KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

35c

JUNE

THE TRAP
by Norman Daniels

A new story by
JOHN COLLIER

Lawrence G. Blochman • Theodore Sturgeon
Rog Phillips • Mary Thayer Muller • Joseph Whitehill

Dear Mystery Fans:

Frankly, we're overwhelmed. When we invited your comments about the first issue of KEYHOLE MYSTERY, we did not expect the avalanche of mail that followed. As a matter of fact, we received so many interesting letters that we decided to establish a (new) letters department, a place where all members of the Keyhole Murder-and-Mayhem society may vent their spleen, or chorus their praises.

Meanwhile, however, Crime marches on. In this second issue of KEYHOLE MYSTERY, we have an assortment of villains and villainy to tempt the palate of the most bloodthirsty among you. There are such masters of the murder story as *Cornell Woolrich, Theodore Sturgeon, John Collier* and *Robert Bloch*— to name only a few of the famous names that appear on this month's masthead.

We didn't know—until your letters made it clear—that the redoubtable Beasley Grove, insufferable genius and part-time detective of Eastern U, had become one of your favorite sleuths, so we couldn't bring him back in time for this month's issue. But watch for him in the next issue of KEYHOLE MYSTERY.

And keep your letters coming. Every one is read carefully, and cherished in our black hearts, even if we haven't got room to print 'em all.

Yours till death (heh-heh),
THE EDITOR

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KEYHOLE MYSTERY *Magazine*

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AUTHOR'S CHOICE:

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

BEASTLY BEASLEY

I read The Great Elvis Presley Mystery featuring the college-student detective Beasley Grove, and I hate him. I hate him! And you know why? Because my brother loves him, and I hate my brother.

Dolores Wilson
Albany, New York

I know a college student who's just as impossible as Beasley Grove. In fact, they could be twins. Are they?

Harold Lankin
Independence, Mo.

Of course not. Beasley is absolutely unique. —*Ed.*

QUERY

I don't believe that the sixteen year old girl in Cinderella and the Mob (*Keyhole Mystery*, April) could pass herself off as a veteran mob girl—even *with* pancake makeup. Has Cornell Woolrich looked at any sixteen year old girls lately?

Dennis Lieberman
Bronx, New York

We certainly hope not. Cornell is a middle-aged man who is not interested in getting into any Lolita situations. Shame on you! —*Ed.*

TOO SEXY?

I hope you don't print any more stories like Peeping Tom's Scrapbook. Yours is the best new mystery magazine I've read in twenty years—and you don't need sexy trash like that.

Evelyn Rosten
Denver, Colorado.

Say—let's have more stories like Peeping Tom's Scrapbook.

Charles Williams
Phoenix, Arizona

ODDS AND ENDS

Great issue! And wonderful cover illustration. Who did it?

Ira Fields
Birmingham, Ala.

Artist Ed Emsh thanks the scores of Keyhole Mystery readers who praised the cover picture. —*Ed.*

I'd like to murder the square who wrote Murder on El Capitan. A real Beatnik doesn't shave off his beard because he meets some broad. Roy was an imposter to begin with.

Max "The Beard"
San Francisco, Calif.

You goofed! El Capitan was a streamliner, the author said, so how come your illustration shows a train that looks like it's a hundred years old?

Jane Maxwell
Hattiesburg, Miss.

How come? We're crazy, that's how come. —*Ed.*

Mr. Lupescu was a masterpiece. The ending is a killer-diller.

Esther Frieze
Cleveland, Ohio

Mr. Lupescu reminds me of my husband. He's a slob, he's got a red nose from too much drinking, and a big stomach from feeding his fat face all day long. Now, my question is, where do I find Gorgo?

Phillipa G.
Phoenix, Arizona

Norman Katkov's The North Star Caper was a thrilling yarn. From personal experience I know that the author gave an accurate picture of a teen-age gang.

Al Frondiziano
Los Angeles, Calif.

Miriam Allen de Ford draws a great picture of a nagging wife in Full Circle. Ask her if she used my old lady as a model for her story?

Leslie Ford
Grand Island, Neb.

Miss de Ford says she's never been to Nebraska. —*Ed.*

SUM UP

I just finished reading *Keyhole Mystery* and want to give you my rating of the stories for what it is worth.

1: Great Elvis Presley Mystery — only passable.

2: Full Circle — well written but pretty dull.

3: Cinderella and the Mob — terrific. Held my interest all the way through.

4: Swan Song — maybe Ken Murray is a good TV entertainer but he ought to stick to that instead of writing.

5: The Mugger — I like the idea of a short-short story in each issue. But this one wasn't much.

6: Mother Knows Best — pretty good. I liked the ending.

7: The North Star Caper — I don't care for kid gangs. Katkov is a good writer, though.

8: Peeping Tom's Scrapbook — very good. The ending took me by surprise.

9: Murder on El Capitan — the greatest. Can't we have more stories about this beatnik detective?

10: The Dog That Wouldn't Talk — first rate.

I'm saving my best rave for the story called Mr. Lupescu by Anthony Boucher. This is the greatest story I've ever read anywhere — and worth the price of the mag a dozen times over. Wheee!

All in all, a great first issue. Keep up the good work, huh?

William Forrest
Portland, Maine

The two young people were being watched, night after night. There was no way to escape. Then Fate gave them an unexpected chance to strike back at their tormentor ...

THE TRAP

by NORMAN DANIELS

THE HEAT WAS OPPRESSIVE, EXhausting. In the three room, second floor walkup, it seemed a little worse than anywhere else.

Gwen Thatcher came in from the kitchen with a fresh bowl of ice cubes and made more cold tea. She was a tall, well-proportioned girl of twenty, but there were dark circles under her eyes and she had acquired an intense, worried look these past four days.

"Is he still there?" she asked.

Ted Young, standing beside the window which overlooked the dusty, hot street, moved away.

"He's there," he said bitterly. "He's *always* there. Four nights now."

She drank some of the iced tea and went over to the window to look down. The man on the sidewalk was named Dan Kendall. He was about fifty, a heavy-set man. He stood there, across the street from the tenement and he wasn't moving at all, except to now and then remove a cigar butt from his lips. Despite the heat, his suit was an all-year-round woolen that hung on him like wrinkles on an old rhino.

He was a cop. A detective, working out of a nearby precinct.

Gwen moved back from the window.

"I can't help feeling sorry for him," she said. "He looks so un-

comfortable."

To Ted, she was as unpredictable as she was lovely.

"Gwen, does it ever enter your sweet and innocent little mind that he's out there for one reason? To make sure you and I don't start running. And then, when they think the time is right, he's coming up here to arrest us for murder."

She nodded, sipped her iced tea. "Of course you're right," she said. "You know, Ted, what I resent more than anything else about this whole thing is the fact that they actually think you and I killed my Aunt Annie. Why . . . I loved Aunt Annie. She was one of the nicest persons I've ever known. She even left me all her money."

"And established a nice little motive against us," Ted said. "But sweetie, there's a lot more to it than that. The maniac who killed Aunt Annie also killed two other defenseless old ladies who were supposed to keep a lot of cash around. If they ever pin that on me . . ." He left the thought unfinished.

"Just when we were thinking of getting married," Gwen sighed. "When Aunt Annie left us six thousand dollars, I thought all our dreams would come true."

"I don't think he ever sleeps." Ted angrily pointed at the window. "All he does is live in the hope of arresting us. Boy, if I was a murderer, I'd have taken care of *him* a long time go."

"But Teddy, when they brought us to the precinct and asked us questions, our stories didn't jibe. You have to admit they didn't. So you can't blame them for suspecting us."

He gestured impatiently. "How are we supposed to remember everything we did a week ago . . . two weeks ago? All that sticks in my mind is the moment when Kendall came in and told us we were wanted downtown. He didn't say why—he just took us. Then they asked us all those questions and maybe we didn't answer them too accurately, but what of it? Neither of us kept any notes about what we did the last couple of months since those murders started."

"Well," Gwen said airily, as if to throw all this unpleasantness off, "we're not guilty, so we don't have anything to worry about."

"Oh, no?" Ted said, with more than usual sarcasm. "They can arrest us when they want to. Then we'll have to get a lawyer and that'll cost every dime your aunt left you. Besides, Kendall's been haunting my office—and yours. I don't know about your boss, but mine is touchy when it comes to police asking questions."

Gwen tried to change the subject. "Let's see if there's any air stirring on the back fire-escape. I'll get some pillows to sit on."

They clambered through the

kitchen window, settled the pillows and made themselves as comfortable as possible. Gwen looked at the solid brick wall opposite, at the starkly lighted back alley below. The stench from unwashed tin cans was magnified by the heat.

"Isn't the river bank green and beautiful?" she asked, jestingly. "And the breeze . . . I declare it smells like magnolias. Do magnolias smell good, Teddy?"

He said, "I thought I'd take you out of this before now, Gwen. I would have too, if this hadn't happened."

"We'll be out of it soon, Ted. They'll stop bothering us and we'll have Aunt Annie's money. You have your job and I have mine . . . "

He didn't look at her. "When I said my boss is touchy about a police check on his employees, that wasn't a lie. He fired me."

She sat up. "Oh, Ted."

"Detective Kendall talked to him again yesterday and this morning the boss told me he couldn't afford to keep anybody around who was even suspected of murder . . . I'm sorry, Gwen. We're just not getting the breaks these days."

She leaned against him and put her head on his shoulder. It had all happened so fast. Their plans to get married, the scrimping and saving. The cold-blooded killer murdering elderly women who lived alone had seemed very remote in their lives. Then the murderer struck again, Gwen's aunt this time. Gwen had been at home at the time of the murder, all alone, and therefore without an alibi.

Ted, who had known Aunt Annie very well and often dropped in to see her, had no alibi either. He'd been at home too—in his room at the modest bachelor hotel where he lived, and nobody saw him come in or go out.

And then there was the six thousand dollars . . .

Maybe Detective Kendall had a right to suspect them at first, but he ought to know better by now. The way they'd been interrogated, separately, together, at her apartment, at Teddy's room. Everyone they knew had been questioned until they both felt they didn't have a friend left. Nobody wanted to be linked with a boy or girl suspected of three killings.

"What are we going to do?" she asked him.

"I don't know. Nothing. Just wait. The cops always make the play. When they whistle, we jump. Oh gosh, I wish *you* weren't mixed up in this."

"It'll all work out, Teddy."

He nodded, but she could feel his neck muscles tighten as he tried to hide his apprehension.

"Something I'm grateful for. You never once asked me if I did kill your Aunt Annie."

She raised her head swiftly. "Why, Teddy, it never crossed my mine. I never once . . ."

She gradually lowered her voice. She was peering down into the rear courtyard below. Ted, attracted by her tenseness, also bent over to look. A man—slightly intoxicated—was weaving a little as he walked along the areaway. Behind him, without his realizing it, were three boys in open-neck shirts, black leather jackets and sneakers. They all looked alike, long hair, swaggering walk, the same intentness. One picked up a loose housebrick which was being used to weigh down the lid of a trash can. Suddenly before Ted or Gwen could shout a warning, the three boys sprang forward and leaped on the man.

Their victim gave one wild yell before the brick hit him again and again. When he went down, two of the boys bent over him and frisked his pockets. It was all over in seconds.

On the fire escape Ted grabbed Gwen's hand in excitement. Detective Kendall began to run toward the boys and their victim.

One boy spotted the detective in time and went running down the areaway as fast he could travel. The other two stood up slowly, raising their hands under the threat of Kendall's revolver. The third boy made a turn at the end of the areaway.

"That one got clear," Ted said.

"No, he didn't," she whispered. "The direction he ran . . . it's blind. Just wall. He has to come back."

Teddy looked down at Kendall. "Maybe Kendall doesn't know it."

Kendall was examining the mugging victim after compelling the two surly boys to lie flat with their hands clasped behind them. Kendall was peering down the areaway, watching and waiting.

The third boy had to retreat, as Gwen had prophesied. When he came into view, he started running as fast as he could toward the nearest alley.

"Hold it!" Kendall shouted.

He pointed his gun upwards, fired once. The boy kept going. Kendall leveled the gun, took aim and brought him down with one bullet. Then he stayed where he was, guarding his prisoners. Before very long they heard sirens and a patrolman came running. Kendall turned the boys and their victim over to him and loped clumsily down the areaway to where the third boy lay, ominously still.

Kendall looked up, directly at the fire-escape. Gwen shuddered and was glad of Ted's protective arm.

"Ted, the way that third boy went down, I . . . I think he's dead. Don't you?"

Ted helped her up. "Let's go inside," he suggested.

She knew very well Ted want-

ed to get her away from watching what would follow if anyone were dead down there. They sat in the stuffy little parlor for an hour or so, until the excitement out back finally died away. Ted went to the front window, looked down at the street.

"Nobody there." He turned back toward Gwen. "Flatfoot's gone. It feels like someone lifted a blanket from my head."

Gwen looked thoughtful. "I wonder if they'll want us as witnesses?"

"We didn't see it," Ted said earnestly. "We don't want to get mixed up with anything that concerns the police. We don't owe them a thing. Not a thing, Gwen. We stay out of it—agreed?"

"But what if they ask us . . . ?"

"They can't make us say we saw it. I had all I can take of cops for the rest of my life. How about you?"

"Yes," she said, in a hard little voice. "I've had all I can take too."

"Well," Ted said, "I'd better be on my way. I have to get up early and hunt a job, thanks to Kendall and the police. No kidding, Gwen, I'm beginning to feel like an ex-con."

She followed him to the door. "It'll all work out," she said again.

The next day, Ted came over to Gwen's apartment at the usual time. He was scarcely there half an hour when there came a knock at the door.

The hard knock was as familiar as if the caller had shouted his name. Only Kendall's big fist knocked like that.

Gwen opened the door and Kendall stood there, all two hundred and thirty pounds of him. His clothes gave off the faint aroma of fresh sweat, and cheap cigars.

"Well, now," he said, "it's good I found you two kids home. How about me stepping in?"

"Look," Ted said, "if this is an arrest, why bother? We're ready. We've been ready for days."

"Who said it's a pinch?" Kendall asked mildly and closed the door behind him. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead. "Hot, ain't it? Look, you two were out on the fire-escape when that little fracas happened yesterday."

"We were there part of the time," Ted admitted cautiously.

"The guy they hit may die," Kendall said. "The one I shot is already dead, but that ain't the worst of it. Y'see . . . the other two kids say they never saw the dead one before in their lives."

Ted's hand sought Gwen's and squeezed significantly.

"So what's that to us?" he asked.

"Well, I'm in a jam over that shooting. I gave that crazy kid fair warning, but he wouldn't stop. This dead boy happens to be the son of Malcolm Ramsey, who is some kind of a big shot, and

Ramsey says his son never ran with those other two kids. Also, Ramsey got to those two kids and offered to defend them. We can't prove it, but there's some kind of a deal. If they say the dead boy wasn't with them, they get a top-notch lawyer."

"No kidding," Ted said. "That means you killed the wrong boy."

Kendall shook his big head. "You two kids know I didn't. You saw the whole thing. How about it?"

"I'm sorry," Ted said firmly. "We just happened to look out the window and heard the shot and then we stepped out."

Kendall eyed the pair of them sharply before he went to the window and leaned out.

"Yeah," he said. "You heard the ruckus and got curious and you just stepped out."

"That's how it happened," Ted said.

Kendall stared at them a long moment. Then he said glumly, "Well, that's how it is."

"So long," Ted said. "Or are you going to tail me home like you always do?"

"I guess not," Kendall said. "Not tonight. I'm sorry this had to happen. You're a couple of nice kids."

"Sure." Ted couldn't keep the lilt of triumph out of his voice. "We're real nice kids. All the cops think so, especially you. We're such nice kids I lost my job because you snooped around the place where I worked."

Kendall's eyebrows shot upwards. "Is that so? Nobody told me. I'm sorry, boy. I really am."

He walked out slowly and they could hear his ponderous steps fade down the corridor until he reached the stairs. Suddenly Gwen threw her arms around Ted.

"I wish we'd told the truth, Ted."

"So what'd happen if we did? They'd drag us downtown again and question us for hours, and we'd have to go into court, and what then? Can you imagine the kind of publicity we'd get when those high-priced lawyers of Ramsey's got through with us? We're murder suspects already. We'd be convicted of killing your aunt without even going on trial for it. No, sir . . . I've had my belly full of cops. All I want is out."

She nodded slowly. "I guess that's right, Ted."

"Besides, we don't owe Kendall a thing, and anyway no cop ever gets in trouble he can't get out of. Stop worrying about him and start worrying about us. We're still a long way from being in the clear."

They followed the Kendall case closely in the newspaper items during the next week. Detective Kendall was accused of being a trigger-happy cop, of having shot the wrong boy. The pair of young hoodlums he'd arrested swore that

the dead boy hadn't been with them and that they'd never seen him before.

"Gets me," Ted said to Gwen one night, "why we haven't been bothered. You'd think Kendall would try to sweat it out of us."

"I wonder what'll happen to him?" Gwen said.

"They'll probably suspend him for awhile, that's all."

Gwen showed him an item in the evening newspaper. "It says here he hasn't been suspended yet because of his record. He's been with the department for thirty years, Ted."

Ted looked out the front window. It was a relief not to have Kendall always waiting there in the shadows. Ted doubted whether anyone else had been assigned to the job and this puzzled him, but maybe the police were just figuring on giving him and Gwen plenty of rope.

Suddenly he turned around with a grunt of annoyance. "I'll say they didn't suspend him. Take a look."

Gwen peered down at the sidewalk across the street. Kendall was back. She saw the heavy-set figure, unmoving, the inevitable cigar dangling from his lips.

Gwen was angry. "I wish he'd leave us alone. We haven't done anything, or hurt anybody. If he'd just listen to us . . . believe us . . ."

"A cop," Ted said, "doesn't believe anybody. That's how he runs his business. Look, let's stop talking about it. So happens I've a little good news for a change."

"You found a job?" She could see she'd hit it right on target. "Ted, I'm so happy. Honestly . . . I'm so darned happy . . ."

"A better one than I had before," he said, grinning. "Funny thing, I tried to get a job there right after I was fired and they wouldn't even listen. But the personnel manager called me in this afternoon and said I could start Monday."

She was so delighted she actually forgot about Kendall. It seemed to her their lives had begun again. Ted was caught up in her infectious gaiety and went out for some beer and sandwiches. She watched him leave the building and saw him wave challengingly at Kendall, who merely removed his cigar and nodded.

Around eleven o'clock they noticed Kendall was gone. He'd never left that early before, but they thought he might just have given up.

And then came the knock. Different this time. Almost timid.

Gwen opened the door. A woman stood there, a very plain woman with a rather shabby handbag, and it was obvious that the black dress she wore was her best.

"Is this Gwen Thatcher? And," she looked into the room, "Ted Young?"

"Yes," Gwen said.

"You look like such nice young people," the woman said. "I'm Luciana Kendall. My husband is the detective. Or like he calls himself, the cop."

"Well . . . what do you want?" Gwen asked uncertainly.

"A favor. A very big favor. If you will let me come in, please . . ."

Ted moved forward. "Mrs. Kendall, we're very sorry for your troubles, but there's nothing we can . . ."

"Come in, Mrs. Kendall," Gwen said.

Mrs. Kendall settled herself in a chair in the living room and fumbled with the handbag as if she were ill at ease.

"My husband is going to be fired from the force. No, wait," she looked up sharply. "Don't say you're sorry. Wait until I finish. I don't want to ask for your sympathy. These things happen to the best of policemen. They, and their wives, are prepared for it."

"We're sorry, Mrs. Kendall," Gwen said. "Really we are."

"Yes, I believe that. You're so young . . . so pretty, and this boy, Ted—a nice boy, Dan says."

"What do you want from us?" Ted asked.

"Only the truth. You're angry because Dan had to question you so much. That's why you won't help him."

"Tell me one good reason why we should," Ted asked. "Just name one reason."

The older woman said, "There can be but one reason—the truth, no matter whom it hurts, or whom it harms. If you didn't see what happened, then tell me so and I will go away. Otherwise, help me. Help Dan."

"We told you . . ." Ted began, not quite so vehemently.

Gwen said, "Mrs. Kendall, did you know your husband has been watching us night after night? Interfering with us, asking questions that embarrassed us, that even caused Ted to lose his job?"

She nodded slowly. "From the first, Dan said it was a surveillance job. The questioning and all that —he didn't tell me about. He never talks much about his work, but when there is a surveillance job, then I know, for he's never home. Never! He stays out all night. He forgets to sleep and eat. The fact that he gets no pay for it doesn't matter . . ."

"What do you mean, no pay?" Ted asked, with doubt in his voice.

"These extra hours . . . his off-duty time. That's when he watches you."

"He does it on his own time?" Gwen asked, in complete wonder.

"Why, of course. The department wouldn't stand for that kind of hours unless they were absolutely convinced the man to be watched would run away . . ."

Gwen said, "Mrs. Kendall, I don't know what you're driving at. We've hated your husband watching us every moment, and now we learn he was doing it in his spare time. Well . . . I suppose we should hate him even more, but . . ." She went to Ted's side and took his hand in her own, "I've had enough, Ted. I guess I never realized a cop had a family, or that anyone on earth loved them. Ted . . . what do you say?"

He nodded glumly. "I suppose so. To tell the truth, it's been bothering me too."

"Then—we'd better go down to the precinct and explain," Gwen said.

Ted found he could smile. "All we have to do is yell for Dan to come up here."

"Dan's g o n e . . . remember?" Gwen said.

"Gone?" Mrs. Kendall asked quickly. "Something must have happened. He wouldn't leave for a moment. He'd be afraid this . . . this murderer would kill someone else and you wouldn't have an alibi . . ."

Ted stared at her uncomprehendingly. It was Gwen who first understood what Mrs. Kendall meant.

She said, "Your husband's been out there all these nights watching us so . . . so if the murderer struck again, your husband could swear Ted *couldn't* be the man?"

"Didn't you understand that?" Mrs. Kendall said. "He was sure you weren't guilty, but he couldn't prove it and neither could you. However, as he said, this killer strikes with a certain pattern so there's no mistaking him. If he kills another—and you weren't near the scene, then you must be innocent of the other crimes, too. That's the way the police work many, many times. That's what Dan means by a surveillance job. It's to protect you, not worry you."

"Well, what do you know?" Ted gasped.

"Dan was sorry you lost your job. He talked to some people and said maybe . . . just maybe, he'd done you some good. My heavens, young man, do you think cops do nothing but arrest people? Their job is to protect you. That's what Dan's been doing."

They sent Mrs. Kendall home in a cab and went down to the precinct right away. Dan Kendall was there and very happy to see them. It seemed that the murderer had attacked another woman, and he'd been caught. The whole thing was over.

They let Ted and Gwen go home much later, after they told the whole story of what they had seen. No one told them they were silly young idiots for having withheld the truth so long.

They knew that without being told. ■ ■

NIGHT RIDE

by THEODORE STURGEON

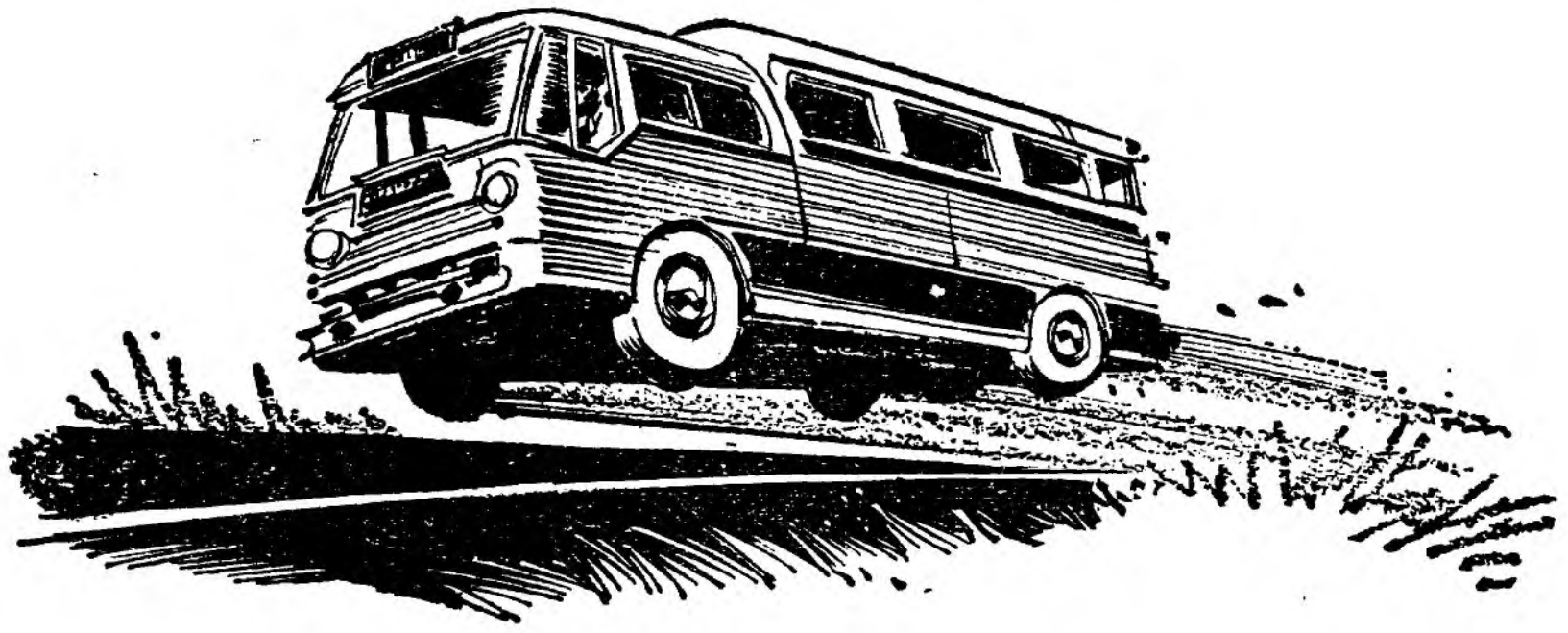
The runaway bus was carrying a strange group on its one-way

NINETY-FOUR MILES AN HOUR. IN the back of the bus somebody was dead. In the front of the bus, a scared little guy with thick wrists was going to be dead.

Ninety-six miles an hour. He had a choice to make, he realized as he manhandled the twelve-ton monster through a rocky gap and down around a turn so sharp that loose material from the shoulder sprayed out into space. He had this choice (at a hundred and two miles per hour): He could die alone, blindfolded and strapped to a chair, while a prison chaplain made things easy as he could; or he could just forget to turn the wheel at the next curve, or the one after, and die that way.

Along with thirty-two other guys. Thirty-two innocent guys and a murderer. That, thought little Paul Cahill, half out of his seat to whip the wheel around, that might be worth the price. A good clean finish to the dirty story of Romeo.

The name really was Romeo . . . Charley Romeo. Only nobody kidded Romeo about it. That could be because he was just under six five and stood about *this* wide. Or it could be because he was



plunge to doom. There were 32 live passengers—and one corpse!

proud of it. He acted the part, Charley Romeo did, hollering *Watch Me, World* the whole time. He played basketball, and girls. When he made a pass, it stayed made. From any corner—*any*body's corner—he sank his shots whenever he felt like it. And if he had to stand taller to do it he'd just as soon stand on somebody's face.

Even Paul Cahill would admit that Charley Romeo was a great basketball player. There was only one thing in all the world that meant more to Paul Cahill than basketball—especially Hill City basketball. He drove the bus at the little mountain school, but he never missed a home game either. The one thing in all his world was Jenny Cahill, his brand new, late-model wife. Some model. They still make that kind, but not often. Jenny Cahill worked in the school office.

Ever since Charley Romeo came to Hill City, his idea of top comedy was to ride the little bus-driver. But when Charley Romeo got a look at Jenny Cahill, and when his first easy hook-shot her

way not only missed the hoop but the backboard as well, why, the wisecracks got a little rougher than funny. Romeo never let up on Paul Cahill, nor Jenny either.

Paul Cahill was a little guy, but he was a gutsy little guy, and he wouldn't have held still for much of this if it had not been for "Turk" McGurk, the coach; for the school; for basketball itself. Paul felt deep loyalties to all these, and there was no arguing the fact that in his big fast hands Charley Romeo held the Conference win and the Invitation—things that the little school wanted and needed, things that Paul Cahill wanted for the school almost as much as Coach McGurk. And as for Coach McGurk, if he ever felt anything or thought anything but basketball, he fought it down till it didn't show. That meant that if, to win, Charley Romeo had to pull the wings off flies, Coach McGurk would go catch flies for him.

All this had been going on for too long a time the afternoon the bus started out for Johnson Mesa and the most important game of the year. Win this one, and the Invitation would be a cinch.

Everyone felt good at first, excited and happy. The big new bus was full—all the second-string players were along to see what they could learn, and a couple of guys to report for the school paper, and that weird-o they called Big Dome Craig. (Wherever you found Charley Romeo, you also found Big Dome—nobody knew why. Except it was Romeo's idea. Maybe he thought some of Big Dome's brains would rub off on him.) And of course, Turk McGurk the coach. It was a fine day, and there was some grand country to climb. But really climb—the road wound up and up for eleven and a half miles to a mountain pass nearly seven thousand feet above sea level.

Paul Cahill kept the giant diesel humming along in third and fourth gears in the low range. At first even Paul felt good, in spite of the trouble he knew would come from the big center and his big mouth. He knew it would come, because it always did on these long hauls. Charley Romeo could look at just so much scenery, and then he'd get bored, and that was when he'd stir up what he called a little fun.

And sure enough, when they were within four miles of the pass, Paul Cahill saw, in the big inside mirror, Romeo suddenly loom up out of his seat. He sat side-saddle on the arm of the seat, about halfway down the aisle, and all the faces from there on back swung toward him.

"Once upon a time—" he bellowed; and all the faces ahead of him swung around to look back.

"Siddown, Romeo," Paul called out peaceably. "You're blocking

my view."

"Little man," said Romeo, "drive your bus. *I* am goin' to tell a story. A real old bed-time story."

From the corner of his eye Paul Cahill saw the coach, McGurk, sight down the aisle, look back up at the mirror, and then subside with that give-him-his-head expression. Romeo went on with his yarn, about how "this guy I know"—he meant himself—drew a bead on "a certain chick"—for a bad moment Paul thought he meant . . .never mind: he wouldn't even think it . . . anyway, the story went on and on. The usual proportion of boneheads who always seem ready to encourage a fool egged Romeo on.

Paul Cahill lost track of the story for a while; he had a job to do. The road was none too wide. Sometimes there were wide flat shoulders, then in a few yards they'd be in a cut with jagged rock walls just far enough apart for two squashed lances of traffic; then again there would be that queasy feeling that if you hung your chin on the right front fender you could look a blue mile straight down.

But at last he reached that long straight slope that approaches the pass, and happened to glance in the mirror. Romeo was still at it, but what jolted Paul Cahill's attention was the face of young Curtis, white, strained, twisted up on itself with a mixture of held-in anger and disgust; he looked as if he might burst into tears, or throw up, or maybe both. Paul Cahill, driving intently, let himself listen again:

" . . . but I mean, she had a bedbug on her, but it was pink. Yeah, a pink bedbug, right *here*." Romeo demonstrated, and the boneheads roared. The reporter, Curtis, bent way down as if he had a shoe to fix or wanted to hide his face.

Suddenly Paul Cahill understood. He'd seen Romeo giving the quick casual rush to Curtis' girlfriend Beth, a squeak-sized upcountry kid who'd be no more able to handle the likes of Romeo than a rock slide. So she happened to have a pink mole some place. And now if Curtis made one move to shut him up, the whole bus would suddenly know just who Romeo was talking about; the whole school would know about her "pink bedbug", yes, and about her and Romeo to boot. Paul Cahill could see Charley Romeo's quick glances down at Curtis. The big fellow was enjoying himself.

Paul Cahill suddenly bellowed, "Now dammit, Romeo, I said get in your seat. I can't see out the back."

Romeo looked around him in stage amazement.

"Any of you fellers hear something?" he said. He made no move to get off his perch. He looked forward, into the big mirror, and that way right into Paul's face. "You mean to say you don't know what goes on behind your back, little man?"

Paul Cahill knotted his jaw and drove his bus. He flicked a glance off the road and saw Romeo's face happy, tense, the flick of his tongue as he wet his lips. He saw McGurk, the coach, looking troubled.

Romeo said, "Tell me something, Shorty, you haul the baseball teams too, don't you?"

Paul Cahill, seeing the coach's face, forcing himself to think of the big game, of the tricky road, did not answer.

"You know what I'm goin' to do," chuckled Romeo, "I'm goin' to stay off the ball team next term. Long as you don't know what goes on behind you, why, every time we have an 'away' game, I'll just stick right around home and—"

Tires crunched heavily, air shrilled as Paul Cahill tramped on the brake, pulled over to the side, set the emergency. All the passengers, but one, sat in surprised silence in the sudden hush. Coach McGurk, however, was on his feet, leaning close over Paul Cahill's shoulder—so close, the little driver could not rise.

McGurk said, pretending to point at the dashboard, "Getting hot?"

Paul Cahill nodded curtly. "A little."

"Listen, boy," said Coach McGurk. "We don't want that."

"Okay, okay," Paul Cahill muttered, and he really meant to stay in line; but then Romeo spoke up, just as Paul Cahill was about to start the bus again.

"Now don't that make y'all go pitty-pat!" Romeo drawled. "Just a mention of her, and he gets all warm."

Paul Cahill was out of his seat and down the aisle before the coach knew he was gone. He stalked up to Charley Romeo, sitting on the arm of his seat in the center of the bus, and looked him in the eye.

"Who's this 'her' you're talking about?" Paul Cahill demanded.

"Your wife I'm talking about. Jenny, I'm talking about. Why?"

Paul Cahill started his swing with the first spoken syllable of his wife's name. Romeo caught his wrist with one easy motion and pulled it past him, fast, snatching Cahill right off his feet. He fell heavily, face down in the aisle, and Romeo slid off the arm of the seat and sat down on him.

"I tell you what I'm goin' to do," Romeo said. "Tonight I'm gonna run up some points, and just so you'll enjoy your favorite

game even more, for every one I sink I'm goin' to holler *Hey Jenny!* and since I plan to sink about thirty, that'll give you lots of chances to do something about it."

"Get off him," said Coach McGurk.

"Oh by all means," said Romeo, getting up, laughing. "Time to get up, little man. Get this show on the road."

Wheezing, white with fury, Paul Cahill managed to get back on his feet. Coach McGurk put a hand on his arm but he shook it off.

"Romeo," Paul Cahill said clearly, "I'm going to kill you."

It was a lousy couple of minutes, and even then, some of the boneheads managed to laugh. Paul Cahill, hurt, angry, and humiliated, let in his clutch, kicked off the emergency, and started uphill again. He drove with especial care all the rest of the way.

One of the first-string forwards gaped at the new sign as they rolled into the Mesa.

"*Science* building? What they done with the casaba pavilion?" he asked.

"There's enough hardwood left to choke a hoop," Coach McGurk told him. "Schools all over are making new science buildings out of gyms. Here, they turned the whole north wing over to the science department. But there's still a court."

"Education got a way of creeping up on you in this business," said Romeo. He liked it. He said it three more times.

Paul Cahill shouldered the big bus through the crowded parking lot, and pulled up by the side entrance. The boys bounded out, heading for the dressing rooms, or for the best seats. Paul Cahill stayed a while, gunned his motor once, watching his gauges. He let her idle, switched on the body lights, walked through the bus, sniffed for monoxide around the back, picked up some scraps of paper. In the luggage rack, here and there, were lunch boxes, coffee flasks. He knew them all, who they belonged to; he knew all these guys, what they wanted out of life. He stood a moment, confused by his vague rush of thoughts.

One of the lunches, battered, bright blue, with brass corners, caught his eye. He frowned, picked it up. It was Romeo's. He knew, just as everyone else knew, that the coffee in it was heavily laced with vodka, which doesn't smell on the breath. Coach McGurk alone didn't know it, probably because he didn't want to. Romeo trained carefully, but on the way back from one of those forty-pointers of his, he just had to celebrate.

Paul Cahill sighed, put the box back, and yanking the keys on the way, hopped out of the bus, closed

and locked the doors. Somebody was waiting for him out there. Coach McGurk.

"Don't go in there, Paul."

"Don't what?"

Coach McGurk looked, sounded, very tired. "Stay out of the hall," he said wearily. "You know that damn fool Romeo will do what he said. Why get yourself all worked up?"

"Oh," said Paul Cahill, remembering. Romeo was going to yell *Hey Jenny!* every time he hit the bucket. He said coldly, "And you wouldn't want me maybe to mess up your ball game."

"It isn't that, Paul—"

"It is that. And . . . for that I got to miss the best game of the year."

"You said it yourself. It's the best game of the year. It's important to all of us. Stay away from it, Paul."

Paul Cahill stood by the bus and watched the coach shamble inside. Then he opened up the bus, flipped up his seat, and fumbled through the tools. After a while he got out again and entered the building. Once inside, he remembered he had not locked up this time. He shrugged and sidled into the noisy gym. No matter what the coach said, this was a game he did not intend to miss.

At the tapoff, Romeo coiled down like a huge steel spring—and then didn't jump. The opposing center, caught by surprise, barely tipped the ball. Romeo's long arms snapped up like the business end of a rat trap; he double-palmed the ball and snapped his wrists. The ball took off like a flying saucer, seemingly self-propelled, and flew by itself to the Johnson hoop, where it swished through without touching iron at all. First blood in the first second of play, and Romeo hadn't even moved his feet.

"Hey Jenny!" he roared. Blind rage came and went in Paul Cahill. The second time it happened he clenched his fists and turned to go. Then it happened a third time, the roar *Hey Jenny!* and this time Paul Cahill roared with it, a sound without words in it. He rushed forward, a ten-inch box wrench flailing the air. Then something like a railway mail-hook caught his left arm and spun him around, and the wrench disappeared out of his right hand, and he was being hustled in the opposite direction, Coach McGurk on one side of him, young Curtis on the other.

A door opened for them; Big Dome Craig opened it, from inside.

"Sorry, son, but you got to stay in there," said the coach, and they shoved him into a room and the door closed. Through the frosted glass, Paul Cahill could see one of them take up what looked like sentry duty. It had all happened

so fast he had stopped thinking.

Hey Jenny! He heard Romeo clearly, and a huge noise from the crowd. He scurried all around the room. There was another door, locked. The windows were hinged vents, high up in a glass ceiling. It had once been part of the gym, he recalled. He saw—now that he looked—that it was a chem lab.

He stood by the glass door after that, listening to the biggest game of the year. *Hey, Jenny!* He thought he would go out of his head. Maybe he did, a little. He heard his wife's name again. He heard the crowd pick it up. He heard that almost thirty times. It was Charley Romeo's big night.

After some hours—months—of this, the door opened and Coach McGurk came in. He spent a moment looking carefully at Paul Cahill's face.

"We won it," he said at last.

Paul Cahill didn't say anything. After a long silence he moved his head tiredly and said, "Let's go."

On the way back, the team was boisterous. Well, they'd won it; that was what they'd come for. Everybody kept patting Romeo on the back. As soon as they were on the road and the lights out, Paul Cahill dimly saw, in his mirror, Romeo's long arm snake up and get his lunch box.

Paul Cahill settled down to his work, and let everything else trickle into a place inside him that had a one-way cork on it.

Therefore he heard the noise a little later than anyone else. It had to filter through to him—a steamboat-whistle kind of *Hoo! Hoo!*

Romeo, of course. Paul Cahill ground his teeth. Then the *Hoo Hoo!* noise turned into a gibbering burble, and a sort of scream so alarming that the boys began to make worried noises. Someone yelled for light and the coach went back. Immediately he called out:

"Stop when you can, Paul." Coach McGurk said it in such a strange tense tone that all Paul Cahill's anger evaporated.

Paul Cahill had to drive nearly half a mile before he could stop, for they were in the pass, still climbing, and they had to get through to the wider road on the other side. But at last he could pull over and stop. He turned on the inside dome lights, and saw his passengers pressing forward from behind, drawing back from around the long figure of Romeo, stretched out in the aisle.

Without the motor, the silence was like a crash.

Then Coach McGurk said, in a weary, puzzled voice:

"Romeo is dead."

"Dead?" they asked each other. "Dead," they kept answering; the word flicked and frothed over them like whitecaps, while they moved under it like waves, cran-

ing to look, pressing away.

Somebody said something about getting the police. The remark just lay there.

"Well, what happened to him?" Paul Cahill suddenly barked.

Coach McGurk extended something—a flask—toward him. Paul Cahill started to take it but the coach used it to push his hand away and put it up to his face instead.

Paul Cahill smelled it: sweet bitter coffee smell, and the odor of something else, like . . . coffee cake? Sugar buns, the kind with . . .

"Almonds," Paul Cahill said.

"Almonds hell, that's arsenic," Coach McGurk said positively.

Paul Cahill made as if to take the flask to sniff, unbelievingly again, but the coach moved it out of his reach, picked up the cover from Romeo's seat, and screwed it down tight. And all the while the Coach kept looking and looking at Paul Cahill out of his tired eyes.

Abruptly Paul Cahill realized what was going through Coach McGurk's mind. He looked at all the other faces and saw the same idea percolate through the crowd.

Who had threatened to kill Romeo?

Who had, with the box-wrench, actually tried?

Who had the best chance, alone in the bus, to put the fatal dose of poison into Romeo's flask?

Paul Cahill said "I—" and again; "I—" and then could only shake his head; and if there were any faces left in the crowd that the idea hadn't reached by then, they got it.

"We can't just sit here . . . put Romeo on the long seat at the back," said Coach McGurk.

Nobody wanted to. Finally Paul Cahill and Coach McGurk had to do it. Romeo's eyes were open and he was kind of snarling, all his front teeth bared. No matter what, Paul Cahill was never going to forget that.

Paul Cahill went back to the driver's seat and switched out the domes. Everyone settled down. He started the motor and released the brake. The bus nosed downhill, began to roll immediately. In thirty seconds it was going fifty. In another ten, Coach McGurk sat bolt upright and shouted at him:

"Hey! Take it easy. *Hey!*"

Paul Cahill did not answer. He was too busy picking out the details of the curve ahead, and its one high wall of cliff. Coach McGurk got up and was thrown right down again as Cahill wheeled around the turn.

"Paul! Paul!" the coach shouted.

Hand over hand in the lurching bus, Coach McGurk got up behind Paul Cahill and clutched at his arm. Paul Cahill removed one hand to throw him off, and the back of the bus slewed and nipped

the rock wall on the left. At the crash and tearing sound of aluminum skin, one of the boys screamed.

The speedometer needle hit ninety-four. One dead, more dead coming. He could be dead strapped in a chair, with a prison chaplain making it as easy as he could. Or he could be dead much quicker than that, just by not taking the next turn, or the one after.

Evidence or not, no matter what anyone had heard him say or seen him do, there was one thing Paul Cahill knew for sure:

He hadn't killed Charley Romeo.

Which meant that someone else had. Someone right here in this bus.

He bellowed, then, at the top of his voice:

"*Listen*. I don't touch the brake until I know who killed Romeo."

"You're crazy!" yelled the coach. "Stop this bus, Paul!"

Paul Cahill yelled back. "Look out!"

Twelve tons of bus entered a turn, sliding, sliding, crossing the pavement to the far side. At the last possible split second the wheels seemed to be taking hold, but there was nothing, nothing at all under the left front—just black dark and distant downward lights. And as the bus plunged over the edge, the road shook itself and moved under the wheels again, and they went howling down the road again.

"One more like that and we've had it!" Paul Cahill bellowed. "*Well?*"

The speedometer needle lurched upward.

One hundred and twelve... fourteen.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Coach McGurk.

"*Shaddup!*" Paul Cahill roared at him. "Look!"

Somebody back there began shrieking over and over. The turn beginning to take shape before their headlights was impossible. The shrieking went on and on—more boys started to yell.

Coach McGurk yelled, "For God's sake, Paul. This is murder!"

Paul Cahill didn't answer. He couldn't take his attention for an instant from the approaching turn —a narrow cut, a sharp left with a wall on one side and a precipice on the other, then a right bend to a second cut.

"We'll all die!" wailed a voice that Paul Cahill dimly recognized as belonging to Big Dome Craig.

Then they were into the turn, and were never coming out of it. Coach McGurk got the idea that saved them, temporarily. He put cupped hands around his mouth and shouted:

"Right side, everybody! Get

over to the right side! *Jump!*"

As the bus shuddered into the turn, yawing away toward the sharp drop to eternity, thirty-two healthy youngsters—somewhere close to two tons of flesh—flung hard to the right side of the bus.

That did it. The two tons turned the trick, by the narrowest of margins. A giant tire spun on emptiness for a second, but the other tires held the road.

Paul Cahill fought the wheel like a bucking bronc.

Behind him someone started to scream.

"Stop him, somebody! *Stop him!*"

That was Big Dome Craig again. He was cracking. But nobody made a move to interfere with Paul Cahill at the wheel. They all knew that would speed the moment of annihilation.

Paul Cahill heard, somewhere at his back, a shrieking, sobbing breath, a scuffle. Big Dome Craig had tried to get at him, but the others were holding him back.

Then Big Dome Craig was yelling, "I did it! I DID IT!"

Coach McGurk stumbled up behind Paul Cahill.

"It's Craig, Paul. He says he killed Romeo. For God's sake, hit the brakes! *Paul*!"

That's when Paul Cahill told him. Even as he swung the wheel as far as it would go and held on, he gritted:

"Brakes gone, coach. Air . . . out. Can't . . . even shift gears . . . air powered."

Coach McGurk wasted no time on a reply. He barked to the others:

"Left, now. Left. *Jump*!"

The two tons dove across to the other seats. That helped—but not enough. In the split second before he swung the wheel, Paul Cahill shifted his grip. There was the tortured rending of aluminum sheathing as the bus slid along the rock wall—enough to slow it. Then the tires kicked gravel out and down into the empty night, and again found the road.

They shot through the cut and, blessedly, ahead of them the road turned up for a half mile before entering the last plunge to the valley. Paul Cahill rode the uphill stretch with the right hand wheels at the very edge of the ditch and, as the bus started to lean, Coach McGurk and the boys shifted again and she settled and ran, and slowed, and not fifty yards from the top of the rise, she stopped.

"Paul," said Coach McGurk. That single word was the finest compliment the little man had ever heard.

Some of the boys began crying, with released tension, crying like the youngsters they were.

Big Dome Craig was crying too, his hands over his face, crying and talking at the same time as the truth poured out of him.

Paul Cahill stood by Coach

McGurk and listened. Once, during a break in the confessional, the coach muttered to Paul Cahill:

"I couldn't believe you were doing it on purpose, Paul. Not even when it was happening."

"Thanks," Paul Cahill said. "Just a coincidence, the brakes going when they did. But I guess I made the most of it." He grinned.

Big Dome Craig was telling now about Romeo and his sister—a long story and a sad one—and how after she had been in that trouble and gone to the doctor, she had still wanted to go live with the big fellow, and the only way Big Dome could stop it was by becoming Romeo's personal valet, doing his school work for him, taking his unending abuse. He had thought of killing Romeo for a long time but he might never have done it, if he hadn't found out about the weekend a month ago, when Romeo went to meet his sister. He only found out about it after his sister had taken the overdose of sleeping pills and had died, and the weekend was the reason. It seems Romeo had waited until the weekend was over before he told her that he didn't intend to see her again. That was Romeo, all right. Take your cake and hand it back, too.

Finally Big Dome Craig ran down and just sat there, strangely relieved.

It was a long time later, after they'd flagged a passing car and were waiting for the tow truck, that Coach McGurk said to Paul Cahill:

"Sorry you had to miss the game, Paul. It was great."

"That's okay," Paul said thoughtfully. "Anyway, we won." They sat quietly, then, thinking about winning. ■ ■

Whenever detective story experts sit down to discuss their special likes and dislikes (and you murder-and-mayhem members tend to get violent on the subject), four names must invariably be mentioned first: Edgar Allan Poe, A. Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, *and* Melville Davisson Post. *These are the Big Four and they will forever be remembered as the originators of the earliest and best in detective short stories. Uncle Abner—the unpredictable, fast-thinking, mild-talking creation of Melville Davisson Post—has been called "one of the outstanding characters of detective fiction, ranking with Dupin, Lecoq and Sherlock Holmes." At one time Uncle Abner was so popular with the mystery-reading public that Author Post demanded—and got—as high as* $8000 *for a short story, an unheard-of writing rate back in the days of the twenties.*

And now we've prepared a little surprise for you:

First read this story of Uncle Abner and "The Concealed Path". As soon as you finish it, turn to the one that follows, "The Diamonds", by Frank Atterholt. We think you'll be as delighted as we were by the fortunate coincidence that placed both of these stories into our hands at the same time.

CONCEALED PATH

by MELVILLE DAVISSON POST

IT WAS NIGHT, AND THE FIRST SNOW of October was in the air when my uncle got down from his horse before the door. The great stone house sat on a bench of the mountains. Behind it lay the forest, and below, the pasture land of the Hills.

After the disastrous failure of Prince Charles Edward Stuart to set up his kingdom in Scotland, more than one great Highland family had fled oversea into Virginia, and for a hundred years had maintained its customs. It was at the house of such a family

that my uncle stopped.

There was the evidence of travel hard and long on my uncle and his horse. An old man bade him enter.

"Who is here?" said my uncle.

The servant replied with two foreign words, meaning "The Red Eagle" in the Gaelic tongue.

And he led my uncle through the hall into the dining-room. It was a scene laid back a hundred years in Skye that he came on. A big woman of middle age dined alone, in a long, beamed room, lighted with tallow candles. An ancient servant stood behind her chair.

Two features of the woman were conspicuous—her bowed nose and her coarse red hair.

She got up when she saw my uncle.

"Abner," she cried, "by the Blessed God I am glad to see you! Come in! Come in!"

My uncle entered, and she put him beyond her at the table.

"You ought to eat, Abner," she said; "for by all the tokens, you have traveled."

"A long way," replied my uncle.

"And did the ravens of Elijah send you to me?" said the woman. "For I need you."

"What need?" inquired my uncle, while he attacked the rib of beef and the baked potatoes, for the dinner, although set with some formality, was plain.

"Why, this need, Abner: For a witness whose name will stand against the world."

"A witness!" repeated my uncle.

"Aye, a witness," continued the woman. "The country holds me hard and dour, and given to impose my will. There will be a wedding in my house tonight, and I would have you see it, free of pressure. My niece, Margaret McDonald, has got her senses finally."

My uncle looked down at the cloth.

"Who is the man?" he said.

"Campbell," she answered, "and good man enough for a stupid woman."

For a moment my uncle did not move. His hands, his body, the very muscles in his eyelids, were for that moment inert as plaster. Then he went on with the potato and the rib of beef.

"Campbell is here, then?" he said.

"He came tonight," replied the woman, "and for once the creature has some spirit. He will have the girl tonight or never. He and my husband Allen Eliott, have driven their cattle out of the glades and on the way to Baltimore. Allen is with the cattle on the Cumberland road, and Campbell rode hard in here to take the girl or to leave her. And whether she goes or stays, he will not return. When the cattle are sold in Baltimore, he will take a ship out of the Chesa-

peake for Glasgow."

She paused and made a derisive gesture.

"The devil, Abner, or some witch trick, has made a man of Campbell. He used to be irresolute and sullen, but tonight he has the spirit of the men who lifted cattle in the lowlands. He is a Campbell of Glen Lion on this night. Believe me, Abner, the wavering beastie is now as hard as oak, and has the devil's courage. Wherefore is it that a man can change like that?"

"A man may hesitate between two masters," replied my uncle, "and be only weak, but when he finally makes his choice he will get what his master has to give him—the courage of heaven, if he go that way, or of hell, Madam, if he go that way."

"Man! Man!" she laughed. "If 'the one who is not to be named,' as we say, put his spirit into Campbell, he did a grand work. It is the wild old cattle-lifter of Glen Lion that he is the night!"

"Do you think," said my uncle, "that a McDonald of Glencoe ought to be mated with a Campbell of Glen Lion?"

The woman's face hardened.

"Did Lord Stair and the Campbells of Glen Lion massacre the McDonalds of Glencoe on yesterday at sunrise, or two hundred years back? Margaret—the fool!—said that before she got my final word."

"Is it not in an adage," said my uncle, "that the Highlander does not change?"

"But the world changes, Abner," replied the woman. "Campbell is not 'Bonnie Charlie'; he is at middle age, a dour man and silent, but he will have a sum of money from a half of the cattle, and he can take care of this girl."

Then she cried out in a sharper voice:

"And what is here in this mountain for her, will you tell me? We grow poor! The old men are to feed. Allen owes money that his half of the cattle will hardly pay. Even old MacPherson"—and she indicated the ancient man behind her chair—"has tried to tell her, in his wise-wife folderol, 'I see you in the direst peril that overtakes a lassie, and a big shouldered man to save you.' And it was no omen, Abner, but the vision of his common sense. Here are the lean years to dry out the fool's youth, and surely Campbell is big shouldered enough for any prophecy. And now, Abner, will you stay and be a witness?"

"I will be one witness," replied my uncle slowly, "if you will send for my brother Rufus to be another."

The woman looked at her guest in wonder.

"That would be twenty miles through the Hills," she said. "We could not get Rufus by the morn's morn."

"No," said Abner, "it would be three miles to Maxwell's Tavern. Rufus is there to-night."

The big-nosed, red-haired woman drummed on the cloth with the tips of her fingers, and one knew what she was thinking. Her relentless will was the common talk. What she wished she forced with no concern.

But the girl was afraid of Campbell. The man seemed evil to her. It was not evidenced in any act. It was instinct in the girl. She felt the nature of the man like some venomous thing pretending to be gentle until its hour. And this fear, dominant and compelling, gave her courage to resist the woman's will.

The long suit of Campbell for the girl was known to everybody, and the woman's favor of it and the girl's resistance. The woman foresaw what folk in the Hills would say, and she wished to forestall that gossip by the presence in her house of men whose word could not be gainsaid. If Abner and his brother Rufus were here, no report of pressure on the girl could gain belief.

She knew what reports her dominating personality set current. She, and not her husband, was the head of their affairs, and with an iron determination she held to every Highland custom, every form, every feudal detail that she could, against the detritus of democratic times and ridicule, and the gain upon her house of poverty, and lean years. She was alone at that heavy labor. Allen Eliott was a person without force. He was usually on his cattle range in the mountains, with his big partner Campbell, or in the great drive, as now, to Baltimore. And she had the world to face.

"That will be to wait," she said, "and Campbell is in haste, and the bride is being made ready by the women, and the minister is got . . . to Maxwell's Tavern!"

Then she arose.

"Well, I will make a bargain with you. I will send for Rufus, but you must gain Campbell over to the waiting. And you must gain him, Abner, by your own devices, for I will not tell him that I have sent out for a witness to the freedom of my niece in this affair. If you can make him wait, the thing shall wait until Rufus is come. But I will turn no hand to help."

"Is Campbell in the house?" said my uncle.

"Yes," she said, "and ready when the minister is come."

"Is he alone?" said Abner.

"Alone," she said, with a satirical smile, "as a bridegroom ought to be for his last reflections."

"Then," replied my uncle, "I will strike the bargain."

She laughed in a heavy chuckle, like a man.

"Hold him if you can. It will

be a pretty undertaking, Abner, and practice for your wits. But by stealth it shall be. I will not have you bind the bridegroom like the strong man in the Scriptures." And the chuckle deepened. "And that, too, I think, might be no easier than the finesse you set at. He is a great man in the body, like yoursel'."

She stood up to go out, but before she went, she said another word.

"Abner," she said, "you will not blame me," and her voice was calm. "Somebody must think a little for these pretty fools. They are like the lilies of the field in their lack of wisdom; they will always bloom, and there is no winter! Why, man, they have no more brain than a haggis! And what are their little loves against the realities of life? And their tears, Abner, are like the rains in summer, showering from every cloud. And their heads crammed with folderol—a prince will come, and they cannot take a good man for that dream!" She paused and added:

"I will go and send for Rufus. And when you have finished with your dinner, MacPherson will take you in to Campbell."

The woman was hardly gone before the old man slipped over to Abner's chair.

"Mon," he whispered, "ha'e ye a wee drop?"

"No liquor, MacPherson," said my uncle.

The old man's bleared eyes blinked like a half-blinded owl's.

"It would be gran', a wee drop, the night," he said.

"For joy at the wedding," said my uncle.

"Na, mon, na, mon!" Then he looked swiftly around.

"The eagle ha beak and talons, and what ha the dove, mon?"

"What do you mean, MacPherson?" said my uncle.

The old creature peered across the table.

"Ye ha gran' shoulders, mon," he said.

My uncle put down his fork.

"MacPherson," he said, "what do you beat about?"

"I wa borned," he replied, "wi a cowl, and I can see!"

"And what do you see?" inquired Abner.

"A vulture flying," said the old man, "but it is unco dark beneath him."

Again on this night every motion and every sign of motion disappeared from my uncle's body and his face. He remained for a moment like a figure cut in wood.

"A vulture!" he echoed.

"Aye, mon! What ha the dove to save it?"

"The vulture, it may be," said my uncle.

"The Red Eagle, and the foul vulture!" cried the old man. "Noo,

mon, it is the bird of death!"

"A bird of death, but not a bird of prey." Then he got up.

"You may have a familiar spirit, MacPherson," he said coldly, "for all I know. Perhaps they live on after the Witch of Endor. It is a world of mystery. But I should not come to you to get up Samuel, and I see now why the Lord stamped out your practice. It was because you misled his people. If there is a vulture in this business, MacPherson, it is no symbol of your bridegroom. And now, will you take me in to Campbell?"

The old man flung the door open, and Abner went out into the hall. As he crossed the sill, a girl, listening at the door, fled past him. She had been crouched down against it.

She was half-dressed, all in white, as though escaped for a moment out of the hands of tiring women. But she had the chalk face of a ghost, and eyes wide with fear.

My uncle went on as though he had passed nothing, and the old Scotchman before him only wagged his head, with the whispered comment, "It wa be gran', a wee drop, the night."

They came into a big room of the house with candles on a table, and a fire of chestnut logs. A man walking about stopped on the hearth. He was a huge figure of a man in middle life.

A fierce light leaped up in his face when he saw my uncle.

"Abner!" he cried. "Why does the devil bring you here?"

"It would be strange, Campbell," replied my uncle, "if the devil were against you. The devil has been much maligned. He is very nearly equal, the Scriptures tell us, to the King of Kings. He is no fool to mislead his people and to trap his servants. I find him always zealous in their interest, Campbell, fertile in devices, and holding hard with every trick to save them. I do not admire the devil, Mr. Campbell, but I do not find his vice to be a lack of interest in his own."

"Then," cried Campbell, "it is clear that I am not one of his own. For if the devil were on my side, Abner, he would have turned you away from this door tonight."

"Why, no," replied my uncle, with a reflective air, "that does not follow. I do not grant the devil a supreme control. There is One above him, and if he cannot always manage as his people wish, they should not for that reason condemn him with a treasonable intent."

The man turned with a decisive gesture.

"Abner," he said, "let me understand this thing. Do you come here upon some idle gossip, to interfere with me in this marriage? Or by chance?"

"Neither the one nor the other," replied my uncle. "I went into the mountains to buy the cattle you and Eliott range there. I found you gone already, with the herd, toward Maryland. And so, as I returned, I rode in here to Eliott's house to rest and to feed my horse."

"Eliott is with the drove," said Campbell.

"No," replied my uncle, "Eliott is not with the drove. I overtook it on the Cheat River. The drivers said you hired them this morning, and rode away."

The man shifted his feet and looked down at my uncle.

"It is late in the season," he said. "One must go ahead to arrange for a field and for some shocks of fodder. Eliott is ahead."

"He is not on the road ahead," returned Abner. "Arnold and his drovers came that way from Maryland, and they had not see him."

"He did not go the road," said Campbell; "he took a path through the mountains."

My uncle remained silent for some moments.

"Campbell," said my uncle, "the Scriptures tell us that there is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen. Did Eliott take that path?"

The man changed his posture.

"Now, Abner," he said. "I cannot answer a fool thing like that."

"Well, Campbell," replied my uncle, "I can answer it for you: Eliott did not take that path."

The man took out a big silver watch and opened the case with his thumb-nail.

"The woman ought to be ready," he said.

My uncle looked up at him.

"Campbell," he said, "put off this marriage."

The man turned about.

"Why should I put it off?" he said.

"Well, for one reason, Campbell," replied my uncle, "the omens are not propitious."

"I do not believe in signs," said the man.

"The Scriptures are full of signs," returned Abner. "There was the sign to Joshua and the sign to Ahaz, and there is the sign to you."

The man turned with an oath.

"What accursed thing do you hint about, Abner?"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "I accept the word; accursed is the word."

"Say the thing out plain! What omen? What sign?"

"Why, this sign," replied Abner: "MacPherson, who was born with a cowl, has seen a vulture flying."

"Damme, man!" cried Campbell. "Do you hang on such a piece of foolery. MacPherson sees his visions in a tin cup—raw corn liquor would set flying beasts of Patmos. Do you tell me, Abner, that you believe in what Mac-

Pherson sees?"

"I believe in what I see myself," replied my uncle.

"And what have you seen?" said the man.

"I have seen the vulture!" replied my uncle. "And I was born clean and have no taste for liquor."

"Abner," said Campbell, "you move about in the dark, and I have no time to grope after you. The woman should be ready."

"But are you ready?" said my uncle.

"Man! Man!" cried Campbell. "Will you be forever in a fog? Well, travel on to Satan in it! I am ready, and here are the women!"

But it was not the bride. It was MacPherson to inquire if the bride should come.

My uncle got up then.

"Campbell," he said, in his deep, level voice, "if the bride is ready, you are not."

The man was at the limit of forbearance.

"The devil take you!" he cried. "If you mean anything, say what it is!"

"Campbell," replied my uncle, "it is the custom to inquire if any man knows a reason why a marriage should not go on. Shall I stand up before the company and give the reason, while the marriage waits? Or shall I give it to you here while the marriage waits?"

The man divined something behind my uncle's menace.

"Bid them wait," he said to MacPherson.

Then he closed the door and turned back on my uncle—his shoulders thrown forward, his fingers clenched, his words prefaced by an oath.

"Now, sir,"—and the oath returned,—"what is it?"

My uncle got up, took something from his pocket, and put it down on the table. It was a piece of lint, twisted together, as though one had rolled it firmly between the palms of one's hands.

"Campbell," he said, "as I rode the trail on your cattle range, in the mountains, this morning, a bit of white thing caught my eye. I got down and picked up this fragment of lint on the hard ground. It puzzled me. How came it thus rolled? I began to search the ground, riding slowly in an ever-widening circle. Presently I found a second bit, and then a third, rolled hard together like the first. Then I observed a significant thing: these bits were in line and leading from your trail down the slope of the cattle range to the border of the forest. I went back to the trail, and there on the baked earth, in line with these bits of lint, I found a spot where a bucket of water had been poured out."

Campbell was standing beyond

him, staring at the bit of lint. He looked up without disturbing the crouch of his shoulders.

"Go on," he said.

"It occurred to me," continued my uncle, "that perhaps these bits of lint might be found above the trail, as I had found them below it, and so I rode straight on up the hill to a rail fence. I found no fragment of twisted stuff, but I found another thing, Campbell: I found the weeds trampled on the other side of the fence. I got down and looked closely. On the upper surface of a flat rail, immediately before the trampled weeds, there was an impression as though a square bar of iron had been laid across it."

My uncle stopped. And Campbell said:

"Go on."

Abner remained a moment, his eyes on the man; then he continued:

"The impression was in a direct line toward the point on the trail where the water had been poured out. I was puzzled. I got into the saddle and rode back across the trail and down the line of the fragments of lint. At the edge of the forest I found where a log-heap had been burned. I got down again and walked back along the line of the twisted lint. I looked closely, and I saw that the fragments of dried grass, and now and then a rag-weed, had been pressed down, as though by something moving down the hillside from the trail to the burned log-heap.

"Now, Campbell," he said, "what happened on that hillside?"

Campbell stood up and looked my uncle in the face. "What do you think happened?" he said.

"I think," replied Abner, "that some one sat in the weeds behind the fence with a half-stocked, square-barreled rifle laid on the flat rail, and from that ambush shot something passing on the trail, and then dragged it down the hillside to the log-heap. I think that poured-out water was to wash away the blood where the thing fell. I do not know where the bits of lint came from, but I think they were rolled there under the weight of the heavy body. Do I think correctly, eh, Campbell?"

"You do," said the man.

My uncle was astonished, for Campbell faced him, his aspect grim, determined, like one who at any hazard will have the whole of a menace out. "Abner," he said, "you have trailed this thing with some theory behind it. In plain words, what is that theory?"

My uncle was amazed.

"Campbell," he replied, "since you wish the thing said plain, I will not obscure it. Two men own a great herd of cattle between them. The herd is to be driven over the mountains to Baltimore and sold. If one of the partners is shot out of his saddle and the crime concealed, may not the other

partner sell the entire drove for his own and put the whole sum in his pocket?

"And if this surviving partner, Campbell, were a man taken with the devil's resolution, I think he might try to make one great stroke of this business. I think he might hire men to drive his cattle, giving out that his partner had gone on ahead, and then turn back for the woman he wanted, take her to Baltimore, put her on the ship, sell the cattle, and with the woman and money sail out of the Chesapeake for the Scotch Highlands he came from! Who could say what became of the missing partner, or that he did not receive his half of the money and meet robbery and murder on his way home?"

My uncle stopped. And Campbell broke out into a great ironical laugh.

"Now, let this thing be a lesson to you, Abner. Your little deductions are correct, but your great conclusion is folly.

"We had a wild heifer that would not drive, so we butchered the beast. I had great trouble to shoot her, but I finally managed it from behind the fence."

"But the bits of lint," said my uncle, "and the washed spot?"

"Abner," cried the man, "do you handle cattle for a lifetime and do not know how blood disturbs them? We did not want them in commotion, so we drenched the place where the heifer fell. And your bits of lint! I will discover the mystery there. To keep the blood off we put an old quilt under the yearling and dragged her down the hill on that. The bits of lint were from the quilt, and rolled thus under the weight of the heifer."

Then he added: "That was weeks ago, but there has been no rain for a month, and these signs of crime, Abner, were providentially preserved against your coming!"

"And the log-heap," said my uncle, like one who would have the whole of an explanation, "why was it burned?"

"Now, Abner," continued the man, "after your keen deductions, would you ask me a thing like that? To get rid of the offal from the butchered beast. We would not wash out the blood-stains and leave that to set our cattle mad."

His laugh changed to a note of victory.

"And now, Abner," he cried, "will you stay and see me married, who have come hoping to see me hanged?"

My uncle had moved over to the window. While Campbell spoke, he seemed to listen, not so much to the man as to sounds outside. Now far off on a covered wooden bridge of the road there was the faint sound of horses. And

with a grim smile Abner turned about.

"I will stay," he said, "and see which it is."

It was the very strangest wedding—the big, determined woman like a Fate, the tattered servants with candles in their hands, the minister, and the bride covered and hidden in her veil, like a wooded figure counterfeiting life.

The thing began. There was an atmosphere of silence. My uncle went over to the window. The snow on the road deadened the sounds of the advancing horses, until the iron shoes rang on the stones before the door. Then, suddenly, as though he waited for the sound, he cried out with a great voice against the marriage. The big-nosed, red-haired woman turned on him:

"Why do you object, who have no concern in this thing?"

"I object," said Abner, "because Campbell has sent Eliott on the wrong path!"

"The wrong path!" cried the woman.

"Aye," said Abner, "on the wrong path. There is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen, Job tells us. But the path Campbell sent Eliott on, the vulture did see."

He advanced with great strides into the room.

"Campbell," he cried, "before I left your accursed pasture, I saw a buzzard descend into the forest beyond your logheap. I went in, and there, shot through the heart, was the naked body of Allen Eliott. Your log heap, Campbell, was to burn the quilt and the dead man's clothes. You trusted to the vultures, for the rest, and the vultures, Campbell, over-reached you."

My uncle's voice deepened.

"I sent word to my brother Rufus to raise a *posse comitatus* and bring it to Maxwell's Tavern. Then I rode in here to rest and to feed my horse. I found you, Campbell, on the second line of your hell-planned venture!

"I got Mrs. Eliott to send for Rufus to be a witness with me to your accursed marriage. And I undertook to delay it until he came."

He raised his great arm, the clenched bronze fingers big like the coupling pins of a cart.

"I would have stopped it with my own hand," he said, "but I wanted the men of the Hills to hang you .... And they are here."

There was a great sound of tramping feet in the hall outside.

And while the men entered, big, grim, determined men, Abner called out their names:

"Arnold, Randolph, Stuart, Elnathan Stone and my brother Rufus!" ■ ■

DON'T READ THIS STORY—unless you've already read the preceding one by Melville Davisson Post. The name of that story is "The Concealed Path" (Page 28). *It's about the famous detective,* Uncle Abner, *and it's told from the point of view of his nephew. This story, "The Diamonds" was written by* Frank Atterholt. *Frank Atterholt is the nephew of* Melville Davisson Post, *and this is Mr. Atterholt's first published short story. We think it's a darned good one, too.*

Mr. Atterholt, long an admirer of his famous uncle, is a retired banker (he was Vice-President of one of the biggest banks in New York City) and currently spends his winters in Arizona, where he is a free-lance investment counselor. Summers he spends in West Virginia, the home state, as it happens, of his uncle Melville Davisson Post.

THE DIAMONDS

by FRANK ATTERHOLT

ONE HOT AUGUST AFTERNOON about half way to evening, I was sitting on the porch of my uncle's law office well out in the country on the waters of Foxes Run in Western Virginia. It was a typical dog day, muggy and humid, and as I sat quietly I could feel the sweat drip down between my shoulder blades.

My uncle, the lawyer, had instructed me to fix the water gap in the Perkins line fence and I had learned through hard experience that his instructions were not to be lightly regarded.

To be perfectly truthful, he was not my uncle, and from various erasures and markings I noticed on the diplomas and certificates in his law office, I had a very strong belief that he was not a lawyer,

either. When my parents were alive, we had all shared the same house, and when they died, I just went on living with him. I called him "uncle", but there was no love lost between us, and I lived for the day when I would be able to leave.

At any rate, there I was sitting on the porch in the heat, when suddenly in the mid-distance, I could hear the hoof beats of a horse coming toward us at a dead run on the narrow clay road and the rattle of the buggy as it crossed the plank bridge over Foxes Run.

This was the manner in which many of my uncle's clients came, so it must either be one of them or the biggest idiot in the county. Sure enough, in a minute or so, around the corner came a buggy on two wheels and pulled up at the porch rail with the horse lathered and quivering.

A big man jumped out, fear written in a plain hand across his white face, and hurried into my uncle's office. His whip lay in the dirt where he had dropped it and I could see his derringer on the buggy seat where it had fallen from his coat-tail pocket in his great haste.

But all this was nothing to me. Many such people came to see my uncle on personal as well as legal matters. I attended to the horse and went about my business.

When I came back, my uncle was sitting in the door of his office tapping on the plank floor with the iron ferrule of his cane.

"Roy," he called. "Put on your shirt and shoes and come in here." Which I did.

The big man was sitting in a caned rocker looking intently out the window. My uncle said, "Roy, this is Mr. Stuart Brandon, President and Cashier of Brandon's Bank at Uxley in Wray County. Mr. Brandon has a problem in that he has been visiting the Charles Town racetrack too often on the bank's time and at its expense, with the result that he now finds himself some thirty-five thousand dollars short on his accounts. Moreover, he has good reason to believe that this will almost instantly come to light."

Then he introduced me: "Stuart, this is my nephew, Roy. While he can never claim to have the keenest mind in the county or even on Foxes Run, you will observe that he is young and muscular. He can hold his own with anyone with his spring knife and, thanks to my training, he can shoot the pip out of an ace with either hand at forty paces. He is precisely suitable for our purpose."

Suddenly my uncle spoke to Mr. Brandon, who was peering intently through the window.

"Stuart, what do you see? Have we an eavesdropper?"

Mr. Brandon turned toward us, large diamonds flashing on his fingers, in his cuffs and on his shirt front.

"No," he answered. "What I see out of the window is the penitentiary. No expense is too great or pain too severe which will prevent my going there."

"There you are, Roy," said my uncle. "You will observe that this is no ordinary legal problem. The best minds at Jefferson Law School could do nothing with it. Nevertheless, I have already evolved a solution which, with a little assistance from you, should prove effective.

"Now, I want you to listen carefully because I have other business to attend to this evening and by dawn tomorrow you should be well away from here. Fortunately, Mr. Brandon has had the foresight to bring with him the bank's remaining cash reserves, amounting to some forty thousand dollars, and this will be your working fund. If you will observe him closely, you can see the slight bulge of his money belt.

"As early as possible in the morning I want you and Mr. Brandon to be on your way in the buggy toward the river. Take Nelly along as lead horse. When you reach Thatcher's Landing, book passage on the next steamer to St. Louis. I have given Mr. Brandon certain advice and instructions with respect to river poker, which, if properly executed, should be successful. Your duty is to see that he is not prevented by force from carrying out these instructions and to take such steps as may be necessary to protect the working fund which naturally is to be returned to me.

"I trust that Mr. Brandon's efforts at poker will be successful. If not, however, he feels that he cannot bring further disgrace on his family. Therefore, you and he will wait inconspicuously, using no hotels, in St. Louis until about midnight. You will then proceed to a small path which leads from the north side of the docks up the bluff through the woods.

"When you have gone about one hundred yards along this path, you will shoot Mr. Brandon in the chest at a point about one inch to the left of the second button of his waistcoat. As he falls, you will then quickly shoot him again through the mouth at an upward angle of about thirty degrees in such a way that the bullet will pass through the brain vertically.

"Remove the money belt from Mr. Brandon and bring it back to me. Bring the diamonds also and we will see that in some way they get back to Mrs. Brandon. Of course, you must turn his pockets inside out and create all the other signs you can of armed robbery. In this way, the double indemnity provisions of his insurance poli-

cies will more than adequately provide for all bank creditors whereas, under the suicide provisions, they would pay nothing.

"Now," asked my uncle, "do you have any questions?"

"Uncle," I started to say but he interrupted me.

"Roy," he said, "kindly do not waste my time with any twaddle about the proprieties of taking money illegally from the insurance company. You should be thoroughly familiar with my views on this point."

"It isn't that," I managed to answer. "I just wondered if with a man of Mr. Brandon's size and only two shots—?"

My uncle was annoyed. "Roy," he told me, "if you expect to bungle, you will always bungle. However, if you have to, why, shoot him a third time. Make it through the belly. That will fix it no matter how inept you have been."

My uncle extended his hand to Mr. Brandon.

"Good luck," he said. "I hope you will retain your bank and your standing, but in any event my way is better than yours because at least the depositors will be paid in full, and your wife will not be left penniless."

We were on the road with the first pink streaks in the morning and in due course found ourselves on the paddle steamer "City of St. Elmo" bound for St. Louis.

Our first step was to scrutinize the methods and characteristics of each of the members of the gambling fraternity aboard. At the same time, we established ourselves a reputation by breaking large bills at the bar and by carefully confiding our worry about the large sum of money we were carrying to St. Louis to be invested in the New Orleans trade.

In the end, Mr. Brandon had his choice among the gamblers. He selected a group headed by an old character in a long-tailed black broad-cloth suit with a square white beard completely covering the lapels of his coat. This splendid beard was, in fact, the old man's greatest asset because under it attached to his clothing he carried two full decks of cards which he was able to exchange adroitly and at will with those in play. These decks, having been previously arranged, were known as "cold decks" and it was for this type of shenanigan especially that my uncle had issued his most particular warnings.

And so one afternoon, we were persuaded to join this group in the customary "small friendly game". However, because of my inept handling of the cards and since I was regarded only as Mr. Brandon's young traveling companion, there were no objections when I dropped out. I took up a

chair between Mr. Brandon and the old gentleman on his right where I could observe Mr. Brandon's hand.

I will say for Mr. Brandon that as a highly respected member of a small community, he played an unusually fine game of poker. Had he restricted his speculative activities to two-legged opponents, I doubt if we would have ever been aboard the "City of St. Elmo."

By three o'clock in the morning, Mr. Brandon was about twenty thousand dollars ahead. Our friends were not pleased. All limits had now been removed and since we were due in St. Louis in the morning, a climax was near.

It was now the old gentleman's turn to deal and while his right hand was too fast for me, I could see from his left and the slight motion of his beard that the exchange of decks had been made. I allowed the lurch of the boat to throw me lightly against Mr. Brandon so that he would know the old man had switched the decks.

The cards were dealt and heavy betting began. Mr. Brandon held the usual hand for this type of operation—four aces and the trey of hearts. When the betting stopped there was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars on the table.

The dealer picked up the deck in his left hand and turned to Mr. Brandon:

"Cards," he said.

Mr. Brandon answered, "Two".

So great was the dealer's surprise that he laid the deck down on the table but almost at once started to pick it up again. This was a situation he could handle.

However, he had not counted on me. While all this was going on, I had moved my chair up near his and now I slipped my right arm up under his left with my coat sleeve against his side.

"My friend," I told him, "would like you to leave the deck on the table and deal the cards by sliding them off with the tip only of your index finger."

"Why should I do that, bub?" he grunted. "Besides, you might wind up in a lot of trouble minding other people's business."

So I poked him a little with the sharp point of my spring knife that I had in my right hand. Just enough to cut the broadcloth of his suit and perhaps the slightest sliver of skin. I answered him politely:

"Why, you can't deal any other way with seven inches of knife blade slipped up under your rib. Also, I have your friends well covered with the little over-and-under pistol I carry in my left coat sleeve."

The others hadn't moved, so he could tell that was so. His beard quivered a little, but he reached down and pushed two cards to

Mr. Brandon and two to the next man, although he hadn't asked for any. The third man threw his hand on the floor and the man next to Mr. Brandon let his fall over face up on the table as he started to get up.

I could see the unfilled straight flush lying there that could never get filled without fancy dealing after Mr. Brandon's two-card draw.

Mr. Brandon announced, "Three aces", and gathered the money into his hat. The dealer threw his hand away and started to get up.

Now he looked at me. "My memory is good, bub," he said.

I spoke up. "Gentlemen, we should not leave each other in anger. Perhaps a little walk on the deck would help us cool off and arrive at a better mutual understanding. The door is right behind you."

So out we all went, me last. Outside the deck was damp and the darkness filled with heavy mist. Not a light was showing except for one lantern wobbling around away down in the stern.

As I expected, they tried to jump me in the dark. I took out my little over-and-under and shot it out. The report was drowned in the roar of the paddle wheel. Nobody moved for a minute. Then:

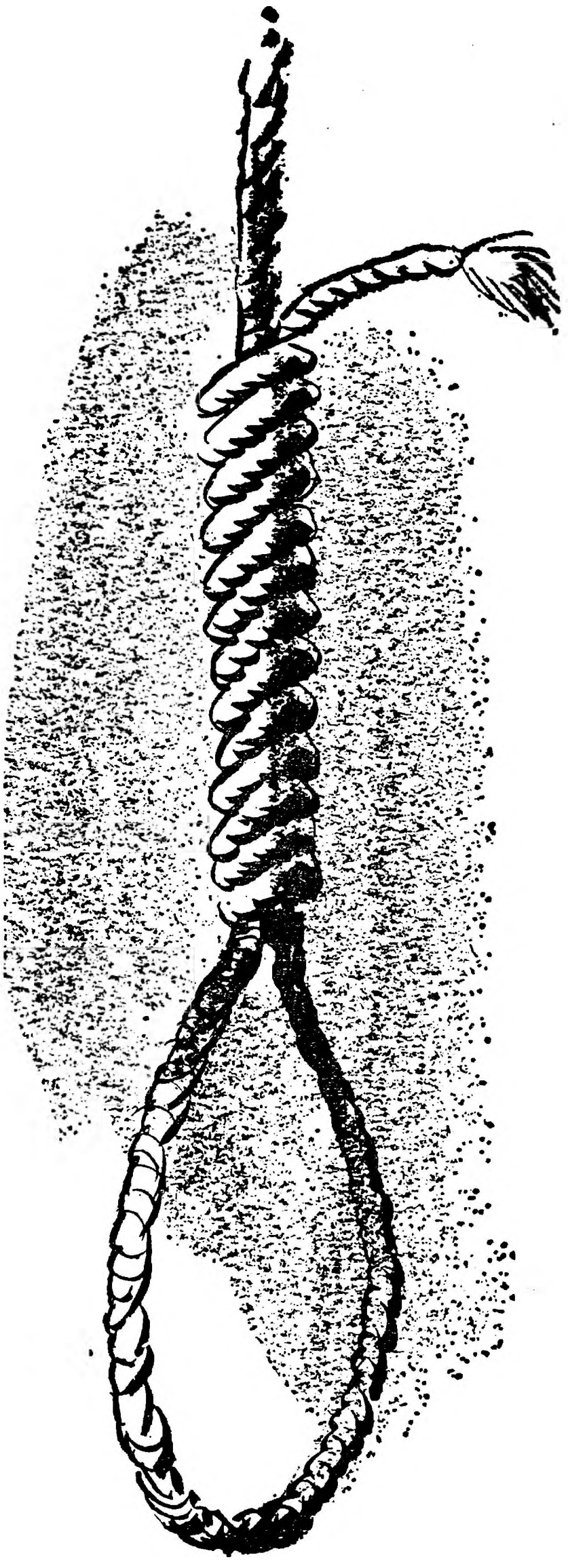
"Goodbye," said the dealer and in they went, leaving Mr. Brandon and me alone in the twisting mist.

All of this was a long time ago. I live in California now and having come here well supplied with capital, I have done well and am respected in the community. I often think of my uncle back in Virginia and wonder whatever became of him. I do not have to wonder about Mr. Brandon. Neither does it bother me that on misty evenings my diamonds sometimes seem to take on a muddy watery tone very much like the turbulence of a large river. ■ ■

When the rich old gentleman decided to cut his five shiftless relatives out of his will, he was simply asking to become ...

A CASE OF HOMICIDE

by ROG PHILLIPS



HENRY WAS BEGINNING TO REALIZE the price all successful murderers must pay. Silence. He found it extremely difficult to restrain himself from shouting his success, from jumping up and down with glee, from taunting Captain Bonner.

It was a perfect murder. It had

gone off with only one hitch, and that had really made it more perfect, Uncle Fred having that seizure during dinner and having to be helped up to bed where the murder weapon was already set. That way, all five suspects were present when Fred Granview died.

In fact, they were all in the bedroom or standing in the doorway when the knife came through the mattress and through his chest, to protrude startlingly into sight through his shirt front. They all gasped at the same time. A second or two later Audrey s c r e a m e d. During Audrey's scream Margaret fainted, and while her husband, Theodore Hanson, bent over her Reggie suggested nervously that the police ought to be called—which was really a laugh because Reggie was the one Henry had chosen to be the fall guy.

A perfect murder. The rich uncle who was going to change his will in the morning leaving all his money to charity, and the five heirs, invited by the uncle for a Last Dinner during which he officially announced to all of them that in the morning they would be disinherited.

And a freak weapon. An invention.

What made it perfect was that Reggie, one of the five suspects, was the only one who could be called an inventor. Plus the fact that when the police investigated Reggie's basement machine shop they would find plenty of evidence that the murder weapon had been made there.

Right now the police were in the dining room, Uncle Fred's bedroom, all over the house, and even searching the grounds, judging from the occasional flashlight beam that cut across the library curtains from outside.

In the library Henry and the other four suspects, and Margaret's husband, Ted, waited under the watchful eye of a uniformed policeman who stood by the door to the hall.

Captain Bonner had told them that as soon as he and his men finished their preliminary investigation he would question each of them. That had been almost an hour ago. The questioning should begin soon.

Henry had been a little in doubt about himself before the murder. He had been half afraid he might get nervous and panicky when the deed was actually done. Instead, he had felt a surge of triumph, an almost orgiastic pleasure at seeing the knife leap into sight and Uncle Fred jerk spasmodically in death.

Henry actually looked forward to answering Captain Bonner's questions when the time came. Meanwhile, to pass the time, he reviewed again and again every step of the crime, looking for a

possible flaw that he knew couldn't be there.

The murder was perfect.

And why shouldn't it be? Henry had planned the murder of his uncle for over a year. He had made the spring-knife in Reggie's shop six months ago when Reggie was away. It had been in the back of his mind to use it when he got sick of always having to beg Uncle Fred for more money to pay his gambling debts. Uncle Fred always ranted and threatened to cut off his allowance altogether, but he also invariably relented and wrote out a check to cover each emergency. Even so, it was always a nuisance to have to ask, and to maintain one's dignity while waiting out the insults and the inevitable lecture.

In his secret heart Henry had always known that someday he would be forced to murder his uncle.

Then—only that morning, but how long ago it seemed!—Uncle Fred had called him on the phone.

"I want you over for dinner tonight, Henry," Fred Granview had said, his voice quavering from old age. "My doctors tell me I don't have long to live, so I'm changing my will tomorrow. Something I should have done long ago. I want you and the rest here to listen to what I have to say, Henry."

"I'll be there, Uncle Fred," Henry said. Then, belatedly, "I'm sorry to hear you aren't well."

"Oh, I'll live to make a liar out of my doctors yet," Uncle Fred snorted. "But Henry . . ."

"Yes, Uncle Fred?" Henry had said.

"If you have anything left out of your allowance this month, Henry," Uncle Fred had said, "hang onto it. It's going to have to last you longer than you think . . ."

Henry's mind had rejected the sense of the words. He said inanely, seizing upon the single concept, *allowance,* "I'm glad you mentioned it, Uncle Fred. I simply have to have another hundred right away—"

"Didn't you hear me?" Fred Granview's voice came in a shout. "Tonight you get a free meal—the last one. In the morning I'm changing my will, cutting off all my worthless relatives without a dime."

The phone had gone dead, and Henry had stood there, starting to tremble—not with fear, but with the realization that the time had come. The time to kill.

He lowered the phone gently to its cradle, went swiftly to the bedroom of his penthouse apartment and pulled the bottom dresser drawer completely out. Taped to the back of the drawer was the weapon. He pulled it free and

held it reverently in his hands.

The weapon was the ultimate in simplicity. A length of half-inch steel tubing fourteen inches long, capped at one end, a powerful compression spring, a slim sharp blade twelve inches long with a round base two inches long, just big enough to fit loosely into the tube, and a trigger mechanism that could release the knife when touched lightly.

For the purpose of carrying it safely the knife blade was narrow enough to slip down inside the coiled spring until its tip touched bottom. Then the round handle served as a top cap.

To load, all that was needed was to reverse the knife and rest the point against the floor and push the tube down until the knife handle caught on the trigger catch.

Henry had not invented the thing himself. At college his room mate had been an engineering student who was always experimenting. The room mate had built it, hoping to design a successful hunting device. There had been something about not being able to get the right balance in the knife for accurate shooting, and the device had gathered dust in a closet.

Henry's room mate later was killed in an auto accident, and Henry had "inherited" the thing. The only change he had had to make in it was an extension to the trigger to bring it up high enough so that a depressed bed spring would set it off.

He had done that in Reggie's workshop when Reggie was away, and also made some crude parts vaguely similar to the five parts that comprised the weapon. He had left the disassembled pieces in the heaps of assorted scraps that cluttered Reggie's workshop. To the police, with a murder weapon in their hands, those innocent scraps would spell the gas chamber for Reggie.

Henry put the drawer back in place and took the weapon to his small kitchen to thoroughly clean it. Not a fingerprint must be on it!

The phone rang. When he answered it, it was Audrey. She was in tears, having just heard uncle Fred's terrible announcement.

"If only he had waited!" she cried. "In another two years my voice would be ready for the Met!"

"It's terrible," Henry soothed.

"I'm not going tonight," Audrey said. "I couldn't bear it."

Henry's blood froze. If none of them showed up—especially Reggie—how could he kill Uncle Fred and have a convenient set of suspects for the police to choose from?

"But you must!" Henry blurted.

"We all must. We mustn't give him the satisfaction . . ."

A deep contralto sigh sounded over the phone.

"You're right, of course, Henry darling," Audrey said.

During the remainder of the day while Henry carefully cleaned the weapon and sharpened knife blade to a razor's edge, Margaret called and moaned about poor Ted not being able to finish his novel now unless she found a job to support him, which she would do of course. Her husband had spent three years on his novel now and hoped to finish it in another year or two, so she would be brave . . .

Henry convinced her she should be brave enough to attend the dinner. Then Reggie called.

" . . . just as I'm on the point of breaking through to an invention that will make millions!" he groaned. "I'm not going tonight. If I went I would strangle him with my two hands!"

Henry finally convinced Reggie he must go.

Even Paul had called, drunk as usual. Paul had always been the smartest one of them, when he was sober. He had talked Uncle Fred into setting him up in the hardware business.

"Uncle Fred is doing this to deliberately bankrupt me, Henry," he had wept over the phone. "I have a note to meet the first of the month. If I can't meet it I'm through."

Paul, at least, was determined to show up at the dinner, and was hoping he could talk Uncle Fred into relenting.

Paul had called at three. From then until six-thirty had seemed a century to Henry. At six-thirty he eagerly left his penthouse apartment and drove to uncle Fred's empty mansion.

From long experience in timing, they all arrived at the same time. Martha, the gray-haired housekeeper, let them in as usual, and greeted them as usual.

Henry delayed going upstairs to wash up until almost the last moment before dinner, so that he would have a clear field to slip into Uncle Fred's bedroom and plant the spring-knife under the bed.

It fitted perfectly as he knew it would. Only when Uncle Fred's full weight was directly over it would the springs sink deep enough to release the knife. Then the powerful spring would drive it up through the mattress—and through Uncle Fred.

Henry went down to join the others in the front room with a feeling of contentment. His share of Uncle Fred's estate was as good as in his hands already.

When dinner was announced Uncle Fred had moved grudgingly into the dining room and the

others had followed. All except Reggie.

Reggie had run upstairs, taking the steps two at a time. Henry had nudged Paul and whispered, "What the heck is Reggie going upstairs now for?"

It had been perfect. Paul would remember that.

For the first few minutes at dinner everything was the way it had always been. Audrey pushed forward to help the housekeeper put the soup at each place, Margaret fussed with the salad dishes. Reggie appeared through the door to the kitchen, having come down by the back stairs. Paul helped Uncle Fred get seated at the head of the table.

Then everyone seemed to remember.

Silence settled over the room, broken only by the sounds of dinner.

With the first taste of soup Henry had become very depressed. He realized it really was the last dinner with Uncle Fred. He had loved Uncle Fred as a father.

In a sense Uncle Fred had created him. From the innocent ten-year-old boy he had been when Uncle Fred took him, he had become an incurable gambler, and Uncle Fred had had a lot to do with it.

There had been that first gambling debt six months after college. Henry had been terrified when the gambling syndicate gave him twenty-four hours to pay up —or else.

He had gone to Uncle Fred and blurted the whole sorry mess, expecting Uncle Fred to kick him out. Instead, Uncle Fred had chuckled!

"Henry," he had said, "they played you for a sucker. But I have to admire your guts, bucking a gambling syndicate." He had written out a check for the full amount and given it to Henry with the mild admonition, "I hope this teaches you a lesson."

Henry had paid off the gambling syndicate feeling a little proud of his manliness. And he had worshipped Uncle Fred ...

A different Uncle Fred from the one now slurping his soup noisily and glaring around the table contemptuously. This one was no more than a cantankerous old man. Little more than leathery skin, and bones.

At that moment Uncle Fred exploded into a fit of coughing.

While Henry and the others looked on, Uncle Fred half rose, still coughing. He clutched at his throat ineffectively, then fell forward on the table.

Audrey and Paul, who were sitting at either side of Uncle Fred, took hold of him and helped him back into his chair.

"My heart!" Uncle Fred choked out.

"Call the doctor, somebody!" Paul had said. "Come on, let's get

Uncle Fred to bed!"

"I'll call the doctor!" Henry shouted.

He rushed into the hall and dialed the number quickly. The doctor himself answered the phone, and promised to come at once.

Henry caught up with the others at the top of the stairs. Reggie and Paul were practically carrying Uncle Fred now. Audrey and Margaret were fluttering. Ted was clutching at his wife Margaret.

The death march continued down the hall to the door of Uncle Fred's bedroom. Ted opened the door. Reggie and Paul helped Uncle Fred through.

But it was Reggie who lifted Uncle Fred in his arms, seemed to hesitate, then dropped him in the exact center of the bed.

A second later the sharp point of the knife materialized through Uncle Fred's chest, glistening pinkly in the light of the ceiling globe someone had turned on from the switch by the door.

Henry forced his mind back to the present. He looked around the library at the books, the policeman sitting by the door. Audrey and Paul had already been called for their interview by Captain Bonner. His turn would come soon.

It would not *do* to keep thinking about the murder. He was "innocent"! He would have to concentrate on that, get into that frame of mind. If he didn't, Captain Bonner might suspect.

The door opened again. The same policeman came in and looked around questioningly.

"Mr. Reginald Granview?" he said.

Reggie stood up looking very pale. He opened his mouth twice like a fish gasping for breath, then followed the policeman from the room.

Henry looked at the closed door with just the hint of a smile on his face.

Henry felt Margaret looking at him. He looked at her with his eyes out of focus, and looked away.

He sensed that Margaret was still looking at him. Damn her, did she suspect the truth?

"You think I killed him, don't you, Henry?" she said.

"Meg!" her husband Ted whispered. "The policeman!"

"Ted's right," Henry said. "Besides, it's absurd. You?" He shook his head, smiling.

Margaret opened her mouth to say something more, then closed it and turned away.

How was Reggie faring? Had Captain Bonner leaped on him? Captain Bonner, Henry realized, was the real enemy. He had sensed it from the first moment he saw the man.

After Henry had called him, old Dr. Ingersoll, the family doctor, arrived within five minutes of Uncle Fred's death. He had taken one look at the knife protruding upwards from Uncle Fred's chest and turned angrily to Henry.

"I thought you said he had a heart attack, Henry," he said.

Henry shrugged apologetically. "He did," he said. "Downstairs at dinner. They were taking him up to bed when I called you."

Dr. Ingersoll had herded them out of the bedroom and closed the door. He undoubtedly used the bedside telephone to call the police, because it seemed only a minute to Henry before the first faint sound of a distant, approaching siren crept into the silence of the hall. From that moment, Captain Bonner of the police had taken over.

Forcing his thoughts back to the reality of the library, Henry took out his handkerchief and dabbed at his forehead.

Margaret was looking at him.

"Hot in here, isn't it," he said weakly.

"Did—?" Margaret blurted. "Did—?" She put her hand over her mouth, but her eyes were suddenly round.

Henry stole a glance toward the policeman guarding the door. The man was watching them with keen interest.

Tension grew. In another moment Margaret would ask the question. Henry held his breath, waiting.

The door opened. The familiar figure stepped in, looked around, and said, "Henry Granview?"

With a sense of relief Henry stood up. He didn't look back as he followed the policeman out into the hall.

"Captain Bonner wants to see you in the dining room," the policeman said.

Henry steeled himself. Bonner, he knew, was very intelligent. But intelligence could carry one only so far. Reasoning could only be applied to evidence.

All he had to do, Henry was sure, was play innocent. Not be sure of anything, really.

In his mind's eye Henry anticipated what line Bonner would take.

"You went upstairs alone, didn't you?" Bonner would say.

"I don't know!" Henry would answer. "I may have. I thought Paul was with me. No, that was last time we were here. I just don't remember." And then, half angrily, "Good lord, man, you act as though I anticipated that Uncle Fred would be murdered and I would remember everything I did so as to have an alibi!"

Just the right shade of defiance, just the right shade of vagueness. That was the best line to take.

The line he really hoped he would get a chance to use was

a stroke of genius.

"So what!" he would say if he had the right opportunity. "So what if Reggie is an inventor! You can probably buy trick knives that would stab through a mattress almost anywhere—can't you?" He would laugh skeptically and add, "Reggie invent something that actually worked?" He would chuckle. Then he would say, "Reggie's workshop is full of his failures. He must have several tons of them laying around . . ."

The policeman led the way across the edge of the huge living room. It was empty now, and silent. At the door to the dining room he paused until Henry caught up with him. Then he opened the door. Henry stepped past him into the room.

Captain Bonner was sitting on the other side of the table. On either side of him, sitting at the table, were men in ordinary clothes but with the indelible stamp of Police on them.

Bonner and his men were looking at Henry as a spider might look at a fly caught in its web.

Henry blinked nervously. Suddenly his attention was caught by a cluster of familiar faces over in the corner. Audrey and Paul and Reggie.

For the first time doubt—genuine doubt—entered his mind. The expression on their faces was almost predatory. Their eyes gleamed with sadistic anticipation. It was almost as though they were sure he was guilty.

Madness! How *could* they know?

Had someone seen him go into Uncle Fred's bedroom to plant the weapon, or when he left? If so, it would be damaging, but not fatal. One person's word against another's.

"Sit down, Henry," Captain Bonner said, pointing to a chair directly opposite him at the table.

Henry took the seat warily, alert to everything around him.

"Now, Henry," Captain Bonner said, "we know you are guilty. No, no!" He waved Henry to silence. "We aren't interested in your protestations of innocence. We know beyond a shadow of doubt that you are guilty of murder. We can prove it in any court of law."

It was a trap!

Henry blinked his eyes innocently. He looked from one face to another, hoping to find doubt. He saw nothing but complete conviction in the eyes of everyone.

What had he done wrong? He had been so sure of success!

"You committed a perfect crime," Captain Bonner said. "You overlooked only one small thing. Something you could not have foreseen or you would have abandoned your plan to kill your uncle."

Henry wanted to blurt, "What was that?", but he clamped his lips together. They weren't going to trap him into talking.

"It was perfect," Captain Bonner repeated, flavoring the words. "Five suspects and a rich uncle who was going to change his will in the morning. All five suspects had the same motive. All five suspects were present, with equal opportunity to commit the crime. Our investigation is less than two hours old, but already I'm inclined to believe you were smart enough and careful enough to make it impossible for us to obtain proof of your possession of the instrument of murder you employed. So . . ."

Captain Bonner smiled blandly.

"Although we can prove to any jury in the world that you *did* kill your uncle," he said, "we'll have to remain ignorant of one small detail of your crime—unless you choose to tell us. Which of the five methods of killing him was yours?

"The spring-driven knife under the bed? The sugar of lead in his glass of wine before dinner? The arsenic in his soup? The strychnine in his coffee? The cyanide?" Captain Bonner tabulated each of them with a finger.

Henry's eyes grew very round as the meaning of Bonner's words sunk in. He turned his eyes toward Audrey, then Paul, then Reggie. Now he understood why they had looked at him the way they did.

And suddenly a new thought struck him. There was still Margaret. Right now she was sitting in the library feeling secure.

What a shock it must have been to her for that knife to appear after she had poisoned Uncle Fred! The shock of all four of them as they helped Uncle Fred up to his room, dying or already dead from the poison each one had given him!

"Which was yours?" Captain Bonner asked.

"Does it matter?" Henry grinned, going over to join Audrey and Paul and Reggie. "Aren't you going to send for Margaret now?"

At a nod from Captain Bonner the policeman left the room. And Henry sat on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, eagerly watching the door Margaret would come through. ■ ■

THE DEADLIEST GAME

by JOSEPH WHITEHILL

AS FAR AS ANYONE WATCHING HIM could tell, Phillip Tussig had no intention whatever of entering the wide gate before the Academy of Art.

Yet he stood now by the stone gatepost with the smiling Easter sun warming his shoulders under the tweed of his rough gray jacket, tensing with an inchoate sense of

his conspicuousness and trying to discover why he should now feel watched. Suddenly, with a klaxon blare through the halls of his brain, his hands cried for his eyes' notice! ... That was it! ... His hands!

Phillip had grown so used to his lame hands, and lived so well within their deficiencies, that hardly once in a month would he affront them—bend a wrist too suddenly to suit the rubbish of bones inside, or misjudge the weight of an object and drop it from his numb fingers. He had even learned, many years ago, how to shake hands without flinching.

His hands cried for notice, he knew, because he was now, for the first time, standing outside the gross old building where he had lamed them some twenty-three years ago. And such a foolish, wanton misfortune it had been!

The faculty, in Phillip's days at the academy, did not even suspect the existence of the Shaft. Indeed, he felt, it was unlikely that they had ever learned of it at all, for it was a passionately guarded secret kept, as boys' knightly secrets are held, with a dire and solemn fervor. Somehow, in the erection of the academy hundreds of years ago, an error was made, or an early idea of the architect was later forgotten; for a slender flue dropping plumb through all four stories had been left behind, with no use assigned to it.

In Phillip Tussig's day, when he was a promising young student of painting, the Shaft was reached at its upper end by removing some of the boards at the back of the sweeper's closet on the top floor, where the boys slept; and it fell straight down through the building, with not another opening, until it emerged beneath a heavy iron grate in the alley between the academy and the building next door.

The Shaft had been held by the boys to be a ritual touchstone of bravery, and so indeed it was.

One boy, little apelike Becker, had gone down the Shaft not once but *four* times, and had then crowned his glory by climbing back up, something never before attempted.

Becker, then only thirteen, had remained in the shaft more than five hours, even calling for food and drink, which was lowered to him in a small hamper.

That had been the real cause of the trouble, Tussig reflected. Teasing and insulting him, Becker had one day so enraged Phillip with his taunts that the smaller boy had unthinkingly caught at the proffered dare, and angrily agreed to make the descent of the Shaft without a rope.

Of the actual fall down the Shaft, Phillip remembered little. He had wormed his way about a

third of the way down when a bit of mortar had broken under his heel and, with gasping suddenness, he had hurtled down between the rough, abrading walls until he had struck the littered bottom. When he had awakened and begun to think again, it seemed to Phillip he must have landed on his knees, with his wrists beneath them, in a kind of foetal position; for in the dim light that came down through the iron grate he could see that his limp wrists no longer bent at a definite joint, but appeared to wilt smoothly over a longer curve.

He had shouldered aside the heavy grate and climbed out, wracked with greater pain than he had ever known.

When Phillip Tussig had returned to the academy a week later with both his arms in casts to the elbows, Becker had been one of the first to greet him. Becker had led him into the seclusion of his own room and passionately apologized to Phillip for having set the dare upon him. He had pleaded so earnestly, gesturing and grimacing in his Iberian manner, that Phillip smilingly had to tell him that no grudge was kept.

Then Becker had asked, "When will you be able to paint again?"

And Phillip had replied, "I don't know. I may never be able to." Phillip had invented this awful fate for himself only to watch Becker writhe in the coils of his guilt, but later, after the casts were sawed off, the terrible thing was true. His hands, though unscarred, felt like fish flesh, and his wrists were agony to bend.

Thus Phillip had prepared Becker for the grievous shock without preparing himself, and it was Becker, quieter and more serious now, who had helped Phillip grow used to his disablement and to think of ways of accommodation. Phillip's instructors had discreetly withdrawn their demands of performance upon him, and had subtly shifted the weight of his studies in an academic direction, so that he no longer had to submit charcoals or washes, and it was even rare that they asked him to use a pen to write with.

It was at about this time, within a month after Phillip's accident, that the Committee of Judges had selected one of his earlier pastels, a still life, for permanent purchase, and had bought it from him and hung it in the Center Gallery on the third floor. When the news was out, Becker had run to Phillip's room to congratulate him. "How perfectly marvelous! To know that a picture of yours is going to hang there forever! Ah, how I envy you, Phillip."

A short time later, Phillip Tussig had modestly resigned from the academy and returned to his

parents' home in the Province, leaving his pastel hanging on the gallery wall.

It was this drawing he was thinking of now. Somehow, in spite of the great personal danger he courted by exposing himself to view in this town, he was driven by an obsessing need to look at it once more.

So it came to pass that Phillip Tussig returned to his academy after more than twenty years, deserting for just this once the safety of his guardian wit; the wit which had so long kept him whole, or at least protected that wholeness which was left to him. For Tussig, during all the years of his service, had never carried a pistol or a knife. He had learned early that his hands were too slow for such things, but some time after learning it he had found that without these weapons he was estimated by others as inexplicably more formidable than those who went armed.

Promising himself that he would stay only a moment—just long enough to see his picture—Phillip crossed the courtyard of broken terrazzo, moving among the holiday groups of students and their parents, and climbed the hollowed marble steps to the entrance.

Inside, he was forced to pause in the dark, cool atrium to orient himself. Groups of best-dressed folk were talking in clumps or silently studying the paintings hung around the walls. Scanning quickly, Phillip Tussig saw that his was not among them. He caught sight of a blue-sashed monitor loitering at the foot of the great staircase, talking with two younger students. They looked up respectfully as he approached, and he asked, "Please, might you tell me where the Permanent Exhibit Awards are hanging?"

The boy consulted a printed card. "They are on the third floor, sir, in the Center Gallery."

"Thank you."

When he reached the top of the staircase, Phillip looked down. The boy with the blue sash had disappeared. Phillip felt sweat starting in his armpits. Instead of ascending higher, he walked down the long corridor he remembered as leading to the music rooms.

He found one empty, and after shutting the thick door, he sat down on the piano bench to think. His heart was beating far too fast for his taste; he felt the blood moving in his tingling wrists .... What use is all that training and proud experience if I must run like a hare at the sight of my shadow? ...

He fingered the keys of the piano silently while he tried to divine the source of his panic. The

rumors he had heard of Becker's return to this country had never been confirmed. Besides, it was highly unlikely that Becker knew of his, Phillip's, part in the opposition movement. Phillip's communicants had for years posted him on Becker's movements and activities, and nothing in their generally sound reports had indicated that Becker was aware that now he and Phillip were pulling on opposite ends of the rope, or, indeed, that he even remembered Phillip.

It must have something to do with Becker and the Shaft, and my hands, Phillip thought.

"Fah!" he exploded as he rose decidedly from the bench. He left the room and walked down the corridor toward the side stairs he remembered. As he climbed the stairs alone, the risks seemed to have returned to proper dimension.

While he stood at the door of the Center Gallery listening to the emanating hum of voices, Phillip suddenly discovered with a shock that he was staring right at his own drawing. The back hair of his head crawled in the nostalgic joy of seeing it again after so long. And it now hung directly before the door! Just where it was the first to be seen when one entered!

The small brass plate tacked to the wall beside the drawing read not his name, but another's, and titled another picture from another year. How is this? he thought. Somebody has made a stupid mistake. Then he noticed that where his picture now hung, the monk's-cloth wall showed a rectangular area of cleanness that matched neither the size nor the shape of his own drawing. Part of the cold truth was already upon him as he thought, My drawing does not belong here at all. Someone has put it here in place of another. And, as he remembered how he had entered this room, eagerly and in a straight line toward his own picture, an icy awareness of *trap!* came over him. He stepped back in momentary indecision, then coolly turned toward the door.

In the side of his eye, Phillip saw what he knew he must. Becker was indeed there, talking to two heavy-shouldered young men with close-cropped hair, and watching him with a slight smile on his large-lipped mouth.

Becker left his two companions with a nod and, striding swiftly with his ape's gait, intercepted Phillip at the door. "Ah, dear Tussig! So many, many years has it been! How are you—how are you?" Becker's hand was groping for Phillip's, but Phillip kept his hands in his pockets.

Phillip kept walking, rudely shaking his head. "No—no." He was trying hard to reach the Gal-

lery of Sculpture, just ahead, where he saw the safety of a large crowd and an open room with several exits.

"Phillip, Phillip!" Becker kept up. "It's I—Becker! Surely you know me!"

Phillip, seeing now that Becker was certain of his identification, allowed a light of recognition to show. Above all, there must be no disturbance. "Ah, yes. Becker. How are you these days, Becker?"

"Busy as can be. Let us sit over here where we may talk." Becker led the way to a couch at one side of the Gallery of Sculpture.

"Believe me, Phillip, I am glad to see you," Becker went on when they were seated. His eyes flickered over Phillip's face and person in a proprietary manner which reminded Phillip of the way of an Argentine beef buyer. Then the animation left his face and he went on, "We were terribly afraid you wouldn't come into the academy at all. It was my idea to wait for you here. We could hardly have gone out into the street to get you, you know. That's the exasperating part of it all. One must be so discreet, is it not so?"

Phillip shifted on the couch and said puzzledly, "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Becker's bland face belied the fury in his voice, which hissed somewhat as he lowered it. "Look, Tussig, let's stop this. Personally, I would delight to sit and chat with you about this and that, but we haven't time. Let me be plain. Just as you know of me, so I also know of you. *I* know what you have been doing all these years. Our corps may move clumsily at times, but our information service is just as adept as your own. Now ... are we understood together?"

Phillip paused, assessing the chances of a quick bolt down the staircase, then said, "What do you want, Becker?"

"Now, that's better." Becker smiled briefly the old smile of fraternity. "Really, you know, it is quite curious that our ways have not crossed before. Do you suppose we have been being polite?"

"I thought you were in a hurry," Phillip said.

"*Touche,* Phillip, so I am. Well, to go on—you surely know what we're after, do you not?"

"No."

"Of course you would say that. I will tell you, then. We want to know, first, how it was that you people managed to engineer that little currency coup of yours in February? Only the very highest men in our corps knew when that transshipment was to take place, but you clever little people were there right on time. Submachine guns in a hay wagon—well, *really!* Tussig, we *must* know where our

leak is. And the other thing we must know is, why are you yourself in this town at this time? That is all."

Phillip squinted thoughtfully. "Supposing for a moment that I know the answers you want, what is to induce me to tell them to you?" This, Phillip knew, was just a formal question.

Becker pulled at his lower lip while he paused in thought. At length he said, "I was just trying to decide how much to tell you. I think we will save time if I tell you everything. The two men with whom you saw me in the gallery are my platoon leaders. In this building are the members of their platoons. There are eighteen men here throughout the academy who know by now that you have been found and that I am talking to you. If you tell me what we want, I will walk with you to the gate outside and let you go your way. If you don't tell me what I need, you will be dead in an hour .... Phillip, do not force my hand. Please."

"Why do you not take me away for torture? I have heard many reports of your excellence in this area. Why this gentlemanly method?"

Becker shook his head sadly. "Phillip—Phillip. This is unkind of you. I shall again be truthful. Right now, it is mechanically impossible for us to take you anywhere. We have nowhere to take you. They watch for us everywhere. We are as alien here as you. But you are outnumbered. Myself, I am glad of this, in a way. Do you assume that because we find ourselves today in opposition, I can put out of my heart all I know of my friend Phillip Tussig? Indeed, do you believe I *have* no heart? Of course not. Simply because our generals and our colonels tell us that you are black and I am white, or you are North and I am South, must we believe this to do our work?"

Watching Becker's earnest face, and the tense, pleading gestures of his hands, Phillip Tussig was half moved to believe that Becker was right; that it was possible to admit humanity to their two-valued system. How odd it was to be caught in a mortal trap, yet find that to love the trapper was not impossible. Phillip said, "Becker, I must have time."

"How much?"

"An hour."

"Too long. My friends and I must be away from here and out of the town in an hour." Becker paused. "Fifteen minutes."

"*Half* an hour, then."

Becker looked worried for a moment, then smiled quickly and gently grasped Phillip's hand. "For a friend, yes," he said. "Ah, the hands. How are the hands, Tus-

sig?"

"Better than they were once."

"I am glad. I have dreamed of those hands often."

Phillip grew impatient. "What must I do? Where will you be when the half hour is up?"

"By the foot of the great staircase. Please, Phillip, do come to me. If you are not down in time, I will leave alone, and my friends will come to you, wherever you are. I know your head is on straight, but please remember you will be watched every second. Do not make a scene." Pressing his hand once more, Becker rose from the couch. "Half an hour, then," he said softly, and with a little wave he strode from the Galley of Sculpture.

Phillip sat for long minutes with his elbows on his knees and his hands dangling loosely toward the floor .... That this is where the end should be, he thought. Right here again where the end might have come twenty years ago, had chances so said. The preposterousness of his position, and a concomitant sense of the unreality of it all, made him raise his head to look about the vaulted room and among its statuary, to find whoever it was who watched him. There were several men of differing sizes and types standing each alone and absorbed in the sculpture. None seemed interested in Phillip. Probably, he reflected, he would never have time to see their faces when they, whoever they were, came to him. He sighed and rose from the couch.

Moving slowly, and in evident aimlessness, so as not to alarm the secret eyes, Phillip went to the door of the Center Gallery and glanced in. Yes, there it was—his drawing—so placed that it was the first thing one saw on entering the room. Phillip stepped aside to the statue of Perseus, which stood with bowed head and sightless eyes, holding aloft the marble head of Medusa with his hand buried among the marble snakes. Phillip took off his coat and folded it neatly and put it across Perseus's feet. He loosened his tie and collar and pushed up the cuffs of his shirt sleeves. Then, with a bustling walk, he sallied into the Center Gallery.

There were nearly a score of visitors there, grazing like cattle among the paintings. The two heavy-shouldered young men were no longer there. Phillip hurried in, then came to a flustered halt, raising his hands in a Gallic gesture of shock as he looked at his own drawing. Several of the visitors looked at him. "Tut *tut,*" Phillip said, "Such a stupidity! Ah, the help one gets these days!" He smiled sadly at a young couple who were attending his mono-

logue. "Just look at that, I ask you," he said as he pointed fussily at the drawing. "*Completely* out of place!"

Then, like a hound on a baffling scent, Phillip Tussig trotted around the walls of the gallery peering at the little brass title plates; craning, bending, and dodging for his view around and between the amused visitors. At length he found the plate which carried his name, over in an ill-lit corner, with the wrong picture hung beside it. The pain in his wrists as he lifted it down brought quick tears to his soft brown eyes, but he shook his head in a petulant way so that people could not see.

With every step he took across the room bearing this wrong picture to its right place, he felt his wrists flex and could hear the stony grating of the bones inside. He almost dropped it as he put it down under his own drawing; yet, without pausing, he took down the pastel of the two partridges and the ring of keys, and carried it back to its proper place. Though to hang his picture took a nearly superhuman denial of the pain that echoed now even to his elbows, he achieved it at length and, straightening the picture with one hand, he mopped his face with a handkerchief wrapped around the other.

Now that his picture was back in the obscurity where it deserved to hang, Phillip Tussig left the gallery without another glance at it. Outside, he took his coat back from Perseus and put it on. Then he straightened his tie and ambled out of the Gallery of Sculpture toward the side stairs. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw two men approaching—two men who before had been standing apart looking at separate statues.

. . . Better now than not at all, Phillip thought, and he raced up the stairs three at a time.

When he reached the top floor, his thin legs tingling and trembling with the exercise, he took a great lungful of air and held it, the better to hear his pursuers. They were, from the sound of their pounding feet, not far behind. Phillip ran down the hall and had to try two doors before he found the sweeper's closet. He pulled the light cord and quickly shut himself inside.

He stared a moment at the closed door, lit by the pendulum swing of the feeble bulb. Now it was the Lord's turn.

Moving as quietly as he could in his haste, he pulled out the canisters of sweeping compound and powdered soap, and the broached case of toilet paper, biting his lip to distract the agony of his wrists. He could hear the men outside in the hall trying doors and calling to each other in

voices of strained softness.

Finally the back wall of the tiny closet was bare, and Phillip's shoulders sagged in relief as he saw in the dim light the blessed dirty thumbprints of countless young heroes on the loose boards there. In an instant he had slid out the boards and switched off the light and swung himself feet-first and awkwardly into the small opening. Bracing with his elbows and knees against the rough walls, he inched himself downward a little way, then stopped as he heard the door open in the closet above him.

"Look at that."

"What?"

"The light cord swinging. He has been in here."

As Phillip listened to their talk, he opened his throat as wide as he could, to diminish the noise of his breathing.

"There is a hole back here."

"Would he go into a hole?"

"Give me a match."

"Here. Try it this way. Strike the match and drop it while it still flares."

The match spluttered brightly and dropped. Phillip gasped in pain as the burning match landed with a wasp's sting on the bare nape of his neck.

"Did you hear that?"

"Yes. He is there, all right."

"You had better go down and get Becker."

"Very well."

"Be quiet about it."

"Of course."

Above, there was now silence. Phillip Tussig, cramped between the walls of the Shaft, loosed one hand and beat at the smoldering collar of his coat where the match had set it afire. The pain in his wrist as he brushed with his hand brought him near to fainting, so he stopped and scraped off the coals by hunching against the bricks.

Then he began descending the Shaft, moving in those tortured inchworm motions that brought so little travel at each cycle. First, Phillip, your left knee down. Brace it. Then right knee down. Brace it. Then skid your back down the wall and bring your elbows down one at a time. Thus ten centimeters are gained. Now repeat all the motions and keep repeating them, long off into distant time; for to reach the bottom whole, you must do this a hundred and fifty times.

Like a crippled beetle, Phillip Tussig made his way down the Shaft, counting wordlessly as he began each cycle, thus to prove his progress. He dislodged a chunk of mortar and breathed deeply twice before it struck the bottom. He heard a whispered voice above him and stopped, head hanging on his

chest, to listen.

"Phillip," said the whisper. "It is I, Becker. I have found a rope. Will you take it?"

Phillip shook his head.

"Here it comes."

A hard, dusty snake of rope fell across his straining arms, and Phillip cried out in anger, "Get that thing off me!"

"Quietly, quietly," said Becker from above. "Please take it, Phillip. I don't want you to do this thing."

"You left me wide choice," Phillip gasped, suddenly sensing for the first time the hungry void below him. "Take away your rope, for God's sake. It's heavy!" The rope rustled and went back up in the dark.

"I never believed you would do this, Phillip," Becker whispered when he had retrieved all the rope. "All you had to do was to tell us two little things, and then you could have walked out. Not *this*."

Phillip Tussig did not answer. Left knee down .... Brace it. Right knee down .... Brace it .... A great cramping pain settled on his shoulders, and he was tiring. His feet found a course of brick which protruded just enough to hook his heels on and let him rest. Mortar dust sifted into his mouth and grated loudly inside his head when he set his teeth. Phillip heard from above the sounds of a conference. Evidently all three of them were in the little sweeper's closet with the door closed, for he could easily hear every word they said, nor was there another sound to confuse the meaning of the words. Briefly, Phillip wondered if it would be like this to hang still in dark outer space and listen to the Lord and two angels chatting quietly about him.

"We could drop our knives on him. Point down, you know."

"Ass. What for?"

"Well, to kill him or make him fall or something."

Becker said, "Those little knives of yours have no weight. They would just sting him even if you managed to hit him."

"They might make him fall."

"To what end?" Becker asked. "What good would his falling do us?"

"Well, he would be punished for running away. He would be dead, perhaps."

Becker sounded choked; whether with rage or tears Phillip could not tell. "Oh, you *fools!* Stupid, beasty fools. Do you think I want that man dead? Werner, listen to me. Are your ears open, Werner? When Tussig was caught out here in the building, I told him to inform or be killed. His life or death was just an article of currency between us. It is information I want, not killing. Don't you think I live with enough already, without having his idle death on my head?"

"I thought he was an enemy," the other said sullenly.

"*Agh!* He is first a man."

Becker's voice now came down more clearly as he leaned into the Shaft and said, "Hey, Tussig, are you all right?"

"Yes."

"How are the hands?"

"Not too bad."

"How far down are you?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps halfway."

Phillip began again to climb downward. The joints at his elbows and knees seemed to hurt worse after his short rest. They felt abraded and warm, as though they might be bleeding. He climbed down for a time undisturbed. It might have been fifteen minutes, or half an hour—he had no way of telling—before Becker again broke the silence.

"Phillip."

"Yes."

"Do you think if you fell now you would be killed?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"That is good .... I think you need some light."

There was a sound of scraping and rustling from above, and Phillip dared not look up. A brightly flaring match tumbled by him, and another, and another. Then came an incandescent shower of them, hissing and leaving smelly sulfur trails. Several landed on Phillip's clothing, and he brushed them off as best he could, before they set him afire.

Becker's voice came again, sounding hollow and gleeful in the distance. "That was light for your soul, Phillip .... Now, here is something to whiten your soul, Phillip." Several thumps sounded, and Phillip lowered his head and tried to cover it with his aching hands. A cascade of powdered soap poured over him, filling his nose and causing him to sneeze loudly several times.

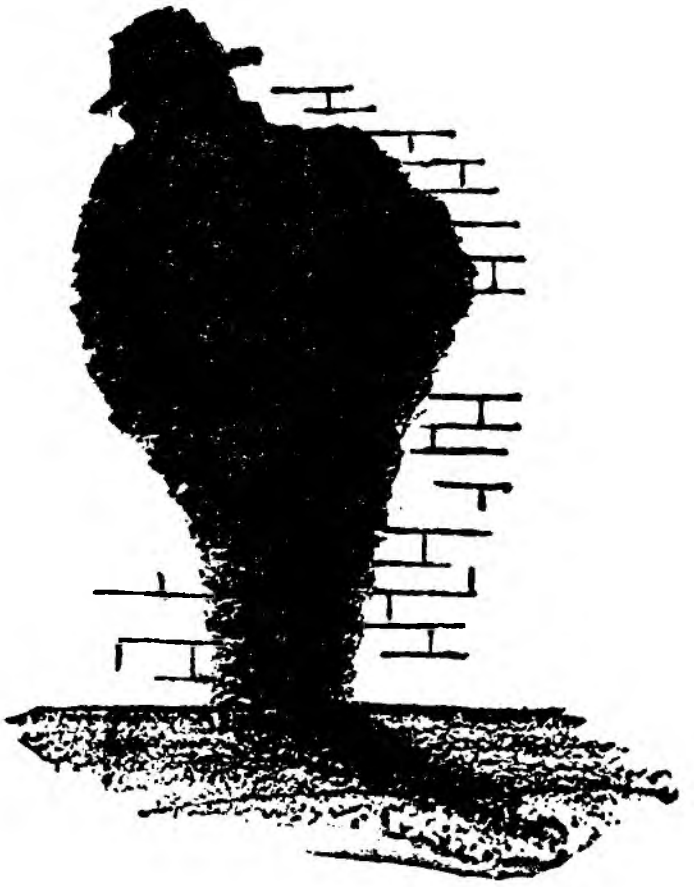
"*Gesundheit!*" whispered Becker in a voice with some love in it. "Now, let me see ... Ah! Here, Phillip, this is to teach the soul humility under degradation!"

An avalanche of cedar-smelling, greasy sawdust flowed down over Phillip, seeking out every gap in his clothing and trying to smother him with its warm, oily filth. Phillip kept moving as best he could, hurrying to escape this catechism.

"Now, this is the last, Phillip," Becker cried hoarsely. "This is to remind the soul of its humanity." A roll of toilet paper struck Phillip a soft blow on the shoulder and rolled off into the dark. Then came another, partially unrolled, trailing a tangling, spidery-feeling train. Soon they were falling in a rhythmic bombardment, some hitting him, and others missing in their hurry.

Phillip knew he was about to fall. Sheer will could no longer keep him wedged there between the walls of the Shaft. His arms and legs no longer obeyed, and, in their numbness and weakness, they seemed not his, but a child's. He looked down for the first time. Then he loosed his legs and dropped the last three meters and landed in a sprawled heap on the pile of soft stuff Becker had used for ammunition. He was hardly jarred.

He flopped out of the shaft like a dirty, tired seal, to a place in the well under the iron grate, and lay there limply on his back, looking up at the small piece of the blue sky, the Easter sky, which he could see between the tops of the buildings. ■ ■



WIFE KILLER

by ROD REED

MACK THE BARTENDER WAS INTENT on the bulldog edition of *The Courier*. But not intent enough to forget business. He noticed Joe's glass was empty and set the paper aside while he drew another one. As he scraped off the excess foam he asked:

"Joe, what'd you do if you caught your old lady cheating?"

"No problem," responded Joe. "I'm not married."

"Just a for-instance," said Mack. "I meant, if you were."

Busy with his brew, Joe couldn't reply at once, so Roarke cut in.

"If I caught *my* woman off base," Roarke bellowed, "I'd beat the be-Jupiter out of her! I wouldn't stand for no nonsense!"

Roarke is a husky truck driver. If any of the boys felt like smiling at what he said, they smiled inwardly, for Roarke could truly lick any man in the house. But the inward smiles would be caused by the certainty that within twenty minutes little Mrs. Roarke would be at the door beckoning to her husky husband and that he'd go to her like a lamb—probably leaving a half-full glass of beer on the bar.

Mack's hypothetical question seemed to have intrigued the rest of his customers. Burkel, thoughtfully breaking a wooden stirrer into small splinters, asserted:

"I wouldn't beat Lucy, but I'd sure leave her. I'd get a divorce quicker than you can say 'Reno!' " Burkel swept the splinters off the bar brusquely. "A wife that plays around don't deserve no consideration!"

Probably a stranger would have been impressed by Burkel's firm

A SHORT-SHORT STORY

stand. But I happened to know that his wife Lucy had run away from him at least three times to have a small fling, and each time he'd taken her back with open arms. Burkel thought nobody knew about it. The poor sap! After all these years he hadn't learned that women talk about *everything*.

I slid Mack's newspaper over toward me. One glance showed what had started Mack off with this trend in conversation.

The headline said: MAN SLAYS WIFE, LOVER. The story was brief; apparently it had barely made the edition. Cops had found the bodies of a man and woman, viciously beaten, in a parked car on Old Delaware Road. Due to the hideous brutality of the attack, the pair was unidentified at press time.

But there was a clue. Pinned to the woman's bloody blouse was an unsigned note, evidently quickly scrawled. It read:

This was my wife. She won't cheat again.

As I finished reading, I caught the tail end of Hutton's views on this fascinating subject:

"I'd forgive her," Hutton said. "Nobody's perfect. I've done a little playing around myself. And a person—even a woman—can't help being human."

Of course, it's possible that in a saloon a man may sometimes say something he doesn't mean, but this mild attitude of Hutton's was a surprise. He's a big wheel, drinks nothing but Scotch, and has a reputation as a tough, hard-headed business man. If he ever forgave anyone *anything,* it's not on the record.

"How about you, Smitty?" asked Mack, pouring a straight rye. "You're very quiet. Let's hear what you'd do if you caught your wife lollying with some other guy."

Smitty downed the shot. "I'd kill her!"

He said it earnestly, fiercely, and the bar rocked with laughter. Everybody howled. And no wonder; Smitty is a small-sized Casper Milquetoast. I was grinning and thinking what funny ideas guys get about themselves after a couple of drinks, when the cops came in.

"Come along, Smith," one cop said.

Smitty mumbled, "Yes, sir."

As they were ushering Smitty out, Mack hollered, "Hey, what'd he do?"

"Killed his wife. Horrible sight. Out on Old Delaware Road." ■ ■

COMPLETE ON THESE PAGES

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

"What is your favorite story?" —the question is one that every writer hears many times during his life. Some writers find it difficult to answer, because they cannot honestly say that they prefer this *one to* that. *The reason? An author may cherish a particular story for an unusual character who came alive during the writing and "took over" the plot, forcing the author to discard his original story line. But it turns out to be a jewel of a story, a sort of bonus to the writer (he never would have thought of that plot idea originally). Or an author's favorite story may be the one he wrote on the day he fell in love (unlikely) or on the day his creditors delivered an ultimatum and if he wanted to eat the next day he had to sit down and write a story that night (much more likely).*

Or a dozen different reasons.

But my reason for choosing "I.O.U." is not so dramatic. I like this story above all others that I have written because:

1. *It is about a family situation. (I prefer this kind of story to the dashing, high adventure type.)*
2. *It is about a father—teenage-daughter relationship (my favorite family situation).*
3. *It poses a very serious problem: a choice between gratitude and duty—a difficult choice for anyone to make.*

Cornell Woolrich

I. O. U.

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

TO THE OTHERS IN THE BACK room, Second-Grade Detective Clinton Sturgess said, "So long, fellows—see you tomorrow." He went down the hall, past the sergeant's desk, out of the precinct house and into the velvety softness of an August dusk. He went around the corner to the garage, got his old car out. He swung it up the ramp to the street, stopped long enough to light a cigarette, exhaled an enjoyable "Aahh!" and started homeward, whistling.

It was a swell night. It was a swell life. He was thirty-five, had a nice wife and a nice kid, he was a second-grader and he wasn't stopping there. He had it all lined up before him, step by step: first-grade, lieutenant, captain, inspector.

He was out on the lake shore drive now, with its lights curving around before him in a long vista and the lake gray-violet in the twilight.

He was whistling *My Blue Heaven*. It was old but it stayed with him, and the words in his mind fitted his contentment:

A turn to the right—
A little white light—

He made the turn (but it was to the left) and climbed the steep grade that led to their house. The development was called Lakeview Heights because it was strung along the top of this bluff. He parked at the curb instead of backing into the garage because he'd decided to take his family to the movies. He sounded the horn, and the porch light went on and they both came out in a flurry, his wife just to the lower step, the kid flying out all the way to swing from his neck as he stepped from the car and caught her.

The kid was pretty. Everybody said so. She'd been on loan to them from heaven for seven years now, and each time he could see

the place she'd come from just by looking at her.

"Get your things ready. We're going to the movies."

The flurry became a whirlwind. His wife said, "I've got supper waiting for you on the table. We're finished already. Barbara, come in and get your hat."

He turned the car around to face downhill, to save time leaving, and braked once more. The kid came racing out past him a second time as he got up to the porch. "I'll wait for you in the car!" she cried gaily.

"All right—but don't monkey with the horn now."

He wasn't even sitting down yet, he was crouched above a chair in the act of pulling it forward under him, and his wife was passing him a plate across the table. He was in a straight line with the porch door. He happened to turn his head that way, and there was something wrong. There was a blankness out there where there shouldn't have been. He could see the opposite side of the street.

His chair cracked over and he was running through the living room to the porch. Behind him a plate shattered on the floor and the SOS of his wife's heels came tapping after him.

He could still hear the whisper of the car's going, receding on the hushed night air. No engine. So then he knew what had happened, and the knowledge nearly felled him, like a crowbar across the top of his head, even before he got out to the porch and could see.

Street lamps made it bright all the way down, all the way to where—the lake was. The car was going straight as an arrow. It didn't swerve at all. Its momentum held it gripped too tightly. A little arm was thrust briefly out at the side, then withdrawn again.

There wasn't a sound behind him. Somehow he knew, without looking, that his wife had fallen senseless there on the walk. But he was already yards down that fearful incline. He ran down that hill like nothing that had ever run down it before.

It was all over so quickly, so soundlessly. He had been gaining on the car, but the foot of the street came too quickly. Horror such as a man sees only once in a lifetime was fleetingly there before his eyes, then gone again. But never quite gone again until the day he'd die. For the car reached Lakeshore Drive, swept across its triple-lane width, unerringly hurtled the pitifully low pedestrian parapet—it was such a new development, and it would have hidden the beauties of the lake to have built it any higher—cleared the barrier almost by the unaided resiliency of its own tires and springs, with a flaring of dust and a crumbling along the top, and was gone from sight.

It was as instantaneous as the

exposure of a snapshot. Two of the limestone blocks along the upper tier, a car's width apart, had been knocked out by the wheels, giving a battlement effect. But the spray that had risen on the other side never seemed to finish falling back into place.

There was a screaming of brakes off to one side of him as he darted across the roadway, and some kind of a pitching, swerving beam of light flicked at him.

A horrid heaving was there below him as he mounted one of the loosened blocks. The high-posted driveway lights behind him played up a single blister-like bubble formed there in the water, a bubble that refused to burst, that kept renewing itself from below. He didn't bother about his coat. He aimed himself face forward into those roiling eddies, and as he went down the thought that he couldn't swim was with him, but that didn't matter.

He went in wrong, with a spanking blow across the chest and stomach. He went down a little way, arms groping before him—toward nothing. Then he was being pushed up again, and he didn't know how to make himself go down any farther. He didn't know how not to breathe either, and long before he could get up again he was nothing but a mass of convulsive muscular spasms, drawing in destruction at every inhalation. He broke the surface briefly, but he didn't know how to take advantage of it. He was already dying himself now, as he went under again.

Something swift and safe and sure got him at some point after that. He never knew when, and it drew him backward through water and up into air; air that now hurt as much as water, but didn't kill. Then he was lying there heaving like a bellows, on a tiny lip of soil that protruded at the base of the parapet, and there was a man standing over him, dripping but not spent, looking down at him with a sort of scorn that had no solicitude or consideration to it. The man said, "What the hell did you go in for, if you can't swim?"

Sturgess turned over on his face, supporting himself on his hands, and between spasms of coughing managed to strangle out: "My kid! In a car down there—!"

The man was suddenly gone again. And in a little while, in only the space between two paroxysms of coughing it seemed, she was there again before his eyes, cradled in the man's arms, her face blue and still in the darkness. From where he lay Sturgess just mutely looked his gratitude, as the stranger climbed up over the parapet still holding her, toward the waiting arms of quickly gathered spectators reaching down to help.

When the inhalator squad had

finished, and Sturgess had held her tight to him a minute, with her open-eyed, breathing, he looked around and asked: "Where is he? Where'd he go?"

He saw a car start to glide furtively off in the background. He shouted, "Wait!" and ran directly across the path of its headlights. The car stopped with a poor sort of grace, and the man at the wheel hitched his head in surly inquiry as Sturgess came up alongside. One hand, on the wheel rim, was bandaged.

Sturgess poised his own two hands downward across the edge of the door, and gratitude was somehow expressed even in the gesture itself. But the man inside grated impatiently, "Well, whaddye want?"

It was hard to put into words, especially when it wasn't welcome. All Sturgess could say was, "You don't know what this means—"

The man said with a jeer, a jeer for himself, "I don't know how I come to do it. I never done a thing like that before."

"But isn't there anything I can do? Won't you at least let me have your name?"

The answer was almost venomous. "What d'you care what my name is? I don't go around giving people my name!"

Sturgess would have taken a kick in the teeth from him. His balked gratitude had to find some means of expression, so he gave the man his own name instead.

The stranger just looked at him stolidly. Sturgess couldn't tell if he was bored or contemptuous. His eyes flicked to Sturgess' fingers, which were folded across the rim of the car door. The meaning was plain: Take your hands off; get away from me.

The car inched away, and Sturgess dropped his hands.

"If there's ever anything I can do—" he called out helplessly.

His benefactor stayed in character to the end. A cynical "That's what they all say!" came floating back above the dwindling tail light.

The reports on the Torrington murder were coming in faster and more promising by the hour. There had been a lull of half a week first, that preliminary lull that the outside world always mistakes for inactivity, even defeat. But they hadn't been idle. They'd been working behind the scenes, in the laboratory, in the Bertillon files, on the weapon-testing range, in the world of the exact sciences. They had built up their man from nothing, with the aid of nap from his suit, body oil from his fingertips, a hundred and one other microscopic things. At the end of half a week they had him, although they had never seen him. They had his height, his weight, his habits, almost the way he walked, and what his blood count

was. Now came the time to get him, to pull him out of thin air, the way a magician makes a rabbit appear out of a hat—to match him in the flesh to his preconceived identity.

The murderer had had plenty of time to leave the city during those three and a half days. He had left. They'd expected him to, they'd counted on his doing just that. They cast their net in a great wide loop first, overreaching the farthest possible limits of his flight; for in his own mind he was still safely anonymous. They began to draw the net in by telegraph, by radio, by all the means they had. Too late by a matter of hours he tried to break through. He was recognized, the alarm sent out, the highways blocked off. He turned and fled back again; the chase went into reverse. He plunged back into the sanctuary of the city. The net was drawn in slowly but surely.

Yesterday his car had been found, abandoned just inside the city limits, and by that they got his name. It was Murray Forman —there were infinite variations to it, but none of them was of paramount importance. He was guilty of cold-blooded murder, and that was.

Tighter and tighter the noose was pulled. From citywide it narrowed to a single neighborhood, from an entire neighborhood down to a single street. And presently they would have the very house, and then the exact room inside that house and then they'd have him. It was a matter of hours only, fractions of hours. They were old in guile, and remorseless, and their combined intelligences never slept. But single they were only human beings.

First-Grader Sturgess, of the Homicide Squad, was relieved temporarily at two that morning, almost at the zero hour, and sent home subject to immediate recall. He had slept only in snatches for a week past, his reflexes were no longer dependable, and much as he rebelled against it, he recognized the advisability of the respite.

He put his key to the door and let himself into the empty house. The wife and kid were away in the country with relatives for two weeks, and the summer mustiness of rooms that have been shut up tight all day clung to the air. He put on the lights and saw halos around them, from his fatigue.

The image of his girl leaped out at him from the green-gold easel on the radio, and already he was less weary. Just the sight of her likeness was restful. She was still on loan; and now, at twelve, more than a hint of the way she was going to be was apparent. And she was going to be the tops.

He said, "Hello, honey," to her. He said it every time he got back, just as though she were here.

"Your old man's all in," he mourned to her under his breath. He opened the windows first of all, to freshen up the place a little. Then he took off the things that bothered him most, in order —his tie and then his shoes and then his coat.

He puttered around in his socks a minute or two. He thought, "Where did she keep the cans of salmon, now?" He thought, "I'm too tired to bother." He went in and stood over the bed, sketchily straightened since the last time he'd been in it. He looked at it questioningly. It was too much trouble to pull down that spread. It would take too long—he couldn't wait another minute. He turned slightly, let himself fall back on the bed in a straight line from shoulders to heels, so that his feet kicked up slightly with the fall. The bed sang out threateningly under the impact but held, and before the springs had stopped jarring he was already out of the world.

The tapping alone would never have roused him. It was too low, too furtive. It was the sharper note of the bell that brought him up through layers of oblivion into the shallows of awareness.

The ring came again, cut short as though no more than a peck had been given the button. The tapping was blurred, like hail or gravel striking on wood. He got up, wavered through the two rooms toward the front door, said sharply, "Who's there?"

The tapping broke off short.

He opened the door and a man was standing there in the dim light. The man acknowledged the opening with a peculiar, warning gesture, a diagonal cut of his hand that held a plea for caution in it.

He seemed to take his right of admission for granted. His hat was low, and Sturgess didn't know him, didn't know why he should. The visitor inserted himself obliquely between Sturgess and the door frame, and then as Sturgess gave ground before him, the man closed the door and sealed it with his own body, pressing himself against the knob.

His pushed his hat higher, but inadvertently, by backing a hand to his forehead as though in unutterable relief. "I thought you'd never open the door," he said. "I saw you come in before."

Sturgess said on a rising inflection that held no anger, yet led the way toward it, "Who are you?"

The man leaning dejectedly against the door—he was starting to sag a little now as if some long-sustained tension had relaxed—sneered: "You don't know me?"

There was memory in that sneer alone, in that characteristic tone that never gave the benefit of the doubt. "You better know

me," he said. And then he jeered, "Or don't you want to?"

His eyes found the picture, rested on it, guessed, came back again with a mocking gleam. But he didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Sturgess knew by now.

He'd never been good at saying things. He said, "You're the fellow, you're the man—the lake, that time." His face lit up with long-stored gratitude, but then the light died again as the man brushed by him. The man found his own way across the room, pitched into a chair.

There was blood on one side of his face, or rather vestiges of it, a thin dark patina.

Sturgess was awake now. He was frightened too, by some kind of foreknowledge. He ran his tongue across his lower lip, said, "What'd you do, hurt yourself?"

The man lowered his head abruptly, glared challengingly. "No, I didn't hurt myself. A bullet grazed me getting over here. From one of your crowd."

Sturgess flinched. "Don't tell me anything you're liable to be sorry—" he said quickly.

"No you don't! I've got something coming to me. What're you trying to do—leave an out for yourself, welsh out of it? So that when they come ganging around here in a minute or two—See no evil, hear no evil, eh? Well, you're looking at Murray Forman, and what are you going to do about it?"

Sturgess ran a hand through the bird's-nest tangle of his hair. "My God!" he groaned. "Don't you know who I am?"

"D'you suppose I'd be here if I didn't? You're my trump card, the last one I hold. Somebody else told me who you were that night. I came across your picture in the paper once after that, when you were promoted for running down those cop-killers. It gave your address." He laughed mirthlessly. "It pays to change addresses more often, when you've got debts outstanding."

He looked rested now, fit, compared to Sturgess. His color was high alongside Sturgess' agonized pallor.

Sturgess flung the door open, folded it back flat against the wall as if he couldn't get it wide enough. "Get out!" he said in a choked voice. "Get out of here! That's the most I can—"

Forman kept looking at the picture, as though he hadn't heard. He said softly, "Is her hair gold-brown like it looks on there? Is that how she smiles all the time, with a little dent in the middle of her cheek?"

"Get out, you dirty killer!"

"I know how they do; sometimes they slip their arm around your neck from behind your chair, and hug you tight. Sometimes they get down on the floor at your feet and lean their head

against your knee, and look up and over at you, backwards. She wouldn't do all that, Sturgess, if it wasn't for me. What's her name, Sturgess?"

"Barbara," said Sturgess limply, and closed the door again very slowly, as though it weighed a ton.

They didn't say anything for a long time—either of them. It seemed like a long time anyway. Forman stayed in the chair, which was the most comfortable one in the room. Sturgess stood against the door.

Forman spoke finally, as matter-of-factly as though they had known each other all their lives. "Gimme a cigarette. Got one on you?"

Sturgess felt absently for his coat pocket without looking up. He didn't have any. Forman must have got up and helped himself from the humidor. The next thing Sturgess noticed he was back in the chair smoking.

Sturgess said finally, as though the trivial request had managed to restore his own power of expression, "I'm a police officer, Forman. There isn't anything I can do."

The man in the chair snapped ashes from his cigarette. "You don't have to do a thing. Just let me stay here till the heat cools a little, then you'll turn your back and I'll be gone, the way I came. That's all, and then we're square —quits."

"You struck down and murdered a man in cold blood—"

"That doesn't cancel *your* obligation. I'd already croaked someone long before that night you first came across me. That didn't keep you from accepting your kid's life from my hands, did it? She breathes just as good, her lungs are just as empty of water, her eyes are just as wide open, as if a right guy saved her, aren't they? I didn't argue the right and wrong of it before I went in, did I? You owe me a life—"

("Two lives," Sturgess admitted to himself. It was clever of him, good psychology, not to mention having saved Sturgess himself, to emphasize only the one that really mattered.)

"—and I want a life back from you. My own."

Sturgess said fiercely, "D'you want a drink? I do!" Three times he started out in the wrong direction, before he could remember where the liquor was kept.

Forman was thoroughly at ease now, sure of himself.

He said, holding his little whiskey glass up to the light and studying it idly, "Don't take it so hard." He went on with detached curiosity, as though confronting for the first time some rare trait he'd often heard of but never encountered until now: "You're dead on the level, aren't you? So

straight it hurts." He made a grimace. "Gee, it must be hell to be like that! I had you figured that way even that night. The way you jumped in without knowing how to swim. I'm good that way at sizing people up. I've had to be. That's why I came here. D'you think I'd have taken a chance like this on one of those other guys you string along with?"

Sturgess had sat down now, staring sightlessly at the problem as though it were spread out on the carpet before him.

"It's simple enough," Forman remarked. Meaning nothing to lose your temper about, nothing to go up in the air about.

"Shut up," Sturgess growled. "The less you say the better." He looked over at the open bedroom door. "When'd you sleep last? You can go in there and lie down if you want to. Get out of here!" Then as Forman rose to his feet, crooked his arms behind his head and yawned—he was that composed—Sturgess added: "Wait a minute. Have you got a gun on you?"

"Sure. Want it?" He brought it out and indifferently pitched it across at Sturgess butt-first. "You didn't have to worry about that," he assured him. "You're my trump card. I have everything to lose and nothing to gain by—" The rest of it was lost as he went, calmly and leisurely, into the bedroom.

Sturgess heard his shoes drop, one after the other, and the bed creaked a little as it had under him, earlier. He balled his hands into fists and put them up alongside his temples as though he were going to bash his own head in. After a while, as if to give his hands something to do, he picked the gun up from the side of the chair and started to empty it. Long before he'd finished, the harsh breathing of a man in deep sleep was coming from the bedroom ....

The knocking came within ten minutes. He stopped dead in the middle of the oval he had been coursing endlessly around the room, one heel raised clear of the floor and held that way. It came again, and the bell chirped, and a voice said, "Sturge! Are you in here?" He recognized it as Hyland's. Hyland was one of his team-mates.

He went over and closed the bedroom door first. Then he came back to the front door, put out his hand to it, breathed deeply and threw it wide open.

Hyland was out there and another man named Ranch, and two uniformed cops. The last two had their guns out. But they'd already started away by the time he got the door open, as though summoning him had been only in-

cidental.

Sturgess said, "What's up?"

Hyland said, "Forman broke through again! At the last minute, just as we were ready to close in! We've picked up a cab driver that brought him as far as the corner below here—he's holed up around here some place! I'm going to case the back."

"You won't find him there," Sturgess said.

He didn't offer to join them. All he said was, "I'm off duty."

Hyland gave him a look, but he turned and went loping off. His voice came drifting back with a cutting edge to it. "Sleep tight—sorry we bothered you."

Sturgess closed the door and stood by it a minute, head down. Down as low as if he were looking at his shoes, but he wasn't.

Behind him Forman's voice said slurringly, through the narrow opening of the bedroom door, "So you went to bat for me."

Sturgess answered viciously through clenched teeth: "I don't have to turn you in behind your back while you're asleep! That isn't my way! I'm not afraid of you!"

"No," was the grudging admission, "it's your own conscience you're afraid of.

"You let me do the worrying about that. And stay in there." Sturgess took a threatening step forward. "Stay out of my sight, or I'll settle the problem with my own two hands!"

The door eased mockingly closed again.

Sturgess was standing in his wife's kitchen, awkwardly jockeying something hot with the help of an enveloping dishcloth, when Forman came out the second time. It was still dark, the gunmetal pall preceding dawn.

Forman lounged there in the alcove a minute, watching him. "What's this, the prisoner's last breakfast? Why so early?"

Sturgess just motioned to a chair drawn up at the formica-topped table. The guest sat down. Sturgess brought over an aluminum percolator, snatched his hand away, blew on his thumb. He sat down opposite the killer.

Forman studied him, detached. "You look like you been pulled through a knothole. I bet you pounded the carpet in there the whole time I was asleep."

To that Sturgess said, "It took me three tries before I got this right." The sink, lined with black coffee grounds, looked like some kind of flower bed. He pointed to a loaf of white bread. "You can cut some of that, if you want any."

They sat there, after that, facing each other across the table with a peculiar sort of normality, an every-dayness; like two men at a kitchen table while their women

were away. Forman, wolfing great chunks of spongy white bread, looked around appraisingly. "How much you pay for this place?"

There may have been a method in his assumption of unshaken confidence, his taking of immunity for granted; or there may not. He may have been as artless as he sounded, or he may have been as wary as a man cornered in a cage with a lion, who knows that to show fear is fatal. Sturgess was past knowing or caring. "Eighty-five," he said.

Forman mused, while he picked his teeth, "I never stayed in one place long enough to pay by the month."

"It might have been better if you had."

They sat a while longer in silence. Then little by little the tension grew—tension that was coming from Sturgess. His hands went down to the edge of his chair seat, gripping it on each side, like a man reluctantly about to stand up. Forman started smoking a little faster, shortening the intervals between puffs. Finally he said, "What're you getting all white like that for? You're getting white as a ghost. You ought to see yourself!"

Sturgess said, "We're going over there. If you feel like starting anything, now's the time."

"Still looking for a way out, huh? No you don't! You don't get off that easy!"

Sturgess got up and left the kitchen without a word. When he came back he had his coat on and was holding an open manacle in his hand. He said thickly, "Come on—let's get started. Shove out your hand."

Forman slowly extended a hand flat across the table top; he started drawing back his sleeve until he had bared his forearm nearly to the elbow. On its upper reaches were transverse white scars, from breaking the glass in the submerged car window that night. He just sat and looked up at Sturgess, holding it exposed that way.

Sturgess' lips got white, he blinked, and the manacle clicked shut on the other's wrist. Forman got up and followed Sturgess out of the kitchen. "You can't go through with it," he said quietly. "It's written all over you; you can't."

The window was open a little from the bottom, just below the shade. Sturgess threw out the handcuff key with a flick of his free hand.

Forman said, "You don't trust yourself, do you? It's going to be a devil of a job now to—"

The picture was lying face down on the radio as they went past. "Is that the way you had to do it?" Forman said. Sturgess turned down the wall switch and the picture vanished. There wasn't enough light outside to penetrate

the room. "You'll have to see her again," Forman pointed out. "You'll have to see her every day of your life. You can't keep her face turned away from you. What'll you do then?"

Sturgess opened the front door, swept his arm around in an arc, and towed Forman through after him. "I'm not going to beg or whine," Forman said. "I'm going to make it tough for you. It'd be a lot easier for you if I went yellow, wouldn't it?"

Sturgess closed the door and they went out side by side. It was steel blue overhead now, but still a little murky down at street level.

"You'll get a citation for this," Forman taunted. "You'll get promoted. You'll be the envy of every man in the department. And without having to lift a finger either. A man comes to you, that gave you the one thing you've got that you give a damn about, the one thing that holds you together, that makes you tick, he comes *trusting* you— You're the lowest thing on the face of God's earth, Sturgess. Even an alley cur has gratitude."

"Shut up!" Sturgess roared.

They went on slowly, almost waveringly, but Sturgess was breathless with effort, as though he'd been running. The green lamps of a precinct house blinked at them as they rounded a corner, and Forman recoiled involuntarily. Sturgess could feel the hitch through the manacle.

Forman said, "They're going to kill me if you take me in there. You know that, don't you? You know that once we go up these steps no power of yours, nothing you can do, will get me out alive again, don't you? I gave you your kid's life, Sturgess. For the last time—*I want my own from you!*"

Sturgess' face was glossy with sweat, and gray in the early dawn. He brought his forearm up level to his chest and nudged Forman into motion.

"Copper!" the man beside him breathed with contempt as they trudged up the steps.

Sturgess just stood there rigid, watching the clock, that last night. They tried to tell him, "Sit down, Sturge, don't take it like that," but he didn't seem to hear them.

When the phone call from upstate came through, you couldn't see him breathe at all while the lieutenant was talking. The lieutenant hung up and was quiet.

Sturgess asked, "Was that it?"

"Yeah, that was it."

"Did he leave any word, say anything about—forgiving anybody?"

"He left a message for you," the lieutenant said, unwillingly, looking down at his desk.

Sturgess came closer still. "Tell me what is it! I've got to know!"

"He said, 'Tell Sturgess I'll be

seeing him again. *He* knows where to find me. In her eyes. Tell him I'll always be waiting there.' "

Sturgess put his hand to where he carried his badge, as if something hurt him there, and turned around and walked out of the room without another word.

Barbara said, half-laughingly, when he squatted down before her, his face so strained and white, and peered so closely, "What're you looking at me like that for?"

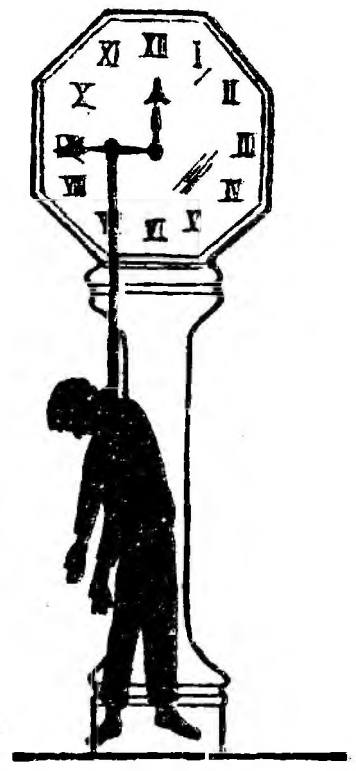
"Hold still," he said huskily, "and look at me." There was sweat all over his forehead.

Then when he had drawn a great deep breath and straightened up again she asked playfully, "Did you think you'd see something in my eyes?"

His answer to that was, "Yes. The ghost of the man who saved your life—" but he didn't tell her that.

"Well *did* you?" she insisted.

"Yes," he admitted sadly, "I guess I always will—a little." He took out his badge and started polishing it. "But the other way," he added mysteriously, "I wouldn't have been able to look into them at all." ■ ■



The salesman had a most unusual product to offer—and, for obvious reasons, only one to a customer . . .

A MATTER OF LIFE

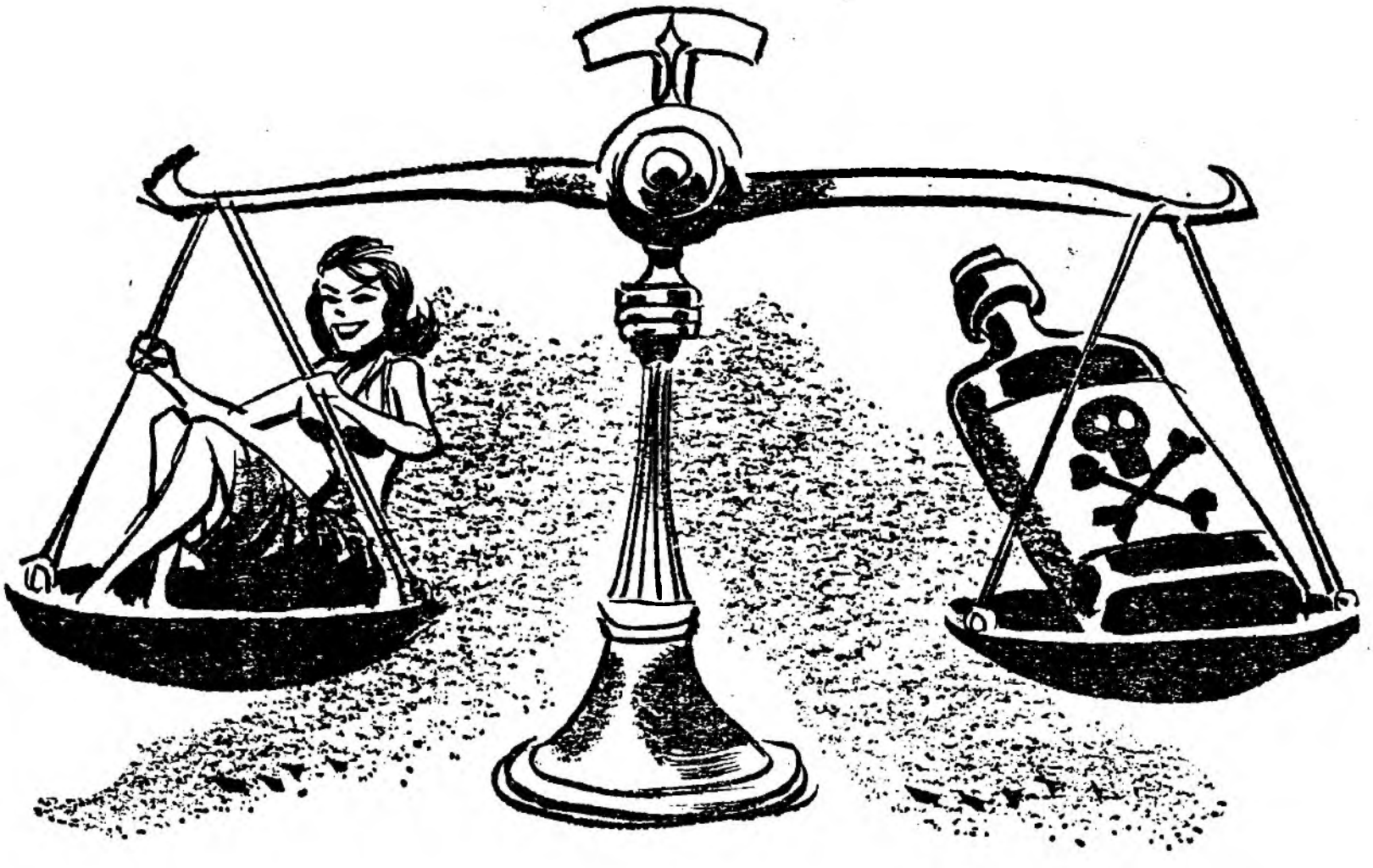
by ROBERT BLOCH

IT WAS A BRIGHT AND SUNNY morning, but the thin man hugged the inside of the walk, staying within the shadows as he made his way carefully along the street.

He paused beneath the ornate awning of a Gold Coast apartment and put his small black bag on the sidewalk, setting it down gingerly as though its contents might be fragile. He drew a little leatherbound notebook from his pocket and opened it to the first page, peering carefully at what he saw there. Satisfied, he flipped it shut, replaced it in his pocket, picked up the black bag, and entered the fancy foyer of the apartment building. His long, bony finger pressed a buzzer beside a marker lettered *Anderson, Julius T.*

Exactly seventy-two seconds later he was standing before a door on the third floor, watching it ease open.

A woman thrust her head out. It was a most expensive sort of head; quickly he inventoried its assets—the thirty-five dollar permanent, the twenty-dollar dye job, the five-dollar tip to the beauty-parlor operator. In addition, he estimated the worth of the dangling miniature mobile earrings at perhaps another twenty-five dollars, plus ten percent



tax. The face itself was decorated with easily five dollars' worth of assorted eyebrow pencil, eye-shadow, mascara, rouge, powder, lipstick, and dabs of perfume. Also, the sagging double chin had been lifted for a considerable fee; contact lenses were fitted to the myopic eyes and caps placed over the irregular teeth. The whole head, give or take a few pennies, must have cost at least two thousand dollars just for upkeep and maintenance.

And yet now, seeing it cocked forward apprehensively with a deep frown furrowing the brow, one could only conclude that the money had been wasted; it was still the head of a middle-aged woman.

"Mrs. Anderson?" the man murmured.

"Yes." She glanced down at the little black bag, then straightened. "Come in, please."

The door opened wider, permitting him to step inside, then closed quickly behind him. He stood in a spacious, deeply-carpeted alcove, gazing through to the living-room of the apartment. There was no need to inventory its contents or even guess at the fee of the interior decorator who had obviously ordered its furnishing.

Also, there was no time. The

woman faced him, the maroon sateen sleeves of her lounging pajamas rustling faintly as she moved a step forward.

"I really wasn't expecting you, Mr. —"

"Mr. Swift."

"Yes." She acknowledged the name with an impatient nod and hurried on. "That stupid Mr. Ross of yours, down at the office, kept telling me it was no use to even discuss the possibilities of a case, because I had no grounds. Of course, that's utterly ridiculous, and I told him so. Even if Julius *is* good about money and doesn't chase after other women, surely there must be *some*thing! I mean, no man his age is a saint, and I'm perfectly willing to pay a good fee, within reason of course, if you'll arrange to—"

"Please, Mrs. Anderson," said the man. "There seems to be a slight misunderstanding here. I'm not from your attorney's office."

"You're not?" The surgically-lifted chin muscles sagged slightly. "Then if it isn't about the divorce, what are you doing here? I mean, when I saw the briefcase, I just naturally assumed—"

"Sorry." The man shrugged. "It's not even a briefcase. It's just a bag. I've something interesting to show you."

"You mean you're a *sales*man? What's the matter with you, can't you *read*? The sign in the lobby says distinctly—"

"I saw the sign."

"Then what are you doing here? I don't want to buy anything." Mrs. Anderson waved her arm. "Please leave. I'm not in the mood for sales-talks."

"So I see." The man retreated a step, but only to set his bag down upon the rich pile of the foyer carpet. "From your remarks, one would gather that you're faced with personal problems. And it occurs to me that perhaps my visit is more opportune than you might think. A little distraction, even a sales-talk, may prove helpful." Slowly, he dropped to his knees and cautiously unzipped the black bag.

Mrs. Anderson stared at him curiously. "What are you selling?" she asked.

"This." A bony hand fumbled in the bag and brought forth a small plastic bottle.

"What is it, perfume?"

"Not at all, dear lady. It's a window-wiper."

"Window-cleaner?"

"Wiper." The man stood up, dangling the bottle between long, thin fingers. "Not an ordinary cleaning compound at all. It wipes away much more than dirt —it literally removes every obstruction, and will give you an entirely new view of the world. Oh, there's a definite psychological element involved, I assure you! Once you use this cleansing compound, your whole viewpoint

changes. I would be only too happy to demonstrate—"

"No!" Mrs. Anderson spoke quickly and emphatically. "I don't *need* anything like that. My maid takes care of the windows. Besides, who ever heard of such nonsense? Why, there isn't even any label on your bottle, it's probably just something you make up yourself, out of water and a few chemicals."

The man nodded slowly. "You're right, of course," he said. "I do make it myself. And of course I use chemicals. Funny your mentioning that. Some of the chemicals are quite unusual. Odorless, colorless, undetectable. Strong enough so that a drop applied to a window will wipe away any stain without leaving a trace of its presence. Strong enough so that a drop placed in a cup of coffee will wipe away life itself—again, without leaving a single trace of its presence. One must therefore be most careful about using this solution. You would be careful, wouldn't you?"

Mrs. Anderson nodded at him now—at him, but to herself. "It really works, you say?"

"I assure you that used properly it will brighten your entire outlook on life."

"How much?"

The man shrugged. "Let's call this a free sample." He held out the bottle.

Mrs. Anderson reached for it, then drew back. "But suppose it—it doesn't work?"

"It will. There's never any difficulty. Take it."

"Maybe I should think it over."

"Dear lady, I'm afraid this is your only opportunity. I won't be coming this way again for some time."

Mrs. Anderson's fingers worked. "You wouldn't be back, then? I mean, in case of trouble—"

"No. I make only one call to a customer."

Mrs. Anderson closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as she reached out her hand. The man placed the bottle in her palm, scooped up his bag, opened the door and made his exit—all in the few seconds that her eyes were closed. When she opened them again, he was gone.

And an hour later he was ringing the doorbell of the neat suburban ranch-house out in Skokie, staring out of the shadows at the harassed face of the young housewife who greeted him with an impatient gesture. The hand which waved him inside held a dustcloth. She blinked at him through thick glasses.

"Honestly," she sighed, "I thought you'd never get here! What with the kids and the housework and all and having to run back and forth between here and the hospital every day, I'm just about out of my mind."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Baker," he said. "I came as quickly as I heard."

He glanced around the disorder of the front room, staring at the litter of toys, the playpen in the corner, the soggy diapers tossed into one corner.

The young woman brushed her hand across the damp curls plastered across her forehead and removed her spectacles with a weary shrug.

"You see how it is," she said. "The place is such a mess I don't even know where to tell you to sit down."

"That's all right, Mrs. Baker. I'll just be a minute."

"A minute? With all we've got to discuss?" She put the glasses back on. "I told the man at the agency what a spot we're in, and he said there just wouldn't be any way of working something out. Can you imagine that? Ben in the hospital with a broken spine, paralyzed for life, and me stuck here with the three kids and he tells me that! Not a penny of accident insurance, either. If he died, I'd collect fifty thousand dollars of life insurance from your firm, but when it comes to an accident like this, they say there isn't one red cent I can collect. And he'll never be up and working at sales again, the hospital is eating up our last penny, they can't even promise to stop the pain, and what am I going to do?"

"I really don't know, Mrs. Baker," the man said. "You see, I'm not from the insurance agency."

"Then where did you get my name?"

"There are sources for such information."

"Oh." She blinked at him through her spectacles. "But who are you? What do you want?"

"My name is Mr. Quick. I've come to give you a free sample, something to help you." He put down his bag delicately in the center of the cheap inlaid carpeting. "I have here a preparation which works wonders on windowglass—or on spectacles, too, for that matter. One drop, properly applied, and you'll really be looking at the world through rose-colored glasses—"

Two hours later the man was back across town, walking through a tangle of tenements on South Halstead. He hadn't stopped for lunch.

He paused in a dim areaway and consulted his notebook, then nodded to himself and plunged into a dank and darkened doorway. Four flights of stairs creaked beneath his feet before he reached the landing he sought and knocked briskly on a door from which all paint had peeled.

"Mrs. Connors?" he called.

"Go away!" The voice from behind the door was muffled, sullenly monotonous.

The man knocked again.

"Go away!" the sullen voice repeated. "The Mister ain't here."

"I came to see you. Open up, please."

"You from the police? I tell ya, he ain't here." But she opened the door and shook her frowsy head, squinting at him through red-rimmed eyes framed by larger bluish-black circles. "C o u p l a beauties, ain't they?" she muttered. "The dirty rat give 'em to me. That's all I ever get from him. You can't prove by me that he pulls any of them big bank jobs you cops always think he's pulling . . . I wish you guys *could* pin a real rap on him, something that'll send him up for twenty years, maybe? Hell, I'd like to see him get life, that's what he deserves. And that's the only way I'll ever get rid of him."

He edged through the door and into the squalid room. "Perhaps I'd better explain, Mrs. Connors. I'm not from the police department."

"No? Then who the hell—"

"The name is Fast. And I've got something here that might interest you." He glanced at the six-pack and the big dime-store goblet on the kitchen table, then put his black bag down beside them with fastidious care. "You see, it's a little something that cleans beer-glasses. And that's not all. If there's *anything* you want to get rid of—"

Early afternoon along LaSalle Street, and the shadows slanted sharply as the man entered the brokerage office. He took off his hat politely before he bent over to give his message to the receptionist. Her own smile faded as she heard what he had to say; then she rose and disappeared into another room. In a few moments she was back, beckoning for him to enter the private, panelled sanctum beyond the big mahogany door.

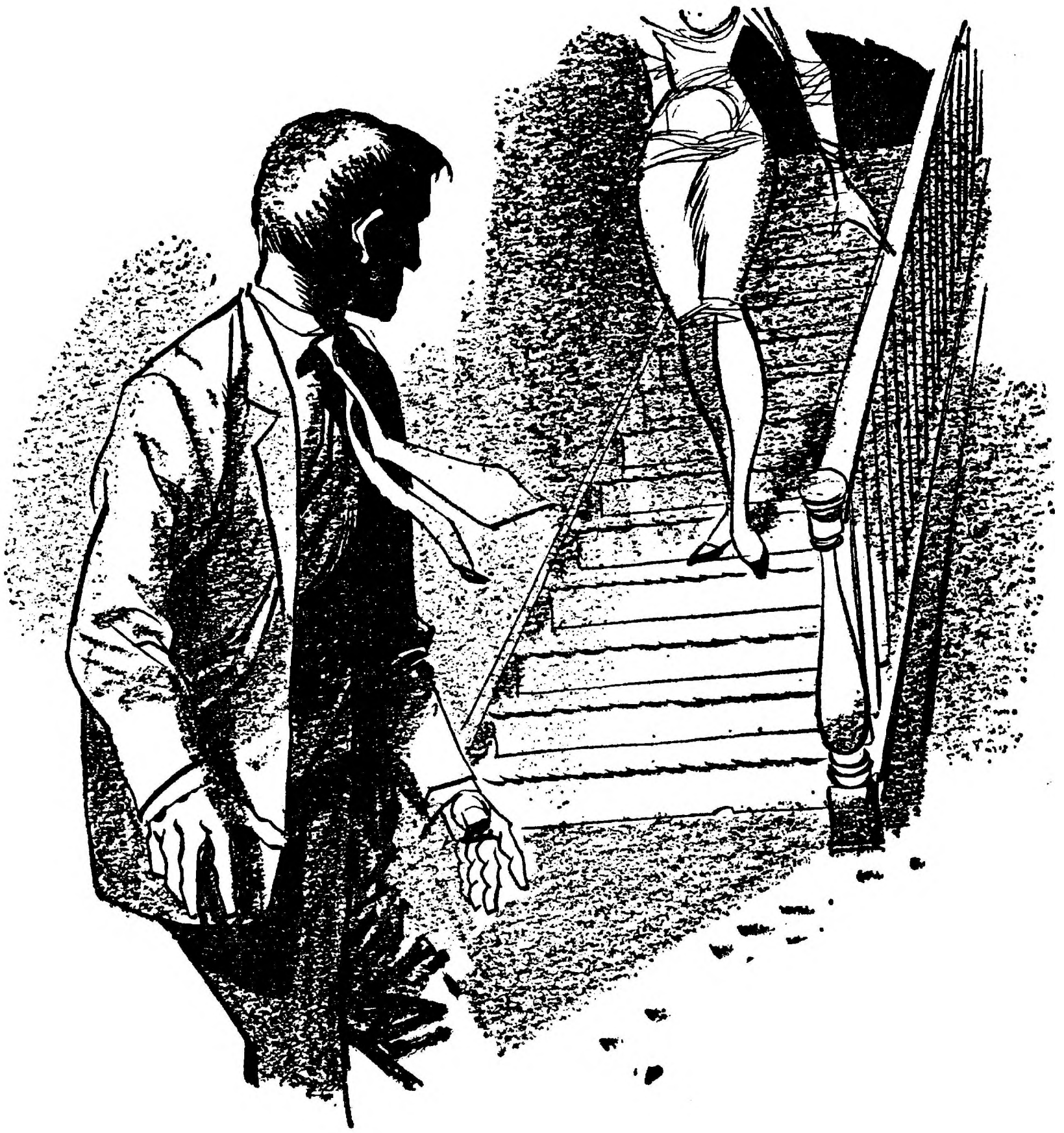
A fat, baldheaded man looked up from behind a kidney-shaped desk.

"Yes?" he snapped. "Now what's all this nonsense my girl tells me? Something about a matter of life and death—"

"Exactly." The man smiled and began to open his little black bag. "A matter of life and death. I have here a preparation for which you will pay me ten thousand dollars in cash. It is something which I assure you is absolutely essential to your welfare."

"Look here, I'm a busy man—"

"I know that, and I won't take much of your time. I'm sure only a few words of explanation will be necessary. As it so happens, I still have two other similar calls to make after I leave you this afternoon. Now, about this little preparation of mine. It's the *only* antidote to an undetectable poison, Mr. Anderson . . ." ■ ■



Some people are more likely than others to become involved in accidents. Medical science calls them accident-prone. *Now John Collier—one of the world's great mystery writers—comes up with an interesting new thesis: that some people are more likely to be murdered than others: in a word, they're* murder-prone . . .

BORN FOR MURDER

by JOHN COLLIER

ALEC WEAVER'S FEATURES WERE not unpleasing and his expression was that of one who is anxious to please. In some people this may be a fortunate combination; in others it makes for a certain redundancy.

"I should like," said Alec, "to write a story about a murderee."

His friend was Jay Wisden, who had a face like his first name, a face with a pipe in it. He now removed this accessory and his mouth opened in surprise. At once he looked as blank and naked as the short-sighted do when they strip off their glasses. "Alec," said he, "are you telling me you want to be a writer?"

"I said nothing of the sort. I said I want to write this particular story. I want to get it out of me. I want to put it down. I want it to be there."

"But already you're walking up and down. You're talking like Gertrude Stein or somebody. *You want it to be there!* And I'd have sworn you had a one-track mind, and thought of nothing but the office and shipping." Here Jay reinstated his pipe, and recovered his look of sagacity. "Or at most a two-track mind, because of course you have your peculiar friends."

In Marseille one sometimes sees a raw yellow funnel towering up unexpectedly among the backstreet buildings. All the big shipping lines have offices there. One's heart is continually troubled by

the harsh songs the sirens sing. And the streets in some quarters seem positively to be cobbled with the hard faces of a people who may be peculiar but who are not easy to imagine as friends.

"I suppose you mean people like the Camattes," Alec replied. "To me Louis Camatte is a very ordinary businessman—black-market and bodyguards instead of stock market and lawyers, but that doesn't make him any different. All he really wants is that horrible wedding cake of a villa with its ridiculous little garden. He wants good schools and nice friends for his children. He wants to cover Marie with jewels and fur coats and things."

"Well, she probably helped a great deal in getting him started."

These words hung in the air as if they had nowhere to go. Unwilling to take them in, Alec turned and looked out of the window. In this large, bad, modernistic apartment house, the living room windows were set at an angle across the corner. There was a useless little balcony of coloured concrete, and beyond it one saw all the way down the Canabiere, down to where the water of the port was still as blue as a flag though it was already six o'clock in the evening.

Jay communed with his pipe, feeling he might have said the wrong thing. The right thing to say seemed sufficiently obvious.

"And what's going to happen in this story of yours about the murderee?"

"I don't know what happens. That's why I can't write it. I feel I know everything about the character but I haven't the faintest idea of the plot."

"Well, it's the character that counts, they say."

"Yes, they all say that. Once before in my life I had the same sort of urge. I read just about all the books there are on how to write a short story. They all say character is more important than plot."

"All the same, something has to happen." As the smoke of opium is transmuted into dreams, the smoke of pipe tobacco changes very easily into good advice. "The guy gets himself bumped off, presumably. Otherwise he'd hardly be a murderee."

"But is there a murderee? Is there such a person? Does he exist in real life?"

"I think the answer to that one is, 'Yes, but not for long' ".

"Very good, Jay! Very funny! But is it a scientific term? Or is it just a word we use? Is it a word cooked up by the people who write books about famous murders? Have you ever seen it in a book by a psychologist? Or is there no such person at all as a murderee?"

Under this thick drizzle of questions Jay oozed smoke from

every orifice, for all the world like a railway engine on a siding; stationary, uncoupled, fulfilling no apparent function. "People get knocked off all the time," said he at last.

"Which proves there are murderers. It doesn't prove there are murderees."

"There are people who are accident-prone. That's more than proved; it's recognised by the insurance companies. They fall downstairs; they get their arms and legs broken; they get smashed up in their cars. They do it to punish themselves."

"Take that to its logical extreme," said Alec, "and you get suicide. You see the difference? The murderee wants someone else to do it to him."

"And no doubt he finds plenty willing to oblige!"

"He attracts the killer," continued Alec. "Perhaps he creates him. At the very least he seeks him and finds him among a million other people. He attracts him as the female does the male. Or rather, as the lamb attracts the wolf."

"*Not* rather as the lamb attracts the wolf. Because the lamb doesn't want to punish itself. It's the symbol of innocence. And it hasn't the slightest desire to be eaten. You were right when you said, as the female attracts the male."

"I don't believe there really is such a person as a murderee." Alec uttered these words in a harsh and fretful tone, turning away from his friend as he spoke.

Jay's pipe, portended like some sort of microphone in which all his finest perceptions were lodged, seemed to become clogged and choked by the contradiction. He was compelled to take out a special gadget, and unfold a spike from it, and pry out a quantity of sodden and unsmoked tobacco. This he eyed with some displeasure, regretting, perhaps, that it would never be transmuted into good advice. "Then you've got nothing to worry about," said he. "You said you have no plot, and now suddenly you say the character's all hooey. So there isn't a story and you haven't got to write it. Alec, thank you for the drink! It's always pleasant to stop in here on the way home from the office. I'd do it more often if you'd let me contribute a bottle now and then."

"Wait a minute," said Alec. "I should have said it *seems,* it *appears,* there's no such person. Jay, I'm no sort of a mystic, I don't believe in being psychic, but, as I told you, there was just one other time in my life when I had the same sort of urge to write a story. I was still in the New York office; I'd never been in France; I'd never even thought of transferring here. Very well, I began to

think day and night about a girl called Felice, and this girl was a slave."

"Southern?" asking Jay, who was busy refilling his pipe for the homeward journey.

"No. Nothing like that," said Alec "I mean a certain psychological type; a physical type, of course; certainly a sexual one. There are sexual slaves. And there are slaves who are like snakes. They're made to be trodden on. But tread on them, and you're done for! I don't know if I make myself clear?"

"Clear enough," said Jay, lighting up. Anything is clear enough to a man who is lighting up.

"The whole point is that this girl became very real. Her name was Felice. It wasn't as if I'd given her that name; she had it already. I felt that I'd seen her, I knew her. I couldn't change her. I couldn't make her do things. Maybe that's what they mean by creative imagination; they say that at a certain point the characters begin to have a life of their own."

"Pity she didn't do something interesting on her own," said Jay, puffing indulgently. "Then you'd have only had to write it down."

"She didn't. She just wouldn't fit in. Maybe that's doing something, in a negative way. I couldn't find any background, any way of living, any sort of set-up in life as I knew it where she could possibly function. I couldn't find anyone like her. Other slaves, maybe, but not this sort. So in the end it seemed as if she didn't exist. Then I came over here, Jay, and I saw at once I'd been right all the time."

"Plenty of girls called Felice in this part of the world," said Jay, a little bored.

"The name means nothing," said Alec impatiently. "It doesn't mean a thing. I saw the girl herself; the genuine article, the real slave. You see them in some of the old quarters here—you know the type—with a great roll of dirty black hair, and a black dress like nothing on earth, and a white face, a sick face, but a beautiful face, a sort of marble face. It makes you realise that this city was started by the Phoenicians and the Greeks, and they've been here, underneath, ever since."

"Well, you found the girl and you found the background. But I gather you didn't write the story."

"By that time I'd lost the urge. I'd been side-tracked. I told you I had a short spell of analysis before I came over here; all I can say is, it wasn't short enough. I paid that guy over fifteen hundred bucks, Jay, and I wasted a whole summer, and I no more needed analysis than I need a hole in the head."

"We all need analysis," said Jay. "Very few of us need a hole

in the head."

"I told him about this girl Felice," said Alec, unheeding. "He hooked her up with a dream or two, and one or two things I told him, and he sold me on the idea that Felice was just the memory of a nursemaid I'd had when I was five years old. Her name was Phyllis, you see."

"Well, there's a resemblance. It's plausible."

"Now wait a minute! Let me tell you what he cooked up. When I was five we went in the summer to Atlantic City. That's a fact."

"Well, that alone could account for a very bad trauma."

"This girl was supposed to take me on the beach in the afternoons. Instead, on certain afternoons, she took me to some sort of a lodging house; to a back room, a walk-up, up about three flights of stairs, and she left me hanging about on the landing while she was in there with a man, a marine. Very well, one afternoon, being bored to tears, I pushed the door open. Hence the slave, crushed down, brutalized—everything documented and accounted for!"

"Well, I must say, Alec, it seems to make a certain amount of sense."

"I thought so too. I swallowed it, hook, line and sinker. I got the picture so clear that I can still see it; I can see that landing right now. That smelly landing, the sun coming in through a dirty window, and the waiting, and the wondering, and then the inside of that room, and the belt and the cap, and Phyllis. But listen here, Jay! My father went broke and had his breakdown in the fall of thirty-two. From that day on, there was no money for any nursemaid, or any other sort of help either. In thirty-three we went to Atlantic City, as I said. We went there because it was cheap; my mother and I, and nobody else at all. So the whole thing was hatched up by that analyst, and sort of wished on to me, and it wasn't until after I'd said goodbye to him that I got out from under the influence and could put two and two together and see it all a myth. That's analysis!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Jay.

"Anyway all this is only to prove that if you feel a character strongly enough you can be sure that character exists, even if you can't find him in your immediate surroundings."

"Which happens to be the exact opposite of what you said before," said Jay. "So, one way or the other, I guess you must be right. There's one fellow we know—I don't know if he's a murderee in your sense of the word—but he's certainly asking for it." And Jay pointed with the mouthpiece

of his pipe, from which a little smoke oozed, as from the barrel of a pistol that has just been fired, to the ceiling of Alec's living room. He indicated a line which, if sufficiently projected, would have led to the row of comparatively cheap, one-room, studio apartments which ran along the back of the building at the top.

"You can't possibly mean Andre?" said Alec.

"That young man," said Jay, "is my choice for the most likely to succeed in ending up at the bottom of one of the Calanques, with a hole in his head and two or three metres of heavy chain wrapped around him, like those two guys they fished up last Easter."

"You don't really know him, or you wouldn't say such a thing," said Alec, quite distressed. "There couldn't be a person farther removed from the type I have in mind. He loves life; he loves his work."

"Do you mean picking out a few notes on the piano and making with the off-colour monologue in between?"

"Now that's not fair, Jay. That's what he does at the *Striptease*. Everybody's got to eat. In the day-time he's quite a different person. The music he's working on may not be anything great, but at any rate he believes in it. He's a composer, and he . . ."

Here Jay enveloped himself in a smoke cloud so dense that Alec was forced to stop and look, and hence to listen.

"It's the music he makes with Marie Camatte that I'm referring to," said Jay, speaking out of the cloud.

"How do you know?" cried Alec in almost childish distress. "What have you ever seen, to make you say a thing like that? Jay, it's not true, and you ought not to go around saying such things."

Jay was not the man to press a point where he saw it was causing pain. "Well," said he, "They're your friends and not mine. I've only seen them the few times you've dragged me to that lousy night-club of Camatte's. All I've seen, if it comes to that, was the abstracted gaze of two people who are playing footsy, and—possibly—maybe—I couldn't swear to it—what might be called a smouldering glance or two in between."

"And on the strength of that you take the typical American view of the French! I don't wonder we're disliked over here."

Magnaminity, even in a pipe smoker, has its limits, and like all limits they are reached sooner than one expects. "Alec," said Jay, "I don't know what the hell's got into you. Certainly you're the world's champion at saying a thing, and forgetting it, or else shutting your eyes to its obvious implications. If I've jumped to

any sort of conclusion, it's less from anything I've seen than from what you told me yourself, quite casually, just two days ago, in this very room. You told me you'd met her several times coming down from Andre's place when you got home from the office."

"He's young, and he's hard-up, and she's interested in his music," said Alec at last. It was a small, weak thought, uttered in a small, weak voice, and it seemed to be anxious to slip away unnoticed.

Jay threw a very light, obvious joke after it; to do less would have been the more conspicuous. "I wish I could stay," said he, "and have a regular musical discussion. But it's after six, and the kids'll be in bed already."

With that he rose to go. Alec opened the door for his guest and walked with him as far as the elevator. Jay talked of the SS *City Of Springfield,* a ship which was coming in damaged and under tow in the morning, an event of some interest to those who work in the Marseille office of a well-known shipping line. Alec pressed the elevator button; He evoked only the considerable silence of a dead elevator, one of those silences for which Sousa demanded three massed bands. "The high-class functional doors in this dump," said Jay, peering down, "have only one defect, and that is, they don't function. The damned things never close properly. It's stuck down there at the bottom. I can see it. I guess I'd better walk down."

He at once set off, leaving Alec looking after him in a silence which would have required even more than three massed bands adequately to render it, a silence which, when time seemed to have been forgotten, was broken by the *tick, tick, tock,* not of a stately clock, but of high heels coming down from one of the upper floors.

This large building, made all of concrete, had four floors above that on which Alec lived, and on each there were several apartments. Many pairs of high heels descended that naked, echoing and always rather dirty staircase, so much like the stairs of a subway, whenever the elevator doors were not properly closed. Nevertheless Alec remained, as they say, rooted to the spot. His eyes were riveted, as they say, on the turn of the staircase immediately above. He *knew* that it was Marie Camatte who was coming down.

There are certain rendezvous' which seem to have been made so very long ago that it is surprising we should feel the opposite of surprise when they are punctually kept. Alec felt only a great sense of inevitability, like a giant hand on the back of his neck, as Marie

Camatte came down towards him.

Even the dress she was wearing contributed to the illusion that he had known her and awaited her from the very earliest days of his life. It was one of those chemise dresses which sometimes give us the disconcerting impression, in places where fashionable women are congregated, of being surrounded by oldtime movie stars. Marie, moreover, came from the back-streets of Marseille, and from one of those narrow quarters where the houses are eight storeys high and the streets not eight feet wide, and which are threaded by yet narrower alleys, and where the tallest houses are bridged and linked by rooms erupting from their sides, which run like lava over the roofs of the lesser houses. In this city, flooded by wave after wave of every nationality in every century, these rock pools have remained inviolate. Whether or not a strain of Phoenician or Greek persists, their inhabitants have all the look of an archaic people and a people apart.

The chemise dress, therefore, was only one of those accidents which always occur at the appropriate moment as if to render inescapable the realities we have tried to ignore. Marie had a great profusion of hair, such as we seldom see in these days, and she had heavily lidded, heavily shadowed eyes. Her cheeks had a soft plumpness utterly different from the apple roundness which has come in since Renoir became popular, and they had a thick, sweet pallor like that of those fleshy white flowers which release their perfume only at night. Her mouth was a perfect Cupid's bow, insistently accentuated, but possessing, when one came to look at it carefully, no resemblance whatsoever to the beak of an octopus. And which of us, for that matter, has ever seen the beak of an octopus?

This face was poised at an angle not measurably different from that at which most other faces are held. Nevertheless it seemed at all times to be on the verge of tilting unbearably far back under an insolent, ravishing kiss. It was the face of a somnambulist, because the mind in it was asleep; it was the face of a medium, because something was awake in it which was not the mind; it was the face of a beautiful psychotic, because its unsleeping purpose was one that we do not usually acknowledge; it was the face of a waxwork in a Chamber of Horrors, because, clearly, it would allow no one to interfere with that purpose. And yet this face, so coldly sensual, so stupidly cunning and so brutishly implacable, was, after all, closely akin to those we discover to our wonderment in the family photograph al-

bum, and over the names of the most high-minded of our great-aunts, or of the most radiant of the young brides who seemed like fairy princesses to us who were their train bearers. So much for the Phoenicians! Perhaps all faces are like this, and those we see around us every day are the only ones we cannot really see.

At all events it was quite fitting that Marie should have the look of an old-fashioned movie queen, for Alec was, at this very moment, in relation to her, finding himself in an old-fashioned movie situation. He was beginning to realise that he had been in love with her from time immemorial, and without knowing it. Apart from this characteristic, at once banal and unlikely, it was a love without any pleasure or prospect of pleasure attached to it. It was the sort of love which is born, not of the normal hunger, but of a sensation which the heart can mistake for that hunger; the dull, persistent ache of an unhealable wound. This is the ugly sister, the quite hideous sister, of the love family. People with unhealable wounds should carry a bell to announce their approach, so that we might back away, crying, "It was not I! It was not I!"

However, Marie was in no position to make a sweeping statement of that sort. When she saw Alec standing there on the landing, she did not back away, but she looked at him as if he were intruding on her. It was the briefest of looks, and it was at once succeeded by a smile.

"But what are all the smiles and caresses in the world," thought Alec, "after such a look?"

He suddenly felt very tired, as if he had been waiting on that landing, not for a few minutes, but for many years. "Marie," said he, "come into my place for a moment. I have something to say to you."

Marie, within a certain narrow range, was the most sensitive creature imaginable. Alec's words were of no particular weight, and he uttered them as if he had no breath in his lungs, but Marie knew that when a man speaks like that, almost automatically, as if someone else was whispering through him, he means business.

"For only a moment," said she, letting him draw her through the door of his apartment. He noticed that her arm, on which his fingers seemed likely to leave marks, was as weak as water. "I'm late already," she said. "Louis will be wondering what has happened to me."

Alec, with his free hand, slammed the door behind them, and at the same time pulled Marie round to face him. "Do you mean with Andre?"

"Andre? What has Andre to do with it?" And Marie drew her-

self away, and put on a look of lofty offendedness, absurd and pathetic. "Is it possible you suggest I was visiting Andre?" continued Marie. "Perhaps I have other friends in this building."

"And perhaps the door was not as completely closed as you thought it was."

There is something to be said for the feeling of inevitability, even though its hard grasp is like that of a big man's hand on the back of one's neck. It can dictate very effective speeches; speeches to which one listens as one utters them, not only with consternation, but also with an illusion of being, at last, absolutely right.

"I have always felt you looking at me," said Marie. "So you are jealous! I knew it. So you watch me! So you peep, or you listen!"

"Never," said Alec. "Never in my life." He was speaking French, and the language more or less presented him with this last expression. "But now I know you were with Andre."

Marie was shaken, but she suddenly remembered an old excuse she had about her, and she pulled it out as she might have pulled out a powder-puff to hold up in front of her face. "You have tried to trap me. But you have done it because you suffer. Because you suffer, I shall explain to you. Today Louis told me that some men are coming, some business friends of his, from Nice. And we are to entertain them tonight at the Club. So I thought I would come here and tell Andre one or two little things about each of them, so he could put them in as jokes, into what he says at the piano."

"And on Monday?" said Alec.

"On Monday?" The excuse, already thin, could not be stretched far back enough to cover Monday. The dignity became attenuated and flimsy. "I don't know what you mean by Monday?"

"And Friday? Shall I ask Louis if you had people to entertain on Monday and Friday? And the other days?"

"Oh, Alec, my friend! I beg of you . . . !" When she had first came out of her back street, Marie had had only two dresses; the inevitable black, and a red one. Now, when faced by an angry or a lustful man, and she recognised no others, she had only two attitudes; the dignified one she had already paraded, and the cowering, palpitating submissiveness of a woman beaten down, whether by blows or caresses is immaterial. Alec's words having stripped her of the first pose, an impulse of something quite like modesty caused her instantly to assume the second. Had she been, in the matter of attitudes, the best dressed woman in the world, she could not have selected one more calculated to inflame Alec's deepest

feelings. He discovered that this was what he had always wanted, all to himself, for better or for worse, till death did them part.

Her hands were stroking at the lapels of his jacket in a manner which most of us would have found very embarrassing. Alec, however, wished it to continue. To this end, he began to abuse Andre, using terms so extremely crude as to give him another satisfying sensation, the sensation which mud yields to the fingers of a child. At the same time, and also with the fingers of a child—they were so angry and pinching and ineffectual—he took Marie by the arms and shook her.

Marie may not have been clearly aware of the weakness of those jealous, though not little, fingers, but she flowed in that direction. At the same time she was afraid for herself and afraid for Andre, and, with the instinct which moves certain birds when their nests are threatened, she fluttering-ly took the line that led most blatantly away from the truth. Drawn thus and driven thus, she was soon clinging to Alec, pouring a froth of confessions and reproaches and endearments all over him, plastering his mouth with kisses as red and sweet and sticky as stolen jam, telling him that Andre was a boy, a toy, a mistake, a nothing.

"It was because of you. Because I loved you! Because I hated you! Because you despised me! Because you looked at me as if I were dirt!" A bystander would have thought it as well that the motion pictures of which she reminded him had been silent pictures.

To Alec, on the other hand, these ridiculous histrionics had all the authority of that solemn double-talk, uttered by our deepest desires, through the mouths of figures of our own creation, in our dreams. He drank in every word; he believed that he had his love and his slave, a repentance sufficiently abject and a rival belittled to nothing at all. Nothing, it would seem, was wanting to complete his pleasure, except perhaps the pleasure itself. The fact is that the realisation of a fantasy, like the attainment of a life-long ambition, or the end of the rainbow or the site of the mirage, all too frequently turns out to be rather colourless and dry. It can look like just another piece of the same old desert. Our real goal, our hearts then sinkingly admit, must be somewhere farther on.

For a minute Alec was so deeply involved in this admission that all his outward force left him, and Marie, concluding that he was quieted for the time being, patted her hair into place, and began to taper the situation towards an ad-

journment. "I must go," said she at last, "or Louis will be home before I get there. You know what Louis is!"

And indeed, for the briefest moment, Alec really knew what Louis Camatte was. Andre, belittled to nothing at all, no longer stood between them. It is the owner who makes the slave, and Alec saw Marie's real owner face to face, and he knew with whom his rendezvous had long ago been made. Such flashes of insight, like lightning flashes, are very justly called blinding, either because we instinctively close our eyes, or because after them the night seems darker than before.

"It is Louis who is the problem," said Alec. He uttered this rather obvious remark in a quiet, business-like tone. He had suddenly become admirably calm, as certain hypochondriacs do, when, after endless fusses over imaginary ills, they at last hear the doctor pronounce the dreaded word. He even smiled. There are all sorts of smiles; this one might have been imagined as fixed upon the lips of an unhealable wound. Marie was not imaginative, but when she saw Alec smile she stopped edging towards the door, and she gave him her serious attention.

"He must never, never suspect," said she.

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Alec. "Perhaps we will let him suspect Andre."

"Oh, no!" said Marie. She had no wish to annoy Alec by a contradiction; the words just slipped out.

"He knows already," said Alec, speaking like a good friend as well as a lover, willing to share all his little amusements with her.

"He knows nothing," said Marie.

"Everyone always knows everything," said Alec. He uttered this important but rather depressing truth in a manner that was positively playful. "They don't always know that they know, but they do. Let me explain! Other people have noticed you and Andre, right there in the Club, and they've seen at once what's going on. Louis was present. He saw the same things. They're there in his head. He just hasn't put them together yet. But the minute he suspects . . ."

"You know what he'd do?" cried Marie.

"Wipe him out," said Alec, nodding pleasantly. He illustrated the words with a gesture that gave him considerable pleasure. "After all, as you say, he was a mistake. He'll be better wiped out. And then, my dear, you and I will be in a position to wipe out Louis. Because we shall know what has happened. We can say a word in the right quarter. Or I can. You will have to be somewhere safe, but you'll have set the ball rolling, and after that things will move by

themselves. Louis wipes out Andre. Andre, in effect, wipes out Louis. And you will have wiped yourself clean. You see the beauty of it?" The word *wipe* passed to and fro over everything he said, as over a rather dirty windshield.

Marie, from her now concentrated gaze, might have been staring through that same windshield, along a dangerous road which, with all this wiping, was gradually becoming clear to her.

"It's so just," continued Alec with increasing enthusiasm. "Andre, a mistake! And Louis, worse than a mistake! In spite of the clever old epigram there are crimes that are worse than mistakes. A crime, a disease, a pollution—he makes you hateful and repulsive to me! And now you'll be clean and free and happy and . . . ." He was going to add, "with the man you love," but he was deterred by considerations of taste, and by a slight feeling of vertigo, such as arises from certain giddy fantasies.

Marie, however, seemed to sense the unuttered phrase. A quite lovely smile irradiated her face, and she raised her eyes as if to heaven, or at the very least to the row of comparatively cheap, one-room, studio apartments which ran along the back of the building at the top. Alec, who had confessed to a weakness in the manufacture of plots, would have been flattered had he known how well she liked this one. On the other hand, he might have resented the one little reservation she made; she felt the characters in the plot were not quit perfectly cast; she felt it would be better if two of them exchanged their respective roles. Alec meanwhile was talking of getting a transfer, of taking her out to the gorgeous East, or to Rio or back to the States or somewhere.

"There would be plenty of money," said Marie. "You wouldn't have to work unless you felt inspired to do so. All the same, my dear friend, this is not going to be easy. To prove anything of that sort . . ."

"When you know what's been done," said Alec, "and who's done it, you can always dig up the proof. Or the police can, when they're put on the right track. They have their methods."

"The police?" cried Marie with a shudder of distaste. "Be careful! Be very careful, my love, my little one. You go to the police. You may speak to the wrong man. Louis has friends in the police. You don't need to speak to them; they'd all see the dossier, and then, my dear, it would be you, and me, too, who'd be wiped out." In fact, she was thinking, one word to a certain man named Gremaux was as effective a meth-

od of murder as Madame Guillotine.

"Listen to me," said she with all the authority that a virtuous woman assumes on such occasions. "Your idea will not work, because to Louis Andre is nothing. Men like Louis know who counts, and who is nothing at all. He'd dismiss him, of course; he'd arrange to have his face spoiled a little, but he'd never actually kill him. After all, we are not in Chicago."

Alec opened his mouth in such wide dismay that he looked for all the world like a little boy who is about to let out a desolate howl.

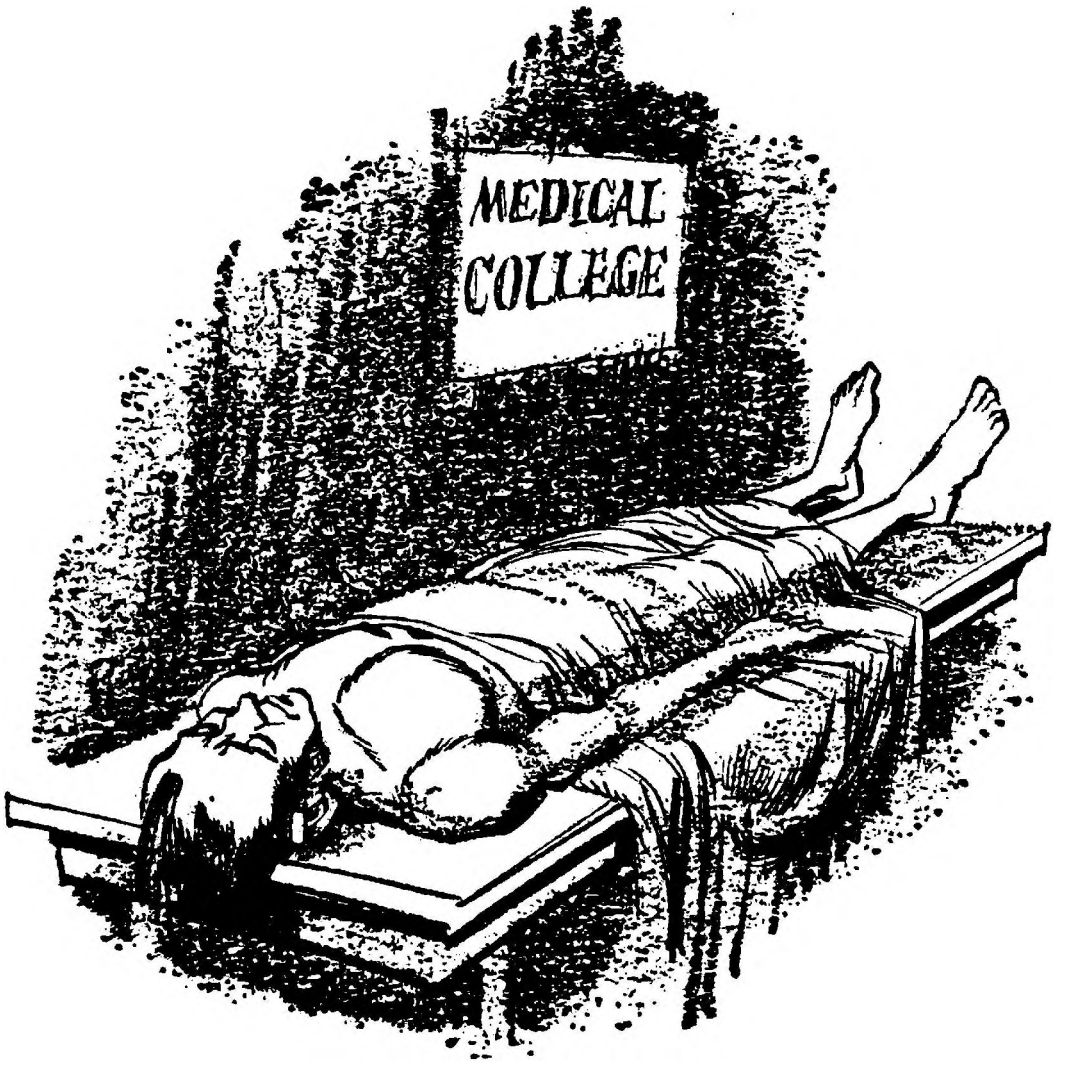
"But wait," said Marie, caressing him, "and I will tell you something very much better. You said a clever thing a little while ago; it is because you are so clever that I adore you. It was wise, it was profound. You said people know all about everything, always, only they don't always put it together. Very well, there were two men, a man named Orozco and his partner, long ago. They were wiped out, as you say, very suddenly, in an emergency, when Louis was scared, when he had no time to take the proper precautions. And these were men of some importance, it is an affair not to be passed over. And the police have most of it, because it was hastily done, but they haven't yet been able to put it together.

"Give me that paper. I write down two names and the name of a place. With this, the police will have their witnesses, and they will find what is left of Orozco and his partner.

"And you, my love, call the police this evening. You must be careful to whom you sing your little song—there are people there who would warn Louis about you almost before you had finished talking. So ask for a man called Gremaux. Don't forget that name. I'm writing it down for you. Talk to no one else. Just say it's the Orozco business. Say that you have what they need. Say that you insist on a private appointment with the head of the division, and not at the Commissariat, but alone with him, at his own house. He will arrange for someone to pick you up; tell him they can call for you here but only after dark. Go with them; take this paper, and everything will go just as you want it to.

"And I shall have helped you! And then, my love," said she, raising her eyes heavenward again, "we shall be free, and rich, and we can go far, far away and live in Monte Carlo." ■ ■

Such a well planned murder that nothing could go wrong. Well, hardly anything.



REST IN PEACE

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

WHEN THE LONG DISTANCE OPERATOR informed Henry Sloucomb of what was perfectly obvious—"Your party does not seem to answer, sir"—he cleared his suddenly tight throat.

"Look here, Operator," he said nervously, "this is the third time in an hour that I've tried to get my uncle on the phone. He's an old man and he's not been well and he *never* goes out at night. I'm

afraid—his not answering—"

There was a second's pause, during which he could clearly hear the voices of the other women at the switchboards; then the operator said, "Well, I could contact his local exchange and have *them* contact the police there—"

"Please. I'd appreciate that very much. And have, well, somebody, call me back. Reverse the charges." And then there was nothing to do but wait.

The doctors had warned old Jacob Sloucomb after his first heart attack, and they had warned him after his first stroke. Henry had added his voice to theirs:

"It's dangerous for you to be living alone, Uncle, in your condition, in this house that's so isolated out here beyond the edge of town. I'd stay with you if I could. But since I can't, why don't you do the sensible thing? Come stay with me. I'll take a larger apartment."

But old Jacob had been stubborn—as usual.

"I've never been greedy," Uncle Jacob had answered. "And I won't be greedy now." His smile deepened the lines in the corners of his eyes. There were surprisingly few lines in his face, considering his age and illness; and his hair was still thick and dark. Henry, though only half his uncle's age, had long been bald and now was going grey.

"Greedy?" Henry asked, puzzled.

"Greedy for life. No, I don't mean 'life.' *Time*. Why should I be greedy for mere time? My life is here, in this house, in this town. My books, my memories are here. My friends, those who are left, are here. And the University is here. I'm not lonely, but I'm used to the measure of solitude I have. It's kind of you, Henry, to offer to let me live with you. In all probability I would be in this world for a few years more if I accepted. But I'd just be gaining time. It wouldn't really be life, not for me, not in new surroundings, strange ones, in the city. I'm grateful for the life I've had—and have. I don't think it would be at all becoming for me to be avid, at this late date."

And nothing Henry had said would sway him. So Henry returned to his small apartment in the city, and his small business there. Both were enough for his needs. It was odd, in a way, when Henry came to think about it—there had been a time when he'd considered making his own life in the small University town. His Uncle Jacob had been teaching there then, and Henry's father (before his death) had also taught there. But Henry had been ambitious. Had wanted to make money, lots of it, and fast. See the world. Live well. Not poke along

on faculty salaries.

In a way it was ironic. Because out of the dark old library in Uncle Jacob's house had come a series of books, most of them written with the leisure of retirement. They had sold well, very well, and in fact were still selling well. Whereas Henry's business had never gone beyond its first decade's growth. Ironic? It was ridiculously unjust.

Henry's nervous waiting was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone.

"Mr. Sloucomb? Mr. Henry Sloucomb? The operator tells me you've been trying to get your uncle on the phone, is that right?" A man's voice, a strange voice: somewhat tired, but authoritative. Whose? Almost as if the question had been spoken aloud, it was answered.

"This is Police Captain Todd, down in—"

"Were you able to get in the house?" Henry asked, nervously. "Is my uncle all right?"

But Captain Todd was not to be hurried. "I understand that Professor Sloucomb wasn't well this past year, is that right? Had a heart attack, then a stroke, and . . . Oh, I see . . . . You came out here after both times? Well. It can hardly come as too much of a shock to you—"

"Oh, Lord, no!"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Sloucomb. The doctor says he's been dead for about two days. Died in his own bed. No pain. Looks very peaceful. *And,* of course, he was an old man."

The amenities dispensed with, Captain Todd went on briskly: "The Medical Examiner has spoken with Dr. Hendriks, the Professor's own doctor, and they're making out a certificate of natural death right now. I expect you'll want to get on out here as quickly as you can. Well. Sorry to have been the bearer of bad news."

Henry's hand trembled just a bit when he hung up. One corner of his mind noted this, but the rest of his mind was busy with other thoughts. Had Uncle Jacob accepted the invitation to come live with Henry, he might be alive today. On the other hand, he might have died some time ago. At any rate, he had died where he wanted to, and quickly, too. No painful lingering on with tubes in his nose and oxygen tents . . .

"Bad news," Captain Todd had said. Ah, but he was wrong. It was good news, as good as could be. For now Henry Sloucomb could close up the drab little flat and the dingy little office. Now he'd have money, lots of it, and fast. He could see the world. Live well. At long, long last.

There wasn't any doubt about it, Henry thought happily. One

day during his last visit to the old man, Henry had come back from a walk to find both Dr. Hendriks and Uncle Jacob's lawyer, a fusspot named Calhoon, preparing to leave.

"Made my will, boy," Uncle Jacob had said, with a faint smile. "The University will get my books. I'm also giving them their choice between the house for faculty use or a flat sum in cash for the scholarship fund, and, well, one or two other items."

Again, the faint smile. Then Uncle Jacob continued, "Don't concern yourself about all that, Henry. The bulk of the goods goes to you. Bank accounts, bonds, stock—so on. I've been fortunate in my investments, as they say, and the books are still selling. You'll be able to travel, as I know you've wanted to. Drink a toast to my shade in some appropriate Grecian vale."

And then, saving Henry from remarks which could only be awkward and sentimental, Uncle Jacob had deftly changed the subject.

It was towards the close of that visit that Uncle Jacob had made his remarks about not wanting to be greedy for time. So be it. Neither would Henry be greedy for him. His last visit? Well, his last *official* visit.

Once he'd made up his mind, Henry hadn't wasted many days. No one in the busy city had noticed his departure. No one in the small town had noticed his arrival, for the old house lay on the very outskirts, and it was late, very late, by the time Henry parked his car. He placed it out of sight up a lane leading to a house torn down years before, about a quarter of a mile from the professor's home. In a way, it was like a scene from Poe . . .

. . . Or Wilkie Collins. Clouds scudding across the moon. Quietly opening the door with the key he'd had for so many years. The small creaks and snaps of the old house. The silent approach to the bedroom. First the pillow. Then, gentle but firm, the hands. And away as silently and as unseen.

And now, the seal of security, as it were: *"Certificate of natural death"!*

Henry Sloucomb didn't need to strain to assume the air of gravity he wore when he arrived at his uncle's home the morning after the long distance calls. He knew what Society expected of a man in his position. Fussy Old Lawyer Calhoon was waiting for him in the living room. A senile moisture seeped from his eyes as he muttered of his fondness for old Professor Sloucomb. Then he pulled himself together.

"Your uncle, rest his soul—did he tell you what's in his will, Henry?"

"Generally speaking, yes."

"Hem. Well. Have to read it

anyway. Let's sit down. Got it here, in—"

"Isn't it customary to wait till after the funeral?" Henry asked. But the old man didn't seem to hear him.

"—in my portfolio," he mumbled, and took it out. With a mental shrug Henry fell silent, settled down to hear. The list of properties was longer than he had expected. A warm glow filled him, he scarcely heard the latter part of the will as the lawyer's cracked voice sing-songed about the library, the house, the scholarship funds . . .

Finally the voice stopped. Henry snapped out of his golden glow as Old Calhoon folded up the will. Time to think of travel later on.

"Yes, yes," Henry sighed. "Poor Uncle Jacob. More than generous . . . Now, about the funeral—"

Calhoon shook his head. "Can't say for sure about that, Henry. Have to consult the Dean, I suppose."

Henry was honestly puzzled. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'What do I mean'? Didn't you hear what I was reading?" He clicked his tongue, opened the will again, testily. "'—and all the rest and residue of my estate—' No, not there. Mmm. Hmm. *Here*: 'And it is my further desire and I do so stipulate, that my body be turned over immediately after death to the College of Medicine of the said University, for purposes of medical research.'"

"No!" said Henry.

"Yes," the old lawyer said, while Henry's mind picked at the possibility that the medical men might not find evidence of strangulation, though logic told him they couldn't possibly miss. "Not my idea, but—Jacob wanted it that way. They took him early this morning. Said they'd not be too long with him, but just when the funeral— Who is that at the door? Ringing and knocking so— Don't they know there's been a death in the— Oh. My word. The police. Wonder what *they* want?"

Henry had a rather good idea about why the police were here, and, as it happened, he was absolutely right.

It was an hour's journey to the State Prison, and, after that, only a short walk to the small room, which was all the traveling poor Henry got to do. ■ ■

Till-Till was a most unusual dog. His doting owners swore he had an almost human intelligence. And they may have been right . . .

A CHRISTIAN BURIAL

by MARY THAYER MULLER

THE OGILVIES WERE THE SORT OF couple of whom people said: "They should have had children."

The Ogilvies knew better. Observing the behavior of their friends' children, and grandchildren, they secretly congratulated themselves on having eschewed the satisfactions of procreation. They lavished all their tenderness on their little Dachshund, Till Eulenspiegel.

Till was so named because he was full of merry pranks: running away with overshoes and objects left on chairs and low tables, chewing the ends off dangling garments, then sitting up, laughing at the owner when the damage was discovered. The darling! They were not the Ogilvies' garments and overshoes, which were kept prudently out of reach.

Mrs. Ogilvie was a large wom-

an whose bosom and stomach left very little lap for anything to sit on, but Till would walk up the steep incline to her large, pink face and lick it while Mrs. Ogilvie shut her eyes and cooed. Till rather liked the flavor of her powder and foundation cream. Besides he knew which side his hamburger was broiled on.

Mr. Ogilvie hated having animals jump up on him. He taught Till his manners, and many little tricks: sitting up with folded paws in an attitude called 'saying his prayers', rolling over, shaking hands, 'playing dead', and so forth. And he boasted dotingly of Till's intelligence.

"Understands every word you say. Be careful!"

At such times Till would half shut his bright, slanting eyes and loll his tongue and Mrs. Ogilvie would say:

"Look! Isn't he adorable? He's laughing at us!"

When the Ogilvies planned brief, infrequent weekend trips away, they had to be careful to conceal their preparations. Till hated the kennel. Compared to the Ogilvies' over-heated house it was cold. There were no treats of buttered tea biscuit and sweet chocolate and he lost weight and was always hungry. The sight of a suitcase sent him under beds and couches to hide and the merry pranks were suspended.

Another thing he hated was Mrs. Ogilvie's nephew, Charles Honeyman, who came to visit two or three times a year. Charles was a long-legged, slightly-bald bachelor of thirty-three who washed his hands after touching anything: door-knobs, other people's belongings, other people's hands. His expression of disgust when Till licked Mrs. Ogilvie's face was lost on no one, not even Till. But he said nothing. He was Mrs. Ogilvie's heir.

Mrs. Ogilvie's fortune came to her from her father, a successful and canny industrialist who regarded the U.S. Government, the Bureau of Internal Revenue and all do-gooding organizations as members of a gang founded for the purpose of shaking down people like himself. The anxieties of out-smarting them had brought on a stroke which killed him and left the out-smarting to his son-in-law, who took it more easily. What was the use of piling up money for that pallid nincompoop, Charles Honeyman?

It couldn't exactly be said that Mr. Ogilvie had married for money. But given a choice of several attractive young ladies and all other things being equal, it was natural for him to have found the one with money the most attractive. It was a comfortable marriage. The Ogilvies saw eye-to-eye on most things.

One evening in November they were sitting before the television in the library, Mr. Ogilvie occupied in turning off commercials, when Charles Honeyman's eye fell on Till, who was scratching himself in front of the fire.

"He's been doing that a lot lately. Must have picked up some fleas," Charles Honeyman said.

"Goodness, where would he pick up fleas?" Mrs. Ogilvie replied. "He hasn't any contact—"

"Then it's eczema. He'd better see a vet."

Till stopped scratching and lay down quietly. Charles Honeyman continued to regard him.

"Of course as dogs get on in years," he said, "they're apt to get skin troubles. Sores. That kind of thing."

"On in years?" said Mrs. Ogilvie, her blue eyes wide. "Why, he's only seven. Dachshunds live to be sixteen sometimes. Longer."

"He's nine," said Charles Honeyman. "You got him the year I graduated from college. Don't you remember?"

"You're right. So we did. Nine years old. Imagine! Here, Till-Till, come to Mommie. *Was* it nine years old, a precious petkins!"

Till sat up in front of Mrs. Ogilvie and said his prayers, his sharp, black nose laid on his folded paws, his eye on Charles Honeyman, who was still looking at him speculatively.

"Yes, they're a long-lived breed. But I'd always rather see a dog put away before he gets decrepit," Charles Honeyman said.

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Ogilvie. "Here, Till-Till. UP! We don't want a darling little pooh-pooh to get sorezes and pains in his back and his footsies, do we, Till-Till?"

"I was thinking," said Charles Honeyman, "that what you and Uncle need is a good vacation . . . sort of a second honeymoon. Have you ever thought of taking a cruise trip around the world?"

"Why, no," said Mrs. Ogilvie.

"Well, I have," said Mr. Ogilvie. "What makes you ask, Charles?"

"A friend of mine just opened a travel agency," Charles said. "He could plan a beautiful trip for you and Auntie. Shall I ask him to send you some literature on the subject?"

"Yes," said Mr. Ogilvie. "I'm interested."

"How long do those round-the-world trips take, Charles?" asked Mrs. Ogilvie.

"Oh, anything upwards from three months," Charles said.

"Three months! Goodness, what would we do with Till-Till?"

"Put him in a kennel, of course," said Mr. Ogilvie.

"Oh, poor Till-Till! His Mommie would miss him so!" Mrs. Ogilvie's lashes quivered. "But suppose Till-Till got sick in the

kennel? Suppose he got sick—and died?"

Till was now curled around Mrs. Ogilvie's neck like a fur piece.

"Don't worry, Auntie," said Charles. "I'll look in on the little beast while you two are away. If anything does happen to him, I'll make all the usual arrangements."

"If poor Till-Till does ever die," said Mrs. Ogilvie, stroking him, "I want him to have a real Christian burial. I mean he's such a person. I'm sure he'll go to heaven when he dies. I want him cremated and his ashes put in a little urn in the family vault. With his name on it. Don't you agree, Harry?"

Mrs. Ogilvie was sentimental about these things. Her own ashes and those of Mr. Ogilvie were to be put in a single urn with the inscription: "One in Life and Death" engraved upon it.

"Certainly, my dear," said Mr. Ogilvie, who always agreed, and was glad to have the matter settled. "Since you feel that way about him. But he'll be fine in the kennel."

"If the least little thing happens to Till-Till," Mrs. Ogilvie said, "you *will* let us know at once, wherever we are, won't you, Charles?"

"It will be a pleasure." Charles Honeyman looked at Till-Till lying quietly in Mrs. Ogilvie's lap. "I never noticed before," he said; "his eyes are really red."

Soon after that Mr. and Mrs. Ogilvie went to bed and Charles Honeyman put on his coat and took Till out for his final walk. What happened on the three steps leading up to the street level no one will ever know. Attracted by Till's excited barking Mr. Ogilvie hurried down the steep hall stairs and opened the front door to find Charles Honeyman sprawled on the sidewalk, blood running from a gash in his forehead, one of his ankles entangled in Till's lead. Mr. Ogilvie rang the door bell frantically and with the help of Otto the butler and Helga the cook lifted Charles Honeyman into the hall.

Mrs. Ogilvie, hearing the commotion, came to the top of the stairs. At the sight of the terrible scene below, her heart lurched once and she fainted dead away.

Mr. Ogilvie telephoned the doctor, then hurried to the lavatory and washed his hands.

When he came back Till was sitting on the bottom stair in the hall, lolling his tongue. His eyes, half shut and glinting, met those of Mr. Ogilvie. The tip of his tail wagged very slightly.

"I'll be damned," said Mr. Ogilvie, turning a little pale.

During the weeks that followed Charles Honeyman's death, the Ogilvies and Till went back to the

same quiet routine. At tea time Till sat up prettily and Mrs. Ogilvie fed him with bits of buttered tea biscuit and chocolate cake. The Ogilvies forgot any ideas they had held about going on a cruise. Till was quite comfortable. Quite content. He scratched as much as he pleased.

One afternoon as the Ogilvies sat at tea Otto appeared at the door of the library with a package which had just been delivered by messenger. There was a receipt to be signed. As Mr. Ogilvie looked it over he shuddered a little and said, "Ugh!"

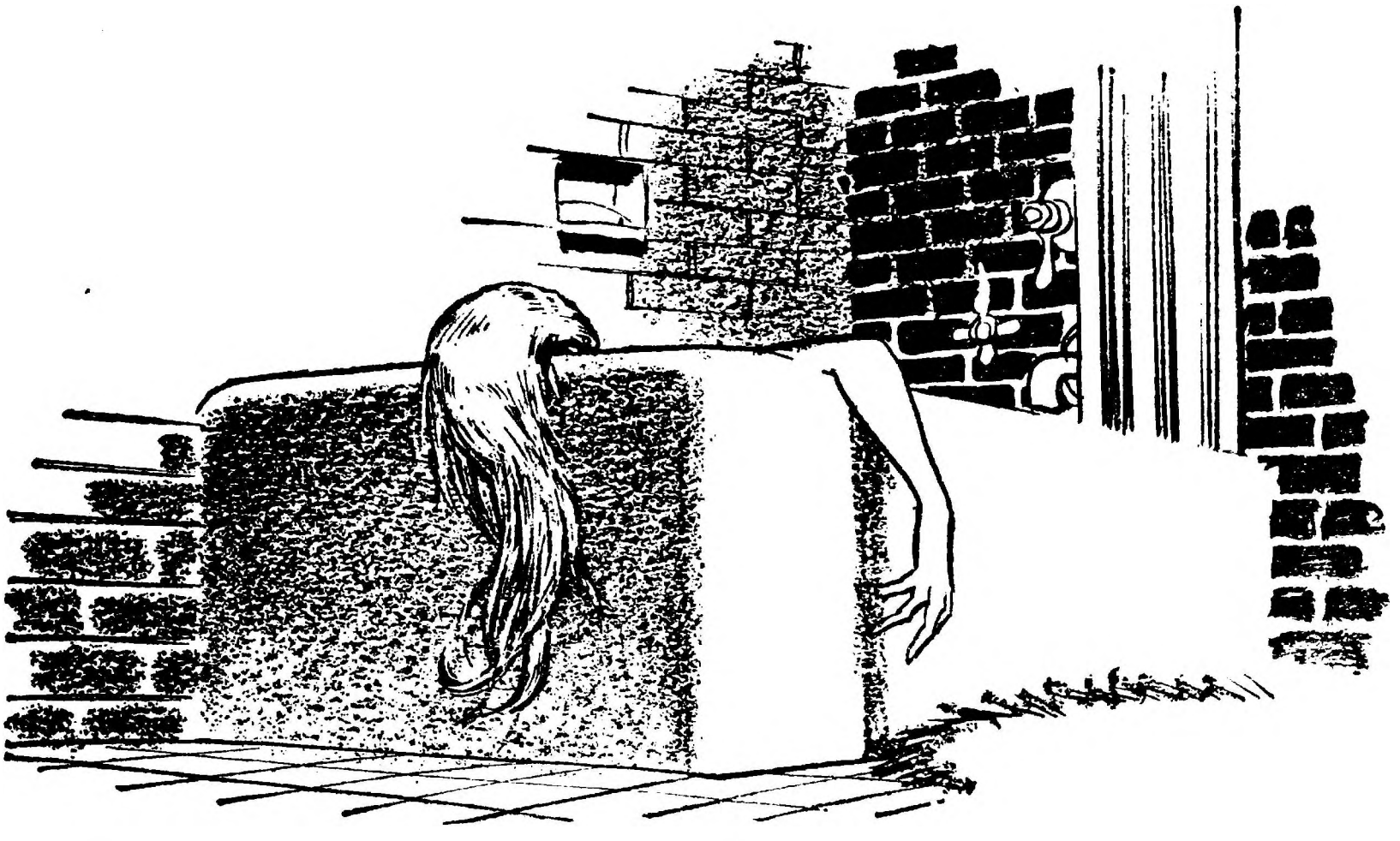
When Otto had left the room Mr. Ogilvie got a paper cutter and opened the package. It contained a small, white porcelain urn of classic shape with an inscription in gold lettering around the base. Mr. Ogilvie set it on the table quickly and hurried to the bathroom and washed his hands.

Till climbed on a chair and stood on his hind legs and sniffed the urn. Then he shoved it with his nose. It moved toward the edge of the table. He shoved again. At the third shove it reached the edge and toppled off and fell with a crash on the hearth. Its contents, a double-handful of some white, flaky substance rather like bone meal, spilled out on the floor.

Till sat up and said his prayers, his small, black nose laid neatly on his paws, his eyes very bright.

Then he got down and licked up the bone meal. It tasted rather nasty. ■ ■

Belinda was blonde and beautiful and kissable, too. But unfortunately someone gave her a kiss—of death!



A KISS FOR BELINDA

by LAURENCE G. BLOCHMAN

THE WOMAN IN SUITE 232 OF THE Southside Apartment Hotel was certainly young, probably on the exuberant side of twenty-five. She was tall and blonde and, if not breath-taking, at least striking in appearance. Although she had lived at the Southside only ten days, both day and night clerks remembered the exact color of her eyes, the fact that she was always well dressed, and the names and

descriptions of the three persons who had visited her after her arrival. They also suspected that she was well built, a suspicion that was confirmed by the night clerk who found her lying in her bathtub, dead.

The woman in Suite 232 was registered at the Southside as Belinda Ford Holliday. The night clerk who found her dead in her tub had been trying to raise her for an hour on the house phone to announce the arrival of a telegram. He knew she had not gone out, and when she failed to respond to the bell-hop's repeated knocking, the night clerk had let himself in with a pass key. As a radio was playing in the bathroom, the clerk investigated, took one good look, gasped, and immediately called the police.

The Northbank police department arrived in three successive waves. The shock troops came within a few minutes, with the sirens of the prowl cars screaming bloody murder. The squad cars drove up with a low growl of authority. The two carloads of technical men deployed in comparative silence, followed by the solitary, slow-gaited dignity of the final link in the chain of command: Lieutenant of Detectives Max Ritter.

Slim, dark, sad-eyed Lieutenant Ritter made his way to Suite 232 without a word. When he entered the bathroom, and instinctively took off his soft felt hat, his big ears gave him the silhouette of a pogo stick. As he gave the body in the tub his professional attention, he noted the pungent, sweetish aroma that permeated the white-tiled brilliance of the bathroom. He observed that the peach-colored silk undies, neatly folded beside the portable radio on the clothes hamper, were hand embroidered. He also noted that an ash tray on the flat rim of the bathtub contained three cigarette stubs smoked to within half an inch of the straw tips. On the cerise bath mat, a mystery novel lay face-down on its open pages.

Ritter took another look at the late Belinda Ford Holliday. His long nose wrinkled as he sniffed pensively at the scented atmosphere. Then, as required by law, he telephoned the Coroner. However, since the Coroner was prone to regard all unexplained deaths as due to heart failure, apoplexy, or accident—unless of course the head was missing or a knife protruded from the back—Ritter also telephoned his friend Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, pathologist at Northbank's Pasteur Hospital, who had a great and useful scientific curiosity.

Dr. Coffee was dining on a sandwich in his laboratory when Max Ritter phoned. An emergency operation was in progress and

the surgeon had asked for a biopsy. It was an hour before Dr. Coffee had made a frozen section of the tissue from the operating room, and given his microscopic diagnosis.

"The Coroner just left, Doc," Ritter said, as the tall, sandy-haired pathologist walked into Suite 232.

"Then you won't need me after all," Dr. Coffee said.

The detective blew an irreverent bubble of sound through his lips. "You know the Coroner better than that, Doc," he said. "In an election year, the Coroner's got no time for autopsies or inquests. So he says this is a case of accidental drowning. He thinks the bath was too hot or the gal got in too soon after eating. He says she fainted, got her face under water and drowned. Only there wasn't any water in the tub when I found her."

"Her hair's wet," the pathologist said. "She could have kicked the plug out after she was unconscious, by a reflex action in a completely automatic struggle to survive."

"That's what the Coroner says." The detective pursed his lips around another pneumatic punctuation mark. "He also says that funny color in her face is a sign of drowning. Cyanosis, he says. I tell him I got it on good authority that cyanosis can also come from cyanide poisoning, and that cyanide smells like bitter almonds. Did you catch a whiff of that almond smell when you came in, Doc?"

Dr. Coffee nodded. The fragrant ghost of bitter almonds still haunted the room.

"But the Coroner says the smell comes from the almond bath-oil the dame's been using," the detective continued. "That's the bottle on that glass shelf, there. You can touch it, Doc. The boys dusted it and there's no prints on it."

Dr. Coffee picked up a bottle labeled: "KISS OF KANDAHAR—Almond-scented Aromatic Bath Oil." There was a small amount of oily yellow liquid at the bottom of the bottle. Dr. Coffee withdrew the cork and raised it cautiously to his nostrils. The fragrance matched the scent of almonds which clung to the air. The pathologist again examined the dead woman's face.

"I don't think it was cyanide, Max," he said. "The lividity of the face isn't the right color. It's not right for drowning either. It's a brownish gray, rather than a purple shade. Of course I can't be sure of anything without an autopsy. Is the Coroner going to do a post-mortem?"

"He is not," Ritter said. "But he authorizes me to hire you to do one if I find suspicious circumstances. And that's what I find, all right."

"What are they, Max?"

"Well, this Belinda dame is divorced in Florida just a few weeks ago. I find the divorce papers in the other room. Her ex-husband in a guy named Warren Holliday from Boone Point—a jobber in spices and stuff he sells to the food canneries around here. Seems like Belinda had a date with her Ex tonight, and he stood her up. Or he wants us to believe he stood her up. Just before the body was found, this telegram came for Belinda."

Ritter produced a yellow telegraph blank from his pocket and read aloud: " 'Sorry can't see you tonight but will try to make it tomorrow. Love. Warren.' The wire was filed at Boone Point late this afternoon. I just had the local police chief on the phone, and he can't locate Warren Holliday anywhere in Boone Point. So maybe Belinda's Ex did come to Northbank after all; maybe he sent this wire to build himself a little alibi in advance. Maybe—. What's up, Brody?"

The plainclothesman in the doorway said: "There's a bird outside, Lieutenant, says he has a date with Mrs. Holliday. Want to see him?"

Ritter winked knowingly with half his face and motioned to Dr. Coffee with his head.

"Sure, Brody. I'll see him." Ritter took Dr. Coffee's arm and closed the bathroom door behind them.

Brody ushered in a slim, homespun young man. The young man, apparently still in his twenties, seemed not quite at home in the alert, executive manner he was wearing. Neither was he at home in his double-breasted gabardine, which, although obviously expensive, hung from his shoulders with a Sundayfied, ready-to-wear character. Somehow his big, well-muscled hands seemed to call for blue denims and precision tools, instead of the green wax-paper cornucopia of flowers they were holding awkwardly.

"Are you Warren Holliday?" Ritter asked.

"No." The young man smiled nervously. "My name is Roy Manson. Isn't Mrs. Holliday here? I thought—"

"Sit down, Manson," Ritter said. "You live in Northbank?"

"Yes." Manson remained standing. "I'm general manager of the Bosworth Shoe Factory."

Of course, Dr. Coffee thought. General manager. Country boy makes good on big job. The good old American phenomenon: the self-made man, the quick rise from the production line to the front office. Dr. Coffee, who had a weakness for Horatio Alger heros, decided he liked Roy Manson, a feeling obviously not shared by Max Ritter.

"Are you in love with Belinda Holliday?" Ritter asked bluntly.

"Oh, no." Manson's smile was

patient. "Belinda and I are very old friends. We went to school together in Missouri as kids. But I'm engaged to marry Esther Bosworth."

"The boss' daughter?" Ritter asked.

"Esther owns the factory now. Mr. Bosworth died six months ago. Would you please tell me what's happened to Belinda? I know something is wrong. I saw all those police cars downstairs, and now all you people here in the apartment. Did she—?"

"She's dead," Ritter declared.

"Oh my God!" Manson sat down clumsily. He stared at Ritter with stunned, unseeing eyes. "I was afraid of something like this," he said numbly. "Was she—? Did she do something to herself?"

"The Coroner says it was an accident," Ritter said. "Tell me about your date with Belinda tonight."

"I'd invited Belinda to have dinner with me and my fiancee tonight," Manson said. "Esther has been visiting relatives in California, but I'd expected her back. Then she decided to stay on the Coast a few days longer, so this morning I called Belinda to tell her the dinner was postponed.

"Belinda sounded awfully blue on the phone. I'd noticed she'd been pretty dejected since she came back from the South, and it worried me. I've always been fond of Belinda. She's been terribly nice to me. When I first came to Northbank, when I was just a kid factory hand, not even a foreman then—why Belinda used to invite me over to Boone Point for Sunday dinner and things. She'd just been married to a man with quite a bit of money, but she didn't try to snoot me. So when I saw how blue she was feeling, I thought I'd come over tonight anyhow, to try to cheer her up."

"What was she blue about?" Ritter asked.

"I can only guess." Manson shook his head. "I think the man she got a divorce to marry may have walked out on her, but it's only a guess."

"What was the man's name?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. He was married, too, and was supposed to get a divorce himself. So maybe . . . ." Manson paused.

"Okay, go on home," Ritter said. "I'll call you tomorrow if I want you."

"I'd better be getting home myself, Max," Dr. Coffee said, "before my wife locks me out. I'll do the autopsy in the morning."

Roy Manson started for the door, hesitated, came back and placed the bouquet of flowers on a table.

"I'd like to leave these," he said, "for Belinda."

Dr. Coffee stirred restlessly in his bed when he heard the doorbell

ring. His wife nudged him.

"Please go down, darling, so whoever it is will take their thumb off the bell. You can sleep through plays and pandemonium but bells keep me awake. Please."

Dan Coffee rolled out of bed and groped for his dressing gown. He stumbled somnolently down the stairs. The door was scarcely open before the woman slipped in.

"I apologize for waking you in the middle of the night, Doctor," she said hurriedly. "But it's terribly important. It's about Belinda Holliday."

Dan Coffee blinked sleepily. The name did not register at first.

"Oh yes," he said, after the third blink. "That's the woman at the Southside. Why do you come to me?"

The pathologist was beginning to wake up. He looked curiously at his visitor. She was a dark, demure little woman, past the first bloom of youth but attractive in a virginal, wholesome way. At second glance he decided she would be attractive in many ways if she gave a little thought to the art of adornment. It was not the lack of make-up, for her skin was of a healthy, golden tint. Her hair-do was wrong—much too prim to go with her flashing black eyes. Her eyes were alive, positive, passionate . . . .

"I was listening to the midnight news on the radio," the woman said. "I heard that Belinda had been found dead and that you, Dr. Coffee, were going to perform an autopsy. Was Belinda murdered?"

"I can't say at this point," Dr. Coffee replied. "Are you related to Belinda Holliday?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't introduce myself. I'm Anne Devoto, Warren Holliday's secretary. The radio said the police are looking for Mr. Holliday."

"Yes. I understand Mr. Holliday has disappeared."

"He hasn't disappeared. He—he's outside in my car."

So that's it, Dr. Coffee thought. *The secretary's in love with her boss. She's hiding him because she's afraid he killed Belinda.*

"Did Mr. Holliday kill his ex-wife?" Dan Coffee asked.

"He should have killed her years ago," said the mousy little Anne Devoto with surprising fervor. "But he didn't."

"Then why doesn't he tell the Northbank police he's not in hiding?"

"It's a strange story," Miss Devoto replied. "He's afraid nobody will believe it. But we've read about you in the papers, Dr. Coffee. When Winifred West was shot, I remember. So we thought—"

There was a pause. *They think I'm a pushover for a likely story,* Dan Coffee mused. *Well, maybe I am. Still . . .*

"Bring Mr. Holliday in," he said.

Warren Holliday was a shaggy, gray-haired man in his late forties. He had tired gray eyes and a hesitant smile. His walk was slow and lumbering, but his handclasp was firm. He sat down wearily at Dr. Coffee's invitation.

"Did you see your ex-wife today?" the pathologist asked.

"No," Holliday answered. "I had a tentative date with her, but something came up and I wired her I couldn't see her until tomorrow."

"But you came to Northbank anyhow?"

Holliday's lips moved silently for a few seconds before he said: "Yes. How did you know?"

"Pure conjecture," Dr. Coffee said. "Why did you cancel your date with the former Mrs. Holliday?"

"Because of a business appointment. I'm a broker in spices and soluble seasonings. Late this afternoon I got a call from a spice importer from New Orleans who said he was in Northbank and wanted to see me. I had no idea how long my meeting would last, so I wired Belinda, calling off our date. Then I drove over from Boone Point to meet my New Orleans man in the lobby of the Northbank Hotel, as he suggested. I waited for more than an hour, but he didn't show up. I tried to call Miss Devoto in Boone Point, thinking perhaps he had changed his plans and tried to reach me, but I couldn't make contact with my secretary. So I got back into my car and started home for Boone Point. Then I—I had an accident."

"Mr. Holliday suffers from periodic migraine headaches," his secretary explained quickly. "Often his headaches are preceded by periods during which he—well, loses track of time. That's possible, isn't it?"

Yes, it's possible, Dr. Coffee thought. Migraine is sometimes preceded by an aura which included a lapse of memory. But it was an unusual coincidence that Holliday's migraine should begin at approximately the same hour as his ex-wife's death.

"What is the last thing you remember, Mr. Holliday?" the pathologist asked.

"Well, I remember vaguely running off the road, as it winds over the hill just this side of Boone Point. I remember trees—or a tree. Then I drew a blank."

"Are your headaches hemicranial, Mr. Holliday?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Migraine usually affects only one side of the head. Do you feel the pain behind one eye, or at the back of one side of your head, usually?"

"Behind the left eye, always," Holliday said.

"Do you mind?" Dr. Coffee said. He pressed his thumbs gently against Holliday's eyeballs. His

fingers explored the top and base of his skull. Holliday did not flinch. *He's lying,* Dr. Coffee thought. *If he had those prodromal signs when he said he did, he would be in such excruciating pain now that he could not hold his head up.*

"Where did you find him, Miss Devoto?" the pathologist asked.

"He wandered into my apartment," Miss Devoto replied. "He was in a daze and shaking all over. I guess he walked from wherever he wrecked his car. I made him lie down and wrapped him in a blanket. I fixed him a hot drink and he slept for a little while. Then I heard the midnight news on the radio . . . ."

"Why did you and your wife break up, Mr. Holliday?"

"It was inevitable. I'm more than twenty years older than Belinda was. I knew when I married her, nearly five years ago, that ultimately she would fall in love with someone her own age."

"And she did?"

"Yes."

"Belinda never really loved Mr. Holliday," Anne Devoto said. Her eyes did not leave Warren Holliday's face. They seemed to say silently, Nobody could possibly love you the way I do. Her whole being radiated a protective warmth meant for him alone, enveloping him with an armor of protective loyalty that was his even if he thought he was still in love with a dead woman, that would wait lovingly and patiently . . . .

"Did Mrs. Holliday get a divorce to marry a man named Roy Manson?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"Oh, no." Holliday smiled sadly. "Manson is a friend of the family. He's an old friend of Belinda's. I believe he's engaged to marry someone else."

"He's engaged to marry a shoe factory," Miss Devoto said.

Then who was Belinda going to marry? Holliday didn't know. Belinda had never told him, and he had never asked. She had told him she wanted her freedom and that was enough. That was the bargain they had made when they were married, and he had kept his part. He had not tried to hold her.

The purpose of his broken date with Belinda that evening? Holliday didn't know, really . . . .

"Nonsense." Miss Devoto volunteered. "Mr. Holliday is much too gallant. He knows perfectly well what Belinda wanted. She's been calling him up practically every day this past week. I think something went wrong with her romance and she was laying plans to get Mr. Holliday to take her back. She would have gone on making a fool of him for the rest of his days—if she'd lived."

Dr. Coffee lit a cigarette. As he smoked in silence, he reflected on the fact that both Holliday and Manson had seemed to have dates with Belinda on the same night.

True, Manson said he had phoned in the morning to cancel his. That would have given Belinda time to try to get Holliday to come over. After a moment, the pathologist said:

"Mr. Holliday, I think you had better tell your story to the police as soon as possible."

Miss Devoto's black eyes narrowed and her back stiffened visibly. "Do you believe that Mr. Holliday had anything to do with his wife's death?"

"Why, no," Dr. Coffee said. "But if your story is true, and if, as the Coroner believes, Mrs. Holliday's death was accidental, you will do well to get through the unpleasantness of a routine investigation as quickly as you can."

"I believe the doctor is right, Anne," Holliday said.

Dr. Coffee went to the telephone to call Max Ritter.

When the pathologist returned to his laboratory at Pasteur Hospital shortly before noon, he was carrying three small flasks of brownish liquid and a Mason jar containing specimens of tissue in formalin. He gave the Mason jar to his technician with the remark:

"The usual sections, Doris."

He placed the three flasks on his desk, took off his hat and coat, and called: "Dr. Mookerji."

Dr. Motilal Mookerji, Pasteur's resident pathologist, materialized from somewhere behind the freezing microtome and set his course for Dr. Coffee's desk. Navigation was no simple problem for Calcutta's gift to Northbank. Not only was the little Hindu broad of beam, but his fore-and-aft dimensions precluded side-slipping through the narrow channels that separated the autoclave, centrifuge, and other pieces of standing gear which cluttered the laboratory. Furthermore, he had to take particular care that the long tail of his pink turban did not become entangled in a beaker, a microscope, or a rack of test tubes. After tacking and coming about several times, Dr. Mookerji managed to warp alongside Dan Coffee's desk.

"Greetings, Doctor Sahib," he said. "Five times greetings. You have no doubt concluded pleasant autopsy?"

"Concluded?" echoed Dr. Coffee. "We've barely started. Have you ever run a Gettler test for drowning?"

"Am familiar with theoretical hypothesis of Gettler test," the Hindu resident replied, "although have never performed same on submerged cadavers. Are not samples of blood from right and left heart analysed separately for chloride level?"

"Exactly," said Dr. Coffee. "Normally the salt content of the blood is the same on both sides of the heart. However, if the person

died of drowning, the lungs would take in water which would dilute the blood in the left heart. Therefore, if the salt content of the blood is higher in the right heart than the left, the person was drowned—in fresh water."

"Am observing surplus blood sample," Dr. Mookerji said. "Am also remarking that blood exhibits brownish tint somewhat resembling chocolate without flogged cream or marshmallows. What is purpose of third sample, Doctor Sahib?"

"We'll try to identify methemoglobin with the spectroscope," Dan Coffee said. "The color is characteristic."

"Quite," the Hindu agreed. "Have observed similar color in native Bengal, in victims of blackwater fever."

"We don't have much blackwater fever in Northbank, but we do see an occasional case of potassium chlorate poisoning, which does the same thing to the blood. I've another rather delicate task for you, Doctor—a qualitative analysis from less than a thimbleful of liquid." Dr. Coffee carefully unwrapped a bottle which he gingerly passed to his Hindu assistant.

"Ha! Kiss of Kandahar!" exclaimed Dr. Mookerji, reading the label. "Kandahar is quite famous place in India, although currently in Afghanistan. You are no doubt familiar with frolics of Great Alexander among almond groves of Kandahar. Or perhaps verses by lady poetess Laurenee Hope regarding almond blooms of—"

"Never mind the almond blooms," Dan Coffee said. "Just handle that bottle carefully. It may be deadly. And start with the assumption that you're looking for an aromatic benzene compound."

"Have no fears, Doctor Sahib. Analysis will be completed in twinkling of an eyebrow or shortly thereafter."

When Lieutenant Max Ritter dropped in that afternoon, Dr. Coffee's laboratory was redolent with reagents, standard solutions, and general toxicological activity.

"Is it murder, Doc?" the detective asked, as he parked one thigh on the edge of the pathologist's desk. "I can't hold my material witnesses much longer. They all got shysters waving law books at me, yelling 'Witnesses to what?' Do I book 'em, Doc?"

"I can't exclude drowning until tomorrow, Max," Dr. Coffee said. "The blood has to stand with picric acid overnight. And our toxicology tests won't be finished much before then."

"I think it's murder," Ritter declared. "That Devoto dame, first of all, is lying her head off. She says she never saw the inside of Suite 232, but I find her prints all over the place. So I bring in the night clerk of the Southside and

he identifies her as a dame who went up in the elevator about half an hour before the telegram came for Belinda, and came back down five minutes later. So the Devoto dame changes her story. She says a New York phone call came for Holliday in Boone Point, and it had to be answered right away because it involved a big deal in white pepper. She didn't know Holliday had sent the wire, so she thinks she'll find him with Belinda. The door to Belinda's apartment is open so she walks in, she says, and finds Belinda dead. So naturally she didn't want to talk about her visit."

"She's protecting Holliday, Max," Dr. Coffee said. "I think if we find that Belinda was murdered, and that Holliday may have killed her, Anne Devoto will confess that she did it herself. Why else would she leave her finger prints in Belinda's apartment?"

"Could be," Ritter said. "She's been Holliday's secretary for fifteen years, and I guess she's been in love with him for fourteen. But Holliday is lying, too. That blackout story of his is just horse-feathers. I find his car, all right, against a tree about a quarter-mile this side of Boone Point. But it was going about three miles an hour when it hit the tree. There's just a little dent in one fender. And it backs right away when we get in and step on the starter.

"So I start looking for this spice importer. No trace of him—not in Northbank, not in Boone Point. I call New Orleans. His home don't answer. His office ain't seen him in two days. Then I bring that night clerk from the Southside down to the station again and let him look at Holliday. 'That guy,' the clerk says, 'came into the lobby just as Miss Devoto stepped out of the elevator, coming down. I remember she grabbed his arm and they went out together.' So maybe she murdered Belinda to keep Holliday from taking her back, and talked him into inventing these cockeyed stories to protect *her*."

"*If* Belinda was murdered," Dr. Coffee said. "What about Manson?"

"I been holding him, too, while we checked his movements," the detective said, "but I can't keep him much longer. All his stories tally. He's going to marry that Bosworth babe who owns the shoe factory, all right. And she's out in California visiting relatives, like he says."

"And the young man Belinda was in love with?"

"Holliday and Manson back each other up on that one," Ritter replied. "They both think he was walking out on Belinda, and they both seem to think he was married, but nobody knows his name."

"Is the spice importer from New

Orleans married, Max?"

"He is. And I'm still trying to find him," the detective said. "Flash me when you know something, Doc."

Dr. Coffee flashed Lieutenant Ritter at ten o'clock next morning. "It's murder, Max," he said. "Belinda wasn't drowned. She was poisoned—by someone who knew her intimate habits .... No, it wasn't cyanide. I'll tell you all about it later. Can you bring all your suspects up here late this afternoon, after I've finished my hospital routine? About five o'clock .... Sure, bring the spice importer, too, if you find him. Meanwhile, don't book anybody and don't mention the word 'murder'."

"Another thing, Max. Since practically everybody in this case has been making free with the truth, I'd like you to do a little second-degree fibbing yourself. First, that bath-oil bottle is still in the apartment, as far as you know. Second, you're positively going to be out of town tonight. You have to leave in a hurry right after our conference. Okay, Max. See you at five."

Ritter had not turned up his spice importer by five o'clock, but he appeared at Dr. Coffee's laboratory with Warren Holliday, Roy Manson, and Anne Devoto. The two men had undergone marked transformation during their brief police custody. Holliday had aged ten years. His gray eyes were no longer just tired; they were frightened. And Manson had shed not only his acquired executive manner, but his homespun shyness as well. He was edgy, harassed, with a badgered, almost haunted look. Only Miss Devoto was her own calm self, demure and maidenly despite her vital, dark eyes. Those incongruous eyes, Dan Coffee reflected, burned with deep, suppressed emotions which might well find an outlet in murder.

"You no doubt know," Dr. Coffee began, "that Lieutenant Ritter suspected foul play in the death of Mrs. Holliday. I'll put your minds at ease by telling you at once that we have found no evidence of murder. We did find methemoglobin, a pathological factor produced in the blood by some diseases and certain poisons. Does anyone of you know if Mrs. Holliday has had a recent attack of ... say, malaria?"

Nobody remembered any serious illness.

"Then there is the possibility of anaphylaxis—a fatal allergy," the pathologist continued. "She may have been hypersensitive to some drug or cosmetic product. Mr. Holliday, did your ex-wife habitually use any particular brand of bath oil?"

"Belinda was crazy about any-

thing that had the scent of almonds," Holliday said. "Her favorite was something called 'Kiss of Kandahar.' She's used it for years."

Dr. Coffee turned to Max Ritter. "Max, are any of your men still on duty at the Southside?"

"Nope," the detective said. "I pulled Brody off at noon today."

"When you get a chance, I wish you'd go back to Mrs. Holliday's apartment and get me that bottle of bath-oil I noticed the other day. It was empty, but I may be able to squeeze out a drop or two and make an analysis."

"Is tomorrow okay?" Ritter asked. "I won't be in town tonight. I got to leave in half an hour for a quick trip upstate to pick up a prisoner."

"Tomorrow's fine," Dr. Coffee said. "There's no hurry. Meanwhile you'd better release these good people. There seems to be no valid reason for holding them further."

"You mean . . . ?" Warren Holliday rose from his chair. The mask of fear slipped from his face as he turned to Miss Devoto, seeking confirmation. She smiled, and he smiled back at her, wonderingly, as though seeing her for the first time. "You mean we can go?"

"If the Doc says you can go, you better high-tail it out of here quick," Ritter said, "with the thanks and apologies of the police department and three bucks a day material-witness fees."

The trio had hardly left the laboratory when Max Ritter said: "I guess we can cut the double-talk now, Doc. Do you and the Swami here know what was in that bottle?"

"Quite," Dr. Mookerji replied. "Analysed contents with own hands. Same contained mononitrobenzene, alias oil of mirbane, which is noisome protoplasmic poison of high-octane potency."

"Then why do we let these characters go, Doc?"

"Because if one of those three killed Belinda, the guilty person knows there was mononitrobenzene in the bath-oil bottle, and that I may be able to identify the poison if I can get my hands on it. Therefore I am convinced that the murderer will sneak back to Belinda's apartment tonight to get the bottle. You and I will be waiting there."

"Okay, Doc. Let's go, then. Swami, take any messages that come here for me."

"Doris!" The pathologist called his technician. "Will you—?"

"Yes, Doctor. I'll call Mrs. Coffee and tell her you'll be home late."

En route to the Southside Apartment Hotel, Ritter said: "Tell me more about this oil of whoosis, Doc."

"Mononitrobenzene," Dr. Cof-

fee said, "is called oil of mirbane in commerce. It used to serve as artificial bitter-almond flavoring in the days before federal food-and-drug laws. It's still used in perfumery, among other things. It decomposes the blood and acts on the central nervous system. It can be absorbed through the skin, causing death—sometimes within the hour—by paralysing the respiratory centers.

"Belinda's habit of reading in the bathtub would allow plenty of time for absorption of the pleasant-smelling poison. Therefore the murderer was well acquainted with her intimate habits."

"Like that spice importer I can't locate," Ritter said.

"Or any of the three persons you've just released. I think I know which one it is—for reasons you'll understand if I'm right."

Ritter parked his car behind the Southside. The two men entered through the basement and walked to the second floor by the fire stairs. Ritter opened Suite 232 with a pass key.

They had been sitting in the dark for more than an hour when there was a knock at the door, followed by a violent, persistent ringing of the bell.

"This upsets my theory," Dr. Coffee whispered.

"I'll upset that Swiss bell-ringer," Ritter growled. He flung open the door. "The Swami! Get inside here quick! What's the idea of—?"

"Have no fears, Leftenant," Dr. Mookerji said. The door closed again and he continued talking in the dark. "Took every precaution to conceal present destination, making surreptitious entrance via devious routes. However, two telegraphic messages arrived for you from police station, Leftenant, so decided to deliver same in person to maintain secrecy of present whereabouts. Herewith."

Paper crackled as the Hindu pressed something into the detective's hand. Ritter shoved two envelopes into his pocket. "I'll read 'em later," he said. "No lights now."

A series of thumps, followed by suppressed exclamations marked the progress of the Hindu in the darkness. The creak of sofa springs and a sigh announced the success of his search for a seat.

Another hour passed in silence before Dr. Coffee heard the sound he had been waiting for: the scrape of a key in a lock.

The door opened slowly. The narrow ribbon of light widened into a pale oblong silhouetting briefly a human figure which disappeared instantly as the door clicked shut. Dan Coffee held his breath. So apparently did Ritter and Dr. Mookerji. Only the breathing of the newcomer was audible in the darkness.

A flashlight beam speared the

gloom, and a luminous disc rippled across the rug. Then Max Ritter touched a switch and the living room was flooded with brightness.

"Hello, Mr. Manson," Dr. Coffee said. "I've been expecting you."

Roy Manson stood in the center of the room, blinking at the gun in Ritter's hand.

"I thought you'd have a key," Dr. Coffee continued, "to be able to substitute mononitrobenzene for Belinda's bath oil during her absence. And a man familiar with Belinda's intimate bathing habits *would* have a key. You were Belinda's lover, weren't you, Manson, for some time before she went South for a divorce?"

Manson turned on his frozen white smile. "We were just old friends," he said.

"Such close friends," Dr. Coffee said, "that Belinda got rid of her husband and came to Northbank to be near you—the man she expected to marry. But she wasn't going to sit by quietly, was she, just because you changed your mind while she was away and decided to marry the shoe heiress instead. When does your fiancee, Miss Bosworth, get back from California, Manson?"

Manson did not reply.

"Answer to said conundrum now reposing in Leftenant Ritter's pocket, perhaps," Dr. Mookerji volunteered.

"That's right. I wired the police chief at Beverly Hills today." Ritter fished the crumpled yellow envelopes from his pocket. He chuckled grimly as he tore them open. "Esther Bosworth is due back in Northbank tomorrow by air. So I guess Belinda got killed because she was going to spill her story to Miss Bosworth—about how she got a divorce to marry her lover, and how Manson was going to ditch her to marry a shoe factory instead."

"It was the shoe factory that first made me suspect Manson," Dr. Coffee said. "Since mononitrobenzene is used in dyeing leather for black shoes, Manson must be well acquainted with its deadly qualities. I'm sure you'll find drums of it at the factory to prove his access to the poison. And with the key to this apartment in his possession—"

The pathologist was interrupted by a childish whimper. Manson sank into a chair, tried to speak, then buried his dead-white face in his big hands.

"Hey, look!" Ritter said. "This other wire is from New Orleans. The spice importer ain't been near Northbank in months. He just got back from a three-day fishing trip in the Gulf." Ritter frowned. "Then who got Holliday over to Northbank on a wild-goose chase?"

"Roy Manson, of course," Dr. Coffee explained. "He knew that Holliday was still in love with

Belinda and was sure to go and see her once he was in Northbank and at loose ends. A visit from Holliday to his ex-wife on the day of her death would misdirect suspicion in case the subject of murder was brought up. Even Miss Devoto, who also knew that Holliday would gravitate to Belinda's apartment, suspected Holliday when she found Belinda dead. That's why she not only dreamed up that elaborate story about migraine and the phony auto accident, but even went all out to leave her own fingerprints here."

"A swell guy, this Manson." Ritter lit a cigarette and blew a contemptuous cloud of smoke at the man whimpering in the chair. "He even brought flowers for Belinda. I'd like him to meet my sister some time."

"Shoemakers," commented Dr. Mookerji, "should remain stuck to last."

"We're going to stick this shoemaker, all right," Ritter agreed. "And believe me, it's going to last."

"You know, Max," Dr. Coffee said, "when Holliday left my lab this afternoon, I think he realized for the first time that his secretary actually believed he had killed Belinda, and was ready to do anything to save his neck, even to taking the rap herself. I believe I'll ask Miss Devoto to come by the lab some day next week. Maybe Doris can give her a few pointers on fixing her hair. She's really quite a good-looking gal, and Holliday may not be aware of it."

■ ■