask, my dear fellow, who impersonated who? Leila Dragon, perhaps, took her brother's place? She had a personal grudge against Glenda Croy. And she was tall and well built, and James was slight, for a man. And of course she had the famous Dragon voice."

"She also had a 'well-rounded bosom'," said Cockrill, "exposed, as you told us, by laced bodice and low-cut gown. She might possibly have taken her brother's part; he can hardly have taken hers." And then he asked, struggling with the two walnuts, why anybody should have impersonated anybody, anyway.

"But everything they said or did was designed to draw attention to Othello. Everything was designed to gain time while the mark was fading under the make-up of . . ."

"Of the Clown," said Inspector Cockrill; and his voice was as sharp as the crack of the walnuts suddenly giving way between his hard, brown hands.

"It was indeed," said Cockrill, "'an angry and frightened man' who rushed round to her dressing [illegible] night—after his son had told him of the threat hissed out on the stage. 'Something about jail . . .'" Cockrill said casually to the Old Man, "You did not make it clear that it was *Arthur* Dragon who had served the prison sentence.

"Didn't I?" said the Old Man. "Well, it made no difference. James Dragon was their star and their 'draw'; Arthur Dragon was their manager; without either the company couldn't undertake the American tour. But of course it was Arthur. Who on earth could have thought otherwise?"

"No one," agreed Cockrill. "He said as much to her in the dressing room. 'Well, if you mean me . . .' and 'We were all wild and silly in those days before the war . . .' That was the 1914 war, of course—all this happened forty years ago. But in the days before the 1914 war, James Dragon would have been a child: he was born at the turn of the century—he would have been far too young to be sent to prison, anyway.

"You would keep referring to these people by their stage names," Cockrill went on. "It *was* muddling. We came to think of the Clown as the Clown, and not as Arthur Dragon, James Dragon's father—and manager-producer of Dragon Productions. 'I am taking the company to America.' It was not for James Dragon to say that; he was the star, but his father was the manager; it was Arthur who 'took' the company here or there. And, 'You can come if you like—playing Celia.' It was not for James Dragon to say that; it was for Arthur Dragon, the producer, to assign the parts.

"It was the dressing gown, I think, that started me off on it," said Cockrill, thoughtfully. "You see, as one of them said, the profession is not fussy about the conventional modesties. Would Glenda Croy's husband have knocked? —rushing in there, mad with rage, would he have paused to knock politely at his wife's door? And she—would she have waited to put on a dressing gown over her ample petticoat, to receive her husband? For her father-in-law, perhaps, yes; but for her husband? "

"That's what really started me wondering.

"At any rate, it was the father who killed her. She could break up their tour, she could throw mud at their great name—it was he who had everything to lose, an aging actor who had given up his own career for the company. So he killed her; and a devoted family and a loyal, and 'not disinterested' company, hatched up the plot to save him from the consequences of what none of them greatly deplored. We made our mistake, I think," said Cockrill, handsomely including himself in the mistake, "in supposing that it would be an elaborate plot. It wasn't. These people were actors and not used to writing their own plots: it was, in fact, an incredibly simple plot. 'Let's all put on our grease paint again and create as much delay as possible while, under the Clown make-up, the red mark fades. And the best way to draw attention away from the Clown is to draw it toward Othello.' No doubt they will have added civilly, 'James, is that all right with you?'

"And so," said Inspector Cockrill, "we come back again to James Dragon. Within the past hour he has had a somewhat difficult time. Within the past hour his company had been gravely threatened by the treachery of his own wife; within the past hour his wife had been strangled and his father had become a self-confessed murderer. And now he was to act, without rehearsal and without lines, a part which might yet bring him to the Old Bailey and under sentence of death. It was no wonder, perhaps, that when the grease paint was wiped away from his face that night our friend thought he seemed to have aged." If, Cockrill added impishly, their friend really had thought so at the time, and was not now being wise after the event.

The Inspector was able to voice this afterthought because their friend, with a murmured excuse, had just left the room [illegible] of another rabbit out of a hat?

In May 1957 the Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project announced the prize winners in its 11th Annual Writing Contest. This national project is conducted entirely by volunteer workers. Its sole purpose is to encourage hospitalized veterans to try creative writing both for recreation and rehabilitation. The HVWP has the approval and cooperation of the United States Veterans Administration, and its annual contests are open, without fees or other qualifying conditions, to war veterans in all public and private hospitals.

To give you an idea of the scope of the HVWP, here are some of the competitive categories, with the judges indicated in parentheses: Short Story (editors of "Redbook"); Poetry (Conrad Aiken); Song Lyrics (Louis Untermeyer); Limericks (Phyllis McGinley).

In the 11th Annual Contest there were no less than 2700 entries, from nearly 900 contestants in 153 participating hospitals, 143 of them VA hospitals. For the past seven years EQMM has sponsored a mystery story division in the HVWP, and in 1957 the winner of the first prize was Robert P. Stewart.

We thought you might like to read Mr. Stewart's story—as an example of the fine work the HVWP is encouraging veterans to do. Mr. Stewart's short tale is a modern detective story set in the Philippine Islands; the "local color" and disciplined use of background are excellent for a writer just beginning his literary career.

CAUSE OF ACCIDENT

by ROBERT P. STEWART

AS THE PLANE SLANTED DOWNWARD into the heat, Captain Kirby snapped on his safety belt and gazed out upon an alien world. Looking through the port window, he saw an endless expanse of blue water stretching out to a rendezvous with the hazy sky. That way, far to the north, lay the brooding Land of the Rising Sun. Straining against the band around his middle, he then peered

over his shoulder through the starboard window. There, to the south, rose the forbidding mountains of Northern Luzon, stronghold of the still formidable forces of Yamashita, the Tiger of Malay.

The plane heeled sharply, banking into its long one-hundred-and-eighty-degree right turn, preparatory to final approach. The landscape tilted upward and the wing of the ship pointed arrowlike at a suddenly disclosed scene of activity below. Rolling waves broke white on a golden beach. Fifty yards inland a row of huts stood in a line on higher ground. Between the huts and the sprawling half circle of stilt-legged dwellings which held back the green jungle was a pasture where a crude landing strip lay like an ugly scar. Brown-skinned figures in shorts were driving a herd of carabaos away from the landing area. The huge patient animals moved slowly, unhurried by the excited waving of the men. The plane came in fast, bounced twice, and jolted to a stop.

The copilot came out of the forward compartment, opened the cabin door, and dropped a ladder to the ground. The pilot walked behind him, wiping his glistening forehead with a bare forearm. "Like landing in a three-ring circus," he observed. He swung down the ladder, followed by his copilot and then the lone passenger, Kirby. As the captain reached the ground an eager-faced officer trotted up to him.

"Captain Kirby?"

"Right."

"I'm Lieutenant Blystone. Been expecting you, sir. There it is." The Lieutenant pointed to the east end of the field. A stone's throw beyond the runway lay the blackened skeleton of an airplane. Its back was broken and the bare members of its tail assembly stood stark against the darkening sky. "Would you like to look it over, Captain?"

"No, not now—soon be too dark. But I would like to wash up before eating."

"Come over to my hut, sir. Nothing much to learn about the crash, anyhow. I realize you have your duty, sir, but I think you'll find I covered everything in my radio report to Clark Field."

"No doubt," Kirby commented dryly.

"On the porch whenever you're ready, Captain—that's where I have my meals. We've got plenty of help around here. Rehabilitation of liberated peoples, you know."

An hour later, having eaten a surprisingly good meal of standard rations, pieced out with rice, fried bananas, and avocados, the two men relaxed on the porch.

"Now tell me about the accident, Blystone." Kirby's tone was conversational.

"Well, sir, there isn't much to tell. This plane—a C-47—had come up

from Clark Field with our weekly supplies. Crew of three. We unloaded the ship pretty fast and in a couple of hours it was ready to return. One passenger, Sergeant Conroy, was aboard. The villagers cleared the carabaos off the strip and at 1400 the plane started to take off. Just before it was airborne, with maybe two hundred feet of strip left, one of those beasts—they must weigh a ton each—charged right in front of the plane. The left propeller hit the animal and the shock tipped the wing into the ground. The ship cartwheeled and crashed—burst into flames immediately. We don't have much fire-fighting equipment here, so there was little we could do. I radioed Clark at once and they sent up a plane yesterday for the remains. But there were damned few remains—you understand, sir. That's the whole story. I can give you a copy of my radio message: it has names, ranks, serial numbers—all the pertinent data." The Lieutenant paused a moment, then added, "Odd thing. We set up this strip to aid crippled planes coming back from bombing missions to the north. Saved three so far—all pretty badly shot up. Never had a casualty. Then . . . to lose a plane this way. Routine supply flight in broad daylight—I just don't know . . ."

"This Sergeant Conroy—your man?" Kirby's Mohawk-nosed profile was silhouetted against the moonlit sea.

"Well, yes and no, sir. He had been on duty here, but it seems he'd put in for a special discharge. One of those Vital to Defense Industry deals. He was some sort of tool-and-die maker in Connecticut before the war. Orders came through last week to transfer him to Clark, where they'd ship him out to the States. To tell the truth, I wasn't sorry to see him go."

"Troublemaker?" asked Kirby.

"He wasn't popular around here. The men didn't like him much and neither did the villagers. Used to hang around with some Corporal in the Medics when the Field Hospital was here. Then the Corporal got himself picked off by a Nip sniper up in the hills. When the Medics moved on, Conroy was on his own again. I don't think he liked it here. Pretty quiet, you know."

"What was Conroy's background?" The Captain's voice betrayed only token interest.

"I never knew him before this detachment was formed. None of us did, except Master Sergeant Flint. He and Conroy left Stateside together but they didn't seem very friendly."

"Where can I find Sergeant Flint?" Kirby was a lean shadow as he came to his feet.

"Why, in his hut, I suppose. It's the next one down . . ." The Lieutenant's voice trailed off as he found himself alone.

Master Sergeant Flint was sitting

on his cot, stringing cat's-eye sea shells on a slender chain. He did not rise.

" 'Lo, Captain. Have a seat."

Kirby wasted no time in preliminaries. "What kind of fellow was Conroy, Sergeant?"

"Conroy? Oh, he was all right, I guess—the kind of guy who thought he could do anything he made up his mind to do. Sometimes picked the wrong things to try, is all."

"You were together for quite a while?"

"Ever since we left the States. That's when I got a load of him the first time . . . on the boat comin' to Hawaii." Flint's yellowed face soured with the memory.

"What happened?"

"Well, we had everything on that tub—sailors, soldiers, Marines, Wacs, and a bunch of civilian stenogs goin' to Pearl. They kept the women separate, of course. First thing I knew, this Conroy had a boxin' match rigged up. He was goin' to take on some Marine. They held the bout on A deck and the dames were all there. Conroy, he was big enough, but he couldn't fight a lick. The Marine knocked him down right off and he stayed down. He wasn't hurt—just puttin' on a show. The gals made a big fuss over him, and he ate it up.

"Then, down in Australia, he acted up again. One night a bunch of us was in the One Mile Inn, outside Ipswitch. Some Waafs were there, sittin' at a table with a crowd of Aussies. Conroy barged right up to 'em and bet he could drink ten glasses of ale in one minute. Crazy! They tried to get rid of him but he wouldn't shake—not with the women there. So the cobbers finally bet him he couldn't do it—hopin' he'd drop dead, I guess. He put the ten glasses of ale down, all right—and they come right up again! Hell of a mess. That's the way he was—always showin' off when dames were around.

"When I heard he was comin' up here to help open this emergency strip I didn't like it a bit, not one bit. These natives here are funny. They give us a big dance one night. All the girls dressed up in old Spanish clothes they dug up from somewhere, and a string band was playin' *You Are My Sunshine*—songs like that. It was kinda pathetic. After the dance the girls went straight home. Each one had her mother or about three aunts along. Very strict.

"Sure enough, it wasn't long before Conroy started botherin' the girls. We got orders not to hang around their houses but he went anyway. He got to drinkin' this Nipa—that's a local booze, kinda like vodka—and he got into some arguments with the men. Called 'em gooks—names like that—'cause they wouldn't let the girls go out

with him. Finally Friar Tuck come up to talk with him one day. Conroy quieted down some after that. Then his discharge came through and I was glad it did."

"Friar Tuck?" Kirby picked a mosquito from the back of his left hand and squeezed it between thumb and forefinger.

"That's what the men call him. Goes around in a long brown robe —in this heat. Some kind of missionary, or somethin'. Been here for years, they say. These village people are Christians. You might not believe it, to see some of the things they do—like walkin' into the ocean with their clothes on when somebody dies, and havin' a big party 'stead of a funeral. They're Christians, though."

Kirby thanked the Sergeant, said good night, and left.

The next morning Kirby and Blystone stood on the latter's porch and watched a procession of women, completely shrouded in black, walk slowly down the twisting path from the village to the sea.

"Another death," the Lieutenant explained. "Juan Mattias, a fisherman. Found him washed up on the beach this morning. Funny, too, because the boats were all ashore and he was a strong swimmer. Maybe he just wanted to die. I'll never understand these people —Oriental blood, you know."

"Where does Friar Tuck live?" Kirby asked abruptly.

"The Padre? About a block down the road. Right across the street from the Mattias house. You can't miss it—there'll be a big crowd there for the funeral feast. Better call him Father—everyone does."

The sun was hot on his face as Kirby stood before the neat picket fence surrounding the rustic church and humble cottage of the village holy man. Flowers grew in abundance all over the property. A frail, elderly man, garbed in a single togalike garment, came down the steps of the little house and walked toward him. His head was covered with silvery hair and his eyes were blue against the weathered skin of his face. He opened the gate courteously.

"Come in, Captain."

"Thank you, Father."

"A ritual across the way." With an inclination of his head the old man indicated the crowd of people gathered in the yard of the drowned man's home. "The Christian Faith has been in these Islands for over three centuries, Captain, but some of the old traditions persist. Soon a young carabao will be slaughtered over there—a loss the family can ill afford. They owned only two—twin bullocks, most unusual. The other was killed by the aircraft three days ago."

"Strange," said Kirby, "that the animal should dash out in front of the plane like that. As a rule they're so docile. I've even seen children riding them."

"Doubly strange," replied the old

man, "when you consider that Juan Mattias, owner of the beast, was standing close at his side before the charge. These animals are so easily controlled by their masters."

A group of women strolled down the road to join the growing throng across the way. They moved with the grace of those accustomed to balancing burdens on their heads. Their bare feet made no sound on the hard-packed earth. Foot-long handmade cigars jutted from their complacent faces.

"Old customs," murmured Kirby's host. "We are surrounded by them here. Sanctity of unmarried girls is chief among the virtues of the village. The cigar is the proud emblem of the matron."

"War," said Kirby, "places a great strain on virtues, Father."

"Yes, it does," replied the old man. "Particularly on cloistered virtues, such as ours. We see little of the outside world here."

"And Sergeant Conroy?"

"Sergeant Conroy was not a good man, Captain. He allowed himself a lustful desire for Consuela, maiden daughter of Juan Mattias. I spoke to him about it, warned him of the danger, but he merely turned to deception. He convinced Consuela and her widowed father that he planned marriage, but that it had to be kept a secret because of the unsympathetic views of his commanding officer. He got a Corporal from the Medical Unit which was stationed here to impersonate a Chaplain. The so-called wedding took place in the Mattias home and was consummated there, in accordance with local custom. It was not until Sergeant Conroy prepared to leave for America that the full extent of his perfidy became clear to Consuela and her father."

The old man gestured with a blue-veined hand toward the raucous gathering across the street. "You see? They are about to kill the young beast. He will furnish Roast de Valencia for many mourners. It is not a pretty sight. A knife is inserted in the great vein of the neck and the heart pumps the blood out of the dying animal. See how they lash the carabao to stakes with strong ropes!"

"Seems sensible," said Kirby. "An animal that size—with those tremendous horns—could cause havoc in a crowd of people with his death throes."

"No." The silvery head shook gently. "Even when that final indignity is inflicted upon him, the faithful carabao will not turn on man. It is strongly believed here, Captain, that the young animal—realizing he has received his death thrust—will make one last powerful rush to the side of his mother, if she is in the vicinity. Since the mother of this beast is Nina—the property of Mayor Carras—and is now grazing in the community pasture, such a dying charge could cause great property damage."

Kirby stood up and walked to the gate. With his hand on the latch he turned and spoke, his voice casual. "I wonder, Father, if Nina was across the runway from this animal's brother when he left the side of his master and charged into the path of the plane?"

"I believe, Captain"—the clear old eyes were unwavering—"that she was."

Kirby sat at the rough table which served Lieutenant Blystone as a desk. Through the open windows of the hut came the roar of engines. Kirby wrote carefully:

Location: Ballesteros, Cagayan Province, P. I.
Date: June 23, 1945
Crew: Three
Passengers: One
Survivors: None

"All right, Captain Kirby!" called Flint. "Your plane's ready, sir."

Kirby continued to write unhurriedly:

Cause of Accident: *Murder*

He folded the paper, buttoned it into his shirt pocket, and walked out of the hut toward the waiting plane, a thin smile on his face.

"The Chief," he mused, "will never believe it."

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RUTH DOYLE**

TITLE: ***Now I Lay Me Down***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An aging show girl, widowed and wealthy, a handsome young lover, and a precocious ten-year-old . . . a tender, poignant tale surprisingly mature for a "first story."*

TONIGHT JOHNNY DAIN IS GOING to die in the gas chamber at San Quentin. I read somewhere that the nearest relative of a victim could apply for permission to watch the execution, but they wouldn't let me go. They said I was too young. I'm ten years old and Johnny Dain killed my mother.

They won't even let me listen to the late news, probably, so I'll know that Johnny Dain is really dead and there is no silly business like a last minute reprieve. But I'm going to fool them. I have one of those pocket-size radios, and I'm going to hide it under my pillow and turn it down real low so no one but me can hear. Then when the flash about Johnny Dain comes in, I'll hear it. And I bet I sleep good after I get the news.

Better than I have since Johnny Dain ran out of the house that day and left my mother lying at the foot of the stairs with her neck all twisty and funny.

My mother is a nice lady. Or was. It's kind of hard to think of Mom as someone who was. Anyway, I don't care what the papers said about the show girl who married an old man for his money and was murdered by a young man for the same money. My mother was as nice as anyone.

And we were happy when Papa was alive. But one day I came home from school and the house was all quiet and you could smell funny things like alcohol and antiseptic in the hall, and a white-capped nurse was flitting in and out of Papa's room, and someone told me he was very sick. And the

next day mother called me into her room. Her eyes were all pink at the edges and she was sniffing like she had a cold, and she told me that Papa was gone. I didn't understand what she meant at first. Papa often went away, to places like Washington to help them run the government, and all over on business. Then I remembered the nurse and the smell like a hospital, and I knew what she meant.

I remember sitting in the high old pew in the church and listening to the preacher say some awfully nice things about Papa. He wasn't just an ordinary preacher, either—you see him on television all the time. It was scary and sad, but you had the feeling that everything was religious and proper.

Johnny Dain came to our house soon after that. He said he was an old friend of Papa's, but I didn't like him. He reminded me of a black panther night-light that sat on my table when I was a little girl. All tensed and ready to spring. I used to have nightmares about that panther clawing out my throat while I was asleep. When my nurse found out what was causing the nightmares, she took the panther away.

But no one took Johnny Dain away. And I got the same feeling when I looked at him.

About a year after he first came to the house, Mom told me that she and Johnny were going to be married. I went upstairs and cried.

Things were a lot different after Johnny Dain moved in. Sometimes I would wake up at night and hear music and people's voices all high and excited, and glass breaking, and all like that. Mom was always feverish and excited, and she was mean and grouchy to me. She acted like she was running as hard as she could to catch up with something that had gotten away from her.

One night I heard loud voices in the hall outside my door, and I sneaked to the door and opened it just a crack. I'm not supposed to be out of bed after nine thirty. Mom and Johnny were standing out there shouting at each other. There was a strange lady there, too, and she had on a lot of makeup, and her dress was open down the front. You know, even more open than ladies' party dresses usually are. Some of her makeup had gotten smeared on Johnny, and he was red in the face and breathing hard.

"Now, Madge," he said to Mom. "Don't be silly. You know how these things are."

Mom was looking at him with her face all white. "In my own house," she said. "This—this," she seemed to be having a hard time thinking what to call the lady. "This strumpet," she said. "Get out!" She started toward the lady with her hand raised and for a moment I thought sure Mom was going to slap her. But the lady

ran down the hall pulling her dress together in front. She looked scared.

"Now, Madge," Johnny began again, and he reached toward Mom, but she drew back. He tried to laugh. "Don't be silly."

Mom just looked at him. Then she turned and left them there. After a little he wiped the lipstick off his face and started down the stairs. I crept back to bed. After that the house got awfully quiet. I guess the party was over.

The next morning Mom woke me up early and fixed me some breakfast herself. She had a bag packed, and she said we were going to the beach cottage for a few days. I didn't ask about Johnny. His door was closed and quiet. I guess he was still asleep.

Mom drove the station wagon herself and we were all alone. I guess it was the first time I had been all alone with Mom since Papa died. It was kind of fun. The sun was sparkling off the waves as we drove down the coastline, and the wind caught Mom's hair and blew it out in long, light waves. Like new honey, Papa used to say.

I sang songs and Mom tried to help, but you could see she was thinking about something else. Once she reached over and patted me on the top of the head the way she used to, and said, "I guess I sort of messed things up, didn't I, kitten?"

I didn't know what she was talking about exactly, but I caught her hand and held it tight. I felt so happy inside I thought I would bust. After a while she took her hand out of mine and put it back on the wheel, but she smiled sideways at me when she did it. Things were almost as good as they had been before Papa died and Johnny Dain came to live with us.

We stayed at the beach three days. Mom sat on the sand for hours and stared at things and stuff. Then she would go to the cottage and have long phone conversations with someone in town. Johnny called several times, but she wouldn't talk to him. I swam and hunted for rocks and got sunburned. Mom did all the cooking for the two of us. I sure got tired of burned toast and soggy eggs.

When we left the cottage my throat was scratchy and I felt all hot and dry. Mom was still thinking about something hard. She didn't even notice that my throat was swelled to where I could hardly talk at all.

As soon as we got home, Mom told me to take a bath and go play in the park for a while. She said she wanted to talk to Johnny alone. I went to the kitchen to see if Belle, the cook, would give me something nice and cold for my throat, but it was Thursday, and the servants were all off for the day, and there wasn't anything in the refrigerator but a jar of olives and a half a bottle of pig's feet.

I got one of the pig's feet and sucked on it. It was cold, and that felt nice, but the vinegar stung my throat. Still, it was a change from eggs and toast. I wandered toward the front of the house, and then I heard the voices from upstairs. It was Mom and Johnny, and they were awful mad. I remembered that I hadn't done what Mom said and gone to the park, so I scooted across the hallway and into the library where she wouldn't see me. I left the door part way open, though, because I wanted to hear what Mom said to Johnny Dain. I guess she was still mad about the lady with all the makeup.

I know you aren't supposed to listen, but how is a girl ever going to learn anything? There are some things people won't tell you, and they are mostly more important than what they will tell you.

"I was a fool to marry you," Mom was saying. Well, I could of told her that if she would of listened to me. "But you're not going to make a complete fool of me. I've done a lot of thinking the last few days."

"Now, Madge," Johnny said. "You're making a big thing out of nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"I know how stupid I've been," Mom said, her voice hard and bitter. "But I've made some arrangements that should guarantee your good behavior from now on. I've cut you out of my will." Johnny tried to say something then, but she raised her voice and went on. "While I'm alive, you'll get an adequate allowance, but after that there will be nothing. And if at any time I do not approve of your behavior, the allowance will be stopped."

When Mom said that, Johnny got really mad. I didn't know what all the words he said meant, but I could sure tell he was mad from the way they sounded. Then I couldn't hear so good any more because one of them slammed the door to the room and after that their voices were muffled. All I could tell was that someone was moving around a lot and opening and closing doors and drawers and stuff.

I leaned back against the wall and wondered if maybe I shouldn't sneak out and go to the park like Mom had told me to do, but my head felt heavy and the vinegar from the pig's foot had made my throat feel all raw. My eyes felt gritty, like maybe they had sand in them from the beach. I sure felt a mess and I didn't want to go to the park. So I sat down on the floor and maybe I dozed off on the thick carpet, because the next thing I remember the voices were loud again. I peeped out through the crack in the door and I saw Mom and Johnny standing on the second floor landing. Johnny was carrying a leather bag and wearing a hat. Mom was hanging onto his arm and crying. She

had on the misty blue housecoat that trailed around her ankles and made her look so pretty usually. Only she didn't look very pretty now. She was crying, and the makeup had washed down her face in long orange and black streaks. She looked sort of like a funny Halloween mask, only I didn't feel like laughing.

I sure hated Johnny Dain right then for making my mother act like that. He shook off her arm and started down the stairs. "Look, you old fool," he said. "What do you think I married you for?"

I knew why Mom thought he married her. She had told me all about love and stuff like that when she and Johnny got engaged. I didn't think then that Johnny Dain loved anyone, but I couldn't say that to Mom. And she was so excited and misty-eyed, she wouldn't have heard me if I had.

"But Johnny," her voice was all choky now, like she couldn't believe what was happening. "You can't just leave like this." Her hands were stretched out before her, and they looked sad and empty, and my throat hurt, maybe because it was raw, but mostly because I wanted to cry.

"Oh, can't I though," Johnny said, and he turned away from her and went on down the stairway.

Mom just stood there and looked after him, and she looked old suddenly, with her shoulders drooping and the bright makeup lying in the folds where her skin was wrinkled. And you could tell that she felt old, too. Johnny had reached the door, almost, when she started down the stairs after him, still chasing whatever it was that she had been trying to catch ever since she met Johnny Dain.

And, like always, she was in a hurry to catch it, and she didn't watch what she was doing the way people should. So her foot caught in one of the misty blue folds of the housecoat, and she came tumbling down the stairs.

I felt all dizzy and uncertain, like you do in a dream, and I watched Mom tumble down the stairs like it was a play on TV. You know, I didn't scream or run —I just sat and watched like I expected the commercial to come on any minute.

Johnny had turned when he heard Mom fall, and when she reached the foot of the long, curvy flight of stairs, he ran over to her. She was lying awful still, and even from the crack in the door I could see that her neck was all twisted, like the neck of a rag doll when you've been playing with it a long time and it gets all limp.

Johnny looked at Mom for a minute, and his face got white. I saw him reach down and feel her wrist. Then he cursed under his breath and picked up his bag and ran out of the door.

I wanted to go to Mom, but I was afraid of Johnny Dain, and I

still felt all hot and dizzy. When I got up, my legs felt weak and heavy, and little achy pains shot through them.

I knelt beside Mom, but she was still quiet, and when I talked to her she didn't answer. I picked up her wrist, the way I had seen Johnny do, but I didn't know what he was looking for, so I couldn't feel anything.

I went out of the house then and closed the door carefully behind me. I don't know why. Maybe because the last thing Mom had told me to do was to go play in the park, and I wanted to do that much for her, anyway.

But I didn't play. My legs ached, and my throat hurt, and I wanted to cry. I sat on a bench for a long time, beside an old man who was reading yesterday's newspaper, and who smelled of stale beer and garlic. Then I went home.

There was an ambulance parked in front of our house. It drove off just as I got to the doorstep. Belle had come back from her day off, and she was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, looking scared. When she saw me, her face seemed to break up into little pieces, and the tears started down her cheeks.

"Oh, you poor child," she said. "Thank the good Lord you're all right."

I cuddled up close to her. She felt awful soft and comfortable. I wanted to ask her why she was crying, but the words wouldn't come out of my throat. I was awful thirsty.

"Why, you're burning up with fever," Belle said, and that's all I remember, except that she carried me upstairs and undressed me, and there were lots of strange men in the hall. And the nurse that had been there when Papa died came back, and I wondered if I was going to die, too, and sometimes she wasn't a nurse at all, but a big white moth, and I was afraid that she would smother me with her wings. Then she was a big bee, and every time she came near me, she stung me, but that was silly, because who ever heard of a white bee?

Once I had a dreadful dream, and I thought that Johnny Dain had come back and was leaning over my bed trying to get me to talk to him. I screamed and scratched at his face, but when I woke up it was Dr. Bob, and he was smiling at me.

"Well, young lady," he said. "It's about time."

I had been awfully sick, and they wouldn't even let me out of my room for two weeks. Dr. Bob told me what had happened to Mom. I acted like I didn't know anything about it. I guess I was scared at first, because I had been listening, and you aren't supposed to do things like that. Dr. Bob didn't say anything at all about Johnny Dain.

By the time I was able to sneak the papers off to the bathroom and

read them with the door locked, Johnny Dain was on trial for murder. The papers said he had married two other older women besides Mom, and they had both died mysteriously. They had a lot of pictures of everyone, even a baby picture of me. It didn't look much like me now, though.

And there was a picture of the lady who had been in the hall that night. She was Johnny Dain's real wife. The papers called him The Deadly Bigamist. He looked more like a black panther than ever in the pictures they took at the trial.

He claimed that he had no motive for killing Mom, that she had disinherited him. Only the District Attorney proved that she hadn't done that at all, that Johnny was going to inherit everything except what was being held in trust for me.

Poor Mom; I guess she just hadn't been able to disinherit him. She loved him too much. She was just trying to force him to love her by threatening to take the money away.

Anyway, that just about took all of Johnny's defense away; especially when it developed that one of Johnny's other wives had died of a broken neck, too. The papers said something about the method being the same.

Of course, they questioned me about where I had been that day. I told them that Mom had sent me to the park as soon as we got home. I didn't say anything about not going until later. They were awful careful not to upset me because Dr. Bob told them how sick I'd been.

Maybe you think I should have said something about what I'd seen that day. But I didn't. By the time I was all well the whole thing was about over. And Johnny Dain killed my mother, all right.

Oh, I know she tripped on her robe and fell down the stairs, but my Mom was gone long before then. She started going as soon as Johnny Dain came into our house and she started chasing something.

The papers all said she was chasing her lost youth. But she was really running after death. I know, because her face looked so peaceful that day in the hall. Like she had finally caught whatever it was.

The newest Dr. Sam: Johnson story is based on that strange figure of history, le Comte de Saint-Germain, who appeared in the mid-18th Century to dazzle the courts of Europe with his priceless gems, his reputation for alchemy, his mysterious past and even more mysterious future—would he really live forever? Saint-Germain the Deathless has already "lent flavor" to an opera and several novels, and now he becomes the adversary of the Sage of Fleet Street, the jovial, Jovian Dr. Sam:

Miss de la Torre's research for this tale has been, literally, enormous. Of course she read the definitive biography of Saint-Germain, and while she was in Paris in the summer of 1955 she talked with its author, Paul Chacornac, in his little book shop on the Seine, opposite Notre Dame; then at the Bibliothèque Nationale she consulted numerous books on the occult; and to have the first-hand "feel" of cartomancy she purchased a genuine pack of Tarot cards in the Rue de Rivoli. The earliest draft of the story was finished just before she left Switzerland in July of the same year.

There followed almost insatiable reading in the mysteries of cabalistic alchemy and the Rosy Cross, while friendly librarians all over the country searched for hard-to-find tidbits among ancient incantations, esoteric allegories, and tantalizing ciphers that no one has yet been able to unriddle. And now that the story is finished, are we certain that Saint-Germain was an alchemist and an adept? Was he The Wandering Jew? Could he really double the size of diamonds? Is he still alive?

SAINT-GERMAIN THE DEATHLESS

(as told by James Boswell; London, in the year 1770)

by LILLIAN DE LA TORRE

SAINT-GERMAIN THE DEATHLESS, that mysterious being, was heralded in the gay world of London by a gipsy's prophecy, and given his congée by Dr. Sam: Johnson, detector of chicane; in both which events I, James Boswell of Auchinleck, played my part. But

of the wizard's advent we had as yet no premonition when upon an autumn night in the year 1770 I carried my philosophical friend to see Mrs. Cornelys' Venetian ridotto in Soho; unless indeed my companion's strictures on the ridotto were premonitory:

"A publick ridotto," declared he roundly, "is the prologue to publick mischiefs innumerable, as, wenching, gaming, coney-catching, the *prig* and the *snatch*—"

To this proposition I did not assent, though in the light of future events I ought to have done. Instead I remarked:

"If this is so, sir, I wonder that you give yourself the fatigue of coming hither, the more especially as you will not masque."

Amid Mrs. Cornelys' Chinese silks and lacquers, that multiplied in her hundred mirrors and threw back the sparkle of her thousand candles, the sturdy philosopher stood four-square, uncompromisingly himself in snuff-coloured broadcloth, complaisant good humour twinkling in his large light-grey eyes and playing over his strong, pock-scarred visage. To my remark he replied merely:

"Look about you, Bozzy, and wonder no longer." I looked upon the motley rout of masquers, sailing past us, round and round, to the sounding of fiddles and flutes. "Here is man in microcosm; and man is ever my study."

"Man?" I was laughing at the absurd anticks of a Pegasus whose wildly flapping mechanical wings could neither get it off the ground nor impel its two tangled pairs of legs smoothly in the same direction.

"Why, sir, man in disguise is man most revealed."

"How do you make that good?"

"Consider. At the ridotto man escapes himself, to become what he would rather be. Behold James Boswell, Esq:, advocate.—" I regarded myself in the long mirror. 'Twas true, I wished the long nose shorter, the swarthy skin ruddy, the stature higher by six inches. Nonetheless, I thought it a gallant enough figure I saw reflected, decked out in ruby velvet riding-coat and snow-white buckskins. Dr. Sam: Johnson thought otherwise.

"You are tired of the law. Hither you come, personating, in your conceit, a more romantick figure—the Gentleman Highwayman."

"Yet I trust, sir, that I am more Gentleman than Highwayman."

"What do you say, then, to yonder fellow who yearns to return to the Garden of Eden? And what an Eve he has chosen!"

Adam's pink silk sheath was so all-revealing it made the ladies blush and stare. His Eve had chosen to appear in the briefest of bodices, the gauziest of petticoats, the tallest of powdered wigs, and the most diamonds. She sailed along superbly, high-bosomed,

long-limbed, rolling bold blue eyes left and right behind her mask of lace and velvet.

"Nay, Bozzy, you perceive here's another use for the ridotto, the publick exposure of one's wares."

"Not so, sir, there you are out; this lady is not for sale. This is Miss Fanny Hall."

"Oh, then she is sold already."

It was too true, as all the world well knew. Her ripe beauties she had long since brought to market, and made a good bargain. She was the acknowledged inamorata of the sardonic sea-faring Earl of F——. It was he who had loaded her white wrists and whiter throat with the diamonds that so ill suited with Paradisal simplicity. Tonight she was wearing the famous Brouwere necklace, a replica of that made by the same jeweller for the Empress of Russia. The necklace, they say, was her price, and the jeweller executed it in the Golconda diamonds the Earl had fetched from India. As the malicious whisper ran, the Earl had had her at cut rate after all, for the Empress' stones outweighed hers two to one; but Mistress Fan, never having seen the Empress or her necklace, flaunted the Earl's gift in ignorant bliss.

As to the Earl, he was now at sea with the Fleet; but Mistress Fanny was showing no signs of being inconsolable. Masquers dangled after: a devil in red, a grasshopper in green, a medley of dominos. Let them dangle; I had a scheam to scatter them. What an adventure for me, were I to win my way over so many rivals, not by diamonds, but by my single power of address! Surely James Boswell, young, amorous, and quick of wit, could distance the field and hornify the Earl . . .

My friend's sonorous voice shattered my candle-light dreams:

"And behold this superannuated houri, such as the bravest Musselman might quake to meet in Paradise. How much more seemly is the flowing crimson domino that follows." The crimson domino tipped me a most unseemly wink.

"And what is this siege-engine in purple velvet?"

'Twas Mrs. Cornelys herself, a formidable Juno, her once handsome visage as seamy as her rumored past. She stood forth, stilled the fiddles, and bade the merrymakers unmask.

"Now masques are dropped," my friend moralized on, "and fancy gives way to reality, action ensues upon desire. The houri will carry her partner to Paradise, Adam will have his Eve—"

"He may not, sir," said I, adding inwardly: *"For I hope I shall have her."*

"He may so, sir; nay, Pegasus may fly. Yet if you find yourself in Bow Street, Bozzy, for going on the heath to cry 'Stand and deliver!' send not to me to go your bail!"

A hand tugged my sleeve. 'Twas the little red domino.

"Come quick, Mr. Boswell, for the gipsy is about to read Miss Fanny's fortune!"

"What, cartomancy is toward?" cried Dr. Johnson. "The coney-catching commences! I'll none of it!"

I smiled. That 'twas coney-catching indeed, none knew better than I. I had already (to confess all in a word) concerted my scheam with Mrs. Cornelys' gipsy soothsayer, telling her what to say and feeing her well to say it. Miss Fanny was greedy for marvels. Let a soothsayer but put me forward, and my affair must prosper. But of this I said nothing.

"What, sir," I protested politely, "will you so soon be gone?"

"I'm for bed betimes. I must be in Streatham tomorrow, and Mrs. Thrale brooks no delay."

"Streatham indeed," said I sourly, for I grudged the volatile lady her half-weekly share of my learned friend's company. "At Streatham you'll find as much masquing and mumming as shall last you a month."

"But no cartomancy," said Dr. Johnson sternly. He gave me a curt nod, and made off.

In the Chinese supper-room the Romany seeress awaited only the presence of her claudestine employer—myself. Her beady eye caught mine, and the ceremony began. Curious faces ringed the table as the wrinkled old gipsy laid out the Tarot pack, the mysterious Egyptian cards that figure the future.

Mistress Fan hung over the strange pictured cards. In the centre was set out a woman meshed in a whirlwind—"Yourself, pretty lady."

"And see, round about a crowd of men," cried Miss Fanny, preening. "Here's one wears a broad hat, a mountebank, by his seeming—"

"The Juggler—trust him not, milady."

"And here's one—how frightsome!—leads a spotted beast. A hyaena?"

"The Alchemist—avoid him, milady."

I plucked at the gaudy sleeve. These cards were nothing to my purpose. A better card fell at once.

"What shall signify this booted rider of swarthy mien? See, he carries a great disc of gold!" Mistress Fanny's pink tongue touched her pouting lip.

"The Knight of Coins, the Tartar Knight, milady—a dark man, a lover, he brings money in his hand, and much money around him—see the cards, the nine golden sequins, the eight guineas of gold, the ten crowns—the dark lover brings much money, madam."

"O brave dark man!" cried the courtesan, who as all the world knew was as greedy for gold as for marvels.

"Why, Fan, sure 'tis Mr. Boswell!" cried my little friend in the red domino, innocently forwarding my scheam, "for see, he's dark as any Spaniard!"

My swarthy countenance in the mirror smiled back at me.

"Poh!" struck in a new voice huskily. "This dark man is never young Boswell. Where should a Scotch lairdie come by so much coin?"

I scowled upon the speaker. 'Twas that plaguy old harridan, Mrs. Cornelys.

"Much money? Nay," she proclaimed, "I can tell you who this dark man will be—and see yonder where he stands!"

Every eye followed her gesture. In the doorway towered a new masquer, one who supported the character of an astrologer. His long black robe glittered with diamond stars. His pointed mage's steeple brushed the lintel above his head. In his long-nosed Venetian masque he loomed like some frightsome genie of legend.

"Pray, Mrs. Cornelys, what is he?"

I thought the woman gave me a malicious smile as she answered Mistress Fan's question:

"A foreign nobleman of great wealth, come to London incognito."

"If he comes incognito," muttered I sourly, "then how do you know him?"

"He cannot deceive me, for I knew him in old days at Amsterdam. What his right name is, no man knows; but he is called Saint-Germain the Deathless."

"How, deathless?"

"They say he will never die. Some people think he is The Wandering Jew, and has been on this earth since Christ at his passion bade him tarry. Nor does he deny it. Sometimes he lets slip a word, as if he remembered times long out of memory, of Pontius Pilate and of Tamas Kouli-Khan."

"What does he live on?"

"On a magical elixir, they say, which he brews himself, being an adept and an alchemist, and this gives him eternal youth."

As if on cue, the tall alchemist in the doorway drew off the masque, revealing a dark hawk's face with glittering black eyes lighting such features as an ancient statue in bronze might bear.

"He lives on air, say others," Mrs. Cornelys gabbled glibly on, "being a sylph or elemental."

"Poh," said Miss Fanny impatiently, "I care not for his diet, I. What estate has he? What money, eh?"

"A great estate, though no man knows surely where it lies. He is plentifully supplied with precious stones. The ones you see upon his robe are the least of his treasure. Some say that in his wanderings he has discovered the secret of the diamond mines of Golconda."

The grasshopper, now revealed

as little Minick the jeweller, stared upon the wizard and sucked his lip.

"Others say," continued Mrs. Cornelys with relish, "that he has discovered the Philosopher's Stone, and makes diamonds. One day, so the story runs, falling in converse with the French King about gems, and inspecting a goodly diamond, Saint-Germain offered by his art to double it in size. Taking it, he returned to the King next day a great flawless gem of the first water, for which the King's lapidary offered ten thousand louis on the spot."

"Ten thousand louis!" Mistress Fanny swept aside the Tarot cards and rose with decision. "Fetch him hither!"

So fast do the best-laid scheams of mortal man, in our old Scots phrase, gang agley! There stood I forgotten, while Mistress Fan held out her white hand to the lips of Saint-Germain the Deathless!

"Monsieur le Comte," cooed Mistress Fan, "is it true that you are a wizard?"

To this had all my hopes and scheams fallen! Within the Chinese alcove, tête-à-tête, Mistress Fanny Hall and Saint-Germain the Deathless sipped sillabub. From the large supper room glasses clinked; in the salon a harpsichord tinkled. Scorning dance and refreshment alike, I stood glowering, unseen, muffled in someone's discarded domino, intent only to watch over Mistress Fan, for the wizard disquieted me. As a gentleman, I stopped my ears; but such a turning did their discourse take, that I soon unstopped them again.

"Is it true, as they say, that you can make diamonds?"

The black brows lifted.

"Alas, no, Madame. There is no person who can make diamonds, without he have diamonds to begin."

His speech was fluent, his tone deep and soothing. The faint accent eluded me. Was it French or Italian, Dutch or High Dutch? Or was it in truth the accent of that dark street in Jerusalem two thousand years ago? I could not tell. It had some smack of all, with a mellow deep-throated tune that was the man's own.

"But if you have diamonds," persisted the Earl's mistress in her silver voice. "If you have diamonds? They say you doubled a great diamond for the French King."

"I may have done."

"Then you shall show me how you do it."

"Ah, no, milady, such doings are not for you to see. It would affright the strongest, and there is desperate danger, if the pentagram fail. But come, give me your necklace, eh, I'll return it doubled."

"Doubled!" The greedy eyes were sparkling. I scowled. "'Twill

be beyond compare in the world!"

She put her hand to the clasp, and paused.

"But stay, how do I know you'll return it?—Nay, never bridle and scowl. You shall augment it while I am by."

"'Twill be the harder," shrugged the wizard, "but I'll essay it."

Again her hand paused.

"How do I know you can do what you claim? How do I know my diamonds will not dissolve and puff to dust under your hand?"

"You do not know," said the wizard angrily. His sombre height towered over her. "I do not seek this task, milady. If you distrust me, I'll e'en bid you good night."

"Poh," laughed Miss Fan. "Sit down again. You shall augment me but one little diamond, to shew your art."

"You will blab it, and I shall be beset by all the greedy and curious of London."

"Trust me, not I."

"You will not be afraid?"

"Not with you." Blue eyes smiled into brown, a soft white hand touched long dark fingers, and the wizard yielded to the charm.

"Then I will do it. First, your diamond."

The courtesan widened her eyes at him.

"*My* diamond? Will you not augment me one of yours?"

"They are augmented already. The diamond, you comprehend, is of a density. If you understand his nature, you may stretch him until he become as two. Then beware! If you force him yet, on the instant, pouf! he will explode to dust, and you no longer have the diamond. No, no, madame; I must practise upon a virgin gem."

Mistress Fan, as all the world knew, was kept by the Earl well provided in diamonds. "You shall have one," she assented.

"And let it be of moderate size, milady."

"Why?"

"Because I say so. It is I who risk my life within the pentagram."

"Risk life?"

In the candlelight the mage's intense dark eyes sparkled wildly.

"These are deep secrets to which I admit you," he said in his vibrant voice. "Some of this lore I had of Friar Bacon in England some hundreds of years ago. On some points it fell to Theophrastus Paracelsus on the Cinquecento to set me right. Some details I am still to perfect. Therein lies the danger."

"How so?"

"Know, madame, the secret: In all things resideth the same primal matter, *materia prima;* to the which is superadded of the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, so much of each as may vary the properties of things."

Unseen without the alcove, I listened ensorcelled, half vigilant to watch over my lady, half in superstitious awe.

"Your diamond, milady," the voice went on, "though he come out of the earth and have a gleam of the water, yet in his perfection is he most tinct with fire. Now in each element resideth a spirit, an elemental by name, in air, the sylph, in earth, the elf, in water, the undine, and in fire, the salamander. These elementals are spirits very wilful and powerful; a man might better tame wild horses, if he were not sure of his powers. A strong and fearless man by compelling their aid may so rend apart, as it were, the very being of the diamond, that he may expand it from within to the very limits of its boundaries. Do you understand me?"

I doubted it; but Miss Fan nodded with wide eyes.

"I control these wild spirits by threads of gossamer," said the alchemist solemnly. "If they break loose, they will rend us both. Therefore, whatever you may see or hear, you must make no noise nor move a muscle—no, not though you see the heavens falling and the ground opening and flood and flame bursting forth, for once the pentacle is drawn you have no hope save in me."

"And what of you?"

"I am Saint-Germain the Deathless. Me they will assail in vain. I will protect you, if you obey me."

"I will obey you," said Mistress Fan in a very small voice.

"Then let us set about it." The magician rose, his velvet robe billowing about him. Hastily I shrank into the adjacent alcove, amid a litter of walnut shells and purple splashes of claret.

"Conduct me," commanded the wizard, "to your lodging."

"To my lodging!" The slut made herself look sanctimoniously horrified.

"I shall require a space suitable to my purpose," said the alchemist coldly, "having fire on the hearth and water nearby. Earth and air I'll make shift to supply."

"But at midnight?" breathed Miss Fanny.

"'Tis the most prosperous hour. Come, let us go."

There went my hopes for the night, past recall! The rooms were emptying. The gipsy crone was gone to her tents; but the Tarot pack still littered her deserted table. I scowled upon the scattered cards. The Tartar Knight rode on with a silly smirk. The ugly Alchemist leered sidewise at me. I tore the leer in two and left the pieces on the table. I longed to do the like to Saint-Germain the Deathless.

"Well, Bozzy, what news?"

Thus was I greeted, three days later, by my philosophick friend, new-returned from Streatham. He sat much at his ease in his pleasant

parlour in Johnson's Court. The emptied tea pot was pushed aside, the ample snuff-coloured waistcoat was unbuttoned, and social cordiality reigned upon his cragged countenance.

"Wonders, sir, wonders! You recall the ridotto? Well, sir, next day when I waited at Miss Fanny Hall's levee—

"Give me leave to say, Bozzy, this ardour to wait upon another man's doxy does you scant credit."

"Nay, sir, there's more to it than gallantry. What do you say to the Philosopher's Stone?"

"What do you call the Philosopher's Stone? The art by which Miss Fanny Hall coins men's hearts is older than the alchemist's."

"The alchemist, that's my theme. What do you say to a wizard that doubles the size of diamonds?"

"I say humbug, sir."

"Nay, Dr. Johnson, hear me out."

He did so, in smiling complaisance tinged with derision.

"And trust me, sir," I completed the tale, "she had it out of the fire doubled, blue-white, of the first water, exquisitely cut. Do not scoff, sir, for I quote old Minick the jeweller. Miss Fan had it under his eye in the morning, and these are his words."

"Well, well, little Minick will not lie. This alchemist has a secret to conjure with. Pray, Bozzy, did not you contrive to make one at the conjuration, that you may also make your fortune?"

"Alas, no, sir, 'twas a conjuration à deux."

"Nor did you not question the lady as to what passed?"

"Be sure that I did, sir, it being a subject most curious, on the which I would gladly be enlightened. But Mistress Fan turns pale at the thought, and all I can learn is this: that there was a dazzle of red wildfire, and a reek as of the Pit, and then the demons rapt away her senses and left her in a swound; from which recovering, there was the augmented diamond in her hand. What do you say, is he not a wizard, this Saint-Germain the Deathless?"

"Saint-Germain! Oh ho, now I see the light. I remember the Comte de Saint-Germain, in the days when he lived at London and intrigued for the Stuart Pretender. Stay, here is a bit of trash that concerns him."

Dr. Johnson rooted a moment among tall folios on his dusty book shelf, and handed me a vilely printed broadsheet bearing an inky woodcut and lines of doggerel.

Like all such things, the wretched engraving bore little resemblance to the man himself as he had appeared at the ridotto. The graver had given the pointed face a sardonic lift of the brow, a sly quirk of the lip, that seemed to laugh at the solemn character the rhymester had given to the

wizard in the doggerel blackly printed underneath:

LE COMTE DE SAINT-GERMAIN
CELEBRATED ALCHEMIST
Even as Prometheus, he stole the Fire
By which the World exists, and all Men respire,
Nature at his Voice must lay down her Lyre,
If he is not a god himself, a God does him inspire.

"There he is, to the life," said Dr. Johnson with a smile. "Many a night has he sat by my fireside and discoursed of strange marvels. A singular being he is, and of a quizzing humour; but he is not therefore immortal. It is singular enough behaviour if he chooses thus to make a lady a secret gift from his store of gems; but he is not thereby an alchemist. More likely a prestidigitator. Had he been searched when his hocus-pocus was done, the smaller diamond would have been found hid about his person."

"Nay, sir, do not deprive me of my faith in the Philosopher's Stone."

"Well, well, Bozzy, I should soon hear the straight of it did I but know where my old friend lodges. I must put him on his guard against the harpy Hall."

"What, you have been rusticated indeed. Have you not seen your *Publick Advertiser?*"

I unfolded it where it lay neglected, and read out:

"M. Le Comte de Saint-Germain, called 'Trompe-le-Mort' (which is to say Diddle-Death), is newly come to London, and lodges at the Cross Keys. In the drawing-rooms of Mayfair he bears away the bell, and rumour will have it, that he will meet with a certain *lady of the town,* at a certain *witching hour,* to display his *marvels* to her, in conjuring of diamonds or otherhow. What marvels the lady will requite him with, is beyond our province to inquire."

JOHNSON: "Come, this is brazen. What will the Earl say?"

BOSWELL: "He has said it. The Fleet is in port. He walks in upon us hard upon the heels of the lapidary, and Miss Fan, afire as she is—"

JOHNSON: "For Saint-Germain?"

BOSWELL: "For diamonds. Miss Fan could scarce support the interval; but by great good fortune, the Earl has business in the country, Miss Fan is left to her own devices, and tonight comes the great conjury."

JOHNSON: "What, he will conjure again?"

BOSWELL: "Aye, sir, now that he has proved his mastery, Mistress Fanny is in haste to have her great necklace augmented."

JOHNSON: "Sure he'll never undertake it. This would cost him too dear in diamonds."

BOSWELL: "He has undertaken it."

JOHNSON: "What, another conjury à deux?"

BOSWELL: "No, sir. He has frighted Miss Fan with his wildfire, and she will have a protector by her side—James Boswell, at her service."

I smirked the satisfaction I felt.

JOHNSON: "And *quis custodiet ipsos custodes,* Who shall guard the guard? I said it, there's coney-catching toward, and I fear the gentlemen, my friends, are the coneys."

He clapped his little three-cornered hat on his old brown scratch-wig. JOHNSON: "I'll e'en pay my old friend a call at the Cross Keys."

As twilight fell, I was before The Turk's Head inhaling the scant of roasting buttock of beef, when Dr. Sam: Johnson came along the foot-way, touching each post as he passed, and muttering to himself.

"Well, sir, did you see your old friend at the Cross Keys?"

"Yes, sir, I saw him, and I shall make one at the conjury, at his express invitation, nay at his insistence. Will you not dine with me, and we'll go along together?"

"No, sir. I do not dine, lest it affront the spirits."

"Bozzy, Bozzy, clear your mind of humbug!"

"Miss Fan will have it so," I rejoined, sheepish but stubborn.

"Then so, I suppose, must it be. Well, well, I care not for the spirits. I'll have a cut off the joint, and make my way thither betimes."

As Dr. Johnson turned in at the fragrant doorway, I glanced just once over the hatch to where the spit turned at the fire, and then turned resolutely away to dine, as they say, with Duke Humphrey, which is to say, on air.

Yet when nearing midnight I presented myself at Miss Fanny Hall's door, there was no sign of Dr. Johnson. Firelight flickered, on sea-green panelling, on the sea-green damask sofa where sat Miss Fanny Hall, on the black shape of the wizard before the chimney-piece.

The wizard did not delay longer to make his preparations. First he presented a flash of his sovereign elixir.

"It will," he said, "so strengthen the vital fluid in your veins that you may laugh at any danger."

I set it to my lips. It tasted bitter. My lady choked over her glass. As the alchemist bent to aid her, I tipped my share quickly over the coals in the hod. Let my vital fluid take care of itself.

Next arrived the necessaries. There was fire on the hearth, earth in the Deathless One's scrip. Water arrived in a copper pitcher, air in the kitchen bellows, borne in upon a marble table by two serving-men in green baize aprons.

One was a neat-built, clever-looking young-old fellow with a quizzical glance. I knew his face and nodded affably, getting a quiet smile and a sketched bow in return.

The other was a tall thick clown such as I had never before seen in Miss Fanny's service, louting low with many an obsequious scrape.

"This new fellow overplays his part," thought I, and looked again, and almost laughed, for he played a part indeed. Was I light-headed from hunger, or did I indeed see behind the green baize apron the majestic paunch of—Dr. Sam: Johnson! Was it come to this, that my common-sensical old friend should appear in his shirt-sleeves at midnight, as conjurer's acolyte and factotum to a wizard! His old friend Saint-Germain must be a warlock indeed!

The master ignored him. Mistress Fan signed the servants to begone. They went, but, I noted, no further than the curtained alcove, from which, as I knew to my cost, there was no egress—but that is another story.

"M. le Comte, we are ready."

The wizard turned the key in the lock.

"You have the necklace?"

The great pendant gems flashed in the firelight as their owner placed them in the copper bowl.

"There is great danger," said the conjurer solemnly, "more especially in the moment of fire. I beg that you will shield your eyes. You may use these masques."

We took the beak-nosed Venetian masques. The eye-holes were blocked. Secretly I resolved not to resort to mine. If Benvenuto Cellini could look upon a salamander, why not James Boswell?

The moment had come. The long deep strokes of midnight began to sound. On the last stroke the wizard opned his book, and the conjury began.

With elemental earth from his scrip, Saint-Germain the Deathless traced about himself on the marble floor three circles, pouring the dry dust in a thin stream between his long fingers. As he did so he muttered strange words:

"Spugliguel, Amaday, Abraym, Aguista, Yayn, Michaiel—Michaiel—Michaiel—"

This thrice-sacred word he traced on the circle with a strange cabbalistic device:

"Tilui, Caracasa Con, Amatiel, Commissoros . . ."

Suddenly there was a stench as of the Pit indeed: the wizard was making fumigations of sulphur. There was no light save the glow and reek of the fire, no sound save its secret voice. In the still-

ness the adept, tracing the holy pentacle, cried out aloud, invoking sacred names:

"By the mighty names of Adonay, El, Elohim, Elohe, Labaoth, Elion, Escerchie, Jah, Tetragrammaton, Saday—appear, assist!"

My head was reeling. I seemed to hear spiny wings rustle in red shadow above me, and spirit voices squeak in answer to their names. A black form against the fire in the grate, Saint-Germain bent over the copper bowl, lost in shadow before him.

"Aye, Seraye, aye, Seraye! El, Aty, Azia, Hin, Jen, Achaden, Vay! El, El, El, Hau, Hau, Hau, Va, Va, Va . . ."

I heard air sigh from the bellows; water lapped; then a shout:

"Now! Beware the fire!"

He seized a blazing brand from the hearth and whirled it about, dashing it around his head, around the bowl, and around the protecting magic circle. Half-swooning, Miss Fan hid her eyes; but mine, open, beheld the great red blaze that sheeted up, so that the distorted face in the ring of fire gleamed like a demon's in Hell. Then his hand shot up above the dwindling blaze to wave in triumph—the necklace we conjured for. Thus he stood till the red fire had died to the floor. Then he stepped forward and laid a much augmented necklace in milady's hand.

"I have obeyed your command," he said. "I am exhausted in blood and spirit. Thank me, and let me go."

"A moment," said Dr. Sam: Johnson, stepping from the alcove.

Saint-Germain whirled.

"You have betrayed me!" he cried angrily. "You have put spies on me!"

"I, set spies?" protested Miss Fan. "Are not these your people?"

"My people? I have no people. I desired your butler to send up air and water, and supposed the bearers to be your footmen."

"I am no footman," said Dr. Johnson. "I am Sam: Johnson, at your service, ma'am, and I have a mind to conjure on my own account."

"Stand back, fellow!" cried the wizard angrily. "Take care, the spirits may do you an injury; and if they do not, I will!"

He was a menacing figure, rearing black and tall in the firelight. But Dr. Sam: Johnson stood as tall, and bulkier. With one powerful thrust he shouldered the threatening magus aside.

"By your leave, sir, my conjury is soon done. Ducdame! Ducdame! Ducdame! Honorificabilitudinitatibus!"

At each of these oddly-chosen incantations he took a handful of magic earth from the scrip on the table. The first two he scattered in a ring. The third, from the left hand, he broadcast widdershins.

The fourth he flung on the fire, where it exploded in a sheet of crimson flame. Above the inferno, Dr. Johnson's great left hand brandished—a diamond necklace.

The Deathless One was at the door; but the key was no longer in the lock. By the door the second attendant stood smiling to himself. Saint-Germain shrugged, and turned back. The little man in the green baize apron stepped forward and took the augmented necklace from Mistress Fanny's hand.

"By your leave, Madame," he said. "I have some skill as a lapidary."

I stared at the speaker as he fixed a jeweller's glass in his eye. So my friend had fetched along a lapidary. I had been foolish in taking that quietly commanding face for a servant's; but if not above a green baize apron, where had I seen that quizzical glance before?

As he studied the augmented necklace, motionless, Dr. Sam: Johnson officiously used his green apron to dust the necklace he had conjured up. Then it in its turn came under the scrutiny of the jeweller's glass. Something held us all silent. At last:

"This necklace," said the lapidary, extending the augmented collar, " is paste; paste made by a master, but paste. These—" tendering the smaller necklace—"are right diamonds—"

"Being," put in Johnson, "in fact your own Golconda stones, which this scoundrel would have carried off in his scripful of red fire, had not I conjured it forth again."

"What!" ejaculated Miss Fanny, unready to believe, "the famous Comte de Saint-Germain, the Deathless One, a charlatan and a thief?"

"He is not the Comte de Saint-Germain. He is Andrew Hopper, formerly diamond-cutter to Brouwere of Amsterdam."

"This fellow is mad," said the tall alchemist loftily.

"Mrs. Cornelys admits the imposture—"

"I thought she was mighty pat with her part, like one that had conned it!" cried I.

"When taxed with it, she just laughs, and says there is no harm in it. Andrew Hopper was ever a quiz, she says, and his jest will pay out Mistress Hall for her pride, which ill becomes a h—hem, which ill becomes her."

"Says she so?" muttered Mistress Fan, and looked like a thunder cloud.

"I came incognito," said the wizard. "Shall I blab my name to the first footman that asks it? I am the Comte de Saint-Germain."

"You are Andrew Hopper," retorted Dr. Johnson. "You fled from Amsterdam having stolen from Brouwere's coffers this necklace—" he dangled it contemptuously—"which is the paste pattern

Brouwere made for the Empress; and with it you came to England, of purpose to cozen Mistress Hall by the hocus-pocus we have seen."

"All lies. I am the Comte de Saint-Germain."

"I cry a thousand pardons," said the little lapidary softly. "I am desolated to say it; but, sir, you lie. You are not the Comte de Saint-Germain."

"How are you so sure, my little man?" demanded the wizard.

"Because I am the Comte de Saint-Germain."

"You?" cried Mistress Fan. "You, Saint-Germain the Deathless?"

"Yes, I, madame, at your service. When I saw in the English newspapers that the Comte de Saint-Germain was in London, when I knew I was at Amsterdam; and moreover that diamonds were to be conjured in my name; I hastened across the Channel. Putting up incognito at the Cross Keys, I walked straight into the arms of my old friend here, who informed me of what had already passed. Together we observed the false Comte, and I recognized Andrew Hopper, who had mystified Amsterdam when he absconded with so many false stones, and one right diamond only—"

"To begin the plot if need be," struck in Dr. Johnson, "with a right diamond, that should reassure the lady, and get the necklace into his hands."

"When we had heard Mrs. Cornelys, I would have exposed the charlatan at once; but my old friend here was for catching him red-handed at his jugglery."

"How did you appear so pat, then?" inquired milady.

"Money opened the way at your kitchen door, where indeed our only difficulty lay in persuading milady's woman to conduct us, not to milady's bedchamber, but to the scene of the conjury—and such conjury! Really, monsieur, such puerilities will do my reputation scant credit! Whence had you this hodge-podge, fellow?" From the table he took the wizard's book. "Pietro d'Albano! Give me leave to say, my friend, that you took great risks in summoning Michael on a Tuesday, and with fumigations of sulphur besides! This it is to copy at random from a book you do not understand! Not that Dr. Johnson's cantrips were any better. What is this 'Ducdame?'"

"As the wise Shakespeare will have it—an invocation to call fools into a circle," replied Dr. Johnson with a grin. "Let my cantrips be what they will, you'll admit I conjured forth the right gems."

"By what magic did you so?" I asked him.

"By observing. Let a man use his eyes, he may penetrate mysteries not revealed in the *Golden Chain of Homer,* the Great nor the Little Albert, nor the mysterious volume of Picatrix."

"What did you observe?"

"That the false conjurer's hands went never to his pockets, many times to his scrip, the only thing upon the table in which, being his, he might carry away a prize. It was thence, while we were dazzled by his *feu d'artifice,* that he must have produced the false necklace, and there he must have hidden the true one. I groped for it, drew it on the third cast forth, and there it is."

"Is the comedy ended?" demanded the unabashed impostor. "If so, I will bid you good night."

"Shall I fetch the constables?" I cried.

"The constables? What have they to do here? I have amused the company by my art, and the performance is at an end. It was nothing but an evening's pastime."

"Nothing!" I cried hotly. "Is theft nothing!"

"Theft? What have I stolen?" demanded the charlatan coolly. "Ah, yes, theft. It is true that in the course of these proceedings the harlot here has cozened me out of a valuable diamond, for which she could be branded on the hand—"

"Branded!" shrieked Miss Fanny Hall. "Unlock the door!"

"—but I give it her, and the paste necklace to boot, and so I take my leave—" (as Dr. Johnson flung wide the door) "—and may the Devil fly away with the lot of you!"

"Ma foi," said the true Count in his soft, sonorous voice, "What a species of a pork, to pass for the Comte de Saint-Germain!"

"Monsieur le Comte," breathed Miss Fanny Hall, seating him graciously, green baize apron and all, by her side on the sea-green damask sofa, "is it true that you will live forever?"

"That, madame," he replied with his quiet smile, "remains to be seen."

"And pray, Count," she wheedled, fingering the stones of her restored necklace, "is it true as they say—"

Observing the thunder clouds gathering on my brow, to see myself once more slighted, Dr. Johnson with a grim jerk of his head recalled me to myself and haled me forth of the room; but the mellifluous coaxing voice floated after us:

"Is it true, Count, that you can augment the size of diamonds?"

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

This page has the avowed intention of emphasizing books that have something special to offer, out of the run of mysteries; but the skill of regular series sleuths deserves notice too.

Old favorites in top form: Perry Mason in Erle Stanley Gardner's THE CASE OF THE DARING DECOY (Morrow, $2.95); Pete Selby, 6th Precinct, in Jonathan Craig's THE CASE OF THE BEAUTIFUL BODY (Gold Medal, 25¢). Old favorites a bit subpar (but who can stop reading them?): Nero Wolfe in Rex Stout's IF DEATH EVER SLEPT (Viking, $2.95); Colonel North in Van Wyck Mason's THE GRACIOUS LILY AFFAIR (Doubleday, $3.75).

Old favorite revived, in form beyond compare: Dr. Gideon Fell in A JOHN DICKSON CARR TRIO (Harper, $3.95), containing THE THREE COFFINS (1935), THE CROOKED HINGE (1938) and THE CASE OF THE CONSTANT SUICIDES (1941).

★ ★ ★ ★ **FOR LOVE OR MONEY: the 1957 anthology of the Mystery Writers of America, *selected by Dorothy Gardiner*** (Crime Club, $3.50)

One of the very best of MWA's annuals, in which the psychologico-literary stories (Allingham, Lawrence) have good plots and the detective puzzles (Barry, Queen, Treat) have good writing.

★ ★ ★ ★ **ODDS AGAINST TOMORROW *by William P. McGivern*** (Dodd, Mead, $3.50)

A study of involuntary racial integration among bank robbers and its effect upon character—strongly impressive both as a suspense thriller and as a serious novel.

★ ★ ★ **END OF THE LINE *by Bert & Dolores Hitchens*** (Crime Club, $2.95)

Third in the Hitchens' excellent series on railroad police, once more combining fascinating procedure with warm human insight.

★ ★ ★ **THE TASTE OF ASHES *by Howard Browne*** (Simon & Schuster, $2.95)

Long, acute, embittered private-eye novel, so successfully in the manner of Chandler that you might think hero Paul Pine was a misprint for Philip Marlowe.

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **MATTHEW GANT**

TITLE: ***The Hungry Look***

TYPE: Suspense Story à la **Black Mask**

LOCALE: New Mexico, U. S. A.

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A violent situation was building up at Dave's Motor Court and Gas Station—as primitive and deadly as a hungry boa constrictor . . .*

YOU RIDE WEST ON HIGHWAY 66 through central New Mexico past Albuquerque, with red-rock cliffs on your right, purple-silver sage on your left, and dwarfed cactus punching its way out of the brown sand. Just west of Grants you see the sign: *Dave's Motor Court and Gas Station, 1 Mile.* Another sign: *Cactus Candy.* And finally: *Live Snakes. Biggest in the West.*

Then you hit Dave's place. I'm Dave.

That is, you used to hit it that way. They started another link on 66 a year ago, and there's a detour that bypasses my place. It's a rough detour, rocky and winding, and you cross the tracks of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe at three different spots in a four-mile detour. That's death on tires.

So I somehow talked the State Highway Commission into letting me keep a side road open during the day, leading off the detour straight to my place, to service the flats that bumped their way out of Grants. It was either that, or starve. At night they close the detour. Motorists have to use a county road that swings way down south. I don't even hear cars any more at night.

That means the motel is shot to hell. All I get is grousing drivers with flats, in a hurry to get off the desert and back to civilization.

I know. I've got a wife who feels the same way. She'd like to get off the desert, too, and back to civilization. Sometimes I see Belle looking out of the window of the front

room where we sell cactus candy, waterbags, foot-long hot dogs, Cokes, and beer, and she gets that hungry look on her face. Belle is twenty-five. I'm fifty.

But ever since last summer, she knows she's chained to the place, and to me . . .

Needless to say, it was a hot day. Hotter than the hinges of hell. I was washing down the dust with a king-size glass of beer—I drink Lucky Lager, nearly everybody out here does—and Belle was mumbling to herself about packing her bags or something silly like that, when I heard the flappety-flap.

I said to Belle, who was clattering around the counter, handling the genuine dime store Navajo jewelry and making believe it was diamonds, "Put on your hungry look. Here comes a Caddy." She turned to me first before she moved to the window, and the look she gave me wasn't hungry. It was her other look—the drop-dead look. It always makes me laugh like a hyena.

She slithered to the window and the automatic wiggle began to work around her hips. That's her bait, she figures. Some day—she's always telling me—she's going to hook somebody, somebody rich, and she's going to go off with him. I just keep on laughing and let her wiggle away. It's good for business. The boys like it and they don't mind when I skyrocket the prices on the candy and trinkets.

The car thumped up to the gas pumps, and sure enough, it was a Cadillac. You can tell by the sound—big and deep and rich—even when they're dragging on their front right wheel.

I watched Belle look at the Caddy—a block long if it was a foot, shiny white, with a blue-tinted windshield. Her lower lip got thick and began to tremble and her eyes sort of glazed over, the lids like dark shades.

Then the guy got out. A real Money Bags. Maybe thirty-five years old, with an athlete's exaggerated leanness and not the slightest jowl to the jawline. I watched him, rubbing my own chin. I never was much of a looker, and now I'm sloppy fat.

I went through the door and to the gas pumps. I put on my honest-to-God cheery Western smile and said, "Howdy, friend. Looks like you've got real trouble there."

He mopped his face with a white handkerchief. The sun was slanting in on us, fading to the west, but still plenty hot.

"It went fff-tt on that damn detour," he said. "Then I saw your signs."

I nodded. "Mighty glad to oblige you," I said. "Got yourself a good spare back there?"

He shook his head, coloring faintly. "Tore it up in Taos this morning. I didn't expect any more trouble. It's still sitting in the trunk, flat as a board."

Well, I thought, this is fine. This is money in the bank. Fix one flat, sell him a new tire. The works. Yep, I'd give him the works.

I clucked sympathetically. "First time on the desert?"

He nodded.

"Pretty rugged roads out here. I'd better give her a good once-over. I'll tell you what—you go on inside and have a Coke while I poke around. Coke's on me."

He grinned, hard-lipped, looking me over, figuring me for a poor friendly slob. "Don't be a fool," he said. "I'll buy you one and bring it out." Inside, I was laughing like hell. Caddy drivers are all alike. They have to toss the money away or they're not happy. It's a matter of pride with them.

I bent down to look at the tire. It was shot beyond repair. I opened the trunk and looked at the spare. It would do, patched up. Then I went back to the front right wheel and examined the rim. I figured it ought to be dented a bit, riding those rocks without the cushion of a full tire. And even if it wasn't dented, I'd let him think it was. My mind was racing like an adding machine. The tires, dented rim, change of oil, adjust the brakes, points, plugs.

You see, I have to do it that way. Ever since the detour nearly put me out of business, I've had to squeeze every last cent out of every sucker who rides up to my place. I've got to have the money. There's no other way of keeping Belle around.

So I take the jerks, especially the big car boys, and then I hop down the highway to Albuquerque and buy Belle a piece of real jewelry and a new dress. She never gets much chance to use them, of course. There's no place to go.

So I toted up the bill in my head. It would run the Caddy driver close to seventy-five bucks.

I kept my head down, looking at the rim, waiting for him to come out with the Coke like he said. I wanted him to see me hard at work, sweating for the money he'd have to pay. It made it just that much easier to slap on a heavy labor fee.

But the minutes ticked by and the sun, still fading, sucked the juice right out of me. So I straightened up and went inside.

And there they were, jabbering away. Him and Belle. Like they had just found each other after fifty years on a desert island.

She said, "Another piece of cactus candy?"

He said, "Sure," looking at her as she bent beneath the counter. I couldn't blame him—I mean, looking when Belle bent down. I'd have looked myself.

She said, "Now, let's see. That's three pieces of cactus candy and one Coke."

He said, "Two Cokes. Yours is on me."

She laughed a little, and the hun-

gry look started to deepen. I swear, I still don't know whether she puts it on or whether it's the genuine article.

I said, "Hate to interrupt, but I thought you'd like to hear the bad news."

He turned, hiding his embarrassment with a forced smile. He wasn't cut out to be a lady's man, I could see, and Belle was hitting him with all she had. Most of the boys play right along with her and maybe get a free squeeze out of it, but that's all. This one was different. Belle was getting under his skin, and he had a sort of glazed look himself.

"Bad news?" he said.

I nodded, face serious. "Rim's dented pretty bad. Tire's shot. Brakes need adjusting. You need a complete tune-up, too, hitting this low oxygen air, but I figured you might not want to pay so mu—"

He said, grim-jawed, "How much?"

"Don't rightly know, for sure," I said. Oh, you little man, I thought. Oh, you sucker, you money on wheels. "Have to see how the points are, and the plugs. But without any extras, it'll come to around seventy-five or thereabouts."

He shrugged carelessly, the twenty-buck sports shirt rising over his lean shoulders and dropping, without a wrinkle. "Fine," he said. "When will she be ready?"

That was when I got my first little shiver.

Whenever I smell trouble—like maybe a rattler outside the shack or a thunderstorm forming up ready to wash out my little road—I get a shiver up my back.

I don't know why he gave me the shiver when he said, "Fine," without batting an eye. Maybe it was the way Belle took it. She seemed to suck in her cheeks, and her eyes raced up and down the guy's body. All of a sudden this guy looked like he was her special Lochinvar. Coming out of the east, instead of the west, but still riding a white horse. Two hundred and twenty of them, to be exact. And there she was, waiting to be grabbed.

I said, my face going tight, "Have her ready in an hour. You'll be able to roll."

He seemed a trifle disappointed. Then Belle clinched it. She said, "But, Dave, it'll be after six by then. He'll never find a motel vacancy by the time he hits Gallup. You know they're all taken by four thirty or five, this time of year."

"Yeah," he said. "You've got your vacancy sign up. How about letting me have a cabin here?"

And there was nothing I could do about it. Because, in the long run, I'm not the guy to chase money off the premises.

So he signed the register. Jonathan Torrance. An address in the East 70s in New York City. His

license number. And he gave me ten bucks for a room that's usually priced at six.

Then he turned with a grin to Belle and said, "How about showing me those live snakes? Biggest in the West, so the sign says."

I said, "Sure thing. We'll show you."

Belle looked at me—her drop-dead look—and said, "Dave, honey, you'll have to get Mr. Torrance's car fixed up. You know there's a lot of work on that front wheel. It'll be getting dark soon, and you know how you hate working at night. Your shoulder aches."

Once more there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. The shivers were running up and down my back, but Belle was right. I had maybe two hours of decent light left, and at least an hour and a half of work on that big heap. So I grunted and wheeled the car to the rear where I've got my work shack and my tools and I went to town on that front wheel.

The rim *was* dented. Maybe a thirty-second of an inch. Not really enough to bother about. Oh, she'd cant all four tires and wear them out after twenty-thousand miles instead of forty-thousand. But that's all.

So I put her on the rim straightener and I started belting at that dent with my hammer. And pretty soon it had a quarter-inch bulge. There, serve the punk right.

Outside of Grants, heading west for Gallup, there's a stretch of about twenty miles where the highway hugs the shoulder and the shoulder is just loose gravel. On the right of the shoulder there's nothing—just nothing. A clean dropoff. Every so often I get a call from the highway patrol about some jerk who took a curve at 85 or 90 and didn't hold the road. I hop in the truck and crank the car out of the draw, wash off the blood, and sell it to a junk dealer in Grants for thirty bucks.

This dent on the rim wouldn't shove Money Bags off the road—it wasn't *that* bad. But it would make him hang onto the steering wheel like he'd never hung onto a fishing pole. The right wheel would keep pulling him over, toward those empty holes in the air, toward those pretty red rocks at the bottom of the cliffs.

Of course, I wouldn't leave him like that if he didn't start any monkey business. Because, sure as hell, that was what those shivers were saying to me. This rich guy, they were saying, is looking for something sweeter than cactus candy, and that hungry look in Belle's eyes and on her mouth was saying he didn't have to look too far.

That's how it figured. But if I was wrong, and I didn't hear any giggling when they ought to be asleep, then the next morning I'd tighten the brake on his front left wheel. That would compensate for the swing to the right.

I walked back from the work shack after spending an hour on the Cadillac, past the big pit where Belle would sun the boa constrictor during the days. Some place along the line she had learned that boas have to have their daily sunbath. I didn't interfere. I can't stand snakes. They give me the creeps. The snakes were her business. Of course, I collected the money. It was two bits for a trip to the snake room.

Outside the snake room I could hear them talking in low voices. Something's up, I thought. A whole hour looking at two garter snakes, a defanged rattler, and the boa. I strained to hear, but it was no good, so I pushed the door open fast, expecting maybe he'd be trying to maul her and Belle would be making sure he succeeded.

Instead, they were just looking at the boa in his glass cage, and their faces were sick-looking.

I couldn't much blame them.

Earlier that day Belle had forked a rattler behind the shack, just getting ready to strike a jackrabbit it had petrified half to death. I came running out with my shotgun when I heard Belle scream, and I pushed Belle away and put a blast into the rattler. It tore his head off. I'm not much of a shot, so I only use a shotgun, twin bore and heavy gauge. And at five feet it's pretty easy to kill a rattler that's already forked to the ground.

The rabbit finally unfroze and started to skitter off, but I already had another load of buckshot in the gun. I aimed in the general direction the rabbit was loping and blasted away. He went five feet in the air and came down, dead.

Belle fed him to the boa.

And there we were, Belle and me and Money Bags, looking at that protuberance halfway down the boa's throat.

It made me sick, looking at him. It made Money Bags sick, too. But I couldn't figure Belle. She never got that look before. She always feeds the snakes. I never thought there was anything the boa could do that would bother Belle.

Finally she said slowly, looking square into his eyes, "Want to see how—how we move him?"

Money Bags was pale and sweating, his hands writhing together, his eyes like twin dagger points. He swallowed, then he nodded.

I said, "Count me out." And I left. That boa disgusts me.

So Belle must have showed him the long lightweight glass tunnel she had had made. She shoves it against the glass door of the boa's cage and then starts prodding him with a stick through a door at the other end of the cage. Finally the boa gets the idea and starts working his way through the glass tunnel. Belle sets up the tunnel so that the far end reaches all the way to the pit. That's how the boa gets his sunbath.

We all had supper that night, foot-longs (they don't measure a whisker over nine inches) and canned beans and a couple of Lucky Lagers for me. Money Bags drank Cokes. So did Belle.

Over coffee, he said, "How come you stay out here, Dave?"

I said, "This is my place."

I wasn't sure he understood. It was my gas pumps and my motel, my snake house and my repair shack. But I really meant more than that. I meant I had come out here with nothing but a grant from the government to pick up some waterless land. That was all I had —a piece of paper allowing me ten acres of New Mexico grub and rock and cactus. I worked that first winter in Grants as a grease monkey, and I didn't spend half what I earned.

With the other half I had a well sunk. And after forty feet I hit water. The rest came easy.

But I had gambled and I had sweated, and now the place was mine. Maybe it was luck, hitting after only forty feet. I don't care. Luck plays a part in every man's life.

That still wasn't *all* I meant. Sure it was my place, and I had worked for it, but there was more. There was Belle.

She was part of my place. She was mine. Nobody else's.

With Belle too I had been lucky. Like I said, I'm not much of a looker. I'm fifty and fat. Belle's twenty-five. But nine years ago, I guess I looked pretty good to her. You see, some sailor had got her into trouble, and then scrammed. She was just a kid, and scared plenty. So when I asked her to marry me—or, rather, told her she could marry me and get out of her trouble—she did it. Oh, she hesitated even then; but her folks talked her into it. So I took her back here, to my place, man and wife.

Five months later she had the kid. Stillborn.

But I didn't know the kid was going to be born dead, and she knew I didn't, so I still find it pretty easy to let her know every so often how I had pulled her out of a hole by marrying her. That's when she gives me her drop-dead look.

But she doesn't do anything about it. She's always talking about getting another guy or getting hold of some dough and leaving. I just tell her she's got it pretty damn good, a roof over her head and a husband who takes care of her. I tell her that if she ever left, I'd grab up my gun and find her, no matter where she was or how long it would take. It's not that hard, either. There aren't many roads around here, and I know everybody in the vicinity. She wouldn't get far, unless she hooked some guy to take her away—some jerk like Lochinvar, I tell her. And I keep reminding her that so long

as I'm breathing, she's going to stick around.

I guess she knows it, too. The drop-dead look sort of fades, and she just looks out of the window.

So that's what I mean when I say, "This is my place."

Money Bags frowned and said, "But the new highway is going to hurt, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Sure it's going to hurt. Already does. But I'll figure something. Maybe I'll go back to Grants and buy me a liquor store. Who knows?"

He nodded and shot a quick look at Belle. There was something in the look he gave her—a bit pitying, I guess, and a bit grim. He was sorry for her, holed up in this desert with a fat middle-aged husband.

Belle let her eyes drop. She couldn't stand looking at him. He was civilization to her. Dammit, he *was* Lochinvar, and the shivers made me tremble.

I pushed myself away from the table and said, "Excuse me. The car. I'll finish her up now before it gets chilly." I took another bottle of Lucky Lager from the icebox, uncapped it and went back to the shack. Somehow I was getting mad. I didn't know what kind of line she had been handing him, but it was working, and I didn't like it. The wiggle had got him started, of course, but she must have been laying it on thick about what a lousy life she led, and if she could only get out of here, and what a crum of a husband I was, and how I belted her when I got drunk, and so on.

And maybe it was all true. I didn't care. The only thing I cared was the way Money Bags looked at her. Like he aimed to do something about it.

So I finished the car and drove it around to the front and left it on the right-hand edge of the dirt road, headed back toward the highway. It drove hard, pulling to the right. I'd have to tell him that it might do that on the dirt road, but he shouldn't worry about it. The road was graded like that, I'd tell him. She'd be all right on the highway.

Yeah, she'd be all right. She'd be a hearse if he ever gave that Caddy a kick on that super-accelerator they got.

Then I went back to my room—mine and Belle's—and I took the shotgun I had fired twice that day, and cleaned it up and loaded both barrels. I laid it down on the floor next to my bed—mine and Belle's—on my side, so I could get to it in case I had to. And I took off my sweaty clothes and lay down, listening.

But I'm not used to that extra beer after supper, and I'm sure not used to working like a dog in late afternoon and evening any more, not since the detour went up. So I tried to catch what they were saying and I tried to keep my eyes

open, but when they started to blink, the only thing I could do was drop my left hand out of bed and wrap my fingers around the gun, which was out of sight on the floor. And I slept.

I don't think it was very much later that Belle climbed into bed. I could feel the springs sag and there was the warmth of her body as she slithered under the sheets, and I figured I had been a damn fool, a jealous fool. There was Belle, breathing easy, next to me. And, I thought, so long as I'm alive, that's where she'll be. So my sleep deepened.

It was the shivers that woke me again. I'm one of those guys who knows what time it is when he wakes, no matter how long he's been asleep, even before my eyes are open. I knew it was close to five o'clock and when I did open my eyes, there was that filtered gray look to the blackness that means the night is dying and morning rushing up on you.

Then I heard Belle get out of bed. Instinctively my fingers tightened on the shotgun on the floor and I grinned. At least I was ready. I figured I'd give her ten minutes and then I'd get up, the gun handy. I was half hoping I'd find them together. Oh, I wouldn't shoot them. I'd beat them silly with the twin barrels.

But it wasn't five minutes before I heard the noise coming back to the room. Money Bags had a cabin in the rear, a good city block away, and she wasn't coming from that direction. She was coming from the other side. I figured then that she had had to go to the john. And like that, just as I heard her open the door, I was sinking back into sleep.

The last thing I remember was the springs sagging beneath me again, and the slithering under the sheets. But I think I only remember that in my imagination . . .

When I woke, it was nearly too late, of course. The boa had worked its way up my ankles and was halfway between my waist and chest. My right arm was tight to my side, and I could feel the muscles of the snake moving sluggishly on my biceps. I pulled my right arm, but it wouldn't budge. All it did was excite the snake into putting on more pressure. I could feel the air leaking out of me and there were white bolts of pain in my chest. My head started to ache, and I knew there wasn't much time before I would black out for good.

I understood it all, of course. Belle had gone to the snake house and pointed the tunnel right on into my room and up to the bed. Rich Boy had stayed in the snake house, goosing the boa with the stick from the other end of the cage.

And—they must have figured—when the boa had finished with me, Belle would toss a wire loop over his head and the two of them

would drag him and me into the pit. It would look as if I made a misstep and fell into the pit while the boa was sunning himself. We didn't have enough traffic to dispute the story.

Oh, I guess they could have done it different. They could have had Money Bags belt me one over the head and then they could have dragged me to the pit and left me there until the boa was led out. But I'd have heard Money Bags walking up to my room and there'd have been a brawl. I'm not a little guy by a long shot. Anyway, anybody who'd ever seen a boa in action—as Belle had—would know how sure the other way was.

So that was how they figured. But they didn't figure on the gun and even though I was gasping, I had time to laugh out loud. I had thought I might need that gun on a couple human snakes, not on a real one.

I raised the gun with my left hand and though it was unwieldy, I put the twin bores at the boa's head, just six inches from my own face. Then I held the gun as steady as I could and I fired—one barrelful. The other barrel I was saving.

The blast knocked me back and my head rang like a bell, but pretty soon the boa's body started to relax and I got out of bed, kicking my way out of the folds of the dead boa.

I heard Belle scream and I heard Money Bags yelling something about the car, and then they were both running.

I was rubber-legged when I reached the door, and in the early morning light nothing was adding up. But then I saw them slamming the car doors shut, and I ran across the road, the gun still in my hands, a hundred feet in front of the Caddy, just off to the right of the road.

He started the big car and they took off, coming down the side of the road—the side where I was standing, the gun raised. I could see their faces, white and scared, just a couple of jerks who had played a crazy game that was now all out of hand.

They weren't going to get away with it, I told myself; they weren't going to run off. Nobody was going to take Belle away from me. I aimed at those white blobs behind the windshield, fifty feet away now, and I fired the gun again.

I stood off the road about ten feet, off to their right, and when the gunsmoke faded I could see the white puffs of air coming out of the right tire. As I said, I am a lousy shot. The big block-long Caddy leaped from the road and bore down on me . . .

In a way, it's all pretty funny. Now Belle has to wait on me, hand and foot. She wheels me around so I get some sun each day and she helps me into bed at night.

We still live at the same place—

Dave's Motor Court and Gas Station. The new highway link is finished and we don't get much traffic—hardly enough to live on. But it doesn't matter.

I still have the name and address on my register. Jonathan Torrance. East 70s. New York City. He sends us what we need. If he ever stops, I'll get in touch with the D.A. and the newspapers. He knows that.

Belle wouldn't want that to happen, so she takes good care of me. Of course, once in a while she gets that hungry look around her mouth, and I know she's thinking of him or of somebody else in a big car or just of getting out of here. But it doesn't do her any good. Not now any more. I tell her so. The look changes then. She gives me the other one.

Not the hungry look.

The drop-dead look.

I just laugh like hell.

a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL GILBERT**
TITLE:	***Operation Cryptic***
TYPE:	Detective-Suspense Story
DETECTIVE:	?
LOCALE:	Southern Brittany, France
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*The yacht* Cryptic *carried a strange crew—and even stranger passengers . . . Journey down the Solent—on one of the most mysterious and intriguing voyages ever taken (in a story, of course).*

THE STEWARD WAS YOUNG, AND the band of freckles across the top of his nose made him look even younger. He was carrying, not very expertly, a tray with glasses on it.

A tall glass of iced lager went to the savage-looking woman who wore her bangles with the air of an experienced gladiator coming out for another dusty battle in the arena of life. A brandy and soda for the savage lady's red-faced, white-mustached husband ("Major and Mrs. Collet," the steward said to himself; a large part of his job was getting the right names attached to the right faces).

A medium-sized gin with French vermouth for the girl in the low-cut linen dress with the gold hair and the biscuit-colored suntan ("French—Marianne something-or-other"; the surname didn't matter—you could always get by with a French girl by calling her M'selle).

A large gin to Mr. Clinton, the owner of the yacht *Cryptic* (Mr. Clinton had a smooth, round face, a smooth round smile, and a pair of sharp eyes).

A very large gin for Captain Herbert, the skipper of the yacht (the second part of the steward's trade was observation, and he saw that the Captain was already a little drunk; the large gin with only a splash of water would take him a long step further).

As he turned to go, the French girl said lazily, "Oh, steward."

"M'selle?"

"I take it you mixed this martini yourself?"

"Yes, M'selle."

"By your own unaided intelligence?"

"Certainly, M'selle."

"Next time I suggest you use the book. A proper martini requires half as much gin, twice as much vermouth, and a dash of bitters."

The steward flushed, bowed slightly, and withdrew. As he closed the door he heard Clinton say reproachfully, "Stewards aren't *that* easy to get, Marianne."

The steward moved away down the passage. He shook his head like a diver, surfacing after a deep dive. But there was no time for resentment—there was too much to do.

The *Cryptic,* though all of two hundred tons capacity, could hardly be expected to carry such a luxury as a second steward. Until the four passengers were all safely tucked in their bunks, he was going to be on the run. If the weather had been bad, his job might have been easier, but the Solent had never looked calmer. The afterglow of a long summer's day lay on the smooth sea like a mantle. How refreshing it would be, he thought, to strip off the tight, white uniform, dive into the water, and swim to some beach where the sand was still warm from the afternoon sun.

Major Collet's cabin. There were two suitcases thrown onto the bunk, one opened, the other closed but unlocked. And a battered leather hold-all containing brushes and a razor. A seasoned traveler, the Major. The steward's fingers moved deftly, removing clothes and packing them neatly away in the built-in cupboard under the bunk. He seemed, somehow, to be cleverer at this part of his trade than he was at mixing and serving drinks. One of the ties which he unpacked bore the broad stripes of the Brigade of Guards. Lower down in the case he found a Rifle Brigade blazer and a Royal Artillery silk square. An all-round man, the Major.

His next call was the galley. The Breton cook, nearly 300 pounds of solid fat, was in a howling temper. He had been in a difficult mood ever since the passengers had come on board at tea-time and had been made no pleasanter by a criticism of his gateaux uttered by Mrs. Collet and incautiously passed on to him by the steward.

The cook was chopping carrots with a very heavy, very sharp knife,

and looking as if he wished it were Mrs. Collet's fingers he was shortening.

"Any more grunts from the sty?" he inquired belligerently.

"They are drinking now."

"Soon they will stop drinking and—" (the cook employed a farmyard metaphor which lost nothing from being in earthy Breton).

The bell in the pantry sounded. With a sigh the steward picked up the tray. It occurred to him to wonder if the job was going to be as amusing as it had seemed when he was first offered it.

At ten o'clock, on the top of the tide, the mooring cable was slipped and the *Cryptic* headed down the Solent. At eleven o'clock Major and Mrs. Collet retired to their cabins. At half-past eleven Marianne followed. The steward, who happened to be in the companionway outside the lounge, held open her cabin door and was rewarded, this time, with a smile. A moment later he heard her bolt click from inside. At a quarter to twelve he fetched a drink for Mr. Clinton. At twelve o'clock another drink. At half-past twelve he found the lounge empty, cleared up the glasses, and washed them in the sink in the pantry. The bell sounded, this time from the bridge. The steward frowned slightly and made his way forward.

At the wheel in the small, enclosed bridge house he found the mate, Cairns, a monkeylike man who rarely spoke and never drank. The Captain was sitting against the side of the bridge house, his head on his chest.

"The skipper," said Cairns, "would like some coffee. Black."

"At once, sir."

"And I could do with some, too."

The coffee took time to brew. When the steward came back with it, the captain was stretched flat, his head pillowed on a life preserver.

"The skipper no longer requires any coffee," said Cairns. "You may have the other cup yourself."

The *Cryptic* was dipping softly now as it cleared the southern tip of the island and met the upchannel swell. The twin Diesel engines purred like cats. A big liner, remote but ablaze with light, sailed across ahead of them.

"You'd better get your head down," said Cairns. "You'll have a lot to do tomorrow."

By eleven o'clock the next morning the steward felt that he had already finished a heavy day's work. The Collets had breakfasted and were now reading in the lounge. Neither Clinton nor Marianne had appeared. The steward snatched a moment's respite to creep on deck and see just where the yacht had set them down.

They lay in the land-locked estuary of the River Odet, half a mile above the fishing village of Benodet. The steward had never been

to Southern Brittany before, but he was aware of a feeling of familiarity. Indeed, it was more Cornish than Cornwall itself—with the high, steep river banks, close-carpeted with blue-black woods, the river, dark in color but clear, and the glimpse of a gray stone roof among the treetops.

There came a pattering of steps on the deck beside him, and a body went through the air in a kingfisher flash of green and gold, and smashed the looking glass of the river. The steward held his breath until she came up, twenty yards nearer the shore. Then he moved, and moved quickly.

Down in his cabin, a tiny cupboard off the pantry, he kept a pair of binoculars. His porthole commanded the eastern river bank, and presently he picked up the French girl's white bathing cap. Marianne was swimming toward a wooden hulk, beached on the mud. She went on until she could grab the wooden sternpost and there she rested for a few moments. Then she turned and started back, swimming lazily but happily, as if the water were her element.

A fat laugh blew off in the steward's ear, nearly making him drop the glasses. The cook, silent in rubber soles, had padded in behind him.

"Ravishing," he agreed. "But not on the menu for you, *mon gars*. Now, suppose we get on with the lunch."

Clinton appeared in time for a gin before lunch. The steward was an adaptable young man. It had not taken him long to realize that as long as a servant behaved discreetly, people would talk in front of him as if he did not exist. (Perhaps he did not exist; perhaps nothing was real in this floating world of silver and polished wood and old-young people.)

"I've never been treated so rudely in all my life," Mrs. Collet was complaining. Her ugly little mouth was well-shaped for sentences like that. "What do they suppose we are? A boat-load of week-end trippers?"

"Hardly, my dear. Hardly," said her husband.

"Then why should they come to my cabin early this morning, when I was barely out of it, and search my luggage? They were there for almost an hour."

"You were lucky," said Clinton. "*I* was still in bed."

"Bit unusual, isn't it—their barging in that way?" said the Major.

"The routine varies," Clinton explained. "They're well within their rights, of course—Benodet's a customs station. But it's the first time I've known them search the baggage."

"And what's this about our not being permitted to go ashore?"

"I think there's been some mistake about that," said Clinton. "A message from Paris perhaps that's been misunderstood. It will all be

cleared up by tonight, I'm sure."

"Meanwhile," said the girl, "I am the only one of us whose feet have touched the soil of France. And very muddy soil it was." She wriggled her bare toes in her sandals.

"They're not being wholly unreasonable," said Clinton. "I told them the cook would have to go ashore for stores this afternoon and they raised no objection."

"Decent of them, I'm sure," drawled the Major.

The steward made a mental note to accompany the cook.

Actually it was quite easy. The cook raised no objection—he appeared to have taken a liking to the steward.

They put two large baskets into the dinghy and rowed the half mile downstream to the ferry and the landing stage. For all his bulk the cook handled the oars daintily; every time he leaned forward at the top of his stroke his undershirt fell away from his chest and revealed the word *Cherie* in startling purple relief.

They tied up below the Bac and went ashore. It took an hour to find all the fruit and vegetables and fish they needed. At the end of the shopping the cook headed for a fisherman's bistro near the port.

"But I ought to be serving tea," said the steward.

"Let the pigs forage for themselves," growled the cook. "I require a drink."

It was a small, dark place which looked like a general store but had a bar tucked away at one end. The cook ordered pineapple squash and rum, which he mixed together and drank with slow enjoyment. The steward had a cup of gritty chocolate.

As they were finishing, the man behind the bar said something in the harsh local dialect and the cook hauled himself up and rolled across. For a minute their conversation continued. The bulk of the cook obscured the space in front of him, but it seemed to the steward that something was being pushed across the zinc counter. He got to his feet and moved over.

The cook's big hand closed on something. It looked like a flat packet of cigarettes. The next moment it was gone.

"Really," said the steward, "it is past five."

"Let us go," agreed the cook.

Nothing was said as they walked back to the dinghy. Nor was anything said as the cook bent again over the oars. As they neared the yacht, however, he paused for a moment in his labors and remarked, "I suggest that nothing be mentioned of our visit to the bistro."

"My sentiments exactly," the steward replied solemnly.

Nevertheless, he seemed to be deeply preoccupied. So much so that he made several mistakes in serving drinks that evening and

was criticized sharply by the owner. There was a feeling of tension in the lounge, which was not improved by the fact that general permission to land, though expected, had not yet been received. When, at last, the steward got to bed, he did something he had never done before: he slipped home the bolt on the door of the little cubbyhole in which he slept.

The next morning the atmosphere was lightened. A customs officer arrived, full of smiles and apologies. A grave error had been committed. Of course the passengers were free to land—anytime.

It was too late to organize a lunch ashore, but a picnic tea was quickly packed into a hamper by the steward and lowered into the dinghy. He had half expected he would be detailed to go with the party, but in the end it was one of the deck hands who rowed them to the jetty at the foot of the wooded slope and shouldered the basket as the party set out up the winding path, the girl running ahead, and disappeared into the blue-green of the woods.

The steward got out his glasses and watched them as they went. His attitude seemed to suggest that he felt some crisis was approaching.

But for the next hour frustration awaited him at every turn. Three times he found himself outside Marianne's cabin, and three times he was interrupted. First it was the captain, who wanted his shoes cleaned. Then the engineer appeared from the depths and demanded hot water. Then the cook wanted to borrow a cup and saucer from the pantry, which was the steward's department. The cook indicated the empty shelf where the white kitchen china, fat cups and thick plain saucers, had been stored. "The pigs," he said, "have taken them all for their picnic. Am I therefore to be deprived of a cup of coffee?" The steward unlocked the pantry china cupboard and took out two cups. He felt in need of some coffee himself.

The fourth time the steward was lucky. All seemed quiet. He turned the handle of Marianne's door and went in. The little room was full of the faint but lovely scent she used. It was as if, her physical presence being absent, she had left behind a sweet-smelling ghost to watch over her belongings. The steward wasted no time. He pulled on a pair of cotton gloves and opened the drawers of the built-in cupboard. Then he turned his attention to the suitcases crowded together at the foot of the bunk. The first two were unlocked, and empty. The third, and smallest, was locked. The steward pulled out a bunch of tiny keys, carefully selected one by size and shape, tried it, then chose another. He was precise and patient. The tenth key worked.

It was a dressing case. At first

sight he thought that it, too, was empty. Then he saw that there was a sort of wallet flap inside the lid. By its bulge he knew it contained papers. The steward pulled out the contents and stared at them for a long moment, the oddest expression on his face. Curiosity, then incredulity, finally something that looked oddly like relief.

"So that's it," he said to himself. Carefully he shut the lock of the small case and just as carefully replaced all the bags where he had found them. Then quietly he left the cabin. He did not notice that the galley door was barely open. Nor was he aware that from the darkness behind it the cook was watching him intently . . .

The guests were back on board by six o'clock clamoring for attention. They were soaked with sun and surfeited with the unusual exercise of walking up and down a steep hill. "Worth it though," the Major murmured. "Remind me of the view from the top of Jakko."

Clinton also seemed in high good humor. He had ordered claret, and as he passed round the second bottle the steward was glad to see that even the Major's wife was drinking glass for glass. He judged that the red wine and the sun would work together to his advantage, and it turned out exactly as he had calculated.

By eleven o'clock the Collets had rolled to their cabins and ten minutes later Marianne followed. Clinton lit his third cigar, called for a brandy, and settled down at the table with a portfolio of papers. When the steward arrived with Clinton's nightcap, the owner said, without looking up, "I shan't be needing you any more. You may turn in."

The steward bobbed his head, left unobtrusively, but in the passage he paused. From the nearest cabin came the sound of a reassuring snore. Under the door of the girl's cabin a thin light showed. Again he hesitated, then drew in his breath as if he were plunging into cold water, and knocked lightly on the panel.

Her voice was calm and unfrightened. "Who is it? A moment, if you please." Then, "Come in."

He pushed the door open. She was sitting in the low chair beside the bunk, smoking a cigarette. Her feet were bare but she had not undressed. She might almost have been expecting him.

He shut the door quietly behind him.

"If you wish us not to be disturbed," she suggested coolly, "you had better slide the bolt. Mr. Clinton, who does not lack for persistence, usually tries my door when he comes past to bed."

The steward said abruptly, "This afternoon I opened your dressing case."

"Yes," said the girl. "You replaced the suitcases carefully—but not quite carefully enough."

"I know your real name and your job. You are with the French police."

"And you, I imagine, with the English police. What is your real name, if I may ask?"

"Peters," said the steward. "Sergeant Peters."

"And there is another name?"

"Patrick."

"*Très gentile.* Pat-trick." She made two equal syllables of it, as if it rhymed with hat trick. Peters thought it sounded delightful. "Now, how can I help you? How much do you know?" she asked.

"I know," said Peters, "that the police of both our countries have been watching Clinton for a long time. That he is a receiver of stolen goods. That he specializes in precious stones—some historic pieces have passed through his hands. He breaks them up, the stones are sometimes recut, then they are shipped abroad, in this yacht, and sold on the continent."

"That is all conjecture."

"If it were more than conjecture, he would be in jail. But it is conjecture based on remarkable coincidences. Half a dozen times gems of great value have been stolen. Up to a certain date we know—we positively know—that they are in England. That's the precise date when Clinton always sails his yacht to Benodet. Then, a little later, we learn that the gems are in Europe. It's as simple as that."

"Simple," said the girl. "Yet not simple. There are a thousand places on a boat like this where a few precious stones can easily be hidden."

"While they are on the ship, yes. But sooner or later the moment comes when they must go ashore. They cannot walk or fly. They must be carried. And until the picnic this afternoon only two people left the ship—cook and myself."

"You are wrong." She stretched out one bare foot. "Remember, I took a swim."

"Yes, I watched you."

"Then you saw me using the old hulk as a post office."

"I saw you do something," said Peters. "But it was too far off for me to be certain. That is why I searched your things and discovered who you are."

"I took a note ashore," she said, "containing a suggestion. It was not an order. I am not in charge of this operation. But I suggested that the restriction be lifted and Clinton and his guests be allowed ashore. And I with them. You may be certain that we took not one step, made not one move, without being observed."

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. We walked up a steep path through the woods. The sailor—the one they call Ron—carried the hamper. Do you think, by the way, that he is involved?"

"No," said Peters. "We've checked the crew thoroughly. I

think they just sail Clinton's ship for him. The Captain's an old soak, but I don't think that any of them are involved—except the cook. But please go on."

"We reached a kind of plateau—an open space of grass where there is a ruined church—you can see the top of the dome through the trees. In the middle of the field there are three stone pillars. They are common in Brittany—they are very old I think."

"Dolmen stones."

"Yes. We sat with our backs against them. It was very pleasant and we had tea."

"Was Clinton ever out of your sight?"

"Not for a minute. He sat next to me and was very gallant."

"I can believe it."

"So much so that he nearly ruined my dress. He—" She broke off, then said urgently, "Shhh."

Footsteps were tip-tapping down the passageway. They seemed to halt for a moment, then passed on. The door of Clinton's cabin slammed.

"Really," said the girl. "I hardly call *that* gallant. He might at least have tried the handle."

She reached up her hand and clicked off the switch. Only the soft bunk-lamp glowed.

"You were telling me about your dress."

"It was nothing, really. We were both drinking from our cups. He leaned across and clinked his against mine—as if they were wine glasses, you understand. Only they were not wine glasses. They were common crockery cups and both of them broke. In a drawing room there would have been a mess. In a field it did not matter."

A memory stirred—something Peters had seen. In the galley, with the cook.

"Common white crockery cups?" he said. "With thick bases?"

"That is so." He saw the sudden gleam of interest in her eye. "Is it important?"

"It might be," said Peters. "They were cups which the cook used, for himself, in the galley. Why should they be used for the passengers? There are plenty of cups in the pantry."

She considered it, then shook her head slowly. "There is nothing in that. They simply would not take good cups on a picnic. In case they got broken—as they did."

"What became of the pieces?"

"When we had finished, the sailor dug a hole and buried the refuse. And the broken cups. Good God." He heard her catch her breath.

"So it's occurred to you, too, has it?" said Peters. "What better hiding place? Bake the gems into the thick bottoms of a pair of china cups, and hang them in the galley, under the cook's own eye."

"You sound so sure."

"You saw Clinton this evening," said Peters. "You must have

noticed the change from this morning. He's relaxed now, at ease. The job is done. It is clear that somehow the stones had gone ashore. And now we know how."

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to do some digging," said Peters. "Where were they buried?"

"Under the left-hand stone as you stand with your back to the river."

Peters was thoughtful for a moment. "It would be better, I think, not to take the boat."

"Take this, though," she said. It came out from her bunk—an automatic pistol. No lady's toy with inlaid mother-of-pearl grip, but a man's gun in shining blue steel.

Peters put it into his pocket. As he handled it, the metal was still warm from the warmth of her bed. She leaned forward and whispered, "Good luck, little Sergeant."

Back in his cabin, Peters stripped. Then from his kit bag he picked out and put on a pair of old khaki shorts and a pair of rope-soled deck shoes. The gun was the real problem. In the end he dropped it in his sponge bag and knotted the sponge bag by its own cords to one of the loops in his waist-belt. It swung awkwardly as he walked, but the arrangement left his hands free.

As he made his way toward the deck he noticed that the cook's cabin door was open. He looked in. The moonlight showed an empty cabin and an unused bunk. When he reached the deck, he saw that the dinghy was gone. He had heard no sound but it would have been easy enough for the cook to cast off and drift with the current until he was out of earshot.

If the cook was already ashore Peters would have to be twice as careful, and need twice as much luck.

The gangway, which ran past the porthole of Clinton's cabin, represented an unnecessary danger. Peters climbed through the sternrail, hung on by his hands, then let himself drop. The water was warm to the touch. He floated quietly downstream. The tide was near full ebb, and the current was asserting its strength. His feet touched mud a hundred yards below the landing stage. The river bank here was built up with concrete blocks against the scour; he pulled himself onto them and sat for a moment to disengage the gun, get back his breath, and improve his night sight. Above him the line of trees was unbroken, but they were mostly pine and oak and he guessed that, with a little caution, he could walk through them as quickly, and with less noise, than on the beaten track.

At first it was scrambling, with hands and feet. Then the slope leveled off. Soon after that he saw the light, dim, ahead of him, and then he had pushed through the last of the bushes and was looking

out at the upland plateau which the girl had described.

Under the pale full moon it was a place of ancient and potent beauty. The grass looked as smooth as a college lawn. In the middle stood the three crooked dolmen stones, throwing long shadows behind them, and on the edge of the clearing was the old chapel, silver-gray in the moonlight. Under that soft light, time went back. Black shades of priest and congregation were moving in the doorway, and the lights were on in the chancel. Peters rubbed his eyes. Surely it was a trick of the moon?

It took an effort of his will to leave the friendly shelter of the wood. The feel of the heavy gun in his hand helped. As he started to move, the voices started. When he stopped, they stopped. He told himself that it was the noise of his own feet, passing through the dry ankle-high grass.

When he reached the dolmen stones, he looked across to the chapel, but it had vanished. It was hidden in mist, which crept up, unnoticed, to his knees. If the mist rose higher or got thicker, it might become a nuisance. The left-hand stone, she had said. Peters knelt beside it. A large piece of turf had been cut out. Needing both hands, he laid the gun carefully down beside him.

At that moment he looked up and saw the cook, five paces away, staring at him. His hand went to the gun. A foot was on it, a booted foot, which stamped on his fingers. As he cried out, men came from everywhere—from behind the stones, from the hollow in the field, from the ground itself. Then the world stopped short on its axis and he was diving, upward and outward, into space, toward the upside-down river of stars which formed the sky. As he plunged he heard shouts, and the braying of a siren but faintly, and more faintly, as he left the busy earth and journeyed out into space . . .

There was sunlight in his eyes when he opened them, and a very pretty girl in a nurse's uniform was doing something to the slats of the venetian blind and saying, "Only five minutes—no more." Peters turned his head painfully, and saw Chief Superintendent Hazlerigg, his bowler hat between his hands and a look of sardonic interest on his brick-red face.

"Where am I?" asked Peters in a barely audible voice.

"At Quimper," said Hazlerigg, "in a hospital run by the Sisters of the Sorority of the Ensanguined Heart. At least, that's what I think it means. My French isn't a patch on yours."

Peters gathered from Hazlerigg's tone that all was reasonably well. "Have you got the stones?" he said. "What were they?"

"The Ladbrook emeralds, none other," said Hazlerigg. "Six lovely

stones. But no thanks to you. Or was it? I'm not sure. This has been rather a muddled case. As I said to the Commissioner, we ought either to have told you a lot more, or a lot less."

"You told me to expect help from the French police," said Peters. "When it turned out to be that girl—"

"Marianne," said Hazlerigg musingly. "Yes. She's in jail with Clinton. You realize she was not being exactly candid with you?"

Peters said nothing.

"The papers you were allowed to discover in her suitcase—the ones that indicated she was with the French police—they had, of course, been planted there for you to find. Not that we lied to you. There *was* help on board. I expect you realize that now. The cook. A very experienced hand. The trouble was, *he* hadn't been told about *you*. A bad lack of liaison. But he suspected you might be on the side of law and order when he caught you watching the girl through binoculars. That was why he took the shore trip. When you suggested coming, he was sure of you."

"If he knew I was on his side," said Peters, "why didn't he tell me?"

"By then it was too late. Clinton and his friends were wise to you too."

Peters grasped at the disappearing skirts of reality.

"Do you mean," he said, "that the girl—that she knew? All the time? Then why did she tell me about the broken cups. Why not just send one of her own side to dig them up? Wasn't it risky?"

"It would have been risky," agreed Hazlerigg, "if the stones ever were in the cups. But they weren't. You were told that story simply to make you go ashore. But the cook heard it. He'd fixed a microphone in her cabin."

"He'd *what?*"

"He had them in all the cabins. I tell you, he's a professional, that man. When he heard what was up, he took the boat and went ashore ahead of you and tipped *us* off. It was a close race, but we got there more or less together. Not in time to stop you getting hurt, but in plenty of time to round up *their* party. She'd left a message for them on her early morning swim, so they knew the plan."

Peters said feebly, "I've no idea what you're talking about. *What* plan? How *did* the stones get ashore?"

"That bit was really quite simple," said Hazlerigg in a kindly tone. "*You* got them ashore. You were carrying them yourself—six lovely stones wrapped in cotton wool, in the magazine of the gun she gave you."

At this point the nurse reappeared. "Do you wish to kill the boy," she said sternly, "with your chattering. Out with you this moment! No, not another word!"

EDITORS' FILE CARD

Author: GUY NEDMON

Title: CONVERSATION PIECE

Type: Short Short-Short

Locale: Anywhere

Time: Anytime

Comments: Duologue de luxe

"No!"
"Yes."
"You didn't!"
"I did."
"When?"
"Just now."
"Where?"
"Bedroom."
"Dead?"
"Yes."
"God!"
"Yes."
"Why?"
"You know."
"I don't!"
"You do."
"Unfaithful?"
"Yes."
"With whom?"
"With you."
"No!"
"Yes."
"She didn't --"
"She did."
"We didn't --"
"You did."

"You knew?"
"I knew."
"How long?"
"Long enough."
"What now?"
"Guess."
"Police?"
"Later."
"Why later?"
"Guess again."
"Tell me!"
"Look."
"Oh, no!"
"Oh, yes."
"You can't!"
"I can."
"Please!"
"Don't beg."
"Forgive me!"
"Too late."
"Good God!"
"Goodbye."

"Operator?"
"Yes, sir."
"The police."

SUDDENLY IT'S MIDNIGHT

by WHIT MASTERSON

(*Continued from page 24*)

TURGEON PICKED UP HIS HAT from the bed and turned to Ilene. "You be packed and gone on the midnight plane. And now my map and opera glasses—I don't believe in leaving any loose ends."

Jim Penn left the plant at five thirty that afternoon, intending to go home and change clothes before meeting Bev for dinner at the club. He had driven half the distance when he began to feel that he was being followed.

In the gathering dusk it was impossible to identify his pursuer—or even to be positive that a pursuer existed. But a pair of headlights seemed to dog his trail with too much persistence to be just another suburbanite homeward bound. The blonde again? Penn wondered. Or someone else?

He drove on, his attention divided grimly between the rear-view mirror and the road ahead. He supposed he should feel frightened but he did not. "You asked for it," he muttered to his unknown shadow. "Let's see what happens."

There was no chance of capturing the other car on the road home; every time Penn slowed, the trailing headlights did likewise. Penn thought he knew the solution. His driveway was shielded on one side by a eugenia hedge that extended to the sidewalk, a barrier high enough to hide a car. Several blocks from his house Penn stepped on the gas, pulling away from his pursuer to gain time to maneuver. He swung into his driveway and braked the car sharply behind the hedge, switching off the lights but leaving the engine running.

He didn't have to wait long. In less than a minute the second automobile came along the street, slowing to little more than a crawl as it neared Penn's driveway. Now, Penn thought, and threw his car into reverse. He hurtled backward into the street. There was a squeal of brakes and then a clash of metal as the two vehicles collided. Before the echo had faded, Penn was out of his door and around the rear of his car.

From behind the wheel of the other automobile Shawley's thin face regarded him mockingly.

"Okay," Penn told the Vulcan security chief. "You want to talk—or shall I beat an explanation out of you?"

"Well, I don't think either of us would care for that." Shawley seemed more chagrined than embarrassed. "I was following you. Orders of Mr. Conover."

"It figures," Penn said. "Okay, you've done your job. Now beat it." He turned and got back into his own automobile. But when he had parked it in the garage, he found Shawley waiting for him on the lawn. "What do you want now?"

"Just a little pow-wow."

"I'm going out," Penn said curtly, opening his front door. He added over his shoulder, "To the club to have dinner with my wife. Be sure to tell Conover."

"Let him fret about it," said Shawley. Uninvited, he followed Penn into the house. "Um, nice place you've got here. Where do you keep the liquor?"

"Find it yourself. You're a detective." Penn went off into the bedroom. While he was changing his suit, Shawley wandered in, a highball in his hand. "What do you want, anyway?"

"Professional curiosity. How'd you know I was behind you? I must be slipping."

"Maybe. Or maybe the letters have got me to the point where I keep glancing behind me. I must look pretty furtive by now, to all concerned. Were you one of the parade at the golf course this noon?"

"I was on your tail, all right, but I got a flat tire and lost you." Shawley moved around to where he could watch Penn in the mirror. "You got a right to be burned up, I guess. But I think we're on the same team."

"Stow it, Shawley. You're Conover's hired hand."

"I work for Vulcan, not Conover. If it's of any interest to you, I don't agree with what Conover is doing in this situation."

Penn regarded him with less hostility. "I didn't realize you went in for moral values. You surprise me."

"Who's talking moral values? I'm speaking professionally. And, professionally, Conover is dead wrong in concentrating on you. He should be going after the man who wrote those letters." Shawley smiled. "Unless, of course, you wrote them yourself—in which case, Conover is the smartest cookie in the jar."

"Why should I write letters to myself?"

"No reason I know of. That's why I think Conover is wrong. I'm a hunch player, Penn. Most cops are, you know. And my hunch is that you're the patsy in this whole affair."

"You mean, you don't credit me with enough brains to be anything worse."

"Let's say you'd be out of character. I tried milking my friends down at headquarters about you but I didn't even get your name

out of my mouth. The minute I mentioned aircraft executive they started talking about the Vincent Gamil killing. So I shut up because my job isn't to drag you into an unsolved murder, too. But that started my hunch working. Could there be a connection?"

"Between the Gamil murder and my letters? I never thought of the two being linked." Penn frowned over this new idea. "I don't know anything about Gamil, except the stories I've heard around the club."

"Too bad we can't run it down," murmured Shawley, studying his glass.

"Maybe we can. I know Wayne Alexander pretty well. I could go over and talk to him, just as one friend to another . . ." He broke off and stared hard at Shawley. "I've got a strange feeling that is exactly what you want me to do—and that is the real purpose of this conversation."

"Who's playing hunches now?" asked Shawley, grinning. He set down his empty glass. "Let me know what you find out."

"Wayne's in the den," June Alexander said, admitting him. "You know the way."

"I hope I'm not disturbing him," said Penn.

"Oh, he's just sorting out first-of-the-month bills. He'll be glad to see a friendly face." She smiled wanly. "If you know what I mean, Jim."

Wayne Alexander looked up in surprise as Penn raped lightly on the open door. He was a serious young man, about Penn's age. "Well, this is a surprise. Come on in." He indicated the coffee table drawn up before his chair. It was littered with invoices. "Just doing my homework."

"Don't let me interrupt."

"Glad of an excuse to quit. What's on your mind, Jim?"

Penn sat down, noticing how tired Alexander looked. He wondered if the same sort of strain was reflected in his own face. "I wanted you to tell me the whole story about Gamil."

"Et tu, Brute?" Alexander sighed and passed a hand over his face. "I think I'll have a recording made and save my voice. Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Everything. I'm trying to run down something that might help clear it up."

Alexander appeared too weary even to be curious. In a flat voice he repeated the story. Vincent Gamil, whom Alexander had known only as a neighboring rancher in Nevada, had come to town to discuss the sale of a portion of his land. He had been Alexander's dinner guests. The Alexanders, in showing their guest a good time, had taken him to the country club's regular Friday night dance. In the middle of the evening Gamil suddenly excused himself. Without any explanation

he returned to the Alexander house, picked up his bag, and started to leave. He had been shot to death with a .32 while backing his car out of the Alexander driveway. "And that's it," concluded Alexander. "I don't know any more now than I did then. What do you make of it, Jim?"

Penn shook his head, trying unsuccessfully to relate the murder to the anonymous letters.

"Me, too," agreed Alexander bitterly. He glanced at a bill in the stack before him, studied it, then raised his eyebrows. "Hey, June," he called to his wife in the next room. "What's with this phone bill? Who'd you call in Las Vegas on—" Alexander stopped. "Now that's queer."

"What is?"

"Here's a long distance call to Las Vegas—and on the same day Gamil was killed."

"Hold on," said Penn. "Do you suppose Gamil called someone in Las Vegas while he was here picking up his bag, just before he was shot?"

"Must have been. I was with him all day. I took the day off."

"Then maybe his call had something to do with why he was murdered." Penn rose excitedly. "And maybe he wrote something down, on the scratch pad or—"

Alexander shook his head regretfully. "If he did, it's been thrown away by now. Wait a second—he could have used the phone in the guest room. Probably did. Let's go see."

They hurried up the stairs to the guest bedroom. They were disappointed. There was a memo pad beside the telephone but it was unmarked. "Should have remembered," Alexander muttered. "The cops went over this room with a vacuum cleaner. If there was anything, it's gone now."

Penn, feeling something within his grasp, refused to give up so easily. "If not on the pad, then where would . . ." Abruptly, he reached for the telephone directory. It was only four months old but its cover already bore a half dozen scribbled notations, names and numbers and meaningless doodles. He thrust it at Alexander. "Recognize anything there?"

"No, just the usual—" Alexander frowned. "Now that you mention it, this looks like a strange handwriting."

Penn followed Alexander's pointing finger. It was a name that had been penciled over several times, making it stand out on the gray directory cover.

Lyle Rayho.

It was not much of a clue and Penn could understand why the police had passed it by, particularly since they could have had no knowledge of the long distance call to Las Vegas. Nor was there any proof that this name had any connection with that call, or with Gamil's murder.

Penn asked permission to use the phone and called Shawley's home number.

Shawley was waiting. "Good work," he complimented Penn. "I'll get right on it."

"Do you think it means anything?"

"Not to me. But it's a beginning. I'll let you know."

Alexander's curiosity, dormant at first, was fully awake now. When Penn hung up, he said, "I think you'd better tell me what's going on."

"I intend to—at the lunch I'm going to buy you tomorrow."

As Penn left the house, he felt a mounting excitement. At last he was doing something positive.

He had left his car at the curb. He strode out into the street and reached for the door handle. He wasn't conscious of hearing the noise but some instinct made him turn his head sharply. And then he froze, the car door half open.

From out of the darkness of the street, a huge black shape came hurtling at him . . .

Bev fidgeted and looked at her wrist watch. Where was Jim, anyway? He had promised to meet her here at the club at six o'clock and it was already half-past.

She had phoned both his office and their home. Jim had left work at the regular hour. Louella, their maid, reported that Mr. Penn had come in sometime before, accompanied by a man she did not recognize, and they had left together shortly afterward. That was forty-five minutes ago.

Bev fought a losing battle against her nerves. On an ordinary evening Jim's inexplicable tardiness would not be cause for concern. But tonight, after the events of the past two days . . . Her imagination, given its head, began to gallop. The threatening letters with their hints of death, the mysterious blonde in the taxi that afternoon . . .

She was jerked back to reality by hearing her name. It was one of the busboys, paging her as he passed through the lounge. She motioned to him. "Telephone call for you, Mrs. Penn."

Oh, thank God, she thought, as she gathered up her purse and hurried out to the bank of telephones in the lobby. It's Jim, calling to explain why he's late. Nothing's happened to him. I was a fool even to think . . . "Hello, Jim, where are you?"

"This isn't Jim," the man's voice said. "Bev? This is Wayne Alexander. Now don't get excited. Jim's had a little accident—but he's all right."

"He's all right?" Bev whispered numbly. "He's all right?" The receiver slipped from her gloved fingers and she dropped to the carpet in a faint.

"—some crazy galoot in a hot-rod nearly ran him down in front

of my house," Alexander was saying. "Jim jumped onto the fender of his car or he'd have been hit, sure. He wanted me to tell you—hey, Bev, are you listening? Bev!"

Ten minutes later, when Jim Penn arrived at the club, his wife had recovered enough to resist his suggestions that a doctor be called. Bev thought he needed a doctor more than she; his cheekbone showed a large bruise where he had collided with the outside mirror of his car and both his knees were scraped. But he was all right. They were both all right. They drove home slowly, sitting close together in silent thankfulness, saying little.

"Please call the police," Bev insisted when they were safely in their living room. "Now, right away. I was scared before, but after what happened tonight—or are you going to tell me it was just an accident?"

"No, that car meant to kill me. And you're right, Bev—I've got to go to the police." He hesitated. "But I've got to go to the company first."

"It's your life that's in danger, not the company's."

"I feel enough responsibility to my job that I have to tell them what I'm going to do—and why. I've got to risk the couple of hours it will take." Penn added, "And maybe if I stall a little longer, I'll hear from Shawley."

His phone call drew Conover away from the dinner table. "What are you talking about, Jim? Why should I call an emergency executive meeting tonight? We can get together in the morning."

"Then I guess I'll talk to the police tonight."

There was a long silence. Finally, Conover murmured, "I see. All right, Jim—if that's an ultimatum. I'll have the rest of the division heads at my office in two hours."

"I may need more than that," Penn said. "If I'm delayed, wait for me."

Immediately, he telephoned Shawley's apartment. There was no answer. "I'll give him an hour," he told Bev. He did so, and then paced nervously for another fifteen minutes. At last, reluctantly, he made preparations to leave for the executive meeting. "If Shawley calls—" he started to tell Bev, and at that moment Shawley arrived in person.

He came in with such a confident swagger that Penn didn't even allow him to sit down. "You've found it!"

"Well, let's say I found something," Shawley temporized. He allowed Bev to take his hat and fix him a drink. "One thing I'm willing to bet on. Whoever Gamil phoned in Las Vega, it wasn't Lyle Rayho."

"Oh," Penn said blankly. "What makes you so sure?"

"Lyle Rayho has been missing for the past five years. In case you're wondering how I got the story, I bought it from a friend of mine in Las Vegas."

"Get to it. Who's Lyle Rayho?"

"Ulcer type, aren't you?" Shawley grinned, then sobered. "First, let me explain the gambling setup in Las Vegas. It's not only a business, it's a way of life and even the top men have the bug. The biggest games are the quiet sessions held by the professionals themselves. The rumors of the amount of money that changes hands are pretty staggering to a salaried man like me. Now, Lyle Rayho was in the Chicago smalltime when he made a killing. He headed West, and his bank account —carefully investigated—was his admission ticket to the big boys' games. Well, he stayed even for a few bouts, but one night they came near to cleaning him. They would have, except every one of his checks bounced. Rayho had closed his bank account and skipped out on all his new friends. He vanished completely. That was five years ago. As you can imagine, the other gamblers moved heaven and earth to find him—but no dice. It wasn't really the money involved, or even their pride. No, gambling is a risky enough occupation without letting a double crosser live to brag about it. So an example had to be made of Rayho —a dead example. Except that you can't kill a man until you find him."

Bev said, puzzled, "I'm not sure that I get the connection."

"Vincent Gamil was one of those gamblers," said Shawley, emphasizing each word. "Now do you get it?"

Penn said slowly, "Gamil must have stumbled onto Rayho, here in town. He phoned the others in Las Vegas and was getting ready to leave when Rayho shot him."

"But that doesn't make sense," Bev objected. "If Gamil did recognize Rayho here, why was he running away? Why didn't he kill Rayho himself?"

"Gamil was a gambler, not a killer," Shawley said. "He wouldn't do the job himself. He'd hire it done. It wouldn't even be very expensive when you have the right connections."

Bev gave a little gasp. "Jim, that car that tried to hit you tonight . . ."

Shawley cocked an inquiring eyebrow and Penn described his narrow escape. "That sounds like a paid job, all right. It all adds up to one thing—somebody obviously thinks that Jim Penn and Lyle Rayho are the same guy. That's the only way to explain those letters."

"We're back to the same old question," Penn said. "Who wrote the letters?"

"We've got some new questions,

too. Why should you be mistaken for Rayho?"

"I don't know."

Bev said, "You don't mean that Jim might look like the man they're after?"

"It's possible. There are similar faces scattered all over the country."

"Pretty terrifying idea," said Penn in a low voice. He ran his hands over his features experimentally. "As if you have nothing that's really your own. But I've never seen or heard of my having a double around town."

"Rayho may have a new face," suggested Shawley. "You may be a dead ringer for the former Rayho. But I think we can dream up a better explanation."

"I don't suppose that one of Rayho's associates was a woman, by any chance?" Bev reddened slightly. "You see, today I happened to be parked near the golf course and I saw this platinum blonde—"

"Wait a minute," said Shawley, frowning. "Rayho had a girl friend. He ran out on her, along with the others. Her name was Ilene Menke. Seems to me she was a platinum blonde." He was silent a moment, considering. "Happen to remember what kind of car she was driving? Out-of-state license plates? Anything distinctive?"

"She was in a yellow cab," Bev said regretfully.

"That's even easier to trace." Shawley rose decisively. "If Ilene Menke is in town, I'm dying to meet her."

"You might as well know," Penn said. "I've decided to go to the police."

"Good idea. But hold off just a little longer. Maybe we can make it a party—you and the cops and Rayho's old flame. That is, it's a good idea unless . . ."

"Unless what?" Penn prompted.

"Unless you really are Lyle Rayho," Shawley said. "Then I wouldn't wait around. I'd start running now."

Turgeon drove southward. He had a definite destination in mind although as yet he wasn't certain of its location. He was looking for a good spot to hide a body.

The metropolitan section of the city fell behind him. He passed the sprawling confines of the naval base, cruised by the electric plant, crossed over the railroad marshalling yards. He scrutinized them all but found nothing to his liking.

Since his first attempt to liquidate Rayho had ended in failure, Turgeon had abandoned his original plan of an "accident." His quarry was now alerted to his danger, so time was short. Turgeon had chosen a middle course: Rayho would simply disappear.

He came to an open stretch of highway where the waters of the

harbor lapped the shore only a few yards from the pavement and he slowed momentarily before passing on. The sea gave up its dead too readily.

Ahead of him he saw a cluster of oil derricks, their framework outlined against the night sky like a ghostly forest. A few warning lights glowed atop the towers, and here and there a pump labored to suck the oil from beneath the surface; otherwise the area appeared deserted. The road was not a main highway and his automobile was the only one visible in either direction. Turgeon stopped his car and got out.

Alongside the road lay a black rectangular marsh, an oil sump into which drained the waste materials from the nearby refinery. Speculatively, Turgeon picked up a broken stick and, squatting at the edge of the sump, used it to probe the evil-smelling ooze. It was nearly four feet deep, enough to hide a man's body—perhaps forever, since the sumps were never drained but merely burned off when full.

Satisfied, Turgeon got back into his car.

It was hot in the little booth. Shawley drummed his fingers impatiently on the wall, waiting for Bev to call her husband to the phone. Penn finally said, "Hello—what've you found out?"

"I'm in a drug store across from the cab company," Shawley told him. "I just checked the dispatch sheets. The blonde was picked up at twelve forty today at the Ridgway Hotel downtown, went out to Rose Boulevard, and returned to the hotel at one fifteen."

"Then that's where she must be staying."

"Looks like it. Want to go see?"

"Give me twenty minutes," Penn said. "I'll meet you in front."

He arrived in the downtown section five minutes early. The block on which the Ridgway Hotel was situated was clogged with cars. There was a movie theater next door to the hotel and Penn decided that the show must be changing. He found a parking space some distance away and walked back rapidly.

As he neared the hotel he began to realize that the congestion didn't have anything to do with the theater, after all. Penn heard the wail of a siren and an ambulance came into view, its red lights flashing. Apprehensively, Penn pushed his way toward the center of the crowd.

He was intercepted by a uniformed police officer who was herding the onlookers back. "All right, where do you think you're going?"

"What happened, officer?" Penn asked.

"A woman jumped out of a window, that's all," the harassed

cop told him shortly. "Come on, get back now."

Penn was pushed into a shop doorway. He craned his neck over the heads of those in front of him. The orderlies were just lifting a stretcher into the rear of the ambulance. Penn caught one glimpse of the woman who lay on it. Her hair shone brightly under the street lamp. It was platinum blonde.

The ambulance doors shut and the vehicle moved off. With nothing left to see, the crowd began to break up. Penn stood where he was, feeling dazed and sick. He had never seen the woman before, yet he had no doubt who she was. A hand touched his elbow.

"You're early," Shawley said. "It's just twenty minutes now."

"Not early enough. Was that Ilene Menke?"

"She was registered as Irene Martin. But I guess we know different."

"When did it happen?" Penn asked. "Did you see it?"

"Nobody did. They found her dead in the alleyway between the hotel and the theater a few minutes ago."

"But why? Who killed her?"

"Maybe whoever brought her here to finger Rayho decided she knew too much. Or maybe Rayho spotted her. Either way, she's no help to us now." Shawley grimaced. "Well, where do we go from here—the police station?"

"I've got one other stop first. I told Conover to call an executive meeting at the plant. I've got a little speech to make."

"I wouldn't want to miss that for the world," Shawley said grimly. "I'll meet you there."

Penn had indicated to Shawley that he intended to proceed directly to Vulcan. Instead, Penn drove home. Bev met him at the front door. She took one look at his set expression and said, "You couldn't find her?"

"I only saw her as they put her in the ambulance. She's dead. Somebody shoved her out a window."

"How ghastly!" Bev whispered. "Do they know who did it?"

"Not yet." Penn looked at his wife in faint surprise. She had put on hat and gloves as if she were ready to leave. "What are you all dressed up for?"

"I thought you might phone and need me to come with you to the police."

"I came back to tell you to stay here. I want you to lock all the doors and windows. Don't let anybody in except me—not even Shawley, if he should come around. I'm on my way to the plant."

"But, Jim, I want to help you. Staying cooped up here—"

"—will keep me from worrying about you." He took her gloved hand and squeezed it earnestly.

"They might try to reach me through you. As long as I know you're safe—" He stopped suddenly, staring down at her hand.

Faintly inked on the side of her white glove was a capital letter P.

"Now where could that have come from?" Bev said in a puzzled voice. She raised her eyes to meet Penn's stare. "What are you looking at me like that for?"

There was a moment of strained silence and finally Penn gave a shaky laugh. For just an instant a wild suspicion of his own wife had come into his mind. That was the length to which the sinister events of the past forty-eight hours had carried his imagination. "Well, Bev, I guess this makes us even for this afternoon."

"We both must be losing our minds. This is the same kind of printing as the letters, isn't it?"

"It looks the same to me."

"But where could I have gotten it?" Bev knitted her brows, trying to remember. "The gloves were fresh this evening. I put them on when I went to the club to meet you. Let's see, where exactly did I go? I sat in the lounge, then went to the phone when Wayne Alexander called . . . and then I fainted. After that, I don't remember anything until I woke up on a couch in the manager's office. Unless somewhere I brushed my hand against a freshly inked sign, I don't see—"

"In that case, the letter would be backward." Penn paced up and down excitedly. "No, the letter on your glove's not in reverse, so somewhere along the line you touched the rubber stamp itself. If it had happened while you were conscious, you'd have noticed, surely. So that means it happened while you were passed out." He took her by the arm. "Lie down on our couch, the way you were when you woke up."

Bev obeyed, murmuring, "I'm not sure I remember exactly . . ."

"It doesn't have to be exact." Penn stood over her, frowning. "Suppose one of the letters from a printing set—the letter P—had fallen onto the floor next to the couch. Or maybe between the cushions. Your hand might have brushed against it."

"That doesn't explain what the rubber stamp was doing in the manager's office."

"No," agreed Penn slowly. "But maybe the manager can."

Cleve Holladay was in his office but Penn did not disturb him. Instead, he took a seat at the bar, watching Holladay's door in the mirror.

Presently Holladay appeared, carrying a menu toward the kitchen. Casually, Penn rose and sauntered across the lounge. He entered the manager's office and closed the door behind him.

He went directly to the sofa and, kneeling, inspected the carpet

beside it. He found nothing. After that, he removed the leather cushions one after another, scrutinizing each. He did not find the letter P but Penn fancied that on the webbing that covered the springs there was a smudge of ink. From the sofa he turned to Holladay's desk.

Penn was crouched, searching the bottom drawer, when a surprised voice exclaimed, "What's going on here?" and he raised his head to see Cleve Holladay staring at him from the doorway. "What are you doing in my desk?"

Penn straightened and, in answer, displayed the toy printing set he held in both hands. "Shut the door," he advised the manager quietly.

Holladay obeyed, his face paling beneath its tan. He didn't come any closer. "Even as a member, you have no right—"

"I'm not here as a member. I'm here to answer your letters—the ones you printed with this set."

Holladay's eyes darted about, anxious and seeking. "I don't know about any letters. I use that set to print notices. For the bulletin board."

"I looked at the board on my way in. Everything there is typewritten." Penn flung down the toy and moved around the desk. "Now start talking, Holladay."

Holladay shrank back. "Don't kill me!"

Penn halted in astonishment. "Kill you? Why should I kill you?"

"Just leave me alone! I don't want to die like Gamil!"

Implacably, Penn viewed the manager's obvious terror. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't. Just who do you think I am, anyway?"

"Lyle Rayho," whispered Holladay. "I knew you back in Chicago. You wouldn't remember me—I wasn't anybody in your crowd—but I remember you. I didn't recognize you until you killed Gamil, the night he was here and saw you."

"If I killed Gamil because he knew me, why shouldn't I do the same to you?"

"It won't do you any good," Holladay pleaded. "Believe me, Mr. Rayho, it won't help you. They already know all about you. They've already sent a man here."

"They? Who are they?"

"I don't know exactly," Holladay mumbled. "The gamblers in Las Vegas. I don't want to know their names. It's not healthy to know too much."

"For a man who's so concerned with his health, it seems to me you've been taking some big chances, writing those letters."

Holladay nodded wearily. "My mistake. I thought I had a setup. I needed the money and I knew you were marked to go any minute. Sure, I knew you were dangerous to fool with but I figured

I'd be able to milk you for at least one payoff. And before you got around to being too dangerous, you'd be dead."

"You're wrong. My name isn't Lyle Rayho. I'm Jim Penn, no matter who I look like to you. There's been a big mistake." Penn flexed his hands. "Of course, I'd like to break your neck for those letters. But I guess I'll leave your punishment up to the law." He took a step forward. "Now get out of my way."

Holladay nearly tripped in his eagerness to scramble aside. Penn surveyed him with grim amusement. "Don't you believe what I said. I'm not Rayho."

"Sure, I believe you," Holladay said hastily. "But if you're not really Rayho, why don't you call the cops now?"

"I'd love to. But I have to attend a meeting first." He saw a shadow of skepticism cross the other man's face. "Believe me, I'll be back for you, Holladay. Or are you counting on my assassin catching up with me first?"

"No—nothing like that, Mr.—" Holladay didn't complete the sentence as Penn left him standing there.

It's not right for him to take all the chances, thought Bev. Huddled anxiously by the phone, she had undergone a half hour of lonely silence in the big house.

What happened at the club? If only I knew that he'd got that far safely. Bev reached for the receiver, then withdrew her hand. To phone the club might spoil Jim's plans. And she didn't want to call the plant.

Doesn't he realize how much I worry about him? Abruptly, she went to the closet for her coat. Then she trotted upstairs to the maid's room to instruct Louella. "If Mr. Penn calls, I've gone to the club. I'll wait for him there."

Bev backed out her station wagon and raced off into the night.

Shawley was lounging impatiently near the elevator doors when Penn stepped off on the fifth floor of the Fishbowl. "You're a slow driver," he chided. "I was beginning to get all sorts of ideas."

"You worry too much. Where's everybody—in Conover's office?"

"Yeah. And if you think I'm edgy, wait till you get a load of them."

Followed by Shawley, Penn strode through the deserted anteroom and entered the spacious office of the executive vice-president. A general chorus of relief mingled with annoyance rose at his entrance.

Penn didn't sit down. "I want to apologize for making you wait so long. I just couldn't get here any sooner."

"Do you mind explaining the precise reason for this unprece-

dented meeting?" inquired Conover. "These men have homes and families, you know."

"And so do I," Penn said. "Yesterday I was fool enough to turn over my private life to this company. Since I took that action on the executive level, I felt it was necessary to withdraw my private life on the same level. I want you all to know that when I leave this room I am going straight to the police—as I wanted to do from the beginning, and as I should have done."

They all stirred and Conover said soothingly, "Now, Jim, I know you're under a strain but let's not go off half cocked. We've got to think of Vulcan."

"For the sake of Vulcan I have allowed my name to be smeared and my life to be in danger. I was nearly killed tonight and a woman was killed. Most of this could have been prevented, perhaps all of it, if we had acted like sensible human beings instead of scared sheep."

He thought he saw agreement on some of the faces but Conover said quickly, "Authority brings responsibility. Men in our position can't think solely of themselves. That's the cross all executives must bear."

Penn plunged ahead. "I owe Vulcan this—to give it my best work and to remain a decent citizen. Everything else is my own business." He strode across the room to confront Conover. "And now I want my private correspondence back."

"Am I to assume that this is your resignation, Jim?"

"After my name is cleared, you'll get my formal letter of resignation." Penn paused. "That is, unless you care to make certain changes around here."

"What sort of changes?" asked Conover, his eyes narrowed.

"I suppose you might call it restoring a little dignity to our jobs, making us feel that we're members of the firm instead of inmates of an institution—or children in a nursery. This present mess came about solely because my telephone was tapped. I don't care how prevalent the practice is, I still say it's indefensible. If you don't trust me, fire me. But don't spy on me."

Conover protested, "We've got to maintain security around here."

"Security, yes. Spying, no. Now you tap the company phones. What's next? Will you bug the washrooms and put closed-circuit TV in our homes? Maintain complete dossiers on our wives and children, as well as ourselves? That's what it's coming to—all in the name of company security. Well, I can't work with someone snooping over my shoulder. I don't think any decent man can." He looked at Conover, then around at the others. "However, I think we're all to blame, myself

as much as the rest. We should have put our foot down in the beginning. Well, I'm putting my foot down now."

There was a silence when Penn had finished. Conover cleared his throat. "I've never said a team member doesn't have the right to disagree. However—"

Woodrow, the plant engineer, interrupted him. "I guess this would be as good a time as any to speak my piece. I've had an offer from up north—though it's probably not a secret since none of us seem to have any—and because I feel the same as Jim here . . ."

"Now hold on," said Conover. "There's no reason—"

"I agree with Jim and Woody," said the Purchasing chief. "That part about restoring some dignity rings the bell with me."

Someone else said, "I haven't had any other offer but I guess I could get one, if it came to that."

Conover waved his hands for silence. "What is this, a mutiny?" He forced a chuckle, glancing around the group for support.

Shawley spoke up with a straight face. "I'm with you all the way, Mr. Conover. I've been wanting to expand my section. I could hire some extra men, maybe put a twenty-four hour watch on all the executives and their wives . . ."

In the rising tumult of voices Conover couldn't make himself heard. He finally rose and pounded on his desk. "Let's have a little order here," he commanded, quivering with anger. "Just what do you men want, anyway?"

"Jim has already told you," Woodrow said. "A new security policy. And since this is on the policy level, I move we take it upstairs to the Old Man."

Imperiously, Conover looked directly at each man in turn, seeking support. His seamed face began to tighten. "No need for us to lose our tempers," he murmured huskily. "We're a team here, as I've always said. It's what the team wants that counts . . ."

Penn didn't wait to hear any more. He gathered the three blackmail letters off the desk and slipped out quietly while Conover was still speaking. He didn't have to hear the surrender; in a way, he didn't even want to hear it.

As he crossed the executive parking lot a horn beeped softly and an automobile pulled up beside him. A man he had never seen before peered out at him, a squat man with a taciturn face. "Mr. Penn? I'm Doctor Morton. Your wife's been in an accident and she needs you right away."

"Bev? Where is she?"

"At municipal hospital." The stranger opened the car door. "Get in and I'll drive you there."

Penn hesitated, then grinned

oddly. "Okay, you're the doctor." He climbed in beside the other man and they drove off together.

Several persons had seen Jim Penn leave the club, so Bev felt considerably relieved. It bothered her now that she had so flagrantly ignored his instructions to stay locked in the house. But he'll know where I am when he calls, she argued, and I'm safer here in a crowd.

She sat in a secluded corner booth, not drinking, keeping an eye on the manager's office. She couldn't imagine what Penn had learned in there. Apparently nothing to the detriment of Cleve Holladay, for she occasionally caught sight of him going about his duties as usual, his flashing smile more confident than ever. Now he had returned to his office, closed the door . . .

Bev watched the door carefully, wondering. What if Penn had discovered that Holladay was the blackmailer? If so, what was Holladay so exuberant about? She longed for Jim to appear and tell her that all their troubles were over, that they no longer had anything to fear . . .

They passed the tall wire fence of the naval base, then headed south. The man at the wheel drove with one hand; the other lay out of sight in his lap. They had not spoken since the parking lot.

Penn said, "What's your real name, by the way?"

"You're a good guesser," said the other man and showed the pistol in his free hand. "You can call me Turgeon. Why did you get in the car without a fuss?"

"I figured you might shoot me right there if I didn't. And maybe I figured we could talk."

"I'm not for sale," Turgeon said. The lights from the electric plant reflected from his eyes, making them glitter like diamonds.

"I just want to ask you one question," said Penn calmly. "How did you find out I was Rayho?"

"You know that. Gamil recognized you at your country club."

"Gamil can't tell you which one he saw. And the club has a lot of members."

"Holladay remembers you."

They swept across the overpass that spanned the railroad yards. Penn held up the three letters. "See these? Holladay wrote them. They're blackmail letters. That's how far Holladay can be trusted."

Turgeon murmured, "He's a very slippery boy, that Holladay." He pulled the car over to the side of the road. "Don't try anything. I'm rather fast."

Penn studied Turgeon as the assassin read the letters by the dashboard lights. Turgeon's taciturn expression didn't change. He gave the letters back to Penn and sent the car rolling forward again.

"Well?" Penn demanded.

"I don't see that means anything. He knew you were Rayho and tried to work both sides."

"Holladay hadn't seen Rayho in years. Even then, he never really knew him. He told me so. Are you going to kill me on his word alone?"

"Why kick it around? The string's run out, Rayho. Ilene Menke is in town. She fingered you. She wouldn't make a mistake."

"She must have made at least one. Or didn't you know she's dead?"

Turgeon stiffened. "No," he said slowly, "I didn't know that."

"Rayho shoved her out of her hotel window. The real Rayho."

"You're the real Rayho. Ilene told me so herself, after she saw you at the golf course today. Now why don't you shut up for a while?"

Penn obeyed, staring out the window at the shimmering waters of the harbor whose shore they skirted. He didn't feel particularly scared, only puzzled and very tired. Did he, as Shawley had suggested, have a double and was this one of life's grim jokes that he should die because of a resemblance to another man? It didn't seem possible that everyone —Gamil and Holladay and Ilene Menke—should be mistaken. And yet what other answer was there? . . . He sat up straighter, so suddenly that Turgeon jammed the pistol into his side. "Wait a minute!" Penn exclaimed, more to himself than to his companion. "Ilene saw me on the golf course. Was that the only time?"

"Once was enough. She recognized you, Rayho."

"But there were two of us on the golf course!" Penn nearly shouted. "Why did it have to be me she recognized? Why couldn't it have been the other man?"

"What other man? What are you talking about, anyway?"

"About the real Lyle Rayho—only now he calls himself Cleve Holladay."

"You're out of your mind," Turgeon scoffed.

"Listen to me," Penn insisted. "Holladay came here—from somewhere—about the same time I did, five years ago. He admits to having gambling connections. Suppose he is Rayho. In this town he found a nice safe spot to hide where he'd be unlikely ever to meet anybody he knew from before. For five years he builds up a whole new identity. Then one night in walks Gamil and recognizes him. He sees Gamil leave the country club in a big rush. Evidently in such a big rush that Rayho knows he's been discovered —but not unmasked. Rayho follows Gamil and shoots him, but not before Gamil has managed to tip off the other men in Las Vegas where their missing double crosser can be found."

Turgeon said nothing. He merely sped the car a little faster.

"Listen! The Rayho search has now been narrowed down to one city and one country club. Holladay's in a real spot, yet he has a choice because his Holladay identity is still his own secret. He can either run again—or he can find a substitute for the gang to kill. Well, he's a gambler, that's his whole background. If he can involve himself in the hunt, misdirect it, and convince the Las Vegas people that they've finally killed Rayho, he'll be safe for the rest of his life. But he's got to find a substitute, somebody who *might* be Rayho in hiding. It didn't have to be anybody who actually looked like Rayho—any more than I do—but the substitute had to fit certain other specifications. Club membership, about the same age, the same length of time in California, and so on. I was the unlucky guy."

Turgeon still didn't answer. Ahead lay a cluster of oil derricks.

"Don't you see? Holladay had one big factor working for him. He'd only spent a few weeks in Las Vegas and had never been well-known there. He knew none of the old gambling circle would risk coming personally to eliminate him. No, they'd send a hired killer—*and the killer wouldn't know him!* His only big problem was the person they'd send for accurate identification. They sent Ilene Menke who would never swallow me as Rayho, so that's when Holladay took his biggest gamble. He set up a situation where Ilene would see both of us together. He banked everything on the chance that you'd think she had identified me—*when all the time it was Holladay she recognized!* And that's exactly what she did." Penn shook his head slowly. "It was a sweet scheme. Holladay killed Ilene before she could find out her mistake. And you were supposed to take care of me."

They passed between the spidery rows of derricks, the only car on the road. Turgeon said, "The letters. If you're not Rayho, why should Holladay blackmail you?"

"But they're not really blackmail letters! The letters were intended to spook me, don't you understand? As a substitute Rayho, I lacked one specification. I didn't act like a man with anything to hide. The letters were meant to turn me into a suspicious character, and they worked. Until I started getting them, I never looked behind me to see if I was being followed or watched. They worked, all right, except that Holladay was just too damn clever. If he hadn't sent the letters, I'd never have known anything was going on until it was too late to care."

Turgeon halted the car. A few yards away was a dark retangular

pool, an oil sump. He said quietly, "Get out."

Penn stared at him. "Can't you see I'm telling the truth, for God's sake?"

"Get out," Turgeon repeated.

Numbly, Penn obeyed. He stood on the dirt shoulder, not bothering to run because he knew it was no use, and he waited for the inevitable.

It didn't come. Instead, Turgeon said, "You'll have to walk back. I'm sorry but I've got business some place else. But I guess you won't mind." He gunned the engine, swung the car around in a tight circle, then sped back the way they had come.

Penn stood on rubbery legs, drenched with sweat, and watched the tail-lights recede into the distance.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, completely engulfed in the wonderful sensation of being still alive. He was roused by the lights of another automobile racing toward him. Shawley was at the wheel of the car as it slammed to a halt beside him. "You all right?" he yelled anxiously. "Where's the other guy?"

Penn held onto the door handle to keep from falling. "He let me go."

"I've been on your tail all the way. I was just getting out of the elevator when he picked you up, back at the plant. I phoned the cops. They got road blocks up all over." He gestured down the road. "Another half mile and you'd have run into one of of them."

Penn looked at the forbidding blackness of the oil sump. "I think this was as far as he intended to go."

"Any idea where he's headed now?"

"Yes," Penn said. He got in. "The country club."

Shawley was a practiced driver and he knew every short cut but it was still nearly a half hour later when they skidded into the club's gravel driveway. Together, they ran up the steps and through the lobby.

Bev jumped up from her table in the lounge. "Where have you been?"

"Have you seen Holladay?"

"He's in his office. I've been keeping an eye on him, just in case."

"Anybody with him?"

"No, I don't think so. Oh, there was a waiter went in a little while ago . . . Where are you going now?"

The two men were already halfway across the room. Penn flung open the door to the manager's office. For just an instant he thought they were in time, since Holladay was sitting, quite naturally, behind his desk, looking at them. But he didn't see them or anything else. The front of his white dinner jacket was soggy with blood. Be-

hind him the window was open.

Bev gave a shriek of horror and Penn spun her around quickly and pushed her back into the lounge. "Don't look," he told her. "Forget you ever saw it."

After a moment Shawley joined them, shutting the door to keep out the curious who clustered around. "The cops are on the way," he told Penn quietly. "But it won't help Rayho any."

"Turgeon?"

"He won't get far, not with the net out. He's scared and running."

"I'm not so sure," Penn said. "He seemed pretty efficient to me. And he's certainly not afraid of anyone."

"You're the authority on guts, all right—deliberately taking a ride with a man who intended to kill you," Shawley said. "I wouldn't have done it."

Bev gasped. "Jim, is that what you did? You promised me—"

"It wasn't really guts. It was pride." Penn grinned. "I'm a Contracts man, and a good one. I like to think that I can deal with anyone."

NEXT MONTH . . .

GEORGE HARMON COXE's	*When a Wife Is Murdered*
CORNELL WOOLRICH's	*Endicott's Girl*
ANTHONY GILBERT's	*The Goldfish Button*
ELLERY QUEEN's	*No Parking*
the LOCKRIDGES'	*The Searching Cats*

GABRIEL HEATTER reports on dramatic new invention that triumphs over hearing loss and hides deafness as never before

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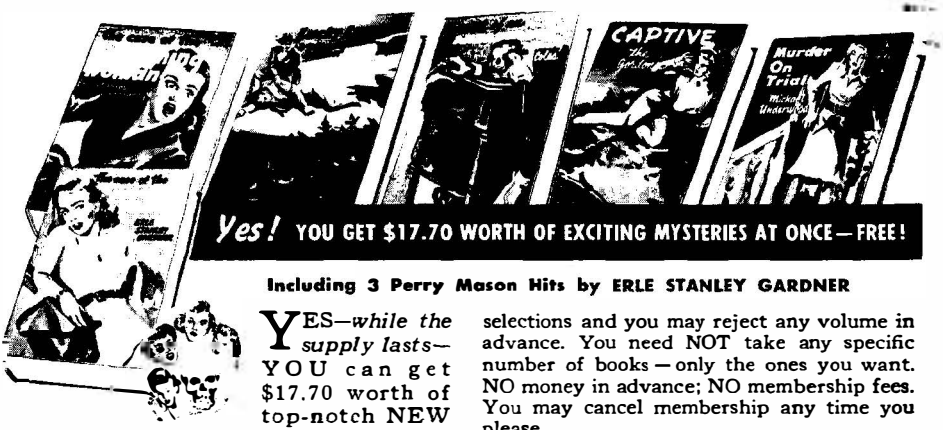

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