KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

35¢

AUGUST

In This Issue

FABIAN

Teen-age idol turns detective in

The Hit-Run Homicide

Murder in Africa

by ROALD DAHL

A NEW BEASLEY GROVE MYSTERY ***PLUS***

STANLEY ELLIN • LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN • JOHN COLLIER

ROBERT BLOCH • MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

Dear Mystery Fans:

Here we are back together again, for a peek through the keyhole into the wonderful world of crime. We're glad to see all the familiar faces out there and we hope that the new faces among you will become regulars of the Murder-and-Mayhem society.

Membership in our Murder-and-Mayhem society keeps growing by leaps and bounds. We are digging out from under the avalanche of mail that inundated our editorial staff and now we can report that everyone has come up weary but grinning. One reason we're happy is that, to judge from your letters and the sales on our first two issues of Keyhole Mystery, you are pleased with our efforts to date. Keep writing to us, and we'll print the letters of most general interest to everyone. Every letter is carefully read, and remembered, even if we can't answer 'em all.

In our third issue, Crime Marches On. Most of you will be pleased to see Beasley Grove back again. The Big Brain of Eastern U. campus is the most popular new detective to have been introduced in many years, and we think you'll enjoy watching him at work again.

Also present is the usual assortment of villains and villainy who will awaken shudders in the most steadfast among you. Their dark crimes are told by today's leading masters of the murder story: such authors as *Roald Dahl, John Collier, Lawrence G. Blochman, Stanley Ellin* and many others. For a different kind of story, try the *Hit-Run Homicide* in this issue, which features one of the most popular young singers in America, *Fabian,* in the startlingly different role of detective. You'll like it.

Now it's time to adjourn this latest meeting of the Murder-and-Mayhem Society—

Yours till death,

THE EDITOR

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KEYHOLE MYSTERY *Magazine*

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PUBLISHER: **William Woolfolk** EDITOR: **Dan Roberts**

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LETTERS to the editor:

ON COPS

I was once involved in a legal scrape similar to the one those kids were in in your story *The Trap*. Even though I was innocent, the cops never left me alone. If I had the same chance as those kids, I'd let that cop stew in his own juice.

Vincent Andrews
Baltimore, Md.

Norman Daniels certainly stacks the cards. Don't ever think that the flatfoots are as understanding as this. I never heard of one who would give up his own time to help teenagers out of a mess. More likely, they'd hand them the back of their nightsticks.

Paul Stam
Washington, D. C.

I thought *The Trap* was just fine. Science fiction, wasn't it?

Peter Haroldson
Atlanta, Ga.

Thanks for publishing a story that made a police officer seem human for a change. We really are, you know—despite what you hear.

Ptl. G. H. K.
St. Louis, Miss.

FAVORITE AUTHOR

I was glad to see Theodore Sturgeon in your magazine. His story was exciting and well written. He's always been one of my very favorite authors. Let's have more by him.

John Temple
New York, N. Y.

Are you listening, Ted? —Ed.

If there's anything I hate, it's a guy who thinks that any female —and I mean *any*—isn't fair game. That's why *Night Ride,* by Ted Sturgeon, burned me up. A guy gets knocked off because he got involved with a miserable girl, and *he's* a big villain. As Nero Wolfe says, phooey!

Mike Delaney
Brooklyn, New York

Reader Delaney's criticism is ridiculous. Nero Wolfe says pfui! *—Ed.*

UNCLE AND NEPHEW

That was an interesting gimmick, publishing stories by a famed author, Melville Davisson Post, and his writer-nephew in the same issue. It proves that blood *doesn't* tell. What the uncle forgot, the nephew will never learn

about how to write a good detective story.

Charles Cansini
Taos, New Mexico

I...enjoyed both stories and, knowing they were written by writers related to each other made them all the more interesting.

Donald Shahane
Portland, Me.

A CASE OF HOMICIDE

I never thought KEYHOLE MYSTERY would stoop so low as to publish a story like *A Case of Homicide*. It treated the murder of that poor old man like it was some kind of a grisly joke.

George E. Allen
Waco, Texas

So which murder method did really finish off the old bloke? Don't leave me like this. Drop the other shoe, fevvensakes!

Peter Lopez
Detroit, Mich.

You pays your money and you takes your choice. No doubt of one thing. The old man was the victim of a multiple murder. —Ed.

READERS' CHOICE

I like stories such as *A Matter of Life* by Robert Bloch. I hate stories such as *Born for Murder* by John Collier. Ordinarily I think John Collier is tops in the field. But this one was a real clinker.

Don Martin
San Diego, Calif.

A new story by John Collier! What a find! What a treat! I thought he had given up writing detective fiction. But he proved with this one he's still head and shoulders above 'em all.

Martin Katz
Phila., Pa.

Eagerly I bought the second issue of KEYHOLE MYSTERY. Hopefully I turned over the pages, searching, searching. But there was no sign of my favorite sleuth, Beasley Grove. I love that man! Don't you *dare* leave him out of another issue, or I'll never buy your magazine again.

Phyllis Nelson
Rockport, Mass.

Beasley is in this issue, ma-am. Hope you like him. —Ed.

I think your magazine is tops—compares more than favorably with the best in the murder mystery field. I particularly liked *Wife Killer* by Rod Reed in your June issue. He's one of my favorite writers.

Rod Reed
Pine Bush, N. Y.

Most detective stories involve fictional characters in fictional situations. A very few go for the different twist, using fictional characters in a real life situation —such as a fictional detective present at the scene of Lincoln's assassination.

Herewith we present a real departure in detective fiction— using real characters in an imagined problem of crime and punishment. In this story the nation's teen-age singing idol—the Fabulous Fabian—*finds himself suddenly projected into the middle of a mystery that would confound many experienced sleuths. How he conducts himself and what effect his actions have on the outcome of the story are entirely the invention of* Bill Boltin—*a writer who spent a great deal of time with Fabian before writing this story, so that he could predict, as well as anyone can, how this famous young man would actually perform in this imaginary situation.*

And so, with no further fanfare, we present Fabian—in his first and perhaps only appearance as a modern Sherlock Holmes.

Fabian Turns Detective in:

THE HIT-RUN HOMICIDE

by BILL BOLTIN

LIEUTENANT QUINNELL WAS POLITE and patient, mindful of the fact that the young man who had reported a crime was Fabian, the juvenile juke king and popular vocal star of the discs and dance halls, the kilocycles and cinema.

Seated on the sofa in his lavish hotel suite, Fabian watched him stalk up and down the length of

the living room.

"Why did you wait until you reached your hotel to contact the precinct?" asked the lieutenant.

"I looked for a prowl car or the officer on the beat," said Fabian, with a soft smile, "but I didn't see any. There didn't seem to be a doctor's office nearby, either. So I checked the victim's pulse. It was very feeble. Since I couldn't do anything, and my hotel was right down the street, I hurried here and phoned you."

Lieutenant Quinnell jabbed some notes into his little black book while he asked, "You didn't examine the victim's pockets for any identification?"

"No, sir. This was a matter for the police. You see, I know a little about the proper procedure. My father was a cop. A darned good one, too." The young singer's tone was pardonably proud.

"Lucky for us you were walking along that side of Central Park South, Fabian, or the body might not have been discovered until next day."

Fabian answered the implied question. "It's not unusual for me to walk that hour of the night. I was on the way to my hotel on Fifth Avenue after my last performance at the theater."

"Now, let's go back over the whole story," the lieutenant said. "You were leaving the theater when—"

Fabian sighed and repeated the story he had already told the lieutenant. He had been taking a brisk walk through the sparkling winter midnight. Suddenly he became aware of a grotesque mass on the sidewalk, huddled darkly against the stone wall beyond the glowing periphery of the street lamp. Approaching warily he had discovered a critically injured man, who could only moan at his touch and murmur, "...sy... sy..." before he quivered in agony and lay still.

As he had started off for help, Fabian's shoe-tip kicked a rabbit's foot, obviously a good luck token belonging to the man. It certainly hadn't been lucky for the victim.

"Another hit-and-run case," said Lieutenant Quinnell. "There's been a rash of these lately." He stared at the ceiling. "*Sy... sy... s-i* or *s-y*. And it rhymed with 'sky'. What could he have been trying to say?"

"He may have meant *cy*anide," ventured Fabian. "Maybe someone poisoned him."

"No," said the lieutenant. "There doesn't seem to be a trace of anything like that. He was a straight hit-and-run victim—we're almost certain of that."

"Maybe he meant, *psy*-chiatrist," suggested Fabian, hopefully, "or *s-i-g-h*."

"Just like in a song lyric," the lieutenant observed with a trace of amusement. "Well, we won't get anywhere trying to add it up

right now. We'll check out the victim. Name's Hamilton Goss. We've already notified his wife to claim the body."

The lieutenant tugged on the brim of his hat to punctuate the end of the interview. "Grateful for what you did, Fabian. Good night."

Fabian held the outside door open for Quinnell. Then an idea occurred to him:

"Say, lieutenant—I'm free until 3:00 in the afternoon. Mind if I come over to the precinct after breakfast to see what plays? After all, I have a personal stake in this case and, besides, it will remind me of old times with my father."

Lieutenant Quinnell smiled. His thin upper lip edged high to reveal a flash of gold amidst his glistening teeth. "Glad to have you, Fabian, but I'm warning you. I'm a Perry Como fan myself."

The lieutenant's humor was a bit heavy-handed, but Fabian grinned happily. It was swell to be allowed to look in on a case like this. The young singer had a hunch this was one hit-and-run killer who wasn't going to get away.

After a hearty breakfast of orange juice, bacon, eggs, and waffles, Fabian went straight down to the station house. The routine investigation was well under way when he arrived. He paused to sign an autograph book for the desk sergeant's pretty young teen-aged daughter who was waiting for him breathlessly and who almost swooned when he thanked *her* as he handed back the autograph book. Then he was ushered into Lieutenant Quinnell's cubicle.

"We've made real progress," said Quinnell crisply by way of greeting. "I asked headquarters to order every available man to check out garages in the city for a car with a dented fender. Goss' body was struck so hard, the impact must have caused some damage."

"And you succeeded in locating the murder car?" asked Fabian.

"We found it. It was a '60 Chrysler. The owner returned his car to the garage a little past midnight. The time checks out to make him our prime suspect. So does one other very important item."

"What's that?"

"The owner of the car happens to be the business partner of the victim, Hamilton Goss. His name is Seymour Bryant—Sy Bryant—*S-y* Bryant!"

"I saw what Hamilton Goss looked like after the accident," Fabian said slowly. "Now I'd like to see the kind of man who could commit that kind of a murder."

"Come along," said Lieutenant Quinnell.

When he opened the door of his apartment to admit them, Sy

Bryant's face matched the color of the slate grey morning they'd left downstairs before being catapulted by elevator to his 21st floor apartment.

"I should've reported it," said Bryant lamely, leading them into a mahogany-paneled study. "But you must believe me. I was going to do it first chance I got this morning. It didn't seem so urgent that I had to notify the police at once."

Lieutenant Quinnell had heard many remarkable statements in his time, but nothing like this. Here was a man who had deliberately—it *couldn't* have been accidental—yes, deliberately run down his own business associate and he was dismissing it as of no importance.

Fabian also stared in shocked disbelief. Then he pulled his eyes away from the distraught figure to observe the entrance of a slim, sloe-eyed 17-year-old. She wore a turtleneck sweater jammed into toreador pants. Her pert, upturned nose was set in a cream-white cameo face, under a crown of jet hair that was combed straight back and twisted into a tight bun. Her ballet shoes gave bounce to her step. She took one of her father's nervously twisting hands into hers.

"My daughter Melanie," said Bryant, introducing her. "Lieutenant Quinnell, and—"

"Fabian! Aren't you Fabian?" interrupted the girl, breathlessly, she glanced at the lieutenant, incredulously. "What is *he* doing here?"

"He's interested in the case," replied Lieutenant Quinnell, fixing flinty eyes on Bryant, "because he found the body."

"Body . . . *body?"* echoed Sy Bryant in a low tremulous voice of fear and astonishment. "Aren't you here because of the light pole in the park I hit last night?"

He was carrying it off very well, thought Lieutenant Quinnell. And he could most likely show them the pole, to serve as an excuse for the damaged fender. Lieutenant Quinnell flatly filled in father and daughter with the details on Hamilton Goss's death, mentioning the dying man's final outburst . . . " . . . *Sy . . . Sy . . .*!"

Bryant collapsed in a deep chair with an anguished moan.

"Oh, my God, my God!" he sobbed. He shuddered convulsively. "Ham's dead, but I didn't do it. I swear I didn't!"

Melanie quickly poured a teaspoon of brown medicine from a bottle on the desk. As her father downed it, she closed a hand over his.

"I don't believe Daddy's guilty of such a terrible thing. Besides, you haven't proved anything at all," she said in a quite level voice, her eyes flaming with anger. Go ahead and try. I know you won't find a shred. Daddy's

incapable of doing such a thing."

But her confidence had been shaken. She was well aware, Fabian thought, that the web of circumstantial evidence could trap her father. As he followed Lieutenant Quinnell through the door, Melanie grasped Fabian's arm.

"Please . . . please . . ." she implored in a tense whisper. "We have nobody to turn to. Help Daddy! Please, Fabian!"

The young singer put his hand on hers. No matter what her father might have done, this lovely young girl was certainly not guilty.

"Try not to worry," he told her.

Later that day, Fabian was busy at the theatre, where his personal appearance had enticed such a throng that police reserves were required to keep his fans in check. At the recording studio, he cut a couple of sides, then canceled a dinner date at Sardi's to down a snack at a drug store counter. Then, moved by an obscure impulse, he took a taxi to the precinct. He couldn't erase from his mind the picture of despair on Melanie's face, or dim the sound of her plaintive plea in his ears. *"Please . . . please. We have nobody to turn to. Help Daddy!"*

At the station house, Fabian signed a photograph for the desk sergeant's wife, who fluttered her thanks and flitted away. Then he spotted Lieutenant Quinnell sipping water from a paper cup at the cooler in the corridor. Seeing Fabian, the lieutenant's voice crackled with smugness.

"We've about wrapped up the case. Goss's wife told me there was a fat insurance policy! The surviving partner was the beneficiary—to the tune of nearly a quarter of a million dollars. *That's* our motive."

"Are you going to arrest Bryant?" Fabian asked. "It's still pretty early. You might be jumping to a conclusion, lieutenant."

"The devil I am!" Lieutenant Quinnell's fingers crushed the paper cup and dropped it into a receptacle. "Add it up for yourself. The dying man identified his killer by name. Bryant's car had a crumpled fender, which he tried to pass off with a phoney alibi. And now, the motive. Do you think that isn't enough to incriminate him?" He answered before Fabian could venture an opinion. "You can bet a stack of your hit records it does, young man. The D. A. will have enough to convict. All I have to do is type up the warrant and bring Sy Bryant in."

Fabian watched Lieutenant Quinnell go back into his office, leaving a final and menacing grunt of triumph hanging in the air.

As Fabian left the precinct, he was preoccupied. He didn't even

hear the desk sergeant ask when he could please sign some more photos for the girls in his daughter's sorority.

The police had indeed woven a tight skein of evidence, but something still disturbed Fabian. The theme, harmony and counterpoint were correct, but the coda was illogical—the coda that is the passage at the end of a composition which brings it to a successful conclusion.

Fabian glanced at his wrist watch. He had almost an hour before he was due back at the theatre for his next performance. The slanting sun had long disappeared and the snow that had threatened all day now broke loose in a flurry, flaking him as he walked swiftly down Lexington Avenue. He was deep in thought as he cut across Park towards Madison.

He was crossing west on Madison Avenue when the raucous *squeak-squeak* of a tiny horn made him jump. The driver of the motorcycle tender, speeding on a service call, shouted an indistinguishable epithet at him as he swerved his vehicle. For a moment, Fabian stood on the sidewalk, watching the reckless rider vanish in the night's swirling snow.

In that split second, Fabian noticed a small, broken chain dangling from the handlebars. A chain that might once have held a good-luck piece.... like a rabbit's foot. And at this thought, another idea leaped into Fabian's mind.

Sy...sy the dying victim had uttered. Could Goss have been making a desperate, dying effort to identify a motor*cycle*?

It was nothing but the wildest of hunches, but Fabian decided to act on it. He found a garage from which the motorcycle might have emerged down a sidestreet.

He dropped in and talked to the owner for a while and then he telephoned Lieutenant Quinnell from the garage's office. From the tone of the lieutenant's voice, Fabian could tell he was impatient with this meddling. But after Fabian talked a little more, the lieutenant finally agreed to come.

"Of course, it's a long shot," said Fabian as he led Lieutenant Quinnell into the steamy comfort of the underground garage, reeking of rubber and gasoline. "But it's worth playing if it means saving a man's life, isn't it?"

Lieutenant Quinnell glared at the *No Smoking* sign and lit a cigarette.

"Okay, I'm here. Let's talk to the owner."

Fabian returned a moment later with the owner, a paunchy man in overalls.

"The lieutenant wants to talk to you about Eddie, the boy who

rides your motorcycle tender," Fabian said.

"Eddie's a bit on the wild side," volunteered the owner. "His job is to pick up and deliver the car when a tenant phones and to answer service calls. The way he roars out of here on his *putt-putt,* it's enough to make a body think twice before daring to cross a street."

"What makes him that way?" Lieutenant Quinnell asked.

"He's a crazy kid, that's all. I've warned him he's gonna get himself killed one of these days, or worse still, kill some innocent person. And that rabbit's foot he carries ain't gonna keep him out of trouble either."

They were still talking to the owner when a stuttering roar reached them and a young blond man barreled down the ramp on the motorcycle tender and roared into the garage. He leaped off the motorcycle. Something about Lieutenant Quinnell's appearance as he strode towards him caused his arrogance to dissipate.

"What's up?" the blond young man asked.

"This is Lieutenant Quinnell of the police department, Eddie," the owner told him.

The lieutenant wordlessly examined the fender over the cycle's front wheel. The metal bore a deep dent. A snapped chain still swung listlessly from the handlebar. Lieutenant Quinnell drew the broken strand, on which dangled the rabbit's foot, from his pocket and matched the two pieces.

Eddie's eyes became pinpoints of fear. Studying him, Fabian saw that the boy was fighting down an instinct to run. The tension stretched almost beyond endurance.

Lieutenant Quinnell snapped:

"You want to tell me now how it happened, or do you want to wait until we get down to the precinct?"

Eddie leaned against a wall for support.

"I would've reported it," he said hoarsely, "but who'd have believed it was an accident.... that it wasn't my fault?"

"You'd have been a lot smarter to report it right away. Juries have a nasty habit of assuming that a hit-run driver is always wrong."

Eddie's face turned pale and sweat broke out on his forehead.

"I didn't mean to hit that Mr. Goss," he said bleakly. "You've got to take my word I didn't even know I'd hit him till I read about the accident in the paper this morning."

"How come?"

"It was dark. Some of the street lights on Central Park South were out. I was just turning the corner when I thought I saw something. I swerved my wheel, but not quick enough. Whatever it was, it flew across the sidewalk and slammed into the wall. It didn't

move. I knew it must be dead. But I never thought it was a man."

"You never stopped to look, did you? If it will ease your conscience, I don't think you could have been of any help if you had stopped."

Lieutenant Quinnell glanced outside. The snow was falling heavily, screening the street like white gauze. "I suggest you get somone to replace Eddie," he told the garage owner. "Eddie's going to be away for some time."

Fabian glanced at his watch. He was due at the theater in just five minutes.

"Lieutenant, can you make a detour on the way to the precinct and give me a lift?" he asked. "I'm due onstage in exactly four and a half minutes, and they'll be worried if I don't show up."

"Sure thing . . . if you promise not to tell Perry Como." Lieutenant Quinnell smiled. "It's the least I can do for you."

He nodded curtly to Eddie, a signal of departure, and propelled him up the ramp towards the waiting, snow-capped squad car.

"By the way," Fabian called after him, "how long will it take you to reach the theater?"

"With the siren, not more than a couple of minutes," Lieutenant Quinnell replied.

"Good. Then I've got time to make one phone call," said Fabian. "It's rather important to a couple of people."

He stepped into the office, and scooped up the phone.

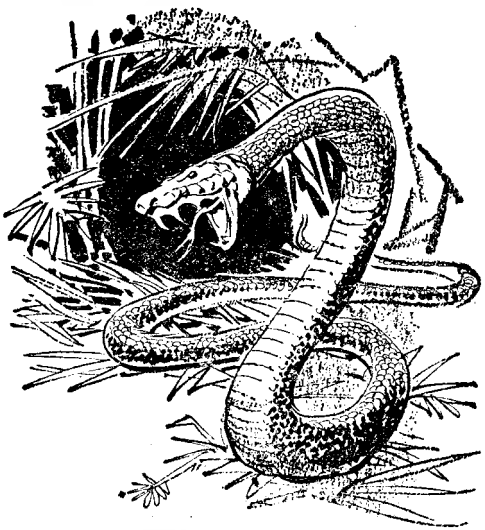
"Melanie Bryant's apartment, please," he said to the operator at the switchboard in a voice which was unusually jubilant. ■ ■

Roald Dahl is beyond question the most accomplished spinner of macabre tales since Edgar Allan Poe. Some of his stories have been made into TV shows, and most of them were published in The New Yorker *magazine, which maintains the highest standards for fiction of any magazine in the country.*

Who is Roald Dahl? Well, he is a former RAF flier, and his first short story collection, entitled Over To You, *dealt chiefly with his wartime experiences as a pilot. He is married to actress Patricia Neal (Remember her in the lead some years back in* "The Fountainhead" *with Gary Cooper? And the critics all hailed her performance this season in* "The Miracle Worker" *now on Broadway). Mr. Dahl now lives in Manhattan, where he turns out his superbly crafted exercises in imaginative terror.*

If this is your introduction to Roald Dahl, we envy you. If you have read his work before, we think you will enjoy adding Murder In Africa *to your most rewarding literary moments.*

MURDER IN AFRICA



by ROALD DAHL

FOR ENGLAND, THE WAR BEGAN IN September, 1939. In East Africa, in Kenya Colony, there was a young man who was a white hunter, who loved the plains and the valleys and the cool nights on the slopes of Kilimanjaro. When he heard about the war he made his way over the country to Nairobi, and he reported to the R.A.F.

and asked that they make him a pilot. They took him in and he began his training at Nairobi airport, flying in little Tiger Moths.

After five weeks he nearly got court-martialed because he took his plane up and instead of practising spins and stall-turns as he had been ordered to do, he flew off in the direction of Nakuru to look at the wild animals on the plain. On the way, he thought he saw a Sable antelope, and because these are rare animals, he became excited and flew down low to get a better view. He was looking down at the antelope out of the left side of the cockpit, and did not see the giraffe on the other side. The leading edge of the starboard wing struck the neck of the giraffe just below the head and cut clean through it. He was flying as low as that. There was damage to the wing, but he managed to get back to Nairobi.

After six weeks he was allowed to make his first solo cross-country flight, and he flew off from Nairobi to a place called Eldoret, which is a little town eight thousand feet up in the highlands. But again he was unlucky. This time he had engine failure on the way, due to water in the fuel tanks. He kept his head and made a beautiful forced landing without damaging the aircraft, not far from a little shack which stood alone on the highland plain with no other habitation in sight.

He walked over to the shack, and there he found an old man, living alone, with nothing but a small patch of sweet potatoes, some brown chickens and a black cow.

The old man was kind to him. He gave him food and milk and a place to sleep, and the pilot stayed with him for two days and two nights, until a rescue plane from Nairobi spotted his aircraft on the ground.

But during his stay, the old man, who was lonely and had seen no one for many months, talked much, and the pilot listened. The old man talked of the lonely life, of the lions that came in the night, of the rogue elephant that lived over the hill in the west, of the hotness of the days and of the silence that came with the cold at midnight.

On the second night he talked about himself. He told a long, strange story, and as he told it, it seemed to the pilot that the old man was lifting a great weight off his shoulders in the telling. When he had finished, he said that he had never told that to anyone before, and that he would never tell it to anyone again, but the story was so strange that the pilot wrote it down on paper as soon as he got back to Nairobi.

We found it in his suitcase two weeks later when we were going through his belongings after he had been killed in training.

This is what he wrote.

The old man came out of the door into the bright sunshine, and for a moment he stood leaning on his stick, looking around him, blinking at the strong light. He stood with his head on one side, looking up, listening for the noise which he thought he had heard.

He was small and thick and well over seventy years old, although he looked nearer eighty-five, because rheumatism had tied his body into knots. His face was covered with gray hair, and when he moved his mouth, he moved it only on one side of his face. On his head, whether indoors or out, he wore a dirty white topee.

He stood quite still in the bright sunshine, screwing up his eyes, listening for the noise.

Yes, there it was again. The head of the old man flicked around and he looked toward the small wooden hut standing a hundred yards away on the pasture. This time there was no doubt about it: the yelp of a dog, the high-pitched yelp of pain which a dog gives when he is in great danger. Twice more it came and this time the noise was more like a scream than a yelp. The note was higher and more sharp, as though it were wrenched quickly from some small place inside the body.

The old man turned and limped fast across the grass toward the wooden shed where Judson lived, pushed open the door and went in.

The small white dog was lying on the floor and Judson was standing over it, his legs apart, his black hair falling all over his long, red face; standing there tall and skinny, muttering to himself and sweating through his greasy white shirt. His mouth hung open in an oddly lifeless way, as though his jaw were too heavy for him, and he was dribbling gently down the middle of his chin. He stood there looking at the small white dog which was lying on the floor, and with one hand he was slowly twisting his left ear; in the other he held a heavy bamboo.

The old man ignored Judson and went down on his knees beside his dog, gently running his thin hands over its body. The dog lay still, looking up at him with watery eyes. Judson did not move. He was watching the dog and the man.

Slowly the old man got up, rising with difficulty, holding the top of his stick with both hands and pulling himself to his feet. He looked around the room. There was a dirty rumpled mattress lying on the floor in the far corner; there was a wooden table made of packing cases and on it a Primus stove and a chipped blue-enameled saucepan. There were chicken feathers and mud on the floor.

The old man saw what he wanted. It was a heavy iron bar

standing against the wall near the mattress, and he hobbled over towards it, thumping the hollow wooden floorboards with his stick as he went. The eyes of the dog followed his movement as he limped across the room. The old man changed his stick to his left hand, took the iron bar in his right, hobbled back to the dog and without pausing, he lifted the bar and brought it down hard upon the animal's head. He threw the bar to the ground and looked up at Judson, who was still dribbling down his chin and twitching around the corners of his eyes. He went right up to him and began to speak. He spoke very quietly and slowly, with a terrible anger, and as he spoke he moved only one side of his mouth.

"You killed him," he said. "You broke his back."

Then, as the tide of his anger rose and gave him strength, he found more words. He looked up and spat them into the face of the tall Judson, who backed away toward the wall.

"You lousy, mean, dog-beating bastard. That was my dog. What the hell right have you got beating my dog, tell me that. Answer me, you slobbering madman. Answer me."

Judson was slowly rubbing the palm of his left hand up and down on the front of his shirt, and now the whole of his face began to twitch. Without looking up, he said, "He wouldn't stop licking that old place on his paw. I couldn't stand the noise it made. You know I can't stand noises like that, licking, licking, licking. I told him to stop. He looked up and wagged his tail; but then he went on licking. I couldn't stand it any longer, so I beat him."

The old man did not say anything. For a moment it looked as though he were going to hit this creature. He half raised his arm, dropped it again, spat on the floor, turned around and hobbled out of the door into the sunshine. He went across the grass to where a black cow was standing in the shade of a small acacia tree, chewing its cud, and the cow watched him as he came limping across the grass from the shed. But it went on chewing, munching its cud, moving its jaws regularly, mechanically, like a metronome in slow time. The old man came limping up and stood beside it, stroking its neck. Then he leant against its shoulder and scratched its back with the butt-end of his stick. He stood there for a long time, leaning against the cow, scratching it with his stick; and now and again he would speak to it, speaking quiet little words, whispering them almost, like a person telling a secret.

It was shady under the acacia tree, and the country around him looked lush and pleasant after the long rains, for the grass grows

green up in the Highlands of Kenya; and at this time of the year, after it rains, it is as green and rich as any grass in the world. Away in the north stood Mount Kenya itself, with snow upon its head, with a thin white plume trailing from its summit where the icy winds made a storm and blew the white powder from the top of the mountain. Down below, upon the slopes of that same mountain there were lion and elephant, and sometimes during the night one could hear the roar of the lions as they looked at the moon.

The days passed and Judson went about his work on the farm in a silent, mechanical kind of way, taking in the corn, digging the sweet potatoes and milking the black cow, while the old man stayed indoors away from the fierce African sun. Only in the late afternoon when the air began to get cool and sharp, did he hobble outside, and always he went over to his black cow and spent an hour with it under the acacia tree. One day when he came out he found Judson standing beside the cow, regarding it strangely, standing in a peculiar attitude with one foot in front of the other and gently twisting his ear with his right hand.

"What is it now?" said the old man as he came limping up.

"Cow won't stop chewing," said Judson.

"Chewing her cud," said the old man. "Leave her alone."

Judson said, "It's the noise, can't you hear it? Crunchy noise like she was chewing pebbles, only she isn't; she's chewing grass and spit. Look at her, she goes on and on crunching, crunching, crunching, and it's just grass and spit. Noise goes right into my head."

"Get out," said the old man. "Get out of my sight."

At dawn the old man sat, as he always did, looking out of his window, watching Judson coming across from his hut to milk the cow. He saw him coming sleepily across the field, talking to himself as he walked, dragging his feet, making a dark green trail in the wet grass, carrying in his hand the old four-gallon kerosene tin which he used as a milk pail. The sun was coming up over the escarpment and making long shadows behind the man, the cow and the little acacia tree. The old man saw Judson put down the tin and he saw him fetch the box from beside the acacia tree and settle himself upon it, ready for the milking. He saw him suddenly kneeling down, feeling the udder of the cow with his hands and at the same time the old man noticed from where he sat that the animal had no milk. He saw Judson get up and come walking fast towards the shack. He came and stood under the window where the old man was sitting and looked up.

"Cow's got no milk," he said.

The old man leaned through the open window, placing both his hands on the sill.

"You lousy bastard, you've stole it."

"I didn't take it," said Judson. "I bin asleep."

"You stole it." The old man was leaning farther out of the window, speaking quietly with one side of his mouth. "I'll beat the hell out of you for this," he said.

Judson said, "Someone stole it in the night, a native, one of the Kikuyu. Or maybe she's sick."

It seemed to the old man that he was telling the truth. "We'll see," he said, "if she milks this evening; and now for Christ's sake, get out of my sight."

By evening the cow had a full udder and the old man watched Judson draw two quarts of good thick milk from under her.

The next morning she was empty. In the evening she was full. On the third morning she was empty once more.

On the third night the old man went on watch. As soon as it began to get dark, he stationed himself at the open window with an old twelve-bore shotgun lying on his lap, waiting for the thief who came and milked his cow in the night. At first it was pitch dark and he could not see the cow even, but soon a three-quarter moon came over the hills and it became light, almost as though it were daytime. But it was bitter cold because the Highlands are seven thousand feet up, and the old man shivered at his post and pulled his brown blanket closer around his shoulders.

All through the night the old man sat there watching the cow, and save when he got up once and hobbled back into the room to fetch another blanket, his eyes never left her. The cow stood placidly under the small tree, chewing her cud and gazing at the moon.

An hour before dawn her udder was full. The old man could see it; he had been watching it the whole time, and although he had not seen the movement of its swelling any more than one can see the movement of the hour hand of a watch, yet all the time he had been conscious of the filling as the milk came down. It was an hour before dawn. The moon was low, but the light had not gone. Suddenly he jerked his head. He heard something. Surely that was a noise he heard. Yes, there it was again, a rustling in the grass right underneath the window where he was sitting. Quickly he pulled himself up and looked over the sill.

Then he saw it. A large black snake, a Mamba—eight feet long and as thick as a man's arm—was gliding through the wet grass, heading straight for the cow and going fast. It's small pear-shaped

head was raised slightly off the ground and the movement of its body against the wetness made a clear hissing sound like gas escaping from a jet.

The old man raised his gun to shoot. Almost at once he lowered it again, why he did not know, and he sat there not moving, watching the Mamba as it approached the cow, listening to the noise it made as it went, watching it come up close to the cow and waiting for it to strike.

But it did not strike. It lifted its head and for a moment let it sway gently back and forth; then it raised the front part of its black body into the air under the udder of the cow, gently took one of the thick teats into its mouth and began to drink.

The cow did not move. There was no noise anywhere, and the body of the Mamba curved gracefully up from the ground and hung under the udder of the cow. Black snake and black cow were clearly visible out there in the moonlight.

For half an hour the old man watched the Mamba taking the milk of the cow. He saw the gentle pulsing of its black body as it drew the liquid out of the udder and he saw it, after a time, change from one teat to another, until at last there was no longer any milk left. Then the Mamba gently lowered itself to the ground and slid back through the grass in the direction whence it came. Once more it made a clear hissing noise as it went, and once more it passed underneath the window where the old man sat, leaving a thin dark trail in the wet grass.

Slowly the moon went down behind the ridge of Mount Kenya. Almost at the same time the sun rose up out of the escarpment in the east and Judson came out of his hut with the four-gallon kerosene tin in his hand, walking sleepily toward the cow, dragging his feet in the heavy dew as he went. The old man watched him coming and waited. Judson bent down and felt the udder with his hand and as he did so, the old man shouted at him. Judson jumped at the sound.

"It's gone again," said the old man.

Judson said, "Yes, cow's empty."

"I think," said the old man slowly, "I think that it was a Kikuyu boy. I was dozing a bit and only woke up as he was making off. I couldn't shoot because the cow was in the way. He made off behind the cow. I'll wait for him tonight. I'll get him tonight," he added.

Judson did not answer. He picked up his four-gallon tin and walked to his hut.

That night the old man sat up again by the window watching the cow. For him there was this time a certain pleasure in the anticipation of what he was going to see.

He knew that he would see the Mamba again, but he wanted to make quite certain. And so, when the great black snake slid across the grass toward the cow an hour before sunrise, the old man leaned out over the window sill and followed the movements of the Mamba as it approached the cow. He saw it wait for a moment under the belly of the animal, letting its head sway slowly backwards and forwards half a dozen times before finally raising its body from the ground to take the teat of the cow into its mouth. He saw it drink the milk for half an hour, until there was none left, and he saw it lower its body and slide smoothly back behind the shack whence it came. And while he watched these things, the old man began laughing quietly with one side of his mouth.

Then the sun rose up from behind the hills, and Judson came out of his hut with the four-gallon tin in his hand, but this time he went straight to the window of the shack where the old man was sitting.

"What happened?" said Judson.

The old man looked down at him from his window. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing happened. I dozed off again and the bastard came and took it while I was asleep. Listen, Judson," he added, "we got to catch this boy, otherwise you'll be going short of milk, not that that would do any harm. But we got to catch him. I can't shoot because he's too clever; the cow's always in the way. You'll have to get him."

"Me get him? How?"

The old man spoke very slowly. "I think," he said, "I think you must hide beside the cow, right beside the cow. That is the only way you can catch him."

Judson was rumpling his hair with his left hand.

"Today," continued the old man, "you will dig a shallow trench right beside the cow. If you lie in it and if I cover you over with hay and grass, the thief won't notice you until he's right alongside."

"He may have a knife," Judson said.

"No, he won't have a knife. You take your stick. That's all you'll need."

Judson said, "Yes, I'll take my stick. When he comes, I'll jump up and beat him with my stick." Then suddenly he seemed to remember something. "What about her chewing?" he said. "Couldn't stand her chewing all night, crunching and crunching, crunching spit and grass like it was pebbles. Couldn't stand that all night," and he began twisting again at his left ear with his hand.

"You'll do as you're bloody well told," said the old man.

That day Judson dug his trench beside the cow which was to be tethered to the small acacia tree so

that she could not wander about the field. Then, as evening came and as he was preparing to lie down in the trench for the night, the old man came to the door of his shack and said, "No point in doing anything until early morning. They won't come till the cow's full. Come in here and wait; it's warmer than your filthy little hut."

Judson had never been invited into the old man's shack before. He followed him in, happy that he would not have to lie all night in the trench. There was a candle burning in the room. It was stuck into the neck of a beer bottle and the bottle was on the table.

"Make some tea," said the old man, pointing to the Primus stove standing on the floor. Judson lit the stove and made tea. The two of them sat down on a couple of wooden boxes and began to drink. The old man drank his hot and made loud sucking noises as he drank. Judson kept blowing on his, sipping it cautiously and watching the old man over the top of his cup. The old man went on sucking away at his tea until suddenly Judson said, "Stop." He said it quietly, plaintively almost, and as he said it he began to twitch around the corners of his eyes and his mouth.

"What?" said the old man.

Judson said, "That noise, that sucking noise you're making."

The old man put down his cup and regarded the other quietly for a few moments, then he said, "How many dogs you killed in your time, Judson?"

There was no answer.

"I said how many? How many dogs?"

Judson began picking the tea leaves out of his cup and sticking them onto the back of his left hand. The old man was leaning forward.

"How many dogs, Judson?"

Judson began to hurry with his tea leaves. He jabbed his fingers into his empty cup, picked out a tea leaf, pressed it quickly onto the back of his hand and quickly went back for another. When there were not many left and he did not find one immediately, he bent over and peered closely into the cup, trying to find the ones that remained. The back of the hand which held the cup was covered with wet black tea leaves.

"Judson!" The old man shouted, and one side of his mouth opened and shut like a pair of tongs. The candle flame flickered and became still again.

Then quietly and very slowly, coaxingly, as someone to a child. "In all your life, how many dogs has it been?"

Judson said, "Why should I tell you?" He did not look up. He was picking the tea leaves off the back of his hand one by one and returning them to the cup.

"I want to know, Judson." The

old man was speaking very gently. "I'm getting keen about this too. Let's talk about it and make some plans for more fun."

Judson looked up. A ball of saliva rolled down his chin, hung for a moment in the air, snapped and fell to the floor.

"I only kill 'em because of a noise."

"How often've you done it? I'd love to know how often."

"Lots of times long ago."

"How? Tell me how you used to do it. What way did you like best?"

No answer.

"Tell me, Judson. I'd love to know."

"I don't see why I should. It's a secret."

"I won't tell. I swear I won't tell."

"Well, if you'll promise." Judson shifted his seat closer and spoke in a whisper. "Once I waited till one was sleeping, then I got a big stone and dropped it on his head."

The old man got up and poured himself a cup of tea. "You didn't kill mine like that."

"I didn't have time. The noise was so bad, the licking, and I just had to do it quick."

"You didn't even kill him."

"I stopped the noise."

The old man went over to the door and looked out. It was dark. The moon had not yet risen, but the night was clear and cold with many stars. In the east there was a little paleness in the sky, and as he watched, the paleness grew and it changed from a paleness into a brightness, spreading over the sky so that the light was reflected and held by the small drops of dew upon the grass along the highlands; and slowly, the moon rose up over the hills. The old man turned and said, "Better get ready. Never know; they might come early tonight."

Judson got up and the two of them went outside. Judson lay down in the shallow trench beside the cow and the old man covered him over with grass, so that only his head peeped out above the ground. "I shall be watching, too," he said, "from the window. If I give a shout, jump up and catch him."

He hobbled back to the shack, went upstairs, wrapped himself in blankets and took up his position by the window. It was early still. The moon was nearly full and it was climbing. It shone upon the snow on the summit of Mount Kenya.

After an hour the old man shouted out of the window:

"Are you still awake, Judson?"

"Yes," he answered, "I'm awake."

"Don't go to sleep," said the old man. "Whatever you do, don't go to sleep."

"Cow's crunching all the time," said Judson.

"Good, and I'll shoot you if you get up now," said the old man.

"You'll shoot me?"

"I said I'll shoot you if you get up now."

A gentle sobbing noise came up from where Judson lay, a strange gasping sound as though a child were trying not to cry, and in the middle of it, Judson's voice, "I've got to move; please let me move. This crunching."

"If you get up," said the old man, "I'll shoot you in the belly."

For another hour or so the sobbing continued, then quite suddenly it stopped.

Just before four o'clock it began to get very cold and the old man huddled deeper into his blankets and shouted, "Are you cold out there, Judson? Are you cold?"

"Yes," came the answer. "So cold. But I don't mind because cow's not crunching any more. She's asleep."

The old man said, "What are you going to do with the thief when you catch him?"

"I don't know."

"Will you kill him?"

A pause.

"I don't know. I'll just go for him."

"I'll watch," said the old man. "It ought to be fun." He was leaning out of the window with his arms resting on the sill.

Then he heard the hiss under the window sill, and looked over and saw the black Mamba, sliding through the grass towards the cow, going fast and holding its head just a little above the ground as it went.

When the Mamba was five yards away, the old man shouted. He cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted, "Here he comes, Judson; here he comes. Go and get him."

Judson lifted his head quickly and looked up. As he did so he saw the Mamba and the Mamba saw him. There was a second, or perhaps two, when the snake stopped, drew back and raised the front part of its body in the air. Then the stroke. Just a flash of black and a slight thump as it took him in the chest. Judson screamed, a long, high-pitched scream which did not rise nor fall, but held its note until gradually it faded into nothingness and there was silence. Now he was standing up, ripping open his shirt, feeling for the place in his chest, whimpering quietly, moaning and breathing hard with his mouth wide open. And all the while the old man sat quietly at the open window, leaning forward and never taking his eyes away from the man below.

Everything comes very quick when one is bitten by a black Mamba, and almost at once the poison began to work. It threw Judson to the ground, where he lay humping his back and rolling around on the grass. He no longer

made any noise. It was all very quiet, as though a man of great strength were wrestling with a giant whom one could not see, and it was as though the giant were twisting him and not letting him get up, stretching his arms through the fork of his legs and pushing his knees up under his chin.

Then Judson began pulling up the grass with his hands and soon after that he lay on his back kicking gently with his legs. But he didn't last very long. He gave a quick wriggle, humped his back again, turning over as he did it, then he lay on the ground quite still, lying on his stomach with his right knee drawn up underneath his chest and his hands stretched out above his head.

Still the old man sat by the window, and even after it was all over, he stayed where he was and did not stir. There was a movement in the shadow under the acacia tree and the Mamba came forward slowly toward the cow. It came forward a little, stopped, raised its head, waited, lowered its head, and slid forward again right under the belly of the animal. It raised itself into the air and took one of the brown teats in its mouth and began to drink. The old man sat watching the Mamba taking the milk of the cow, and once again he saw the gentle pulsing of its body as it drew the liquid out of the udder.

While the snake was still drinking, the old man got up and moved away from the window.

"You can have his share," he said quietly. "We don't mind you having his share," and as he spoke he glanced back and saw again the black body of the Mamba curving upward from the ground, joining with the belly of the cow.

"Yes," he said again, "we don't mind your having his share." ■ ■

Ambition should be made of sterner stuff, says Shakespeare. But the District Attorney's ambition was equal to any human test . . .

AMBITION

by CHARLES BOECKMAN

RUDOLF COX, ASSISTANT D.A., TOOK a last look at his precious carnation plants that were only six inches tall. They looked pale green in the last slanting rays of the sun. He walked reluctantly to the shed where he kept his tools and hung the rake meticulously on the rack that he had made himself. He removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, a habit he had gotten into lately when he was worried. He was small, thin-nosed, rather meek in appearance. He entered the car that belonged to the city and backed carefully out of the graveled drive, leaving his own car in the garage.

He drove carefully, remembering to signal at all the turns and keeping his speed at twenty-nine miles an hour, remembering the mayor's campaign to cut traffic mishaps.

Near the river he turned right along a brick-paved street, slowing his car as he searched for the right number. At the middle of the block he pulled to the curb and rang the bell of the shabby brownstone. He waited, then rang again.

Finally, the door was answered by a heavy-set woman who

clutched a thin robe around her ample middle.

"Yeah? What is it?" she shouted.

Rudolf Cox took a step backward. "You got a Lou Heintz living here?"

"Never heard of him, Mister. You got the wrong address." She turned, started to slam the door.

"Wait. Tell him the assistant District Attorney is here. He'll see me."

She eyed him with cold suspicion. "Just a minute, Mister, let me check my records again. Lou Heintz was the name, wasn't it?" She disappeared somewhere in the gloom of the old house, her bedroom slippers slap-slapping as she walked.

When she returned her tone was almost apologetic. "Please come in. Third door back on the right."

There were no lights on in the hall. He groped his way to the rear. He knocked once. The door opened a crack. A sweat-slick, pale face peeped out at him.

"It's all right, Heintz. It's me, Cox."

The door opened further and Rudolf Cox walked in. The room was lit by a small lamp near the bed. The shades were all drawn.

Heintz was a thin, jerky, man of about fifty. His face was the color of putty and his hands twitched.

"I'm glad it's you, Mr. Cox. I thought it might be a trick. I thought it might be Big Mac. I'm sure glad it's you."

Rudolf Cox sat on the edge of the unmade bed. "Now take it easy, Heintz. You're safe here. Big Mac will never find this place we've moved you to."

"Oh he won't, huh?" Heintz came over and stared at the assistant D.A. with bulging eyes. One shaky hand moved and clutched the other. "Big Mac won't find me here, huh? That's a laugh, Mr. Cox. That's real funny, sayin' Big Mac won't find me."

Rudolf Cox frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Quit babbling, Heintz. What do you want to tell me?"

"Big Mac knows I'm here, that's what. He knows. He already found out." Sweat stood out on Heintz' face and soaked his limp collar.

Rudolf Cox smiled. "Now listen, Heintz, he couldn't possibly—"

The frightened man took out a gold cigarette lighter. He thrust it at Rudolf Cox. Assistant D.A. Cox took out his glasses, carefully fitted them on. He turned the gold lighter over on the palm of his hand. Underneath was engraved the name, "Mac Lackey". Rudolf Cox took the glasses off and put them in his pocket and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He knew it was Big Mac's. He'd given it to Big Mac himself, one Christmas several years ago right

after the war.

"Where did you find this?" he asked, handing it back to Heintz.

Heintz threw it on the bed as if it were a rattlesnake. "On my floor, that's where I found it. Early this morning I went out for a fresh bottle of gin. When I came back all my drawers had been pulled out, my clothes dumped on the floor. I found this where he must have dropped it. Big Mac had been in here, searching my place."

Heintz caught the assistant D.A.'s coat with damp, clutching fingers. "Big Mac ain't never going to let me testify. I worked for his bunch too long. I know how those guys operate. I won't live to get to the courthouse. Either Big Mac or his partner Ernie Stillinger will get me."

"Now don't get panicky," Rudolf Cox said soothingly.

"I'm gonna catch a bus out of town." Heintz almost screamed.

"Then you will commit suicide," Rudolf Cox said. "You fool, your only protection is to play along with us. If they know where you are they'll never let you leave here alive. Look, I'll get some men down to keep an eye on this place. That make you feel better?"

Heintz wiped his face with a handkerchief. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I guess so. Will you really do that, Mr. Cox? Will you promise?"

"We have to protect you, Heintz. You're our whole case against Big Mac and Ernie Stillinger. I'll get some boys down here right away. You stick close to this room."

Rudolf Cox left some money with Heintz and went down to his car. Then he sat there rubbing the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. The truth of the matter was that he didn't have a case against Big Mac and Ernie Stillinger even *with* Heintz to testify. The District Attorney had pointed this out to him. A little rat like Heintz, with his record, was a poor witness. But Rudolf Cox was an ambitious man. A very ambitious man.

He made a turn at the corner, watching carefully. The big car leaped ahead, the motor purring like a warm kitten. Two blocks further he stopped for a light. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye he caught the outline of a familiar figure emerging from a drug store. Their eyes locked for a second. Then the tall figure walked over to the car, opened the door.

"Hi, Rudy," Big Mac said quietly, sliding into the car.

Rudolf Cox frowned a little as he pulled across the intersection. "What brings you down to this neighborhood, Mac?" he said.

The tall man lit a cigarette, cupping his hands around it. Then he rolled down the window and flipped the match out into the

night. "Let's stop kidding ourselves, Rudy," he said in his quiet voice.

"So you know where my witness is hidden out," Rudolf Cox said. "If you rub him out you'll really burn. You know that."

Mac smiled wearily. "Rudy, now you're insulting my intelligence. You know I don't operate that way."

"Okay, Ernie is the trigger-happy boy in your partnership. Still, I've got both of you on the spot. And I know you've been up to Heintz' room, nosing around."

Big Mac shot him a surprised look, then he shrugged. "I was just checking to see if maybe the little rat did have something that could hurt me." He chuckled. "You haven't got anything, Rudy. Nothing . . . not a thing—"

Rudolf Cox took one hand off the wheel to rub his nose. Inwardly, he felt tired.

They drove for a while, turning away from the main streets, heading out to the suburbs.

Big Mac settled back, folding his arms. "You know, Rudy," he said, "I'm tired. I've come a long ways since the old days, but I'm tired. I know you don't have much of a case. But Ernie, he's scared silly. He's all for dressing Heintz up in a concrete bathrobe and dropping him in the river. I know you can't touch me, so I'm not worried.

"But the thing is this, someday maybe you will get something. The reform element in this town is howling for my scalp, and that's a big vote, Rudy. Enough to put you in the Governor's mansion some day, maybe. So you'll keep trying and maybe one day you'll really get a case. Then I'll go up the river. I'm getting too old and comfortable to do a stretch. And why do it, I ask myself? I got my pile made. I'm fixed for life. And I want to get married.

"That's a laugh, ain't it, Rudy? Me—married. It's the real thing, too. This girl, Peggy . . . she's not like the babes we used to know down on Rincon Street. She's . . . well, she's class. She'll marry me if I get out of the rackets." It was a long speech for Mac Lackey.

Rudolf Cox was frowning and there was something with cold teeth gnawing at him somewhere inside. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm getting out. I'm dumping the organization in Ernie's lap. I'm washing my hands and they're going to stay clean . . . ."

Rudolf Cox drove in silence. Both men were busy with their thoughts. Rudolf wondered if Big Mac was thinking about the old days when they grew up together in the tough Rincon Street district. They'd played together, fought together. And in the war, they were buddies. Once, Big Mac had saved Rudolf's life. That was

the year Rudolf gave Big Mac the gold cigarette lighter. Not much of a thing to give a man for saving your life, but it had been a kind of memento and Big Mac had appreciated it. He'd carried it all these years.

After the war they split up. They were both very ambitious men. But they took opposite roads. Rudolf Cox had no basic love for law and justice, but he figured the right side of the law would pay off bigger in the long run. Big Mac had made his pile while Rudolf was still sweating out law school, getting started, worming his way into the first rung of the political ladder. Now he was in a position to make a big splash. Sending Big Mac up the river would put him in solid with the growing reform ticket. It would mean the D.A.'s job next term, the mayor's after that, then who knew? The sky was the limit.

But how could he send Big Mac up the river if Big Mac was getting out of the rackets? This was an ironic twist. He had accomplished the purpose of ridding the town of Big Mac, but not in a way that would benefit him politically.

It was enough to worry a man sleepless.

They rode around some more and Rudolf Cox let Big Mac out and he went home.

At nine the next morning, Rudolf Cox was out in the garden when the black patrol car pulled into the driveway. He recognized the tall string-bean stepping carefully over the plants. Lieutenant Walker of the Homicide squad. It was evident that Lt. Walker was excited.

"Sorry to bother you on Sunday, Mr. Cox. But something happened that I figured you'd want to know about right away," Walker said.

"Well, I've been trying to get these glads weeded today. You like gladiolas, Lieutenant?"

"What? Oh, sure. What I came about is that witness of yours on the vice case involving Big Mac Lackey and Ernie Stillinger."

"You mean Heintz?"

"Yeah. He's dead, Mr. Cox. They shot him in his bed last night about nine o'clock."

Cox slowly put his rake down. He rubbed the bridge of his nose absently. After a moment he asked, "Are you sure about the time?"

"There's no doubt about it, sir. His landlady went out to buy him a bottle of gin. When she got back fifteen minutes later he was dead."

"Hmm. Ernie Stillinger got trigger-happy—"

The Lieutenant said, "Well, we figured it was bound to either be Ernie or Big Mac. But it looks like it was Big Mac."

Cox looked surprised.

Walker said, "We found Big Mac's cigarette lighter in the room with his name engraved on it. The bullet we dug out of Heintz came from a gun owned by Big Mac."

"Ernie could have used Big Mac's gun," Rudolf Cox pointed out.

"Sure," Lieutenant Walker admitted. "All that stuff's circumstantial. But there's the matter of the alibi. Ernie has some boys who swear he was playing cards with them at the time Heintz was shot."

Rudolf Cox licked his lips. "And Big Mac?"

Lieutenant Walker frowned. "That's the only thing that has us stumped. Either he's bluffing or crazy, or he's got the best alibi in the world. He says he was riding around with you at the time of the murder, Mr. Cox!"

Rudolf Cox nibbled on his lip.

He thought about that night in Germany when Big Mac had gone crawling across the field on his belly under a hail of machine-gun bullets and dragged him fifty yards to safety. Then he thought about himself and his wife in the governor's mansion in a few years. Mostly, he thought about the big flower garden back of the governor's home and what he could do with it.

He looked up at the Lieutenant.

"Big Mac must have lost his mind," he grunted. "I haven't seen that man in six months!"

A grin spread over Lieutenant Walker's face. "Then we've got him this time. Dead to rights."

Rudolf Cox rubbed his hands together. "Yes. Yes, I believe maybe we have. Oh .... Lieutenant—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't step on the begonias on your way out." ■ ■

A wife can be a problem—for which the only solution seems to be murder. But committing murder can sometimes be a problem tool

FAT CHANCE

by ROBERT BLOCH

THEIR NAMES WERE JOHN AND Mary, and they lived in a little white frame house with a picket fence all around the front lawn. They owned a fintail car and a TV set with a 21-inch screen, and a power mower and a freezer. John went bowling once a week, on Thursday nights, and Mary subscribed to three of the better women's magazines and cut out all the recipes. They had been married for fourteen years now, and in every respect they were a typical middle-class American couple.

So, naturally enough, John wanted to kill Mary.

Perhaps this is an oversimplification. In John's defense it must be stated that he was perfectly willing to put up with most of his wife's little ways. He did not object to her pin-curled presence at the breakfast table every morning, or to her habit of using baby-talk when she addressed the canary, or the way she appropriated his electric shaver to use on her legs. He had no complaints about her cooking, or the way she ran the household and spent his money. He had long ago realized that she was not a stimulating companion or conversationalist and he was willing to accept the fact that her domestic habits, in the kitchen, parlor, or bedroom, were dull indeed. All this he resigned himself to putting up with, as most typical middle-class American husbands inevitably do. But there was just one thing he couldn't endure, one crime he could not forgive.

Mary was getting too fat.

She had begun putting on weight a few years after they were married. Eight years ago she had been "pleasingly plump" but presentable. Six years ago she began having trouble finding "her" size in the dresses she selected. Five years ago she had embarked on what proved to be an endless series of ineffectual diets, all of which failed to remedy the situation because in the end they required that she cut down on her intake of calories. Three years ago she had apparently resigned herself to the situation—she was fat, and she admitted she was fat. Not *too* fat, of course; just plain "heavy."

Of course Dr. Applegate warned her about stuffing herself; there were examinations and explanations about the way she reddened upon the slightest exertion, about the high blood-pressure and the strain on her heart. But the fatter Mary became, the less she felt like exerting herself and the easier it was to just stay home and watch television. Besides, as she told the doctor, John was away almost every night at the store—his pharmacy stayed open until ten, except on Sundays—and there was nothing for her to do. And she didn't really eat a lot; just nibbled now and then to calm her nerves.

Dr. Applegate had a few words to say about compulsive appetite and John had quite a lot to say about her sloppy appearance, but these things only seemed to make Mary more nervous. So, of course, she ate.

Now she was positively gross, but John didn't bother to talk about it any more. He knew it wouldn't do any good. She was fat as a pig.

That's when John began to have these dreams about butchering hogs.

It might very well have ended with that—after all, John was so

typically middle-class and middle-aged, and he could have so easily developed a few interests of his own. An ulcer, perhaps, or a coronary condition, or a woodworking shop in the basement.

It took something out-of-the-ordinary to bring him to the actual point of murder.

Her name was Frances.

Actually, Frances Higgins was extraordinary only in John's eyes; to others she was only a tall, well-preserved woman on the wrong side of thirty, with rather pretty auburn hair. John saw her slimness and he was dazzled. He had frequent opportunities to be dazzled, because Frances Higgins was Mary's best friend.

They had gone to school together (incredible, that fat, candy-chewing, Welk-watching Mary had ever attended business college!) and continued the acquaintance after Mary married and Frances went on to a career as private secretary for a prominent downtown attorney. Mary was proud to welcome a smart, sophisticated career-woman to her home, and Frances—like most smart, sophisticated career-women of a certain age—was lonely enough to pay frequent visits. John had accepted her occasional presence for years, but he never knew just how lonely she was until one day, well over eight months ago, when she had come to him at the pharmacy and hesitantly confided in him the measures she had resorted to in an effort to assuage her loneliness.

It had all happened as a result of one of those "office parties" held during the holidays, and she assured John, very shamefacedly, that she had been quite intoxicated. So intoxicated, in fact, that she neither remembered the exact circumstances nor the man's name. But she was, to put it delicately, "in trouble", and she had no one to turn to; she lived alone and was afraid to confide in either her straitlaced employer or the equally straitlaced Mary.

"But I knew you'd understand," she told John. "And besides, you're a druggist, and I thought that perhaps—"

John shrugged. He didn't particularly like being called a "druggist" and he knew very well what she thought; women with similar ideas approached him on the average of once a week. He was quite sorry for these women, but of course he could do nothing. In the first place, he didn't dare; in the second, there was no assurance that any artificial or chemical abortificant would prove effective.

All this he carefully explained to Frances as they sat in one of the rear booths behind the soda-fountain, after the store was closed. And yet in the very act of explanation he found himself drawn closer to her in her misery; when he saw the slim shoulders shake convulsively as she sobbed,

he knew that he must do something.

It was then that he mentioned the name of Dr. Applegate. As a pharmacist, John was well aware of irregularities on the part of certain medical men, and he had long known that Applegate—under special circumstances—violated the ethical tenets of his profession.

He promised Frances that he would speak to the doctor, and he did. Before he knew it, he was involved in helping to make the actual arrangements; there was the need for secrecy, and Frances had no one else to help her. John and she became fellow-conspirators, and it was only natural that he should visit her following Dr. Applegate's surgery. Just as it was only natural that the solitary sufferer would welcome his cheering presence, his sympathetic understanding, and the little gifts he brought to console her in convalescence.

Frances was grateful for John's help, and after she had completely recovered she endeavored to express her gratitude. And that's the way it started.

Neither of them realized that they were embarking on an affair. One does not associate passion with middle-aged pharmacy proprietors, or with private secretaries who keep rubber plants in the office. Both of them were quite unprepared for the overwhelming consequences—the compulsive need to constantly see one another, touch one another, and be with one another at any cost to self-respect or self-control.

"I can't stand it, darling!" she told him. "Visiting you and Mary, seeing you together. And then, thinking of you and Mary together when I'm *not* there—"

"I know," John sighed. "How do you think it is with me? I don't *want* to be with Mary, I hate the sight of her. Even before I found you, I hated her. Now I can't bear it. And if what you say is true about a divorce—"

Frances nodded sadly. That had been one of the first things they'd thought about; the possibilities of divorce. Frances had not been fool enough to reveal her true feelings about John when she sounded Mary out on the subject. Instead she had chosen the devious method; she had gone to Mary, as her best friend, and hinted that there was something she ought to know. It appeared as though John had been, as she put it, "stepping out of line a little." There were nights when he absented himself from the drug store without Mary's knowledge. She refused to mention the sources of her information, but people were talking. And while it might not be really "serious" one never knew; perhaps Mary ought to prepare herself just in case and think about the future. A friendly warning—

Mary shrugged. Yes, she knew

John had been restless lately; a wife can always tell. And she and John had been so very close through all the years. But for that very reason, she had no intention of leaving him, now or ever. Let him have his fling, poor dear. Sooner or later, it would blow over.

"But what if he came to you and demanded a divorce?" Frances had persisted. "What if he just walked out on you, cold, and left you for another woman?"

"He wouldn't do a thing like that," Mary answered. "He just *couldn't;* John isn't that type at all." Then her apologetic air had suddenly given way to grim resolution. "But if he did, he'd be sorry, believe me! There are laws, you know. I'd see to it that he paid—I'd get everything I've got coming to me. By the time I was through with him, he and this little tramp, whoever she is, would be good and sorry they ever started anything."

Frances had reported the conversation to John the following evening and they both agreed, sadly but logically, that Mary meant what she said. Moreover, she had the power to execute her threat. A divorce would mean an irreparable financial loss to John, perhaps even the loss of his business. And as for Frances, her elderly employer (who never, under any circumstances, ever handled a divorce proceeding) would fire her handily. Love in a garret is all very well for moonstruck teenagers, but both John and Frances had reached a time in life where they enjoyed the creature comforts both of them had striven for over the years. And, being human, they felt the equal necessity of protecting their present status as respectable members of the community.

So divorce was out. And the only apparent result of Frances' conversation with Mary was that she began to gorge herself still more heavily. Dr. Applegate's latest diet was tossed overboard and Mary stuffed herself night and day. John would come home and find her consuming candy from the store—indeed, she insisted that he constantly supply her with more each time he put in his appearance from a night of work behind the counter.

"Cheer up," John told Frances, although he didn't really believe she would follow his suggestion. "The way the old sow is going now, she'll eat herself to death in a few years."

"A few years!" Frances looked at herself in the mirror behind the soda-fountain. Then she looked at John. She didn't say anything, but then she didn't have to. John knew what she was thinking. A few years was all they had left, really. A few years of being together as they wanted to be together, or a few years of this endless aching, this ceaseless torment

of furtive, fear-filled meeting interspersed with interludes of mocking, maddening pretense. And meanwhile Frances would have to live on in her little cell-like apartment, while John stayed with the fat pig.

That's what Frances called her now. "The fat pig." A year ago she would never have dreamed of describing anyone that way, let alone her best friend. But a year ago she hadn't really known John, hadn't wanted John. So now it was easy for her to say what she really felt. "I can't go on like this. I won't go on! It isn't right. It would be different if she felt anything for you, darling, anything at all. But she doesn't. I've talked to her, and I know. To Mary, you're just property. Another household appliance, something she owns, a convenience that supplies her with food and shelter and performs menial chores around the house for her comfort. When I hinted you might be running around, she wasn't even jealous—just *angry*. The way you get angry at some gadget when you suspect it might be going out of order and cost you something to repair.

"I can't bear to think of you putting up with her any longer; the way she just sits around all day and all night feeding her fat face—why all the time I was talking to her, even when she started to get excited, she kept eating those damned macaroons out of a big box and watching the Arthur Godfrey show. She isn't any good to you. She isn't any good to herself. Nobody would miss her if she died tomorrow."

She stared at John. He lowered his eyes and didn't answer.

"Look, darling, I've been thinking. You're a druggist. Isn't there something you could give her that—"

John shook his head. He continued to avert his gaze as he answered. "I won't lie to you. I've been thinking about that, too. And it wouldn't work. Just because I *am* a pharmacist. Don't you realize that's the very first thing the police would think of if they ever became suspicious? And they *would* become suspicious, because of the medical report. A doctor would have to be called, he'd have to sign the death-certificate, and he'd know right away. Contrary to what you may be thinking, there just aren't any drugs that will do the trick without detection; at least nothing I could get out of stock here. And I couldn't order anything special or obscure without accounting for it. We have to make out reports, they check on us, we're inspected. No, that's out."

Frances put her hand on his arm—her cool, slim hand, with the long fingernails which could claw so deeply when she clung to him.

"All right," she said. "All right. But you've got to do something. I can't take much more of this. In fact, I'm going away."

"Going away?"

There was such anguish in his response that her own voice softened. "Don't be alarmed, darling. It's just a vacation. I've got two weeks coming this year, you know. At first I wasn't even going to take them, but I decided I'd better. All this has made me so nervous lately. There's an aunt and uncle of mine out in Portland —they've asked me to visit them."

"When?"

"Next week. I've got plane reservations for Monday."

John blinked. "But that means I won't be seeing you again, not for almost three weeks."

The nails dug into his arm. He could feel them even through his suitcoat. "Maybe longer than that," she said. "Darling, I meant what I told you. I can't stand living this way any longer. It's up to you, now. Either you find some way out for us, soon, or this is the end."

"But I can't—"

"You must! I don't care if you hit her over the head with a club and lock her in the deep-freeze. All I know is that I've had it. From now on, it's all or nothing." She relaxed her grip. "I didn't tell you this, darling, but my aunt and uncle have been urging me to move out there. They say the climate is wonderful in Oregon and I'd have no trouble finding another job in Portland. When I visit them, I'm going to investigate the possibilities. Maybe that's the best thing to do, after all."

"No!" John muttered. He stood up, taking a deep breath. "You're coming back here, you've got to promise me you'll come back."

"Do I?"

"Yes. And I'll make you a promise, too. I'm going to think of a way. I don't know how, but I'll think of one. When you come back she'll be gone."

John kept his word. From that moment on, he thought of a way. He thought of a hundred ways during the next few days before Frances' departure. He thought of them by day while he sold bobbie-pins and aspirins and band-aids in the store, and he thought of them by night as he watched Mary eating doughnuts in the livingroom, belching in the bathroom, or snoring stertorously by his side in bed.

He didn't see Frances again during the weekend, but he saw a lot of Mary. There was, he reflected grimly, quite a lot of her to see. She tipped the scales at about 240 now. All weekend long she kept babbling about still another new diet Dr. Applegate wanted her to try. And all weekend long, John kept thinking about ways of killing her. A hundred ways.

But none of them were any good. None of them would work. Oh, he could *murder* her all right, but the point was to get away with it. Get away with it scot free, get away with Frances, sell the damned business and move to Oregon after everything was over. That part would be easy. But the method, the method—

On Sunday night it came to him, just like that. And there was nothing particularly surprising in the phenomenon, because it had been there all the time. Frances had told him; he was a pharmacist and he had access to poisons.

Not obscure poisons, not undetectable poisons, but that didn't matter; he didn't need anything special, as long as he made sure he administered a lethal dose. Of course a physician would examine Mary's body before writing out a death-certificate, but there wouldn't be any trouble.

Because the physician would be Dr. Applegate. And Applegate, in addition to being the family doctor, was the man who had come to Frances' assistance in her hour of need. Now he would come to John's aid in *his* hour of need. And he would not demur, he would not question, he most certainly would not talk. If he did, then John would talk too, and Dr. Applegate would be up on criminal charges.

It was really very simple, now that he realized how to solve the medical aspects of his problem. Mary's few friends all knew that she was grossly overweight, that she had put a strain on her heart. So the death-certificate would testify, and nobody would ask any embarrassing questions.

All that remained to be considered now was the exact *modus operandi* to employ.

John thought about it all day Monday in the store. It kept him from thinking about Frances' departure that morning. On the other hand, he was really quite glad that she had left, under the circumstances. It meant she'd be out of town during the time of the tragedy; there'd be no strain of having to simulate grief, attend the funeral, and avoid any accidental betrayal of her true feelings in John's presence. Better still, her absence would rule out any evidence of collusion.

For his own part, it would be ideal for him to dispose of Mary immediately; the funeral and the subsequent winding-up of her affairs would occupy him during the next two weeks and keep him from brooding about Frances' absence. Yes, all in all, this was the ideal time.

And the method?

He had the whole pharmacopia at his disposal, everything from acetanilide to zinc phosphide. Yet in the end, John decided upon the simplest toxic agent of all, the

old standby of Borgia and bourgeoise alike—plain arsenic. It was fast, reliable, deadly, and that's what he wanted; it didn't in the least matter if the symptoms of arsenic poisoning were apparent to a physician under the circumstances. More to the point, John could easily remove the necessary quantity from his stock without fear of its loss being noted.

Administration of the dosage would be no problem, either. He'd put it into some chocolates; bring Mary a box of candy from the store, as she expected. With her sweet tooth, she'd gobble down one or two—probably just one, because of the taste, but that would be enough. More than enough. Her resultant agonies would be painful to witness, but John had no intention of being present. He'd take her the box tonight but neglect to give it to her until tomorrow when he left again for work. That should give her something to do while she watched her daily soap-operas. Of course, there was always the offchance that Mary, after swallowing a piece of the candy, would manage to get to the telephone before collapsing. But even then there was little risk; she would either call him or Dr. Applegate. *He* knew how to react, and as for Applegate, John intended to have a chat with him this evening in private before heading for home with the chocolates. It might prove to be a bit messy, but he knew he could convince the physician to cooperate.

As it turned out, he had little difficulty with Applegate. The only really messy part of the entire business was in actually introducing poison into the candy.

There were so many things he hadn't anticipated; opening the box itself and removing the plastic wrapper without damage, so that it could be resealed without detection—carefully melting the chocolate coating and removing a portion of the creamy fondant to make room for the poisonous powder—then re-melting the coating and smoothing it over until each individual piece of candy could survive inspection.

But finally he was finished, and the telltale evidence of his labors obliterated so that Willie Hayes, the assistant pharmacist, would notice nothing tomorrow morning when he opened the store. John made a mental note; he must remember to dispose of the remainder of the chocolates tomorrow night, the moment he was sure Mary had succumbed. If he took care of a few details like that, the rest was just a matter of routine.

The routine of going home, after his brief but satisfactory interview with Dr. Applegate. The routine of greeting the old sow as she grunted up at him from her chair before the TV set; of kissing her fat forehead and asking her the same stupid questions

about her same stupid daily routine; of using the bathroom and turning out the lights and settling down in bed next to that repulsive mountain of flabby flesh (for the last time, he exulted silently, the last time) and composing himself for sleep.

Sleep did not come easily, because anticipation stood in its path; anticipation of the morning, when he'd give her the box of candy and leave for work. He'd let Willie handle the evening shift tomorrow, as was usual on Tuesdays, and come home for supper early. No sense in waiting too long; suppertime would be long enough. She ought to open the box right after lunch, and then—

No, John did not sleep. He merely planned. He planned what he'd do after he found the body and phoned Applegate, planned how he'd break the news to the neighbors and send a wire to Mary's sister in Omaha. While he was at it, he might just as well be practical and consider what undertaker to select. A decent funeral would be expected, but there was no need of being unduly lavish. Mary had two thousand dollars' worth of life insurance. He could probably pick out a nice coffin for about four hundred; the whole deal would run a little under a thousand. Then, with the extra thousand, he could think about something for Frances, later on. On their honeymoon, perhaps. Say a year from now, or a little less. He could sell the business, sell the house here, move out to Portland or some other city. He'd always wanted to see the West Coast anyway; he'd never been there. Maybe Frances and he could take a plane over to Hawaii. That would be nice. Oh, it was all going to be nice, after tomorrow—

The odd thing was that he felt no guilt, no fear, no remorse. It had been Frances who actually came out and suggested the murder, of course, but now he realized that he had been killing Mary for years, in the deepest, darkest dungeon of his own mind. He was completely prepared to accept the act; he welcomed the role of murderer as familiar.

Everything seemed familiar, everything was normal. In the morning he rose and shaved and dressed and Mary had his breakfast ready as usual. She made the usual pretense of passing up the meal— "just coffee and orange-juice, that's enough for me today" —but he knew she'd fry herself the usual three eggs as soon as he was out of the door. And when, at the door, he produced the box of chocolates as an afterthought, she could not conceal her squeal of delight. Hogs always squeal.

John managed to conceal his own elation long enough to peck at her cheek and escape.

Escape. Today was the day he would *really* escape! Escape forever.

Forever is a long time, and before the afternoon was over, John was thinking only of escaping the store itself by five o'clock.

He wanted to get home and get it over with. He didn't actually look forward to seeing what he'd see when he got there, or doing what he'd have to do during the subsequent evening hours. But the whole point was that it was something which *must* be done, and the sooner the better.

So he drove home, as usual, at five-thirty, parked the car in the driveway, and went inside.

The kitchen was deserted, and he could hear the idiot drone of the TV set from the parlor beyond. Naturally that's the way it would be; she'd settled down to watch the afternoon programs, opened the box of candy, popped a chocolate into her mouth, and probably never managed to leave the easy-chair.

John tiptoed through the hall. He saw her then, slumped in the big chair, with just the back of her head showing—the back of her head and her big fat neck with those repulsive rolls of heavy flesh. Frances had a slim neck; a pale white adorable neck, with delicious little hollows made for kisses.

John was glad he could think of her under the circumstances because it proved he wasn't frightened, he wasn't going to lose his nerve, even at a time like this. A time like this, when he walked into the parlor to see his wife's dead body—

His wife's dead body turned and stared at him. And then it rose from the chair. Mary was standing in front of him, big as life. Hideously big, hideously alive. She grinned at him.

"Early tonight, aren't you?" she said. And then, "John, what *are* you staring at?"

It took a moment for him to answer, and when he did he couldn't help himself, he had to blurt it out.

"Wh-where are the chocolates I brought you?"

The stupid grin loomed closer. "Surprise! I didn't eat any of them! Remember that new diet I told you about? Well this time I'm sticking to it. I'll lose at least twenty pounds, you'll see. I was telling Frances—"

"Frances?"

"Yes, Frances, silly! Remember she was supposed to leave yesterday? Well, she didn't. She left today. She stopped by here this afternoon, on her way to the airport. And since she was going on a trip, I gave her the box of candy to eat on the plane."

"You gave her—?"

"Sure." Mary giggled. "I figured it was a sort of a farewell present..." ■ ■

44 "Froze to death," said Beasley, "in the middle of July?"

The redoubtable Beasley Grove, full-time genius and part-time slip-horn player and amateur detective, made his first appearance in KEYHOLE MYSTERY *in the well remembered* Elvis Presley *mystery case. His debut was instantly recognized by aficionados of detective fiction as heralding the arrival of an immensely popular new sleuth. Letters poured in upon our hapless editors in a flood—commanding that Beasley Grove reappear in all his unsufferable majesty. As soon as we could persuade writer* Will Folke *to again set down a Beasley Grove adventure we, of course, did so.*

This time Beasley's I.Q. turns its dazzling beam upon the problem of a corpse in Eastern U's medical school—a corpse which is not all it purports to be. Never fear. Beasley Grove unravels the devious threads of this sinister murder plot—to the certain delight of his fans, and the constant despair of Lieutenant Morrison.

THE CASE OF THE CLUMSY CADAVER

by WILL FOLKE

"—INDEED!" SAID BEASLEY GROVE, leaning over the corpse.

Nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand would be queasy at finding themselves face to face with a partially dismembered human body. Beasley Grove was the one thousandth person.

He bent over the table in the laboratory of the Eastern University Medical School, his bright eyes gleaming, his small nose all but twitching with interest in the situation. And this in itself was unusual; for Beasley was not the sort of man to be aroused by anything less than the sudden discovery of a means for squaring the circle, or a solution to the Three Bodies Problem.

For Beasley was a genius; not one of your ordinary bright boys, but an actual, thousand-carat diamond-pure genius. In fact, some-

times it seemed that his head was packed far too full for his skinny five-foot-two, one hundred twenty pound frame to support, or his friends to endure.

One of these friends was Dick Staunton, the young man two years older than Beasley who stood opposite him now, eating a candy bar with the paper wrapping carefully peeled back. Dick was a third-year medical school student; and he was, by ordinary standards, extremely intelligent. By Beasley standards, of course, he was only moderately bright.

"Indeed?" repeated Beasley. "A derelict, you say?"

"They all are, Beez," said Dick waving the candy bar expressively around the Dissection Lab. "The city gives them to us if no relative or friend claims the body. This one's quite a specimen. He froze to death."

"Froze to death!" said Beasley, darting a needle-sharp glance at Dick. "In the middle of July?"

"Solid as a board," said Dick with a grin. "Of course he had to hunt around for a refrigerated railroad car to freeze himself in. But he did manage it—after getting his face beat out of recognition, and hit on the head, and loaded up on enough liquor to probably account for him, anyway."

"Liquor?" said Beasley. He was examining the left arm of the cadaver. "What kind of liquor?"

"Brandy," said Dick. "Or was it cognac? They've got the details in the coroner's office downtown—" he stared over his candy bar at Beasley. "Why, Beez?"

"Look at this," said Beasley. He indicated a patch on the inside of the dead man's forearm. The area he indicated had been scraped raw.

"Bad abrasion," commented Dick, cheerfully, leaning forward to examine it. "What about it?"

"What caused it?" snapped Beasley.

"Caused it?" Dick blinked at Beasley, then bent over the bruised arm. "Uh—why, some . . . . . that's funny! Looks like some long, narrow object scraped over the skin there a number of times."

"Ah!" said Beasley in a note of satisfaction. He indicated a bit of untouched skin on the edge of the scraped area. "And what would you say *that* was?"

Dick peered.

"A couple of little spots of blue pigment under the top layer of the skin," he answered. He straightened up and stared at Beasley. "What about it?"

"The remnants," said Beasley, "of a tattoo."

"Huh? Oh!" said Dick. He continued to stare at his small, intelligent friend. "But what if it is? You can go down to the morgue any day and see half a dozen bodies like this. Why the sudden interest in a bum who's died an

accidental death?"

"Because," replied Beasley crisply, "this one happens to have been murdered."

He spun about on one heel; and headed out of the lab, leaving Dick with a half-eaten candy bar held aloft in one hand and staring after him.

Down at the coroner's office in the City Hall basement a half hour later, Beasley found he had a small amount of trouble getting the coroner, a man named Ernest Blye, to let him have the report mentioned. Blye sat behind his desk, shaking his balding head.

"If you'll look here," said Beasley, producing the card which the Commissioner had given him some time back in glowing testimonial of Beasley's efforts on the police department's behalf, "you'll see I'm entitled to your cooperation." said Beasley.

"I don't give a hoot what that card says," said Coroner Blye. He was a sour-looking, waspish, half-balding man. "These reports are—" At that moment the phone rang. Coroner Blye broke off, and picked it up.

"Hello?" he said. He listened for a few moments and his face gradually went from its expression of normal sourness into one of outrage. He slammed the phone down into its cradle and glared across the desk.

"*That*," he said, "was the Commissioner. You didn't happen to phone him before you came down here, did you?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," said Beasley.

Half a minute later, Beasley had the coroner's report in his hand and was skimming through it, his photographic memory taking notes as he went. The dead man, identified by papers on him as Two-Bottle O'Gara, had been a well-known wino down on Drexel St. where the skid row district backed up against the area known as Night Club Row. In fact, the police report clipped to the morgue file stated that his normal hangout had been The Carousel—a gin-mill, the back door of which was just across the alley from the back door of The Mirador, one of the Town's plushest night spots.

Beasley finished the police report and cast his eye over the rest of the file.

"Definitely brandy in the stomach contents, I see," he commented. "And neither of his sleeves were torn?"

"Does it say they were?" growled the coroner.

"It does not," said Beasley.

"Then they weren't."

"Excellent!" said Beasley. He placed the report down on the desk, having already memorized its contents. "Thank you," he said, "I won't be needing this again; and now if I might see the morgue itself?"

Coroner Blye, with a venomous glance, pressed a button on his desk. A moment later a small, bent old man in a white coat shuffled into the room.

"Show *Mr.* Grove here," said Blye, "through the morgue, Harry. Show him every courtesy. If you don't he might report us to the Commissioner."

"This way, young feller," said Harry in a rusty voice and shuffled off through the open door behind him, leading Beasley into the morgue itself. The morgue at first sight was unimpressive. It consisted of a long room with what looked like oversized filing cabinets set in the wall. Harry led Beasley around and pulled out one of the filing cabinets at random. Inside, covered by a sheet, was a body; two naked feet protruded from under the sheet.

"How do you know who's who?" demanded Beasley.

"Why, they all got their tag on," cackled Harry. He pointed to the large tag, rather like a shipping tag, wired to the toe of the corpse lying before them. "Now, if you'll look over here—"

"No thank you," said Beasley, "I've seen all I need to. Thank you very much, and good day."

Beasley went out of the morgue, out past the corridor, and took the elevator upstairs in city hall to the police department. There, after some small delay, he was ushered in to see Lieutenant Mollison. Mollison, a dark-browed rather square-shouldered man in his mid-thirties, was at his desk, drinking a cup of Police Department coffee, and eating a cheese sandwich with an expression that suggested he expected them both to give him indigestion.

"Siddown," said Lieutenant Mollison, waving Beasley to a chair. "What bit of bad weather blew *you* in here?" He glowered at Beasley. "It can't be anything good."

"Certainly not. Unless you call murder good," replied Beasley, perching on the edge of the chair.

"Murder!" Mollison jerked upright suddenly in his chair slopping coffee on himself. He set the paper cup down on the desk. "Who's been murdered?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," replied Beasley.

Lieut. Mollison let out a roar that rattled his flimsy office door.

"Listen here, you!" he roared. "It's been one year. One nice, peaceful year with nothing more than an occasional kid shoplifter. This department of mine is up for an award for having a completely crime-free community during the last year. The year ends next Tuesday. And here you have the nerve to come busting into my office, spouting off that there's been a murder committed. And when I ask you who it is, you don't even know!" Lieutenant Mollison's fist crashed down on the desktop. The

paper coffee cup jumped and spilled the rest of its contents over the lieutenant's desk.

"Your misapprehension, Lieutenant," replied Beasley calmly, "reveals a basic lack of attention to what I just said. I said *I* did not know who the murdered man was. Undoubtedly, there *is* somebody who does. And I should think the police department would want to locate that person." And he proceeded to tell Lieutenant Mollison about the cadaver in the lab.

"Get out of here!" shouted Lieutenant Mollison, when Beasley was through. "I remember that case. There was identification on the body. He was just an old bum from down on skid row. And besides, it was ruled an accidental death three weeks ago!"

"But—" said Beasley.

"Don't gimme any buts!" said Lieutenant Mollison. "I don't want to hear anything about murder. I don't want to hear anything about this being a murder! The case's been closed! What—" the lieutenant's voice checked suddenly in mid-sentence. He stared hard at Beasley. "You know something you aren't telling me? You got some proof that this *was* a murder?"

"Merely what I told you," replied Beasley. "An area of a man's body which has been obviously tattooed, is scraped clean of that tattoo. A skid-row bum who is known to live on wine is discovered to have been drinking brandy shortly before his death. And then there is the matter of the unusual form of death, freezing—"

"All right, all right," growled Lieutenant Mollison. "I said—you got any *proof*?"

"Not exactly," confessed Beasley. "Are you going to investigate this murder?"

"I n v e s t i g a t e? On what grounds?"

"I should think the answer would be obvious," replied Beasley, "but perhaps obvious only to me." And he turned on his heel and walked out of the office, leaving Lieutenant Mollison chewing worriedly on his underlip.

Once out on the street, Beasley bought a newspaper and carried it with him onto the bus he took back toward the campus. He scanned the news rapidly but thoroughly for anything dealing with the skid row district in general, and The Carousel, in particular. A small item tucked away in the second section caught his eye, and he stopped to read it over carefully. It was headlined:—

NITE CLUB OWNER SOUGHT

Joseph H. (Joey) Williams, owner and operator of The Mirador, Drexel Street nightclub, was still being sought to-

day with a subpoena in connection with the upcoming trial for income tax evasion of Big Mike Hanscomb, racketeering figure of the thirties, who was released last Wednesday from state prison after serving twenty-four years of a forty-year term for third degree murder. Hanscomb, who has always claimed that he was framed on the murder charge by Williams, is known to nourish a long-standing grudge against the nightclub owner.

Beasley's eyes narrowed, remembering the proximity of The Mirador to The Carousel. He half-straightened in his seat with the impulse to get off this bus and take another one to the night club. But then memory of his chronic financial state came back to him. He recalled the forty-seven cents currently in his pocket, made an annoyed mental note to get around to studying the stock market and making some money, and as usual immediately forgot the resolution. An idea had occurred to him of a possible way to get inside the Mirador. He turned to that section of the want ads that dealt with the employment of bus boys, waiters, and bartenders.

There was nothing there, however. But a second later, an ad in the "HELP WANTED—FEMALE" section caught his eye.

When the bus reached the campus, Beasley got off and hurried over to the Phi-Delt house.

Beasley had intended to find out if his girl friend, Susan Alcorn, was at the house. To his mild surprise, he found her not only there, but waiting for him. She reminded Beasley he had been supposed to meet her for lunch; and she pointed out that it was now nearly three o'clock. And why hadn't he shown up in the first place?

"No time for that now, Susan," said Beasley crisply. "This is an emergency."

Twenty minutes later, over coffee and doughnuts down at The Positive End, Beasley was outlining a plan of action for Susan.

"—But won't it be dangerous? I mean—" said Susan, "what if I'm found out? I don't think the house mother would approve of me working in a nightclub."

"The answer to that is simple," said Beasley. "Don't tell her about it."

Susan asked doubtfully, "But why do you want me to go to work at the Mirador as a waitress, anyway? What's the point, Beasley?"

"In the local newspaper here, January 13, 1955, on page 14, column 2," said Beasley delving into his encyclopedic memory, "there was an article about a local City Hall investigation of multiple ownership of nightclubs—

which as you know is forbidden under our city law. One of the places that came under scrutiny was the Mirador; and although nothing was ever proved, the newspaper gave us to understand pretty clearly that Joey Williams, who owns the club, was pretty much the king-pin of gangster activities here in the city."

"G a n g s t e r s!" Susan's eyes glowed.

"Absolutely," replied Beasley. "I am convinced in my own mind that the body now lying in the University Medical Schools is the result of a murder; and a gangland murder at that."

"But how do you know that, Beez?" queried Susan.

"It would take too long to explain right now," said Beasley. "To get back to business—I happened to check up in a newspaper while riding here from downtown on the bus. There is a want ad for a waitress at the Mirador. Shall we go?"

They went. An hour and a half later, with Susan safely hired as a waitress at the Mirador and due to start work that very evening, Beasley returned to his own room —planning to get in a little slip-horn practice before dinner. He was writing a new college song for Eastern U. and he wanted to play his part in the song through, allowing his superb imagination to supply the sounds from the rest of the band. However, he had barely settled himself with his slip-horn in his favorite armchair, when the telephone rang. It was Lieutenant Mollison.

"Tell me how you did it!" were the first words Beasley heard.

"I assume," said Beasley, "that you are referring lieutenant, to my early knowledge of the murder. In fact, I assume that you have found the other body. Is this correct?"

There were flabbergasted noises at the other end of the line.

"How did you know that?" babbled Lieutenant Mollison.

"It was obvious—at least to me —that another body must turn up shortly," said Beasley. "However, let us waste no time on the things which we both now know. I will be down immediately to view this other corpse."

"I—I'll meet you at the morgue," said Lieutenant Mollison weakly.

Once more down at the morgue, Beasley examined carefully the second corpse Lieutenant Mollison had mentioned. It resembled to a certain extent the original corpse over at the Medical School. That is to say it was about the right height and weight; but there were significant differences. Beasley learned that this corpse had been dressed in expensive clothes without, however, any label or laundry markings on them. Also—

"I take it this one didn't freeze to death," said Beasley.

"Someone jammed an ice-pick into him," growled the coroner. "Although I'd say malnutrition and alcoholism were contributing factors."

"His alcoholism wouldn't have been involved with brandy?" said Beasley, "would it?"

Snorted Coroner Blye, "Cheap wine and rot-gut booze, I'd say."

"We found this one in a creek a couple of miles out of town," said Lieutenant Mollison. "But it was the ice-pick that did for him, not drowning. The point is, who is he?"

"I imagine," said Beasley, "that the clothes belonging to the body at the Medical School might be a better fit on this body here."

At this moment the telephone rang. The coroner picked it up, listened a moment, and handed it to Beasley.

"It's for you," he said. Beasley put the receiver to his ear. Susan's voice squeaked at him.

"Beez! *Listen!* —I got it. It was right in her locker, like you said it probably would be. But listen —she's still on the job down here and I tried to talk to her; and a couple of men got up and came over and practically forced her away from me! And *Beez*—one of them, anyway, had a gun under his coat."

"Naturally—," said B e a s l e y, calmly. He turned to Lieutenant. "Come along, lieutenant: Susan Alcorn—you remember my fiance, I'm sure—has just located your killers for you."

When Beasley and Lieutenant Mollison drove into the parking lot of the Mirador, twenty minutes later, a shadow detached itself from one corner of the building and came toward them. It was Susan, her curvesome little figure enticingly clad in the ballerina skirt and off-the-shoulder blouse which was the regular uniform for waitresses at the Mirador.

"Oh, B e e z—lieutenant!" she whispered gratefully. "Those two men I told you about. They're sitting inside in a corner of the main diningroom. And they've been watching me!"

"Never mind," said Beasley, soothingly, "you needn't go back inside. Wait in the car here while the lieutenant and I go in. Have you got it?"

"Oh! —Yes," said Susan, and handed Beasley a long silver nail file with an ivory handle.

"Come on, come on!" growled Lieutenant Mollison. "S u p p o s e you explain what this is all about?'

"It's really quite simple," Beasley informed him as they walked together toward the nightclub. "Joey Williams has become involved in a little dispute with another local figure on the shady side of the law—I imagine you know who I mean."

"Sure. Mike Hanscomb—Big Mike Hanscomb," replied Lieu-

tenant Mollison.

"At any rate, for some reason which we will have to discover," said Beasley, "their dispute reached the point where Hanscomb decided to put Joey out of the picture. The only way to do that would be to hire two out-of-town professional gunmen. I say two, because it would have taken at least two men to move the body around with any degree of efficiency."

"Yeah," muttered Lieutenant Mollison.

"I sent Susan down here to answer an ad for a waitress, when I found no jobs available here that would enable me to investigate the place," said Beasley. "I had come to suspect that there might be a woman involved, when I discovered that a waitress job was open. I therefore instructed Susan to look for—"

Beasley broke off suddenly. A doorman, resplendent and huge in a gaudy uniform, had just emerged from the shadows by the parking lot entrance. Without a word, he held the door open for them. They went in, to a plush, green-carpeted, green-walled, foyer. A curvaceous hat check girl took their hats. Or, that is to say, she took Lieutenant Mollison's hat. Beasley never wore one.

"Wait—" said Lieutenant Mollison. "Those two gunsels." He reached out and caught Beasley by the arm as they reached the entrance of the main dining room. "That girl of yours didn't tell us where to find them."

"Of course she did, lieutenant," said Beasley. "There can only be four corners to the room. As she specified, the men must be in one of them."

"Well—yeah," said Lieutenant Mollison. He and Beasley went inside the dining room. On a raised dais, a blonde in a honey-colored evening dress was singing a sad torch-song to the music of a five-piece band behind her. In a corner to the right of the bandstand, sat two men in light gray suits. Beasley tapped Lieutenant Mollison on the arm, pointed, and they started toward that table.

They were less than half way there, however, when the band switched suddenly from the torch song into a rapid cha-cha. And at almost the same instant, a waiter who was heading in an entirely different direction across the room, turned full-tilt into Mollison. They both sprawled on the floor; and a split second later, Beasley felt his ankle unaccountably pulled from underneath him. When he and Lieutenant Mollison scrambled to their feet a few seconds later, the table in the corner where the two men had been sitting was empty. Lieutenant Mollison's face turned purple.

"What's going on here?" he fumed, and, turning about, stamped back out to the entrance,

where he commandeered the phone at the hat-check counter.

"Wait! You can't use that—" cried the hat-check girl. Lieutenant Mollison waved her away from him angrily.

"Police business!" he snarled; and put in a call. Over the phone he described the two men they had seen; and sent out an all-points bulletin to pick them up.

While the lieutenant was doing this Beasley unobtrusively took the opportunity to slip off. He returned to the dining room and spotted a door beside the bandstand. He crossed the room, opened the door, and went through. He found himself in a short concrete corridor with a door at its far end.

Going through the door at the far end of the corridor he passed some dressing rooms and came to a third door, ajar on what seemed to be a rather expensive-looking office. A faint sound of sobbing came through the crack of the open door.

Quietly, Beasley eased the door open. Inside the office, a blonde in the same abbreviated waitress costume that Susan had been wearing was crying with her head on the desk, the bright strands of her hair against a tall decanter.

Wrapped in misery as she was, she had not heard him. Beasley lifted the decanter quietly, removed the stopper, and sniffed at the contents. Quietly he replaced the decanter on the desk.

"May I extend my sympathy," Beasley said softly. "It is never pleasant to be involved in a murder. I'm sure you never thought things would go that far; but gangsters make rough playmates, don't they?"

The girl jerked her head up.

"You—you're a cop!" she whispered between stiff lips.

Beasley said with a touch of asperity, "I have far better uses for my time. While I find murder interesting, the day-by-day humdrum of ordinary police work —however, there's no point in our going into that." He reached into his pocket and withdrew the long nail file Susan had handed him. "I believe this is yours. It came from your locker, down in the waitresses' dressing room."

The girl stifled a cry with one hand over her mouth as he held the file out before her. Then suddenly her eyes stilled with horror.

"Something—?" began Beasley. He started to turn around; but before he had made more than a small fraction of a half circle, something hard jabbed him in the back. A low, tense, male voice spoke in his ear.

"Don't move!"

"Ah," said Beasley, stopping. "One of the gunmen, of course."

"Just freeze!" snarled the voice in his ear. "Just freeze like it was a thousand below zero."

"Two-hundred-seventy-three de-

grees below zero, you mean," said Beasley absently. "Fahrenheit, that is. There's no such thing as a thousand below zero. —What do you intend to do with me? Now that you have a gun in my back?"

"Two guesses, punk," said the voice at his ear. "You're going to get it, both of you—" the gun-pressure slipped suddenly away from Beasley's spine. "First the doll—"

The gun roared suddenly, almost in Beasley's ear. He flung himself about, and saw one of the men in light grey suits, his face contorted, raising a heavy automatic in Beasley's direction. Then Beasley flung every ounce of his hundred and twenty pounds upon him. There was a swirl of motion, something slammed sickeningly against the side of Beasley's head, and the next thing he knew, he was picking himself dizzily up off the floor.

The gunman had gone. But the girl, when Beasley turned to look at her, was silent and still on the floor, red staining the front of her costume. Beasley knelt beside her, and felt for her heart, just as Lieutenant Mollison, followed by two uniform policemen, came charging in.

"She's still alive," said Beasley, getting up from the girl. "Take care of her!" He turned on Lieutenant Mollison. "Come on!"

He led the way at a run, out through the door, down the corridor, and out of the night club. They raced together across the shadowy parking lot. They were only two rows away from where they had left the car they had driven out in—with Susan in it—when Beasley gave a sudden ejaculation and doubled his speed.

"Hey! What's up?" Lieutenant Mollison lumbered after him. He found Beasley standing by the open door of the car.

"Susan's gone!" said Beasley. His voice was tight. He thrust a piece of paper at the lieutenant. "They must have spotted her when they ran out this way. Read this!"

Lieutenant Mollison held the paper up into the light:

"We got the girl. Think twice, and think right, and you'll get her back O.K. There won't be any other warnings."

Lieutenant Mollison read the note out loud. He turned around and stared at Beasley:

"Who wrote this?" he asked.

"Those two gunmen," answered Beasley crisply. "They've probably both panicked now, and that's why they've tried abducting Susan to cover their escape."

"I'll get the whole force after them!" said Lieutenant Mollison. His hand darted for the microphone belonging to the car radio.

"No!" said Beasley. "We can't put pressure on them, Lieutenant. They're liable to get frightened and kill Susan. Besides, we'd have a difficult time catching them

now. But I think I know where they may have gone. Call the F.B.I."

Lieutenant Mollison stood where he was, staring at Beasley.

"Lieutenant!" snapped Beasley. "Don't just stand there like a stuffed *Megascops asio!* Susan—the girl I love—is in danger!"

"But-but—" stammered Lieutenant Mollison. "F.B.I.?"

"Must I stop to explain everything at a time like this?" barked Beasley. "The situation is clear enough. The two gunmen are on the run. They will naturally turn to the only man who can be forced to help them cover their escape."

"Who—?"

"Hanscomb, of course!" said Beasley. "The gunmen are headed for Big Mike Hanscomb."

"Hanscomb—find Hanscomb, you said?" stuttered Lieutenant Mollison. "All right! I'll put every man on it—" He reached toward the radio in the car.

"I just finished telling you," said Beasley forcefully. "Call the F.B.I., Lieutenant. Big Mike Hanscomb is free on the charge for which he served time, but only out on bail as far as his income tax fraud charges are concerned. The F.B.I. will certainly be keeping an eye on him."

"Oh? *OH!*" said Lieutenant Mollison, and dived for the radio in the car. Within moments he had the information, relayed through police headquarters back downtown from the local F.B.I. office. Beasley and Lieutenant Mollison scrambled into the car; and the lieutenant sent it rocketing out of the lot.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up outside a screen of small ornamental pines.

"Come on," said Lieutenant Mollison.

He led the way out of the car and through the pines quietly, up to a large building resembling a Swiss chalet from within which came the sound of voices.

Cautiously, Lieutenant Mollison tried the door. It was unlocked. The lieutenant eased it open; and he and Beasley stepped into a dim kitchen.

They crosssed the kitchen and looked in through a half open door to a large, comfortable lounge. Within, twenty men looking like well fed business men were lounging about, drinking and talking.

Beasley poked Lieutenant Mollison with his finger, and pointed. In a corner Susan, rather white-faced, sat with one of the men in gray close beside her. Across the room, the other man in gray was talking tensely with a man at least six feet four inches tall and weighing around two-hundred and fifty pounds.

"Big Mike," muttered Lieutenant Mollison in Beasley's ear.

Throwing the door before him suddenly open, the lieutenant

stepped into the room with his gun out and snapped:

"Up with your hands, all of you! You're under arrest!"

A sudden silence fell on the room. The men standing there turned around. As if half hypnotized, they slowly began to raise their hands into the air.

"Look out!" shouted Beasley.

The man in gray beside Susan sprang to one side, drawing his gun as he did. Half falling to the floor, he snapped a shot at Lieutenant Mollison, who staggered, dropped his gun and clutched at his arm.

Beasley dived for the gun, grabbing it up as he rolled over and over across the floor. Beasley fired four times. And four of the men around the room went down clutching at various sections of their anatomy—two shoulders, an arm, a leg.

Beasley rose to his feet facing a stunned room. The men, who remained jerkily erect, raised their hands again, and stood still.

"Oh, Beez!" cried Susan, rushing across the floor to throw her arms around him. "You did it! You got them all!"

"Of course," said Beasley, blowing casually on the hot muzzle of the gun "A common trick. Western heroes do it all the time on TV. Though I must say it's a good thing I took a couple of afternoons off last summer to practice on the police target range." He turned back to Lieutenant Mollison who was examining his own shoulder. "How are you, Lieutenant?"

"All right," grunted Lieutenant Mollison. "Just a burn. Barely tore the skin." He reached out his hand to Beasley. "I'll take my gun back now."

Beasley gave it to him. Lieutenant Mollison turned toward the men in the room.

"All right, you rats!" He snapped. "Line up against the wall!"

Three hours later, with the men who had been in the ski lodge safely locked up and the wounded gunmen along with them, Susan and Beasley were in Lieutenant Mollison's office having some Police Department coffee in paper cups with him.

"Well, you fixed me," growled Lieutenant Mollison. "Crime-free year! Ha!" He added grudgingly, "You *did* help me make the largest haul of criminals this state ever saw. All of those guys were wanted police characters—half of them from out of state."

He swallowed some coffee, brightening. "And I caught all of them conspiring in some connection with the kidnappers of Susan. There won't be one of them we can't put away." He beamed, "all of Big Mike Hanscomb's old buddies. Characters we've been after for years."

"Quite true," said Beasley.

"You've been very fortunate, Lieutenant."

"*Fortunate*?—" began Lieutenant Mollison. But he could not quite work up enough energy to roar. "The thing that beats me," he growled, "is how you figured that first cadaver for a murder in the first place."

"Why, I should think it would be completely obvious—even to you, Lieutenant," said Beasley, in mild surprise. "The damage done to the body I saw over at the Medical School was just a little too various and ingenious to be caused by chance. A man who gets almost drowned in alcohol, *and* hit on the head, *and* then actually frozen to death, is a little too good to be true. That's where the cleverness of the scheme entered into it."

"What cleverness?"

"Why, if a body comes into the coroner—especially such a coroner as we have here—with an almost humorous catalogue of injuries, the really important one is liable to pass in the crowd without being given undue attention."

"What? —You mean, the hit on the head?"

"Not at all," said Beasley. "The scraped section of the cadaver's arm."

Lieutenant Mollison groaned. "Okay, I'll bite. What did that have to do with the murder?"

"Let's approach it this way, Lieutenant. It may simplify matters for you."

Lieutenant Mollison glared at Beasley, who blithely continued:

"How to do away unobtrusively with a man in the public eye? Answer—first do away with one that isn't anybody. They picked a skid-row bum, disposed of him with an ice-pick and dumped his body in a creek out of town. Then, with the aid of the waitress who got shot—and who had been planted in the Mirador before by Big Mike—they trapped Joey Williams in his own office. She got him drunk on brandy, then they hit him on the head, and left him in the refrigerator car to freeze.

"The waitress never thought they had anything that serious in mind, of course; but by that time she was deep into it and it was too late to back out."

Beasley rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "A very efficient crime. Instead of one dead Joey Williams, well-known night club owner, we have a dead stranger and one dead bum nobody cares anything about. And if anybody wants to get suspicious, it's the stranger, not the bum, who was murdered."

"But how did *you* know all this?" snarled Lieutenant Mollison.

"It forms," said Beasley, "a logical progression. A rather unusual scrape for no apparent reason on a forearm led me to look closer and discover an erased

tattoo. The erased tattoo led me to speculate why and how it was erased. The only obvious answer was—to hide the identity of the body; which implied that it was not of the man it seemed, which led to the inference that it was someone else, which postulated a second person—or, more conveniently, a second body, which required a reason for both bodies, which—"

"Stop—" said Lieutenant Mollison, weakly.

"Which," continued Beasley calmly and inexorably, "indicated an organized purpose behind both deaths, which demanded a motive which could only be supplied in such a man as Big Mike Hanscomb, who of necessity would make use of a certain type of underling, which eliminated all but gunmen such as we encountered, which restricted the murder methods to those of a certain type, which agreed with the complications of the two corpses and the environment of the skid-row and Drexel Street establishments, and led directly to the need for such a contact individual as the waitress, whose *nail file* was the very instrument for the removal of the tattoo, the erasure of which had attracted my attention in the first place. When Susan found the nail file in the waitress' locker, and the waitress reacted so violently when I confronted her with it, the matter became certain in my mind."

"I see," whispered Lieutenant Mollison in a strangled voice.

"Of course," added Beasley, idly, "the matter was further confirmed when I smelled the decanter on Joey William's desk and found that, although it was empty, it smelled strongly of brandy."

"Sure," said Lieutenant Mollison, closing his eyes, "sure. Nothing to it."

"I knew you'd see it once I'd pointed it out to you," said Beasley, kindly. "Well, come on, Susan. Let's go catch a bus and get back to the Positive End for Pizza and cokes. So long, Lieutenant."

They went out. Lieutenant Mollison sat where he was. After a minute or two, he threw his paper cup of coffee at the wall and began to curse. He cursed—of all people—a Dr. and Mrs. Penworthy Grove, an estimable couple who lived in Keokuk, Indiana, had never so much as spoken to Lieutenant Mollison in his entire life, and had done nothing in any way objectionable except to produce and rear their only son, Beasley. ■ ■

THAT NIGHT

by GEORGE KAUFFMAN

IN ORINDA COUNTY, ON THE SHORES of San Francisco bay, the following trial took place in Superior Court Number II....

"I shall now call Mrs. Sturtevant," said the District Attorney. "Tell us what happened that night, if you please."

"Miss Dane came for dinner. We had some drinks. She died."

"Mrs. Sturtevant, do you usually have your husband's mistress over for dinner and drinks?"

"No. My husband told me Miss Dane was blackmailing him. He suggested that we invite her over for dinner and at that time I poison her."

"And you agreed to do so?"

"Yes. But I didn't say that I *did* poison her."

The District Attorney thought a moment. "If you didn't poison Miss Dane, then who did?"

"Nobody."

"You mean she poisoned herself?"

"No, sir. She is still alive."

"Mrs. Sturtevant," said the District Attorney, "you will pardon me for expressing surprise over the fact that the person recently cremated is, in your opinion, alive."

"I am aware of that fact. Were there any more questions?"

"Not from you, at this moment, Mrs. Sturtevant. You may step down." As she walked back to her chair, the District Attorney said, "I now call Martha Rose... what do you do in the Sturtevant household?"

"I am the maid, sir."

"Tell us what took place that night, if you please."

"Mrs. Sturtevant, her husband, and a friend, Peggy Dane, had dinner together in the patio. I was in my room, which is a guest-cottage across the swimming pool from the main house. I was reading when I heard a scream...."

"Pardon—a scream?"

"Yes. It was Mrs. Sturtevant. I ran around the pool to the patio. Miss Dane was on the ground in some sort of fit. Mr. Sturtevant said to his wife, 'You poisoned her.' Mrs. Sturtevant said nothing."

"Nothing?" asked the District Attorney.

"Yes, sir. She remained silent, sort of numb, I guess. Mr. Sturtevant called the doctor. When he got there Miss Dane was dead. The police and the coroner came and took her away. They took Mrs. Sturtevant to jail."

"Thank you. I now call the doctor to the stand... will you tell us what happened that night, please?" said the District Attorney.

"Mr. Sturtevant called me and

A SHORT-SHORT STORY

told me to come right over, that there had been an accident. When I arrived I found Miss Dane. I said she had consumed some strychnine. I called the coroner and the police."

"Thank you." The District Attorney turned to the defense. "Any questions?"

"Yes." Mrs. Sturtevant's attorney stood up and approached the doctor. "When you went to the Sturtevant home and found Miss Dane, was she in fact dead?"

"No, sir."

"Is she alive at this moment?"

"Yes, sir."

The District Attorney was on his feet. "I object!"

"To what point?" asked the judge.

"To the point, your honor, that a person cremated *can't* be alive."

"But, counselor," said the judge, "perhaps this person was not cremated in the first place. May we proceed along this line for a while and see what develops?"

"When you said, Doctor, that Miss Dane was alive, do you mean you can produce her in this court?" asked the defense attorney.

"Yes, sir. She is hiding in my apartment."

"Thank you, Doctor." The defense attorney turned to Mrs. Sturtevant and asked her to take the stand again. "Now, tell us *exactly* what happened that night."

"That night, as I mixed the drinks, I changed my mind. Even though my husband had told me Miss Dane was blackmailing him, I thought to pay off Miss Dane and forget the whole thing. I brought out the drinks and was going to indicate to my husband that I had not put the poison in. But Miss Dane already had taken her drink. When she fell to the floor, supposedly dying, it was then I screamed, as I realized I had been fooled by my husband again."

"In other words," said the defense attorney, "they thought you had put the 'poison' in?"

"Yes. So they went on with their little drama. The doctor signed a false death certificate, the undertaker put on a false cremation. I was to be framed in a murder-charge and put away while my husband could live happily ever after with Miss Dane and my money."

"Then it wasn't a poison after all they gave you to put in."

"No. It was a harmless substance to fool me. Quite by accident, I fooled them. Knowing this, you as my attorney approached the doctor and told him to cooperate with me and no charges against him would be made for false registration. He has now done so."

"But you agreed to murder someone."

"Yes. But I plead guilty to a murder that was never committed. And what is the penalty for that?"

COMPLETE ON THESE PAGES

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

To paraphrase The Bard, it is a wise author that knows his own brain-child. Or even his brightest brain-child.

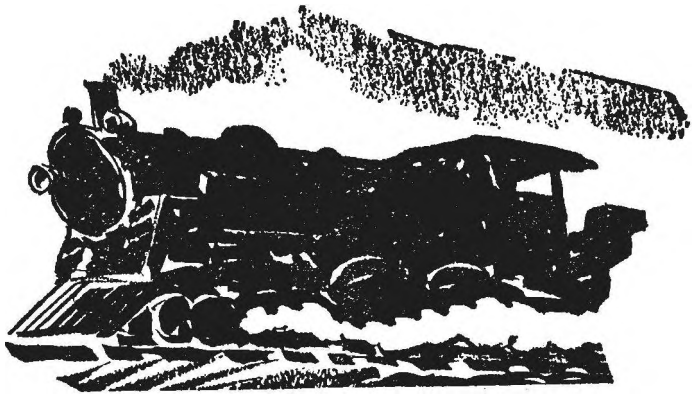
To avoid the controversy inevitably stirred up by the word "best," I am going to say that "The Zarapore Beat" is my favorite *story; at least nobody can quarrel with my personal predilection. I happen to be very fond of O'Reilly Sahib—fonder, I think, than of any other character I ever created. I was, and still am, tickled by the concept of a New York cop who has never been farther from the city than Asbury Park but who, when circumstances take him to India, continues to function with the same assurance and methods as though he were still pounding the pavements of the Ninth Precinct in Manhattan. I thoroughly enjoyed writing this series of stories and apparently some of the fun came through to the reader, for Anthony Boucher has characterised "The Zarapore Beat" as the "joyous . . . account of the debut of O'Reilly Sahib."*

One of the reasons I enjoyed writing the O'Reilly Sahib stories is that I could use my favorite device of evolving plot from background. It is a long time now since I was in India (I worked on a Calcutta newspaper in 1922-3*), but when I wrote "The Zarapore Beat" the colors, the sounds, and the smells of the East were still fresh in my memory. It was a pleasure to put them down on paper before they grew dim.*

I had written half a dozen O'Reilly Sahib stories when World War II began. With the world in a state of flux I realized I had better bring my New York cop home. Then came Indian independence and the splitting off of Pakistan. I could of course not send O'Reilly back to a new and strange India which neither of us ever knew, so the series came to an end.

New York City,
May 13, 1960.

Lawrence G. Blochman



ZARAPORE BEAT

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

"YOU MEAN AN INDIAN CHIEF," said O'Reilly.

"I mean an Indian *prince,*" insisted the precinct captain. "He ain't one o' these c o m m o n or Madison Square Garden variety Indians with feathers and moccasins. He's a—well, elephants. Pearls. Curry and rice. He's—"

"I got it," said O'Reilly. "A Hindu Indian. And what am I supposed to do about him?"

"Go up to his hotel right away," said the precinct captain. "The Prince and the British Consul have been to see the Mayor, and the Mayor told the Commissioner to assign a cop to look after the Prince, and the Commissioner passes the buck to the Deputy Chief Inspector, and the Inspector picks you. I'm damned if I know why, unless it's because you're six-feet-four and the heavyweight champion of the force. Anyway, you're the Prince's personal bodyguard as long as he's in New York. Now beat it."

Thus did Patrolman Terrence O'Reilly, of the Ninth Precinct Police Station, become attached to Prince Vinayak Rao Bahadur, eldest son of the Maharajah of Zarapore, and heir apparent—so he thought—to the throne of that distant and somewhat obscure Indian state.

Prince Vinayak was on his way

back to Zarapore after two years spent at Oxford acquiring social polish, an English accent, and a back-hand tennis stroke. Having mastered these and similar fundamentals fitting him to take his ultimate place among the six hundred-odd rulers of the so-called independent states that make up the India that is theoretically non-British, he should have come home immediately to begin waiting for his father to die. The Prince, however, was something of a heretic; he was unduly interested in the theory of government. He was taking the long way home via the United States of America, to see what those former British colonies were doing in the way of industrial development, municipal hygiene, and state control of utilities. He was even making arrangements to attend lectures on political science at Columbia University, when Patrolman Terrence O'Reilly was ushered into the suite of his Park Avenue hotel.

O'Reilly was surprised at the sight of the Prince. He had expected to see a fat, dark man reclining on silken cushions while many beautiful ladies, dressed—or undressed—in the manner of a Broadway night club floor show, attended him with large feather fans. Instead, he saw a slim, keen-eyed young man in a well-tailored gray business suit, sitting at a desk writing letters. The Prince's skin was no darker than that of Detective Joe Manelli of the Mercer Street Station, and there was nothing royal about him except perhaps the square-cut diamond as big as an ice cube, which adorned his cravat.

"Howdy, Prince," said O'Reilly. "The Commissioner sent me."

Prince Vinayak looked up. He, too, was surprised—at the towering bulk of O'Reilly. The policeman was roughly triangular, with shoulders that looked as if he had left an oversized hanger in his coat, tapering down to muscular hips and wiry legs. The size of his feet kept him from being top-heavy. You could hang a hat on the corner of his jaw, and somebody had already hung a haymaker on his slightly flattened nose, one night while he was breaking up a free-for-all in a Greenwich Village speakeasy. His hair, the color of a ripe persimmon, topped off a truly impressive spectacle.

"My name's Terrence O'Reilly," said the new bodyguard. "You can call me Terry."

The Prince smiled. "Mine is Vinayak Rao Bahadur," he said with his precise Oxford accent. "You may call me Vinnie."

Then he laughed—an elegant, amused laugh that was completely lost in the great guffaws of O'Reilly as the patrolman joined in the joke.

From that moment O'Reilly and Prince Vinnie were fast

friends. O'Reilly slept in the Prince's suite, accompanied him to official receptions, dozed while he listened to college lectures, yawned while he inspected hospitals and waterworks. The nights were less boring, for the Prince had a tremendous curiosity regarding what New York did after dark, which O'Reilly was eminently fitted to satisfy. Since the Prince's European education had been partly devoted to the appreciation of vintage champagnes, their friendship grew warmer over many a cold bottle. It reached a climax with the suddenness of a thunderclap.

One cold, blustery March night, O'Reilly was awakened from a sound, vintage sleep by some one shaking his shoulder. He blinked into the bearded, spectacled face of Sharik, the Prince's Hindu secretary, who continued to shake him.

"Wake up. Wake up, please," Sharik was repeating in a frantic tenor. "Something is happening to His Highness."

O'Reilly sprang from his bed. Faint, strangled cries came from the next room. O'Reilly ran to the door. It was locked. On previous nights it had always been open. It was open, he was sure, when he went to bed. He applied his shoulder, sprung the lock, fumbled for the electric switch.

Light flooded the room. The bed was empty. The window was open. Three long strides, and O'Reilly was leaning across the sill. Prince Vinayak Rao Bahadur, in silk pajamas, was clinging to a narrow ledge outside, fifteen stories above the street.

When O'Reilly dragged him back into the room, the Prince collapsed into a chair. Drenched with nervous perspiration, he sat trembling for half a minute while the policeman poured brandy into a water tumbler.

"You saved my life, Terry," gasped Prince Vinayak when he had gulped the brandy.

"What happened, Prince?"

"I don't know. I awoke to find myself going out the window. Instinctively I clutched the ledge. How I held on, I don't know . . . I've never walked in my sleep before, have I, Sharik?"

"No, Your Highness," said the secretary gravely.

"Who locked the door between this room and mine?" demanded O'Reilly, very much the policeman. He addressed the question to the room at large—to the Prince, to Sharik, and to the two turbaned body servants who were bustling futilely about.

"I am finding it locked when aroused by His Highness' cries," said Sharik solemnly.

"If I'm getting to be a somnambulist, Terry," said the Prince with an uneasy laugh, "perhaps I locked it myself."

"Nix, Prince," said O'Reilly.

"You ain't no somnam— You don't walk in your sleep. Somebody sneaked in here with a passkey and just plain chucked you out of the window, that's what."

"Nonsense, Terry. Why should anyone—?"

"Who gets the nomination for Maharajah in case you kick off?" pursued O'Reilly professionally. "Anybody?"

"Yes. My half-brother, Prince Mahmed; but he's a long way off, in India. Besides, our father, the Maharajah, has a good many years to live yet. Unless—" The prince stopped suddenly. His face went ashen. He half raised himself apprehensively in his chair. "Sharik, what time is it?"

"Ten minutes of four, Your Highness."

"Call the desk." There was dread in the Prince's voice. "Ask if there are telegrams."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Sharik went to the phone. He looked a little like an owl with his close, curly black beard and horn-rimmed spectacles. He was young—about the same age and build as the Prince. Same deep-set brown eyes, too. O'Reilly thought he would probably resemble the Prince without his beard, spectacles, and the blue turban he wore constantly.

"There is a cablegram, Your Highness," said Sharik, as he hung up. "It came half an hour ago, but the clerk did not wish to disturb Your Highness until breakfast. He is sending it up."

Sharik remained standing by the phone. No one spoke. The anguish of anticipation in the Prince's eyes increased, second by second, until the bellboy knocked on the door.

O'Reilly took the envelope, examined the flap to see if it had been previously opened, then handed it on. The Prince's fingers shook as he tore it open. When he finished reading it, he looked blankly at the wall for a long minute. Then he said in a lifeless voice:

"My father, the Maharajah, is dead."

"Gee, that's tough, Prince. I'm sorry—"

"Terry! I wonder if you're right. I wonder if someone in New York received this news before I did."

"You're doggone right I'm right," said O'Reilly. "And from now on, Prince, you don't leave my sight, night or day."

Prince Vanayak arose suddenly. A ghostly smile of hope crossed his harried face. His voice came to life.

"Do you mean that, Terry? Then you'll come to India with me?"

"What? Me? Why, I couldn't do that, Prince Vinnie. I'm still on the Force. I'm due for promo-

tion pretty soon."

"I'll go to the Commissioner for you. I'm sure he'll grant you leave of absence. We will have to start at once."

O'Reilly's blue eyes clouded—with a sort of fear, although he would never have recognized it as such. O'Reilly was not a coward; his record showed that. He once walked into a nest of East Side gunmen single-handed, and had lead dug out of his thigh without an anesthetic. He had cleaned out a dive of thugs in Hell's Kitchen with his bare fists. He had exchanged shots with paroled killers. He knew danger, and therefore did not fear it. But India—well, India was a purely imaginary place, something to read about, not to go to. And for O'Reilly, who had never been outside New York in his life, except for a week in Asbury Park one summer and a trip up the Hudson on the day boat, going to India was a little like dying....

"You see, Prince," he said, "I still got my old lady livin' over in Brooklyn. She depends on me."

"I'll take care of her," said the Prince. "My bank will send her money every week. And I need you, Terry. I need your strength, your courage, and your loyalty. I need someone I can trust. Will you come?"

"Well, O.K., then, Prince," said O'Reilly gloomily. He sat down, a little dazed by the decision he had just made. "Say, how far is it to India? Will we have to stop somewhere overnight, or can we make it in a day?"

They made it in thirteen days, thanks to a lucky connection with the Imperial Airways plane in England. It was an unreal fortnight for O'Reilly. Six days of unimagined and ignominious nausea on the Atlantic, a fleeting glimpse of London, then a week flying away from the last blustering days of winter. Like the magic carpet, the plane for India turned gray seas to blue, caught up with the green of spring, left it to dance in the heat that eddied upward from the yellow sands of the desert. Enchanted names passed beneath the wings—Paris, Italy, Egypt, Bagdad—but to O'Reilly they were just names. Landscapes from the air were as impersonal as a page from a geography, and an airdrome, after all, is just an airdrome. O'Reilly spent his time studying New York police regulations. He was due for promotion when he got back.

At Karachi, the sticky heat from the Arabian Sea began to make India a personal matter while he and the Prince and the Prince's small retinue were waiting for the shuttle plane for Bombay. But it was at Bombay that India really began.

In the glaring, sweltering streets

of Bombay, teeming with more shades of black and brown than Harlem, more whiskers than Allen Street, more garish and brilliant costumes than a Knights of Pythias parade, Patrolman O'Reilly became O'Reilly Sahib. He put up his police regulations and bought a copy of *Hindustani Simplified*. He was outfitted in white drills by a Parsi tailor with a black oilcloth miter. He bought —with some misgivings, as it was twenty years since a self-respecting New York cop had worn anything resembling a soup-tureen helmet —a *sola topee*. He also bought a Malacca stick of appropriate strength and weight to beat off further attempts on the life of Prince Vinnie. But prospective assassins were conspicuously inactive while the Prince's party made its way through the tangled traffic of squawking motorcars, bullock carts, *gharis,* and water buffaloes, to the private car which Sharik arranged to have attached to the Punjab Mail as far as Zarapore.

Aboard the train, the Prince, too was transformed. Instead of the natty Western business suit, he wore tight satin trousers, a long tunic of ivory silk, and a pale pink turban, on the front of which glittered a diamond, the square-cut diamond as big as an ice cube. He also wore a frown, which became more and more worried as the train chuffed over the Western Ghats and rolled across the sun-baked plains of Central India, past drab mud villages and parched, dusty peepul trees.

Sharik, the solemn secretary, must have noticed the deepening frown, for he said: "Perhaps Your Highness would like the private car detached when we cross the frontier of Zarapore State. We could proceed secretly to Zarapore City by motor."

"Nonsense," said the Prince.

"I was thinking Your Highness was uncertain regarding Prince Mahmed—"

"Sharik, my name is Vinayak Rao Bahadur. I remind you that *bahadur* means 'brave.'"

"Besides," put in O'Reilly, who was smoking a Trichinopoly cheroot and feeling warmer than he had ever felt in his life, "there ain't nothin' to be afraid of, as long as Terrence O'Reilly is on the job. And I don't mind tellin' you, he is."

As O'Reilly spoke, he had a sudden sensation of strange, restless excitement—a feeling that unreasonably recalled a certain hot July night in Manhattan, when he and Detective Sullivan had cornered two gangsters on a tenement roof, and Sullivan had been shot. He wondered why he should have that sense of impending doom now, the same presentiment of death that came a few moments before Sullivan was gasp-

ing out his life in O'Reilly's arms.

There was no reason, of course. It must be the heat—the same sticky heat that hung like a black blanket over New York that July night. He tried to dismiss the whole feeling by drawing deep on his cheroot and blowing a thick blue cloud into a futile, buzzing fan. The smoke came back at him in little puffs—like the puffs from the muzzle of an automatic....

It was after dark when the Mail puffed into Zarapore City. While the train was being shunted onto a siding, where the private car could be detached, O'Reilly looked out the window, fascinated by the color and movement of the station platform. Blazing torches sprayed wavering, orange light over the crowd—*bhistis*, with their glistening black goatskin water bags; bearded food venders; half-naked baggage coolies; brown women with gold ornaments in their ears and nostrils, and bright *saris* wound around their bodies and over their heads. A line of troops kept the crowd away from the center of the platform, green-turbaned soldiers wearing khaki shorts and khaki puttees wrapped above their bare feet.

Prince Vinayak, too, was at the window, scanning faces in the crowd.

"Do you see Prince Mahmed, Sharik?" he asked.

"No, Your Highness."

The train stopped opposite an open space on the platform, where, surrounded by flashing bayonets, stood a group of portly Oriental nobles in silk tunics, ceremonial scarfs, brilliant turbans, and egrets.

"The local lodge is turned out to meet you, Prince," said O'Reilly.

An assistant stationmaster opened a door of the private car. A band of yellow-robed musicians beat on drums and blew shrieking notes from buffalo horns and interminable silver trumpets. The Prince stepped to the platform. Close behind him were O'Reilly and Sharik.

The turbaned troops presented arms. The silken nobles salaamed.

As O'Reilly's alert glance swept the scene, his eyes paused on the one familiar object in this exotic display: a white face! It was not a very inspiring face, to be sure—thin cheeks, dejected mouth, haunted eyes that peered furtively from beneath the misshapen brim of a grimly, once-white topee. O'Reilly saw it for just an instant before it disappeared behind the turbaned head of a soldier. Then he saw something far more important.

A Hindu in a tattered loincloth broke through the line of soldiers, his naked torso smeared with ashes, his eyes gleaming wildly through a tangle of gray beard. He ran toward the Prince, scream-

ing. His yells were echoed by excited cries from the crowd. He was holding something in front of him, an earthenware sphere trailing a swisp of smoke!

When he saw the smoke, O'Reilly leaped forward.

"Hey, Prince!" he shouted. "Duck!"

Before Prince Vinayak could move, O'Reilly had committed *lese majeste* by tackling the heir apparent to the throne of Zarapore and throwing him to the ground. He scrambled over the Prince's recumbent body to get at the screaming fanatic with the earthenware sphere. Before he had taken a step there was a deafening explosion.

O'Reilly suddenly found himself sitting on the ground. His hands instinctively before his face, were bleeding. He coughed violently from the acrid fumes that filled his lungs. When he got to his feet he was engulfed by a yelling, fighting crowd that had surged forward in instant confusion. The Prince was gone!

The half-naked Hindu who had carried the crude bomb was spead-eagled on the station platform, motionless beneath the bare feet of running, shouting soldiers. Men near him sat on the ground moaning.

"Hey, Prince!"

O'Reilly charged through the yelling, milling, panic-stricken mob, seeking Vinayak Rao Bahadur. Grunts and howls followed him as he cleared a path with his elbows, tramped on bare feet with a trip-hammer tread. Faces swam before him in the shimmering torchlight—bearded faces, fear-contorted faces, brown faces, the determined faces of the soldiery. Once he caught a glimpse of the haunted face of the white man with the grimy topee, the man he had seen from the train window. The white man was slinking away into shadow. But nowhere did he see the pink turban of Prince Vinnie, nor even the blue turban of Sharik, the owl-faced secretary. The earth had apparently swallowed Vinayak Rao Bahadur.

"Hey, Prince!"

The confusion was lessening. Little by little the Hindu soldiers were driving back the crowd with their rifle butts. At last O'Reilly found himself almost alone on the station platform, looking into the tiny cruel eyes of an Oriental almost as big as he was.

"You are O'Reilly?" queried the Oriental.

"You guessed it, mister," said O'Reilly, scrutinizing his inquisitor. The man was half a head shorter than he was and about fifty pounds heavier—e x c e s s weight which almost hid his small, glittering eyes and billowed under his long black alpaca tunic. He had a little, silky, black mustache and wore a lemon-yellow

turban.

"Come with me, please," he said.

"Yeah?" said O'Reilly. "And who the hell are you?"

"I am Major Kobi Khan, Minister of Police for the *Sirkar* of Zarapore."

"So there's a minister runnin' the police force in this town, is there?" declared O'Reilly, folding his arms. "I mighta known it, from the lousy protection you gave the Prince. You oughta go back to your church."

"Come with me, please," repeated Major Kobi Khan.

"Let's put it the other way," said O'Reilly. "I happen to be special bodyguard to the future Maharajah o' Zarapore that your imitation cops just lost in the shuffle. Suppose you come with me while we find out what happened to the Prince."

"Havildar! Idhar ao!" shouted the Major over his fat shoulder. A squad of soldiers with fixed bayonets r e s p o n d e d, surrounding O'Reilly. "Come with me, please," repeated Kobi Khan to the red-headed giant.

O'Reilly came, muttering. He was convoyed through a murmuring crowd, through the station, into the hot darkness of a street lined with trees aglitter with fireflies, and finally into an imposing building surmounted with domes which made silhouettes like inverted turnips against the stars. Here he was left to perspire in a smelly room full of soldiers who could not understand him.

He was impatiently considering the most expeditious means of exit when a door opened and someone called "O'Reilly Sahib."

O'Reilly was ushered again into the presence of Major Kobi Khan, who was now seated at a table beside a florid gray-haired European. The white man was introduced as Mr. Leonard Henderson, British Political Officer for Zarapore.

"Howdy," said O'Reilly. He started to extend his hand, but Mr. Henderson dismissed the introduction with a curt nod. He made a distinguished picture in his tussah silk suit, if somewhat cold and preoccupied.

"Mr. H e n d e r s o n wishes to know what you are doing in Zarapore?" demanded Major Kobi Khan.

"Me? Why, I'm just a pal o' Prince Vinnie's. You see, in New York, me and the Prince—"

"Please tell us what you know about the plot."

"Plot? What plot?"

"You were seen to attack His H i g h n e s s. You knocked him down."

"Sure. That's the natural move when a mug heaves a pineapple. Offer the smallest target possible—"

"When informed that you were

accompanying His Highness," interrupted Major Kobi Khan, "I had your antecedents investigated. You seem to have been once a reputable person. How did you become involved in this conspiracy?"

"Say, what is this? A frame?" O'Reilly flushed indignantly. "Why don't you ask that fuzzy-face secretary where's the Prince? Why don't you ask that guy Sharik about a plot? Where is Sharik, anyhow?"

"Sharik," said Major Kobi Khan, "is in jail. He will be shot in the morning."

"Shot?" exclaimed O'Reilly. "What for?"

"Negligence. Neglecting the safety of a sovereign is treason in Zarapore. Ten men will be shot for treason at dawn: The Risaldar of the State troops, seven of his subordinate officers, the assistant station-master and Sharik."

"That's pretty dumb," said O'Reilly. "Why bump off a lot o' witnesses before you find out what happened to the Prince? Bring these birds over here, and let's work 'em over a little. I bet I can sweat a story out of 'em."

"Your advice," said Major Kobi Khan, "is not required."

"Listen, Mr. Henderson," O'Reilly appealed to the Britisher who was watching with calm detachment. "Prince Vinnie's a friend of mine, and I'm just the guy to go to bat for him. I put in time with the Missin' Persons Bureau. I been with the Explosives Squad before they stuck me in the Ninth Precinct. I—"

"As Political Officer of the Viceroy," said Henderson, "my capacity in Zarapore is purely advisory. I have no authority to interfere in strictly internal affairs. This, as I see it, is a police matter. Moreover, I fail to see how you could be of value to the investigation, beyond telling Major Kobi Khan what you know. You are a stranger here . . . . "

"A good cop," said O'Reilly, "is a good cop anywhere."

"The first train leaving Zarapore," said Major Kobi Khan, "is the Bombay Mixed Passenger at six o'clock in the morning. You will please take it."

"So you're running me out o' town?"

"Not at all. My idea originally was to have you shot with the others. Since you are an American, Mr. Henderson suggests that we avoid possible complications. So you are free—at least until six o'clock tomorrow."

O'Reilly stared at the Minister of Police for a long moment. His rough-hewn features were perfectly solemn. He saluted gravely—and winked at Leonard Henderson.

"O.K., toots," he said.

He walked from the Ministry of Police swinging his Malacca

cane like a night-stick, his square chin high, his stride as confident as though he were starting out to take over his beat on Avenue A from Monahan. There was nothing synthetic about O'Reilly's confident manner, either. He was not a man given to bluster. He was simply unaware of the enormous handicaps which lay before him in the task he had set himself. A foreigner in a strange land? Not O'Reilly. The land might be foreign and the people strange, but O'Reilly was a New York cop. New York was the greatest city in the world, wasn't it? Therefore a cop who knew his job in New York should find any other city a minor problem.

True, O'Reilly was a trifle mystified by the disappearance of Prince Vinayak Rao Bahadur—at least by the actual mechanics of the disappearance. He was not fooled in the least by the bomb explosion. The crude earthenware pineapple had been chiefly noise and smoke. Any well-made bomb, or even a first-class grenade, would have killed dozens in that crowd, notably Terrence O'Reilly. As it was, the only casualty had been the ash-smeared fanatic who was hugging the bomb close to his naked stomach; and his death had probably been an accident.

No, the explosion was evidently designed to promote sufficient panic and confusion to cover the abduction of the Prince. He had been kidnaped, of course. And kidnaping was certainly not beyond the ken of a New York cop. The routine was simple. He had only to keep his eyes and ears open and ask questions.

O'Reilly walked toward that part of Zarapore that was still lighted. Where there was light, there would be people. In ten minutes he had reached the bazaar streets—crooked ant-runs between whitewashed buildings, swarming with yellow turbans, purple pugarees, red fezzes, green *hajji* caps, and wagging beards. Flares burned before striped awnings, and oil wicks flickered inside cavernous open-front shops. Here and there were signs in ungrammatical English, and O'Reilly entered to ask questions. He described a man he was seeking, but the few shopkeepers who understood could give him no information.

Several hours passed in useless interrogation. Wooden shutters went up in front of shops, for it was long past midnight. *Rayots* trickled into the bazaars from the country, bringing produce for the next day's markets: two-wheeled carts dragged by nodding, hump-backed-bullocks; a string of dusty donkeys, no bigger than dogs, piled high with earthenware *chatties*.

O'Reilly mopped his brow as he watched a shopkeeper take down his display of bright, spangled

slippers with turned-up toes, hanging in bunches like bananas. He began to feel disheartened. He was a little giddy, too, from breathing the strange, humid scents of the hot night—the mingled spicy fragrance of saffron and jasmin, with unpleasant overtones of rancid *ghi,* sweat, and bullock dung.

Then he saw his man.

He had been looking for the furtive European in the grimy topee, the man he had seen slinking away from the railway station immediately after the explosion. At first glimpse O'Reilly had spotted the man as a familiar type—the sort of person he would pick up if he found him loitering on his beat, to be fingerprinted on a chance that he might be wanted somewhere, to be questioned if there had been any unsavory incidents in the neighborhood. Now the man in the grimy topee was still slinking, walking stealthily along the opposite side of the narrow street, hugging the buildings, looking behind him every dozen steps. O'Reilly backed into the gloom until the man had passed.

The man disappeared around a jog in the crooked street. O'Reilly, trying to hurry his steps, found himself knee-deep in a flock of black goats that a naked ten-year-old boy was herding through the bazaar. By the time he reached the corner, the man with the grimy topee was nowhere to be seen.

Not yet having heard of the Hindu Rope Trick or the Great Mango Tree Illusion, O'Reilly did not ascribe the disappearance to an Oriental miracle. Instead, he began examining the closed shutters of the first shops at hand. He looked at nine before he found one with light glowing between the boards. He put his eye to a crack. Instantly a deep chuckle of satisfaction stirred in his throat. His man was inside.

He was seated at a table with three Orientals—a pot-bellied, three-chinned Bunya; a gray-whiskered Punjabi; and a coal-black Singhalese with a semi-circular comb stuck into the knot of long hair at the back of his head. Light from a kerosene lamp glistened on four perspiring foreheads bent over an object lying in the palm of the white man's hand. The object was a square-cut diamond, as big as an ice cube and flashing cold fire. It was the diamond of Prince Vinayak Rao Bahadur.

O'Reilly retreated a few steps, lowered his shoulder, and charged. The dry wood of the shutter splintered into kindling.

The four men about the table sprang up in alarm. The man with the grimy topee thrust the diamond into the trousers pocket of his crumpled white suit.

O'Reilly advanced into the dim, odorous recesses of the shop,

brushing himself off.

"Evening, gents," he said.

The quartet stared at him in h o s t i l e silence until he had reached the table. Then the Bunya said in a quavering tenor:

"Good evening, O'Reilly Sahib."

O'Reilly blinked in surprise. "Where'd I ever meet you before?" he demanded.

"Nowhere, Sahib. Bazaar talk has wings. And how could we mistake one so tall and strong, with such magnificent s c a r l e t hairs?"

"What's *your* name?" O'Reilly pointed his stick at the man with the grimy topee.

The European did not answer.

"You are doubtless stranger in India," whined the Bunya after a pause. "From Calcutta to Bombay people know Jan Van Laar . . . . "

"Van Laar, eh? Dutch?"

"Yah," said Van Laar.

O'Reilly's forehead creased in a pensive frown. He had arrested four Dutchmen once, during a diamond cutters' strike.

"What's your business?" he asked.

"Oh, a liddle uff ever't'ing," said Van Laar. "Anyt'ing to make a liffing."

O'Reilly noticed that Van Laar still had one hand in his pocket, the hand that held the Prince's diamond.

"Ever been a diamond-cutter?" he asked suddenly.

Van Laar began to stammer. "No . . . . Dat is, I used to was a diamond-cutter . . . but . . . years ago when I was young . . . in Amsterdam . . . . "

"And you cleared out two jumps ahead of the p o l i c e." O'Reilly shook his head knowingly "Hot ice, eh?"

Van Laar did not reply. His lips quivered slightly.

A poor crook, O'Reilly thought. No nerve. The sort of petty criminal that turns stool-pigeon.

"You was at the station tonight," said O'Reilly. "What happened to Prince Vinayak?"

There was a long pause. Insects buzzed and thumped about the kerosene lamp. Finally the Bunya spoke again.

"A n y o n e can guess, Sahib. Prince Vinayak is dead."

"Yeah?" exclaimed O'Reilly. "Why?"

"Because his greedy and ambitious half-brother, Prince Mahmed, wants to be Maharajah."

"Does Major Kobi Khan know this?" queried O'Reilly.

The Bunya, the Punjabi, and the Singhalese laughed softly. Only Van Laar did not laugh.

"Of course," smirked the Bunya. "Kobi Khan will be Prime Minister when Mahamed is Maharajah."

"Then why'n hell is Kobi Khan havin' ten men shot for not protectin' the Prince?" p u r s u e d O'Reilly.

The Bunya smiled pityingly. "Men to be shot are friendly to Prince Vinayak," he said. "Mahmed and Kobi Khan are destroying possible enemies."

"And is this guy Henderson in on their game?"

"Henderson Sahib is learned man," said the garrulous Bunya. "Henderson Sahib is making new translating of *Mahabharata* from Sanskrit. But his eyes are too deep in books to see what goes on in court and bazaars of Zarapore . . . . "

"Suppose he found out? What'd happen?"

"Who knows, Sahib?"

"Well, who the devil knows for sure that Prince Vinayvak is dead?"

No answer.

"You, Van Laar!" O'Reilly poked the European in the chest with his cane. "Was the Prince dead when you grabbed the diamond off his turban?"

Van Laar paled. "Vot . . . vot diamond?" he faltered.

"The sparkler you got in your pocket."

"You must be mistooken," Van Laar began, "I got no—"

His speech ended in a whimper. O'Reilly reached out one hand, grabbed Van Laar by the back of his soiled collar, lifted him clear off the floor, and shook him until his teeth chattered. Suddenly he dropped him. He saw something glitter in the hand of the Punjabi.

O'Reilly's cane swished through the fetid air. A knife clanged to the table. Then O'Reilly's left fist, with two hundred-odd pounds of New York policeman behind it, smacked into the Punjabi's hirsute face. A chair clattered over as the Punjabi fell backward and lay in a limp heap on the floor.

"And now," said O'Reilly, buttoning his coat, "let's quit foolin'. Where is that diamond?"

Van Laar no longer hesitated. His trembling hand placed the sparkling gem on the table. O'Reilly picked it up.

"I—we found it," said Van Laar.

"That's a lie," O'Reilly declared.

"No, I swear."

"Don't give me those," said O'Reilly.

"He is speaking truth," whined the Bunya. "We found it."

"Where?"

"Between railway station and *qaibkhana*."

"Come again?"

"Between station and jail."

"Now we're gettin' some place," announced O'Reilly, sitting down and taking out a Trichinopoly cheroot. "How'd you happen to find it? Follow the Prince?"

"No, no," protested Van Laar frantically. "We did not know it was Prince Vinayak. After bomb explode, I see some men carrying somet'ing heavy between cars of train—jail is on odder side of

tracks from station—so when train leave, I follow. Just before jail, I find *burra hira*—dis diamond."

"That's funny," mused O'Reilly. He lit his cheroot and squinted into the smoke. If they were going to kill the Prince, why hadn't they killed him outright, blaming it on the bomb? Why had they packed him off to jail? Maybe they were making sure in some way that Prince Vinayak would be obliterated without an incriminating trace. How? And why the jail? And why, of all things, had they got rid of this diamond? The diamond could not merely have dropped off, since it was firmly fastened to the front of the Prince's pink turban.

O'Reilly puffed furiously on his cheroot. It was possible, of course, that Van Laar was lying, although O'Reilly's policeman's instinct, born of years of contact with liars, told him that this trembling, sniveling beachcomber was speaking the truth. O'Reilly leaned back in his chair, looked at the glowing end of the cheroot, and thought back to that night in New York when someone had tried to push Prince Vinnie out the hotel window . . . .

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

Van Laar cringed before an expected blow.

"What time is it?" O'Reilly shouted.

"Half past four of morning time," said the Bunya.

O'Reilly stuffed the diamond into his pocket and grabbed Van Laar's arm.

"Come on," he said. "Show me the way to this bird Henderson's house—in a hurry."

O'Reilly banged on the door of Henderson's bungalow for five minutes before he aroused a sleepy *durwan*. Between yawns, the *durwan* explained drowsily that under no circumstances could he awaken his master at this hour. Whereupon O'Reilly awakened the *durwan* with a sharp blow of the heel of his palm under his brown chin. As the Hindu started over backward, O'Reilly caught him, tucked him under his left arm, and entered the dark house. The outraged *durwan* squawked, kicked, and yelled as O'Reilly strode across book-lined rooms. The *khansama* and two other servants came to the rescue, added their voices to the uproar.

At last the Political Officer himself appeared

"You!" he exclaimed, as the luminous cone of his flashlight picked out the New York policeman.

Leonard Henderson was the first man O'Reilly had ever seen who looked dignified in a nightgown.

"Get your duds on, Mr. Henderson," shouted O'Reilly, unceremoniously dropping the

squalling *durwan*. "We're going to stop a massacre."

"My dear fellow, I've already told you that this is a purely internal—"

"Listen," O'Reilly interrupted. "You're Political Officer, ain't you? Then rotten politics is right up your alley, ain't it? Well, where I come from, they invented rotten politics, Mr. Henderson, and I know the smell. Look here."

He showed the prince's diamond, briefly told his story.

"Extraordinary!" agreed the Political Officer. "Perhaps I *had* better go with you."

"Right away!" said O'Reilly.

The sky was already beginning to pale in the east as O'Reilly helped Henderson's heavy-eyed *syce* hitch a horse to his victoria.

Henderson was still tying his cravat when he jumped into the carriage, and ordered: *"Jeldi jao!"*

The *syce's* whip cracked, and the horse leaped into a canter. In front of the Ministry of Police, the brakes clamped shrieking against the wheels.

A *pahare-walla* on duty said that Major Kobi Khan was not there. He had already gone to the prison for the executions.

Again the *syce* urged the horse into a gallop. The victoria bounced and clattered over the railway tracks. Ahead, at the foot of a gentle slope, the bulging domes of the prison loomed black against the brightening sky.

There were crowds of people on the road, too, despite the hours—straggling groups of Hindus and Moslems heading for the prison, drawn by some common morbidity, by the universal fascination of foreordained death. Apparently the executions were to be public, on the sun-baked field outside the prison walls, for a troop of mounted guards was deployed there, green pennants hanging limp from their lances in the calm of dawn.

The mounted guards stopped Henderson's carriage, and there was a heated parley in Hindustani as to whether it was to be allowed to go on. In the meantime the prisoners were being led from the prison. O'Reilly could see them marched through a gate, flanked by soldiers and torch-bearers whose flares paled at the advance of day. He heard a sudden blare of sound—the ominous beat of drums, the mournful bellow of Hindu horns, and the squeal of gourd instruments. A little band of turbaned musicians in gaudy uniforms followed the prisoners, pouring out strange dissonances as a last salute to the men about to die.

"Achcha, Sahib!"

The mounted guards were convinced. The Political Officer's carriage started rolling again.

O'Reilly could see the firing squad, now—a double rank of green-turbaned soldiers. Opposite them the ten condemned men were being lined against a wall. Eight of them stood erect and unafraid. One was gesticulating and talking wildly. The tenth, whose blue turban, horn-rimmed spectacles, and close-cropped black beard proclaimed him as Sharik, was slumped against the wall.

Major Kobi Khan half turned in his saddle at the approach of the victoria. When he saw the Political Officer, he beamed with pleasure. When he saw O'Reilly beside him, his expression changed. Turning back abruptly to face the officer commanding the firing detail, he gave an order.

"Banduq chalao!"

"Stop!" Henderson exclaimed. "They mustn't fire, Major! They—"

"It is the hour set for the execution," said Kobi Khan.

Then Terrence O'Reilly went into action. With a single bound he landed in the driver's seat, almost in the *syce's* lap. Snatching up the reins, he snapped them with the sound of a pistol shot, stung the horse into a gallop.

Kobi Khan shouted something as the victoria dashed past him, past the firing squad.

O'Reilly tugged at the right rein as though he wanted to pull the horse's head off. The carriage veered, tottered, then went careening across the field of death, throwing up showers of stones and clouds of dust between executioners and condemned.

Henderson leaned over the driver's seat, his face white.

"You're mad, O'Reilly. They'll kill us."

O'Reilly stole a backward glance. The voice of Kobi Khan boomed above the confused roar of the crowd.

"They won't dare shoot the Political Officer," said O'Reilly. "And as for Officer O'Reilly—"

He yanked the left rein. The horse reared, shied, then made the turn. There was a scraping of wheels.

O'Reilly jumped. Without looking behind, he ran the few remaining steps to the ten prisoners backed against the wall. He went directly to the limp, black-bearded man in the blue turban, who toppled over when touched. O'Reilly picked him up tenderly, listened anxiously for his heartbeat. The man gave a queer, guttural gasp.

Inexplicably the fatal volley still hung fire.

Leonard Henderson, who had stopped the victoria, came running up beside the red-headed giant.

"Hear that snoring noise he makes, Mr. Henderson?" panted O'Reilly "Concussion. They musta cracked him on the onion when they snatched him .... Grab that blue turban off, Mr. Henderson. And them glasses...while I peel

off those phony whiskers. Look. Crepe hair, Mr. Henderson!"

O'Reilly stripped tufts of false beard from the psuedo-Sharik.

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Henderson. "It *is* Prince Vinayak. How will Major Kobi Khan explain this?"

But Major Kobi Khan had not remained to give any explanation. While he was more than eager to murder his own people for the sake of his ambitions, he was not ready to risk the wrath and might of the British Empire by shooting a Viceregal representative. Hence he had left the firing squad to shift for itself, while he departed hurriedly for the Zarapore palace to inform Prince Mahmed and the genuine Sharik, who was hiding there, that a long voyage would be good for their health, and that he would be glad to accompany them on the Bombay Mixed Passenger leaving at six o'clock ....

Prince Vinayak Rao recovered consciousness late that night. O'Reilly and Henderson were at his bedside.

"What happened?" he asked.

Leonard Henderson told him briefly, and Terrence O'Reilly told him at length. O'Reilly explained that his suspicions had been first aroused when the name of Sharik was included in the list of friends of the Prince scheduled for execution. Since the incident of the cablegram and the sleepwalking in New York, O'Reilly had had a pretty good idea that Sharik was by no means a friend of the Prince. The finding of the diamond by Van Laar suggested that the Prince's pink turban had been torn violently from his head. Why—since it was not for the purpose of stealing a gem as big as an ice cube? Something more important. What? Well, it must have been for a quick change, to replace the pink turban with a blue one, to disguise Vinayak Rao so that he could be shot, killed right under the nose of the British agent, and buried under another identity, which would balk investigation.

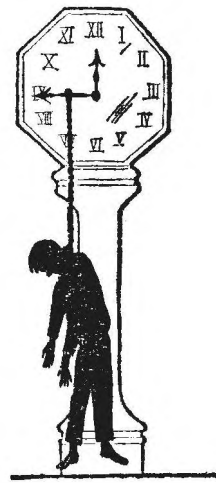
"An extraordinary bit of police work, Your Highness," commented the Political Officer, "for a man who has been only a few hours in Zarapore, who doesn't know the language, who—"

"Baloney!" interrupted O'Reilly, holding up his huge, authoritative hand as though he were directing traffic in Times Square. "A good cop is a good cop anywhere." ■ ■

Some people are devilishly hard to kill. Uncle Nicholas was one. Even the most determined murderer could grow long teeth waiting for stubborn old Uncle Nicholas to give up the ghost . . .

LONG TEETH

by R. A. LAFFERTY



"A PERSON CAN GROW A PRETTY long set of teeth while waiting for a man to die," said Carla.

"A man is entitled to live out his life. And you won't hasten a death by wishing," said Clinton.

Clinton was glad that it was his wife Carla who had brought the topic up. He had often wished his Uncle Nicholas dead, but he had always been afraid to voice the wish.

"A man is not necessarily entitled to live out his life," said Carla. "Sometimes he must move along to make room for others. This old world is a little crowded. One man cannot hold one table all day and dawdle over a glass of water. It's like in a cafeteria. You have to keep them moving through. It's our turn to sit at the table now."

"He isn't old. A little over fifty."

"He is fifty-three years, seven months and nine days old. His calculated worth is three hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars (my own calculation but a close one); you are his heir, Clinton. He is moreover highly insured with such a multiplicity of policies that it is almost impossible to tabulate them or even to be sure that I know about them all. He is unsound of heart, liver, lung, kidney, and stomach; has high blood pressure, ulcers, and Evan's Disease; in short, he is the kind of man who might live forever. I have no faith in the early death of a man with a number of deadly

diseases."

"It worries me that I have a clever wife. Why did you marry me, Carla?"

"I married you because you are the heir of a rich uncle. But I did not invest in you to wait forever on my investment."

So Clinton knew that his Uncle Nicholas had already been sentenced to death, and he was not really sorry for it. The old man had lived long enough, he told himself. Or had Carla told him so? He was no longer sure in his own mind what was his own and what Carla had sown there.

Uncle Nicholas had no kindred except the two nephews, Clinton and Walter; and Walter had been disinherited. Walter was the prodigal nephew and he was no great respecter of Uncle Nicholas. Velma his wife was an empty doll. And Walter Jr., well who could say what he was really like? He may have been a little bit like Uncle Nicholas. He may even have been a little like Clinton.

And as for Clinton, he was serving time. He was the right-handman for Uncle Nicholas. He waited; and now that Carla had given him the idea, he waited with a certain impatience. Yet actually he was rather fond of Uncle Nicholas. Of himself he would never seriously have thought of doing in the old duffer.

Nicholas was, in fact, a fine old bumbler, quiet and generous, and his only fault was that he was living too long. He lived in the old house on top of the hill. Clinton and Carla, by his bounty, lived in the New House half way down the hill. And by common custom, for theirs was a very close family, each had the run of the home of the other.

Nicholas, however, was not a bumbler as to money. He had been lucky and he had been astute. And he had accumulated quietly and steadily. Yet always he had led a quiet life.

Now, however, his life was filled with a series of odd events.

There was first the time that he was bitten on the inside of the mouth by a milliped or some such poisonous pest. The creature was inside a sandwich that he had been eating at a small family picnic. But how the monster happened to get into the sandwich was a mystery. Uncle Nicholas did not die. He did not even become very sick, and the doctor said that he had a very resilient constitution, for all of his disabilities. It is true that his tongue swelled to elaborate proportions, and that for about three weeks he spoke in a comical mush-mouthed childish way.

And there was the night when, the last thing before he went to bed, Uncle Nick got his toddy glass and then reached for the door of the small cabinet where he

kept the most steadfast and gracious bottle of rye whisky in town. But for once he paused and turned on the light.

It was not a large snake. A coral snake is not commonly very large. And nine and a half men out of ten would have taken it for one of the non-poisonous king snakes of the region. But, scarce forty years before, Uncle Nicholas had been a boy scout, and things once learned are learned forever.

So he killed the poisonous coral, and then held a conversation with the rye whisky as the two of them became one.

"I know I do not have an enemy; for a man such as I am does not make enemies. But it may be that one of my friends has calculated my life span on a shorter basis than is practical; that one has desired to ease and shorten my path and spare me the last long years which are commonly, though I believe erroneously, thought to be dismal ones. But there are some things in which a man should not let himself be influenced, not even by well meaning friends."

For now Nicholas began to develop an ingenious and amused antipathy towards dying.

Then there was the fine piano wire across his stairway that pinged when he broke it.

"Luckily I am such a heavy-footed clod-hopper. I see now that I have to do with an eager amateur, than which nothing is more dangerous."

And then there was the sad death of the grandfather clock. It was very old when it died. This is the way it was. Uncle Nicholas had inherited it, and it stood in his main hallway. He wound it every Friday night, the last thing before he took his toddy, after he had checked and locked the doors and turned down the thermostat, and killed the main lights, and turned on the night light in the stair well.

There was a little snap door that one opened and inserted there the key to wind. But there was an oddity about (or behind) the small door this night.

"Can it be," said Uncle Nicholas, "that a kind friend has decided that the time is very late for me as well as for the clock, and would spare us both the trouble of ticking any more hours? But an old fox can smell a trap, just as a coyote can sense poisoned bait, and a canny fish a hook. I wonder what it is that they put in blasting powder nowadays? I believe that they have cheapened it. They have not, at any rate, made it odorless. O well, the clock has lived a long and faithful life; but, as for myself, I cannot come till I am called."

But he sought to do it with the least possible damage to his hallway. From the backyard he

brought in two sheets of galvanized iron and made a v-shaped shield. Then, with a cord to the knob of the key compartment, from a distance of ten feet, he opened the door.

It was loud; and at close range it might have been fatal. It did some, but not extensive, damage to the hallway. And it stilled the clock forever. It dissolved into ancient splinters, with its metallic entrails looped grotesquely about.

"One more old friend gone," said Uncle Nicholas, "and there are so few left."

There were other incidents; and some of the weirdest of them were those that never happened. The old house, high on the crest of the hill, was a target for lightning. And the high lightning rod above the main gable had drawn and grounded many a bolt. So Uncle Nicholas was not greatly surprised when he discovered a clever gadget attached to its ground. This was a transformer with its heavy primary coil in series with the ground, coupled with a sparking coil arranged to detonate caps for a truly amazing quantity of powder sufficient to bring down the house.

"My friends become still more solicitous," said Uncle Nicholas. "They would ease the burden of my days, and give me release from a world which, for even the best of men, is no more than a compromise. I sympathize with their concern; but a man still has not the right to leave till he is called."

And there was the time when he made the periodic check on his fire extinguishers, for he was a careful man and had several of them. Now, carbon-tetrachloride and kerosene both have pungent odors, but they are not the same, and even a dotty old man (and he was not that yet) can tell the difference. Fortunately, for the several small fires that had broken out mysteriously, he had not had to use them.

All this time the months were going by and they were all getting a little older. It seemed in fact as though Clinton and Carla were gaining on Uncle Nicholas in age and might someday even surpass him if stern steps were not taken. But efforts were doubled and redoubled and all stops pulled out and thrown away.

There were Amenhotep I, II, III and IV, not to mention V, VI, VII, VIII and IX, the latter several of these having no dynastic equivalents. These, not to be mysterious, were cats. Uncle Nicholas had always kept a large black cat. And from common politeness he invariably offered the cat of his own fare several hours before partaking of it himself. And as each cat died queerly, he procured another from a cat man in a near town, all identical in appearance; and every

few months he had to inter one and procure another, but the world did not know that he had more than the one cat.

Carla continued to bring delicious and esoteric dishes to Uncle Nicholas, but she had long since lost faith in them.

"There are some very weird things going on at Uncle Nicholas'," remarked Clinton one day.

"Weird indeed!" clacked Carla angrily. "If you can devise them any better, then the world is still waiting for it. Is it I who have failed so far? But I will not always fail."

Clinton noticed that of recent years his wife Carla used only the angry edge of her voice. She sounded like a cracked bell. There had been a time when there were chimes in her voice. And her looks had slipped a little. A bitterness had taken part of the sheen from her, and she was no longer the fairest female you might encounter in a long journey. A five-minute walk now would turn up a dozen to beat her.

Once, for a few months in the middle years, there appeared a complication. Walter, the prodigal, came home with wife and waif, and, having no home of his own, they moved into the Old House with Uncle Nicholas. The waif was Walter Jr., who had now reached his mid-teens; and the three interlopers worried Carla unaccountably.

"There is the terrible possibility that Uncle Nicholas may change his will to include them," she said. "We must somehow counteract their machinations."

"I don't believe that Walter is at all interested in the inheritance," said Clinton, "or has even thought of it."

But that very summer a terrible accident occurred, the cause of which has never been ascertained. Uncle Nicholas had gone riding with Walter and his wife Velma Jr., in the sway-backed but very scupy old car of Walter's. Now, in an old car like that one that has had the very whey driven out of it, and which was admittedly mobiling at a high rate of speed, a fault is always likely to occur. But what happened to the steering mechanism may not have been accidental, though the investigators could prove nothing definite from the wreckage.

Walter and Velma were killed, but Uncle Nicholas and Walter Jr., came out of the smash-up scarcely scratched.

"It saddens me," said Uncle Nicholas to himself, "that my kind friends should have brought destruction to others in their attempts to shorten my long way. But it is always the case that an erroneous postulate will give an embarrassing answer."

So Clinton and Carla were now

burdened with the care of Walter Jr., their growing nephew. Carla, who had in those years become nervous and taut, seemed unable to generate anything beyond a chilly sort of love for him, though Clinton came to like the boy well enough.

Then for a period of years they went through the last phase. Uncle Nick must have known that his friends would finally lay him to rest before his full days had run out. They hunted him over the squares of the old chess board, and he knew there were only so many plays till mate.

"The boy also is a threat to us," said Carla. "When he reaches his majority he will surely be included in the inheritance, or even earlier if Uncle Nicholas happens to think of it."

"What is the difference? In any case we will in turn make him our heir."

"There is all the difference. What if junior should marry (and he does seem to have that glitter in his eye young as he is), and Uncle Nicholas still be alive? Our own share would be diminished, and I will not be satisfied with anything less than the total; not after all the patient planning I have put into it."

But Walter Jr., continued to grow up, and the nubile glitter in his eye had now become a gleam. And all the while Uncle Nicholas remained discouragingly alive.

"It is time to take stern measures," said Carla. "I have been cautious and luck has been against me. I cannot afford to be cautious any longer. I will settle this one way or another this very weekend. This is the end of the road. There will be no backing down or half-way measures this time. It will be Uncle Nicholas or myself."

But, as it happened, it was both of them.

It was an unusual accident; and, if not an accident, as least an unusual happening. What really took place, by the very nature of the thing, could have been known to only two persons, Uncle Nicholas and Carla; and they, both being dead at the finish of it, were unable (or at least unwilling) to come forward with an explanation.

Uncle Nicholas burned to death, there is no doubt of that. He was thoroughly roasted. And Carla had apparently set herself slightly on fire in the melee; and then that cool woman seemed to have lost her head. She could easily have extinguished the little fire that had caught her by rolling. She did, in fact, put it out by her rolling fall downstairs. But she broke her neck in doing it, and died unjustified and perhaps unrepentant.

Clinton had expected to be lonesome now that his wife was gone, but he was not. He entered

a period of surprising contentment. He himself would never have gone so far as to murder for money. But the murderer, if there was one, had been punished; and all of the apples had fallen into Clinton's waiting basket, though another had gone to the trouble of shaking the tree.

Clinton and Walter Jr., moved into the Old House, and Clinton now looked forward to many happy and full years in his new role as the elder uncle. He became surpassing fond of young Walter, his pride and heir. This was a good boy of fine prospects, and when he married (as he had every indication of doing) then he would be given the New House for himself and bride, and Uncle Clinton would continue on in the Old House as proud Uncle and respected head of the tribe.

There were so many of them, and all so pretty: Marietta and Jeannie Lou, and Anabelle, and Charlotte, and Stella Marie.

Young Walter, as the heir apparent to a wealthy uncle, had his pick of them; and he married Charlotte.

Sometimes, if you are not paying attention, you may look away for an instant, and when you look back you will find that four or five years have gone by. If it weren't for these abridgements, life would be as long as it is wonderful.

Something like this happened now and a handful of years had passed. Clinton one day wandered down to the New House of young Walter and his wife. And, not having announced his presence, he happened to overhear them quite by accident.

"He is not really old," said Walter, "a little over fifty. We may as well take off our coats and hats and be patient. We may have a long wait.

"There is a point," said Charlotte coldly, "where patience ceases to be a virtue. Fate is the pokiest ox in the world if left to itself. But with a prod it can be hurried."

"I hope you are not thinking what I am afraid you are thinking."

"All I can say is that a person has time to grow very long teeth while waiting to dine on a dead man's leavings."

Clinton was chilled and saddened and suddenly aged when he heard it.

"I am deeply shocked to hear you talk like that," said young Walter. Yet a thoughtful listener, and Uncle Clinton was, might have felt that Walter was not nearly as shocked as he should have been. ■ ■

He planned her murder so beautifully that nothing could possibly go wrong. He was such a careful man ...

THE CAREFUL MURDERER

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

SIMEON FLETCHER WAS A CAREFUL man. He did nothing on impulse, and left no strings untied. Not for him a perfectly planned murder undone by just one neglected factor.

His plan included pretended drunkenness. Therefore he must, though hitherto he had been alcoholically abstemious, accustom himself to hard liquor. Mithridates, he remembered from his schooldays, had done as much with alcohol?

Gradually, little by little, he let himself have one too many and show it—but always in very special company, that of his fellow-members in the Harcourt Den of the Ancient and Benevolent Order of Bruins; for they were a *sine qua non* of success in his project. The time had already been set—the annual State get-together of the ABOB in Valley Town, 30 miles from Harcourt. Fletcher was local Nose Ring of the Bruins (it was good for business) and would certainly be a delegate.

By the time he grunted a cold farewell to Madge—the last time, he hoped, he would ever have to speak to her—the boys had become accustomed to seeing old Sim occasionally the worse for wear; in fact, some of the brothers were beginning to wonder whether it was desirable to keep him on as guardian of the Den's treasury. That didn't bother Fletcher; once he had used the Bruins as an alibi he didn't care whether or not he even remained a member. Like everything else in his life—including Madge—they were only a means to an end.

When he had married Madge,

14 years before, she had had youth, good looks, a small fortune, and an amiable disposition. Now she had none of these. The good looks had vanished with the youth, the disposition had soured, and the money had been invested in her husband's business. She had become a nagger, a sloppy housekeeper, and a hypochondriac. It was time to do better. Naturally, he had her successor picked out, though, careful as ever, he had made no advances that could arouse suspicion. Madge would never divorce him, he had no grounds on which to divorce her, and so there was only one way left to remove the burden. Being kind as well as cautious, he had worked out a method which would avoid foreknowledge, pain, or blood; she would never know, and it could never be pinned on him.

The convention went as such conventions go. The night before adjournment was the one he had picked. He had been to many ABOB meetings, and he knew the ropes. After the big banquet some of the Harcourt boys would gather in one of the rooms and polish the celebration off. Any room in the St. John would do, as long as it wasn't his own. It was Joe Ludwick who issued the invitation.

"O.K., Joe, but I've got to go easy. Back to work tomorrow, you know."

"Back to work for all of us, Sim. Just one more good time till next year."

Joe had a whole case of Scotch. The room grew hot and noisy and hazy with smoke, with six of them in it. But Sim was careful. His glass needed refilling constantly, but nobody noticed how often he slipped into the bathroom and came back with an empty one. It wouldn't do to seem to be affected too quickly. By nine o'clock he was leading the singing. By 9.30 he was insisting on doing a solo. By 10 he was incoherent. At 10.30 —he glanced at his watch first— he collapsed on the floor. Face down, he waited for action.

"Oh-oh, old Sim's passed out." That was Joe.

"Sho hazh." That would be Jim McNamara, pretty near ready to pass out himself.

"What'll we do—throw him up here on the bed?" Harry Munn's voice.

Fletcher managed a sigh. "Wanna go m'own room," he muttered, then snored.

"Come on, Harry, gimme a hand. Key's in his pocket, I guess —yeah."

He felt himself being picked up by both shoulders, let himself be dragged through the door and down the hall, be propped against the wall while his door was opened. He was hoisted and dumped; the bed springs creaked beneath him.

"Lock the door?" asked Harry.

"You go out first and I'll lock it and push the key under the crack so he can use it in the morning."

At 1.15 by his watch the phone rang—one of the boys, doubtless, trying to find out if he'd revived and could rejoin them. It couldn't be anybody else, since Madge wouldn't dream of phoning him—and would be asleep by now, anyway. Carefully, he let it ring. They must be satisfied he was still dead to the world.

He could hear the celebration down the hall—and other celebrations in other rooms—quite easily. The hotel would ignore complaints, since the Bruins were big business. But this wouldn't be any all-night affair; he remembered past conventions. The liquor would give out, and they'd try to get some sleep.

By 2 a.m. the doors had stopped slamming, the goodnights had all been called, the last footsteps had passed. He got up cautiously, retrieved the key, and opened the door. Quiet as a desert at midnight.

Fletcher straightened his clothes, combed his hair, washed his face and hands in cold water. He looked out again; not a soul stirring.

He had stayed many times at the St. John. He knew its lay-out well. The fire stairs were at the end of the hall, and they ended at the back of the lobby. The night clerk was the only hazard; the side door was kept locked at night to discourage possible rent-dodgers. But trust Fletcher, the careful man, to manage that. The house phones stood in their niche near by, the switchboard was behind the frosted glass partition at the desk.

Soundless on the thick carpet, he removed a phone from its cradle as he passed. The instant he heard the clerk answer, he slipped through the darkened lobby. Before the man could investigate, he was through the revolving door and around the corner.

He had left his car at a self-service all-night parking lot a block from the hotel. He met nobody. In ten minutes from the time he had left his room, wearing an overcoat but hatless—hats can blow off in winter winds—he was driving, strictly at the speed limit even at such an hour, toward Harcourt. He had noted, of course, that there would be no moon; the clouds that hid the stars were a piece of luck that not even he could have arranged.

He was not stupid enough to park too near his own house. Neighbors sometimes wake and see inconvenient things—above all, old Mrs. Askins across the street. She hated him. Perhaps she had found out who had sent the anonymous complaints to the authorities about the chickens she kept, and about the way she let her

front garden go to weeds, and lower neighborhood values. He had been far too cautious ever to attack her openly, but she must have guessed. She never answered his polite "good morning" any more.

Behind his back garden a parkway separated the street from the campus of Harcourt Junior College; he ran the car in under the thick trees, crossed the street on foot, vaulted the picket fence, and walked on grass to the front door, where, after a cautious glance around, he let himself in.

Madge's schedule was as familiar to him as his own. Every night she walked her disgusting Pekinese, went to bed around 12, read and smoked for an hour, then put out the lamp and went to sleep. Without that schedule, there could have been no plan; without her smoking in bed the whole thing would have been impossible. It had been the memory of the three times in the past when he had awakened to smell smoke, and saved her, the house, and himself in the nick of time—once, he recalled with satisfaction, he had had to call the fire department and they had had to report it to the insurance company—which had given him the original idea.

He paused outside Madge's closed door to reconnoiter.

No light would be needed, he knew the position of everything by heart. Fingerprints didn't matter; who but themselves knew how seldom the husband entered his wife's bedroom? There was no danger of awakening her; she slept like the dead (he permitted himself a private grin) and only an alarm clock woke her to grumble out of bed and, in dressing-gown and slippers, grudgingly make his breakfast. Nevertheless, he need not make a sound. The dog knew him and would not bark.

He had considered carefully how she should be smothered. To pull a pillow from under her head might arouse even Madge. To bring one from his own room meant returning it, in case the fire should not spread far enough. He could, of course, simply sit down on her head and stay there till she ceased struggling. But the thought of that, especially if she happened to be lying on her back, was distasteful. So he had decided to use his heavy overcoat, and his wiry arms. He took the coat off now, and folded it twice. Then, very quietly, he opened the door. He had thought of everything; he had even made sure before he left for the convention that the hinges and the knob were well oiled.

On the bedside table, besides the lamp and clock, there would be her book, her reading glasses, her cigarettes, matches, and the ash tray she had already missed three times with sleepy fingers from which a smouldering ciga-

rette had dropped on to the mattress. As soon as he was certain she was dead, he would light a cigarette, smoke it down an inch, then drop it beside her. To make doubly sure, he would set fire to the mattress in several other places as well. His tidy brain reminded him to take all those matches with him and throw them away later—fires were freakish, and there must not be more burnt matches found by chance than there were cigarette stubs. He had played with the idea of sprinkling a little kerosene on the bed for absolute certainty, but the firemen might smell it. Even using a lighter might be dangerous.

By the time anyone could discover the fire, he would be far away. Madge's body would be burnt beyond any evidence of how she had died. (But wasn't death by asphyxiation the same, whether through inhaling smoke or through smothering?) The house was fully insured.

For an instant he thought worriedly, *had* he forgotten something? How had he arranged to re-enter the hotel without being seen? Then he remembered. The side door was locked at night only by an outside bolt, for the convenience of employees—one of whom would catch hell for having left it open. But that didn't matter. He could easily climb back up the stairs and, by watching carefully, make it back to his room and be apparently completely "out" till he woke with a fearful hangover—or was awakened by a phone call from the Harcourt police. Everything was perfectly planned. This was not going to be one of those murders where one foolish mishap ruins a perfect crime.

He reached the bed.

It was empty. It had not been opened. Not even that spoiled pooch lay on it.

Bewildered, he fingered the bedside table. There was nothing on it but the lamp and the alarm clock.

Simeon Fletcher, careful as ever, thought fast.

Had Madge taken advantage of his absence and left him, gone away of her own accord? No such luck; he knew his Madge. Had she gone to spend the night with someone? She was on no such terms with anybody.

Had she been taken ill suddenly, phoned the doctor, been taken to a hospital? Then he must get back to Valley Town immediately, be in his hotel room to receive a phone call. He thought uneasily of the unanswered call at 1.15, but he could say he had been dead to the world, and be backed up in it by his friends. His whole scheme would be ruined, and another would have to be concocted, but the abortive effort would remain a secret.

But, careful and cautious as always, he must know the score before he could do anything. Sick with disappointment, after all his trouble and labor, after having keyed himself to the deed, still his mind remained clear and sharp.

A phone call from the house might be traced. As quietly as he had come, he left again, carefully locking the door behind him. A block away there was a public phone booth on the street. By a roundabout route, watching for people abroad—milkmen, policemen, homeward-bound revelers—he reached it.

He dialed the local hospital, then the other two in nearby towns. None of them had received Madge Fletcher as a patient.

Placing a handkerchief over the receiver to disguise his voice, he dialed Dr. Norton's number. Doctors are used to calls in the early hours. After four rings, Norton himself answered, his voice heavy with sleep.

"Doctor," Simeon said, "I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but I'm Mrs. Fletcher's next door neighbor. I'm a night worker, and I just got home. My wife says Mrs. Fletcher was taken ill tonight and she thought she saw you come to the house. But she couldn't get any answer when she called right afterwards to see if she could help, and she's afraid after you left Mrs. Fletcher must have become unconscious and need you. Mr. Fletcher's out of town and she's all alone."

"Tell your wife she's been dreaming," snapped the doctor. "I haven't been near the Fletcher house tonight, and as far as I know they're both in blooming health." He banged down the receiver.

Madge, a creature of habit, would never have called any other doctor, if she had been able to call at all.

Had she for any reason called the police? Had she heard a prowler, or imagined she had? Was she at police headquarters now, trying to identify a suspect? He didn't dare call them.

The sensible thing was to give up at this point, hurry back to his hotel room, wait till the convention was over and he had come back home at the expected time to find out what had happened. Anyone else, Fletcher realized, would do just that, and quickly, before the darkness faded. But with Simeon Fletcher caution had become a compulsion. He went back to his house to check up once more.

There, as he took out his key to open the front door again, a uniformed police officer emerged from the shadows and grabbed him.

He did not lose his calm.

"So something *is* wrong!" he cried, letting his voice get a bit shrill. "I knew it. I'm Simeon

Fletcher, officer. I live here. I've been at the Bruins' convention in Valley Town, and tonight I tried three times to phone my wife, with no answer. I knew she had expected to stay here while I was gone, and I finally got so worried I got out of bed and drove all the way here to find out. What is it—has something happened to her?"

As he spoke, he was pulling out of his wallet the cards that would identify him. The policeman scarcely glanced at them, though he turned a flashlight briefly in their direction.

"Where's your car?" he asked.

"Under the trees on the parkway; I was afraid I'd disturb her if I drove right in."

Another man appeared from the shadows—one in plain clothes this time. Fletcher knew him by sight—the chief of police of Harcourt, and one eighth of the entire force.

"What kind of car is it?" he demanded.

"Dark blue sedan." Fletcher gave the make and year.

"Uh-huh, that checks. Sullivan, go around and drive it here."

"Look, what's this all about? Where's my wife?"

"Where you put her. In the morgue."

"The—the morgue?" Fletcher no longer had to simulate bewilderment or excitement.

The chief was silent. They stood there, Fletcher's mind frantically trying to get some inkling of what had happened, until the uniformed officer drove the car up to the closed garage. He disappeared again around the corner, and arrived in a minute with the town's only police car, which had apparently been parked there. Then the chief spoke.

"All right, Sullivan. Fletcher, get into your own car. I'll drive. We'll talk at the station."

"But this is nonsense!" Simeon said angrily. "What kind of stuff are you pulling? I told you why I came here."

"I don't care why you came, mister. All I want to know is when."

It was an impasse. If something had happened to Madge—something not of his planning—*when* had it happened? Never mind the all-night alibi he'd arranged; this changed things. And so far as a genuine alibi went, nobody had actually seen him after 10.30.

"O.K.," he said briefly. "Let's go and get this straightened out. Here I come home because I'm worried about my wife, and before I've even entered the house you tell me—my God, you tell me she's dead! How? Why? When? For heaven's sake, man, tell me what happened!"

The chief looked for an instant rather taken aback. Then he pushed Fletcher into his own car, shoved him over, and climbed in after him into the driver's seat.

"We'll be at the station in five minutes," he said, "and then you can find out what's what. I've got the affidavit there."

In the chief's office Fletcher listened, trying to figure it out.

Madge had been walking the dog, at nearly midnight, as usual. A hit-run driver, coming behind her as she crossed the street, had struck her, hurling her 20 feet to land on her head against the curb. She had been killed instantly; the Pekinese had been injured so badly the policeman who reached the scene soon after had shot it.

"But this is ridiculous! What makes you think *I* had anything to do with it?"

"You were seen. A neighbor happened to be looking out of her window and saw the whole thing. She swears it was your car, and that you were in it."

Mrs. Askins, the vindictive old hag.

"You won't find anything wrong with my car, anything whatever to indicate I hit anything, because I didn't. You can go over it inch by inch."

"We're doing that now," said the police chief calmly. "But it won't matter. The car struck Mrs. Fletcher slantingly and she was thrown away from it instantly. There wouldn't necessarily be any damage to it."

"But of all the idiotic things! It *wasn't* my car; at 12.30 I was in my own room in the St. John Hotel in Valley Town. And suppose it *had* been mine—what kind of impossible coincidence would it be that I should just happen to drive down that block at the moment my wife just happened to be crossing the street, and then just happened to hit her?"

"But that isn't the way Mrs. Askins said it occurred. I have her affidavit here."

The chief put on reading glasses and consulted a paper on his desk.

"It seems she couldn't sleep, so she was sitting at her bedroom window."

"In the dark?"

"There's a street light. She saw your house-door open, and Mrs. Fletcher come out with the dog, as she did every night. Then this car appeared at the end of the block, going slowly in the same direction. Mrs. Askins saw it plainly, and she insists it was yours, which she sees daily, and that you were driving. It speeded up suddenly, and Mrs. Askins swears it deliberately ran Mrs. Fletcher down as she started to cross the street.

"As soon as Mrs. Fletcher was identified, we tried to reach you in Valley Town, but there was no answer. If you'd answered, of course, we'd have paid no attention to her story. But instead we caught you trying to sneak into your house here."

Simeon Fletcher was utterly beyond words.

They couldn't convict him, of course, on nothing but the accusation of a crackbrained old woman who hated him—couldn't convict him even of manslaughter or negligent homicide, let alone premeditated murder. He probably couldn't even be indicted. But the publicity would be enough, in a town this size. Nobody would ever be sure. His business would be ruined, the affluent young woman he had in mind as Madge's successor would never let him near her again, he would have to leave Harcourt forever.

For if the charge could never be proved, it could never be disproved, either. He had no way to verify that he had been in bed in the hotel at midnight. Ludwick and McNamara and Munn could testify he had been too drunk to drive when they put him to bed, but it would be easy to show that they themselves were in good earnest too drunk to be judges. No one had seen him leave the hotel, no one had seen him take his car from the lot, to show that he was still in Valley Town at 2 a.m. And because he had been careful not to answer the phone, his very care had undone him. They must have tried again after he had left: then, when there was still no reply, they would have asked the Valley Town police to have his room entered—and it would have been found empty, nobody would know for how long.

And where could he say he had been, between the time Madge was killed and the time Sullivan grabbed him at his front door? He certainly couldn't tell them the truth—that he had been in his own house, in Madge's own room; that he had called the hospitals and the doctor; that when they caught him on the doorstep it had been for the second time he had stood there.

So Mrs. Askins' fantastic fabrication would be believed—by far too many people in Harcourt.

Every single thing he had done to make sure he would never be suspected of Madge's death—the elaborate alibi, the careful checking and rechecking, the cautious protection against every foreseeable emergency—had backfired on him. Some crazy speeder, whose car happened to be of the same common make as his own, and whom nobody would ever look for now, had done his job for him. And the only result of this miracle was that he, completely innocent, would never again be free of suspicion of having murdered his wife.

Simeon Fletcher sat speechless by the chief's desk. He was trapped by his own impeccable and far-seeing carefulness. ■ ■

For a number of years John Collier has been the acknowledged master of the ironic crime story, a form in which he has produced such unforgettable masterpieces as De Mortuis, Home for Christmas, *and* The Chaser. *When writing at the top of his bent, John Collier turns out fiction with the unmistakable stamp of the classic, a fact demonstrated by its frequent appearance in various anthologies of the 'best' in crime fiction. His formidable reputation is based upon a graceful and expressive style, a highly civilized approach to people and the situations in which they find themselves, and a delicious appreciation of the subtle and unexpected developments which human conduct can often take. All these qualities are present in his newest story, the tale of a "con" man and his lady love. O. Henry immortalized the confidence man in his memorable stories about* The Gentle Grafter, *but we suspect that John Collier has here created perhaps the gentlest of them all.*

STRAIGHT AND NARROW

by JOHN COLLIER

BILL SNYDER BROUGHT HIS HAND down loud and flat upon the table. The table, under the impact of so much self-righteous meat, trembled as if its legs were about to give way. Harry's felt much the same. The scales fell from his eyes.

He saw that Bill Snyder should never have been included in the venture; Bill Snyder's hair was of that densely growing variety which suggests a voracious materialism and a vulgar energy. Harry looked at the lower joints of Bill Snyder's fingers splayed upon the harmless, still trembling table. These, too, bore hairs of a peculiar sort, strong as wire and curved as cruel as claws. Harry belatedly recognised the claws of that beast which all his life he had had most reason to dread.

"What I want to know," Bill Snyder was saying, "is just exactly what's been happening to our money."

The indecent demand, stabbing to the point, opened wounds like newly opened eyes on all the otherwise rather blind and mild faces of the people in the room. They now turned towards Harry, looking at him. In these little showdowns, or revelations, or Judgment Days, there is inevitably a certain apocalyptic quality.

This showdown was the result of many months of Harry's work, and he was sorry to see the last of it. Its disappearance left the room inexpressibly colourless and sad. And over all there darted and threshed and slashed the muscular and untiring tongue of Bill Snyder, like a serpent's tongue, like a flail, like a flaming sword. Such is the tongue of one who is unashamedly obsessed with the question of what may, quite unintentionally, have happened to his lousy money.

"Okay, so you paid on the land," said Bill Snyder. "So the deeds are in Mexico City. So there's lots of red tape. That, I'll buy. But if the money's in escrow, if those Latin *licenciados* are just sitting on the papers, how about the cancelled checks? What about the dough for the builders, to get them started on the cabins? All right—it's Mexico! It's *manana*! But let's have a bit of good old U.S. business method. Let's see the receipts. Let's see some evidence of where our money's gone. And I'll be the first to apologise."

Outside, there was no sky at all; only layers of pale Wisconsin air, rather like sodden Kleenex, which is no good to anyone. On a pitiful trellis a few feet from the window were humped the untended masses of a rambler rose, of a variety which should never have been planted. One weak shoot lifted itself from the tangle as if to hold high a single, skimpy, purplish bloom, which bled into the grey like yet another wound.

All the warmth and the confi-

dence and the good fellowship of the months gone by were oozing out from it; it was all too obviously the last rose of summer. Harry found himself much depressed by the banality; it seemed to validate a whole flock of other cliches and truisms, all of them highly offensive to a man of imagination and taste. *Honesty is the best policy! Be sure your sins will find you out! You can't fool all the people . . .*

"Dear people, fellow investors," said Harry. "I don't choose to use the words *friends* until these smears have been completely cleared up, which I'm glad to say is perfectly easy.

"Myra and Walt, Herbert, Bonnie, and you too, of course, Helen, and Margaret and Don, I move we all meet here, in this place, at this same hour tomorrow, if that's all right with Myra and Walt; if they don't mind all the rest of us barging into their place like a herd of *toros* two days in a row.

"I'm going to bring the whole file of correspondence, *and* the receipts, *and* the cancelled checks, which Bill Snyder is quite within his rights to want to see. Then, when he's satisfied, and all the rest of you are satisfied, down to the last *peso,* what I'm going to say to you is this:

" 'Business is business, just as Bill says,' I shall say, 'but Mexico is *Mexico.*' I can quote Bill's own words used just now as showing a *negative* attitude towards the people who will be our hosts, and our help, and our friends, as well as being our customers for the compost-grown fruits and vegetables we're going to raise.

"These people may have the easy-going ways of the Mayan, but they also have the pride of the Aztecs and the Conquistadores. It's remarks like that which Bill made about *manana* which stamp a man in their eyes as a *gringo.* From that, our whole colony could very well come to be looked down on as a typical *gringo* outfit. I don't think any of us want that.

"So therefore I'm also going to bring my *personal* check for every dollar Bill Snyder has so far invested in our joint enterprise, plus interest at the rate of six per cent, and I'm going to ask him to please create a vacancy which we shall find plenty of people only too ready to fill. And the first and foremost qualification is, a decent attitude towards Mexico and the Mexicans."

As combs and looking glasses thrown down at the critical moment may turn into thickets and lakes to halt the pursuing wizard, these last words of Harry's, uttered in the convincing tone of a mouse that has been provoked into talking like a man, opened a crevasse in front of Bill Snyder.

Harry, however, had been under the necessity of resorting to such delaying tactics at similar mo-

ments in other cities and in earlier years; he knew that the respite was likely to be all too brief. He therefore sought Helen's eye, which came dog-like to meet his own. Its dog-like quality, he noted, was rather of the faithful than of the frisky order.

"Helen," said Harry, "I don't feel I can say one single word more until tomorrow, when I come up with all the documentation. But if you'd like to stay and chew it over with the rest . . ."

The tall girl rose to that rather drooping height which goes with pale hair, a pale skin, and rather large, pale freckles. She neither flaunted nor concealed their relationship; the effect was that of a Bikini on a figure not rounded enough to be of any great interest. Nevertheless, or perhaps therefore, she was loyalty itself.

"Let's go," she said, and, smiling round the room, she added, "*Hasta le vista,* everybody, and see you tomorrow."

In a moment they were outside, and walking towards the older part of the town, where Harry had his one-room bachelor apartment, and Helen her studio.

"Your place or mine?" asked Harry. "Mine's in a bit of a mess."

"Have you *really* got those receipts?" said Helen.

Harry had a yea-saying attitude towards life, especially on questions of this sort, which always seemed to arise sooner or later. He would have sworn by dog and by cat that he had the receipts, but he was suddenly in great need of love, and his own love, welling up like a secretion into the vacuum of his need, made it impossible for him to tell Helen that he *really* had them.

"I didn't mean for it to end up this way," said Harry. "It's hard to explain."

"Let's go to my place," said Helen.

She had a vision, suddenly of Harry's room, in what he called *a bit of a mess,* but now undappled by those shadows of tropical foliage which hitherto had been cast by a light which, all too obviously, never was on sea or land.

They therefore repaired to Helen's studio. Her canvases, standing all around the walls, diffused their own particular glow into the air, and this gave Helen courage to rise superior to the present situation.

Helen was, by temperament even more than conviction, a modern of the moderns. Her pictures were as abstract as so many Rorschach cards, which they resembled also in that not everyone who inspected them was prepared to name in public the objects they suggested. It will never be known how many people had been reminded, by these uncompromising abstractions, of bats, toadstools, gnomes, squirrels and twisted trees. It might have been Mr. Dis-

ney, who, in a fit of rage, had thrown his pot of paint at the canvas.

All this is to lay a foundation for the disclosure that Helen saw Harry as something bright-eyed, startled, furry, and so altogether out of this world that he could hardly be expected to do much about book-keeping. She felt he was a sort of non-literary Lawrence; *Lawrence in real life,* she had once said, but fortunately only to herself. She really meant he was a *Bambi.*

Helen had come from a prosperous and rather unpleasantly wholesome home, of the sort which is said to represent all that is best in American life. Such families, which have begun quite differently, end not infrequently in tallness, pallor, vagueness and art. This one, moreover, had exploded all at once and without warning in such a burst of adulteries, bankruptcies, re-marriages, breakdowns, hushed-up offences and sudden deaths, that it was as if W. Faulkner had been induced to take over the concluding episodes of a soap-opera.

Thus Helen, before she was out of college, had been left alone, or at best in company of a hundred and ninety dollars a month (a sum not easily divisible by four, or thirty, or thirty-one) and a tiny factory in what they all called Darkest Sheerwater, Wisconsin.

It was not really a factory; it was just an old factory building, and soon it would not really be a building, it was so run down. However, it was spacious and it had built-in benches, and therefore made a good studio, though a damnably draughty one.

As they entered, Helen noted that she had lived twelve years with a makeshift bathroom, and that now she was in love with a man who was, unconsciously of course, quite the reverse of honest.

"I shall pay them all back," said Harry, who seemed always to be aware of what she was thinking.

He was the kindest creature in the world, and would say anything to give pleasure to the woman he loved, and to most other people.

"I somehow never had enough money all at one time," said he. "So I couldn't send it to Mexico. I was waiting for more people to come in. By the time they did, it had sort of gone on expenses. I could pay them back so much a week if I had the time, but Bill Snyder's just the type to go squealing to the police."

Helen realised that a woman must stick to her man, even if he is a wanted criminal. This situation is inconvenient; the compensation is, it is also rather sexy. They would be on the run, hiding out in the strangest places, with nothing but each other.

And it would not be so bad,

after all, because she could go to Bill Snyder and tell him he might take the studio, and sell the lot for whatever it would fetch, which would certainly pay everyone more than they were owed. Helen always paid more than she owed when she was able to pay anything at all, and she was always able to pay, though often with such difficulty that she had a vague impression of having settled up with canvases at the *bistros* and *epiceries* of Sheerwater.

She said nothing at all to Harry about her intention concerning the studio; it would have destroyed the feeling of being *on the run*. She more or less realised that, while a wanted criminal has a certain appeal, no one wants an unwanted criminal.

"Harry," she said in a voice that seemed hardly her own, "we're going to get out of here—and fast."

"You'll come too?" cried Harry in surprise and delight.

Little catastrophes of this sort had befallen him before, but the girls with whom he had had tender relations had always displayed a streak of Bill Snyderism. This had made him feel rejected.

"You're the first woman who hasn't let me down," said he to Helen.

"But you'll really and truly go straight in the future?" said Helen, with a look that seemed to blaze right through him, and to scorch certain little weaknesses out of this wild one. Though she wanted her criminal to be wanted, Helen did not want him to be a criminal.

Harry himself had no ambitions in this direction. He desired only a life of dreams blossoming in quiet squalor, like nasturtiums on a rubbish heap.

"Straight? With you? Yes." said he simply. "But straight where? That's the question."

"Have you any of that money left at all? asked Helen.

"A bit," said Harry. "I'm afraid it's been melting away."

It was, in fact, melting away at that very moment; the *bit* was rapidly dwindling like a hailstone in Harry's hot little mind. He feared that Helen might insist it be handed over as a down payment on the weekly restitution.

He had already reduced it to two figures when Helen said thoughtfully:

"Mexico's big enough, isn't it, for you and me to lose ourselves in?"

"I wouldn't like to get extradited," said Harry.

Helen might have reassured him on this point, but she still wished to do, without the necessity, what the wicked do without the wish; that is, to flee where no man pursueth. Accordingly she said nothing, but thought only of lying blissfully close in a tiny cottage, all in a dark wild wood, delightfully prowled by non-ex-

istent wolves.

"We could just fade into the landscape," she said.

"I'd need time to polish up my Spanish if we're going to do that," said Harry.

To him, the border was like the shimmering skin of a soap bubble. He believed everything he had ever read and even said about the colour and glamour of Mexico, and its potentiality as a market for compost-grown fruits and vegetables. Nevertheless, however, fervently one may believe in a soap bubble, one knows better than to break the film.

Helen was wearing an expression so extremely thoughtful that it might have resulted from a physical rather than a mental strain.

"Harry," said Helen at last, "if you are so good at selling real estate which isn't there, just think what you could do, say, in Oklahoma, or Kansas or somewhere, where there's lots of real estate, and people buying it all the time!"

"*Real* real estate!" cried Harry, in a tone not exactly beat, but certainly off-beat.

The idea was so droll and yet so down to earth that it constituted a gay and free way of thinking and talking and living, into which they swept on gales of laughter, hand in hand, and at the same time, almost without noticing it, they got dinner ready. They ate it also without noticing, which perhaps was just as well.

After dinner they made, first coffee, and then love. Neither of these were of a sort to rob them of any great amount of sleep. Next morning they woke as happy as children on a holiday, and as eager to get going.

Harry went early to his room to pack his bag, and Helen to the storage company, and then to see Bill Snyder at his office. Bill Snyder, though full of threats and advice, settled in the end for Helen's factory building and the lot, and promised to see that everyone was paid in full, and to take whatever was over for himself. This gave the fugitives that amateur status which is to some people as water to a fish, and to others as water to whisky.

They went by devious ways to the first bus stop outside the town, and then zigzagged south-east and south-west for two or three days, until they fetched up in the city of their unlikely choice, in blowing dust and under a yellow sky.

Here they put up at a motel, the name of which shall be suppressed to avoid offending the squeamish. Sheerwater seemed far away and long ago. Harry put all manner of little, innocent questions to Helen, the object of which was to find out if she felt that *going straight* was to apply retroactively. On Helen displaying a carefree and cynical attitude, Harry was emboldened to come out

with that part of the money which was, after all, still unmelted, and it was a positive iceberg of thirteen hundred dollars, the greater part of which, as we know, had been concealed beneath the surface. Harry entrusted the money to Helen, saying that she was the practical member of the family.

It was in this character that Helen went out early next morning, while Harry took a little extra rest, and at once she chanced upon what anyone else in the world might have spent half a lifetime looking for, and what very few would have known what to do with had they found it.

It was nothing less than the largest trailer ever seen, standing on concrete piers in a grove of cottonwoods on the outskirts of the town. Beer cans lay like fallen fruit under the trees, and the trailer had a score of plywood tables standing in front of it, from which the chairs or benches had been removed.

The trailer was a thousand bucks, lock, stock and barrel, take it or leave it, as is and where is. And, indeed, it could only be where it was, since it had no wheels. Helen was quick to see that this deficiency was actually a great saving, since it no doubt reduced the price and anyway the trailer was too large and too flimsy ever to be used upon a road. What was more, she and Harry had no car.

It was necessary to pay a monthly rent for the use of the grove, and there was no lease, but the man who owned the grove was very nice.

She went back to the motel, where Harry was now shaving and singing like a bridegroom, and she told him they had a home, a caravan, in which, like gypsies, they could travel the years if not the roads. Harry was a little dismayed by the size of the cash payment necessary for the trailer, but his misgivings were forgotten under the cheering influence of the *making of the list.*

In this atomic and inflationary age, a man like Harry finds his security less in stone walls or bank deposits than in large stacks of canned goods. He now exultantly erected a tower against the blows of fortune with no less than five dozen medium-sized tuna, and a strong place with as many Alaska salmon. His ramparts were of chili-con-carne and his battlements were of every imaginable variety. His powder was of home-made type pancake mix and his shot was Boston baked beans. He finally furnished their magazines with a dozen cartons of filter-tipped cigarettes, of the kind which offers more protection.

Harry's spirit was so fortified by these fortifications that he was emboldened to complete their armory with a set of steak knives. At the very next market they

passed, Helen selected a substantial slab of rump steak on which to try them.

That evening, on a fire of sticks in a ring of bricks, Harry barbecued the steak to perfection. Between mouthfuls (which took a little longer to negotiate, but this proved his point) Harry explained how these razor-sharp steak knives were, so to speak, the *machetes* that would carve out his path to success, through the jungle of the real estate business. He pointed out that with the addition of a good garlicky salad, and washed down by a sound red wine with a real punch to it, a thick rump steak, sizzling from the coals, must inevitably warm and encourage any business contact whom they might entertain at an informal barbecue, and lead—certainly not in every instance but in a reasonable percentage—to signature on the dotted line.

Harry invited Helen to make a conservative estimate of the number of such little business dinners they would be called upon to give each month.

"If we could give a barbecue to twenty people each night, and make fifty cents on each portion," said Helen, with a laugh that showed she was being neither satirical nor serious, "we'd soon be living free."

Harry joined in her laughter, first saying, however, that she was not kidding as much as she might think, because there were plenty of people around whose minds actually worked that way. Helen leaned across the table, and, taking his head in her hands, she kissed him on the eyes, as if to strengthen them. They slept close in the lower of the two bunks, and an enchanged forest grew up all over the cornlands and the oil fields that surrounded them, and Bill Snyder huffed and puffed in vain.

Next day Harry was all over the town, in the park, in a barber shop, at a lunch counter, and talking to everyone. Everyone said the real estate business was riding high. There were those, however, who declared it to be a very close racket, by no means easy to crash into.

Finally a young man who was actually employed in one of the largest agencies told Harry that the State Legislature, for ethical reasons, had imposed a rigorous code upon the profession, and before hanging out one's shingle, or even getting a job as junior executive salesman on basic salary plus commission, it was necessary to possess a Charter Diploma from the Associated Realty Board.

As he told Harry this, the young man glanced at the wall above his desk, and there was the Charter Diploma itself, garnished with more seals than Magna Carta! This was, in fact, neither more nor less than a First Class Charter

Diploma.

Harry fell in love at first sight with this blazon of authenticity rampant; it may or may not have been the attraction of opposites.

"How," said he in the hushed voice of reverence, "would anyone get qualified for that bit of sheepskin?"

"Strictly speaking," replied his informant, "you've got to go through the mill at State U."

Harry, with a glance in which dignity and melancholy were exquisitely combined, indicated that he would prefer not to speak, or be spoken to, as strictly as all that.

"Of course, if you're older," continued the other, "or if you haven't the grades, or if you're not free in the daytime, there's a course you can take right here at the City High, three times a week in the evenings. But you've got to get an okay for that one, and pay a *bona fide* deposit before they let you pass the exam. They don't want a lot of wild-catters and claim-jumpers muscling in."

Harry was at the High School as soon as the evening session opened; he told his whole life story, or someone's life story, to the Adult Student Body Career Counsellor. That lady was moved by his enthusiasm, and arranged for him to take an aptitude test. This consisted mainly in a series of questions, each supplied with four alternative answers. It was necessary to check that answer which seemed most likely to gratify the examiner.

Harry had the finest of instincts for this sort of thing; had his finger tips been equally sensitive he could have opened any safe in the world. He scored close to a hundred per cent, and was speedily enrolled for the approaching winter term, with the prospect of two others to follow, it being necessary to complete three semesters before taking the examination.

Never was a pupil so eager and so apt as Harry. He soon learned that all the students, however irregular their attendance or dim their wits, unfailingly passed the examination at the end of their year, providing they had paid the *bona fide* deposit in advance. This mattered nothing at all to him.

Nor was he at all put out when he discovered that *all* the Charter Diplomas were First Class Charter Diplomas. For this cruise, on this luxury dreamboat, he realised it was better there should be no second class.

Once a month, some prominent realtor sent a substitute to oblige the class with a brief address. In these inspiring talks, the law of contract and the technique of salesmanship and the friendly attitude and ethics and hints on repossession were interwoven into a positive fugue. Harry quickly found that, as soon as the opening chords were sounded, he could anticipate the unfolding of the whole

movement, and often his lips would move silently but in the closest harmony with the speaker.

Nor could he resist humming the whole score of salesmanship over again, and over again, during the days he spent at the trailer. He would try it this way and that way, with all sorts of little improvements. He did this on winter days when the sun shone through bare branches and the peremptory woodpecker tapped on every tree like knuckles on a door. The squirrel dropped his hoarded nut on the thin and resonant roof of the trailer with a crack like a pistol shot. These sounds made Helen long to take her fugitive into her protecting arms. Harry's long sales recitals somewhat abated the longing.

On spring days, with the tepid rain thick and close about them, like showerbath and curtain in one, and rainwater kisses on tap, and that smell of damp clothes and hair which to some speaks so eloquently of love, Harry was speaking eloquently of sub-divisions. He wooed Helen with ranch types and comforted her with easier payment plans; his voice throbbed and moaned like that of the importunate dove, but it celebrated the ethics of the profession.

"He is going straight for *my* sake," thought Helen, trying to respond. "But it was somehow nicer before."

The travel-poster days of high summer came up from Mexico, sunburned and tired already like returning tourists. Helen began to put more and more herbs into her Spanish Rice as if, in a reversion to cave-woman magic, she hoped that the tang of marjoram and oregano might compel the return of that fragrance of the personality which had once made Harry so different. Girls from families like Helen's either want their men to be the same, or different. It would seem there is not much other choice for any girl, but these make more of a point of it than do others, and to Helen all beauty lay in the difference.

Her paintings, as the year went on, became more Rorschach-like than before, and people would have been more reluctant than ever to mention the things they thought they saw in them. She very nearly sold one to a middle-aged couple who lived along the road and who stopped by at the trailer one evening just to see what the hell went on there. They lingered over a dramatic abstraction, which she had entitled *Created He them*. They said they found it mentally stimulating.

But while Helen, bad at figures, was still wondering what sort of price she might ask, Harry burst in, back from his class, crying that he had passed with nothing but straight A's. People do not buy a painting from a woman who is married to, or even living with, a

man who has taken a business course and got nothing but straight A's.

Harry had the further distinction of being chosen to make a speech on behalf of the student body on the night when the diplomas were handed out, and he rehearsed this at all hours, even leaning out from the upper bunk, where he now slept alone like a tired executive, to try the effect of some new passage on Helen. His subject was split-levels.

"We are already sleeping on a split-level," thought Helen, "and as soon as he makes money enough we shall be living in one altogether. I might as well be back at home with poor Daddy before he jumped out of the window."

She was not in the least cheered when she heard that Mr. Reeves, the prominent realtor who had been pressured into taking the chair on the auspicious night, had been so impressed by Harry's eloquence that he had offered Harry a job in his office. Harry accepted with alacrity. Next day, Helen neglected to put any herbs whatsoever into her rice. This was a great improvement as far as the flavour was concerned, but in Helen it marked the passage from desperation to despair. This is but a single step, but, like that which her father took from the window, it is one that counts.

Harry, however, now had troubles of his own. He was required to start at the bottom of the ladder. This is a depressing situation for anyone; it was especially so to Harry because he was so extremely persuasive and had sold himself such a bill of goods. He found that his desk had no drawers down the side, and no lettered strip announcing his name to prospects. It was not even against a wall on which he might have hung his First Class Charter Diploma. His job was the transcribing of certain particulars on to cards, and the filing of these cards in a cabinet. For this he had no flair at all. He was perhaps too easily discouraged, which is a defect of sanguine temperaments, but he saw no chance of becoming a junior executive salesman in the foreseeable future: and of the unforeseeable future he could see nothing at all.

Harry had said so much about his hopes to Helen, that he felt a certain diffidence when it came to confessing his disappointment. He therefore suffered in silence, and so did she.

It was late in the warm, sad autumn of that year, when, walking forlorn in the grove, Helen came upon a mushroom of a rather sickly colour. As to its form, the less said the better. Helen was much addicted to such gleanings from the bountiful lap of Nature, but in happier days the appearance of this specimen would have

given her pause. As it was, she picked it, and cooked it for her lunch, and ate it, careless of whether she lived or died. The mushroom did her no serious harm, but it tasted like absolute hell.

Fate, like an inaccurate watch, once every now and then achieves superlative timing. Harry at this very moment was sitting all alone in the spacious office; the salesmen were either out making sales, or were late in returning from lunch.

There entered a man and a woman whom Harry at once recognised as a married couple, not because both of them were so ugly, but because they were ugly in exactly the same way.

Harry rose up behind his desk, glowing like a Phoenix new risen among the ashes of his hopes.

"We're interested," said the man, "in this *Whispering Hills* development."

"Whispering Hills!" exclaimed Harry in the voice of an amorous cello. "So called because at evening the breezes from the . . . "

"It's Lot 171 we're interested in," said the woman, endeavouring, like the frugal housewife she was, not to seem *too* interested.

Harry led the couple to a large map of the subdivision, on which he speedily located Lot 171. He was trembling lest one of the genuine junior executive salesmen should return before he could clinch the deal.

"A budget-priced but situationally exciting lot," Harry began, "facing what will in time become an old world village green and recreational center . . . "

"We know the lot," said the man, "and we know the price, and we've got the cash. Now, how much discount do we get if we buy through you?"

Harry was mortified to find himself unable to answer this question. Cash payments had been rare in his short experience, and discounts entirely unknown. He had a strong hunch that they were disapproved of on ethical grounds. He therefore tried to give the conversation a happier turn.

"I want you to realise," said Harry, "that when the streets of *Whispering Hills* are lined with fast-growing, d r o u g h t-resisting shade trees, the evening breezes, rustling the leaves of those trees . . . "

"Listen," said the man. "If you'll cut out the hooey about trees that ain't planted and hills that ain't there, and give me a straight answer about the discount, maybe we can do business. If not, you're not the only firm handling this property. We can go right across the street."

Harry looked from one to the other, longing to tell them how the hills would soon be created out of the fill taken from the *Shady Valley* development next door, but

somehow the words would not come. While he still stared at them dumbly, the man gave a grunt and turned away. Followed by his wife, he marched out through the door, brushing rudely past Mr. Reeves, who was coming in.

"What did those people want?" said Mr. Reeves to Harry.

"Just wanted something for nothing," said Harry. "I don't know whether they were crooks or just plain chiselers, but they were in here wasting time."

"I know the type," said Mr. Reeves. "People like that make me sick to my stomach of the real estate busines. If I could find some decent, easy way of life where I could just turn a buck now and then by way of a hobby to avoid that retirement let-down, you wouldn't find me sitting in there taking it on the chin all day from pikers and fourflushers of that description. Well, give me their address, anyway."

"Their address?" said Harry in some dismay.

"You mean to say you let those people get out of this office without getting their address for a follow-up?" exclaimed Mr. Reeves in both sorrow and anger. "I can tell you this right now and for sure: a fellow who makes a mistake like that is *never* going to get his foot firmly even on the bottom rung of the real estate business.

"I took a liking to you the first time I met you, Harry, so I won't go so far as to fire you for making just one bloomer, but I'm frank to say if I was you I'd start looking for something you've got more talent for."

With that, Mr. Reeves withdrew into his little glass office, leaving Harry crushed at his desk.

Harry went sadly home that evening. It was already dark, with the moon peering through a thin film of cloud, looking rather worried. Helen was sitting on the doorsill of the trailer, spitting now and then into the tall weeds that stood around the neglected steps.

"I found a mushroom at lunchtime," said she, "and I ate most of it before I realised it tasted like absolute hell."

"I know what you mean," said Harry. "You can go on a long time, lapping something up, and then you suddenly realise." And, tasting his own bitter mushroom of defeat and disillusion, he too spat into the weeds.

His tone, and still more the gesture, so suggestive of a repudiation of a future junior executive salesmanship, stirred something in the deeps of Helen's heart, where she had thought nothing would stir again.

"We were so happy when first we came to live in this trailer," said she.

"I wish it had wheels," said Harry.

Helen turned her face to his.

She wanted to ask, "But your job?" She found herself unable to utter the word.

"I wish it had wheels," said Harry, "and I wish we had a good used car. I wish we had a bit of capital. We could move on."

"South?" murmured Helen, almost inaudibly.

"South of the border," said Harry, his tone becoming a little fuller "Maybe we could get this thing shipped down there some way. We could live in it while we got a cabin built, and then it could be the first chicken house.

"You know, Helen, I was reading about an idea for filling tin basins with half-decayed compost, and you put worms' eggs in, and you bore holes in the bottom of the basin, and the worms fall out and the hens pick them up, and that puts vitamins in their eggs, and a flavour out of all comparison with store-bought, battery-raised eggs, and the chickens taste altogether different when you sell them off for fryers and broilers. And of course there's a big saving on your feed bill."

"And our own eggs free," said Helen. "Chickens too!"

"We might get a little group together," said Harry, tentatively. "I mean, if they all put down a certain amount, you and me could ride along for contributing the organisation and the know-how. There's that couple along the road, for sure, and I really believe I could interest Mr. Reeves, and he's got the addresses of a lot of other people, too. You know, in the neighbourhood of one of those new resorts they're starting down there: far enough off for the land to be cheap; near enough to make deliveries at the hotels . . ."

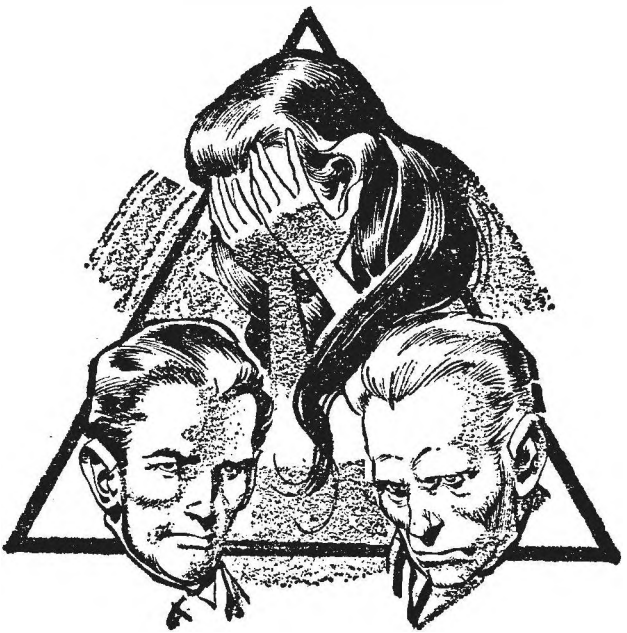
"On a lake, maybe," said Helen.

"Why not?" said Harry. "Lots of pure water for the chickens, and a plentiful supply of freshly caught fish for the table. That cuts the overhead. I can just see the hills sloping down to the lake. I can hear the tropical foliage whispering in the evening breeze. I can see the hotel lights across the water. Maybe we could use your monthly dough for instalments on a little cruiser, and make our deliveries that way. Coming home across the lake, I can just hear the guitars and the native folk songs in some little village on the shore. We could anchor the boat . . ."

". . . and swim together," murmured Helen, already drowning in bliss.

"By moonlight," said Harry. "Just you and I." ■ ■

She was dating other men and he was jealous—jealous enough to kill anyone who tried to take her away from him . . .



TRIANGLE

by WILLIAM T. HARREL

CURBING HIS GREEN SPORT COUPE behind Fran's black sedan outside the arching stone entrance to the Shamrock Apartments, Oliver Caldwell cut the ignition and settled back against the cushions to wait. He was calmer now that he knew she was still inside. He had been afraid he would miss them; that he would be too late.

But the black sedan was there ahead of his car. He was in time.

Oliver Caldwell thrust his sloping head forward on round shoulders. Though it was noon, the clouds overhead shrouded the street in gloom. He stared with tired brown eyes past the rain rivering down the windshield over the now-dead wipers. Overhead, the storm drummed on the steel top of the coupe.

Oliver Caldwell had always been a creature of comfort and luxury; and now, in the face of this threat to his security, his thoughts were ordered, coldly calculating.

He had known from the first, since he'd discovered Fran was seeing Mike Johnson in his apartment, that Johnson had to die.

It was the only answer to an unfortunate triangle involving himself, Fran and Mike Johnson. And since Johnson was hardly likely to die a natural death, Oliver Caldwell had brought along the gun, a .32 Savage, complete with silencer.

One shot from the gun and they would return to normal, he and Fran, as though Mike Johnson had never existed.

The car, he though angrily. The black sedan parked just ahead of his own. That had been the beginning. If he'd never suggested Fran needed a car; if he'd kept his mouth shut, Fran would never have gone to Mike Johnson's used car lot and bought the sedan. She would never have met Mike Johnson, and the triangle would never have happened. But then he wouldn't have had the Cadillac for his own use while Fran was out shopping, either.

He sighed, his heavy body sinking further into the cushions.

Shopping. Fran had said she was going shopping. But it was just an excuse and he cursed them both inwardly. Fran for her cheating; Mike Johnson for his spell-casting. Yet Oliver Caldwell knew he couldn't blame Fran entirely. Naturally she would desire the companionship of men her own age. She must get pretty tired of looking at him every day and every night.

But their life together had been a sweet thing to Oliver Caldwell. It was nice having Fran around. She was so gay, so vivacious. And Caldwell knew how lucky he was that Fran's income was large enough to take care of them both so comfortably.

Yes, he could blame Mike Johnson for trying to break up a beautiful arrangement. He could even kill him for it.

Leaning forward, Oliver Caldwell peered up through the sloping, rain-drenched windshield at the windows on the second floor of the Shamrock Apartments. He knew—from the trip he'd made here a week ago—Mike Johnson's rooms were on the second floor above the entrance. He'd seen the mail boxes in the lobby, too.

Checking his watch, Oliver Caldwell saw that it was twelve-thirty. He grunted impatiently. What was taking Fran so long?

The thought of what could be happening in Mike Johnson's apartment brought blood rushing to Caldwell's temples. He dipped a hand into his pocket and touched the gun.

There was power in the weapon. Power to solve the problem confronting him with a finality no one could escape.

Not even Fran.

Through the rain he saw the entrance door of the Shamrock building open, and Fran stood in the vestibule. She pulled her plastic raincoat close about her slender shoulders, adjusted the transparent hood over her hair and, after a hurried, furtive glance up and down the street, dashed for the black sedan.

Oliver Caldwell huddled behind the collar of his raincoat—needlessly, for the heavy rain pelting the windshield could have shown Fran nothing more than a blurred figure. And there was no danger of her recognizing the coupe because it was a demonstrator model Oliver Caldwell was "trying out" and would return to the dealer—not Johnson—once it had served its purpose.

Fran got into the sedan. Clouds of moisture burst from the exhaust, a white cloud of vapor mushroomed out. Fran jockeyed the sedan back, ground gears, cut sharply out into traffic and disappeared.

Oliver Caldwell waited five minutes—until he was sure Fran wouldn't return. Then he climbed heavily from the coupe, stood a moment staring up through the rain, turned the collar of the raincoat high around his cheeks, gripped the gun in the depths of his pocket, and entered the Shamrock Apartments.

He went up the stairs deliberately, taking his time, making certain he didn't touch anything, knowing his only real danger lay in being seen. But he hadn't killed Mike Johnson yet and it was not too late to call it off it somebody stepped out of one of the doors along the hall.

But no one did and he paused outside Mike Johnson's rooms and drew on the black gloves he'd brought. Then he rang the bell.

Mike Johnson answered his ring. A tall, broad-shouldered, powerfully built man, Johnson exuded confidence. He said:

"Yeah? What can I do for you?"

"My name is Caldwell . . . Oliver Caldwell."

Smiling slightly, Caldwell waited, hands deep in his raincoat pockets, water puddling on the ragged, wine-colored hall carpet. He saw Mike Johnson's startled look, but in a moment Johnson recovered himself.

"What can I do for you?" Johnson repeated.

"It's a confidential matter, sir," Oliver Caldwell said, glancing meaningfully along the hall. "May I come in?"

Reluctantly, Johnson stepped aside. Oliver Caldwell went in. The apartment was cheaply fur-

nished. A red sofa with sagging cushions faced a scarred mahogany coffee table. Two empty glasses and an amber bottle, half full, told Oliver Caldwell they hadn't wasted any time. There were other signs of Fran's visit. The lipstick-stained cigaret butts in the big ashtray beside the empty glasses; the cloyingly sweet scent of her perfume; and the sofa cushions strewn about in limp disarray. Johnson saw the direction of Oliver Caldwell's stare and moved to block his view.

Caldwell sat down on the sofa. It groaned despairingly.

"I'm out for lunch," Mike Johnson said uneasily. "I've got to be getting back to the lot. Can't keep business waiting, you know."

Oliver Caldwell smiled.

"All right," Mike Johnson said, irritation sharpening his voice. "You're Oliver Caldwell. So what do you want?"

"You've been seeing Fran."

"Fran? Who's she?"

"Don't try to fool me," Caldwell said softly, letting silence emphasize his words. "Know all about you and Fran."

Mike Johnson blinked, then laughed as though it were some sort of stupid joke Caldwell had told.

"I don't know what you're talking about, mister," Mike Johnson said insolently.

"Fran's a good woman," Oliver Caldwell said, "but she's weak. You couldn't let her alone, could you?"

He had meant to be calm, but he felt anger rising in him. It really wasn't Fran's fault. Mike Johnson had woven his spell around her. Left alone, Fran never would have involved herself... her lovely, meticulous self.

"You're going to pay for what you've done," Oliver Caldwell said. "I'll make you pay."

A big man with ham-like hands, broad shoulders and powerful muscles, Johnson towered over Oliver Caldwell.

"You?" Johnson sneered. "Why, you couldn't punch your way out of a paper bag!" He took a threatening step closer to Caldwell. Oliver Caldwell's hand went into his coat pocket.

"I know," he said, "so I brought this along to improve my chances." He brought the gun into the open.

Mike Johnson's laugh died suddenly. "Say, what *is* this?" He came a step closer.

Oliver Caldwell leveled the gun at Johnson's heart. "Don't come any further," he warned.

"But, good God, man!" Johnson sputtered. "You can't mean this!"

"But I do mean it," Oliver Caldwell said. Johnson's eyes were frightened now. He swallowed.

"All right," he said. "I've been seeing Fran."

Rain torrents whispered against the window at the far end of the room. From somewhere came the

blast of a horn, near, yet distant.

Oliver Caldwell kept the gun trained on Johnson. Suddenly the full horror of his predicament seemed to strike Johnson. His mouth quivered and fear squeezed sweat out of his broad forehead.

"I've been seeing her," he repeated, "but she never said anything about you. I swear she didn't! I give you my word of honor I'll leave her alone from now on..." Mike Johnson had been inching nearer as he spoke, and now, with a cat-like leap, he was upon Caldwell. One hand slashed the gun aside, the other smashed into Caldwell's face.

Oliver Caldwell reeled back against the wall. Blood spurted from his cut lip. Mike Johnson's distorted face loomed before him. He jerked the gun up, pulled the trigger. Recoil drove the weapon hard against the heel of his hand. The sound was slight; no more than a sharp hissing.

Oliver Caldwell couldn't have missed. But Johnson came on and for one terrified moment, Oliver Caldwell thought he *had* missed. Then the big man faltered and fell against him, his hands clawing at Caldwell's coat, reaching for his throat. Desperately, Oliver Caldwell jammed the gun against Johnson's ribs and fired again.

Johnson fell back, turning, landing on his side. He lay there in an ever-widening pool of blood. He was quite dead.

Skirting the body, Oliver Caldwell felt a giant wave of nausea sweep over him. But he fought it down and went on to the door. He opened it a crack, checked the hall. It was empty. He glanced back once to be certain Johnson hadn't moved, would never move again. Then he let himself out and, carefully closing the door behind him, went down the stairs and out into the rain.

He drove away from the curb slowly, so that he would not attract unnecessary attention, and headed south. At Long Beach Pike he disposed of the gun, dropping it over the railing into the sea when no one was looking. Then he returned the green coupe to the dealer, told him it wasn't exactly what he had in mind, and drove the Cadillac home.

He had several more attacks of nausea during the interminable afternoon. The fear that somehow he had been seen drove him back and forth in the den of their gracious home in the hills overlooking the city. He tried watching television but couldn't concentrate and gave it up in favor of a radio newscast where he learned that Johnson's landlady had found the body around three o'clock when she went to collect the rent. But there were no details and when darkness fell, Oliver Caldwell took the Cadillac downtown and brought back copies of all

the evening papers.

Fran still hadn't returned when he drove into the garage. He wasn't too concerned by her protracted absence. She often stayed out late when she went shopping.

Upstairs, Oliver Caldwell drew the drapes, put on his slippers and smoking jacket. Then he relaxed in the luxury of his favorite chair and puffed contentedly at the stem of his pipe while he read.

The screaming headlines said merely: LANDLADY DISCOVERS BODY! But the stories beneath gave Caldwell the details. Mike Johnson was dead . . . murdered. But no one had seen a woman come out of his apartment. No one had seen the killer, either. There were no clues of any value to the police.

Oliver Caldwell smiled and stretched luxuriously. He had left no fingerprints. He hadn't been seen near the scene of the crime. There was no weapon. It would rust at the bottom of the sea. And no one had seen Fran. He could relax. The police would never connect Fran or Oliver Caldwell with Johnson's murder. He was safe.

He threw all the papers, except one, into the incinerator. He left the one on the table where Fran couldn't miss it. Afterwards, he sat in the chair smoking comfortably, waiting for Fran.

It was late when he heard the sedan come up the driveway into the garage. Moments later Fran entered the den, her arms filled with packages.

Oliver Caldwell hid a smile. The packages didn't fool him. They'd never been much more than an excuse. Well, there would be no need for it from now on. Amused, he watched as Fran, her face childishly happy, dumped the packages on the table.

"Oh, Oliver!" she exclaimed. "I had such a good time shopping. I bought so many, many nice things. And Oliver! I found a new smoking jacket for you!"

She held up a wine-colored jacket. Oliver Caldwell shook his head.

"You shouldn't have," he said. "I really didn't need it."

"But, darling! It was such a bargain, I simply couldn't pass it up!"

She reached for another package, stopped in mid-air as she saw the headlines. She snatched the newspaper up, scanning the picture, reading the story, her face registering growing horror and grief. Oliver Caldwell went to her.

"Why, Fran! What's wrong?" he asked.

"I knew him!" Fran sobbed. "I —I saw him today. Oh, this is terrible!"

He kept his face gentle, masking his own thoughts with seeming concern for Fran, patting her thin shoulder comfortingly.

"We have to talk about this," he said gently. "Did anyone know

you were seeing him?"

"No."

"It's too bad," Caldwell said. "You know what people would say about visiting him in his apartment, Fran. Really, I'm shocked! As it is, you can't tell anyone about him without involving yourself in a scandal and murder. Do you see?"

She nodded miserably and Oliver Caldwell turned to the window, drawing the drapes back. It was still raining outside but the luxurious homes in the surrounding neighborhood were not changed. They represented everything Oliver Caldwell held dear. He watched the blinking lights contentedly a moment, then turned back to Fran.

"You can't go to the police," he said gently. "You understand? They might even think you killed him."

"Yes," Fran said faintly.

She lifted her tear-stained face.

He let her cry. It was better, he thought, that she get it out of her system now. She would forget in time and his life would go on as though Mike Johnson had never existed.

"I know you were close," he said. "But you'll forget him. Now, let's have a look at what you bought today!"

He went to the table. He was safe now. The threat was gone. His life would go on the way it always had. Fran and he would be together. He would not have to leave the luxurious comfort of this house. He thought of all the poor devils out in the rain and how fortunate it was that he had the steel nerve and ruthless courage necessary to protect his creature comforts. Smiling, he picked up the smoking jacket.

A white card fluttered to the table. Caldwell picked it up. One side was printed. He read: "Gerald Mashburn, Men's Wearing Apparel." There was an address and a phone number. Caldwell started to put the card on the table. The penciled message on the back stopped him. He read it, too.

"Dearest Fran, I must see you this afternoon. Come alone to my apartment. Come up the back way at five."

It was signed *"Gerry."*

Caldwell gripped the table. Johnson! Mashburn! How many others had there been? How many more in the future? In growing horror, he knew he had it all to do over again and Fran's concerned voice seemed distant and unreal.

"Oliver! What is it, darling? What's wrong?" Her face was distorted with emotion. She looked old . . . *old.*

"Nothing," Oliver Caldwell said hoarsely. "Nothing at all, mother" ■ ■

Ever since Stanley Ellin made his first appearance with the celebrated story, Specialty of the House, *critics have been competing with each other to acclaim him as the great master of the unusual in crime fiction. We are honored to bring you another in the, as yet, small treasury of stories that are firmly establishing this fine young writer's unique reputation.*

BROKER'S SPECIAL

by STANLEY ELLIN

IT WAS THE FIRST TIME IN A GOOD many years that Cornelius, a Wall Street broker, had made the homeward trip in any train other than the Broker's Special. The Special was his kind of train; the passengers on it were his kind of people. Executives, professionals, men of substance and dignity who could recognize each other without introductions.

If it weren't for the Senator's dinner party, Cornelius reflected. But the Senator had insisted, so there was no escape from that abomination of abominations, the midweek dinner party. And, of course, no escape from the necessity of taking an earlier train home to the tedium of dressing, and an evening of too much food, too much liquor, and all the resultant misery the next morning.

Filled with this depressing thought Cornelius stepped down heavily from the train to the familiar platform and walked over to his car. Since Claire preferred the station wagon, he used the sedan to get to and from the station. When they were first married two years ago she had wanted to chauffeur him back and forth, but the idea had somehow repelled him. He had always felt there was something vaguely obscene about the way other men publicly kissed their wives good-by in front of the station every morning, and the thought of being placed in their position filled him with a chilling embarrassment. He had not told this to Claire, however. He had simply told her he had not married her to obtain a housekeeper or chauffeur. She was to enjoy her life, not fill it with duties.

Ordinarily, it was no more than a fifteen-minute drive through the countryside to the house. But now, in keeping with the already exasperating tenor of the day's events, he met an unexpected delay. A mile or so past where the road branched off from the highway it crossed the main line of the railroad. There was no guard or crossing gate here, but a red light, and a bell which was ringing an insistent warning as Cornelius drove up. He braked the car, and sat tapping his fingers restlessly on the steering wheel while the endless, clanking length of a freight went by. And then, before he could start the car again, he saw them.

It was Claire and a man. His wife and some man in the station wagon roaring past him into town. And the man was driving—seated big and blond and arrogant behind the wheel like a Viking—with one arm around Claire who, with eyes closed, rested her head on his shoulder. There was a look on her face, too, such as Cornelius had never seen there before, but which he had sometimes dreamed of seeing. They passed by in a flash, but the picture they made

was burned as brilliant in his mind as a photograph on film.

He would not believe it, he told himself incredulously; he refused to believe it! But the picture was there before him, growing clearer each second, becoming more and more terribly alive as he watched it. The man's arm possessing her. Her look of acceptance. Of sensual acceptance.

He was shaking uncontrollably now, the blood pounding in his head, as he prepared to turn the car and follow them. Then he felt himself go limp. Follow them where? Back to town undoubtedly, where the man would be waiting for the next train to the city. And then what? A denunciation in the grand style? A scene? A public humiliation for himself as much as for them?

He could stand anything, but not such humiliation. It had been bad enough when he had first married Claire and realized his friends were laughing at him for it. A man in his position to marry his secretary, and a girl half his age at that! Now he knew what they had been laughing at, but he had been blind then. There had been such an air of cool formality about her when she carried on her duties in the office; she sat with such prim dignity when she took his notes; she had dressed so modestly—and when he had first invited her to dinner she had reddened with the flustered naivete of a young girl being invited on her first date. Naivete! And all the time, he thought furiously, she must have been laughing at me. She, along with the rest of them.

He drove to the house slowly, almost blindly. The house was empty, and he realized that, of course, it was Thursday, the servant's day off, which made it the perfect day for Claire's purpose. He went directly to the library, sat down at the desk there, and unlocked the top drawer. His gun was in that drawer, a short-barreled .38, and he picked it up slowly, hefting its cold weight in his hand, savoring the sense of power it gave him. Then abruptly his mind went back to something Judge Hilliker had once told him, something strangely interesting that the old man had said while sharing a seat with him on the Broker's Special.

"Guns?" Hilliker had said. "Knives? Blunt instruments? You can throw them all out of the window. As far as I'm concerned there is just one perfect weapon —an automobile. Any automobile in good working order. Why? Because when an automobile is going fast enough it will kill anyone it hits. And if the driver gets out and looks sorry he'll find that he's the one getting everybody's sympathy, and not that bothersome corpse on the ground who shouldn't have been in the way anyhow. As long as the driver isn't

drunk or flagrantly reckless he can kill anybody in this country he wants to, and suffer no more than a momentary embarrassment and a penalty that isn't even worth worrying about.

"Think it over, man," the Judge continued: "to most people the automobile is some sort of god, and if God happens to strike you down it's your hard luck. As for me, when I cross a street I just say a little prayer."

There was more of that in Judge Hilliker's mordant and long-winded style, but Cornelius had no need to remember it. What he needed he now had, and very carefully he put the gun back in the drawer, slid the drawer shut, and locked it.

Claire came in while he still sat brooding at the desk, and he forced himself to regard her with cold objectivity—this radiantly lovely woman who was playing him for a fool, and who now stood wide-eyed in the doorway with an incongruously large bag of groceries clutched to her.

"I saw the car in the garage," she said breathlessly. "I was afraid something was wrong. That you weren't feeling well . . ."

"I feel very well."

"But you're home so early. You've never come this early before."

"I've always managed to refuse invitations to midweek dinner parties before."

"Oh, Lord!" she gasped. "The dinner! It never even entered my mind. I've been so busy all day . . ."

"Yes?" he said. "Doing what?"

"Well, everyone's off today, so I took care of the house from top to bottom, and then when I looked in the pantry and saw we needed some things I ran into town for them." She gestured at the bulky paper bag with her chin. "I'll have your bath ready, and your things laid out as soon as I put this stuff away."

Watching her leave he felt an honest admiration for her. Another woman would have invented a visit to a friend who might, at some later time, accidentally let the cat out of the bag. Or another woman would not have thought to burden herself with a useless package to justify a trip into town. But not Claire, who was evidently as clever as she was beautiful.

And she *was* damnably attractive. His male friends may have laughed behind his back, but in their homes she was always eagerly surrounded by them. When he entered a roomful of strangers with her he saw how all men's eyes followed her with a frankly covetous interest. No, nothing must happen to her; nothing at all. It was the man who had to be destroyed, just as one would destroy any poacher on his preserves, any lunatic who with ax in hand ran amok through his home.

Claire would have to be hurt a little, would have to be taught her lesson, but that would be done most effectively through what happened to the man.

Cornelius learned very quickly that his plans would have to take in a good deal more than the simple act of waylaying the man and running him down. There were details, innumerable details covering every step of the way before and after the event, which had to be jigsawed into place bit by bit in order to make it perfect.

In that respect, Cornelius thought gratefully, the Judge had been far more helpful than he had realized in his irony. Murder by automobile was the perfect murder, because, with certain details taken care of, it was not even murder at all! There was the victim, and there was the murderer standing over him, and the whole thing would be treated with perfunctory indifference. After all, what was one more victim among the thirty thousand each year? He was a statistic, to be regarded with some tongue-clicking and a shrug of helplessness.

Not by Claire, of course. Coincidence can be stretched far, but hardly far enough to cover the case of a husband's running down his wife's lover. And that was the best part of it. Claire would know, but would be helpless to say anything, since saying anything must expose her own wrongdoing. She would spend her life, day after day, knowing that she had been found out, knowing that a just vengeance had been exacted, and standing forewarned against any other such temptations that might come her way.

But what of the remote possibility that she might choose to speak out and expose herself? There, Cornelius reflected, fitting another little piece of the jigsaw into place, coincidence would instantly go to work for him. If there was no single shred of evidence that he had ever suspected her affair, or that he had ever seen the man before, the accident *must* be regarded by the law as coincidence. Either way his position was unassailable.

It was with this in mind that he patiently and single-mindedly went to work on his plans. He was tempted at the start to call in some professional investigator who could promptly and efficiently bring him the information he wanted, but after careful consideration he put this idea aside. A smart investigator might easily put two and two together after the accident. If he were honest he might go to the authorities with his suspicions; if he were dishonest he might be tempted to try blackmail. Obviously, there was no way of calling in an outsider without risking one danger or the other. And nothing, nothing at all,

was going to be risked here.

So it took Cornelius several precious weeks to glean the information he wanted, and, as he admitted to himself, it might have taken even longer had not Claire and the man maintained such an unfailing routine. Thursday was the one day of the week on which the man would pay his visits. Then, a little before the city-bound train arrived at the station, Claire would drive the station wagon into an almost deserted sidestreet a block from the Plaza. In the car the couple would kiss with an intensity that made Cornelius' flesh crawl.

As soon as the man left the car Claire would drive swiftly away, and the man would walk briskly to the Plaza, make his way through the cars parked at the curb there, cross the Plaza obviously sunk in his own thoughts and with only half an eye for passing traffic, and would enter the station. The third time Cornelius witnessed this performance he could have predicted the man's every step with deadly accuracy.

Occasionally, during this period, Claire mentioned that she was going to the city to do some shopping, and Cornelius took advantage of this as well. He was standing in a shadow of the terminal's waiting room when her train pulled in, he followed her at a safe distance to the street, his cab trailed hers almost to the door of the shabby apartment house where the man lived. The man was sitting on the grimy steps of the house, obviously waiting for her. When he led her into the house, as Cornelius bitterly observed, they held hands like a pair of school children, and then there was a long wait, a wait which took up most of the afternoon; but Cornelius gave up waiting before Claire reappeared.

The eruption of fury he knew after that scene gave him the idea of staging the accident there on the city streets the next day, but Cornelius quickly dismissed the thought. It would mean driving the car into the city, which was something he never did, and that would be a dangerous deviation from his own routine. Besides, city tabloids, unlike his staid local newspaper, sometimes publicized automobile accidents not only by printing the news of them, but also by displaying pictures of victim and culprit on their pages. He wanted none of that. This was a private affair. Strictly private.

No, there was no question that the only place to settle matters was right in the Plaza itself, and the more Cornelius reviewed his plans in preparation for the act the more he marveled at how flawless they were.

Nothing could conceivably go wrong. If by some mischance he struck down the man without killing him, his victim would be in

the same position as Claire: unable to speak openly without exposing himself. If he missed the man entirely he was hardly in the dangerous position of an assassin who misses his victim and is caught with the gun or knife in his hand. An automobile wasn't a weapon; the affair would simply be another close call for a careless pedestrian.

However, he wanted no close calls, and to that end he took to parking the car somewhat farther from the station than he ordinarily did. The extra distance, he estimated, would allow him to swing the car across the Plaza in an arc which would meet the man as he emerged from between the parked cars across the street. That would just about make explanations uncalled-for. A man stepping out from between parked cars would be more in violation of the law than the driver who struck him!

Not only did he make sure to set the car at a proper distance from the station entrance, but Cornelius also took to backing it into place as some other drivers did. Now the front wheels were facing the Plaza, and he could quickly get up all the speed he wanted. More than that, he would be facing the man from the instant he came into sight.

The day before the one he had chosen for the final act, Cornelius waited until he was clear of traffic on his homeward drive, and then stopped the car on a deserted part of the road, letting the motor idle. Then he carefully gauged the distance to a tree some 30 yards ahead; this, he estimated, would be the distance across the Plaza. He started the car and then drove it as fast as he could past the tree, the big machine snarling as it picked up speed. Once past the tree he braced himself, stepped hard on the brake, and felt the pressure of the steering wheel against his chest as the car slewed to a shrieking stop.

That was it. That was all there was to it . . .

He left the office the next day at the exact minute he had set for himself. After his secretary had helped him on with his coat he turned to her as he had prepared himself to do and made a wry face.

"Just not feeling right," he said. "Don't know what's wrong with me, Miss Wynant."

And, as he knew good secretaries were trained to do, she frowned worriedly at him and said, "If you didn't work so hard, Mr. Bolinger . . ."

He waved that aside brusquely. "Nothing that getting home early to a good rest won't cure. Oh," he slapped at the pockets of his coat, "my pills, Miss Wynant. They're in the top drawer over there."

They were only a few aspirins in an envelope, but it was the im-

pression that counted. A man who was not feeling well had that much more justification for a mishap while he was driving.

The early train was familiar to him now; he had ridden on it several times during the past few weeks, but always circumspectly hidden behind a newspaper. Now it was to be different. When the conductor came through to check his commutation ticket, Cornelius was sitting limp in his seat, clearly a man in distress.

"Conductor," he asked, "if you don't mind, could you get me some water?"

The conductor glanced at him and hastily departed. When he returned with a dripping cup of water Cornelius slowly and carefully removed an aspirin from the envelope and washed it down gratefully.

"If there's anything else," the conductor said, "just you let me know."

"No," Cornelius said, "no, I'm a little under the weather, that's all."

But at the station the conductor was there to lend him a solicitous hand down, and dally briefly. "You're not a regular, are you?" the conductor said. "At least, not on this train."

Cornelius felt a lift of gratification. "No," he said, "I've only taken this train once before. I usually travel on the Broker's Special."

"Oh." The conductor looked him up and down, and grinned. "Well, that figures," he said. "Hope you found our service as good as the Special's."

In the small station Cornelius sat down on a bench, his head resting against the back of the bench, his eyes on the clock over the ticket agent's window. Once or twice he saw the agent glance worriedly through the window at him, and that was fine. What was not so fine was the rising feeling in him, a lurching nervousness in his stomach, a too-heavy thudding of his heart in his chest. He had allowed himself ten minutes here; each minute found the feeling getting more and more oppressive. It was an effort to contain himself, to prevent himself from getting to his feet and rushing out to the car before the minute hand of the clock had touched the small black spot that was his signal.

Then, on the second, he got up, surprised at the effort it required to do this, and slowly walked out of the station, the agent's eyes following him all the way, and down past the station to the car. He climbed behind the wheel, closed the door firmly after him, and started the motor. The soft purring of the motor under his feet sent a new strength up through him. He sat there soaking it up, his eyes fixed on the distance across the Plaza.

When the man first appeared,

moving with rapid strides toward him, it struck Cornelius in some strange way that the tall, blond figure was like a puppet being drawn by an invisible wire to his destined place on the stage. Then, as he came closer, it was plain to see that he was smiling broadly, singing aloud in his exuberance of youth and strength—and triumph. That was the key which unlocked all paralysis, which sent the motor roaring into furious life.

For all the times he had lived the scene in his mind's eye, Cornelius was unprepared for the speed with which it happened. There was the man stepping out from between the cars, still blind to everything. There was Cornelius's hand on the horn, the ultimate inspiration, a warning that could not possibly be heeded, and more than anything else an insurance of success. The man swung toward the noise, his face all horror, his hands outthrust as if to fend off what was happening. There was the high-pitched scream abruptly cut off by the shock of impact, more violent than Cornelius had ever dreamed, and then everything dissolving into the screech of brakes.

The Plaza had been deserted before it had happened; now, people were running from all directions, and Cornelius had to push his way through them to catch a glimpse of the body.

"Better not look," someone warned, but he did look, and saw the crumpled form, the legs scissored into an unnatural position, the face graying as he watched. He swayed, and a dozen helping hands reached out to support him, but it was not weakness which affected him now, but an overwhelming, giddy sense of victory, a sense of victory heightened by the voices around him.

"Walked right into it with his eyes wide open."

"I could hear that horn a block away."

"Drunk, maybe. The way he stood right there . . ."

The only danger now lay in overplaying his hand. He had to watch out for that, had to keep fitting piece after piece of the plan together, and then there would be no danger. He sat in the car while a policeman questioned him with official gravity, and he knew from the growing sympathy in the policeman's voice that he was making the right impression.

No, he was free to go home if he wished. Charges, of course, had to be automatically preferred against him, but the way things looked . . . Yes, they would be glad to phone Mrs. Bolinger. They could drive him home, but if he preferred to have her do it . . .

He had allowed time enough for her to be at home when the call was made, and he spent the next fifteen minutes with the

crowd staring at him through the car window with a morbid and sympathetic curiosity. When the station wagon drew up nearby, a lane magically appeared through the crowd; when Claire was at his side the lane disappeared.

Even frightened and bewildered, she was a beautiful woman, Cornelius thought, and, he had to admit to himself, she knew how to put on a sterling show of wifely concern and devotion, false as it was. But perhaps that was because she didn't know yet, and it was time for her to know.

He waited until she had helped him into the station wagon, and when she sat down in the driver's seat he put an arm tight around her.

"Oh, by the way, officer," he asked with grave anxiety through the open window. "Did you find out who the man was? Did he have any identification on him?"

The policeman nodded. "Young fellow from the city," he said, "so we'll have to check up on him down there. Name of Lundgren. Robert Lundgren, if his card means anything."

Against his arm Cornelius felt, rather than heard, the choked gasp, felt the uncontrollable small shivering. Her face was as gray as that of the man's out there in the street. "All right, Claire," he said softly. "Let's go home."

She drove by instinct out through the streets of the town. Her face was vacuous, her eyes set and staring. He was almost grateful when they reached the highway, and she finally spoke in a quiet and wondering voice. "You knew," she said. "You knew about it, and you killed him for it."

"Yes," Cornelius said, "I knew about it."

"Then you're crazy," she said dispassionately, her eyes still fixed ahead of her. "You must be crazy to kill someone like that."

Her even, informative tone fired his anger as much as what she was saying.

"It was justice," he said between his teeth. "It was coming to him."

She was still remote. "You don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

She turned toward him, and he saw that her eyes were glistening wet. "I knew him before I ever knew you, before I ever started working in the office. We always went together; it didn't seem as if there was any point living if we couldn't be together." She paused only a fraction of a second. "But things didn't go right. He had big ideas that didn't make any money, and I couldn't stand that. I was born poor, and I couldn't stand marrying poor and dying poor... That's why I married you. And I tried to be a good wife—you'll never know how hard I tried!—but that wasn't what you wanted.

You wanted a showpiece, not a wife; something to parade around in front of people so that they could admire you for owning it, just like they admire you for everything else you own."

"You're talking like a fool," he said harshly. "And watch the road. We turn off here."

"Listen to me!" she said. "I was going to tell you all about it. I was going to ask for a divorce. Not a penny to go with it, or anything like that—just the divorce so that I could marry him and make up for all the time I had thrown away! That's what I told him today, and if you had only asked—only talked to me—"

She would get over it, he thought. It had been even more serious than he had realized, but, as the saying went, *all passes*. She had nothing to trade her marriage for any longer; when she understood that clearly they would make a new start. It was a miracle that he had thought of using the weapon he had, and that he had used it so effectively. *A perfect weapon,* the Judge had said. He'd never know how perfect.

It was the warning clangor of the bell at the grade crossing that jarred Cornelius from his reverie —that, and the alarming realization that the car's speed was not slackening at all. Then everything else was submerged by the angry bawling of a Diesel horn, and when he looked up incredulously, it was to the raging mountain of steel that was the Broker's Special hurling itself over the crossing directly ahead.

"Watch out!" he cried out wildly. "My God, what are you doing!"

In that last split second, when her foot went down hard on the accelerator, he knew. ■ ■

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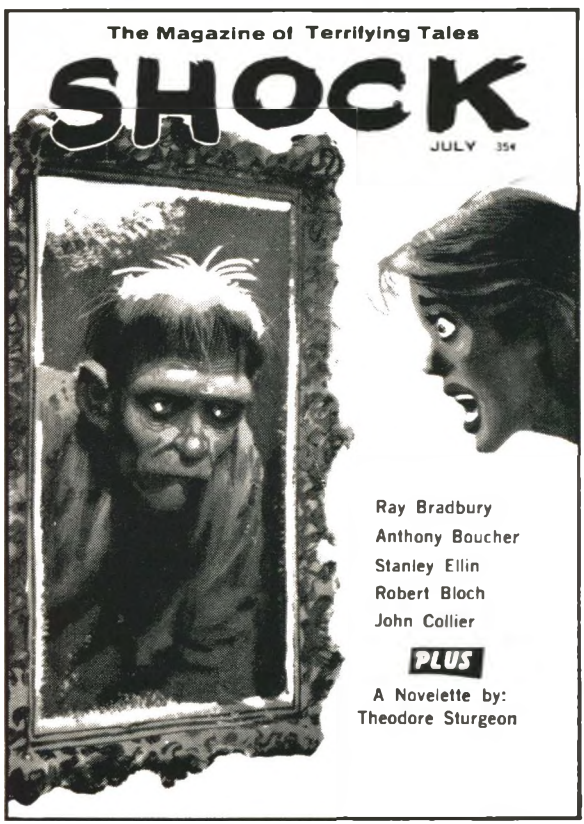

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