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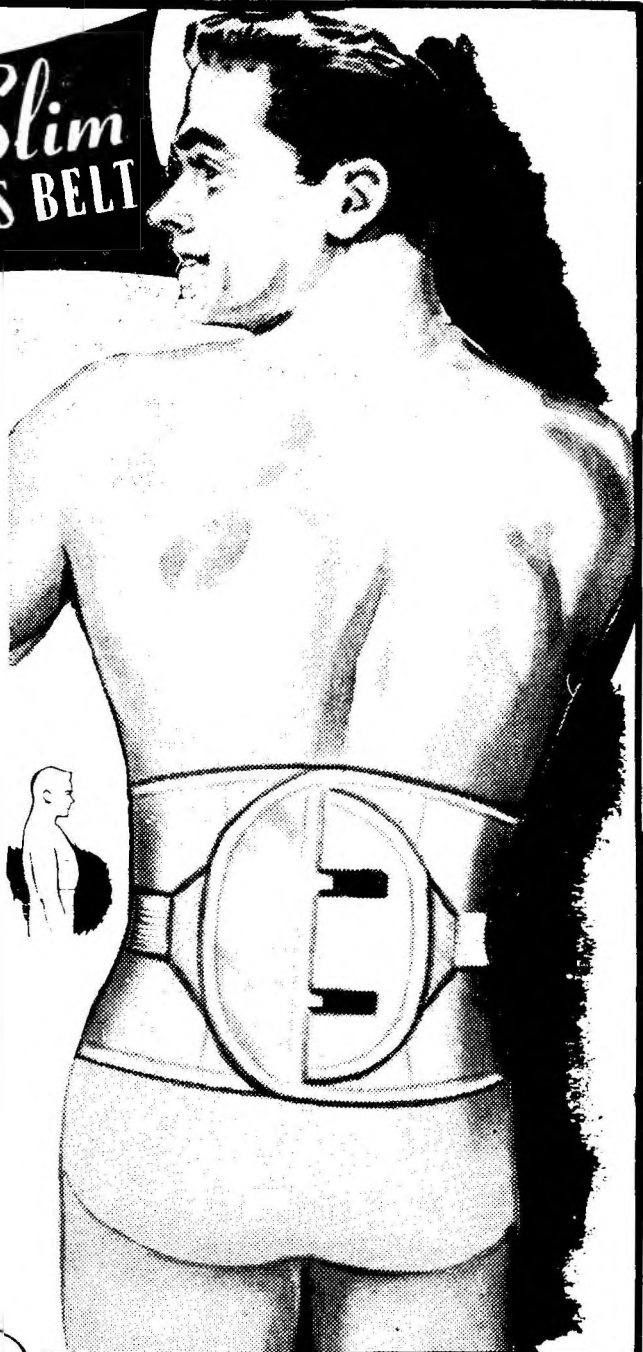
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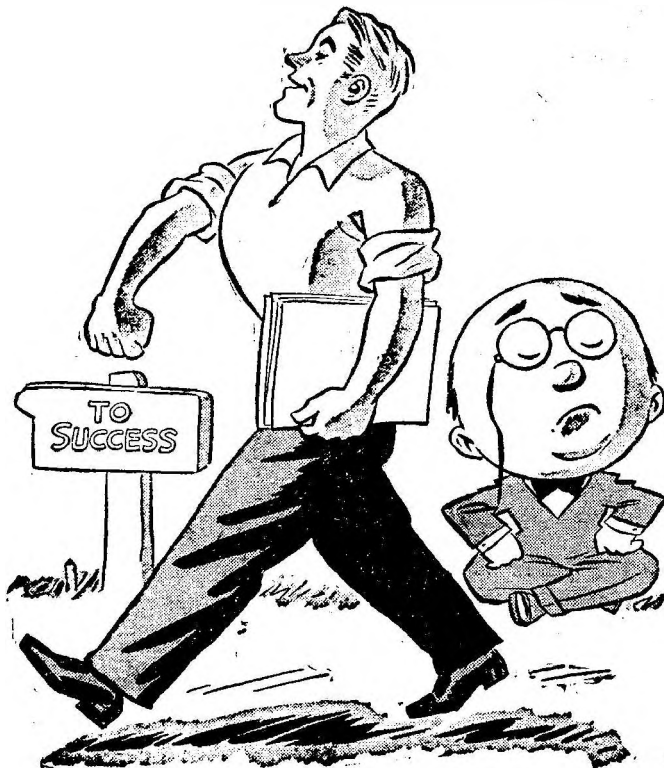


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FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

All
Stories
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Reprints

In This Issue

● Featured Fiction

- **MURDER'S OLD MAIDS (Novel)** Donald Bayne Hobart 6
The old ladies on the porch talked scandal and malicious gossip, even as murder made its appearance at this summer resort hotel. And Mark Creston couldn't help but feel that there was a connection—particularly when his wife was among the people maligned.
- **SO I'M DYING (Novelet)** Bryce Walton 35
Not only couldn't I kill Crandall myself—I couldn't let anyone else get him, because I'd be sunk in either case, and sunk just as deep!
- **THE INSCRUTABLE SIAMESE** Leonard Pruyn 52
The inside story of why Detective Sonnenberg was almost fired for solving a murder case...
- **THE COUGH** Florence K. Palmer 60
Malvinia didn't really intend blackmail, but...
- **THE WOLVES OF WERCLAW (Simon Ark Novelet)** Edward D. Hoch 70
I couldn't believe that packs of wolves were killing people in this Polish town, but it took Simon Ark to uncover almost unbelievable facts...

● Special Features

- **MURDER OR SUICIDE?** J. J. Mathews 58
- **THE SPRINGING OF SLUGS MULLIGAN (Verse)** Edward Garner 59
- **WANT YOUR FORTUNE TOLD?** Harold Gluck 64
- **SHERLOCK HOLMES — ANCESTOR** Irving L. Jaffee 66

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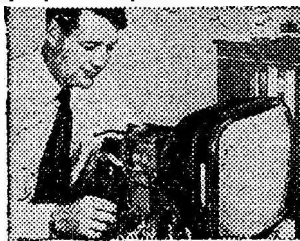
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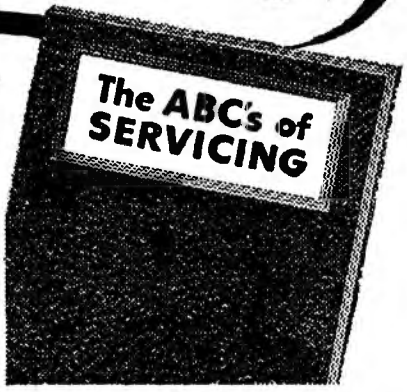
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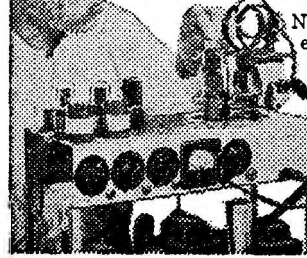
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"Jack suddenly jumped up and fell overboard."



What was the relation to the old ladies on the porch, with their malicious gossip, and the wave of murder that swept over the summer resort hotel?

MURDER'S OLD MAIDS

Featured Novel of Sinister Mystery

by DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THERE WAS something almost eerie about them as they sat on the porch of the old-fashioned New England summer resort hotel. Three old ladies who seemed part of the deepening shadows of the September dusk.

Mark Creston was conscious of their eyes watching every move he made as he came up the steps carrying his bags. A lean, tall man with quiet sureness in the way he moved. Behind him the motor of the taxi that brought him from the station gave a snort as the cab rolled away. A breeze carried the moist, salty tang of the sea as it pushed against his face.

"He's young," came from one of the old ladies in the loud whisper of the very deaf. "She'll think he's handsome—that Fairfield woman, I mean."

"Be quiet, Polly," said the one on her left; "he'll hear you."

The third old lady didn't speak. She just sat there, her white knitting nee-

dles flashing like narrow fencing swords.

Creston felt that his footsteps sounded unusually loud as he walked on across the porch and entered the hotel lobby. Behind him he heard the murmur of the three voices, muffled by the distant roaring of the sea; he was glad he couldn't distinguish the words.

The musty odors, that were always part of tired old public places, ebbed and flowed around him. The red plush furniture sagged with the remembered weight of too many strangers it had known; ceiling lights made little yellow pools on the green carpet that ran from wall to wall. A man with thin, sandy hair and pale blue eyes in a tired face stood behind the hotel desk. There was no one else around.

"Good evening sir," he said. "You have a reservation?"

"I believe so." Creston put down his bags. "I'm Doctor Creston, from New York."

"Oh, yes, of course," said the man behind the desk. "I've a room and bath on the second floor for you. I'm Adam Blakely, the hotel manager; sorry you arrived so late in the season."

"Why?" asked Creston, as he signed the register.

"Because we're a bit short-handed, now that most of the help have left," said Blakely. "We're closing up for the winter next week." There was a far-off look in the pale eyes as they stared in the direction of the porch. "Afraid you won't like it here, Doctor."

"You could be wrong about that," said Creston. "I'm tired, and want rest and quiet. Perhaps I'll enjoy it more than you think, Mr. Blakely."

"Rest and quiet," said Blakely, half to himself. "I wonder if they'll let you have either one."

From somewhere a bellboy ambled into view like a weary ape. He had a pale, wrinkled face and little dark eyes. His uniform was clean and neat. He went to Creston's bags and just stood beside them.

"Show Doctor Creston two-ten," Blakely said, drawing a key from the rack. "Where were you, Joe?"

"Two-fifteen sent for me," said the bellboy without the slightest change of expression. "She's still scared."

"Naturally." Blakely frowned and gave the bellboy a hard look. The hotel manager's smile was an automatic thing as he turned to Creston. "One of our guests—a Miss Fairfield—was nearly drowned this afternoon, and hasn't quite recovered from the shock."

"They ain't found the body yet." Joe dropped the room key into his pocket and picked up Creston's bags. "Still looking."

"Body?" Creston looked at Blakely.

"Man named Jack Summers," said the hotel manager. "He was with two-fifteen—with Miss Fairfield in the

canoe." Again Blakely stared toward the porch with that far-away look. "They didn't like him."

"They give me the creeps," said the bellboy. "This way, please, Doctor."

JOE LED Creston to a creaky old elevator and the boy ran the car up to the second floor.

"You doing all the work around the place, Joe?" Creston asked as they walked along the hall.

"Most of it," said Joe. "The cook and a couple of waitresses are still here; they serve the meals and make up the rooms. The rest wouldn't stay after—" He hesitated, then went on quickly. "After they found we're closing so soon."

The bellboy unlocked 210, switched on the lights and carried the bags in. He put them down and turned to Creston. "Anything else, Doctor?"

"That's all for now, Joe." Creston gave the boy a dollar tip. "Thank you. What time does the dining room open?"

"Seven to nine," said Joe. "Thanks, Doctor." He went to the door, hesitated and looked back. "Their names are Mrs. Martin, Miss Nash, and Miss Ward."

"The three old ladies on the porch," said Creston.

"You could call them that." The bellboy quietly closed the door behind him.

Creston stared at the door, then frowned and began to unpack his two bags and put his things away. When he finished he stepped into the bath and washed, and then combed his thick dark hair and put on his suit coat.

Satisfied, he snapped off the lights, stepped out into the hall, looked the door and dropped the key into his pocket. He was conscious of the worn hall carpet beneath his feet, the ghastly yellow of the painted walls, and the dim lights that left deep shadows in unexpected places.

For an instant he stood listening.

He'd always been sensitive to his surroundings, and there was something bleak and dismal about this old hotel. The only sounds were the far-off roaring of the sea, and the creaks and groans that night always brings to ancient wooden structures.

He shrugged, then went to the door of 215 and knocked. As he did so, he glanced back over his shoulder, half expecting the three old ladies to suddenly appear and stand watching and waiting. But there was nothing but the shadows and the dim light.

"Who's there?" called a feminine voice from the other side of the closed door.

"Mark Creston." He felt sudden impatience sweeping over him as he heard her. "Let me in, Martha."

The door open and she stood there in those Nile green lounging pajamas he had given her for her birthday last year. The red hair was a bright flame above the pale face. She seemed a bit thin, and he automatically thought she needed a thorough medical check-up.

"You did come in answer to my wire, Mark." He stepped into the room and she closed the door. "I—I wasn't sure you would; I just hoped."

"I was surprised," Creston said. "You wired you were worried—to please come at once. I didn't think you'd ever want or need me again."

"Of course you'd feel that way." She nodded as she dropped into a chair. "We both said such bitter things the last time we were together. I said more than you did."

"I'm inclined to doubt that." He frowned. "What's this about Jack Summers?"

"Then you've heard about it?" There was fright in the big amber eyes. "Have they been talking to you, Mark?"

"They?" Creston looked puzzled, then gave her a startled glance. "You mean the old ladies?"

"Yes," said Martha. "Miss Nash,

Miss Ward and Mrs. Martin." She moved restlessly. "I'm terribly afraid of them, Mark. They've hated me during all the month I've been here—I don't know why."

"**P**ERHAPS it's because you're still young and lovely," Creston said, then smiled ironically. "I'm a fool to say that to my wife after she left me for another man."

"Left you for another man?" Martha stared at him in amazement, then laughed almost hysterically. "Great Heavens, Mark, have you really thought that I left you for Jack Summers?"

"That was my impression," he said a bit stiffly. "After all, he was one of the reasons we quarreled before you suddenly walked out on me and came here."

"I know," said Martha. "You were always a little jealous of Jack—because I knew him even before I met and married you five years ago, and—"

"And saw him again quite frequently during the past year or so," said Creston. "So, naturally—"

"I've tried to make you understand. I was very lonely, and your patients left you so little time for me."

"I warned you what the life of a doctor's wife would be like; you understood once. Had Summers been here all the past month?"

"No. I hadn't seen or heard from Jack until he appeared here unexpectedly, two days ago. I didn't even know he'd learned where I was until he arrived." Martha frowned. "After I left you in New York, I came to this hotel to be alone—to think things over. That's why I'm registered as Miss Martha Fairfield instead of Mrs. Mark Creston." She shuddered. "But they knew."

"The old ladies on the porch?" Creston asked.

"Of course," said Martha. "There's

something cruel and horrible about them. Day after day, and far into the evenings, they've sat there gossiping about every guest in the hotel. They're clever about it, too. So insidious—"

"How do you mean?"

"At times, they seem all sweetness and light. Such dear kindly out souls—particularly when the very deaf one is wearing her hearing aid; and yet—"

"Yet what?"

"They manage to spread their gossip—their lies—and make it stick. The other guests gradually left a few at a time, afraid the old ladies would blacken their reputations by lies, even though they hadn't done so yet."

"What sort of lies?" Creston asked.

"They said one woman's husband was having an affair with one of the chambermaids," said Martha, "and made it so convincing the wife finally believed it. She'll never quite trust him again. It ruined the maid's life, too; the man she was engaged to jilted her."

"Good Lord!" Creston exclaimed. "Are they really that bad?"

"Worse," said Martha. "Some of the things they've hinted about the guests and employees here I'd rather not repeat, even to you."

"Why hasn't Blakely managed to get rid of them?" Creston asked. "A hotel manager should be able to do that."

"He can't. They've been clever; all three had paid their board here in advance until the end of the season. They've announced they intended to stay until the hotel is completely closed." Martha looked anxiously at the door as if suspecting the old ladies were listening outside. "That's why most of the guests and the help are gone and Blakely is closing the hotel next week."

"What did they say about you, darling?" Creston demanded gently.

THAT I was a married woman hiding from my husband and

using my maiden name so—so I could have a good time with every man I meet," Martha said bitterly. "They talked so much that every male guest here was afraid to even glance in my direction."

"Even Jack Summers?"

"No; Jack wasn't afraid of the old ladies. He was a fool to be so brave about it." Martha lowered her voice and again looked nervously at the closed door. "He told them to their faces they were malicious gossips. They killed him for it, and tried to kill me, too."

"How could they?" demanded Creston. "I understood you and Summers went out in a canoe, and you were saved and he was drowned."

"Jack wasn't drowned," Martha said slowly. "He was shot and killed by a bullet from some sort of a noiseless gun. The canoe overturned when his body fell into the water; a second bullet just missed me."

Mark Creston stared at his wife, unable to believe what she'd just said. Yet he knew her so well, he felt he could be sure if she were lying. Martha never had been very good at that sort of thing.

"You're certain Summers was shot?" he asked. "You told the police about it?"

"I'm sure," said Martha. "And I didn't tell the police anything; they haven't questioned me to any extent—just took it as a matter of fact that the canoe tipped over. They made it plain they thought we were fools to be out in one in a choppy sea. I was able to swim to the beach, but they're sure that Jack drowned."

"I see," said Creston. "But if the police find the body—and there's a chance they will, for a man who's dead before his body hits the water quite often floats—you'll *have* to talk." He smiled at her. "But don't worry, darling. I'm here and I'll protect you."

"I know you will, Mark. That's why

I sent for you before—before anything actually happened.”

She rose and came to him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said as he released her. “I’m hungry—how about having dinner with me, Mrs. Creston?”

“Why I’d be delighted, Doctor,” Martha said. “Run along to your room while I change. If I appeared in these pajames, I’d really give the old ladies something to talk about.”

He laughed. “I’ll be back in twenty minutes or so; I warn you I’m really hungry.”

Creston returned to his room feeling younger and far more light-hearted than he had in weeks. Martha hadn’t left him for Jack Summers or any other man. Everything was again all right with his world.

He decided the occasion called for a clean shirt and a change of clothes. He pulled open the second drawer of his bureau, then stood staring at the powerful air pistol lying on top of his clean shirts. There was something damning—horribly menacing about that gun lying there. Creston again seemed to hear the voice of the deaf old lady.

“He saw his wife out in the canoe with her lover and the doctor shot and killed the other man,” said the one named Polly.

“Be quiet, Polly,” said one of the other; “he’ll hear you.”

Creston shuddered, wondering what trick of the imagination had made him think he heard their voices. He remembered he had locked his door when he went to Martha’s room and it had been still locked when he came back here.

“They couldn’t have unlocked the door unless they had a pass key,” he said to assure himself. “So they didn’t plant the gun in my bureau, unless—”

Why should he suddenly think of the old ladies as the Three Fates. A locked door wouldn’t have mattered to them...

- 2 -



FIFTEEN YEARS as a successful general practitioner had taught Doctor Mark Creston to make swift decisions regarding the welfare of his patients; but personal reactions were not always acted upon so swiftly.

His feeling at the moment had nothing professional about it, there was something terrifying in the air gun being in his bureau drawer.

He was tempted to examine the weapon, but controlled the impulse; as long as he didn’t touch the pistol, his fingerprints couldn’t possibly be on it. It was strange how important that seemed at the moment. He had visions of being questioned by the police, and contending that he couldn’t possibly have handled the pistol since there was no sign of his fingerprints.

“But they might insist I wore gloves,” Creston muttered. He shoved the drawer shut and breathed a sigh of relief, now that the murder weapon was no longer visible. He completely dismissed the idea of changing his shirt. He would have to lift the gun to get a fresh one, and he had no intention of doing that.

His one thought, as he turned away from the bureau, was to get back to Martha as swiftly as possible. There was a murderer lurking in this old hotel; danger was something constantly waiting for Doctor Creston and his wife.

Creston started for the door, then ganced at his wrist-watch. It hadn’t been more than five minutes since he’d left Martha, and he’d promised to give her at least twenty minutes to change and get ready to go down to dinner with him. He’d better wait a little

longer, though it was hard to do. Martha never had liked to be hurried about dressing.

Creston frowned as he heard a soft knock on the closed door of the room. He didn't like the sound; there was something so gentle about it that the rap seemed spooky. He found himself wondering if it could be one of the old ladies.

He opened the door. A tall, thin man stood in the hall. His bald head gleamed faintly in the dim light, and he stared at Creston through yellow shell-rimmed glasses.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Fuller is my name, Stephen Fuller. Mr. Blakely told me a Doctor Creston had just arrived; you're a medical man?"

"I am," said Creston coldly. "Why?"

"Well, I—that is, I haven't been feeling very well," said Fuller. "Wondered if I might consult you professionally, Doctor?"

"Sorry," said Creston. "I'm here on a vacation, not in any professional capacity, Mr. Fuller. I suggest you consult the local physician, surely there must be one."

"There is, of course." Fuller glanced nervously over his shoulder toward the elevator door. "A Doctor Ames, but I—I don't dare consult him."

"Why not?" demanded Creston.

"Because Ames is *their* doctor," said Fuller. "Miss Nash, Miss Wards, and Mrs. Martin have been his patients for years."

"What of it?" asked Creston.

"I can't go to him and tell him those—that I suspect the old ladies are deliberately trying to poison me," said Fuller. "Doctor Ames wouldn't believe it, or even admit it, even if it's true."

"Poison you?" Creston stared at Fuller in amazement. "What makes you think that?"

"That's just the trouble; I have no real proof," said Fuller. "Only—for the past week, nothing I eat tastes

right, and my stomach has been quite upset."

"I see," said Creston. "You're one of the guests here, Mr. Fuller?"

"No," said Stephen Fuller. "I own this old Seacrest Hotel. He looked pleadingly at Creston. "Couldn't you make an exception in my case, Doctor, and examine me professionally?"

"All right, Mr. Fuller," Creston said. "I'll make an exception this time." He glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's seven-ten now, and I haven't had dinner yet. Suppose I come to your room and look you over at eight-thirty tonight?"

"Thank you, Doctor," said Fuller in a tone of relief. "I'll be glad to double your usual fee—"

"That won't be necessary," Creston interrupted. "I'm merely trying to relieve your mind."

"It will. I'll be in my room—three-sixteen on the third floor—waiting for you at eight-thirty. Thanks again, Doctor."

CRESTON stood watching as the hotel owner turned away. Fuller made a thin shadow against the walls as he walked along the hall until he came to the fire door leading to the emergency stairs. He opened the door and disappeared as it swung shut behind him.

Outside, the sea muttered its sullen song; in one of the nearby rooms came the flapping sound of a blind blowing against an open window. Creston locked the door of his room from the outside, not bothering to turn out the lights. His expression was thoughtful as he walked along the corridor to two-fifteen.

Stephen Fuller showed no visible signs of having any poison in his system, but was obviously a very frightened man. In the doctor's estimation, Fuller was suffering from a bad case of nerves that had affected his appetite. That the old ladies would make any attempt to poison the hotel owner

struck Creston as ridiculous. Just what would they gain by doing such a thing?

Martha opened the door when Creston knocked. She was wearing a becoming dress he hadn't seen before, and appeared in a much calmer mood. He decided he would tell her about the air pistol and Stephen Fuller later, if at all.

"Very nice," Creston said with a smile. "The dress I mean. You always have excellent taste in clothes."

"Thank you, Doctor," said Martha. "You used to say things like that on our honeymoon, remember?"

"To be truthful, no," said Creston, as she switched off the lights and stepped out into the hall. "Nice idea. Perhaps if I'd said more of them recently, instead of being so wrapped up in my work, you wouldn't have left me."

She smiled, the amber eyes soft, the red hair burnished copper in the light of the hall. Her room door closed and the lock clicked. She placed her key in the bag she carried.

Directly across the hall the door of 214 opened. A dark man stood there staring at them in surprise. Something about him reminded Creston of an actor grown a bit old for the part but still the perennial juvenile.

"Why, good evening, Miss Fairfield," he said, in just the sort of cultured voice Creston expected.

"Good evening, Mr. March," Martha said. "I'd like you to meet my husband, Doctor Mark Creston."

The way March controlled his surprise was a nice bit of acting. He stepped toward Creston with hand extended.

"This is a pleasure, Doctor," he said. "I'm Phillip March; delighted to meet you."

The two men shook hands. March's clasp was strong and firm. Then he stepped back with a smile.

"Your husband will be quite a shock to the old ladies, Miss Fairfield—beg pardon, Mrs. Creston,"

March said. "Probably spoil the whole evening for them—I hope."

"My wife used to be on the stage," said Creston; "that's why she's been using her professional name here."

"I see," said March, with a quick glance at Martha. "You're a clever girl, Martha."

She looked startled at his use of her first name, but said nothing. Creston caught a mocking glint in March's dark eyes: A man who was always sure of himself where women were concerned. The doctor didn't like him.

"We're just going down to dinner." Creston's voice carried polite but firm dismissal. "Pardon us if we run along."

"Of course," said March. "Just remembered I must make a long distant call. I'll be down later." His smile was a surface thing that didn't reach his eyes. "Nice to have you with us, Doctor."

HE RETURNED to his room as they started along the hall. Creston and Martha walked to the elevator in silence. He glanced at her as he pushed the bell button.

"Thought you said that none here even dared look at you, because of the old ladies' talk," Creston said. "March knew you well enough to call you Martha."

"I don't understand it," said Martha with a puzzled frown. "I've barely said anything but good morning to the man. Had no idea he even knew my first name." She looked at Creston anxiously. "Don't you believe me darling?"

"Certainly," said Creston. "You've got me wondering. What does March hope to gain by making me think that you two are old friends?"

"I don't know," said Martha. "He acts and talks like an actor, but I can't recall ever hearing his name mentioned in show business, Mark."

The elevator door opened, Joe, the bellboy, was running the car. He grinned at Creston and Martha like a friendly gorilla. "Gosh, I'm glad you

and Miss Fairfield are friends, Doctor," Joe said as they stepped into the car. "I been worried about her being so nervous and all."

"Thanks, Joe," said Martha, "that's sweet of you. Doctor Creston is my husband."

"Swell!" said Joe without the slightest sign of surprise. "And I hope the old dames choke on their dinner when they learn that."

"Apparently you don't like the old ladies, Joe," said Creston.

"*Like* isn't a nasty enough word, Doctor," said the bellboy. "I hate their digestive systems. Running me ragged all summer and bringing back the ten-cent tip!"

The car stopped at the lobby floor and Creston laughed as he followed Martha out. Save Blakely standing behind the desk, there was no one in the hotel lobby. Creston wondered if the room clerks had left with the other employees and the hotel manager was on twenty-four hour duty.

"We'd better explain to Mr. Blakely that we're married, Mark," Martha said as they walked toward the desk. "That may save complications later."

"True," said Creston.

He noticed that the double doors of the dining room were now open. He could hear the hum of voices, rattle of dishes, and all the other sounds that indicated the evening meal was in progress.

"Good evening, Miss Fairfield," Blakely said as they reached the desk. "I hope your room is satisfactory, Doctor."

"Quite all right, Mr. Blakely," said Creston. "Miss Fairfield and I feel we'd better explain she's really my wife."

"Your wife, Doctor?" The hotel manager looked startled. "But I always thought—I mean this is quite a surprise."

"It's true, Mr. Blakely," Martha smiled at him. "I've been using my maiden name—which is also my stage

name, since I've been here because I—well, I wanted a rest."

"Of course, Mrs. Creston," said Blakely. "I understand perfectly. Frankly, this is quite a relief to me."

"A relief to you?" said Creston. "I don't quite understand."

"**I**'VE BEEN worried about Miss Fairfield having no one here to protect her." The hotel manager ran his hand over his thin, sandy hair, the pale blue eyes glanced toward the dining room. "Particularly after what happened to Mr. Summers."

"Have—have they found the body yet?" Martha asked.

"They have," said Blakely. "It was washed ashore an hour ago five miles further down the beach. Fred Hardy, the local chief of police phoned and told me so."

"What did you mean in saying you're glad Mrs. Creston has someone here to protect her?" Creston asked. "Do you feel she's in danger?"

"We all are," said Blakely, with a second glance in the direction of the dining room. "Chief Hardy told me Mr. Summers wasn't drowned—he was murdered."

"Murdered!" Exclaimed Creston, hoping he made his surprise convincing. "But how?"

"The chief said Mr. Summers had been shot in the heart," said Blakely.

"So that's why Jack leaped up and overturned the canoe as he fell out," said Martha. "I—I didn't know just what happened. It was all so quick." She shivered. "I guess I'm childish to be glad I was wearing my bathing suit."

"You're sure Summers was shot?" Creston asked the hotel manager. "I mean the chief of police is positive?"

"Not the slightest doubt of it," said Blakely. "According to what Hardy told me over the phone. Doctor Ames—he's the local coroner—probed for the bullet and got it out."

"I see," said Creston casually. "What sort of bullet was it?"

"The chief said it was a bullet from a twenty-two caliber rifle or revolver." Blakely's smile was a tired grimace. "Hope you or Mrs. Creston haven't a gun like that, Doctor."

"No," said Creston, thinking of the air pistol, which definitely wasn't a .22 caliber gun. "We certainly haven't a gun like that." He smiled at Martha. "Come on, my dear, let's go have dinner. I'm hungry."

- 3 -



IT WAS A typical old-fashioned hotel dining room. There were numerous tables, but only six of these appeared to be in use. At a table for four, which gave them a complete view of the room and the entrance door-

way, sat the three old ladies. Their attitude was that of rulers of all they surveyed.

Miss Polly Ward saw Creston and Martha first as they entered the dining room. She gasped and stared at the couple through rimless glasses.

"Abigail, Lucy, look!" she said, her deafness making her voice louder than she ever realized. "The brazen huzzy—she's already attached herself to the new man who just arrived."

"Hush, Polly," said Lucy Nash; "they'll hear you." She stared at the doctor and his wife as did Mrs. Abigail Martin.

Creston was conscious of the shocked disapproval in the gaze of the three old ladies, but not in the least perturbed by it. He looked them over calmly. In the course of his career he had met many charming, gracious, even lovable old ladies; but something about these three set them apart from all others of their kind. He couldn't explain it, but they struck as a trio of utterly evil old harridans.

He felt Martha stiffen as they watched her, and he realized the old fear had swiftly returned. She glanced at him, eyes pleading for reassurance, and his smile was an intimate and comforting one.

"Let's do the unexpected," Creston said softly. "Introduce your husband to the charming ladies."

Martha looked startled, then amused. An impish gleam came into the amber eyes. "Let's!" she said with the eagerness of a little girl about to play a new and exciting game. "That'll be fun."

They headed straight for the old ladies' table. They were so calm and casual about it that the trio grew uneasy. The sudden silence upon the part of the old ladies was like the abrupt ceasing of the roaring of the sea. Mrs. Martin fiddled with a fork beside her plate, Miss Nash took a quick drink of water and Miss Ward hastily attached her hearing aid to her left ear.

"Good evening, ladies," said Martha with the air of a hostess greeting old friends. "I'd like you to meet my husband—he just arrived. Miss Ward, Mrs. Martin, Miss Nash this is Doctor Mark Creston."

"Your husband!" exclaimed Lucy Nash, looking coyly at Creston. "And so handsome and distinguished looking." She simpered. "I just knew when we saw you arrive you must be a professional man, Doctor."

"Of course." Polly Ward's voice was surprisingly low and gentle now she was wearing her hearing aid. "I'm so glad you're here, Doctor. We worried about Miss Fairfield, after what happened—"

"This is a surprise, Miss Fairfield," said Mrs. Martin. She was tall and thin, with dark eyes and petulant mouth. "Though something about you made us suspect you might be a married woman." Her smile was a wintery thing. "One can always tell about such things."

"Really, Mrs. Martin?" Martha

smiled serenely. "I had no idea the marital yoke was so visible."

"Abigail knows more about those things than Polly and I do," said Miss Nash. She was short and stocky, with pinkish white hair, and make up so badly applied it almost gave her a clown-like appearance. She giggled. "We girls have so much to learn."

"Aren't you a little frightened, Doctor?" Polly Ward's eyes glinted through her glasses. "After what happened to Mr. Summers, I mean. I—I'm afraid your wife is dangerous—well, that is—" The soft voice drifted away like a hornet that left its sting and departed.

"Polly—that wasn't a nice thing to even hint." Mrs. Martin glared at Miss Ward. "You mustn't say things like that, Sister."

Sister. The last word lingered in Creston's mind. So Mrs. Martin and Miss Ward were sisters. He didn't quite know why, but he considered the fact important.

"**S**HE ONLY meant Miss Fairfield seems to attract accidents," said Lucy Nash. "Some people do—I've heard."

"I wouldn't like to think that," Martha said bleakly, the zest gone from the little game. "It wasn't my fault that Mr. Summers was drowned."

"We couldn't say about that," said Polly Ward. "The police—I mean—they decide about the guilty and all—"

"I'm glad I'm here, Miss Ward," said Creston, "as you said a few moments ago. You see it gives me a chance to protect Mrs. Creston from everything." He stared hard at the three old ladies. "Even accidents shall we say?"

"Or murder," said Martha firmly. "I hope you'll pardon us now, ladies." She turned away from the table. "Come on, Mark; I'm hungry." She glanced back over her shoulder at the trio. "In case it bothers you, Martha Fairfield is my stage name."

"And as a physician I've had quite

a lot of experience with dead in various guises," Creston said. "Even from poison."

The hate in three pairs of eyes was a livid thing that pressed against him as he swung around. Martha put a hand on his arm as they walked away. A waitress came over and led them to a table for two. Behind them Mrs. Martin voice was deliberately loud. "I wonder if she or the doctor killed her lover?"

Her words carried clearly. Creston's blue eyes narrowed. Had Abigail Martin just made the first dangerous mistake upon the part of the old ladies? How did she know Jack Summers had been killed—murdered—when apparently everyone at the hotel believed he had been accidently drowned, until Blakely talked to the chief of police over the phone this evening?

As he and Martha gave their dinner order, and the waitress left their table, Creston glanced over the few other guests in the dining room. There were only four of them present besides the old ladies and Creston and Martha. Near the door sat an elderly man with white hair and a white mustache. Not far from the Creston's table sat a young woman with dark hair and a pretty but rather blank face.

On the opposite side of the room two men who looked like traveling salesmen of the modern type sat at a table for two. One of them was thin faced, blond, and reminded Creston of a fox. The other was stout, with a smile that appeared and disappeared with the automatic regularity of a neon sign flashing on and off—and was just as impersonal.

"Quite an interesting collection of guests, my dear," said Creston. "Do you happen to know the names of the other four?"

"Yes," said Martha. "The dark haired girl is Fern Griffin, and I suspect has more than a casual interest in Phillip March. That's all I know about

her, except she thinks she's beautiful and I suspect she's dumb."

"And the old gentleman?" Creston asked.

"A Mr. Fielding—who refuses to say more than 'Good morning' or 'Good evening' to anyone here. I don't know the names of those two men sitting together at that table. I never saw them before. They must have come today."

"I see," said Creston as the waitress brought their appetizers and soup. He found himself regretting that the old Seacrest Hotel did not serve liquor. He would have enjoyed a cocktail before dinner. "Have you met Mr. Fuller, the hotel owner?"

"I have," said Martha. "Poor man, he seems worried to death most of the time, and stays in his room a lot. I'm afraid the old ladies have been too much for him."

"He appears to be afraid of the same thing," Creston said. "He came to my room while I was waiting for you to change." The doctor spoke without thinking. "That was just after I found the gun."

"GUN?" MARTHA but down her soup spoon and stared at him. "What gun, Mark?"

"A powerful air pistol that someone planted in the second drawer of my bureau," said Creston.

"The gun that—that killed Jack Summer?" Martha asked.

"I thought it was, until we talked to the hotel manager," said Creston. "Blake said the chief told him a twenty two caliber bullet killed Summers; an air pistol doesn't fire that type of bullet."

"Then why did someone put that pistol in your room?"

"I don't know." Creston gave her a warning glance as the waitress came to the table, and took the soup plates and other empty dishes. He looked at the girl. "This old hotel is quite an interesting place."

"It used to be until this season, sir,"

the waitress said. She was young, pretty and her face was lonely. "Until they came. I've heard the hotel is over forty years old. Before that it was someone's private residence. People's homes were big places in those days. Will you have your coffee now or later?"

"Later, please, Nellie," Martha said.

The waitress nodded and hurried away. There was only one other waitress serving the hotel guests. Creston and Martha started eating the meat course. The old ladies talked quietly, their voices not carrying beyond their table.

"You were going to tell me about Mr. Fuller," Martha said, "but I interrupted about the gun."

"Oh, yes," Creston said. "He knocked on my door and asked if I'd examine him professionally. I refused at first, suggested he get in touch with the local doctor."

"That was wise," said Martha. "Did he agree?"

"No. Said he didn't dare see Doctor Ames, because Ames is the old ladies' physician," said Creston. "Fuller believes they've been poisoning him."

"Poisoning him!" exclaimed Martha. "What a horrible idea."

"Probably just his imagination," Creston said. "But I promised Fuller I'd give him a going over at eight-thirty tonight."

"You've plenty of time." Martha stared at her wrist-watch. "It's just eight now." She smiled at him. "Remember the Christmas you gave me this watch, darling? It was the second year of our marriage."

"Of course," said Creston.

He was watching Phillip March make an entrance into the dining room. The dark man strode briskly to what was evidently his favorite table, glancing from right to left as if expecting a round of applause from the other guests present. Fern Griffin smiled at him but he was careful not to give her a direct glance.

"Either he must be an actor," said Martha. "Or a pure slice of ham on rye."

Creston laughed. It was good to be with her again; he hadn't realized how lonely he'd been during the ghastly month when he'd thought Martha had gone out of his life forever.

"I've missed you, darling," he said softly.

She smiled, a tiny part of old memories in her look. That placid, but strangely sweet intimacy seven years had brought them. The little signs which taught him to sense her moods. The way her hands moved restlessly when she was worried or frightened. They did that now. Picking up her fork and putting it down, stirring her coffee with a spoon, touching the diamond ear-rings he'd given her.

"The police will question me again, now they know the truth," Martha said. "I'm afraid, Mark; more frightened than I've ever been before in my life."

"There's no need to be," Creston said. "Tell the police the truth—everything will be all right."

CRESTON saw Joe, the bellboy, step briskly into the dining room and head for their table. There was a worried expression on Joe's pale, wrinkled face, his little dark eyes darted glances at everyone in the room.

"Beg pardon, Doctor," he said as he reached the Crestons' table. "Sorry to bother you, but Mr. Fuller just phoned down to the desk. Said he's very ill and please get a doctor right away. Mr. Blakely tried to reach Doctor Ames, but he wasn't in. So we thought maybe you—"

"Of course, Joe." Creston rose from the table. "I'll go right up with you." He smiled at Martha. "Finish your dinner, dear, then wait in the lobby. I'll be back in a little while."

"All right, Mark," Martha said. "I'll be waiting."

Creston followed the bellboy out of

the dining room. Bakely came from behind the hotel desk and joined them as they headed for the elevator.

"Thank you, Doctor," the hotel manager said. "Mr. Fuller sounded very ill. I'd go up with you, but there's no one else to take care of the desk."

"That's all right, Blakely," said Creston. "I'll phone down if we need anything."

Blakely nodded. "I hope Mr. Fuller is still alive," he said, as he turned away.

- 4 -



TEN MINUTES later, Doctor Mark Creston stood waiting as the bellboy knocked on the closed door of room 316. There was no answer. Joe scowled as he tried the door-knob.

"It's locked, Doctor, and Mr. Fuller doesn't answer."

"He may be too ill to talk or come to the door. Have you a pass-key, Joe?"

"Sure." Joe reached into his pocket and drew out a small bunch of keys. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Creston didn't bother to say anything further as the bellboy found the key and unlocked the door. The two men stared into the brightly lighted room.

Stephen Fuller was lying on his bed, clad in shirt and trousers. The light of the reading lamp beside the bed gleamed down on his shell-rimmed yellow glasses.

"He looks awful still." Joe's words fought against the hush of the room. "Is he dead, Doctor?"

"I don't know yet."

Creston walked across the room. Fuller was lying on his left side so he faced the wall behind the bed. Automatically Creston felt for the hotel

owner's pulse. There was none, though the flesh the doctor touched was still warm. Stephen Fuller hadn't been dead long.

Joe stood silently watching. Creston rolled the body over so Fuller was lying on his back. A small hole in the white shirt just over the heart was clearly visible—a wound that might have been made by a powerful air pistol.

"Then he wasn't poisoned," the bellboy said; "he was shot."

"Evidently." Creston placed his ear to the chest just to make sure there was no heart-beat, though he realized it was useless. He always believed in being thorough in his examinations. Then he stood erect. "He's dead, Joe. Murdered."

"Aw, hell!" Joe sank into a chair, looking like he was going to cry. "Mr. Fuller was a nice man. One of the best guys I ever worked for—and—" He broke off and blinked.

Creston stood there, feeling more like a man in his seventies than one of thirty-four. His eyes searched the room, seeking the air pistol, yet knowing it was not there. Had the killer put the murder weapon back in the bureau drawer of room 210?

He heard footsteps out in the corridor, the muffled sound of voices. Men talking. Then they stood in the open doorway staring into the room. The thin, blond man who looked like a fox, and the stout one with that automatic smile.

"What's wrong Doctor?" the thin man asked. "Blakely told us that Fuller was very ill. Came up to see what we could do. I'm Bill Clark and this is Thomas Stowe."

"It's a long climb up two flights of stairs for a fat mat," Stowe said, the smile blinking on and off. "Is Mr. Fuller unconscious?"

"He's dead," Creston said; "shot through the heart. Nothing any of us can do for him now."

He watched them, waiting for ex-

pressions of shock and horror, but their faces remained blank. Only the fat man's smile was no longer visible."

"If this is murder, there's a lot we can do about it," Stowe said. "Part of our business."

"We're detectives," said Clark, from the local police department. Chief Hardy had us register as guests this afternoon, so we could check on the rest of you here."

"Detectives," Creston said curtly. "Anyone might claim that—prove it."

"You're so right, Doctor." Clark held out a leather case with a detective badge pinned to it so Creston saw it clearly. "Glad you didn't take us at our word."

"So am I." Stowe displayed his badge and the automatic smile; "I like a man who can't be bluffed."

CLARK AND Stowe went to the bed and stared at the dead man. The sea roared monotonously in the distance. Somewhere a floor board cracked. Creston stared at Fuller's yellow shell rimmed glasses. The hotel owner would have put them on to let his killer in.

"We'll have to phone the chief, Tom," Clark said. "Doctor Ames will want to check before the body is moved."

"Of course," said Stowe. "Phone Hardy, Bill." The stout man turned to Creston. "Fuller was dead when you and the bellboy reached the room, Doctor?"

"He was," said Creston. "The door was locked; the bellboy let us in with a pass-key."

"I see." Stowe glanced at Joe, now standing beside the chair. "This hotel is so old fashioned that the doors don't lock automatically when closed. The killer must have used the room key to lock the door from the outside."

"That's right," said Joe, then blinked and lapsed into silence as the stout man stared at him.

"I'll be glad to answer questions

later," Creston said. "I left my wife in the dining room; I'm anxious to get back to her, under the circumstances."

"Then Miss Fairfield is your wife, Doctor?" said Stowe, paying no attention to Clark as the other detective talked over the phone. "We didn't know that."

"You do now," Creston said impatiently. "May I leave?"

"Of course," said Stowe. Then as the bellboy started for the door he added, "You better stay, Lang; some questions I want to ask you. I'm sure Doctor Creston won't mind walking down instead of using the elevator."

"Quite all right," said Creston, heading for the hall.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he started down the stairs to the second floor. It was good to get away from that room of death. In his interne days, he'd received his training at one of the big city hospitals. On ambulance duty he'd seen plenty of murder, suicide and sudden death and hadn't liked any of it. Memories of the D. O. A. reports he'd written still gave him a strange feeling. There was something so bleak and final about that "Dead On Arrival."

The stairs creaked and groaned with the weary weight of the years as he went down. He found himself wondering why Stephen Fuller had been shot to death; it seemed a senseless sort of murder. Yet, Creston realized he knew nothing about the hotel owner, save that Fuller had believed the old ladies were trying to poison him. Here again was the question of motive. What could Mrs. Martin, Miss Nash and Miss Ward hope to gain by Stephen Fuller's death? Mark Creston hadn't the foggiest notion as to the right answer.

He reached the second floor hall, started for the second flight of stairs leading down to the lobby, then hesitated. The whereabouts of the air pistol still worried him. It would only take a few minutes to check and see

if it was still in his bureau drawer. Martha wouldn't mind waiting a little longer.

He unlocked 210 and switched on the lights, closed the door and drew the second bureau drawer open. He felt sick as he saw the gun still lying on top of his clean shirts, but there was something different about it. It took him only a moment to realize what was wrong. The killer had been careless, hasty or both. The barrel of the gun had pointed in the opposite direction the last time Creston had seen the air pistol.

He had the wild impulse to throw the gun out the nearest window, but realized it would be a foolish move—the action of a guilty man. Besides which his fingerprints would be on the weapon and he was clinging to that lack of evidence to protect him now.

CRESTON shoved the drawer shut. The faint rasp of wood against wood seemed like the screaming of an accusing voice. He stood staring at the top of the bureau, and then he saw the key. "What the devil?" he muttered.

He picked it up and examined it. It looked strangely like one of those pass-keys the bellboy, Joe Lang, carried. Creston found it strange he hadn't even known the bellboy's last name until the stout detective called Joe "Lang".

A pass-key. Why had the killer left it in his room? Then he realized it was another attempt to plant suspicion on Doctor Mark Creston. If the doctor had a pass-key, he could have unlocked the door of Stephen Fuller's room, killed the hotel owner with the air gun, and departed.

"Good Lord!" Creston dropped the key in his pocket. "So could Joe Lang or Adam Blakely; the hotel manager must have pass-keys."

To Creston, the murder of Fuller became a personal thing. This attempt to frame him with gun and key had

some motive behind it, in addition to protection of the actual killer. It seemed instigated by vicious hatred for Mark Creston by someone whose identity he did not know.

If such was the case, the killer might bring harm to Creston's most precious possession—Martha. He found himself suddenly horribly afraid for her safety. He realized he must find her at once and protect her day and night until the killer was caught.

Creston locked his room and hurried down to the lobby. Blakely stood behind the desk but the doctor had no desire to talk to the hotel manager. He saw that the double doors of the dining room were closed. Dinner was over.

HE LOOKED around, expecting to see Martha waiting for him in one of the big old fashioned comfortable chairs, but there was no sign of her. There was no one around save the elderly man with the white hair and mustache. Fielding sat slumped back in his chair staring out through the open doorway leading out onto the hotel porch, a newspaper across his knees.

Creston walked over. Perhaps Mr. Fielding had seen Martha.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Fielding, did you—" Creston let the words die away as he stared at the elderly man in the chair.

He reached out and touched a thin blue-veined hand. Then he stood upright, thought swiftly and turned away. Finding Martha was the vital thing now.

Creston headed for the desk. He knew that Blakely must have learned about the murder of Fuller and would want to talk about it. Still the hotel manager might know if Martha had gone back to her room or stepped out on the porch for a bit of fresh air.

"I hear you were too late, Doctor," said Blakely. "The hotel operator listened in when Clark called the chief, and told me what has happened."

"We'll talk about it later, Blakely." Creston said, tense urgency in his voice. "I'm worried about Mrs. Creston. Did she go back to her room?"

"No, I'm sure she didn't, Doctor," said Blakely; "I saw her go out on the porch a little while ago. Probably she's still there. Don't recall seeing her come back in, though I did leave the desk for a few minutes."

"Thanks, I'll take a look for her outside." Creston stared at the manager. "You'd better phone up and tell the detectives about Mr. Fielding."

"Mr. Fielding?" Blakely stared at the elderly man in the lobby chair. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's dead," said Creston. "Slumped forward just enough for me to see he'd been stabbed in the back with a steel knitting needle."

"They hated him, too." Blakely pale eyes stared toward the porch. "I didn't know how much until now."

"It seems to be their specialty," said Creston as he headed for the porch. "That's why I'd better find my wife." He glanced back over his shoulder. "Did you lose a pass-key, Blakely?"

- 5 -



CRESTON walked on out onto the porch. Instinctively he knew Blakely was watching him with those pale blue eyes, but he did not look back again. He was tired of death. Clark and Stowe had said murder was their business. Let them take care of Fielding.

In the softly blue light of the night that touched the porch he became part of the drifting shadows. The air was cold with the salty tang of the sea in it. Beyond the gravel driveway in front of the hotel, the driveway leading to the highway back behind the old

building, the white sand of the long beach was a pale ribbon in the starlight. Further away, the breakers of the Atlantic Ocean rolled and roared.

The three old ladies were sitting in the same chairs they had been when he first arrived at the hotel. There was no sign of Martha.

"She's not here, Doctor," said Mrs. Martin. "She went down to the beach after dinner, and hasn't returned yet."

"Thank you, Mrs. Martin," said Creston, starting down the steps. "I'll see if I can find her."

"She went to meet her other lover," said Polly Ward loudly. "That Marsh man."

"Hush, Polly," said Lucy Nash. "The doctor will hear you."

The words of the old ladies went with him as Creston crossed the driveway, gravel crunching softly beneath his feet. To meet her other lover. He resented the constant maliciousness in things Polly Ward said, using her deafness as a shield to mask her spite. It had been useless as far as he was concerned. He still believed and trusted Martha implicitly. She'd assured him she didn't know Philip March well enough for him to call her by her first name and that was that.

Suddenly Creston saw a woman approaching along the beach. It was too dark to see her clearly. Her face was a pale white blur in the dim silver light, her hair dark as Martha's red hair would seem now in the shadows. The dress she wore seemed like the one Mrs. Mark Creston chose to dine with her husband that evening.

"Darling!" Creston exclaimed as he rushed to her, his only thought to hold her in his arms—assure her she was safe.

He caught her. As he tried to draw her to him, she struggled like some crazed, desperately frightened wild thing. Her scream was a shrill, horrible sound rising above the roaring of the sea.

Only then Creston realized the wom-

an he held was not Martha. He released her, as if the soft warm flesh of her bare arms had burned his fingers. She screamed again as she turned and ran—heading back down the beach in the direction from which she'd appeared.

Creston just stood there, feeling weak and foolish, as he watched her vanish into the distance and be blotted out by the shadows. If the woman was one of the hotel guests she could only have been the dark-haired girl Martha said was Fern Griffin.

"Good Lord," exclaimed Creston. "And she probably thinks I was trying to attack her, or some such rot."

He decided any further attempt to try and find Martha here on the beach was useless. It was too dark, and for all he knew the white sand might extend for miles and miles. Besides, if he went in the direction Fern Griffin had gone she would be sure he was following her. Martha wouldn't be fool enough to stay out in this chilly air very long.

Creston returned to the hotel. As he came up the steps of the porch, he found the old ladies were still sitting just where he'd left them. They watched, but didn't speak, their silence more ominous than any words might have been.

He wondered if they'd heard Fern Griffin's screams. Such shrill sounds might carry above the crashing of the breakers for quite some distance. He wanted desperately to explain what happened out on the beach, to tell the old ladies he'd mistaken the other woman for Martha, but was sure they'd think him a fool if he tried to put it into words.

"I couldn't find Mrs. Creston," he said.

"Couldn't you," said Mrs. Martin. "I do wish I knew where I'd left my knitting needles."

He waited for the deaf one to make some loud comment, but there was nothing more. Only silence as they

watched and waited as he was doing. He felt there was something he should say or do, but didn't know quite what.

CRESTON went on into the hotel lobby, ears straining for some last remark from these three who'd become a weird Greek chorus in his life. This time there was no caustic comment upon the part of Polly Ward, no "Hush, Polly, he'll hear you," from Lucy Nash. Only the blank, dangerous silence upon the part of all three of them.

To his surprise the lobby was deserted. The body of Fielding was no longer slumped down in the chair, and Adam Blakely wasn't standing behind the hotel desk. The red plush furniture seemed part of a stage set on which the curtain had risen before the play began.

Creston walked toward the desk, hoping to find the hotel phone operator in her booth that contained the switchboard. He'd have the girl phone up to Martha's room and make sure she had returned.

He halted as he heard the creak and rumbled of the old elevator descending. The sounds drove away some of the blank stillness that filled the lobby, but was a little series of noises compared to the distant murmur of the sea.

The elevator door slid open and Adam Blakely stepped out of the car. The light touched his thin, sandy hair, then dropped behind him as he advanced toward the desk. His shoulders were stooped and he walked with the tired shuffled of a man who had been on his feet too long. He glanced at Creston then turned his gaze away and stepped behind the counter of dark wood seasoned by the years.

Creston went to the desk. Blakely's pale eyes searched the doctor's face, something in his gaze making Creston feel he was a patient and Blakely a physician.

"I haven't been able to find Mrs. Creston," the doctor said.

"Sorry, Doctor," Blakely said. "Have you tried her room?"

"No," said Creston. "I was going to ask the hotel operator to phone up and see if Mrs. Creston is there."

The hotel manager glanced at the clock on the wall above the key rack. Creston followed the direction of his gaze. It was sixteen minutes after nine.

"The operator always goes home a little before nine," Blakely said. "She lives in the town. Her booth is empty, she must have gone."

"Then who takes care of the switchboard the rest of the night?" Creston asked.

"I do," said Blakely. "Though sometimes the bellboy relieves me." He stepped toward the operator's booth. "Wait here, Doctor; I'll phone two-fifteen and see if Mrs. Creston is there."

"Thanks very much," said Creston.

He stood watching as Blakely opened a door and stepped into the booth. Idly the doctor realized that when the hotel operator was busy at the switchboard she couldn't see out into the lobby. He listened and heard Blakely's voice, too muffled to distinguish the words. Yet Creston felt hope stealing over him. Surely Blakely could only be talking to Mrs. Creston, and that meant Martha was safe in her room.

THE BIG clock ticked off a minute and a half, then the hotel manager reappeared. There was the faint ghost of a smile on his tired face.

"Mrs. Creston is in her room, Doctor," Blakely said. "Told me to assure you she is quite all right." He frowned and hesitated. "Do you—I mean—could the idea she was missing have been, well, another—"

"Another what?" Creston demanded impatiently as Blakely left the sentence unfinished.

"Hallucination," said Blakely firmly. "Like the one you had about Mr.

Fielding being murdered, when he was merely sleeping in his chair."

Creston stared at the hotel manager. There was an illusive sort of menace in Blakely's quiet voice. He almost seemed anxious for the doctor to vehemently try to refute his statement. If Blakely was the killer, and it was possible, it might be wise to leave him confused and uncertain.

"Sorry," Creston said quietly, knowing he had found no pulse beat when he'd felt Fielding's wrist. "My error. Mr. Fielding looked dead, but then the old sometimes do in a deep sleep."

A baffled expression flitted across Adam Blakely's face like a passing shadow. He lowered his gaze at the mocking glint in Creston's eyes.

"Mrs. Martin is worried about her steel knitting needles," said Creston. "She doesn't know where she lost them."

Automatically Blakely glanced out through the open doorway leading to the porch. "I forgot about the old ladies," he muttered.

"A foolish thing to ever do," Creston said. "Why that might even be dangerous."

His words brought a little hush in which the gaze of doctor and hotel manager clashed like invisible swords. A long hard look that lasted three ticks of the clock. Then Blakely lowered his eyes, staring at his hands on the counter. There was a little spot, that might have been red rust or dried blood, on the left cuff of his white shirt showing below his coat sleeve. Creston stared at it, too.

"I'm having another hallucination, Blakely," Creston said as he turned away from the desk. "But I won't tell you about it; you might not believe me."

He headed for the stairs leading to the second floor. He still wanted to be sure that Martha was really safe and in her room. He wondered what had become of Clark and Stowe and the bellboy. If they were still in Fuller's

room with the murdered hotel manager, they were staying there a long time.

Once he glanced back. Blakely stood behind the desk looking in the direction of the porch. It suddenly occurred to Creston that it might be dangerous for the old ladies because Mrs. Martin had lost her knitting needles.

He hurried up the stairs, reached the second floor hall, found it deserted and went to the door of 215 and knocked.

"It's Mark," he called before there was any answer. "Are you all right, Martha?"

There was nothing but silence from the other side of the door. A stillness that built and grew greater until Doctor Mark Creston found it engulfing him in a nebulous fog of terror.

"Martha!" His fingers tightened on the knob of the locked door and the way he twisted and shook the metal was close to madness. "Martha!"

Only the silence mocking him, no answer. He thought of trying to break the door down. To keep the vision of her lying in there dead out of his mind, but he couldn't do it. In a sort of helpless gesture he thrust his hand into the left pocket of his coat. Flesh touched a tiny metal object—the pass-key someone had left in his room. He'd forgotten he was carrying it around with him.

IN THE distance he heard footsteps, someone coming down the stairs leading to the third floor of the old hotel. Who it was didn't matter to him now. He drew out the pass-key and tried it in the lock. It worked and in a moment he had the door open. He tried to see into the dark room, but blackness fought his vision.

He stepped in through the doorway, groping for the light switch, walking as gingerly as he might have over thin ice. His left foot struck something soft, something he knew could only be a body. Martha? In that instant he died a little.

Creston moved back, finding the wall beside the door running his hands over the smooth surface until a palm found the light switch. He pressed the button. As the lights came on he forced himself to turn slowly and look at the object on the floor.

Relief swept over him in waves that left him dizzy as he saw it wasn't Martha lying there. The body of Fielding was sprawled face downward on the rug, the steel knitting needle still in the old man's back.

"Another murder victim, Doctor?" said a quiet voice from the door.

Creston turned. It was Thomas Stowe who stood there, no sign of the automatic smile on the stout detective's face.

"It's Fielding," Creston said. "When I first saw him dead he was slumped down in a chair in the lobby with the knitting needle in his back. I told Blakely about it at the time, then went out on the beach to look for Mrs. Creston."

"Find her?" Stowe asked as he stepped into the room and quietly closed the door behind him. "You were worried about her when you left us upstairs."

"I still am," Creston said. "I haven't found her. A little while ago Blakely, phoned up to this room. He pretended to talk to Mrs. Creston—"

"Pretended?" interrupted Stowe as he examined the dead man. "Sure of that?"

"I think so," said Creston. "Blakely was at the switchboard while I waited at the desk. I couldn't hear what he said, but he claimed he'd talked to Martha—to Mrs. Creston."

Stowe stood up. "Hard to be sure, but at a guess this man has been dead for at least an hour. This Mrs. Creston's room?"

"That's right."

"Then why bring the body here? Unless—" Stowe shrugged.

"Unless what?" Creston demanded.

"They were still trying to frame you,

Doctor. Clark found the air pistol in your bureau drawer. He searched all the rooms on this floor while the chief and coroner checked on Fuller's body."

"How'd they get here?" Creston asked. "I didn't see them arrive."

"None of the guests did," said Stowe. "Chief Hardy and Doctor Ames came in the hotel by the back way. There's a service elevator as well as the one for guests. The chief is taking the hotel owner's body out that way."

Creston found he wasn't really listening. He couldn't forget for a moment that Martha was still missing. Perhaps lying dead somewhere, the fourth victim of a ruthless killer. The thought haunted him. Yet he tried to think of other things.

"Why did you and Clark come here as guests, instead of in your actual identity?" Creston asked.

"Trying to track down a thief," said Stowe. "Fuller claimed that someone had been stealing valuables and money from the hote safe. Stuff the guests had left for safe-keeping." The stout man's smile was less automatic than usual. "No one would suspect you of *that*, Doctor."

"Thanks," said Creston dryly. "But of murder?"

FINDING the air pistol in your room struck us as a little too pat." said Stowe slowly. "Particularly as you made no real attempt to hide it. By the way it *is* the weapon that killed Summers and Fuller."

"Blakely told me Chief Hardy said over the phone that Jack Summers was killed by a twenty-two caliber bullet."

"If he keeps on, Blakely is going to talk himself into trouble," said Stowe. "By the way I saw you unlock this door with a key. Was it Mrs. Creston's key?"

"No," said Creston. "A pass-key I found on the bureau in my room when I went back to see if the gun was in the drawer, after we found Fuller murdered."

"And it was," said Stowe.

"Only the barrel pointed in the opposite direction from the last time I saw it; my fingerprints aren't on it."

"Probably neither are the murderer's prints," said Stowe dryly. A thought struck the stout man. "What was Jack Summers business? We haven't checked with New York on that yet."

"Salesman for a manufacturing jewelery firm in New York," said Creston. "And—"

"Oh, my!" Stowe interrupted. "When Summers registered here, he left a locked leather briefcase in the hotel safe. Fuller saw Summers do it. Later Fuller checked the safe, found that the briefcase, and envelopes containing valuables of the other guests were missing."

"You think that Summers was carrying expensive sample jewels in the briefcase?" Creston asked, fighting his impatience to hunt for Martha, yet realized he had to do everything possible to clear himself as a murder suspect. "Come to think of it, Summers did mention once that he worked the New England Territory—"

He broke off abruptly as he saw the doorknob turn and a key clicked in the lock. Stowe moved fast for a stout man; one leap and he switched off the lights.

The door opened on darkness within the room. The figure in the hall was vague in the dim light. The roars of the gun came too swiftly to be anything but an automatic. A bullet seared Creston's upper arm through the cloth of his coat and shirt as he dropped to the floor. He heard the thud of a heavy body close by.

A shout came from somewhere along the hall as the firing ceased. Then the door slammed shut.

"You all right, Doctor?" came Stowe's voice out of the dark.

"Just nicked my arm," said Creston, getting to his feet. "How about you, Stowe?"

"Didn't even touch me," said the

stout man. "He must be getting desperate."

- 6 -



STOWE switched on the lights. Both men blinked for an instant in the glare. The faint smell of gunsmoke, lingering in the room, blended with the tang of salt air drifting in through the open window. A heavy knock on the door was a firm sound in the silence.

Creston looked at the stout man. Murder was Stowe's business. The detective reached into his pocket, the round face set in stern lines.

"Open it," said Stowe softly. "Then step to one side. This time I'll do the shooting."

Creston pulled the door open, careful to remain protected by the wood in front of him, yet taking some risk of being hit by a bullet as he peered around the edge.

Phillip March stood in the hall, breathing heavily—a little ruffled. A dark man, sure of his good looks, and making an entrance more dramatic than usual.

"He got away," March said. "Heard the shooting as I came up the stairs. Shouted when I saw him standing there firing into his room." March's gaze lingered in fascination on the service revolver covering him in Stowe's right hand. "He—he got away."

March stepped into the room, not looking where he walked. He stumbled over the body on the floor, and fell heavily against Creston. The doctor caught him, kept him from falling, finding the left side of March's coat too hard and warm.

"You recognize the killer, Mr. March?" Stowe dropped his revolver back into his pocket.

"No, never turned his face in my direction." March stared down at the corpse. "Good God, old Mr. Fielding with a knitting needle in his back! Is he dead?"

"Very," said Stowe.

"I was numb with horror when I saw the murderer firing into this room," March seemed to be ad libbing, building up his part. "I realized it was Martha—Mrs. Creston's room."

He watched Creston for some reaction to his words and found none. The doctor was not impressed. Stowe waited, and the Law frequently does for someone to say too much. March was evidently a man who had to fill silences with words.

"Three murders," he said. "First Jack Summers, then Stephen Fuller, and now Fielding. This is terrible!"

The suspicion in the gaze of Creston and Stowe drove hard against him, leaving him frowning and uncertain.

"How did you know about Fuller?" Stowe demanded.

"Why, Blakely told me," said March. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Maybe not." The stout man sighed. "Blakely talks too much. The guests weren't supposed to hear about Fuller's murder yet."

March stared at the body lying face down on the floor. He shook his head sadly. "Poor old man," he said. "I was the only one of the guests he ever bothered talking to at all. Shielding his loneliness and bitterness with a front of afoof disdain toward the rest of the world."

"Alas poor Yorick, I knew him," muttered Creston.

March blinked and looked confused. Apparently he hadn't read much Shakespeare. Stowe's grin was very human, but vanished quickly.

"Would you mind doing me a favor, Mr. March?" he said.

"Of course not," said March. "What is it, Mr—"

"Stowe, I'm a detective. Please go up and tell Chief Hardy and the coron-

er I need them down here. They're in Fuller's room on the third floor."

"Be delighted." March hurried out into the hall as if glad to get away.

Creston went to the door and stood silently watching until March stared up the stairs to the third floor of the hotel.

"He's wearing a gun in a shoulder holster," Creston said without turning. "Felt it when he stumbled against me; it was still warm."

THE DOCTOR swung around. Stowe was kneeling beside the body, going through Fielding's pockets.

"The old trick, I suppose," said Stowe. "The killer running away, then returning as the man supposed to have been chasing him. March was pretty quick to identify Fielding without seeing the dead man's face."

"So was I," said Creston. "It seems as if we've been here for hours. I'm still worried about Mrs. Creston. I've got to find her."

"Where's March's room?" Stowe asked, examining some papers he taken out of Fielding's inside coat pocket. "The old boy was rich, according to this bank statement. Fifty-six thousand, one hundred and eighty-two dollars and sixty cents in his checking account."

"Proving what?" asked Creston.

"His wallet's empty of cash and there's not a cent of change in his pockets," said Stowe. "Somebody robbed the old man after they killed him."

"I see," said Creston. "March's room is directly across the hall from this one. Why?"

"Suppose March is our killer. Could be Mrs. Creston came into lobby just in time to see March stab Fielding with the steel knitting needle. It took plenty of strength to do that. Maybe March played it smart and pretended not to notice Mrs. Creston and went away."

"Good Lord," exclaimed Creston.

"Then Martha could have come on up to her room. Blakely did talk to her over the phone, and she had him tell me she was all right. Then March waited and fired into this room in the dark, thinking she was still here and trying to kill her."

"As a detective, your diagnosis is not so hot, Doctor," said the stout man. "The killer knew darn well Fielding's body was in this room because he put it here. He also knew Mrs. Creston wasn't still in the room, for the simple reason that he knows where she is now."

"You—you mean you think he'd killed her and hidden the body?" Creston couldn't keep the tremble out of his voice.

"I don't know," said Stowe gently. "But I suggest you use the pass-key and search March's room in a hurry, Doctor."

"All right."

Creston hurried across the hall. He unlocked the door of March's room and stepped inside. The lights were burning, but the room appeared deserted. Bleak disappointment swept over Mark Creston. He quietly closed the door from the inside, and on a sudden impulse locked it with the pass-key.

He turned, staring at a dark flat object beneath the bed. He drew it out. It was an empty briefcase of brown leather with the initials J. W. S. Jack Summers' briefcase. Why hadn't Clark found it when he searched the rooms as Stowe said his detective partner had done. Perhaps Clark had merely looked in this room.

Creston went to the door of the clothes closet and opened it. Martha was huddled down on the floor, bound hand and foot and with a gag in her mouth. The amber eyes filled with relief as she saw her husband standing there.

"Thank Heaven," Creston said, and meant it.

He worked swiftly removing the gag and cutting the ropes with a safety razor blade he found in March's bathroom. Martha was crying softly and steadily from sheer emotional reaction at finding she was safe.

"It's all right, darling," Creston said soothingly as he helped her out of the closet. "Don't even try to talk now. We've got to get out of here fast before March gets back. Damn killer, I'll ring his neck!"

"But he—" Martha started, then lapsed into silence.

Creston swiftly unlocked the door. There was no one in the hall, and the door of 215 was closed.

"My room," said Creston, closing March's door softly as they stepped out. "Come on; hurry, darling."

HE BREATHED a sigh of relief when they were in his room with the door locked. Martha sank weakly into a chair. She looked tired and sick. Creston stood looking at her anxiously. "What happened?"

"I don't know exactly," said Martha. "It all seems some sort of nightmare. After you left me in the dining room to go up and see Mr. Fuller I finished dinner and then went out into the lobby. You seemed gone such a long time. I finally went out on the porch. The old ladies were there; just being near them made me uncomfortable, so I went down on the beach. Then somebody jumped at me out of the shadows. I didn't have time to even scream before someone hit me on the head and everything grew black."

"March, of course," said Creston. "But how did he get you up to his room without being seen?" A thought struck him. "The rear entrance of the hotel and the service elevator? Of course, that's it."

"I don't think it was March," said Martha. "Even though you found me in his room. He talked to me for a

few minutes in the lobby after he finished his meal and came out. Told me he's a private detective who is working for old Mr. Fielding as a sort of bodyguard."

"He didn't do much good if it's true," said Creston. "Fielding has been murdered, too?"

"Shot in the heart with the air gun that was planted in this room of mine," said the doctor. "And then the killer put the gun back in my bureau drawer. Clark and Stowe have the gun now."

"Who are they?"

"Those two men you couldn't identify at dinner. The stout man and the one that looks like a fox. They're local detectives."

Creston thought swiftly, then reached a decision. "I'm going to talk to the police," he said. "I want you to stay here with the door locked from the inside, darling. And be sure to keep the key in the lock."

"Why?" Martha asked.

"Because the killer has a pass-key. Even with that, he can't get in here unless he manages to shove your key out of the lock. Here." Creston handed her his room key. "Don't let anyone in, even if you think it's me." He kissed her and then smiled. "Remember what you used to call me on our honeymoon? Doctor Darling."

"Of course—why?"

"That'll be the signal it's actually me."

Creston stepped out into the hall and closed the door. He heard Martha turn the key from the inside, then tried the knob to make sure the door was locked. Down the hall Thomas Stowe stood in the now open doorway of 215 watching and waiting. The stout man was smoking a cigar. Creston walked toward him.

"Find her?" Stowe asked as the doctor drew nearer.

"Yes," Creston said. "She's all right

now; had her lock herself in my room."

He swiftly related what had happened. Stowe listened silently until the doctor finished.

"So March is a private detective," said Stowe, watching a little cloud of blue smoke. "The empty briefcase seems too obvious; the killer trying to frame March this time. He sure is a busy little bee." The stout man frowned and glanced at his wrist-watch. "What the devil is keeping them upstairs?"

"You've got me," said Creston.

THERE WAS a light patter of feet and the sound of feminine voices. In a moment the three old ladies entered the hall from the stairs leading down to the lobby. Casually Stowe reached back and closed the door behind him as he saw them.

Creston studied them as they approached. They seemed old and tired and lonely—ghosts of what once must have been three pretty girls.

"Remember the games we used to play along this hall?" Lucy Nash said. "You were eight then Polly; I was ten, and so was Abigail. It seems so long ago now."

"Over fifty years," said Mrs. Martin.

Polly Ward said nothing, but Doctor Creston saw she was wearing her hearing aid. The old ladies completely ignored the two men as they walked by, though Polly Ward couldn't resist a disapproving cough at the smell of cigar smoke.

"I beg your pardon, ladies." The quiet authority in Stowe's voice halted them. "Did you happen to see who murdered Langston Fielding in the lobby? He was stabbed with a steel knitting needle while you were out on the porch."

They turned completely around at his words, instinctively huddling closer to each other like three lost and fright-

ened sheep. Lonely women, finding the private world in which they lived had become a public place.

"We didn't know." Polly Ward spoke softly, as she always did when she wore the hearing aid, but there was nothing gentle in the green eyes behind the glasses. "We wondered about you, Mr. Stowe, and the other gentleman, Mr. Clark. Wondered enough to ask Mr. Blakely your names."

Lucy Nash giggled nervously. "They always were the bold ones," she said. "I never had the nerve to do such things." The pinkish white hair gave Creston the odd impression the flesh of her skull was showing through. "And I—"

"Be still, Lucy—there's always one fool in every family." Mrs. Martin's dark eyes withered Miss Nash with a glance, made her seem to shrink within herself and become more dumpy than ever. "You're a detective, of course. Mr. Stowe." It was a statement not a question.

"That's right," said Stowe.

"Have you found the body out on the beach?" Mrs. Martin's gaze lingered on Doctor Creston.

"What body?" Stowe demanded.

Creston waited, growing a little tense as he realized what Abigail Martin was working up to now.

"The corpse of the woman Doctor Creston strangled to death," said Mrs. Martin. "We saw it happen and heard her screams."

"You believe I killed Mrs. Creston?" The doctor tried to keep a mocking note out of his voice. "Is that it, Mrs. Martin?"

"No," said Mrs. Martin. "We're sure it was that—that other woman. Fern Griffin."

"Of course we are," said Lucy Nash. "Abigail is always so clever at spotting the murderer in detective novels. Why she—"

"Quiet, Lucy," said Polly Ward firmly.

"YOU DIDN'T tell me about the woman on the beach, Doctor." Stowe's tone was neither friendly or otherwise. Strictly impersonal. The stout man looked at Mrs. Martin. "What makes you think Doctor Creston would do such a thing."

"I didn't even know Miss Griffin," Creston said. "Never saw her before in my life. I'll admit I ran into her on the beach tonight—in the dark I thought she was Mrs. Creston, and started to take her in my arms. Then she screamed and ran away." He scowled. "As for murdering her, that's a lot of rot. There isn't any motive."

"Yes, there is," said Mrs. Martin. "We heard Fern Griffin tell that March man she knew who killed Jack Summers, and—"

There were men's voices coming from the stairs leading to the third floor. Mrs. Martin stopped speaking as she heard them. Then four men appeared in the hall. Clark; the bellboy Joe Lang; and two others. One was stooped, gray-haired, carried a doctor's bag and looked like an old-fashioned country physician. Creston decided this must be Doctor Ames. Chief Hardy was a big, square-faced man with authority in his voice.

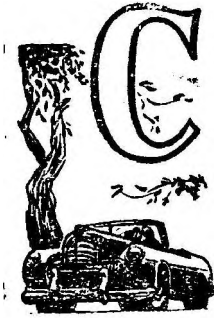
"Come on, girls," said Mrs. Martin. "It's time we went to bed."

Stowe made no attempt to stop the three old ladies as they turned and went on along the hall in the opposite direction from that of the approaching men. As they disappeared around a corner Creston realized the far end of the corridor was L-shaped. It didn't seem to matter much. He wondered what had become of Philip March as he turned and looked in the opposite direction.

"I'm going to hate it if Fern Griffin's body is found out on the beach, Doctor," Stowe said softly. "It's hell

to have to charge a man you've grown to like with murder."

- 7 -



CRESTON just stood there tiredly. His first reaction was that he had been on his feet a long time this evening and would like to either sit or lie down.

"Sorry we were so long getting down here, Tom," Chief Hardy said to Stowe. "We've been busy getting Fuller's body out of the building and shipping it off to town."

"Yeah," said Clark as Stowe opened the door of room 215. "And now we go through the whole routine all over again, with another stiff."

"Do you mind if I leave now?" Creston asked. "I left Mrs. Creston alone in my room. I don't want her to worry needlessly."

"Well, Doctor, there might be—" Stowe started, and then broke off with a grin, as he started back along the hall over the doctor's shoulder. "Sure, go right ahead; we don't need you any longer."

Creston followed the direction of the stout man's gaze. Fern Griffin and Blakely had just stepped out of the elevator and were coming along the hall. Clark, Hardy and Doctor Ames stepped into 215.

"She makes a rather attractive corpse," said Stowe softly to Creston as he followed the others into the room.

Creston looked at the bellboy. "You been with them all the time, Joe?" he asked.

"Sure," said Joe. "And they been running me ragged. First I gotta go downstairs in the service elevator and see if the ambulance the chief phoned for has arrived. It hasn't so I go back and tell them. The chief says go down

and look again. I take my time about it and the ambulance finally shows up—so I take the guys with it up to the third floor. Boy, I sure wish there'd been a good tip in it for me."

"How'd you like to earn five bucks, Joe?" asked Creston, as he watched the hotel manager and the dark-haired girl draw nearer. "Find me a bottle of good Scotch and bring it to my room."

"Can do," said the bellboy, a bright gleam in his little dark eyes. "From my own private stock. When a dump like this don't serve liquor a guy can find ways to make an extra buck. Coming right up, Doctor."

He hurried toward the elevator. As he passed Blakely and Fern Griffin she seemed to shrink away from the man who looked like a gorilla in uniform. Joe Lang kept right on going. Creston waited and watched until the couple reached him.

"Sorry I made such a fool of myself out on the beach, Doctor." Fern's smile was bright and charming. "Mr. Blakely told me you were looking for Mrs. Creston out there, and must have mistaken me for her in the dark."

"That's right, Miss Griffin," said Creston with a sign of relief. "Thank you for being so gracious."

Blakely glanced into the room, then shuddered as he saw the coroner examining the body of Fielding.

"Been dreading this all evening." the hotel manager said, turning away and looking sick. "Just can't stand the sight of anyone who is dead. Makes me ill for days afterward."

"I—I don't care much for it either" said Fern. "I think I'll go to my room."

She hurried a little further along the hall, unocked a door and disappeared as it gently closed.

"Mrs. Creston all right, Doctor?" Blakely asked.

"Yes, thanks. She's waiting for me in my room."

"I don't understand about Mr. Fielding," said Blakely with a frown. "When you told me he'd been mur-

dered in his chair, I tried to force myself to go over and make sure, but couldn't do it. Then I went to the men's room. When I returned, Mr Fielding was no longer in the chair."

"So you thought I was mistaken, and he'd merely been sleeping," said Creston. Was there anyone else in the lobby when you left?"

"Not a soul," said Blakely. He lowered his voice. "I've been so worried, Doctor. I think Mr. Fuller suspected me of stealing the stuff that's missing from the hotel safe. I swear I didn't do it."

"I'm inclined to believe you, Blakely," Creston said. "But we'll talk later. Must get back to Mrs. Creston."

HE HURRIED to his room and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" Martha called.

"Doctor Darling," said Creston. "It's all right, dear; let me in."

She unlocked the door and he entered. He smiled at her, then shut the door and locked it.

"You've been gone an awfully long time," said Martha, dropping into a chair. "What happened, darling?"

"Plenty," said Creston wearily, as he stretched out on the bed. "I'm very tired; I nearly became the main murder suspect again."

He had just finished telling her about the old ladies accusing him of murdering Fern Griffin when there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Creston called, getting to his feet.

"Joe, the bellboy. I brought your order, Doctor."

"Good!" said Creston as he unlocked the door.

Joe shuffled in carrying a tray on which there were two glasses, a bottle of Scotch and one of soda, and a bowl of ice cubes.

"This is real service, Joe," Creston said as the bellboy put the tray down on the bureau. The doctor drew out his

wallet. "What do I owe you for the Scotch?"

"Cost me seven bucks from a friend," said Joe.

"Then it should cost me at least eight," said Creston. "Can you change a twenty-dollar bill?"

"Sure." The bellboy drew a thick roll of bills from his trouser pocket. "How much change you want, Doctor?"

"Take thirteen dollars and give me the rest." Creston stared at the hundred-dollar bill that topped the roll the bellboy carried. "Just thought of something." He went to the open doorway and looked out into the hall. "Better be sure the killer isn't lurking around out here."

"Yeah," said Joe. "That wouldn't be nice." He started to count out the change.

Martha sat silently watching and listening. Creston saw Stowe and Clark coming out of 215 and beckoned to them with a quick silent gesture. He dropped the pass-key on the hall carpet, then closed the door.

"Here's your change, Doctor," Joe said, handing him the money, and taking the twenty-dollar bill. He thrust his roll into his pocket. "Thanks."

"We've been a pack of fools, haven't we, Joe," Creston said as he put his wallet away. "Not knowing who the murderer really is."

"Guess so." The little black eyes searched the doctor's face; "and we still are."

"Not now," said Creston, his voice hard. "How much did you get when you robbed Fielding after you killed him, Joe?"

The bellboy was close to the door. He swiftly reached back, turned the room key in the lock, then thrust it into his pocket.

"I been afraid of this," Joe said. "I like you and Mrs. Creston, Doctor. Now I've got to kill you both."



MARTHA gave a gasp, and then sat motionless. In a little moment of silence the far off roaring of the sea seemed unusually loud.

"Kill us?" Creston smiled. "With what, Joe? You haven't got a gun. You played it too smart when you fired into two-fifteen with March's automatic—" It was a wild stab in the dark but it worked.

"Yeah," said Joe. "I shouldn't have dropped his gun when I saw him coming."

"He must have picked it up and thrust it in his shoulder holster." Creston's hands were resting on the back of a chair as he faced the bellboy. "You made a lot of other mistakes, Joe."

"Such as what?"

"Planting the air pistol in my room where it was so easy to find," said Creston. "If I were the killer I'd been smart enough to hide the gun. Pretending you'd forgotten your pass-keys when we went to Fuller's room—"

"Another smart guy, like Summers and Fuller were," snapped Joe Lang. "Summers was going to turn me over to the police—"

"So you killed him with the air pistol when he was out in the canoe with Mrs. Creston," interrupted the doctor. "Probably from a window of one of the vacant front rooms."

"You figured it too good, Doctor." sighed Joe. "Like I said—I gotta kill you."

"With the police out in the hall?" asked Creston mockingly.

"There's a fire escape outside the window of this room," said the bellboy. "They won't know who did it after I'm gone."

He advanced toward Creston looking like a mean and dangerous gorilla. Suddenly there was a long steel object in his hand.

"You forgot the other knitting needle," Joe said. "I been carrying it around with me just in case. This is it, Doctor."

He lunged at Creston, the knitting needle raised to strike. The bellboy never made it. The straight back chair on which the doctor's hands rested came up swinging. It crashed against Joe Lang and knocked him back.

Behind the fighting men, the room door opened as Stowe and Clark used the pass-key Creston had dropped in the hall. Creston didn't realize the detectives were there. He hit Joe with the chair again before the bellboy could recover. Lang dropped to the floor and sprawled there unconscious.

"Nice work, Doctor," said Stowe. "We heard everything Lang said when we listened at the door. You played it smart."

"Smart, my eye," Creston said with a shudder. "If Lang hadn't taken the room key out of the lock Martha and I might be dead by now." He scowled. "From now on I let the police do the detective work."

"It's our job, Doctor," said Clark. "We suspected the bellboy, but couldn't prove anything until you made him talk. Lang was gone too long every time the chief sent him down to look for the ambulance."

"And the only one likely to use the service elevator to bring Fielding's body up here, and put Mrs. Creston in March's room," said Stowe. The stout man smiled as he heard the murmur of voices in the hall. "The chief decided to question everyone. They're all out there."

"Come on, Martha," said Creston. "I want to see how the old ladies act when they find I'm not the killer."

"So do I," said Martha.

THEY FOUND Hardy and Doctor Ames talking to Mrs. Martin, Miss Nash, and Miss Ward. March and Fern Griffin stood nearby listening.

"We've got the murderer, Chief," said Stowe. "It was Joe Lang, Clark is guarding him in Creston's room. The doctor knocked Joe out with a chair."

"The bellboy!" exclaimed Mrs. Martin. She looked at Creston. "And we thought—"

"You aren't always so clever about those things, Abigail," said Lucy Nash. "Trying to get back property that belonged in our family fifty years ago wasn't so smart either."

"What do you mean, Miss Nash?" demanded Chief Hardy.

"This old hotel used to be our home," said Lucy Nash. "We tried hard to make trouble here, gossiping about everybody all season. We had some wild idea that if we put the hotel out of business we could buy the property cheap and get our old home back." The short, stocky old lady with the pinkish white hair looked frightened and her lip quivered. "We—we didn't mean any real harm."

"What did you say, Lucy?" Polly Ward demanded.

"Be quiet, Polly!" said Miss Nash; "no one even wants to hear you!"

"We found Fuller's will in his room," said Hardy. "It appears quite legal, even though dated over a year ago. It leaves the old Seacrest Hotel and all property connected therewith to Ms. Abigail Martin, Miss Lucy Nash and Miss Polly Ward, to be shared equally by these three."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Martin. "And we always thought we hated Stephen Fuller."

"I'm so ashamed," said Lucy Nash; "I'll never say another mean thing as long as I live."

"Go back to your rooms, all of you," ordered the chief. "That's all for tonight."

"Hadn't you better tell them about us, Phil?" Fern asked March. "I'm tired of pretending."

"Of course," said March dramatically. "I'm a private detective that Mr. Fielding hired to guard him. He always carried at least ten thousand in cash around with him, even though he had money in three banks. If you ask me the old boy was slightly cracked—but the job paid well. Miss Griffin and I are engaged, but we pretended to ignore each other. I didn't want Fielding to know that my girl friend was taking a vacation at his expense."

The old ladies had turned away. Creston watched them going slowly back to their rooms and their own little lonely world. He saw Clark lead the bellboy out into the hall and head toward the elevator.

"Come on back to my room, darling," Creston said to Martha. "I need a good stiff drink of what might have been the most expensive Scotch I ever ordered."

"You're so right, Mark," said Martha with a shudder.

In a few moments they were back in his room with the door locked. Creston mixed them each a drink. Off in the distance the sea was still roaring, but the voices of the old ladies no longer seemed to rise above the crashing of the breakers.

"I'll never be afraid of them again," Martha said. "They are just three lonely and bitter old ladies."

"Some day we'll be as old as they are," Creston said as he handed her glass to her. "Hope we won't be as lonely and bitter."

"Of course not, darling," said Martha serenely. "Not as long as we have each other." She raised her glass. "To Doctor Creston."

"And to Mrs. Creston," said the doctor. "Such a nice couple. Why, they even like each other."

Killing Crandall, or letting someone else get him, would have been a pleasure except for one thing — if anything happened to Crandall, I'd find myself in the gas chamber quick. He had all the evidence on me . . .



NOVELET

SO I'M DYING

by BRYCE WALTON

I COULDN'T have been that stupid, but there the back door was— open, wide open in the night like the door of a morgue, or a coffin lid. I ran toward it and then stood there frozen. There were little puddles of rain going across the kitchen floor toward the hall that led eventually to Crandall's study.

I could feel the sweat running heavy under my coat; I couldn't move for a minute. I kept waiting to hear a sound like a gun putting a bullet into Crandall's brain. But I couldn't afford to wait to hear a sound like that. If Crandall died, I died; if he lived, I might. I couldn't have been that stupid—

I ran. Whoever had sneaked in hadn't done it just to shake Crandall's fat little hand. I stopped just outside the double doors going into Crandall's study. One of them was partly open.

"But, Miss Harte! Surely you don't think you can get away with this absurdity!" He always talked as though a jury was listening.

"You think I care what happens to me? You phone the governor! Phone him, now! Ask for a reprieve!"

"Miss Harte—"

"I'll really shoot you! Maybe you don't think so!"

I eased in through the door and up behind Miss Harte where she stood in front of Crandall's big walnut desk. I

took my time, as though walking a tightrope. That little bungle with the back door had about cinched my shipment back to the Los Angeles Cops and a trip to the gas chamber. But if she shot Crandall now, I'd be absolutely sure to get that little pellet dropped into my lap. I needed a reprieve. I figured, a lot more than whomever she was so concerned with.

She was saying, "Dad told the truth and you know he did! Dad was Schroeder's next door neighbor and a dear friend; he just wouldn't have murdered Schroeder!"

"I wish, Miss Harte, that I could help you. You must realize that my job must be dispassionate. I prosecute criminal acts, not people. I can't afford—"

She cut in on him impatiently, "Why wasn't the evidence about the diary brought into the trial, Mr. Crandall?"

A little bit of Crandall's smile went away. I knew then that the girl had hold of something really hot in the Harte case. A diary.

I was right behind her then, and I was grateful for the thick rug under my feet. Crandall didn't show any sign that he saw me; but then he was good at that, anyway. "A diary, Miss Harte?"

"Yes! Dad told me about it yesterday."

"What did he tell you?"

"The diary tells who really killed Schroeder, proves who killed him."

"Did your Father say who—"

"You phone the governor and then we'll talk."

"We knew about the diary and we looked. There isn't any diary, Miss Harte; I can assure you of that with absolute certainty."

"You're lying!"

I hooked her right arm and squeezed the gun out of it. She was squirming violently. I slapped her so hard that she fell halfway across the room, and onto the floor. She was nice.

A brunette, and almost as tall as I am, but slim. Her eyes were very black. She was lying there looking up at me, and her eyes were saying a great deal—but hate didn't mean anything to me much, either. That's common cheap stuff these days.

I picked up the .25 revolver and put it on Crandall's desk, hesitating only a moment, but he caught the pause. There was the fleeting temptation to shoot the bustard right in the middle of his smile. Miss Harte was there. She had the motive; she would take the rap along with her old man. But I didn't do it. I never had done things like that when I should have done them. That was one reason why Crandall was on top of the greased pole, while I was crawling around at the bottom.

HE DROPPED a monogrammed handkerchief on the gun, slid it across his desk, and into a drawer. Only—as he was doing that, Miss Harte flew up off the floor and made for the gun. This time I hit her so hard she went clear across the room and bounced into the bookcase, I could tell by her face she was out cold. I hadn't intended to hit her that hard, but she bit my hand, and the sudden pain made me do it that way.

Crandall smiled at me. "I wish I needed someone around just to beat up women," he said, "but it's such a specialized thing isn't it?"

"Crandall," I whispered.

He went on, as though I weren't really there much. "If you had one other redeeming characteristic, I might have some further use for you. You have none, Hayes."

"Why did you pick me up, then, Crandall?"

"When one of my boys spotted you hiding out in Laramer, I thought perhaps you would be useful to me. You had been to college, and had been a Captain in the Marines. But now I see that higher education can be a

misleading factor; it serves only to put a superficial layer over hereditary stupidity."

"I'm sure I locked that damn door," I said. My legs felt weak and his smile was blurring slightly. "I just went outside a minute to fix that clogged drain—"

"—and so," Crandall said, as though I hadn't said anything, "I'm going to have to let you go."

Vaguely I wondered if that smile had been cut into his face. But it had slipped just a little when Miss Harte had mentioned the diary.

"So I made a little mistake," I said.

A *little* mistake! That's what I mean. If letting someone in here to kill me is a *little* mistake, Dawes, God knows when you might make a big mistake—like killing me yourself, for instance. When you hit that fellow over the head with a beer bottle in L.A., it was just a matter of losing your temper, wasn't it?"

"That's what it was."

"Just a *little* case of quick-triggered nerves."

"I won't lose my temper like that again," I said. "I'd have to be more than stupid to kill you. I'd have to be insane. If you were dead the first thing they'd see when they looked into your files would be a dossier on me. You can trust me more than anyone else around here, Crandall. You know that."

"You're desperately squirming at something," he said, smiling. "What is it?"

"Maybe she knows a lot more than you think."

"She doesn't know anything that can hurt me," Crandall said quickly. "And if she does, she won't get a chance to use it. Her old man is going to be electrocuted at midnight; after that, it'll be too late for her to try to cause any trouble."

"But between now and the time her old man fries," I said, "Crandall—you can afford to give me a chance. This

is an awkward thing on your hands. Let me take care of her."

His round pink little face beamed as he smiled at me. He touched the waves on his blond toupee. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'll take her to Ben's cabin up above the lake."

He smiled at her; she was still out cold. "A nice guest to have all alone with you up at Ben's cabin. But why should I let you do it when you're so stupid?"

"You can really trust me, Crandall."

"That's no point; I don't depend on that with anybody."

"What," I said, "if she has an accomplice waiting somewhere; and you detain her in some obvious way; and someone raises a stink about that? You let me take her for a while. Later I can assure you that she'll never be able to convince any one she wasn't spending that time with me of her own free will, and that she enjoyed herself."

He smiled at me for what seemed an hour. I could feel my stomach turning, and I could actually feel the whining and groveling coming out of my pores. He liked seeing that. And he really liked it this time, because he just kept looking and smiling at it.

"You do have a way with women, as they say," he finally admitted as he looked at Miss Harte. "And at the moment, there's no one else around but Packer and Kennedy. They would hardly be suitable. All right, Dawes; you take care of her for a while. No slip-ups though. One more is all there will ever be for you."

My desire to kill him, and my inability to do it, was beginning to make me so sick I couldn't stand there any more. I picked Miss Harte up off the floor and went out.

THE GRAVEL road had a funny, unreal look the way it was shining in the rain under the thrust of the headlights—as though there was

world around; just a road with the girl and me driving on it.

I glanced at Miss Harte. She was conscious, and her black eyes were fixed on me. Her voice was as direct and calmly intent as her eyes were. "You're a real hellion when it comes to hitting women aren't you, tiger?"

"You bite hard, too," I said. "I always strike out blindly that way when women bite my hand."

She lit a cigaret. I noticed that her hand was calm. "You taking me for a ride, Mr. Dawes?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "Yes, I am."

She blew smoke in my direction. "You talk like you think you're in the movies."

"In the movies they don't really die," I said. "You weren't sound asleep back at Crandall's were you?"

"No; I heard him point out how stupid you are."

"I sure thought you were out cold. You looked like it."

"I heard enough to know you're not really going to kill me."

"I won't, if you'll tell me something very good about Crandall railroading your old man. About the diary and everything."

"The worm turns, is that it?"

Already she was beginning to saw on me with that damn calmness of hers. "Call it anything you like, honey, but I'm taking the longer lake road way to Ben's cabin. Maybe you'll never get there. You won't unless you tell me all about the diary."

"You're just trying to play boogie man. You're supposed to be the stupid one; not me."

"You're stupid too, busting in on Crandall that way."

"But I heard him talking to you, Mr. Dawes! He's got enough on you to keep you a good boy. I don't scare easily, anyway."

"You don't want to die, though. If the diary's good and I can get it, I'll be off Crandall's hook. I'll tell you

this—I'd kill anybody to get off."

"What if I don't know anything?"

"You know plenty. And if you really don't, I'll find that out too."

"What do you do, Mr. Dawes—hold lighted cigarets against girls' feet?"

"Not against their *feet*, honey. And you can stop trying to be cute; I mean business."

"Now Mr. Dawes! If I really had anything that dangerous to Mr. Crandall, he would know it. If he knew it, he certainly wouldn't let you and me have a long lonely talk together about it so you could get the information and use it against him!"

"He's not like you; he really *does* think I'm stupid. I've seen to that. I've worked hard at it, and now he's convinced that I'm a crawling, whining, stupid wretch. That's why he's leaving us alone together. So now you'd better tell me all about the diary."

I slid my automatic from underneath my coat for emphasis. I held it up so she could get a good look at it. Only, instead of cringing, she made a grab for it. I moved it over to my left hand and slid it into my left coat pocket.

"You can try jumping out of the car too," I said. "Persuading you might even be a little easier if you had a broken leg."

I decided I had drawn a really cool one, though I'd had no choice in the matter. Anyway, I figured all that bravery was only on the outside.

- 2 -



DROVE off onto the sightseeing point where the cliff drops into the lake. I killed the lights and the motor, and then sat there a few minutes just listening to the rain.

Her face was white, but her eyes

were black, calm and defiant. I hated her then; I hated her for not showing how scared I knew she had to be. I reached across and flicked the button and opened the door on her side. I could feel the way her nice body moved against me. "Get out now," I said.

"What for? God—you could at least pick a warm indoor spot to torture a person."

"You mean with a fireplace and crackling logs," I said, "and maybe some sparkling badinage, and a chance for you to persuade me that there are other ways to have fun?"

"Do you really have a way with the women, like Mr. Crandall said? I mean—other than hitting them or torturing them cleverly?"

"Get out," I said. I was losing patience.

"Where are we, tiger?"

"Devil's Rock. A sight-seeing spot by day; a famous place for dying at nights."

She shrugged and started to get out. I grabbed her neck, twisted her head around. She had to be scared. Pride, that was what was getting under my skin. Who the hell had any right to feel that kind of pride these days?

Then I managed a laugh and shoved her out. I kept a firm hold on her and dragged her over to the edge. There was a slight shine on the bare rock, and then there was just the black pit. I forced her right to the edge. I forced her head down so she was looking into the blackness. You could hear the water sucking and gurgling down in there. A dank smell came up and a whirling wet draft of air.

"It's three hundred feet down," I said, "like a big well. Several people who really wanted to go out the hard way have jumped in here. Granite walls all around down there. Once you jump, or are thrown in, you can't climb out; you can't swim out. You can only drown in it."

I jerked her head up and twisted it

around and held it a few inches from my face. Her face was white and shining wet, but there was some kind of a look of horrible amusement on it.

"All this," she said, "just because you lost your temper one night."

"What about the diary," I said.

"Sorry," she whispered as she smiled a little and shook her head.

I shook her. "You *want* to die? You nuts or something?"

"What happens to Dad—an innocent man—doesn't mean a thing does it?"

I twisted her toward the edge again.

"I want to save Dad's life. You think I care about living if he goes on and has to die?"

It wasn't going to work. I didn't have to stay there in the rain and make an idiot out of myself to know that. Maybe there was a smarter way.

I dragged her back a ways toward the car. "Tell me about the diary; maybe we can help your old man."

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"You've got to believe it. What the hell else can you do? You can't do anything with the evidence alone. No matter how hot it is."

"Why should you help Dad? That would be stupid from your very narrow perspective. If you turned the evidence over to the Governor, or the Attorney General, Crandall would be indicted. If he's indicted, you get sent back to Los Angeles. The only way for that diary to do you any good would be to keep it, use it to blackmail Crandall, keep your freedom—and get money from him, perhaps. Crandall's no good to you unless he's free to keep on functioning as a respectable citizen, a people's servant. Am I right?"

"We could work something out," I said. "But the hell with it! You've got me to the point now where I'm just going to enjoy watching you waiting for your old man to fry!"

"You're not going to kill me then."

I PUSHED her toward the car. "I knew you wouldn't," she said; "I knew you weren't that stupid. Because if I hadn't given you the information, and you killed me, you would have had to explain to Crandall. He wouldn't have liked that."

I shoved her into the car, got in behind the wheel and rammed it back onto the gravel road and headed for Ben's cabin through the walls of dark pines.

"Give me your gun," she said.

"What's that?" I really didn't think I'd heard that straight. I felt jumpy. I'd wanted to get out from under Crandall for so long, taken so much crap from him, wanted to kill him so badly, that the nearness of a possible way of beating him was almost more than I could take.

"Give me the gun."

"No more cute talk," I said. "Just sit there and think about your old man—"

"Give me the gun, tiger. And then I'll tell you some things."

At that moment I saw the headlights reflect suddenly in the rear-view mirror.

I had hit the small Sunrise Highway. I slowed to thirty, but the headlights stayed on me. I gunned her up to eighty and those bright eyes didn't go away.

"We're being tailed."

"Oh?" she said, glancing back, then at me. "Are you sure?"

"It's Crandall. He didn't send his boys after us just to be of service if we had a flat or something!"

"Well, then—give me the gun," she said. "We'd better start working something out hadn't we?"

I couldn't figure Crandall's angle. At first I thought the hell with her; I would just drive on up to Ben's cabin. I could explain that little side trip to Devil's Rock. After all nothing had happened there. I was still heading for Ben's cabin wasn't I? But I was scratchy and raw, and the tension had

grown on me like a rash. I was too close to something; I had to take the chance, I figured. I was going through the motions of living on borrowed time. I'd never known from one hour to the next whether or not Crandall would turn me over. I'd woke up screaming too many times dreaming my room was a little white room; and I was strapped in the middle of it in a chair; and I heard a hissing sound, and saw the little pellet drop into my lap.

I couldn't take any more of that. Quickly, I handed her the gun.

I watched her release the safety. "You know about guns."

"Dad taught me; he was an ex-cop you know. So was Schroeder. I'm taking a big chance, though, just the same. I don't know if I'll be able to watch you closely enough all the time. But it's the only chance Dad's got."

"Now," I whispered, "what about the diary?"

She just looked at me. The headlights stayed glued to my tail. Miss Harte sat tight up against the right door. her legs curled under her, the gun pointing at me.

"There is a diary," I said.

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know."

A weak kind of rage dropped through me; I felt that something was going to crack. I forced my hands to loosen a bit on the wheel. The lights reflecting in the rear-view mirror seemed blinding.

And after a while she started talking, slowly, calmly as though we were on our honeymoon, and she had all the sweet time there was in the world.

HER DAD had been a retired ex-cop and so had Schroeder. They were next door neighbors, buddy-buddy. They played cards at nights, usually at Schroeder's house, and drank beer. Schroeder confided in old man Harte. Seems that several years back, when Schroeder was a Laramer

detective and Crandall was a criminal lawyer, Schroeder had gotten hold of this diary, and with it enough to hang Crandall. Schroeder had been blackmailing Crandall for years—politely, that is; not heavy gouging. Just enough to live very comfortably, play the horses, and things like that. And probably because Schroeder had something hidden in his own past and the diary was a good way to keep Crandall from exposing it.

She talked well, pausing for emphasis, with just the right inflection to make it all so damn interesting. And she kept the gun pointing at my ribs so in case I wasn't snowed by her oratorical ability, I would have to be interested just the same. And the car stayed on my rear like a dark angel's shadow.

"About the diary," I urged, "remember?"

It was only yesterday that her Dad had told her all this about the diary. Death row seemed to be working on him, changing his original determination not to tel her, because he had been afraid she might try to do something about it, become implicated, and get hurt. Her old man evidently wasn't nearly as cool a number as his Vassar daughter was. He had made her promise not to mention it, not to try to do anything about it. He just wanted her to know he was innocent. Now we go into a character analysis of her father and his intricate motives.

The hell with the gun, I thought. If she doesn't get to the point, I'll kill her, anyway, do anything. It would be better to die right now and get it over with.

I kept the needle wavering at about thirty and the headlights behind me stayed on me like the promise of a fate reserved just for me. I had to go slow. A few miles away was the last turn-off to Ben's cabin; beyond that was the Freeway all the way into Ocean City. It was a one-way road up to Ben's, and if Miss Harte's story

turned out to be really good, I'd have a hell of a time getting back down past Crandall's gruesome disciples. And if her story was no good, I wanted to know it in time to make that turn to Ben's cabin.

All these years, she explained carefully, Crandall had been waiting his chance to get Schroeder. First he had to get the diary. He had gotten it. That same day, evidently, was when Schroeder confided in old man Harte. He had nothing to lose by confessing; he knew he was going to die. They were playing cards at Schroeder's house when Schroeder told Harte all this. The next thing Harte knew he woke up with a knife in his hand, the cops coming in, and Schroeder a corpse under the card table.

"So now," I whispered, "what about the diary?"

It seemed that there was a girl named Emily Foster; she was murdered in Laramer on a cold winter's night. Schroeder was the detective in charge of the investigation, and that was when he found the diary—Emily Foster's diary. She was Crandall's mistress, one of them—one of the lesser ones. In the diary there were pictures, the motive, the girl's sordid affair, in detail. The statement that, if she died, Crandall would be the responsible party, and why—everything. That was Schroeder's private little sin. He kept the diary for his own purposes, and the murderer was never found.

It would have been so wonderful, I thought, to have had the diary all to myself, had it put away in a bank vault somewhere, and then watched the expression on Crandall's face when I told him about it. Only it was just a crazy pipe-dream now, and I knew it. The whole thing was a turkey.

"So what?" I almost shouted. "So Crandall's got the diary!"

"I'm not at all sure of that."

"Crandall wouldn't have had Schroeder bumped if he hadn't got the diary!"

"Crandall *didn't* get the diary, though; he had someone else get it."

I TOOK A deep breath; I hadn't thought of that. I wasn't thinking much at all. I was too keyed up to think, but I knew I'd better start thinking or I would finish dying.

"What makes you think Crandall doesn't have the diary?"

"Well—soon as I left the prison, after talking with Dad, I was followed. Watched. Ever since then I've been watched."

So I started thinking. Someone had gotten the diary for Crandall—but she was already ahead of me.

"That night, Schroeder told Dad that the only one who could have taken the diary out of Schroeder's house was a woman named Rita Burth. She and her husband moved in next door to Schroeder about six months ago. She got to be very friendly with Schroeder. Finally she started coming in every day or so to clean up the place for him. He lived alone; that gave her a chance to find the diary and steal it."

"So you went to the Burth residence," I sneered, "and asked them if they would be kind enough to give you the diary."

"I went there, but I had a gun with me. Only they didn't live there."

"And so finally," I said, "you get around to making the point. It isn't Crandall's boys following us; it's the Burths."

"That's what I think."

"It's also what *I* think," I said. "They probably figure you got dangerous information from your old man. Maybe information to the effect that there are photostatic copies of the diary around somewhere. They'd be afraid of that. But Crandall wouldn't have been, not with Schroeder, because the stuff would all have been in the same hands. But the Burths probably figure they're smart enough to handle this, but they don't want to take a

chance on someone else playing the game with the same hand!"

I gunned the Buick hard past the turn-off that went up to Ben's cabin. Burth's car stayed on me; I was all the way in from then on.

I naively suggested that I let Miss Harte off someplace, while the Burths weren't looking, because then she wouldn't get hurt if there were any fireworks. She said she just couldn't trust me that much, she didn't know why. I told her she might get killed. She said she would take that chance, or her old man wouldn't have a chance.

All right, I thought. But when I got the diary, there would be plenty of chances to get rid of her. If I did get the diary, I sure as hell wasn't going to spring her old man with it, and send myself to the gas chamber.

I hit the Stormking Freeway and tromped the big Buick up to ninety-five. Four lanes—two for me, and two, for all the heavy traffic going to the mountains for a fun-filled weekend. A fast straightaway for over thirty miles, with only one long curve in it. It went clear into Ocean City, but I didn't intend to go there to play that kind of tag with Burth.

No houses or towns along the Freeway that bypassed Laramer. Nothing but dark walls of forest, and once in a while a guard rail where the Freeway scraped too close to edge of some dark height.

It was wet, slippery, dangerous going. I stayed in my right lane rolling between seventy-five and ninety-five. Burth could worry about cops; I had a courtesy card from Crandall's office.

I heard Miss Harte say. "You don't look like a thug."

"Neither did Hitler; he just looked like a jerk. And think what a meek looking little fella Crippin was."

"You don't talk like one, either."

"I took a correspondence course in elocution. You see I read that book by

Dale Carnegie. I was unpopu lar, and—”

“What did you major in, in college?”

“Women mostly, until I got tired of the curricula.”

“You learn anything?”

“Enough to recognize one, but then maybe you're just some species that was never introduced in class.”

“What does that mean?”

“Your old man did a good job on you, honey. How old were you before he found out you had been born a little girl?”

“I'll bet you could be really nasty if you didn't have so many other things on your mind.”

“Maybe later I won't have,” I said.

“All right, tiger. What are you planning to do about Burth?”

“Get the diary out of him.”

“How?”

“First I'm going to drive off into one of those emergency parking zones. If Burth stops too, that'll be it. If he doesn't, he'll have to go past me because he can't stop on the Freeway and there's no shoulder. Once he's ahead of us, I'll get him before we get into Ocean City.”

“How?”

“I'd rather wait and surprise you with it.”

I'd be damn surprised if I didn't just manage to kill all of us.

- 3 -



WHEN I SLOWED down and drove off into the narrow emergency parking zone only big enough for about three cars, Burth went by. He was driving a black Olds sedan, and it wasn't the latest one on the road either.

I had him on speed. The Olds was probably complaining already. I figured to get him inside the next ten

miles, if my memory of the Storming Freeway's geography wasn't failing me.

I pushed the Buick up, crowding Burth's car. He didn't know what the hell I was up to, I knew that much. He was probably getting jumpy, all right. I was keyed up, too, but I felt good. It had been a long time since I'd felt so good. I had a way out, and that's all anybody needs—just to feel they've got a fighting chance to get out.

Burth started slowing down. He slowed a little more. I was crowding him good and tight, letting my brights raise hell with his nerves. My needle dropped to fifty. Then I knew that quarter of a mile or so of picnic ground space was coming up, just about halfway around the long curve. A nice lovely picnic spot right off the Freeway, with tables and drinking water and fireplaces to roast weiners and marshmallows in and admire the scenery. The State Highway Commission had arranged it all just so I could get the diary.

“This is just about it,” I said. “Let me have the gun now.”

“You must have also learned to underestimate the intelligence of a woman.”

“What do you think I'm going to do with Burth? Sit down at a picnic table with him and talk the diary out of him?”

“I'll be with you, and I'll have the gun.”

I couldn't argue with her; I didn't have time. I started to reach casually toward the glove compartment.

She motioned with the gun. “Naughty, mustn't touch,” she said.

“I was only going to get a pack of cigarets!”

“I'll get them.”

She opened the glove compartment. She hesitated, then took out the spare gun. Actually it wasn't my idea. This particular car just came equipped that way. Maybe, for guys like Crandall,

they turn them out of the factory that way.

She looked at me with mock accusation, then put it back into the glove "You won't need it," she said.

"I'll bet you're a real Annie Oakley, too."

I gave the Buick a sudden goose, all it had, and roared up beside Burth as if he were standing still. "Hold on to your girdle," I said.

I twisted the wheels. There was a hair-raising grind of two big pieces of speeding metal rubbing together. I saw a white, terrified face. I pulled on the wheel more against the resistance. I put all my weight onto it; the Buck was digging, trying to get away from me.

And then all at once Burth broke like something flying out of a bow. The black Olds bounced over the slight rise of concrete into the dark patch of the picnic ground. I heard a crashing roar as I concentrated on keeping the Buick under control, heading into the grounds myself, without skidding, pumping the brakes, watching to avoid ramming too many picnic tables or crashing into a fireplace.

I missed the fireplace. A table loomed up. Metal jarred. Wood flew up through the beam of the headlights. A part of the windshield turned into fine spiderweb.

I'd tried to time it so that the nearest oncoming car was far enough back not to hear the crash. Otherwise they wouldn't bother stopping, just because a couple of cars had turned off onto the picnic grounds. Funny night for picnicing, but not so funny that any one would stop to ask questions. If a cop car happened to be hiding in there, though, it would be messy.

I KILLED the lights and the motor and didn't waste any time getting out and running toward the other car.

I was ready to be shot at, but I kept running. I wasn't any target in the almost pitch blackness. The only

light at all was from Burth's car. One shot off at a crazy angle. Steam rose up through the light. Burth had had a very hot motor.

Burth had ploughed into a stone fireplace; his radiator was smashed in. I could hear the fanbelt clacking on metal. The door opened just as I got there. Burth was hanging half out of the car, holding onto the top of the door, with one hand, his head drooping. The inside of the car was lit up because of the opened door. I could see blood running down Burth's swollen face. His windshield was cracked.

I hadn't expected it to be this easy. I dragged him on out, and onto the wet grass at my feet. I started to slam the door to get that light out. Then I remembered the headlights, and I wanted to get the motor off, too. As I started to reach in there to take care of those items, I saw a little flurry of movement; I smelled perfume. My throat tightened and a tingle ran over my arms.

"Just stand that way," she drawled. "Now don't make a move at all."

I rolled my eyes enough to see her fat maternal face leaning toward me from the back seat. The gun was in my right hand, hanging down with the frame of the car in front of it. If I lifted it, she would shoot me right in the face. The gun was up there angled across the back of the front seat.

"I'm gettin' out. Now don't you make no move."

She still had that look, the kindly next door neighbor. Schroeder had fallen for it. Probably was a helluva good cook, too. She kept the gun pointing into my face; she was starting to open the left back door with her other hand, and then I heard the shot.

It had that dull crack that a shot has out in the country in a wet night, muted, something like the flat deadly crack of a mortar. Only it was right on me, My ears rang and for one aw-

ful moment I thought someone had killed me.

And what happened to Mrs. Burth's face was something I had seen happen to faces on Tarawa but that had seemed a hundred years ago. Alive now, a second later dead. A burst of blood and the eyes still looking at you out of a dead face. You want to scream at them. "You're dead, you want to say, so God's sake lie down!"

She started sliding down onto the floor. I felt numb. Her head slowly sank out of sight, and her arm flopped over the back seat after her head.

My mouth was dry. That had been an accident, my killing that guy in L. A. I had hardly remembered doing it. This was as cold and casual as someone shooting frogs. I turned stiffly. Miss Harte was right beside me.

She whipered. "I—I had to do it didn't I? Didn't I?"

"Anyway you did it, "I said.

I felt paralyzed. I could see Miss Harte's round white face wet in the rain, her red lips, the black hair shining with moisture. Sweet, clean looking kid, fresh out of Vassar or somewhere. I saw the headlights going down the Freeway, people in their little world—they wouldn't believe what was happening in their picnic grounds. If they read about it in the morning papers though, I wanted to be in another state, bedded down with that diary, or I was washed up.

BURTH WOULDN'T tell anyone about anything; his only chance would be to run the hell out of the country. His wife wouldn't talk either, unless it was at a seance. Crandall wouldn't. Not if I got the diary.

That left Miss Harte. If I just ditched her now, she would tell on me—unless I went on and tried to help her old man, maybe I would have to kill her. It had been okay as a bluff. Already I'd had enough homicide; I felt sick and shaky.

But then I thought, *get the diary and start figuring it from there.*

I could feel Burth moving a little to my feet. I reached inside and got the ring of keys, turned off the motor and the lights. I found a small flashlight in the glove compartment. I squatted down and rolled Burth over and flashed the light down into his face.

It was pretty bloody and he had a very fat lip. The rain was turning his face pink. His eyes blinked wildly up at me. He was conscious enough not to like what was happening.

I felt the misty rain cool on the back of my neck. I realized that I felt hot, like I had a fever. A chill rippled down my back.

"Burth," I said. "You're going to tell me where the diary is, and how to get it." I shook him a little. I felt the back of his head thud on the wet grass. He wasn't human to me; he wasn't anything but a kind of machine I had to coax something out of, like a slot machine.

He spoke with difficulty. Some of his teeth were broken. "I'm going to tell you just one thing."

"What's that?" I asked.

"To go straight to hell."

"You first," I said. I jerked him around, lifted him up and jammed his head into the back of the car near the floor. His eyes were about five inches from his wife's face.

I could feel his body jerk. And then I could feel him crawling inside.

"Rita—oh—Rita—" he choked.

"It's an old song," I said. "Only it's Rio Rita—"

"Oh— oh Rita—" he kept singing over and over. I heaved him around in front of the car and lifted him up by one hand, twisting his collar around his thin neck. He was a scrawny guy, with a neck like a turkey. I had a good idea who had worn the pants in the Burth family, but he was stubborn enough.

"It was easy and quick for Rita," I

said. "But it can be long and rough for you. Where's the diary?"

"You go straight—"

I shoved his cut face under the car, where the boiling water from the smashed radiator could run into it. He screamed. His body twisted and jerked.

I looked up at Miss Harte. I could see her outline, and a white blur of a face. "You don't have to watch."

"I don't want to, but I guess I'll have to. I'm really watching you."

"I'm self conscious," I said, "when people watch."

She didn't say anything; she stayed right there and watched. It took a while, but there's something inside any man alive that breaks up after a while. He finally told us all we needed to know. Naturally, he didn't have the diary with him. They had been intending to leave town, but then they'd decided to wait until old man Darte was burned. They evidently knew that Harte had gotten more from Shroeder than he had been allowed to reveal, so they were waiting to find out if he had dropped anything. Naturally, they had started tailing Miss Harte to find out—particularly after she started getting nosy.

Now the Diary was at the Tourist Hotel in Ocean City. The Burths had rented a room there, under the name of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Connell.

"**N**OW WHAT," Miss Harte whispered, as though she didn't feel so good. "No one will investigate until it gets light, and daytime is still about seven hours away. If someone drives in here they won't investigate the car either, sitting here blacked out in a night like this. Even a cop car might not be that curious. They'll probably just figure that someone's smooching, and that's still legal out here."

"Unless they're close enough to see there's been an accident."

"We'll have to take that chance,"

I said. I opened the front door and reached for the glove compartment to look for some friction tape. I couldn't remember if there was any in the Buick or not.

"Mr. Dawes."

I turned. In the light from the Olds interior, her face shone in at me. "Better not do that," she said. "It would be better not to tape him up or anything like that."

I didn't move. For a minute I couldn't even say anything. There was something horrible about her cute innocent looking face. It wasn't just that she had the gun on me, and that now I knew she would as soon kill me as look at me. It was something else. I couldn't figure out what it was. It was a feeling of naked fear, a kind of helpless feeling. As though for all the way I felt, and the big talk, somehow or other she was the boss. I determined to get rid of that feeling fast; I couldn't afford it. I turned around and looked at her. "I doubt if he would tell what's really happened, but we can't afford to take any chances. I figure to keep him quiet for a while; that's all."

"But it would be better if we left him this way; then the police wouldn't know any one else had a hand in it."

"There's the matter of the bullet in Mrs. Burth's head."

Miss Harte moved around and opened the rear door. I saw her take Mrs. Burth's gun, and I saw her squat down and drop the other gun she had shot Mrs Burth with on the ground and then she was rubbing the handle of the gun in the wet grass.

She stood up. "Can they trace that gun of your, Mr. Dawes?"

I shook my head no.

She nodded. "This way is better then. He'll probably stagger onto the Freeway and try to flag down a car. The police will come in on it. They'll question him, and that way it will be a lot more complex and better for us."

I doubt if he can even remember you enough to describe you. He can explain about the diary even, if he's that desperate, but who will believe him? There won't be any diary by then anyway, will there?"

"No," I said. "Not for Mr. Burth."

"Well, so we had better go get the diary now," she said.

I felt tired. I got out of the car and closed the door. I started walking fast toward the Buick, but she walked faster. The gun was on me all the time. She got to the door first and opened it so she could watch me when the light went on. She waited until I got in before she got in.

Her old man had done a good job on her, I was thinking as I drove back onto the Freeway and headed for Ocean City. She was too cool; it was really getting me. And then I got to thinking—what if it were my old man who was waiting to fry in a few hours, innocent, depending only on me to get him out. Maybe somehow it would be different. Maybe you could be a lot cooler doing that than trying to save your own neck.

But the main thing was I knew that—even if and when I got the diary in my hands—I wouldn't be free at all, not until I got rid of Miss Harte. I kept wondering over and over if I could do it, how I could do it. The thing was—it looked as though I'd have to do it. If I could get the diary and get that gun away from her without getting killed, there she was just the same. I was scared of her. She could get the cops on me before I got out of the county. She knew all about me. If Burth had seen me, he sure hadn't seen her. My gun; my murder—not hers. They would be after me for murder on both ends of the line.

If I had the diary, I could pressure Crandall to fix it with the local cops. But the state troopers—that was something else.

There was one chance—to get the

diary, and the gun away from her, and then hold on to her, or put her in a closet or something, until I was a long way off.

But how to get that gun away from her? I'd rather have taken a silly chance of disarming a guy like Parker or Kennedy, than this girl. And whatever I did about that I'd have to do it fast once we got hold of the diary. Because she was hell-bent on using it to push Crandall into that call to the governor.

- 4 -



I GOT the diary all right. *We* got it. The feel of it was wonderful. I kept seeing Crandall's smiling face melting down like wax as I told him about having it. But it would have been so much better if I'd

had the diary all to myself.

We got it.

I made other suggestions, but Miss Harte wasn't hearing any of them; at her insistence we both went into the Tourist Hotel together. She had the gun in her handbag and it was on me all the time. We went together up in the elevator and down the hall and into the Burth's room, and we got the diary from inside the water closet where it was stuck with some tape inside some water-proofed plastic. And we came back out and down the hall, and into the elevator, and back out into the lobby of the Tourist Hotel, into the street, back into the car—still together. It had the sticky suffocating feel of a life-long relationship. She wasn't exactly my type, and it would be pretty uncomfortable going to bed with a gun.

First, I thought of driving down some dark residential side street so I could

park and get a good look at the diary. But that would be conspicuous; so I drove down Main. The town was wide open, and the bars were going strong.

I parked and we sat there and looked at the diary. I forgot everything else; I thumbed the pages, and looked at the pictures of Crandall and the girl—Page after page of deadly indictment. The Governor was on a corruption killing kick, anyway, and politically speaking he would like to get something that would freeze Crandall. That's what made the diary really deadly; I could see that now. It was more than enough to reopen the Emily Foster murder case, and it was enough to finish Crandall.

"Let me see," Miss Harte said; "put it down there on the seat."

She was way over there, tight against the door. I couldn't make a move then either. She picked up the diary and somehow managed to skim through it with one eye and watch me with the other. "Beautiful," she said. "Isn't it?"

I nodded.

"Crandall won't argue about calling and asking for a reprieve now, not when we have this to persuade him, will he?"

I was staring into the wet street. "Don't try to get away with the diary now," I said; "I'll kill you."

"Why should I do that? We're partners aren't we?"

"It looks that way." I tried to think, get it clear. "As far as my purpose goes," I said, "it's simple. All I have to do is get out of the state, send Crandall some sign that I have the diary. But getting your old man reprieved—that's not simple at all."

"No, I realize that, Mr. Dawes. We're not going to phone Crandall. Maybe you planned to do that, but I'm not taking any chances. I want to know that he calls the Governor. I want to *know* Dad gets his reprieve. In other words—we're going to Cran-

dall's house and make sure he calls the Governor."

IT WASN'T the rainy dark and the reflection of neon that made the street take on a hypnotic blur so that I just kept on staring at it. I was afraid to look at her, afraid to let myself go. I was afraid I'd blow my stack and make a play for the gun if I wasn't careful. I stared into the street, trying to control myself.

"So," I said, not looking at her, "we walk in with the diary. Crandall's goons take us over, and Crandall takes the diary. I'll go back to L.A. and—but then I wouldn't care what the hell happened to you."

"Both of us aren't going to see Crandall; you are."

I shook my head. "Sorry, no dice. I've had it now, honey. The hell with it." I was going to try to get the gun and take my chances, I thought. Or I don't know now what I thought—except that I wasn't going to commit suicide when I could stretch it out, run, hide, and that way maybe live a little longer. "If I went in there with the diary, Crandall would get it. That's stupid. If I went in without it and told him I had it, he'd think I was bluffing. Even if I quoted to him from it—"

"That might work," she said, "only I'm not interested in that. I'm only interested in making sure he calls the governor and asks for a reprieve."

The ripping sound seemed to be something inside of me. I jerked around.

She had torn half of the inside of the diary out.

She kept the pages, and dropped the black bound rest of it on the seat between us.

"You just tell Crandall I have the other half of the diary, and he'll spare your life; I'm sure of that. The diary's a lot more beautiful in one piece, but it's effective this way too. There's enough on either part to fix Crandall.

I'll be waiting in Ocean City; but Crandall won't know where I am. You'll be there to see that he phones the governor fast enough to save Dad's life!"

"And meanwhile," I said thickly, "you'll have enough to get away from Crandall. I might keep my half just for protection; Crandall won't like me much after this I'm afraid."

"All right," I finally said. "Get out."

"Not here. My car's parked here in case I need it fast. The Greyhound Bus terminal. You can call me there as soon as you leave Crandall's. Stop as soon as you can call me and tell me about Dad."

I drove her around and down Crown Street to the terminal. She got out and stood there, and behind her I could see the parking lot. She stood there looking in at me very seriously. But the handbag was angled just right.

If I could have thought of any way out, I would have taken it. Making a play for that gun would have been damn near sure death; any other way at all, I still had a slim chance. If I had taken my half of the diary and run with it down the highway, she would have got the state cops on me. I wouldn't have gotten out of the county. I could hear her telling the cops, putting on a scared little girl act. She had been driving along the Freeway, and she had seen this awful thing. My car was overheating, and I saw this picnic ground, so I drove in, and right there in the glare of my headlights was—"

She would remember my description perfectly, the license of the car, everything.

This way, there was a chance. It was just the kind of chance that might work; it had to work. I had to think it would work. It was the only and last chance there would ever be for me. Maybe my conscience would feel better later, too. I'd have done a good

deed; saved an innocent old man from the electric chair.

But somehow, I knew there was something terribly wrong. I didn't know *what* it was. I went back over it all, but my mind was fevered and desperate—and all I could think about was getting in, seeing Crandall, fulfilling my obligations, getting back and checking in with Miss Harte and getting her okay so I could go on out of it for good. That was all I could think about even though I knew somewhere it was all horribly wrong. I couldn't afford to think about what was wrong.

I DROVE right up to where the curved drive almost touched the big colonial type porch. Packer was standing out there. He didn't seem to see me. He never did seem to see me. Everywhere the caste system. I took the gun from the glove compartment, and dropped it into my coat pocket.

I let myself in and walked through the dim light of the big walnut-paneled living room that was like a mausoleum. I went into Crandall's study without knocking, without hesitating, without thinking or feeling much of anything, because I felt numb like someone who was almost but not quite under hypnosis.

Crandall was over by the liquor cabinet, and he turned with a martini glass in his hand and smiled at me as I came in and shut the paneled doors.

"Hello, Dawes," he said as though I had never been away. "Drink?"

"No, thanks." I took the half of the diary Miss Harte had allotted me and held it up close to him so he could get a good look at it. His eyes brushed over it, and then he was dropping ice cubes into a glass. "Maybe it's been so long since you've seen it you don't remember what this is," I said.

When he looked at me again his smile was even wider. He brushed at his blond toupee. "You're a good re-

triever, Dawes, I'll credit you with that. I wish I had room to keep you in my kennel."

Something cold breathed over my face. I went on though, but my mouth felt stiff and puckered. "Half of it's here; Miss Harte's got the other half. Call the governor, get a reprieve for old man Harte. That's for her half. Then tell your boys I'm on my way out of here, and that's—"

"Please," he said and sipped at his martini. I wondered what the other glass was for, the one with the ice. "I know, Dawes; just put the diary over there on my desk. I can put it in my safe later."

"I don't have time for gags either."

"You just don't have very much time," Crandall said. He was standing there looking at me, as though I were on a home movie screen. Still curious, but very bored now too.

Get out, get out, something whispered inside my head, *get out, shoot your way out, make a try anyway...*

But I stood there, gripping that diary the way a drowning man would hold on to a chip of wood.

I heard a car drive up outside. I heard a door slam.

"That must be Teresa now," he said. "With the other half." He sauntered to his desk and took a cigaret out of a silver box and lit it. "Teresa—Miss Harte to you. You see, Dawes there isn't any Miss Harte at all; old man Harte never had a daughter. You didn't bother to check that, and neither did the Burths. To put it simply, without wasting words, Dawes—I wanted the diary from Burth, but I didn't want him to think I was pushing him to get it. So Teresa and I cooked up this little scheme. She pretends to be Harte's daughter and the words are dropped in the right places that she knows about the diary. So the Burths are hooked; that's all. Simple."

Teresa came in, and the rain made



her black hair shine. She kissed him. He smiled at me, and I could see the smear of lipstick on his fat pink cheek. She waved the pages from the diary and flicked a hand at me. She put the pages down on the desk and sat on the desk, crossed her legs, and began moving one of them slowly to and fro.

There was a rusty turning and grinding in my head; I wanted to scream. My nerves were crawling and my shirt was sopping wet. I wanted to get hold of something, break something loose, tear something wide open.

Far away, sounding to me like a whisper, I could hear her telling Crandall how the Burths had been taken care of, and I heard him make a telephone call and fix that up for the record. She was seeing that that little item was cleared away too.

I felt as if I was going to fall down on the floor. I felt the diary drop out of my hand.

"Teresa's been an actress, and now she plays her important roles for me." I heard Crandall say. I heard them both laugh. He was handing her a glass, I heard the ice tinkle.

They hadn't had to have been so elaborate and clever about it, I thought. They had done it that way for kicks, to watch me perform. A good clown has to have a script, props, a supporting cast.

LOOKING BACK, I could see a thousand holes in it. The door I'd known I locked. I'd known I knocked her cold, too. Later she knew all

about it—not because she had overheard it lying there, but because she already knew. Crandall agreeing too readily to my taking care of her. And that little matter of the Burths knowing about “Miss Harte”. I’d never stopped to figure out how they had gotten wise to her. But now I knew—it had been planted so they couldn’t miss it. And Harte waiting until the last minute to tell his ‘daughter’ about the diary. He really wouldn’t have done that, would he? Harte was some poor old fall guy probably, without a relative in the world or any one else who gave a damn whether he lived or died; just a patsy.

There were other holes too, a lot of them. But looking back on my life from where I am now, I can see that it was always full of holes.

“Why,” I heard her say, “do the good-looking guys always have to be such knuckleheads?”

A red haze was filming my eyes. A kind of horror was burning in my blood. Their faces were blurred. Somewhere I could hear a clock ticking louder and louder.

Crandall had used Teresa for bait and sent me out to do the fishing.

“You’re right,” I whispered. I couldn’t see Crandall’s face, only the smile. “I’m stupid. You’ve convinced me, Crandall.”

“Fine,” he said. “It’s gratifying to see false pride break down at last.”

I jerked the gun out of my pocket. For one second I hesitated about who to get first. Then I shot Crandall. His smile dissolved into a look of shocked disbelief, and then he fell on his face. I walked toward her. She had picked up the other half of the diary from the floor and was picking up the rest of it from the disk.

I heard Crandall whisper. “Theresa—the gun—you didn’t take out—the bullets—”

“No,” she said looking down at him curiously, “I left that one in—for you.”

I fired and kept on firing, but nothing happened. Just the click of the hammer on an empty chamber.

“I figured you would shoot at him first,” she said to me. “The seniority of hate.” She was going toward the side door. It went through a bedroom, and out into the hall. I made a lunge for her, but she was gone. I couldn’t follow her either, because Packer and Kennedy came in behind me.

When had she taken the bullets out, all but one? When I’d ran over to Burth’s car. They had worked that out together, too—heat me up to the point of murder—with an empty gun. Only she had put a bullet in it, just for Crandall.

I tried to break through, but Packer and Kennedy beat me down to the floor. I lay there and somewhere I could hear them bending over Crandall and talking to him; and I could hear them on the phone, too.

Crandall would live, maybe. Teresa had taken the diary and now I knew why. Just on the chance that Crandall might not die.

No matter what had happened, she had had it made. If I had missed Crandall completely, I would have tried to get him in some way, any way at all. She knew that. She was there waiting for the big scene, waiting to walk out with the diary no matter what happened, while Packer and Kennedy came in and got me.

Teresa and Crandall had one thing in common. They played it all the way for the kicks. I guess that’s the way to do it—never take anything too seriously, even dying.

She was driving away with the diary. I hoped Crandall would live, and he did. You pay on and on in your way, Crandall, and in a few more hours I’ll pay in mine. Everybody pays, right Crandall? And eventually, even the Teresas, the smart ones at the top of the greasy pole.

Just how many lives, now, is a cat supposed to have?

THE INSCRUTABLE SIAMESE

by LEONARD PRUYN

IT WAS NOT through choice that Mr. Atkins became involved with a vengeful professor, an unfortunate woman, and an officer of the law. A reserved sort, Mr. Atkins cherished his independence and devoted his life to the proposition that People Are A Frightful Bore. He was courteous, clean and hygienic in his habits. He solicited neither companion nor notoriety; and he was discriminating in his taste. Being a quiet and somewhat cynical individual, Mr. Atkins made few friends. His ways were cerebral and uncertain; he was special; he was aristocratic; he hated competition. But certainly, he did not deserve his fate.

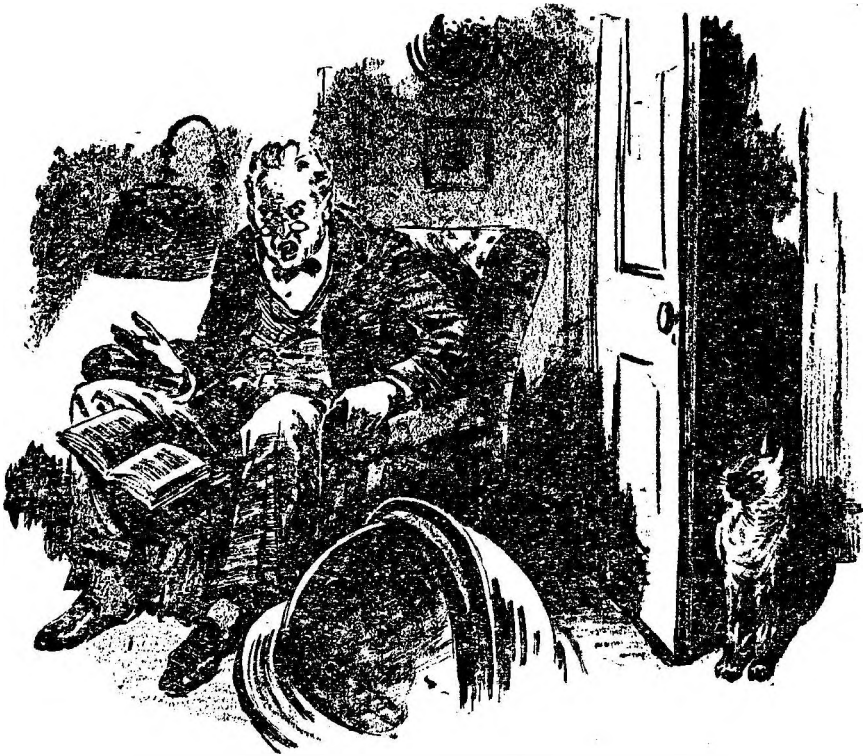
Mr. Atkins was a cat. A Siamese. Officially, he died by electrocution, in the arms of a beautiful woman, listening to a toccata by Bach. . .

The affair was hushed because of scandal; the story lacked a hero, and people were afraid. No one was even certain what really happened—except Mr. Atkins, who would not tell. For years after the murder, people said it would have been different if Professor Nolan and his cat had not been so much alike in mood and temperament,

if they had not loved the same woman, if the odds had been more closely even. For while Mr. Atkins was a clever and sagacious creature, he was also strong and beautiful. Such was not the case with his servant, Robert Nolan. The professor was merely kind and average, a man who adored his wife and desired to keep her. He was intelligent; he was not handsome. His prize was Belle Louise, a lovely woman with long brown limbs.

Like most men married to beautiful women, Robert Nolan was appallingly human; he considered himself lucky, and was very jealous. No man had ever dared to take his prize. He determined that Atkins wouldn't either, but it did no good. Mr. Atkins fell in love with Belle Louise the day he met her. The Siamese could not help himself. Mr. Atkins devoted twenty-four hours of every day to the keen, tormented annoyance of the professor, who in turn explored man's every known device calculated to discourage and drive a Siamese from family the hearth.

For long evening hours, Professor Nolan would recline in a soft leather chair and study the object of his wife's affections: the sapphire almond eyes,



Nolan looked up, amazed, when the Siamese walked in.

cold with disdain for him; the sharp white teeth which mocked him; the wedged and arrogant head, insolently proclaiming its feline superiority; the lean and sinewy body, fawn-colored and bitter-chocolate dipped; the imperious length of tapering tail. . .

MR. ATKINS (high upon the mantelpiece) would raise his dark-masked and scornful face, like a gargoyle, his wide red mouth ridiculing the professor, laughing at him, hating him, reminding Robert Nolan of every witch-cat that ever lived. And every time the Siamese would rub itself against the ankles of the beautiful Belle Louise, or like a miniature panther would cuddle to her breast, it seemed as if the woman and the cat would purr together, sharing some deep and lascivious secret that the thin-haired, ineffectual professor could never know. Robert Nolan had rightly

thought that women and cats had much in common: they were cruel; they were beautiful; they were sensuous and deceitful. You could never understand a woman. You could never understand a cat. . .

"I really don't think you like our cat," Belle Louise had said one day, in a moment of idle comment. But instead of dropping the subject, she began to study her husband with round bright eyes. "You never seem to love him."

Robert Nolan felt a constriction in his chest. He watched his wife move her fingers through Mr. Atkins' svelte and close-cropped hair. "I hate Mr. Atkins," he said.

"Why?" Belle Louise seemed truly puzzled.

It was a good question. Robert Nolan decided to answer it. "Because cats in general and Mr. Atkins in particular—have no sense of property!"

The professor's wife withdrew her hand from the Siamese. "You're joking, Robert—"

She looked very strange. She pulled Mr. Atkins to her lap. "You're surely not jealous of a Siamese! My God."

That was the day she knew. Immediately, Robert Nolan sensed the danger. He laughed. "Of course I'm not jealous," he said. "I'm just in a bad mood." He dismissed the subject. "Whenever I'm in a bad mood, I don't like anybody—and cats, especially."

Belle Louise had laughed to herself and closed the subject. But during the afternoon that followed, an apprehension filled the house: they both began to fear the worse and somehow realized that matters would get no better.

In fact, the matter got quite out of hand. From that day forward, the Siamese became an obsession with Robert Nolan. Where at first he had hated and despised the cat, now he came to fear and dread it. He would cower at the tiny *pit pad pit pad* sounds of Mr. Atkins' clawed and oval feet; he would skulk through the house at sundown, turning on lights and placing candles in dark corners. Robert Nolan gave up eating, and missed his classes, and ignored his wife. And when night at last would come, the frightened professor would barricade himself within his room and tensely wait the dawn.

IN JUSTICE it must be said that Mr. Atkins, himself, was not a bit less careful than most courageous men. He also became quite wary and took great pains to avoid his servant's (or master's, as other humans put it) path. Although the professor had never laid a hand upon him, Mr. Atkins would preen his teeth, and grind his claws upon the banister which overlooked the hall, and spend the twilight hours peering down between the balusters with clear blue and cautious eyes.

It would seem that the Siamese began to anticipate his peril. He jumped



loudly at the slightest sounds. When the professor was in the house, he followed Mrs. Nolan's skirts assiduously and refused to leave her side. The top-floor chambers became his realm, while Robert Nolan made a bright illuminated fortress of the first-floor rooms. Belle Louise would have to travel up and down the staircase in a jonquil yellow housecat, like an emissary or a nurse who served two armies. She became accustomed to her role.

She watched the professor gather the books of lore and history about him—the books of Inquisition, of the Kabouterje in Holland, the Cat-God Mau of Egypt, the worshipers and goblins and witches and tales of Scottish warrior cats and of women who burned at the stake and men who shaved their eyebrows to mourn the deaths of cats...

And yet Belle Louise did not know that the eclectic Professor Nolan had marked those pages that gave ancient instruction on the accepted means to dispose of suspect Siamese. He had carefully outlined the chapters on torture and execution in red, and there were notes throughout the margins. *Dip in oil and set afire* was especially noted. *Beat to death with whip and lash* was marked with a smudgy asterisk. *Crucify and skin alive* was distinguished by a cryptic notation in shorthand. In time, Belle Louise learned to live with her husband's excesses and ignored them. But she grew no less

fond of Mr. Atkins. She seemed to love the professor and cat with equal faith. It was the failing of Belle Louise, in point of fact, that she could never maintain an emotion, carry a grudge or take anything in life too seriously...

It was the death of her.

THE DAY following the night that Mr. Atkins had attacked and clawed Robert Nolan in his sleep, Belle Louise was in the bath she loved. Her brown limbs basked in an ocean of fragrant bubbles. The radio next to the tub hummed with the evening concert. Mr. Atkins was performing a minuet along the tiles. Robert Nolan was concealed behind the bathroom door. The professor's eyes were a hateful red.

He pushed cat, radio and wife into the sudsy water—roasting them as a group, in a bright electric shower of alternating current. It was a crime of passion and over quickly. Professor Nolan buried them in the garden.

Now the officer of the law in the Atkins' affair was a little man named Milton Sonnenberg. A genial cop, Detective Sonnenberg was also an exceedingly clever fellow. He was witty, had slicked-down hair and bought clothes which never fit him. Despite his baggy pants, however, this was a man to like and trust. He had imagination. He had a sense of humor. Indeed, the verities in the life of Milton Sonnenberg were few but quite important. A mongrel dog. Beer and blackjack. The wife and kids. Justice. His new promotion to the Detective Force. And the night games at Ebbets Field...

The only trouble with him was that he disliked cats, and did not understand them; he had no taste for the moribundities of odd scholars, and judged all women by his wife. In fact, the detective disliked cats almost as much as Robert Nolan, but was not

jealous of them. It was his job to investigate a neighbor's report that the golden-legged Belle Louise had disappeared and her husband was acting strangely...

Among his colleagues and the denizens of his beat, Milton Sonnenberg was an extremely popular fellow. And, as with most well-liked people, he was appreciated more for his friendship than his talents. He was that kind of direct and simple man who takes the world invariably by surprise. Except in the line of duty, the little policeman possessed inherent respect for the privacy of others. Should it ever be resolved as to whether Milton Sonnenberg blundered in the Atkins' case, it will be said that he failed before extraordinary tasks and matters which got completely out of hand. For it is not the fault of detectives that they are infrequently equipped for the perverse and wayward habits of their peculiar clientele. Sonnenberg was no exception. He found distraction in the histories of beautiful women like Belle Louise, now dead or lost, remembered only by seaside photographs of jade green eyes and copper almond tans.

AFTER THE murder, Detective Sonnenberg discussed these matters and the disappearance of Belle Louise at length with Professor Nolan. But it was no longer the same man he talked to. Robert Nolan was neither kind nor average now: he was cold and obsessed. The detective spent two weary hours questioning the instructor and found that a business-like interrogation got him nowhere. Professor Nolan's smug indifference became a challenge, and the detective proceeded in a more light-hearted and sarcastic vein...

"Maybe she went to see an aunt?" suggested Sonnenberg.

"Doubtful."

The policeman scratched his neck. "Could be she's left you?"

The professor grimaced at this intrusion of privacy. It was a painful gesture. "Obviously."

"What if she's dead?" asked Sonnenberg.

The English instructor managed as best he could. "I hope not."

"Well, then; what are you going to do?" demanded the policeman.

"Not much I can do," smiled Robert Nolan.

The professor was anything but hospitable, and Sonnenberg disliked the man on sight: the cold and superior manner, the Mephistophelean eye. Robert Nolan had the manners of a madman or a murderer.

After the usual checks and counter-checks and laboratory work, Sonnenberg decided to play the game in his own inimitable fashion. Officially, he dropped the case. In a matter of a week, Professor Nolan was free again to live his strange and sequestered life. He had given up the university altogether now, and his mood was one of morbid introspection. Full of memories he took midnight, fortnight trips to the country to forget. He carried his guilt about with him till it worried and bent his shoulders. He began to miss his wife. He commenced once more to hate the Siamese and refused to accept its death. . .

His life became a series of lonely trips to Upper New York State and through the Adirondack Mountains, desolate voyages through the downy green hills of Pennsylvania. For three long weeks, the little professor made a journey to wilderness regions of Ontario and Lake Simcoe.

Fortunately, the Immigration Authorities ignored his small and leaky suitcase. . .

THE PROFESSOR'S last trip was the longest. Citizens of New Hampshire and Maine became accustomed to the effete small man with his round wicker basket. It never left his



side as he rested at the now quiet summer resorts. When energy and peace at last returned to him, Robert Nolan began the long motor trip back to Long Island and his home. Ostentatiously, he dropped the empty basket from a road above the Hudson. A short time later, a freckle-faced boy retrieved it from the river near Peekskill. Professor Nolan returned to the burnished autumn gardens of his house in Forest Hills. The Rhesus on his back had finally ceased to weigh so fitfully.

Even the first night home, Robert Nolan had a deep and dreamless sleep. He prepared himself a dean's breakfast the following morning, and wrote a letter accepting an assistant professorship for the winter semester at a select girls' college in Maryland. He leisurely wiled away the day, working on his doctor's thesis, "The Didacticism of Alexander Pope." . . .

That evening, he settled down in his study chair with a Benedictine and coffee, a cigar and a delightfully funny satire by a South African woman writer. He looked up as Mr. Atkins walked in the door. . .

Bela Bartok's "Children's Dances" caroled loudly from the phonograph, and towels were stuffed beneath the study doors. Hanging in a jute cloth

sack from the chandelier. Mr. Atkins struggled weakly. Robert Nolan paced the room in large, erratic strides, his eyes the dun gray color of dead fish. Again and again, the old English proverb would repeat itself within his mind:

*The finest pastime that is under
the sun is whipping the cat at
Abrighton*

And all the lore and superstition came back to him: the Druid sacrificial cats; the good common-sensical Christians roasting *felis libyca domestica* over warm Lenten fires; the burnt-faced peasants washing the faces of cats to bring on rain. . .

Robert Nolan, himself, would have been the first to admit that the strangest thing of all was the sang-froid and cool acceptance with which he had greeted the return of Mr. Atkins. He had dispatched the matter quickly and efficiently. It had not troubled him too much. But then, perhaps, he had been in a state of shock. The second visit of the hard and living ghost of Mr. Atkins was a trifle more disconcerting. . .

The English instructor had packed his bags and was about to leave for the Roland Clyne School for Girls in Baltimore. His car was parked within his garage and as he opened the door, Mr. Atkins began to hiss at him disdainfully from rear-seat quarters, its back bowstring-taut and arched for flight. The professor was badly mauled.

DURING the third, fourth and fifth visits of Mr. Atkins, the venerable professor lived under an incubus of fear and nightmare. The food he ate turned sour in his stomach. His memory and loss of Belle Louise burned deep and gnawed within him.

On the sixth and seventh reincarnations, the English instructor took to cementing the cadaver in the walls like a devotee of Edgar Allan Poe.

But, again, it did no good. Mr. Atkins would always return once more. In fact, the only consolation in the tormented professor's life was the complete absence of Detective Sonnenberg, who had presumably dropped the case.

Legend has it that on the eighth visit and ninth life of Mr. Atkins, Professor Nolan took the Siamese half-drugged with chloroform to a cabin in the Catskills, a place moonlit, serene and surrounded by tall and almost holy trees. He carried Mr. Atkins in a soft cheesecloth bag, with the intention of drowning his foe in a deep and nearby lake.

The professor had aged a score of years, it seemed. His face was harrowed and white; his silver hair brushed in the wind against his dark-lined eyes. Like a doomsday preacher, his thin shoulders defied the wind now and carried him gaunt and erect to the edge of the water, the yellow bundle against his soiled dark suit. . . was beatific. . .

Robert Nolan lifted Mr. Atkins high above the ground, his tight and wiry fingers about the animal's throat. His black mouth spoke the ancient words into cold frost night: *In pace requiescat!*

THE LAKE was dragged for days, but the body of Mr. Atkins was never found. There is only the unconfirmed report that a Siamese fitting the description of Atkins was seen by the village idiot, a certain Teddy Stackhouse, passing through the streets of the nearby town of Kingston at about four o'clock the following morning. Mr. Stackhouse maintains that the cat ran dripping water on the dusty road and screaming fitfully.

As for Professor Nolan, he confessed his crimes to Detective Sonnenberg and a court reporter right at the water's edge. It is rumored that the English instructor is still confined to an institution for the mentally de-

ranged at Buffalo. They say he crawls along the floor from time to time, arching his back and hissing like a petulant Siamese.

Regarding his late wife, Belle Louise, they report various parts of her were recovered from a several hundred mile area of Upper New York State and Canada. The story itself was suppressed by state and police officials. They almost fired the man who solved the case.

Milton Sonnenberg?

MURDER or SUICIDE?

by J. J.
Mathews

THIS SURELY did not look like a tough case for the C.I.D. to crack. All that seemed necessary, in that summer of 1923, was to write one single word at the end of the report: "*Suicide*", and then close the file forever.

The girl was in her early twenties, and had been a servant in the household of a prominent member of the nobility. She had become infatuated with a worthless young man, who had been more than willing to spend all of her earnings.

It was this young man who had notified the police of the suicide of the young lady; she had been found dead on a couch in the apartment they had shared together. There was a gas tube near her mouth, and a piece of cloth tied around her throat. His story was brief. "She had become despondent and talked about taking her own life. I didn't put much stock in her words. When I came home, I found her right there on the couch. Didn't touch a thing; just called the police."

Just as the case was about to be called "*Suicide*", one of the Inspectors mentioned it to a brother officer, who happened to be one of London's top men. He went over every detail of the case. "It could be murder," he pointed out. "If the young man tired of the girl, you would have your motive. Or it could have been a suicide pact:

He will scratch that great brown Mediterranean nose of his and tell you the story himself, over a game of blackjack and a good bottle of Eastern beer at a place called *The Alley Cat*, near Mott and Bleeker streets. If he likes you, he might even give you the chilling, terrible ending to his tale:

Milton sent only seven carefully selected cats to the house of Robert Nolan. He was as scared as the professor when the eighth and last cat appeared...

Both agreed to die together. He helped her first, then maybe got cold feet."

Call it a hunch, but the Inspector felt that it was murder. How could he prove it? What about the old theory that the killer always makes one mistake? Well, it is up to the detective to find one.

The Inspector asked his brother officer not to close the case. "Don't call it suicide; it's murder—plain murder!" he advised him. Alone, he started to think about every possible error a killer could have made. He was getting tired and discouraged. Then his eyes glanced at the gascock, and he had the solution! Who could have turned off the gas? Not the victim, for she had first lapsed into unconsciousness from the effects of the gas, and then had died. Hence, by the simple process of elimination, it must have been the young man himself. Instinctively, or by force of habit, he did what he had done countless thousands of times. Opened a gascock and then closed it.

The young man was arrested, charged with murder, and was found guilty. Later, he admitted that his victim had believed it was a suicide pact. He put the gas tube into her mouth, and that was her end. But he made just one simple mistake: he turned off the gas! And in the tradition of Sherlock Holmes, C.I.D. had solved an impossible case by logic.



THE SPRINGING OF SLUGS MULLIGAN

by Edward Garner

Attorney Gray had a courtroom way,
He had never lost a case,
His mind was shrewed, and his clients
viewed
The wisdom on his face,
And they could see they would be
free—
All guilt Gray would erase.

Slugs Mulligan in purple wrath,
In ire that was intense,
Did on the person of Kid Broole
Wreak vengeful violence—
He drove a gas pipe in his conk,
And thereby sent him Hence!

Slugs wet the Kid with kerosene,
And burned him long and nice,
And roundly swore at him the while
In flames he paid the price—
Slugs even wished the Kid were twins,
So he could kill him twice!

No things dismay Attorney Gray,
(Except a modest fee)
He went to work upon Slugs' case,
Resolved to set him free,
To pursue happiness, and have
Both life and liberty!

In court Attorney Gray with words
Both silvery and fine,
Elaborated on the way
Slugs toed a lawful line—
The jury drank the words of praise
As some men gulp moonshine!

From the scene of homicide, Gray said.
Slugs had in absence been,
Slugs was a man that one could scan,
And know he had no sin—
A man could look into Slugs' heart,
And see no guile therein!

The hours crept, the jury wept
At good Slugs' painful plight,
They went into the jury room,
Resolved to make things right—
"Not guilty" was the verdict, for
They felt Slugs' soul was white!

Slugs said, "I t'anks youse guys
For treating me dis way."
And then he to his lawyer turned,
Said to Attorney Gray:
"Da gas pipe's where? I've got to conk
Kid Broole's old man today!"



Malvina Pettigrew really wasn't going to tell what she suspected, but . . .

THE COUGH

by FLORENCE K. PALMER



MALVINA PETTIGREW dabbed her eyes with mournful relish. "It don't seem real—to think of Carrie laid out at the undertaking parlor this very minute."

"And so unnatural, too!" her friend agreed. "How's he taking it—the Mister, I mean?"

"Charlie? They ain't been able to locate him yet, so's to tell him."

"They ain't?" Mrs. Hoffman wagged her head knowingly. "Well, with all that money she left, maybe he won't be too broke up. Wouldn't surprise me none if it's what he married her for in the first place!"

"Lucy Hoffman, you ought to be ashamed, talking about the dead like they didn't have no personal attraction."

There was honest indignation in her voice, and a flick of uneasiness as well. Lucy was worse'n a cat worrying a mouse once she got hold of something! If Malvina wasn't careful, she'd wind up with the notion Carrie hadn't died accidental!

Blamed old tabby, she thought warily, you can almost see her tail switch.

"Maybe it's suicide," Lucy pounced suddenly. "Maybe he deserted her, Carrie being so stingy."

Relieved it wasn't the other possibility she'd landed on, the one that gave a body goose bumps, Malvina scuffed her frayed slipper against the floor, eyeing the sole that'd begun to tear loose again.

"Well—" Lucy demanded avidly, "couldn't that be a reason?"

"Mind your tongue! It was an accident—the constable says so!"

"But if she planned it, not to let folks suspect, and—"

"Humph, you and your theories!" Malvina snorted.

Everyone, including the law, was mixed up—everyone, that is, except herself! Naturally she wasn't, because Carrie'd been her best friend; Carrie had done a lot of talking, too, even if she got kind of irritating times, the way she was tight as the bark on a tree.

Take how she came over only last night with a peeled spud, and a hunk of side pork. "Ordered my gas shut off," she'd announced bold as you please. "Can't see any grain in paying a minimum charge while I'm gone. There's probably a smidge still in the pipes, but I don't calculate it's enough to cook this potato clear through."

Wasn't that exactly like Carrie Wagner, always watching her pennies, and putting on other folks to spend theirs every chance?

Well, she'd set aside a heap of dollars, and now Charlie'd have it all! It made a person fair sick the way that man sweet-talked Carrie into getting married, and him widowed so quick after. Why, Charlie was bound to fritter every cent the minute he laid hands on it, A downright shame too, that's what it was, with decent folks having to do without things they needed!

"You wool-gathering, Malvina?" Lucy prodded snippily.

"Umm-umm, thinking."

"Me, too," the tip of Lucy's tongue curled moistly across her lips. "I was turning over in my mind that you found Carrie—"

"Listen to me, Lucy Hoffman! Once and for all, Carrie never committed suicide!"

"But how'd she look—where was she?"

"I ALREADY told you she was on the sofa, and her valise sitting there packed right by the front door. Carrie was real anxious to get up to Modoc and meet Charlie today—it's where he's selling them mining stocks from."

"Trips cost money!"

"And she wasn't traipsing along for the fun of it, either—figured to cook their meals herself to save him eating in high-price cafes."

"Then why ain't they found Char-

lie, if she was supposed to meet him in Modoc? It seems to me—"

"Too many things seem to you! The hotel says he went up in the hills overnight to do some selling." She glared at her companion challengingly. "You got anything else bothering you?"

"Well, with Carrie so careful, she should of seen the stove was going—unless it was on purpose!"

Suicide's a crime, Lucy!" Malvina's patience wore thin. "You want to keep picking away until other folks begin to wonder? You want to fix it so Carrie can't lie quiet in her grave?"

"No-o—" Reluctantly, Lucy stood up to leave. "Only it does seem awful funny—"

Funny? Closing the door after her, Malvina couldn't help smiling inside at how funny it actually was! Lucy didn't half guess—the constable neither, for that matter!

Land sakes, when she run over this morning with a pot of coffee, it was a terrible shock to find Carrie stretched on the sofa, and the place smelling to high heavens of gas! Anyone was bound to get the wrong idea; only, by the time the constable came, she'd remembered there couldn't be enough gas leaked to kill a fly, let alone a grown woman.

She'd pieced together a couple of other things, too!

Then Constable Brown marched in, took one whiff, and seen the stove spigot turned on. "Accidental—plain case of carelessness!" he decided on the spot.

His positiveness riled her, and Malvina immediately bit her tongue back about the gas being cut off at the meter, and how the water glass there on the table by Carrie, more'n likely had been chockfull of sleeping pills.

Let him have an autopsy, and find out for himself if he was so cocksure!

"Sleeping pills, eh?" Malvina could just imagine the way he'd snap. "Where's the box—a corpse can't get

up and hide pill boxes, Mrs. Pettigrew!"

Old smarty-britches—wouldn't his eyes pop if Malvina let loose of a fact or two? Well, she wasn't a bit sure she was going to, at least not until her rheumatism quit hurting like sin so she could think straight.

Now, those sleeping pills—they were the one luxury Carrie had always allowed herself; only, how could she take an overdose? She didn't have a single capsule handy even if she had a mind to!

"His cough keeps him awake," Carrie had explained when she borrowed the aspirin last night before she went home. "So I let Charlie take my sleeping medicine along with him. Figured I'd manage to sleep without them, and so long as I'm going to see him tomorrow, there's no point in laying out good money for another re-fill, not the way that prescription costs!"

WELL, WHAT with Carrie visiting awhile after that, and the extra supper dishes to wash, it was later than ordinary when Malvina finally started for her customary walk to the Park.

Probably was close to eleven, and the whole town sound asleep, by the time she turned in at her own gate again, and heard something from over on Carrie's porch. Scared her for a minute, too, before she realized what it was!

"Why, the Mister must've come to fetch Carrie himself to save bus fare," she reasoned. She called out, real friendly, "Charlie—tell Carrie she'd best come over in the morning for coffee being your gas is shut off."

She waited a spell before she limped on into the house. "Humph, don't have to answer if you don't want, Charlie Wagner—that cough is good as a trademark anyhow!" She muttered, smiling a little sourly. "Well, no matter; trust Carrie to stop by early without no invite!"

But she never did—how could she?

Of course, Charlie being around last night might just be circumstantial evidence like the newspapers call it, only it was sort of queer, too!

Mulling it over, once Lucy Hoffman had gone, she kept thinking on how Carrie used to harp, "Money's what counts in this world!"

And with all he'd inherit, Charlie Wagner could be innocent as a kitten, yet be powerful embarrassed if Malvina was a gossip woman!

"Wonder if he knows how much money can really count?" she mused thoughtfully, and winced at the rheumatic kink in her leg when she went to fetch a tablet and pencil from the kitchen.

Charlie was a mighty ornery cuss, but it was proper and neighborly to write him a note of sympathy, wasn't it? Only first, she'd just run through that travel folder again—it was real educational reading how warm and dry it stayed all year in Arizona!

For a long time Malvina studied the pamphlet she'd gotten in the mail recently. Finally she sighed, and reached for the pencil.

Dear Charlie— she wrote painstakingly. It's awful sad what happened to Carrie, but I know she'll rest better if somebody reminds you about that cough. It sounded pretty bad last night, and I figured to talk with you this morning—kind of warn you it was risky to let it go—only you was gone before I found poor Carrie's body.

You want to watch you don't get into trouble with that cough Charlie. It's like my rheumatism—bound to get worse! If it was me, and I had a hundred dollars certain every month, I'd go a long way off from this wet climate—clear to Arizona. Now, with you it's different! A hundred dollars

won't amount to a hill of beans once you have all Carrie's money to spend taking care of yourself.

I don't aim to interfere, Charlie, how you keep living, but with Carrie gone, there ain't nobody left to help you look out for that cough—not the other neighbors, or the constable, or anybody to do it besides me!

Hoping you'll understand my interest at this sorrowful time, I am,

*Your well-wisher,
Malvina Pettigrew.*

Carefully, Malvina folded the note, and glanced out the window to the house next door. No lights showed, so they hadn't traced Charlie yet to tell him the news. Well, he'd be back sooner or later, so she'd slide this under

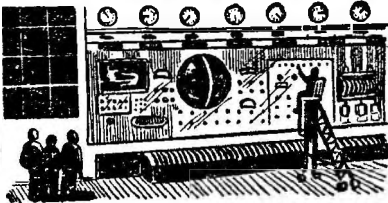
the door anyhow, coming home from her walk.

On the street outside, the dense shrubs fringing the sidewalk were more shadowy than ever, and the night was so still that each time a leaf stirred, it sounded like footsteps keeping pace behind her. Made a body jumpy!

Pure nonsense, too, because when she darted a quick look over her shoulder, there wasn't a soul to be seen in blocks.

"Don't be a silly goose, Malvina Pettigrew—you got nothing to worry about!" she scolded, touching the crisp reassurance of the letter in her pocket.

And directly behind, so close she could feel the hot breath of it on her neck, a man coughed harshly!



Adventures in

Space and Time

Wallace West, author of many well-liked stories, leads off our latest issue with a novelet

THE TIME-LOCKERS

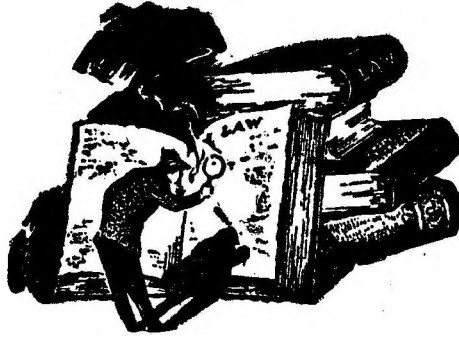
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ANNALS OF CRIME

Want Your Fortune Told?

by Harold Gluck

AS LONG as people want to try to take a peep into the future, fortune tellers are going to line their pockets with other peoples' money. Is there a person alive, male or female, who honestly can say that he or she isn't bothered about some fact and would turn down the chance to have a crystal ball give the answer? It isn't hard to mention what is on the minds of the members of the human race. Such questions as: *Will I get that job? Will my wife get well? Will my horse win? Is my husband flirting with his stenographer? Will I find my lost watch?* are common to all of us.

Fortune tellers vary in setup, from the travelling gypsy who wants a look at your hand to the swami in evening clothes and white turban who is going to unfold the future, either by going into a trance or by using his favorite crystal ball. Anything can, and usually does happen, in the gentle art of looking into the future.

Mrs. Margaret Sullivan had three

convictions to her name, because she insisted on reading the future. At the given moment, she had before her one woman by the name of Martha L. Mirsberger. And Margaret gave Martha full advance information on the future. First she said that her daughter would get a letter from a man she loves some time in the future; second, that Martha's husband would get a job; third, that Martha herself would get a job in three days.

The trouble with this bit of divination was: one, Martha had no daughter. Two, Martha's husband had a job and had it for a good number of years. Three, Martha herself had a very good job. For the past fifteen years she had been, and still was... a police-woman. Total result was that Margaret paid a fine and was ordered to serve a thirty day sentence that had been suspended. It seems to me that the first job of any fortune teller is to look into the future of his or her own account.

Some people like to have the future predicted by tea leaves; others prefer a pack of cards; many go for the crystal ball; the stars have their own followers; and some feel the best way is to read the lines in your hand. Keeping cash and jewelry around is dangerous when the gypsies are on the loose.

Two middle-aged gypsy women paid Robert Long a visit. They said they knew his wife had been ill and they could cure her. He came across with \$110 in cold cash, which the gypsies put in a pair of silk stockings. They tied them around Mrs. Long's waist as she lay in bed. They promised to return. When they did, they asked for more cash. So Mr. Long went to the bank and withdrew \$1500 and that money followed the first into the stockings. A couple of incantations were pronounced and the two gypsies went on their way. Something made Mr. Long take a peep into the stockings. It was real magic, for in the place of all that cold cash was only a package of cigarets. In this case, the gyping gypsies foretold their own future very successfully, for they were \$1610 to the good. Oh yes, there was a nine states' alarm looking for them.

Mrs. Ruth Amuso had a very bitter story to unfold in Felony Court. Into her home came another member of the female sex to tell her fortune. This woman said there was a curse hovering around Mrs. Amuso, and her jewelry needed blessing. So out came the jewelry worth about \$300. Then the fortune teller asked for a cup of tea and in an obliging manner, the hostess went to get it. When she returned, the fortune teller was gone; the jewelry was gone; and so was a \$5 bill on the table. Net result was that the fortune teller landed in court.

ACTUALLY, you need no specific laws to make fortune telling for money a crime. It falls under the heading of obtaining money by false pre-

tenses, and if the fortune teller does a little stealing on the side, you have larceny thrown in for good measure. If you think that in the "good old days" such fakirs did not exist, forget it. They played people for suckers 150 years ago.

In a famous criminal study, "A Treatise on the Police of London," published in 1789, the author complains bitterly about "Cheats who pretend to tell fortunes." And he says, "These impose on the credulity of the public, by advertisements and cards; pretending a power, from their knowledge of astrology to foretell future events, to discover stolen property, lucky numbers in the Lottery, etc." In fact, conditions were so bad that a law was passed which "punishes all persons pretending skill in any crafty science of telling fortunes, or where stolen goods may be found; with a year's imprisonment, and standing four times in the pillory (once every quarter) during the term of such imprisonment."

In the case of Joseph Powell, who tried to make a living by telling fortunes to the good people of London in the year 1807, his defense was rather unique. He just couldn't get a job and having a wife and a child to support, he undertook to tell the future by peeping at the stars. He had circulars distributed and that brought customers to his house. The court gave him six months as "a rouge and vagabond."

Any time you feel you want to part with some of your hard earned cash in return for some information about the future, just meditate over this thought: If the fortune teller really can do a good job, then all he or she has to do is to figure out the stock market or the horse races, and make a couple of millions—instead of taking your fifty cents.



SHERLOCK HOLMES — ANCESTOR

by Irving L. Jaffee

It's astonishing how many features common to present-day detective fiction were first developed in the famous cases of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson.

SOME TIME ago an analysis of the Conan Doyle story, "The Final Problem", appeared in this magazine under the same title. At that time, replies were invited from any readers who might care to take issue with the question raised therein. To date, however, the response has been negative. This entire investigation has been based upon the assumption that Professor Moriarity, Holmes' arch foe, was an illusion, rather than a real person.

It is conceded, of course, that one cannot draw a hard and fast line when discussing such phenomena; nevertheless, in the light of what has gone before, it must be admitted that there is a pretty strong case in favor of this point. As with hypothesis, equally valid arguments could be presented in support of the opposite view, namely, to accept the story as written. Any reply that might be forthcoming from the general reader in that direction would be most welcome. Likewise, perhaps, with these concluding notes, the world-renowned Baker Street Irregulars, or one of their scion Societies expressly concerned with the Holmes stories, may wish to submit something in rebuttal.

Sherlock Holmes was, of course, a stranger to the psychiatrist's couch. Were he living today, however, he might be diagnosed as one with a persecution complex. Certainly, Holmes'

actions and motivation in "The Final Problem" resembled those usually ascribed, in modern medical parlance, to persons suffering from "an obsessive compulsive reaction of the paranoid type with tendencies to acting out". After all, the famous detective had matched wits with some of the greatest criminal minds of his day so that it was not at all incongruous for him to envisage Moriarity as the very personification of the evil he had so long resisted.

We read in his own words: "As you are aware, Watson, there is no one who knows the higher criminal world of London so well as I do. For years past I have continually been conscious of some power behind the malefactor, some deep organizing power which forever stands in the way of the law, and throws its shield over the wrong-doer. Again and again in cases of the most varying sorts—forgery cases, robberies, murders—I have felt the presence of this force, and I have deduced its action in many of those undiscovered crimes in which I have not been personally consulted. For years I have endeavored to break through the veil which shrouded it and at last the time came when I seized my thread and followed it, until it led me, after a thousand cunning windings, to ex-Professor Moriarity, of mathematical celebrity." 1.

As is well known now, this fixation

took such strong hold upon Holmes' mind that, following it through, it led to his wild flight by hansom to Victoria Station; thence, by first-class carriage to Newhaven, with a stopover at Canterbury (ostensibly still eluding Moriarity); then on to the Continent and Switzerland—with a wide swing through Dieppe and Brussels; and, ultimately, the end of the chase; the Reichenbach Falls and the epic struggle which almost cost him his life.

As we were told subsequently, through his knowledge of *baritsu*, an obscure form of Japanese wrestling, the world's foremost detective managed to extricate himself from the fateful hand-to-hand encounter. Judging from the zest with which he applied himself to his latest adventures—"The Empty House", "The Dancing Men", "The Sussex Vampire", and many others—it could be concluded that Holmes had seen through the machinations of Moriarity and successfully rounded up the gang, or that his recovery was complete, or both. In any event he went on to further triumphs, as recorded by Dr. Watson, until his final bow and eventual retirement to his beloved Sussex Downs.

IN OUR concern with this faltering phase of Holmes' life—probably more due to overwork than anything else, and only constituting a temporary lapse in his otherwise colorful and extraordinary career—the picture would be one-sided indeed to close without some sort of nod in recognition of those achievements which have won him legions of devoted followers all over the globe. Let us, then, touch briefly on some of the more notable stories in which his diversified talents were especially highlighted.

Persons of high and low estate repaired to the house on Baker Street for help. What stronger commentary on the inherent democracy of the man can be found than in the very character and station of the clients themselves

who frequented 221B. We read of a distracted typist visiting him; a music teacher who loved to cycle, by herself, through deserted country lanes; a stock-broker's clerk solicited his aid; members of the aristocracy appeared there, and, once, a Prime Minister and even a king—a king who sought to remain incognito but whose identity Holmes quickly surmised: "Your Majesty had not spoken before I was aware that I was addressing Wilhelm Gottsreich Sigismund von OrNSTEIN, Grand Duke of Cassel-Felstein and Hereditary King of Bohemia." 2.

Outwardly cold, stern of demeanor and presumably devoid of emotion, we know, however, that Holmes behaved with conspicuous gallantry toward any lady in distress who sought his assistance and, in many cases, when the occasion warranted, waived the fee. But he always remained aloof. Dr. Watson, on the other hand, readily admitted his own susceptibility, and was not above rounding off an adventure by marrying one of the principals, as, for instance, his first wife, who was none other than Miss Mary Marstan of "The Sign of Four".

We read with some amusement in "A Study in Scarlet" of Dr. Watson's dismay at the cluttered condition in which Holmes kept the rooms at Baker Street. As we are reminded again and again, in so many of the stories, the man who kept his tobacco in the toe of a Persian slipper; his cigars in a coal scuttle; his unanswered correspondence jackknifed to the mantle; who put bullet holes in the wall, forming the initials V. R., by way of indulging in a little indoor pistol practice; and who kept the place littered with manuscripts of all description, and chemicals and chemical apparatus (with the resulting odor therefrom), showed no analagous untidiness of mind. Indeed, as Watson notes in the "Memoirs", Holmes possessed a very exact and orderly mind. The shrewdness of his judgments, in fact, based on

penetrating observation of the meager clues laid before him, were masterpieces of deductive reasoning, all part of the famous method he developed into a fine art, and at which he displayed such amazing versatility.

A classic instance of his adeptness with this technique, which has more or less become a trademark of his in English fiction, is his dialogue with Miss Mary Sutherland in "A Case of Identity". We quote:

"Do you not find," he said, "that with your short sight it is a little trying to do so much type-writing?"

"I did at first," she answered, "but now I know where the letters are without looking." Then, suddenly realizing the full purport of his words, she gave a violent start and looked up, with fear and astonishment upon her broad, good-natured face.

"You've heard about me, Mr. Holmes," she cried, "else how could you know all that?"

"Never mind," said Holmes, laughing; "it is my business to know things. Perhaps I have trained myself to see what others overlook. If not, why should you come to consult me?"

While this was no mean feat in itself—guessing the lady's occupation from these few physical characteristics—Holmes' deductions, when he entered the purely psychological realm were even more impressive. A remarkable illustration of this was his synthesis of a man's character, drawn entirely from the contemplation of a cap brought to him on Christmas morning by Petersen, the commissionaire. This occurred in the story, "The Blue Carbuncle", and here Holmes inferred, without any prior knowledge of the individual to whom the cap belonged, that:

1. He (the owner) was highly intellectual. (Because of the "cubic capacity" shown by the size of the hat.)

2. He was slipping morally. (Because he had at first repaired a tear in the cap but later on neglected an even more obvious flaw). And,

3. His wife no longer loved him. (Because there was dust of about three weeks deposit on the cap, an utter indifference no attentive wife would ever be guilty of)!

IN HIS affectionate surveillance of Holmes' habits in the early days at Baker Street, Watson drew up a small check list of the great detective's assets and liabilities as he had an opportunity to observe them in the rather close quarters of their bachelor apartment. Among the more positive traits he enumerated were: "11. In an expert singlestick player, boxer and swordsman." All admirable accomplishments, no doubt, but had the good doctor known what was to follow afterward, he should have added to his assessment: "Is an actor of uncommon skill in the art of mimicry and disguise." 3.

How many times did Holmes deceive his faithful friend by popping up disguised as a clergyman, an elderly book-collector, a drunken groom or a foreigner complete with dialect and mannerisms. Never, however, was his gift for histrionics more amply demonstrated than when he so realistically simulated all the dread aspects of the Coolie Disease of Sumatra and completely deluded poor Watson—who was a skilled physician as well as his fellow-lodger.

And so Watson was prevailed upon to fetch the wily Culverton Smith to Baker Street for the final showdown. This time no plaintive tones of the violin reached the street; foaming at the mouth, and still feigning delirium (with Watson hidden behind the head of the bed to get it all down), Holmes

contrived to wring a confession from the murderer that was to convict him. Holmes' ruse in this case was to pretend to have been infected by the tiny needle smeared with a deadly poison so ingeniously concealed in the ivory box with the treacherous spring lock mechanism that Smith had sent from Java to get him out of the way. But all his perverted knowledge of the mysterious drugs and potions of the Orient, acquired over the years spent as a planter in the Far East, were to be of little avail to Culverton Smith once Holmes had closed his own clever trap, and delivered the assassin of Victor Savage into the hands of a grateful Inspector Morton. Thus a trail of murder and intrigue that stretched from the coasts of Borneo to a fine house in Kensington was to be picked up and followed by Holmes to its logical conclusion in this case, "The Dying Detective", truly one of his most dramatic performances.

All of which, no doubt, were he around today, our hero would modestly disclaim in the words of his familiar aside, "Rudimentary, my dear Watson, rudimentary". Yet it is for precisely such attributes as these that the name of Sherlock Holmes has become something of a legend and his popularity has remained unfading over the years. But even while taking stock of these solid qualities, readers of *Famous Detective Stories* will, with a little reflection, easily recognize the great detective in the role of innovator as well. Although a great many of the problems Holmes faced may seem a little familiar to us today, if we remember that these were all unique and baffling when he came upon them, then his discernment seems even more acute. As all good Sherlockians will agree, other detectives unravel these mysteries for us today but it was Holmes who solved them all first.

THE SOLUTION of a murder in which an attempt was made to

"fix" a racehorse ("Silver Blaze") was surely a situation hitherto unknown in the annals of detective fiction, although the men of the famed Pinkerton agency often have to cope with this type of villainy in real life today. The breaking of a cipher, the initials K K K, in "The Five Orange Pips", was probably the predecessor of stories of this kind; the tracking down of a long-buried treasure from the details of a mysterious code in "The Musgrave Ritual" may well have been the first such search if we exclude "The Gold Bug" which did antedate it; and, in "The Naval Treaty", as early as 1901—and, later, in "His Last Bow"—the whole series of German espionage dramas that were to come out of World War I and II was foreshadowed.

Other fertile sources of inspiration for writers of mystery stories of our day which could be cited were: "The Speckled Band", in which the bizarre touch is so skillfully introduced; "The Adventure of the Six Napoleans": a precious stone is secreted in a plaster bust of the Emperor—possibly, in its way, the progenitor of all of the eye-of-the-idol type stories and others of like genre; and, lastly, for a tale of terror and suspense, what is there to match the unforgettable story of an ululant hound, roaming the moors at night, painted over with a luminous paint, and scaring the poor, cardiac heirs of Sir Henry Baskerville to death, one by one, as if in conformity with an ancestral curse on that unfortunate house.

If we may sum up, then, whether Moriarity was real or fancied is perhaps of not too great importance. The diabolical man whom Holmes thought he saw standing before him in the flickering firelight that memorable evening—the vapors of the night still dripping from his clothes, and seemingly to have sprung from nowhere out of

[Turn To Page 98]

Packs of huge wolves suddenly attacking men sounds good in legend and tale, but Simon Ark and I knew that there must be some other explanation.

THE WOLVES OF WERCLAW

Simon Ark Novels

by EDWARD D. HOCH

IN THIS modern age, it's difficult to believe that cities the size of Houston or Buffalo could be terrorized by packs of giant wolves prowling the streets. In fact, I was one of the doubters when first I heard the strange stories coming out of Poland.

But I learned, the hard way, that they were true.

And I learned, too, that there was a far greater evil in the city of Werclaw than the wolves which prowled its streets...

It began last winter, just after the first of the year, at a time when the United States and Russia were in the midst of exchanging all kinds of visiting delegations. Farmers, students, dancers, businessmen—in fact, just about any group that could be gotten together—were making the trip across

the Atlantic, to see how people lived on the other side of the gradually-lifting Iron Curtain.

Somehow, because I was the vice-president of a leading New York publishing firm, I was selected for inclusion on one of these exchange visits. I'd just returned from a business trip to London, and I hated to leave my wife, Shelly, again after such a brief time. But a chance to visit East Germany, Poland, and Russia was something not to be missed—especially since the ever-changing political situation might make such a trip impossible at a later date.

And so it was that I found myself in Poland in the middle of a snowy, freezing January. The rest of our trip, through East Germany and Russia, has been well-reported already in a dozen newspaper and magazine articles. But it was in Poland, where our



group of twenty was split into several smaller segments, that I was to encounter the odd people of Werclaw.

Two of us had been picked to make the side trip to Werclaw—myself and a fat, fiftish, man named Franklin Fangler. He was in publishing, too, though on a somewhat smaller scale than myself. His sole effort was a weekly called *The Sentry Box*, an ultra-conservative publication owned and edited by Fangler and a group of midwest businessmen. I couldn't quite figure how he'd managed to get him-

self included in the trip; but, anyway, there he was, and at present I was stuck with him.

The Polish city of Werclaw (not to be confused with Wroclaw further to the south) lies in the valley of the Bug River, some hundred miles due east of Warsaw. The latest census figures released by the government of People's Poland showed it to have a population approaching 200,000. Once, back in another lifetime, it had been the center of a rich farming belt; but now under the industrial plans of the peo-

ple's government, it was making a hard—and only partially successful—try at becoming an industrial center.

It was one of a number of middle-sized Polish cities chosen for our inspection; and though the view of everyday Polish life was interesting, I could see nothing about Werclaw that would have made the visit memorable. We were met at the city line by a tall, well-built man, somewhere past forty, who identified himself as the chief of the local police.

"Chief Berza at your service, gentlemen," he said in English obviously learned in the classrooms of Oxford or Cambridge. I began to understand now why Werclaw had been picked for our visit; Berza was certainly a man to make a good impression on visiting Americans. Of course, the very fact that he held such a high post in the city government meant he was a loyal Communist; but somehow he seemed a little more educated, a little better dressed, than the others we'd met.

FANGLER was as unimpressed as usual with him, but I tried to carry on a conversation while we drove on into the city. "What's the celebration for, Chief?"

Chief Berza followed my gaze and looked for several seconds at the crowd of people gathered in a tree-lined park. "The fifteenth anniversary of the battle at the bridge—when we held the town for three days against a thousand crack Nazi troops. All those still alive who actually took part in the fighting are being honored at special ceremonies today."

"That is something to be proud of, Chief," I agreed; "are we going to see much of your city?"

"I believe you'll be returning to Warsaw in the morning. You will spend the night here, as my guests."

"That's very good of you, Chief. We hate to impose upon you, but I

must admit we're grateful to get this view of Polish life."

Chief Berza's house appeared to be the largest in the city—at least, it was the largest we saw during our visit. He apparently lived there alone, and we found that a whole wing of the big place had been turned over to us. Except for the fact that our rooms featured large lighted pictures of Lenin and Marx on the walls, they were more than suitable.

I finished unpacking the few things I'd brought, and went through the adjoining door into Fangler's room. He paused in the act of lighting an American cigarette to mutter, "I sure don't see why you bow down to these Commies like you do. What the hell, are you one of them or something?"

"Of course not, Frank. But the fellow seems to be friendly enough."

"He'd probably like nothing better than to line us up against a wall. Just wait till I get back to my typewriter! Maybe I'll be able to wake up the American people at last."

I grunted and ignored him. After two weeks of traveling together, I'd come to expect this sort of thing. "Well, let's get downstairs, anyway. Berza's probably anxious to start the tour."

Fangler followed me down, and in a few moments we were back in the official car, being shown around the typical Polish city of Werclaw. I saw at once that they'd never need to worry about a traffic jam here—at least, not or the next several years. Though the roads in the city itself were quite good, we passed very few private cars. Occasionally a drab military vehicle would rumble past, and once or twice I caught a glimpse of an army tank in the distance. It was odd to see such military movement at a time when the world was supposedly at peace, but I'd come to expect it after the last two weeks of our tour.

WE PASSED again by the park where the speeches and celebrating were in full swing; then we roared on to the suburbs, where the glistening towers of a growing industrial empire were beginning to rise.

"Many of the workers are attending the celebration," Berza explained as we drove between endless rows of storage tanks. "There are over a hundred survivors of the great battle to be honored. When we made plans for the affair, we did not realize so many would come forward. The war took an awful toll of our poor city." He lit a thin cigar and continued, "Had it not been for the kindness of our Russian neighbors, all would be still in ruins today."

Fangler snorted at this and asked, "You mean that your people live in complete peace, without any attempt at revolt against the Communists?"

"Not entirely, of course." Chief Berza chuckled. "You Americans read the newspapers, I'm sure. But thus far we've been able to keep the peace quite well—at least, here in Werclaw."

We drove on through barren countrysides which showed no sign of life. I was amazed that not even a cow or horse could be seen on the horizon. "I notice you have very few farms, Chief."

"That is true. Many people have been evacuated from this region, and others have moved into the city to work in the industrial plants."

Our tour continued, and by evening we had seen every facet of daily life in the city of Werclaw. We dined at the city's leading restaurant, and then took in a performance of folk dancing apparently arranged especially for us. By the time we returned to Chief Berza's home, I was ready for bed.

Just as we were mounting the stairs, the telephone rang and Berza answered quickly in Polish. He talked for some minutes and then hung up.

"There are reports of some wolves

heading this way," he told us. "I must make some calls and get out my men."

"Wolves?" Fangler muttered. "You mean animals?"

"Most certainly," the chief smiled. "I am deeply sorry this had to happen during your visit, but I trust it will not be too serious a matter." Then he went back to the telephone.

Fangler and I strolled up to our rooms in a state of mild excitement. "Did he mean real wolves?" Fangler asked me, still unable to comprehend it.

"I think he did," I replied. "I've heard reports. . ."

"Wolves! Why, we might as well be living back in the Middle Ages! Imagine wolves this near to a large city. . ."

I grunted and we separated at the door of my room; the day's activities had me sleepy. I could still hear Fangler moving around in the next room as I dropped off to sleep, under the dimly lighted painting of Marx. . .

- 2 -



WHAT WOKE me, I do not know; perhaps it was the distant church bells chiming the fourth hour. I had been awake only a few seconds, though, when I heard someone enter my room.

It was Chief Berza, in a state of great agitation. "Quickly," he said; "please come with me. The wolves are in the streets of Werclaw. They have just killed a man."

"What?" I was wide awake now, with no thought of sleep. "What are you saying?"

"Get your companion and meet me downstairs. I cannot leave you alone while I go; you must come with me."

He hurried out of the room, and I roused myself enough to call out Fangler's name. In a minute he appeared, fully dressed. "Haven't you been to sleep yet?" I asked.

"In this house? I don't trust that Berza, or any of these other Commies," he replied. "There's lots of people over here that would jump at the chance to cut my throat."

"Well, Berza just told me the wolves are inside the city. They've killed a man; he wants us to come with him."

"I'm ready. Anything's better than this house."

In a few minutes we were downstairs, and Berza joined us. He wore an army automatic at his side and carried a high-powered rifle. We followed him outside without a word and climbed into the police car.

"What is all this business about wolves?" Fangler wanted to know. "You mean they actually kill people right on the city streets?"

But Berza did not answer; instead, he speeded up the car until we were doing close to fifty through the narrow streets of the city. Presently he slowed to a stop and I saw a growing circle of people in the street ahead.

We followed Berza through the suddenly-alive street, pushed on every side by people running to the center of the group, and by others running away from it, their faces blank masks of horror. An old woman pulled her child into the house; a girl fainted; and even men began a quick retreat. The circle dissolved before us and then suddenly we were looking at the horror in the street at our feet.

HE WAS NOT too old a man—perhaps thirty-five—and he must have been handsome once. But now his face and body were streaked with claw marks, and his shredded clothes were red with blood. A girl, some ten

years younger, knelt sobbing by his body.

Other police had arrived now and were clearing away the crowd. Chief Berza cast a quick glance up and down the street and then handed his rifle to one of the other officers.

"What happened here?" he asked the girl in Polish. My knowledge of the language was meager, but when they talked slowly I was able to follow their conversation.

"He...he's my brother," the girl sobbed. "My name is Katherine Volgatz. We...he and I and my friend Conrad," she motioned toward a handsome man who stood behind her, "had been at the celebration. My brother and Conrad were two of the heroes being honored today. We...we were drinking and singing and we were so happy. We heard the reports of the wolves and Conrad thought we must start for home. The bells were just ringing four when we left the gathering. My...my brother was a little ahead of Conrad and I, because he knew we liked to be alone. Everything was so wonderful, and then suddenly we heard the scream..."

"Did you actually see the wolf?" Chief Berza asked.

"Just its shadow as it hurried away. We ran to my brother, but it was already too late."

A motorcycle policeman roared into the nearly-deserted street then, and braked to a halt before Berza. From the windows of the nearby houses I could see the flurry of movement as curious heads followed this latest development.

The man's Polish was too fast for me to catch, but Berza turned to us with a look of intense pain. "A second man has just been killed. Stay here, in a group; the wolves won't attack a large group. I must go."

He ran back to the police car, followed by the officer with the rifle.

"Another one!" Fangler gasped.

"What kind of a nightmare is this?"

"We must get inside, under cover," Katherine shouted. "They are all around; come quickly, Conrad!"

Fangler and I followed them into the shelter of a nearby restaurant that had been opened to receive the neighbors who could no longer sleep this night. Inside, we found people huddled in small groups, talking among themselves, glancing from time to time out the window, and drinking the glasses of wine the proprietor sat in front of them.

Outside, I could see two policemen covering the body of the dead man, and lifting it into the morgue wagon. I turned to the girl Katherine and her friend Conrad and asked them in muddled Polish, "What is all this about the wolves? Does this happen often?"

Conrad answered in a fast flow of words that caused me to throw up my hands. He understood and took it slower after that. Luckily, my college knowledge of Latin and German was coming in quite handy; by talking slowly, we were able to carry on a conversation.

"Every winter now," he answered my question. "They are Russian wolves, from the east. Sometimes they even come in the summer. They range as far north as the Baltic Sea and far to the southwest as well. They have been seen in the very streets of Danzig and other cities. They are huge, and they prowl the countryside by the thousands." His voice was rising as he talked, as he remembered his dead friend in the street.

KATHERINE joined in, "Last winter even Warsaw, our capital—a city of 600,000 people—was completely encircled by the wolf packs. Nothing can stop them when they come; nothing."

"But what causes it?" I asked. "Certainly it was not always like this."

"It is the fault of those dirty Rus-

sians," Conrad replied. "They have evacuated the former Baltic states and East Prussia. The protective belt of farms that once guarded us from the wolf packs is now gone."

"I noticed the lack of farms on my tour," I agreed. "But certainly you people must be able to kill these wolves."

"Ha!" Katherine laughed. "Only the police and the military are allowed to carry guns. They are too afraid that the farmers and peasants might revolt; so we get no guns—even to defend ourselves from the wolves."

I was interested to hear this. "Then there is an underground movement here in Poland?"

Conrad frowned slightly. "Perhaps not as fully organized as we would like, but there is one. Saint Stanislas, our patron, was martyred for opposing tyranny; I think the Polish people will always oppose it, too."

While we talked, Fangler had stayed by the window, watching the street outside. Now he let out a shout that brought us all running. "Look! Wolves!"

It was true.

Three large grey wolves were running down the opposite side of the street, keeping in the shadows close to the buildings. One of the policemen saw them, too; he dropped to one knee as he brought his rifle up to firing level. There was a single dull crack and the third wolf leaped high in the air under the bullet's impact.

The rifle cracked again and sent the other two beasts scurrying away into the darkness. While the police officers ran over to inspect the single body, I studied the faces of those around me. I saw terror and fright in the eyes of the old women, and the young ones, too; and I saw—even on the faces of the men—a shadow of something that didn't belong there. They were like people I'd seen during the war, old

folks in a bombed village or soldiers just before the attack.

I didn't like it. I didn't like the body of the dead wolf stretched out in the street, and I didn't like the faces of these people around me. I didn't like anything at all about the city of Werclaw...

- 3 -



IT WAS dawn over the city when we saw Chief Berza again. He looked tired and worn, and the shadow of a beard was beginning to form on his chin.

"How many?" I asked him, because I knew there had

been more.

"Four so far," he answered in a toneless voice; "perhaps more that we haven't found yet. My men have killed six wolves, though," he added hopefully, as if this somehow balanced the score.

"Will we be able to leave for Warsaw this morning?" Fangler asked him.

"I fear not," Berza sighed. "They're all around out there; sometimes they attack even in daylight."

"But surely it would be safe in a car!"

"Probably—but I cannot take the chance with visitors, like yourselves. If anything happened to you the American papers would say I killed you. It might even start a war." He said this last with a smile, but we knew he meant it.

"Very well," I said; "but where to now?"

"There is a wolf expert arriving from Moscow this morning. He has been following the course of the packs for some weeks now; I want to show him the bodies and confer with him."

"You want us to be present, too?"

"I feel much better with you in sight," he said. "I shouldn't have left you alone last night. Come."

Our car roared into the morning dawn, toward the local morgue, its oddly shrill siren cutting through the sleeping streets. Already people were on the move, spreading the word to friends who might somehow have missed the news of the wolf pack invasion. Everywhere the people moved swiftly, as if afraid that, in their unarmed state, even the daylight would not keep away the wolves.

"When will they come again?" I asked Berza.

"Probably not until around nine o'clock tonight," he said. "And with luck they will have passed on by morning. Although sometimes they stay for weeks..."

"Isn't there anything you can use besides rifles? How about poisoned food or traps?"

"We use everything. But there are thousands of them out in the hills. Thousands..."

Our car pulled up in front of the morgue and we followed Berza into the building. A tall, heavy-set man approached and held out his hand to the police chief.

"Good morning, sir," he said in perfect Polish. "My name is Simon Ark, and I have been sent by Moscow to look over the situation here."

I saw the face and heard the name, but still I did not believe it. For I had been with this man only a month before in England; and whatever he was, I knew he certainly wasn't employed as a wolf expert by the Russian government...

I'D FIRST met Simon Ark some fifteen years earlier, when I was a young newspaper reporter; since then, I'd seen him on perhaps three other occasions in my life. He was an odd man, a man of mystery who prowled

the world in search of a vague evil that might have been Satan himself. He'd once told me he was over 1500 years old; and sometimes, after a few hours in his company, I believed it.

But to find him here, in the Polish city of Werclaw, posing as a Soviet official on a wolf hunt, was the most amazing thing yet. Since it was obvious that he wished to keep up his masquerade, I followed Berza's example and shook hands with him. As I did so our eyes met briefly, and I detected a slight twinkle of greeting deep in his.

Fangler grunted his usual greeting reserved for Soviet officials, and the three of us followed Berza into the rear of the building.

The bodies were there, four of them, all of men in their thirties or forties. I recognized the corpse of Katherine Volgatz's brother, but of course the others were unknown to me. All of them had been horribly mangled, and their clothes were all but torn away by deep grooves of parallel claw marks that nearly covered their bodies.

Simon Ark bent intently over the first one, studying the claw marks, and I saw the expression of casual interest vanish from his features. He'd found something he hadn't been expecting, and I wondered what it was.

He went next to the second body and then the third and fourth. After he had examined each with the same care, he turned to face us with a grim expression.

"What is it?" Chief Berza asked.

"Wolves never made these marks," he told us very quietly. "Even giant wolves, such as those found in this area, would not have claws able to penetrate this deep into the flesh. And," he added, "if you look here, you'll find a torn piece of cloth in this man's fist—a piece of cloth he tore from his killer at the moment of death."

"You mean," Berza exclaimed, "that

these four men were murdered? By another human?"

"They were murdered all right," Simon Ark said. "Whether or not the killer was human remains to be seen."

"But," I insisted, "I saw the wolves myself; the police have shot six of them!"

"I don't doubt they have. The mid-winter wolf invasion is now a fairly common thing in these parts; but someone is using it to cover up a particularly horrible series of crimes."

"It's true there were never this many deaths in other years," Berza said. "But how...?"

Simon Ark walked to the window and looked out at the city before him, with its winding streets and oddly shaped buildings that were a reminder of the Poland that used to be.

Then he turned back to us and asked, "Is the belief in werewolves still prevalent in this part of Europe?"

CHIEF BERZA'S mouth dropped open, and Franklin Fangler paused in the act of lighting an American cigarette. I was not quite so surprised; I knew from our past meetings that Simon Ark's mind ran to such supernatural explanations.

"Werewolves?" Berza repeated slowly. "Certainly I know of no such..." Then he paused and seemed to think a bit. "Of course there's old Otto Hummler, but no one seriously believes..."

"Who is this Otto Hummler?" Simon Ark asked.

"A German; he used to be a shoemaker. I remember when I was younger the children were always making fun of him; and sometimes their mothers would tell them he was a werewolf that would get them if they were bad."

"I would like very much to meet him," Simon Ark said. "There is always a possibility that such things exist. Certainly somebody killed those four men; and if we can solve the

crime before another nightfall, it might be best. . . ."

We all looked up at the clock on the wall; and although its hands still stood on the near side of noon, Simon Ark's words were somehow urgent.

"I will take you there at once," Berza said. He gave quick instructions to two of his men and led the way to the street. Simon Ark motioned toward the police car that had been assigned to his use, and I followed him to it. Berza and Fangler took the lead car.

"Now." I began, when Simon Ark and I were at last alone, "just what is this all about, anyway, Simon?"

"Simple, my friend," he said. "I was in the area investigating another matter when I heard about these wolf deaths at Werclaw. And when I learned that you and another American were in the city, on a visit I hurried here as fast as I could. You seem to have the unusual gift of attracting this sort of odd happening, my friend."

"I sure do," I sighed in agreement, though actually it was only the second time that I had involved us in something of this sort; the other times it had all been Simon's doing. "But what's this about you being a Russian official?"

He smiled slightly as he swung the car around a corner behind Berza's vehicle. "You know, there are ways of arranging such things."

And I knew there were. Such arrangement was one of Simon Ark's special gifts; it was no less fantastic than some of the other things he did from time to time.

"Now," he said, "I want to hear about everything that's happened since you arrived in Werclaw. And I want to hear especially about your traveling companion, Mister Fangler."

"Why?"

"He seems to have a great hatred for Russians."

"He has a great hatred for Commu-

nists; he's certainly not alone in that feeling."

"No," Simon Ark agreed slowly. "Anyway, tell me what has transpired before my arrival."

I told him, going into as much detail as I remembered. When I'd finished, Simon Ark merely grunted.

BY THIS time, we'd reached the run-down house that was apparently the living quarters of Otto Hummler. Fangler was already out of the car, but Berza had remained a moment to give a few swift instructions to the driver. Then we all entered the little house.

A huge woman with a broom was busily sweeping the front hall as we entered; in reply to Berza's question she pointed toward the rear. There, behind a half-open door, we found Otto Hummler. . . .

He was a German, all right; when he spoke it was in an odd mixture of German and Polish that I barely understood. But it was not his voice or his speech that held us spellbound before him. It was the two giant teeth that protruded from either side of his mouth like great tusks. They were fully two inches long, and came nearly down to his chin.

It was a fantastic, horrible thing; and even with his kindly, withered face it gave him the look of a monster from some cheap horror film. I'd read somewhere of odd cases where people and animals had been so afflicted with out-sized teeth, but this was the first time I'd ever seen one. It made me wonder what kind of a man this Otto Hummler must be, to go through life listening to the laughter and jeers of children and the horrified gasps of adults, when surely a simple operation would have removed the offending teeth.

To Simon Ark, the man before us seemed more an object of pity; and he knelt before him to converse in

German. The old man appeared frightened and unsure of himself, but presently Simon turned to us and said, "He claims to know nothing of the killings. He says he hasn't been out of this room in two days."

Of course it was fantastic to believe that an old man like this could be the insane killer of four strong men. Things like this just didn't happen, and Chief Berza seemed inclined to agree.

"What's that noise?" Franklin Fangler asked suddenly, and we listened.

From outside in the street came the sounds of a great crowd, a crowd of moving, surging, angry people. Berza and I ran to the front door, with the others close behind.

- 4 -



HERE WAS a crowd in the street, all right—a crowd of the very same people who had huddled together in the bar early that morning, the same people who had been afraid to journey out such a short time ago.

But now they were not afraid. . .

"Stop!" Berza shouted, throwing up his hands. "What do you want here?"

"We want the werewolf, Hummler," one man called out. "Kill him before he kills more of us."

"Go back to your homes, you fools," Berza shouted in reply.

Here and there in the wild crowd I recognized a familiar face; and near the very front, I saw Katharine's friend, Conrad. Simon Ark and Fangler were behind us now, and I heard Fangler mutter, "Just give me a gun, Chief, and I'll show you how to handle mobs. Nothing I'd like better than to shoot a few stinking Reds, anyway."

"Shut up, Fangler," I told him. "They're Poles, not Reds; and they can be stopped without bullets."

"Then you do it, wise guy," he told me. "You do it."

A rock crashed through the window on my right, sending shinny slivers of glass flying before it. "Kill the werewolf!" someone shouted from the street.

I knew I could wait no longer. Chief Berza was already drawing his gun, and Fangler was looking around for some weapon. I darted out between them into the street.

One of the men recognized me and shouted, "Kill the American, too." But no one took up the cry. I waited while they moved in around me, more curious than anything else. One of them shouted something that I missed, and then Conrad was at my side asking, "Is the werewolf inside?"

I looked around at them, at their friendly faces now twisted with fear. These were not bad men, not the kind that might have made up a lynch mob in the South twenty years ago. They were simply men who were afraid for their homes and wives and children, and who wanted to kill the evil of Werclaw before it killed them.

I ignored Conrad's question and asked him instead, "Who are all these people? What are they doing here?"

"Some are of the Union of Polish Youth; others are leaders of the city affairs. They are all brave men, American, who will kill to protect their homes."

"Do you kill the Russians when they come to take over your country? Do you kill the wolves that prowl your streets?"

"The day for killing Russians will come soon enough," Conrad replied. "As for the wolves, we have no guns against them—only our hands and knives. But this man," he motioned toward the house, "we can destory."

"Who told you Hummler was responsible for the killings?"

"If the wolves did not kill them, only Hummler could have. Everyone knows he's a werewolf."

THE CROWD pressed around me murmured in assent. They were growing restless again, and I knew I couldn't hold them long from their attack. "Listen," I shouted. "Listen to me, Conrad." I directed my remarks to him, though I meant them for all to hear. "Hummler is just a poor old man who happens to have a slight physical deformity." I was speaking slowly, sometimes pausing a second or two to grop for the correct word in my limited Polish vocabulary. "You all knew him when you were children. You made fun of him then because of his teeth, but did he ever harm you? Did he ever harm anyone?"

A further murmur went up from the crowd. "You are right," Conrad admitted; "he did us no harm. But how else do you explain the wolf-killings?"

I pointed toward the doorway where Simon Ark stood. "That man is an expert, come to investigate the matter. He will have the answer for you before another night has passed."

They turned toward the tall, shadowed figure of Simon Ark, and Conrad called out, "Can you stop the killings, sir?"

The crowd fell silent, waiting for his answer, and he replied, "I can stop the killings; return to your homes and the killings will stop."

This seemed to satisfy them, and gradually the crowd began breaking up. I returned to the doorway where Simon and Fangler and Chief Berza stood. "Hope you can live up to that promise," I told Simon.

"I'll try," he answered, but I noticed his eyes were not smiling. They were deeply troubled, as I had never seen them before.

We left Otto Hummler alone in his room and went back to Chief Berza's

house to await the coming of another night...

THE REST of the afternoon was spent answering frantic telephone calls from Warsaw. Apparently, the remaining Americans on our tour had been advised of our predicament, and I could already imagine the headlines that would be flashing around the world: **TOURING U. S. PUBLISHERS TRAPPED BY RUSSIAN WOLF PACKS.**

Actually, in the restrained comforts of Chief Berza's house, it was not as if we were in any actual danger. Berza and Simon Ark were busy pondering maps of the city during most of the afternoon, and Fangler was busily jotting down notes which I knew would make a blazing editorial in his hate-Russia weekly.

But with the coming of night the tension increased. The darkness settled like a blanket over the countryside, and a cold northern wind was blowing a gathering storm of snow into Werclaw. Once I thought I heard the distant mourn of a wolf crying to its mate, but then all was silent but for the wind. The streets were all but deserted as the citizens of Werclaw waited for something to happen, at the same time dreading what that something might be.

Once, when I found myself alone with Simon Ark, I asked him, "Do you have any idea about this at all?"

"Many," he answered.

"I was thinking—could the other killings be simply a cover-up for a single slaying? Suppose this Conrad, or someone else, wanted to kill Katherine's brother, or one of the others. Wouldn't this be the way to do it?"

"Possibly," Simon Ark replied. "Do you suspect the girl Katherine, too, might have had a part in her brother's killing? You said she was walking with Conrad at the time."

"I don't know," I told him. "I hate

[Turn To Page 82]

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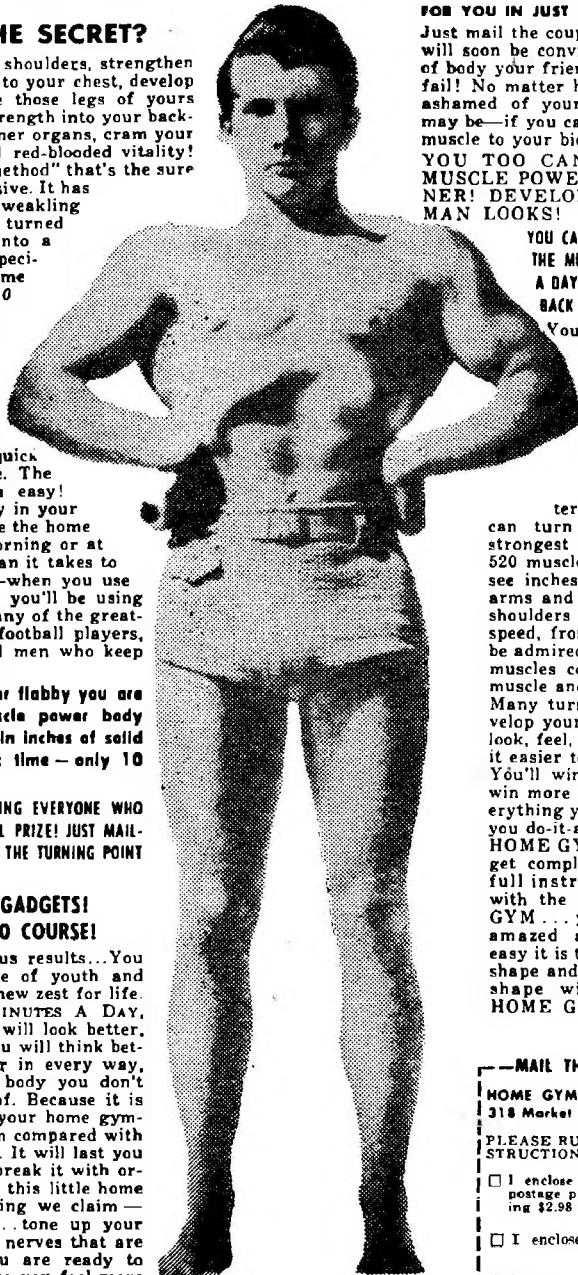
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to think that anyone could be responsible for such horrible crimes. But somebody is, if the wolves didn't kill them."

After that, even talk waned as we waited, with the rest of the city, for the thing we knew must happen. At twenty minutes after ten it came.

Chief Berza's emergency telephone leaped to life, shrilly telling us that something was happening out there in the lonely darkness.

Berza answered, listened a moment and then put it down without changing his expression. "There's been another one," he said calmly. "A middle-aged man, one of the speakers at yesterday's celebration. He was a personal friend of mine..."

Fangler and I turned our eyes toward Simon Ark, but already Berza's other telephone was ringing. He answered it and spoke quickly in Polish. When he hung up he told us, "It was that fool Conrad, the leader of the mob this afternoon. He has heard

about the new killing and he says the people are ready to kill Hummler for sure this time. He says they'll go there as soon as it's morning, or maybe sooner. I told him to come here first, to talk to us."

"Talk, talk!" Fangler shouted. "We've been talking to you Reds for too long now. Are we supposed to sit around talking while a few more people are killed?"

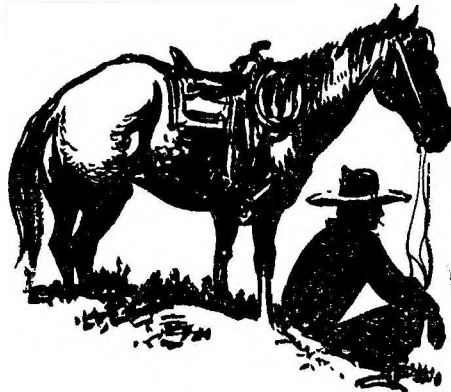
"Have you any suggestions?" Berza asked caustically.

"Yes, I have. Give us rifles and let us hunt down some of these so-called wolves. Your police seem to be quite powerless to prevent new killings."

"That's out of the question," Berza answered. "It would be impossible for me to arm you."

"Yeah?" Fangler took a sudden step toward Chief Berza, and before we could stop him he let go a surprise right fist at the chief's jaw. Berza stood there a second, looking infinite-

[Turn To Page 84]



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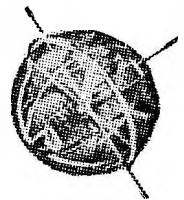
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ly surprised, and then he toppled backward against the fireplace. Fangler followed through with a left that sent Berza to the floor.

"You guys stay here if you want to," he shouted at us as he ran from the room. "But I'm going wolf hunting."

In the next room we heard him smashing the glass doors of Berza's gun cabinet and in another instant he reappeared with a high-powered hunting rifle and two boxes of ammunition. "Don't try and stop me, Ark," he said; "I'd just as soon start killing Russians right now." And then he was gone.

"Follow him," Simon told me; "there's danger in those streets tonight. Hurry! Before Berza recovers!"

I WAS JUST as afraid of the danger as Simon or Fangler might be, and I stopped in the gun room long enough to arm myself with a wicked looking revolver that looked simple enough to operate.

Outside, I made my way through streets dark with night and white with

snow, and I wondered dimly what I was doing here, half a world away from Manhattan's towers and my waiting wife's arms, in a city I'd never even heard of a week ago.

I was chasing a dream in a fantastic world of Simon Ark's making; I was chasing the dim figure of Franklin Fangler down a dark tunnel between two worlds.

And I saw him, running quickly, as if in combat, carrying the rifle loosely in his right hand. For a fantastic second, I wondered if Franklin Fangler, the Red-hater, could somehow have caused the deaths of those five men...

Then I stopped thinking; I stopped running; I stopped breathing—and I heard it behind me.

I turned and looked into the glistening eyes of the grey, ghostly thing that looked like a dog but wasn't. It stood there, some ten feet behind me, waiting for any movement of mine that would give it an excuse to jump.

I wanted to yell out, to shout to Franklin Fangler to save me, because
[Turn To Page 86]

10 Champion Stories

STRETCH DRIVE

by Robert Silverberg

MERELY A MILE

by Richard Brister

PRODIGAL SON

by Bill Toddy

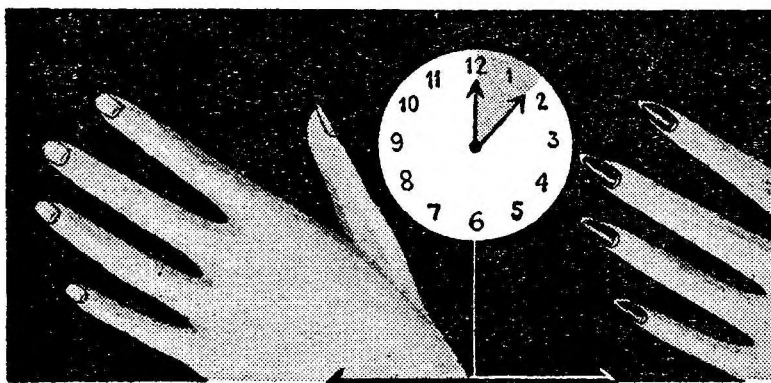
These and 7 others, appear complete in the October

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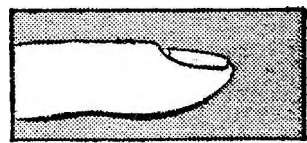


Have Lovelier Nails Than You Ever Dreamed Possible

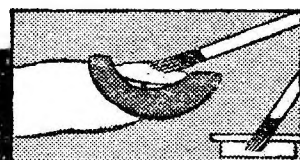
Upset because your nails just won't grow? Embarrassed to show your hands in public because of short, broken off nails? You need no longer suffer! Now you can be proud to show your lovelier hands on dates, parties, dances and elsewhere. Amazing new NAIL-GRO gives you the long, beautiful tapering nails you've always wanted and needed to give you confidence and assurance in your appearance.

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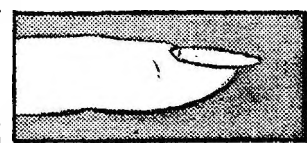
NAIL-GRO is a liquid plastic material applied directly to fingernails just like nail polish. Discovered by science, it sets to a clear, hard surface—looks and feels like your regular nail—actually grows with your nail. It can be cut, filed, polished—yet it's so strong, it can't break or tear—even when you're cleaning house, washing dishes, doing laundry, playing the piano, or typing. In just minutes, you have longer, lovelier nails—just the kind of hands men love to hold, caress—and place rings on.



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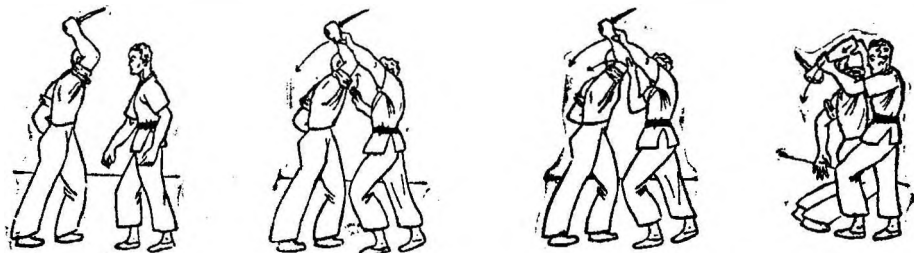
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a man's politics aren't important when he can save your life.

But I couldn't.

We stood like that, watching each other, for perhaps ten seconds, though it seemed much longer. Then my right hand went for the gun in my pocket and the grey wolf leaped.

I could feel its breath on my face as it hit me full on the chest, knocking me backward into the snow. By this time I had the revolver free of my pocket, but there was no chance for a shot. With a sudden desperate movement I raked the barrel across the beast's head.

It was enough to throw the huge wolf off-balance, and then for a second I was free of him. I brought up the gun and fired a single quick shot that grazed its furry back; then I ran backward a few steps and fired my second shot.

It smashed into the animal's head and the battle was ended.

For several minutes I just stood there, fighting to regain my nerves. It was the closest to death I'd ever been, except for a street fight once in London; and for a man close to forty who isn't in top shape, the tiring effect of the brief battle was no surprise.

AFTER A few moments, I heard footsteps behind me; I saw Fangler returning on the run, still clutching the hunting rifle. "I heard the shots," he explained, and then he saw the great grey wolf stretched out dead. "Looks like you had a close call."

"I sure did. See anything further on?"

"Couple more wolves. They went down an alley before I could get a

[Turn To Page 88]



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IF YOU CAN WHISTLE OR HUM A TUNE

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shot at them. The damn place is crawling with them!"

"Listen," I said suddenly. "Somebody's coming!"

Fangler pulled me into the shadows and we saw the dim outlines of a man appear some two blocks ahead, moving quickly and purposefully through the streets toward us.

"It's that guy," Fangler whispered.

"Conrad. He must be headed for Chief Berza's house to talk with us."

But before we could move from our covering shadows two other figures had appeared behind Conrad. They moved silently and in an instant they were upon him.

"Those aren't wolves," I shouted to Fangler.

"Not the four-footed kind, anyway."

"Come on! We've got to save him."

We were still nearly two blocks away; and even as I started running Franklin Fangler had dropped to the pavement and was carefully aiming his rifle.

How he could pick out anything in that madly-struggling group at that distance I didn't know. Perhaps he wouldn't have cared too much had his bullet hit Conrad rather than his attackers. But when the crack of Fangler's rifle finally came, his shot was true, and one of the men clutching Conrad's back fell to the ground.

The other attacker broke free then and tried to run. There was another bark from Fangler's gun and the second man went down too, sliding a few feet along the rough pavement.

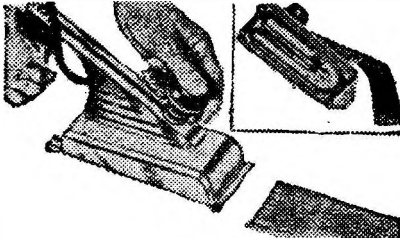
I reached Conrad's side and pulled him to his feet. Blood from a dozen deep scratches covered his face, and his clothes were ripped and ragged.

"My God!" I gasped. "What were they doing to you?"

"I...I found the werewolves for you," he said. Fangler had come up to join us now and the three of us went over to examine the fallen bodies.

[Turn To Page 90]

Meridian's

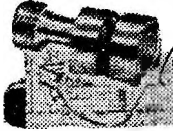


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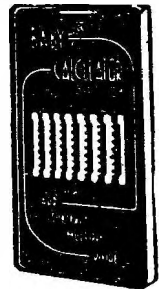
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"That was pretty good shooting, Frank," I told him.

"Put a Commie in my sights and I'll hit him every time."

The two fallen assassins were dressed in black, and on their hands were strapped curious claw-like implements like those I'd once seen in a movie about the African leopard-men. There was no doubt that these were the killers who had terrorized the city of Werclaw.

"But who are they?" I asked.

Conrad knelt and went through their pockets, pausing from time to time to wipe his bloodied face. "There is nothing here," he told us at last. "Simply a few Zloty coins and some cigarets."

"Simon Ark will want to examine these claws of theirs. We'll take them back with us and have Chief Berza send someone for the bodies.

"I'll stay for a few minutes," Fangler said. "In case there are anymore of these guys roaming around. See you at Berza's in a little while."

"Right! Come on, Conrad. Let's go see Berza and Simon Ark." I stripped the steel claws from the dead hands and dropped them into my pocket.

"I MUST CALL Katherine, and tell her of this," Conrad said as we hurried through the streets. "The people were about to leave for Otto Hummler's place to hill him." He sighed and continued, "Well, this should convince them all that Hummler is innocent. Whoever those two were, they're the ones behind the killings. I owe my life to your friend back there."

I snorted silently. "He's not really my friend, Conrad. There are all sorts of people in America, and you can't judge us all by the few you meet. There are others like Fangler over there—but not too many, I hope."

"He saved my life," Conrad insisted.

"I know he did; and he'd probably
 [Turn To Page 92]

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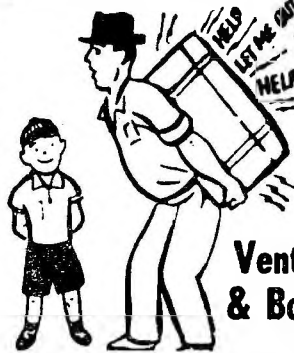


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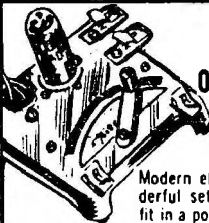
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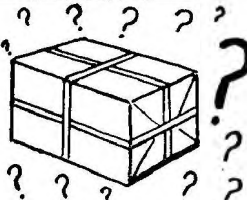


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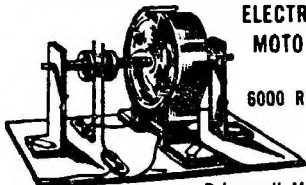
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die saving people's lives from the Reds, if it came to that. Only he'd never give a minute of his time in a search for peace. His sort lives on war and killing and hate. Maybe we'll all have to be like that someday, but I hope not."

We ran up the stone steps and into Berza's living room. The police chief had recovered himself and was sitting in a big easy chair, holding a cool cloth to his head and talking with Simon Ark.

When he saw me he leaped up and shouted, "Where is your murderous friend? Is he trying to start an international incident? Is he trying to kill my people?"

"No, Chief Berza," I told him. "Settle down and listen now. Franklin Fangler has just shot two of our werewolves as they were attacking Conrad here. Look." I produced the steel claws from my pocket. "They were wearing these. That's how they killed their victims, and if these claw marks had looked more like wolves they might have gotten away with it."

"Who were they?" Chief Berza croaked.

"I don't know; there was no identification on them."

Simon Ark rose from his chair and faced us. "Still another mistake on your part, Chief. You really should have provided them with papers. Everybody has papers behind the Iron Curtain. That is, everyone except the secret police..."

"I..." Chief Berza began.

"Simon! What are you trying to say?" I asked.

"Simply that the two men Fangler killed tonight were some of Chief Berza's assassins, and that we've just interrupted one of the most fantastic plots for mass murder in the history of the world."

But even as Simon's words fell upon our ears, Chief Berza was out of his chair and covering us all with his automatic...

- 5 -



BERZA SAID, "Drop your gun!" He motioned to me, and the revolver slipped from my fingers; I was so startled at that moment I had no chance to beat him to the draw. He moved around until he stood between us and the door and then said, "Suppose you explain some more, Simon Ark."

"You gave yourself away on a number of points, really," Simon replied, speaking very quietly. "The mob at Hummler's house already knew the killings weren't done by wolves, but no one was supposed to know that except us. Only you could have spread the word, while giving instructions to your men, that the truth was out and they should stir up feeling against Hummler."

"An interesting theory, Simon Ark. Should I tell you now how I knew you weren't from Moscow, as you claimed?" The gun was still ready in his hand, and for the first time I began to fear that he might fire it. The diplomatic protection of the United States government can extend just so far; and it was little consolation to me that my death would cause an international incident, and maybe even a third World War.

But Simon Ark appeared unmoved. "What I am is of little consequence. Chief Berza. Although I'm certain your leaders in Moscow would never have wanted you to keep on with your fantastic plan, even with two American visitors present."

"Those are the fortunes of war, Simon Ark. The American gentlemen are the only ones whose deaths might give me any trouble, and I believe they will be killed by Conrad here. Thus I will

[Turn Page]

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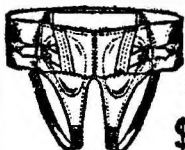
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become a sort of hero—even to your American eyes—by saying the killer of the American visitors.”

Simon Ark frowned. “It was this American who first stumbled on to your plot, you know.” I looked at Simon in amazement, but decided to keep quiet and listen. “You came to his room just after four o'clock this morning with news of the first killing; but according to Conrad, and the girl Katherine, the killing was only just taking pace, then. In other words Chief Berza, you knew about it before it happened. You knew about it because you planned it. You didn't know that Katherine Volgatz's brother would be the first to die, but you did know it would be someone leaving the celebration. . . .”

“You mean. . . .” Conrad began.

“Yes,” Simon continued. “The whole plot was to kill the hundred survivors of the battle against the Nazis. Didn't you notice that the victims were all men, and all men between the ages of thirty-five and fifty? And didn't you realize that they were all men honored in yesterday's celebration?”

“It's fantastic,” I gasped. “Why? Why?”

SIMON ARK closed his eyes, and continued. “The Russians knew there was a growing underground movement; they knew that the leaders of Werclaw were rising against them. But they didn't know who these leaders were, so they borrowed a page from ancient Greek history and arranged yesterday's celebration. The men that defended Werclaw once against invasion from the west would be the most likely to defend it again, against the Russian menace.”

Chief Berza's lips twisted in a grin; he was so intent on Simon Ark's words that he never heard the door open behind him. . . .

“The plan,” Simon Ark continued, “was to use the annual wolf invasion

[Turn To Page 96]

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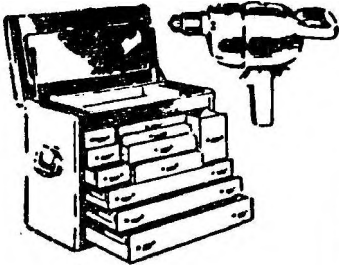
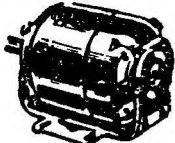
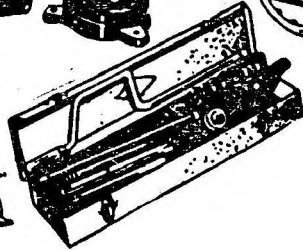
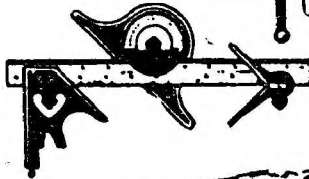
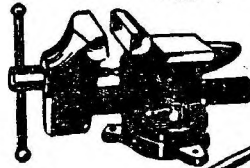
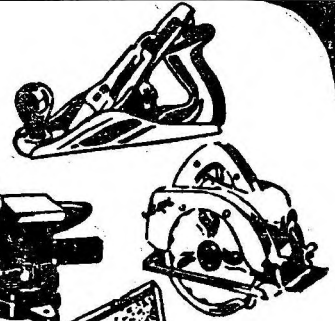
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to kill the brave men. Oh, before they all died, someone would realize the truth and accuse the Reds. But what could be proven? Who would listen: One hundred men would have died, and the underground movement would be crushed.”

“Why didn't they just line us up against a wall and shoot us?” Conrad asked.

“Two reasons. Bad publicity for the outside world, and also the chance that many would escape when they heard what was happening.”

It was sinking into our minds, the absolute horror of a nation, a government, that would do such a thing to its people. It was mass murder on a fantastic scale, for a terrifying motive. It was nearly beyond human comprehension, and yet it had happened.

And then, as we faced the gun held tightly in Berza's hand, we saw Franklin Fangler step into the room behind him, and waited for him to swing the rifle in an arc and bring it down on Berza's head.

But the rifle never moved in Fangler's grip until its muzzle was inches away from the police chief's head.

Then, before anyone could stop him, Franklin Fangler pulled the trigger. Chief Berza's skull seemed to explode under the bullet's shattering impact. . .

THE NEXT hours were a nightmare of questions, interviews, and interrogations; for a time Fangler and I seemed in the midst of a giant tug-of-war between Washington and Moscow. But finally, nearly a day later, Moscow disclaimed all knowledge of Chief Berza's efforts at mass murder, and we were free to go.

And I found myself once again with Simon Ark, waiting for Fangler and for the official car that would carry us back to Warsaw.

“You said something about Greek history,” I reminded him.

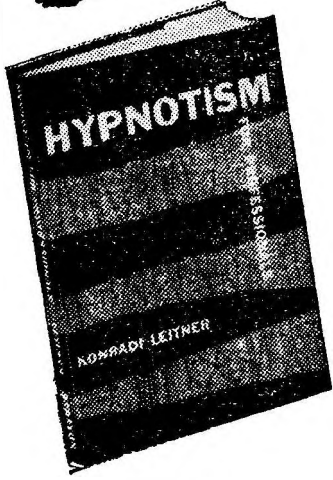
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Simon Ark sighed. "I sometimes believe there is no really new evil in this world, only variations of the ancient sins. Some 2500 years ago, in ancient Sparta, the Secret Corps, fearing a possible uprising against the government by the Helots, announced that freedom would be granted to all those slaves who had rendered special service in war. Thucydides reports that two thousand Helots applied for their freedom. They were feted in a triumphal celebration, but within a few days every single one of the two thousand had disappeared, never to be seen again. The Secret Corps had put them to death, in much the same way that Chief Berza's men tried to do."

"Horrible," I said. "I never believed such things were possible."

Simon Ark gazed off into the distance at the approaching armoured car. "Here comes your transportation to take you through the wolf packs. And here comes Fangler, too."

"Are you joining us, Simon?"

"No, the wolves still prowl the streets, and possibly I can stay a few days and help dispose of them."

I smiled at him a little. "Are you still searching for the devil, Simon?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps Satan was inside the body of Chief Berza. Perhaps he sits in Moscow. It is hard to say."

"Will I see you again?"

"Perhaps," he said. "Perhaps..."

And then I was in the armoured car, bound for Warsaw, with Franklin Fangler at my side and the tall figure of Simon Ark receding in the distance.

And I wondered for a brief few seconds, as our vehicle left the city of Werclaw behind, if possibly Fangler was right in his eternal hatred. Could we ever deal peacefully with the type of minds that would conceive such schemes? Could we ever live in the same world with men like Berza?

I didn't know the answer; I could only hope that if we looked long enough, and tried hard enough, we'd find that all the men in Moscow weren't like Berza.

In the meantime, the Franklin Fanglers would always be with us, with their hatred and their courage—for better or for worse.

And perhaps, in a world that produced men like Berza, it would always be necessary to have men like Fangler. Perhaps...

Sherlock Holmes-Ancessor

(Continued from Page 69)

the fog-shrouded streets of Victorian London—symbolised but one more in a whole gallery of criminals that the great sleuth had labored so diligently to bring to justice. What does matter, after all, is that so long as we read of the exploits of Holmes and Watson, the call to adventure sounds, and we shall always be ready to heed that call until all the Moriarty's of this world have been swept over the falls, or landed safely behind prison walls.

1. The part of Dr. Moriarity, in the radio version originally referred

to, was played by Orson Wells.

2. "A Scandal in Bohemia".

3. Watson does admit in a later story, to his ascendancy in the art: "It was not merely that Holmes changed his costume. His expression, his manner, his very soul seemed to vary with every fresh part that he assumed. The stage lost a fine actor, even as science lost an acute reasoner, when he became a specialist in crime".

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Suddenly Curry and High-Lo stopped in their tracks. There, on the steep slopes of Devil's Canyon were the two men Curry had sworn to run out of the territory! A voice broke the silence. "Stay where you are, Curry! Ride one step closer and you'll be feelin' some hot lead!"

"I ain't aimin' to turn back until I get some straight answers!" Curry warned. The only answer were two gleaming six-shooters, a spurt of fire and...

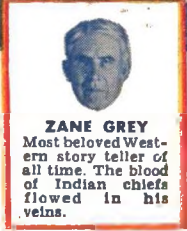
Thus begins the pulse-pounding climax of this action-crammed story!



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