THE saint DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

NOV.
35c

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Laughing Buddha
by SAX ROHMER

Women Are Poison
by BRETT HALLIDAY

The Paper Trail
by COREY FORD

Death on the River
by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

The Smart Detective
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

MURDER IN THE FAMILY
A NEW SHORT NOVEL by CRAIG RICE

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A STANDARD PUBLICATION

Only yesterday, it seems, or not much more than a year ago, to be exact, I was sitting here batting out some light-hearted cracks about how tough it would be if this magazine ever became a monthly, because I would then have this chore to do a mercenary twelve times a year instead of a graceful and gentlemanly six. Little thinking, of course, that it would ever actually happen.

Well, WE ARE NOW A MONTHLY.

In actual fact, we have already been out monthly for three months; but on account of the suddenness of the transition and the peculiar logistics of publishing, this is the first chance I have had to make public comment about it.

At least, that's what the Publisher tells me. And that's also supposed to explain why certain stories promised in our July issue did not show up in the next number as forecast, for which we apologize and herewith deliver.

But to reassure those who may be about to take flight from the awful prospect of having to read a new Charteris story every month, I hasten to explain that this ordeal does not go with our new status. As a matter of fact, those six extra issues per year will provide the opportunity which I have long wanted to feature some really important new work by other writers with the prominence which it deserves.

Every other month, then, the Saint story will frankly be one which some of you may have met before—as, in this issue, THE SMART DETECTIVE. But the odds are that any of you under the age of 35 missed it when it first came out; and the others are welcome to skip it, and no hard feelings.

But in these alternate months, the place of honor will be given to such scoops as, this time, MURDER IN THE FAMILY, a brand-new short novel by Craig Rice. Craig has long been one of my own very favorite writers; and the honor of giving first publication to the latest episode in her ingenious and uproarious chronicles of that great legal beagle, John J. Malone, is one which I think sets a pretty fine cachet on our new policy.

Besides this, you will have noticed such distinguished supporting features as THE PAPER TRAIL, by Corey Ford; WOMEN ARE POISON, by Brett Halliday; DEATH ON THE RIVER, by Lawrence G. Blochman; and THE LAUGHING BUDDHA, by Sax Rohmer. Maybe you can get eyestrain just as easily from television, but our commercials are a lot shorter.

Leslie Charteris

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the smart detective

by . . . Leslie Charteris

A pretty girl, and emeralds in the mysterious night might have led to an amiable rogue's undoing. But daringly nimble was Templar's wit.

INSPECTOR CORRIO was on the carpet. This was a unique experience for him, for he had a rather distinguished record in the Criminal Investigation Department. While he had made comparatively few sensational arrests, he had acquired an outstanding reputation in the field of tracing stolen property, and incidentally in pursuit of this specialty had earned a large number of insurance company rewards which might have encouraged the kind-hearted observer to list a very human jealousy among the chief causes of his unpopularity. He was a very smug man about his successes, and he had other vanities which were even less calculated to endear him to the other detectives whom his inspired brilliance had more than once put in the shade.

None of these things, however, were sufficient to justify his immediate superiors in administering the official flattening which they had long been yearning to bestow. It was with some pardonable glow of satisfaction that Chief Inspector Claud Eustace Teal, who was as human as anyone else if not more so, had at last found

THE SAINT IN ONE OF HIS FAMED CLASSIC LONDON ROLES THAT MADE HIM THE MOST ADROIT OF BELOVED BANDITS.

From THE HAPPY HIGHWAYMAN. Published by Doubleday and Company, Inc.

the adequate excuse for which his soul had been pining wistfully for many moons.

For at last Inspector Corrio's smug zeal had overreached itself. He had made an entirely gratuitous, uncalled for, and unauthorized statement to a writer on the *Bulldog* which had been featured under two-column headlines and decorated with Inspector Corrio's favorite photograph of himself on the first inside sheet of that enterprising but sensation-loving weekly.

This copy of the paper lay on Mr. Teal's desk while he spoke his mind to his subordinate, and he referred to it several times for the best quotations which he had marked off in blue pencil in preparation for the interview.

One of these read: "If you ask me why this man Simon Templar was ever allowed to come back to England, I can't tell you. I don't believe in idealistic crooks any more than I believe in reformed crooks, and the Department has got enough work to do without having any more troubles of that kind on its hands. But I can tell you this. There have been a lot of changes in the system since Templar was last here, and he won't find it so easy to get away with his tricks as he did before."

Teal read out this and other extracts in his most scorching voice, which was a very scorching voice when he put his heart into it, and let his temper rise a bit.

"I hadn't heard the news about your being appointed Police Commissioner," Teal said heavily. "But I'd like to be the first to congratulate you. Of course a gentleman with your education will find it a pretty soft job."

Inspector Corrio shrugged his shoulders sullenly. He was a dark and rather flashily good-looking man who obviously had no illusions about the latter quality, with a wispy moustache and the slimmest figure consistent with the physical requirements of the Force.

"I was just having a chat with a friend," he said. "How was I to know he was going to print what I said? I didn't know anything about it until I saw it in the paper myself."

Teal turned to page sixteen and read out from another of his blue-pencilled panels: "Inspector Corrio is the exact reverse of the popular conception of a detective. He is a slender well-dressed man who looks rather like Clark Gable and might easily be mistaken for an idol of the silver screen.

"You didn't know that he'd say that either, did you?" Teal inquired in tones of acid that would have seared the skin of a rhinoceros.

Inspector Corrio's face reddened. He was particularly proud of his secretaryship of the Ponders End Amateur Players, and he had never been able to see anything humorous in his confirmed con-

viction that his destined home was in Hollywood and that his true vocation was that of the dashing hero of a box-office shattering series of romantic melodramas.

Having dealt comprehensively with these lighter points, Mr. Teal opened his shoulders and proceeded to the meatier business of the conference. In a series of well-chosen sentences, he went on to summarize his opinion of Inspector Corrio's ancestry, past life, present value, future prospects, looks, clothes, morals, intelligence, and assorted shortcomings, taking a point of view which made up in positiveness and vigor for anything which it may have lacked in absolute impartiality.

"And understand this," he concluded. "The Saint hasn't come home to get into any trouble. I know him and he knows me, and he knows me too well to try anything like that. And what's more, if anybody's got to take care of him I can do it. He's a grown-up proposition, and it takes a grown-up detective to look after him. And if any statements have to be made to the papers about it, I'll make them."

Corrio waited for the storm to pass its height, which took some time longer.

"I'm sure you know best, sir—especially after the way he's often been able to help you," he said humbly, while Teal glared at him speechlessly. "But I have a theory about the Saint."

"You have a what?" repeated Mr. Teal, as if Corrio had uttered an indecent word.

"A theory, sir. I think the mistake that's been made all along is in trying to get something on the Saint *after* he's done a job. What we ought to do is pick out a job that he looks likely to do, watch it, and catch him red-handed. After all, his character is so well known that any real detective ought to be able to pick out the things that would interest him with his eyes shut. There's one in that paper on your desk—I noticed it this morning."

"Are you still talking about yourself?" Teal demanded unsympathetically. "Because if so—"

Corrio shook his head. "I mean that man Oppenheim who owns the sweat shops. It says in the paper that he's just bought the Vanderwoude emerald collection for a quarter of a million pounds to give to his daughter for a wedding present. Knowing how Oppenheim got his money and knowing the Saint's line, it's my idea that the Saint will try to do something about those jewels."

"And try something so feeble that even a fairy like you could catch him at it," snarled Mr. Teal discouragingly. "Go back to do your detecting at Ponders End, Corrio. I hear there's a bad ham out there that they've been trying to find for some time."

If he had been less incensed

with his subordinate, Mr. Teal might have perceived a germ of sound logic in Corrio's theory, but he was in no mood to appreciate it. Two days later he did not even remember that the suggestion had been made; which was an oversight on his part, for it was at that time that Simon Templar did indeed develop a serious interest in the unpleasant Mr. Oppenheim.

This was because Janice Dixon stumbled against him late one night as he was walking home in the general direction of Park Lane through one of the dark and practically deserted streets of Soho. He had to catch her to save her from falling.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

He murmured some absent-minded commonplace and straightened her up, but her weight was still heavy on his hand. When he let her go she swayed towards him and clung on to his arm.

"I'm sorry," she repeated stupidly.

His first thought was that she was drunk, but her breath was innocent of the smell of liquor. Then he thought the accident might be only the excuse for a more mercenary kind of introduction; but he saw her face was not made up as he would have expected it to be in that case. It was a pretty face, but so pale that it looked ghostly in the semi-darkness between the far-spaced street lamps; and he saw that she had dark circles under her eyes and that her mouth was without lipstick.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"No—it's nothing. I'll be all right in a minute. I just want to rest."

"Let's go inside somewhere and sit down."

There was an all-night snack bar on the corner, and he took her into it. It seemed to be a great effort for her to walk, and another explanation of her unsteadiness flashed into his mind. He sat down at the counter and ordered two cups of coffee.

"Would you like something to eat with it?"

Her eyes lighted up, and she bit her lip. "Yes. I would. But—I haven't any money."

"I shouldn't worry about that. We can always hold up a bank."

The Saint watched her while she devoured a sandwich, a double order of bacon and eggs, and a slice of pie. She ate intently, quickly, without speaking. Without seeming to stare at her, his keen blue eyes took in the shadows under her cheek bones, the neat patch on one elbow of the cheap dark coat, the cracks in the leather of shoes which had long since lost their shape.

"I wish I had your appetite," he said gently, when at last she had finished.

She smiled for the first time, rather faintly. "I haven't had anything to eat for two days," she

said. "And I haven't had as much to eat as this all at once for a long time."

Simon ordered more coffee, and offered her a cigarette. He put his heels up on the top rung of his stool and leaned his elbows on his knees. She told him her name; but for the moment he didn't answer with his own.

"Out of a job?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"You aren't on a diet by any chance, are you?"

"Yes. A nice rich diet of doughnuts and coffee, mostly." She smiled rather wearily at his puzzlement. "I work for Oppenheim."

"Doesn't he pay you?"

"Oh, yes. But maybe you haven't heard of him. I'm a dressmaker. I work with fifty other girls in an attic in the East End, making handmade underwear. We work ten hours a day, six days a week, sewing. If you're clever and fast you can make two pieces in a day. They pay you one shilling apiece. You can buy them in Brompton Road for a pound or more, but that doesn't do us any good. I made twelve shillings last week, but I had to pay the rent for my room."

It was Simon Templar's first introduction to the economics of the sweat shop; and hardened as he was to the ways of chiselers and profiteers, the cold facts as she stated them made him feel slightly sick at his stomach. He realized that he had been too long in ignorance of the existence of such people as Mr. Oppenheim.

"Do you mean to say he gets people to work for him on those terms?" he said incredulously. "And how is it possible to live on twelve shillings a week?"

"Oh, there are always girls who'll do it if they can't get anything else. I used to get six pounds a week doing the same work in Kensington, but I was ill for a couple of weeks and they used it as an excuse to let me go. I didn't have any job at all for three months, and twelve shillings a week is better than nothing. You learn how to live on it. After a while you get used to being hungry; but when you have to buy shoes or pay bills, and the rent piles up for a few weeks, it doesn't do you any good."

"I seem to have heard of your Mr. Oppenheim," said the Saint thoughtfully. "Didn't he just pay a quarter of a million pounds for a collection of emeralds?"

Her lips flickered cynically. "That's the man. I've seen them, too. I've been working on his daughter's trousseau because I've got more experience of better class work than the other girls, and I've been going to the house to fit it. It's just one of those things that makes you feel like shooting people sometimes."

"You've been in the house, have you?" he said, even more

thoughtfully. "And you've seen these emeralds?" He stopped himself, and drew smoke from his cigarette to trickle it thoughtfully back across the counter. When he turned to her again, his dark reckless face held only the same expression of friendly interest that it had held before.

"Where are you going to sleep tonight?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. You see, I owe three weeks' rent now, and they won't let me in until I pay it. I expect I'll take a stroll down to the Embankment."

"It's healthy enough, but a bit draughty." He smiled at her suddenly, with disarming frankness. "Look here, what would you say if I suggested that we wander around to a little place by here where I can get you a room? It's quiet and clean, and I don't live there. But I'd like to do something for you. Stay there tonight and meet me for dinner tomorrow, and let's talk it over."

She met him the following evening; and he had to do very little more than keep his ears open to learn everything that he wanted to know.

"They're in Oppenheim's study —on the first floor. His daughter's room is next door to it, and the walls aren't very thick. He was showing them to her yesterday afternoon when I was there. He has a big safe in the study, but he doesn't keep the emeralds in it. I heard him boasting about how clever he was.

"He said, 'Anybody who came in looking for the emeralds would naturally think they'd be in the safe, and they'd get to work on it at once. It'd take them a long time to open it, which would give us plenty of chances to catch them; but anyhow they'd be disappointed. They'd never believe that I had a quarter of a million pounds' worth of emeralds just tucked away behind a row of books on a shelf. Even the man from the detective agency doesn't know it—he thinks the safe is what he's got to look after.' "

"So they have a private detective on the job, do they?" said the Saint.

"Yes. A man from Ingerbeck's goes in at seven o'clock every evening and stays till the servants are up in the morning. The butler's a pretty tough-looking customer himself, so I suppose Oppenheim thinks the house is safe enough in his hands in the day time . . . Why do you want to know all this?"

She looked at him with an unexpected clearness of understanding.

"Is that what you meant when you said you'd like to do something about me? Did you think you could do it if you got hold of those emeralds?"

The Saint lighted a cigarette with a steady and unhurried hand, and then his blue eyes came back

to her face for a moment before he answered with a very quiet and calculating directness.

"That was more or less my idea," he said calmly.

She was neither shocked nor frightened. She studied him with a sober and matter-of-fact attention as if they were discussing where she might find another job, but a restrained intenseness with which he thought he could sympathize came into her voice.

"I couldn't call anybody a criminal who did that," she said. "He really deserves to lose them. I believe I'd be capable of robbing him myself if I knew how to go about it. Have you ever done anything like that before?"

"I have had a certain amount of experience," Simon admitted mildly. "You may have read about me. I'm called the Saint."

"You? You're pulling my leg." She stared at him, and the amused disbelief in her face changed slowly into a weakening incredulity. "But you might be. I saw a photograph once. . . . Oh, if you only were! I'd help you to do it—I wouldn't care what it cost."

"You can help me by telling me everything you can remember about Oppenheim's household and how it works."

She had been there several times; and there were many useful things she'd remembered, which his skillful questioning helped to bring out. They went down into the back of his mind and stayed there while he talked about other things. The supremely simple, obvious, and impeccable solution came to him a full two hours later, when they were dancing on a small packed floor off Shaftesbury Avenue.

He took her back to their table as the three-piece orchestra expired, lighted a cigarette, and announced serenely:

"It's easy. I know just how Mr. Oppenheim is going to lose his emeralds."

"How?"

"They have a man in from Ingerbeck's at night, don't they? And he has the run of the place while everybody else is asleep. They give him breakfast in the morning when the servants get up, and then he takes a cigar and goes home. Well, the same thing can happen just once more. The guy from Ingerbeck's comes in, stays the night, and goes home. Not the usual guy, because he's sick or been run over by a truck or something. Some other guy. And when this other guy goes home, he can pull emeralds out of every pocket."

Her mouth opened a little. "You mean you'd do that?"

"Sure. Apart from the fact that I don't like your Mr. Oppenheim, it seems to me that with a quarter of a million's worth of emeralds, one could do a whole lot of amusing things which Oppenheim would never dream of. To a bloke with my imagination—"

"But when would you do it?"

He looked at his watch mechanically. "Eventually—why not now? Or at least this evening." He was almost mad enough to consider it; but he restrained himself. "But I'm afraid it might be asking for trouble. It'll probably take me a day or two to find out a few more things to get organized to keep him out of the way on the night I want to go in. I should think you could call it a date for Friday."

She nodded with a queer childish gravity. "I believe you'd do it. You sound very sure of everything. But what would you do with the emeralds after you got them?"

"I expect we could trade them in for a couple of hot dogs—maybe more."

"You couldn't sell them."

"There are ways and means."

"You couldn't sell stones like that. I'm sure you couldn't. Everything in a famous collection like that would be much too well known. If you took them into a dealer he'd recognize them at once, and then you'd be arrested."

The Saint smiled. It has never been concealed from the lynx-eyed student of these chronicles that Simon Templar had his own very human weaknesses; and one of these was a deplorable lack of resistance to the temptation to display his unique knowledge of the devious ways of crime, like a peddler spreading his wares in the marketplace, before a suitably impressed and admiring audience.

"Not very far from here, in Bond Street," he said, "there's a little bar where you can find the biggest fence in England any evening between six and eight o'clock. He'll take anything you like to offer him across the table, and pay top prices for it. You could sell him the Crown Jewels, if you had them. If I borrow Oppenheim's emeralds on Friday night I'll be rid of them by dinner time Saturday. And then we'll meet for a celebration and see where you'd like to go for a holiday."

He was in high spirits when he took her home much later to the lodging house where he had found her a room the night before. There was one virtue in the indulgence of his favorite vice; talking over the details of a coup which he was freshly planning in his mind helped him to crystallize and elaborate his own ideas, gave him a charge of confidence, and optimistic energy from which the final strokes of action sprung as swiftly and accurately as bullets out of a gun.

When he said good night to her he felt as serene and exhilarated in spirit as if the Vanderwoude emeralds were already his own. He was in such good spirits that he had walked a block from the lodging house before he remembered that he had left her without trying to induce her to take some money for her immediate

needs, and without making any arrangement to meet her again.

He turned and walked back. Coincidence, an accident of time involving only a matter of seconds, had made incredible differences to his life before. This, he realized later, was only another of those occasions when an overworked guardian angel seemed to play with the clock to save him from disaster.

The dimly lighted desert of the hall was surrounded by dense oases of potted palms, and one of these obstructions was in a direct line from the front door, so that anyone who entered quietly might easily remain unnoticed until he had circumnavigated this clump of shrubbery.

The Saint, who from the ingrained habit of years of dangerous living moved silently without conscious effort, was just preparing to step around this divinely inspired decoration when he heard someone speaking in the hall and caught the sound of a name which stopped him dead in his tracks. The name was Corrio.

Simon stood securely hidden behind the fronds of imported vegetation, and listened for as long as he dared to some of the most interesting lines of dialogue which he had ever overheard.

When he had heard enough, he slipped out again as quietly as he had come in, and went home without disturbing Janice Dixon. He would get in touch with her the next day: for the moment he had something much more urgent to occupy his mind.

It is possible that even Inspector Corrio's smugness might have been shaken if he had known about this episode of unpremeditated eavesdropping, but this unpleasant knowledge was hidden from him. His elastic self-esteem had taken no time at all to recover from the effects of Teal's reprimand. And when Mr. Teal happened to meet him on a certain Friday afternoon he looked as offensively sleek and self-satisfied as he had always been. It was beyond Teal's limits of self-denial to let the occasion go by without making the use of it to which he felt he was entitled.

"I believe Oppenheim has still got his emeralds," he remarked, with a certain feline joviality.

Inspector Corrio's glossy surface was unscratched. "Don't be surprised if he doesn't keep them much longer," he said. "And don't blame me if the Saint gets away with it. I gave you the tip once, and you wouldn't listen."

"Yes, you gave me the tip," Teal agreed benevolently. "When are you going out to Hollywood to play Sherlock Holmes?"

"Maybe it won't be so long now," Corrio said darkly. "Paragon Pictures are pretty interested in me—apparently one of their executives happened to see me playing the lead in our last show at the Ponders End Playhouse,

and they want me to take a screen test."

Mr. Teal grinned evilly. "You're too late," he said. "They've already made a picture of *Little Women.*"

He had reason to regret some of his jibes the next morning, when news came in that every single one of Mr. Oppenheim's emeralds had been removed from its hiding place and taken out of the house, quietly and without any fuss, in the pockets of a detective of whom the Ingerbeck agency had never heard.

They had, they said, been instructed by telephone that afternoon to discontinue the service, and the required written confirmation had arrived a few hours later, written on Mr. Oppenheim's own flowery letterhead and signed with what they firmly believed to be his signature. Nobody had been more surprised and indignant than they were when Mr. Oppenheim, on the verge of an apoplectic fit, had rung up Mr. Ingerbeck himself and demanded to know how many more crooks they had on their payroll and what the *blank blank* they proposed to do about it.

The imposter had arrived at the house at the usual hour in the evening, explained that the regular man had been taken ill, and presented the necessary papers to accredit himself. He had been left all night in the study, and let out at breakfast time according to the usual custom. When he went out he was worth a quarter of a million pounds as he stood up. He was, according to the butler's rather hazy description, a tallish man with hornrimmed glasses and a thick crop of red hair.

"That red hair and glasses is all nonsense," said Corrio, who was in Chief Inspector Teal's office when the news came in. "Just an ordinary wig and a pair of frames from any optician's. It was the Saint all right—you can see his style right through it. What did I tell you?"

"What the devil do you think you can tell *me?*" Teal roared back at him. Then he subdued himself. "Anyway, you're crazy. The Saint's out of business."

Corrio shrugged. "Would you like me to take the case, sir?"

"What, you?" Mr. Teal disrobed a wafer of chewing gum with the same distaste with which he might have undressed Inspector Corrio. "I'll take the case myself." He glowered at Corrio thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, if you know so much about it you can come along with me. And we'll see how clever you are."

It was a silent journey, for Teal was too full of a vague sort of wrath to speak, and Corrio seemed quite content to sit in a corner and finger his silky moustache with an infuriatingly tranquil air of being quite well satisfied with the forthcoming op-

portunity of demonstrating his own brilliance.

In the house they found a scene of magnificent confusion. There was the butler, who seemed to be getting blamed for having admitted the thief. There was a representative of Ingerbeck's, whose temper appeared to be fraying rapidly under the flood of wild accusations which Oppenheim was flinging at him. There was a very suave and imperturbable official of the insurance company which had covered the jewels.

And there was Mr. Oppenheim himself, a short, fat, yellow-faced man, dancing about like an agitated marionette, shaking his fists in an ecstasy of rage, screaming at the top of his voice, and accusing everybody in sight of crimes and perversions which would have been worth at least five hundred years at Dartmoor if they could have been proved.

Teal and Corrio had to listen while he unburdened his soul again from the beginning.

"And now what you think?" he wound up, "these dirty crooks, this insurance company, they say they don't pay anything. They say they repudiate the policy. Just because I tried to keep the emeralds where they couldn't be found, instead of leaving them in a safe that anyone can open."

"The thing is," explained the official of the insurance company, with his own professional brand of unruffled unctuousness, "that Mr. Oppenheim has failed to observe the conditions of the policy. It was issued on the express understanding that if the emeralds were to be kept in the house, they were to be kept in this safe and guarded by a detective from some recognized agency. Neither of these stipulations have been complied with, and in the circumstances—"

"It's a dirty swindle!" shrieked Oppenheim. "What do I care about your insurance company? I will cancel all my policies. I'll buy up your insurance company and throw you out in the street to starve. I'll offer my own reward for the emeralds. I will pay a hundred—I mean five thousand pounds to the man who brings back my jewels!"

"Have you put that in writing yet?" asked Inspector Corrio quickly.

"No. But I'll do so at once. Bah! I will show these dirty double-crossing crooks."

He whipped out his fountain pen and scurried over to the desk.

"Here, wait a minute," said Teal, but Oppenheim paid no attention to him. Teal turned to Corrio. "I suppose you have to be sure of the reward before you start showing us how clever you are," he said nastily.

"No, sir. But we have to consider the theory that the robbery might have been committed with

that in mind. Emeralds like those would be difficult to dispose of profitably. I can only think of one fence in London who'd handle a package of stuff like that."

"Then why don't you pull him in?" snapped Teal unanswerably.

"Because I've never had enough evidence. But I'll take up that angle this afternoon."

Corrio took no further part in the routine examinations and questionings which Teal conducted with dogged efficiency, but on the way back to Scotland Yard he pressed his theory again with unusual humility.

"After all, sir, even if this isn't one of the Saint's jobs, whoever did it, they're quite likely to deal with this chap I've got in mind, and we aren't justified in overlooking it. I know you don't think much of me, sir," said Corrio with unwonted candor, "but you must admit that I was right a few days ago when you wouldn't listen to me, and now I think it'd be only fair to give me another chance."

Almost against his will, Teal forced himself to be just.

"All right," he said grudgingly. "Where do we find this fence?"

"If you can be free about a quarter to five this afternoon," said Corrio, "I'd like you to come along."

Simon Templar walked north along Bond Street. He felt at peace with the world. At such times as this he was capable of glowing with a vast and luxurious contentment, the same deep and satisfying tranquility that might follow a perfect meal eaten in hunger or the drinking of a cool drink at the end of a hot day.

As usually happened with him, this mood had made its mark on his clothes; and he was a very beautiful and resplendent sight as he sauntered along the sidewalk with the brim of his hat tilted piratically over his eyes, looking like some swashbuckling medieval brigand who had been miraculously transported into the twentieth century and put into modern dress without losing the swagger of a less inhibited age.

In one hand he carried a brown paper parcel.

Chief Inspector Teal's pudgy hand closed on his arm near the corner of Burlington Gardens; and the Saint looked round and recognized him with a delighted and completely innocent smile.

"Why, hullo there, Calud Eustace," he murmured. "The very man I've been looking for." He discovered Corrio coming up out of the background, and smiled again. "Hi, Gladys," he said politely.

Corrio seized his other arm and worked him swiftly and scientifically into a doorway. There was a gleam of excitement in his dark eyes.

"It looks as if my theory was right again," he said to Teal.

Mr. Teal kept his grip of the Saint's arm. His rather froglike eyes glared at the Saint angrily, but not with the sort of anger that most people would have expected.

"You damn fool," Teal said, rather damn-foolishly. "What did you have to do it for? I told you when you came home that you couldn't get away with that stuff any more."

"What stuff?" asked the Saint innocently.

Corrio had grabbed the parcel out of his hand, and he was tearing it open with impatient haste.

"I think that this is what we're looking for," he said.

The broken string and torn brown paper fluttered to the ground as Corrio ripped them off. When the outer wrappings were gone he was left with a cardboard box. Inside the box there was a layer of crumpled tissue paper.

Corrio jerked it out and remained staring frozenly at what was finally exposed. There was a fully dressed and very lifelike doll with features that were definitely familiar. Tied around its neck on a piece of ribbon was a ticket on which was printed: "Film Star Series, No. 12: CLARK GABLE. 2/11."

An expression of delirious and incredulous relief began to creep over the chubby curves of Teal's pink face—much the same expression as might have come into the face of a man who, standing close by the crater of a rumbling volcano, had seen it suddenly explode only to throw off a shower of fairy lights and colored balloons. The corners of his mouth began to twitch, and a deep vibration like the tremor of an approaching earthquake began to quiver over his chest.

Corrio's face was black with fury. He tore out the rest of the packing paper and squeezed out every scrap of it between his fingers, snatched the doll out of the box and twisted and shook it to see if anything could have been concealed inside it. Then he flung that down also among the mounting fragments of litter on the ground. He thrust his face forward until it was within six inches of the Saint's.

"Where are they?" he snarled savagely.

"Where are who?" asked the Saint densely.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about," Corrio said through his teeth. "What have you done with the stuff you stole from Oppenheim's last night? Where are the Vanderwoude emeralds?"

"Oh, them," said the Saint mildly. "That's a funny question for *you* to ask." He leaned lazily on the wall against which Corrio had forced him, took out his cigarette case, and looked at Teal.

"As a matter of fact," he said calmly, "that's what I wanted to see you about. If you're particularly interested I think I could

show you where they went to."

The laugh died away on Teal's lips, to be replaced by the startled and hurt look of a dog that has been given an unexpected bone and then kicked almost as soon as it has picked it up.

"So you know something about that job," he said slowly.

"I know plenty," said the Saint. "Let's take a cab."

Templar straightened up off the wall. For a moment Corrio looked as if he would pin him back there, but Teal's intent interest countermanded the movement without speaking or even looking at him.

Teal was puzzled and disturbed, but somehow the Saint's quiet voice and unsmiling eyes told him that there was something there to be taken seriously. He stepped back, and Simon walked past him unhindered and opened the door of a taxi standing by the curb.

"Where are we going to?" asked Teal, as they turned into Piccadilly.

The Saint grinned gently, and settled back in his corner with his cigarette. He ignored the question.

"Once upon a time," he said presently, "there was a smart detective. He was very smart because after some years of ordinary detecting he discovered that the main difficulty about the whole business was that you often have to find out who committed a crime, and this is liable to mean a lot of hard work and a good many disappointments.

"So this guy, being a smart fellow, thought of a much simpler method, which was more or less to persuade the criminals to tell him about it themselves. For instance, suppose a crook got away with a tidy cargo of loot and didn't want to put it away in the refrigerator for icicles to grow on. He could bring his problem to our smart detective, and our smart detective could think it over and say, 'Well, Featherstonehaugh, that's pretty easy. All you do is just go and hide this loot in a dustbin on Greek Street or hang it on a tree in Hyde Park, or something like that, and I'll do a very smart piece of detecting and find it. Then I'll collect the reward and we'll go shares in it.'

"Usually this was pretty good business for the crook, the regular fences being as miserly as they are; and the detective didn't starve on it either. But somehow it never seemed to occur to the other detectives to wonder how he did it."

He finished speaking as the taxi drew up at a small and dingy hotel near Charing Cross.

Mr Teal was sitting forward, with his round moon-face looking like a surprised plum-pudding and his eyes fixed sleepily on the Saint's face.

"Go on," he said gruffly.

Simon shook his head and indicated the door. "We'll change

the scene again. Just be patient."

He got out and paid off the driver, and the other two followed him into the hotel. Corrio's face seemed to have gone paler under its olive tan.

Simon paused in the lobby and glanced at him. "Will you ask for the key, or shall I? It might be better if you asked for it," he said softly, "because the porter will recognize you. Even if he doesn't know you by your right name."

"I don't quite know what you're talking about," Corrio said coldly, "but if you think you can wriggle out of this with any of your wild stories, you're wasting your time." He turned to Teal. "I have got a room here, sir. I just use it sometimes when I'm kept in town late and I can't get home. It isn't in my own name, because—well, sir, you understand—I don't always want everybody to know who I am. This man has got to know about it somehow, and he's just using it to try to put up some crazy story to save his own skin."

"All the same," said Teal, with surprising gentleness, "I'd like to go up. I want to hear some more of this crazy story."

Corrio turned on his heel and went to the desk. The room was on the third floor—an ordinary cheap hotel room with the usual revolting furniture to be found in such places.

Teal glanced briefly over its salient features as they entered, and looked at the Saint again. "Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

The Saint sat down on the edge of the bed and blew smoke-rings.

"It would probably have gone on a lot longer," he said, "if this smart detective hadn't thought one day what a supremely brilliant idea it woud be to combine business with profit. And have the honor of convicting a most notorious and elusive bandit known as the Saint—not forgetting, of course, to collect the usual cash reward in the process.

"So he used a very good-looking young damsel—you ought to meet her sometime, Claud, she really is a peach—having some idea that the Saint would never run away very fast from a pretty face. In which he was damn right. . . . She had a very well-planned hard-luck story, too, and the whole act was most professionally staged. It had all the ingredients that a good psychologist would bet on to make the Saint feel that stealing Oppenheim's emeralds was the one thing he had left glaringly undone in an otherwise complete life.

"Even the spadework of the job had already been put in, so that she could practically tell the Saint how to pinch the jewels. So that our smart detective must have thought he was sitting pretty, with a sucker all primed to do the dirty work for him and take the rap if anything went wrong—besides being still there to take the

rap when the smart detective made his arrest and earned the reward if everything went right."

Simon smiled dreamily at a particularly repulsive print on the wall for a moment.

"Unfortunately I happened to drop in on this girl one time when she wasn't expecting me, and I heard her phoning a guy named Corrio to tell him I was well and truly hooked," he said. "On account of having read in the *Bulldog* some talk by a guy of the same name about what he was going to do to me, I was naturally interested."

Corrio started forward. "Look here, you—"

"Wait a minute." Mr. Teal held him back with an unexpectedly powerful arm. "I want the rest of it. Did you do the job, Saint?"

Simon shook his head sadly. It was at that point that his narrative departed, for the very first time, from the channels of pure veracity in which it had begun its course—but Mr. Teal was not to know this.

"Would I be such a sap, Claud?" he asked reproachfully. "I knew I could probably get away with the actual robbery, because Corrio would want me to. But as soon as it was over, knowing in advance who'd done it, he'd be chasing round to catch me and recover the emeralds. So I told the girl I'd thought it all over and decided I was too busy."

The Saint sighed, as if he was still regretting a painful sacrifice. "The rest is pure theory. But this girl gave me a cloak room ticket from Victoria Station this morning and asked me if I'd collect a package this afternoon and take it along to an address on Bond Street. I didn't do it because I had an idea what would happen; but my guess would be that if somebody went along and claimed the parcel they'd find the emeralds in it.

"Not all the emeralds, probably because that'd be too risky if I got curious and opened it; but some of them. The rest are probably here—I've been looking around since we've been here, and I think there's some new and rather amateurish stitching in the upholstery of that chair. I could do something with that reward myself."

Corrio barred his way as he got off the table. "You stay where you are," he grated. "If you're trying to get away with some smart frame-up—"

"Just to make sure," said the Saint, "I fixed a dictagraph under the table yesterday. Let's see if it has anything to say."

Teal watched him soberly as he prepared to play back the record. In Chief Inspector Teal's mind was the memory of a number of things which he had heard Corrio say, which fitted into the picture which the Saint offered him much too vividly to be easily denied. Then the dictagraph be-

gan to play. And Teal felt a faint shiver run up his spine at the uncannily accurate reproduction of Corrio's voice.

"Smart work, Leo . . . I bet these must be worth every penny of the price on them."

The other voice was unfamiliar.

"Hell, it was easy. The layout was just like you said. But how're you goin' to fix it on the other chap?"

"That's simple. The girl gets him to fetch a parcel from Victoria and take it where I tell her to tell him. When he gets there, I'm waiting for him."

"You're not goin' to risk givin' him all that stuff?"

"Oh, don't be so wet. There'll only be just enough to frame him. Once he's caught, it'll be easy enough to plant the rest somewhere and find it."

Corrio's eyes were wide and staring.

"It's a plant!" he screamed hysterically. "That's a record of the scene I played in the film test I made yesterday."

Simon smiled politely, cutting open the upholstery of the armchair and fishing about for a leather pouch containing about two hundred thousand pounds' worth of emeralds which should certainly be there unless somebody else had found them since he chose that ideal hiding-place for his loot.

"I only hope you'll be able to prove it, Gladys," he murmured; and watched Teal grasp Corrio's arm with purposeful efficiency.

We're sure you'll agree that the Saint is a world traveler without peer, sparkingly at his best in matching wits with the most accomplished of cosmopolitan scoundrels . . . In our next issue, our Brighter Buccaneer spars with crime in one of the most exotically exciting adventures of his career to the beating of Haitian voodoo drums on an island of magic. You won't want to miss THE QUESTING TYCOON, *a brand new Leslie Charteris saga pulsing with all the dark mystery and suspense of a West Indian waltz macabre under a red Caribbean sky . . . And there's a truly great short novel by Hugh Pentecost—*TWO WERE MISSING, *in the very same issue, as chilling a study in cold blooded murder as we've brought you in many a moon . . . Also, there are nine diversified crime short stories.*

murder in the family

by . . . Craig Rice

Malone had no real proof of his client's innocence. Only the trust in a girl's tormented eyes, and a dropped stitch in Death's fabric.

IT DIDN'T SEEM exactly fair, or even quite honest, for spring to come so abruptly on the last day of February. True, the trees were still bare. But they were threatening to burst into bloom any week now, and the damp, muddy brown grass was hinting that it just might, if given a little encouragement, turn green again.

Yes, there was spring in the very feel of the unexpectedly warm air, and Ann McKeon walked briskly along Chicago's lake front, humming quietly to herself and throwing her gay plaid coat open to the warm sunlight and the soft breeze. There would be more storms, more snow and chilling rain, but not on this one first day.

She had come at last to a decision that matched the defiant independence of the spring weather. In spite of the unpleasant interview she'd just had in the old mansion on Lake Shore Drive, in spite of Clare Robinet and her son Noel, she wasn't going to let Andrew's mother dictate his life for him. They were going to be married whether old Mrs. Acton

To say that a brand new J. J. Malone detective novel by the justly famed CRAIG RICE *is an event of some importance would be a grossly libellous understatement. It is much more than an event. It is one of those incredible windfalls which makes editors rejoice in their calling and often sets them to humming poetry. We've grounds, we think, for our lyric enthusiasm.*

liked it or not and nothing could alter her decision.

Clare Robinet had stopped her in the hall and said, "You're making a tragic, terrible mistake."

Noel Robinet, waiting on the steps, had pleaded, "Ann, you mustn't do this thing. Think of me. Don't you realize what you mean to me?"

Even Ellen, the stiffly-starched blonde nurse had given her a look that was a curious combination of ugly dislike and a strange pity.

But it wasn't any of their concern. It was all strictly between Andrew Acton and herself. She wished Andrew were back from his trip to Tomahawk. Still, she had always been capable of handling her own affairs and her own problems.

She half turned, thinking about going back, and facing them all. She was still hesitating when the squad car pulled up to a stop beside her. She heard a voice saying, above the sputter of the police radio, "That's the girl, all right. A redhead. Plaid coat, tan suit."

Another voice asked, "Are you Miss Ann McKeon?"

She looked up, startled and a little frightened. "Yes. Why?"

"Get in, please." One of the two uniformed officers got out and grasped her firmly by the arm.

"But—why?" Her voice was urgent. "Is anything wrong?"

"They'll explain down at headquarters," the officer behind the wheel told her. "They just want to ask you a few questions. Get in, now."

"And please don't give us any trouble, Miss McKeon," his companion added.

She got in meekly. What was happening? Why should she give anyone—the police least of all—any trouble? "Please—what is this all about?" She pleaded. "I don't understand."

The car started. "All we know is that there's a call out for you, Miss," the driver said almost soothingly. "It will all be explained to you."

A few clouds hurried across the sky, hiding the sun for a moment. There was a sudden chill in the breeze. Spring had come, briefly, and now was gone beyond recall.

"Has anything happened to Andrew—to Mr. Acton?" It was her first and frightening thought.

"I don't know," the officer beside her said. "If I did know—I couldn't tell you."

Ann McKeon gripped her hands tightly together. By the time the police car stopped at the big, forbidding-looking building, she had steeled herself to face whatever might be awaiting her. But not, she suddenly discovered, a clamorous barrage of newspaper photographers. Instinctively she tried to hide her face.

"Please," she begged of them breathlessly. "Please *don't!*"

A slender, dark-haired young man elbowed his way to her side,

and caught at her arm. "Ann, darling!" Noel Robinet gasped. "I rushed down here as soon as I could. You've got to have a lawyer. I'll get you one. I'll help you."

The two policemen escorted her hastily on out of earshot.

The word on the door they opened read HOMICIDE DEPARTMENT.

Quickly the door opened, and closed behind her.

There were two men in the office. Despite her fright and bewilderment she scrutinized them intently. The one behind the desk was broad-shouldered and red-faced, with curly, silver-grey hair. He scowled at her as she came in. The other was a smaller, almost paunchy man, with kindly eyes, and rumpled dark hair. His suit was wrinkled and there was a sprinkling of ashes on his vest. He rose to his feet with a gesture of reassurance.

"My dear girl," he said in a comforting voice, "don't talk to anyone until you've talked to me." He added, "I'm John J. Malone."

"But you are not her lawyer," the big man growled.

"I am now, von Flanagan," Malone said smoothly and serenely, "and I'm warning you in advance that you can't hold this young lady for five minutes, if that."

"Malone!" von Flanagan protested. "She was known to be in the Acton house. She was heard quarreling with Mrs. Acton—loudly and furiously. She swore to everybody that she was going to marry Andrew Acton, and that nobody could stop her. And not very long after she left, Mrs. Acton was found dead in her wheel chair, smothered with her own pillow."

Ann gave a horrified little gasp. Malone took her gently by the arm, and guided her deftly into the nearest chair.

"Look at her," the police officer went on furiously. "Did you ever see a woman with that color hair who didn't have a temper? She's got a motive, a temper, and she was there. That's enough for me to hold her."

"On what charge," Malone demanded, still smoothly. "Having red hair?"

"Held for questioning," von Flanagan raged.

"Please," Ann McKeon said. "Listen to me, both of you. I didn't—"

They ignored her. Malone said, "I don't want to go to all the bother of getting a writ. She's walking out of here with me. I'll produce her any time you need her. Haven't you been told, in all these years, that the law doesn't permit you to hold an innocent person?"

"She isn't innocent," von Flanagan insisted stubbornly.

"Prove it," Malone said, just as stubbornly.

Again Ann entreated, "Please

—" and again both men ignored her.

"Damn you, Malone," von Flanagan said. "Why do you always turn up to put obstacles in my way? Especially when everything is so simple." He scowled, his red face taking on an ominous, darker tinge. "Heaven knows I never wanted to be a cop. I never would have been a cop except the alderman owed my old man dough. That's the only reason I didn't get to be an undertaker like I'd planned—"

"If you knew how many times I've heard this," Malone said to Ann McKeon, with a despairing shrug.

Von Flanagan went right on, "—and I didn't want to be promoted, and above all, I didn't want Homicide." His voice rose belligerently. "And then along comes a nice simple little killing that an idiot could understand, and you get everything all jammed up. Damn it, *go away*. Not *you*," he added hastily to Ann McKeon, and was silent.

Malone began to slip the cellophane from a cigar, very slowly and deliberately. "Keep this in mind, von Flanagan," he said. "This little lady's uncle writes a newspaper column. Do you remember that famous poker game up in Maywood—"

"That's enough!" von Flanagan glared. "Shut up, can't you?"

"And then there was that time down in Blue Island," the little lawyer went on relentlessly, "when you and Klutchetsky—"

"Blackmail!" von Flanagan roared. He gave Malone a look that needed to be sent to a laundry, fast. "Just one thing, Malone. Don't dare try to take her out of the county. That's all." He paused an instant, then added with false heartiness, "Too bad all this had to happen, Miss McKeon. Tell your uncle I always enjoy his column."

There were several photographers still waiting in the hall. Malone took Ann McKeon's arm, and waved at them impartially and magnificently.

"It was all just a little misunderstanding," he assured them. "My client here had nothing to do with it."

Ann tried her best to smile, but failed miserably.

The dark-haired young man was also waiting. "Ann," he said urgently. "They wouldn't let me talk to you. Are you all right?"

She paused briefly. "Mr. Malone—this is Noel Robinet—Mrs. Acton's nephew."

The young man eyed Malone coldly. "So you've already got a lawyer. I suppose it was advisable. But if there is anything I can do—"

"There's nothing anybody needs to do," Malone told him firmly, "except me. Let me do the worrying." He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was

destined to do more worrying than von Flanagan, as the case progressed.

"Ann, let me take you home," Noel Robinet pleaded.

"Not now," Malone said. He took a slightly firmer grip on Ann's arm, and steered her to the door. "From now on, young lady, talk only to your lawyer. And don't talk to him while we're in the cab."

"Where are we going?" she said as the cab started off. "Please, I want to go home," she added, in an unhappy little voice.

"No," Malone said firmly. "Not just yet. You'll be driven to the ends of your wits by reporters, curious strangers, and possibly the police if von Flanagan should decide to call my bluff."

She smiled wanly. "I hope he won't."

"Just trust me," Malone said, patting her very gently on the shoulder, and leaning forward to give an address to the driver.

II

A few minutes later the cab drew up in front of the hotel where Malone had lived for more years than he liked to think about. He ushered her up to the desk and said, "George, this is Miss Mehitable McGillicuddy, from Kankakee, Nebraska."

"Kankakee is in Illinois," the desk clerk reminded him, grinning broadly. "Room seven thirteen. I believe that's where we always hide out your clients and witnesses."

"No visitors." Malone grinned back. "And no phone calls, except from me. If she wants to order anything, send Willie up with it. Nobody else, understand?"

"As if I didn't know by now," George said, and handed him the key.

It wasn't until the door of the hotel room had been closed and locked that the first tears came into Ann's eyes. "I don't know what this is all about, Mr. Malone. It all happened in such a hurry. I just don't understand."

"Don't try, yet," Malone told her. "Just make yourself comfortable and let's see if we can't sort it out from the beginning. You—" he paused. "I'm going on the theory that you didn't kill her."

"I didn't. You've got to believe me."

"Sit down and stop wringing your hands like that," Malone grunted, without harshness. He relit his cigar and said, "You went to see Mrs. Acton this morning. Did you or did you not quarrel with her, *loudly and furiously,* as von Flanagan claims?"

"I didn't. I—oh, I guess I did." Ann dropped down in the nearest chair. "She was trying to keep Andrew from marrying me," she went on at last, in a very small voice. "It wasn't fair of her, Mr. Malone. He has a right to live his own life." She pawed through

her purse for a handkerchief, found one, and said, "I'm afraid I did lose my temper. I stormed out of the house, and walked along the lake front to calm down. And it was such a wonderful day, I couldn't have stayed angry at anybody. I don't have such a really bad temper, Mr. Malone. And I had just about decided to go back and try to reason with her, when a police car swung in to the curb."

The little lawyer walked to the window and stood a moment looking out at the rooftops of the Loop. The sky had turned grey now. The day that had promised spring and ultimately summer had changed its mind, and was gloomily hinting at snow.

"And just a few minutes after you left," he said, "she was found murdered." He crushed his cigar out savagely on the window-sill, threw it in the wastebasket, and reached for another.

"But no one can seriously believe I did it," the white-faced girl said, desperately. "I quarreled with her, yes. But I wouldn't have murdered Andrew's mother."

Malone turned around, and stared at her. At last he said very gently, "You might as well know this right now, and from me. She wasn't his mother. She was his wife."

Ann McKoen stared at him, stricken. Then she said, "I think I'm going to faint," and immediately did.

The lawyer had only one unfailing remedy for fainting clients. He raced down the hall to his own room, and came rushing back with a pint of gin. She was half-sitting up when he returned, and waved away the glass he held out to her.

"Sorry," she said, smiling wanly. "I'm allergic to the juniper. I break out in a rash."

"Shall I send Willie out for Scotch?" Malone asked helpfully, wondering if his bankroll would hold out. If she made a practice of fainting—

She shook her head. "Another allergy—to barley." The smile grew a little brighter—not much, though. "I'm also allergic to eggs, cheese and feathers. Which reminds me. Would you mind sticking this pillow out in the hall? If you don't I'll get asthma in about an hour."

"I hope you're not allergic to lawyers," Malone said gallantly. He placed the pillow outside the door. "How about beer, wine, and rum? Nothing is too good for a new client."

"I'll settle for a glass of water," she said. Her face grew deathly serious again. "You were telling the truth? That old woman in a wheelchair was *Andrew's wife?*"

Malone nodded. "She was in a wheelchair, but she wasn't an old woman. Actually, she was thirty-four. You see, she had been in that wheelchair long enough to make anyone look old."

"I didn't know," Ann almost

whispered, her face very pale now. "I didn't even dream."

"It was a tragic accident, eleven years ago," Malone explained gently. "They had been married a little less than a year. From all reports, Andrew Acton had been devotion itself."

Ann's hazel eyes clouded. "Malone—how do you know so much about them?"

He sat down in the other chair. "Because Andrew Acton was a client of mine—in a manner of speaking. He came to me about a stock transfer. I sent him to another lawyer—it wasn't exactly in my line—but we got to be friends."

"Is that why you were with the police this morning? Did you know?"

"Telepathy isn't one of my many talents," Malone assured her, shaking his head. "I just happened to be in von Flanagan's office when the word came in, and I stayed."

"I'm glad you did."

"So am I. Now stop getting ready to cry." He frowned, but not at her. "Did he ever tell you that she was his mother?"

She shook her head, slowly and thoughtfully. "No, I don't think so. No, I'm sure he didn't. He just introduced me to her as *Mrs. Acton.* I guess I just assumed she was his mother. That wheelchair —everything about her. Her hair was almost white, and she was so very thin and frail. And he—he seemed so young."

"He *is* young," Malone said. "He's thirty-three." He flicked an ash toward the wastebasket, and missed. "You didn't really know much about him, did you?"

She sat thinking for a minute. "Not much of anything, really," she said. "I met him at a friend's party. He took me out a few times and I liked him—a lot. He'd only been in Chicago a little while. The house up in the Drive was rented."

Malone nodded. "I know."

"He invited me there for dinner, and that's when I first met her. I didn't really like her, and I could feel that she didn't like me. Now, I know why. And I met the rest of the family."

"The rest of the family," Malone repeated. "Who are they?"

"There's Noel—Noel Robinet. You met him this morning. He's very nice, really. But he has a silly idea that he—well, that he's in love with me."

"Small wonder," Malone said admiringly.

She blushed prettily. "He's a—well, he doesn't do anything, actually. I think he gambles, some. Then there's his mother, Clare—Mrs. Acton's sister. She's nice, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't like me either. I thought Noel was Andrew's cousin, but now he's Andrew's nephew." She paused, then said unhappily, "It's all so mixed up."

"Everything gets unmixed in time," Malone assured her, "even blessings. Go on about the household."

"Clare and Noel live there. And there's Ellen, Mrs. Acton's nurse. She's tall, blonde and pretty. And very stiff. And sort of unfriendly."

"I know exactly what you mean," Malone said, nodding sagely. He knew a lot more about tall, unfriendly blondes than he cared to admit to anyone.

"Then there's a Mrs. Naysmith." Ann went on. "She's an aunt or something of Andrew's, and she manages the house. She's nice, I guess, but kind of cool too." She paused, thought an instant, and said, "That's about all, except servants. I met Andrew's partner, Mr. Henderson. I liked him."

"I like him too," Malone said, smiling at her. "I get the definite impression that the atmosphere in the Acton household was not one of unrestrained cordiality exactly."

She frowned. "Oh, everybody was pleasant enough to me. It was just—well—" She drew in her breath sharply. "Andrew told me he wished he could marry me. But she would never let him. I didn't know then what he meant. I thought she was one of those awful, possessive mothers who don't want their sons to fall in love!" The last words came out in a half-choked, gasping rush.

"Stop it," Malone snapped. "*Stop* it!"

He got up, and began prowling restlessly around the room, picking up an ashtray and putting it down, straightening a picture, fussing with the window-shade.

Suddenly he stopped and said, "Tell me. Did Acton ever ask you for any money?"

Ann stared at him, startled. "In a way he did. He managed an investment for me. I inherited some money—almost twenty thousand dollars. He said that he'd invest it for me in some kind of mining property in Canada."

They stared at each other as the implications of what she had said began to sink in.

"But I trusted him," she emphasized. "I would have trusted him with my life."

"I'd trust Andy Acton myself," Malone said, "especially with money."

"Mr. Malone, I know it's the customary thing when you have to have a lawyer to give him something right away at the beginning."

"We'll talk about that later," Malone reassured her airily, hating himself.

"But I want to talk about it now. You see, I don't have any other money. Not enough, I mean, for anything like this. I'm an orphan. Except for Uncle Ned I haven't anybody, and I don't see him very often. I have a little bit of money from my father, but it just about pays the rent on my apartment. And I have a job that my uncle got for me on a newspaper. I sell subscriptions over

the telephone. But maybe I won't even have that any more, after this."

"I told you I'd do the worrying," Malone said. He added, "You'll get your money back from Andrew Acton."

"I don't want to talk to him about it. I don't want to talk to anyone, ever, not as long as I live."

"Here now!" Malone said. "Don't blow a fuse." He looked out the window again.

She calmed down obediently, and the fragile smile tried to come back. "And just this morning, it was spring."

"It will be again," Malone said softly, "and many times. It always has."

He puffed furiously at his cigar, then said suddenly, almost brutally, "The police are going to say you killed her because she was his wife. And it's only your word against theirs that you thought all along she was his mother."

"Mr. Malone—"

He waved her to silence. "They're going to say a lot of things, my dear. That Andy Acton lost all your money for you, leaving you only slightly less than flat broke, and that you figured you couldn't get it back except by marrying him. Or that twenty grand isn't a lot of money even if you do get it back, and you wanted to marry a lot more. Or just that you were insanely in love with him—he *is* an attractive guy—and, in any case, the only way you could marry him was to murder his wife, because she wouldn't give him up."

"Please," she interrupted desperately. "Mr. Malone, she said she'd never let me marry Andrew, *never*. And I told her that I was going to in spite of everything. Clare heard me say it—and Noel—and the nurse, I guess, and even Mrs. Naysmith. But that isn't what I meant at all."

Malone said, "My dear girl, you can say a hundred times that you didn't know she was his wife, and that you didn't kill her, but right now you can't do a damned thing to prove it."

He started toward the door, turned abruptly, and said, "Stay put."

"But Mr. Malone," she said miserably, "what are you going to do?"

"Something," he promised. "I'm going to be busier than a she wolf with ten cubs, trying to keep warm in a Montana blizzard. But don't *you* worry."

III

On his way to the elevator he reflected that the something was going to have to be done very fast and very effectively, and right at the moment he couldn't think for the life of him what it was going to be.

George spoke to him from the desk. "Malone, that guy von Flanagan tried to call you up. I

told him you came in, and went right out again, alone."

"Thanks," Malone said. "If anyone else calls tell 'em the same, and more of the same. And you know nothing about Miss McGillicuddy."

He paused at the newsstand, with an idea of sending up the daily newspapers. One look at them changed his mind.

The front page headlines and pictures: NED MC KOEN'S NIECE INVOLVED IN SOCIETY SLAYING, GIRL ACCUSED OF WIFE MURDER, and SOCIALITE SLAIN, SPOUSE'S SWEETHEART SUSPECTED were flattering enough, even to himself, and the accompanying stories were not too bad. But something new had been added.

FORTUNE MISSING FROM MURDERED WOMAN'S HOME. *It had just been discovered by the police and Inspector Daniel von Flanagan that something over seventy-eight thousand dollars in jewelry and valuable furs were missing from the home of the recently deceased Mrs. Grace Acton.*

Ann McKoen was stirred up enough already, Malone decided. He settled for a half-dozen magazines for her, and bought all the newspapers for himself . . .

Maggie, his black-haired secretary, was talking into the phone when he came into the office. She signaled him to be silent and said, "No, I don't know where he's gone, and I don't know when he'll be back."

"How much do I owe who?" Malone asked as she hung up.

"A lot, and to everybody," she told him. "But that was von Flanagan."

"Not a surprise," Malone said. "Next time add one piece of information. You don't know where Ann McKoen is, either."

"Nor Judge Crater nor Charlie Ross," Maggie said acidly. "And another thing, Malone—"

"I know, you don't know when you're going to get paid. Well, I do. Very soon. Now stop worrying." He wondered why he kept on telling people not to worry.

Malone closed the door of his inner office, and spread the papers on his desk. Except for the robbery, they didn't tell him much that he didn't know already. The late Mrs. Acton's nurse, Ellen Olsen, had discovered the murder when she had entered Mrs. Acton's bedroom to take her patient a cup of broth. He checked off the details as he read them. The police. The pillow. Ann McKoen picked up for questioning. Andrew Acton away. John J. Malone retained as lawyer. Possible motives. The police again, promising early developments. Altogether, nothing helpful.

The jewelry and furs. Their disappearance had been discovered when Mrs. Parke Naysmith, housekeeper and relative of the deceased, had suggested that robbery could be a possible motive. The vault had been

opened—as near as Malone could make out, everyone in the family knew the combination—and found empty.

Only one piece of fur was involved, and that had been in a moth-proof, burglar-proof storage compartment. It was a chinchilla wrap valued at thirteen thousand dollars. Inexpensive for chinchilla, Malone reflected. Neither the vault nor the storage compartment had been opened for some time, and the looting might or might not have taken place recently. The storage compartment had held other furs, and they had not been disturbed.

The only other piece of important information was that tomorrow would have been Andrew and Grace Acton's twelfth wedding anniversary. There was a picture of the murdered woman taken as a bride, and Malone looked at it thoughtfully. She had been a thin-faced, rather sulky but very pretty little thing, with a lot of fluffy light hair.

Malone was admiring the other pictures when Maggie walked in, picked one of the papers, and started looking at it.

"Nice pictures," Malone said, with coy modesty.

She sniffed. "Next time, to coin a phrase, just keep your hat on so I'll know you . . . Malone, what do you think?"

"I think seventy-eight thousand bucks would buy a lot of furs and jewelry," Mayone said. "If I had it, I'd spend it all on you, dear."

"You'd probably spend it on some blonde chorus girl," she peered coldly. "Tell me, did the McKoen girl do it, or didn't she?"

"She's my client," Malone said, as though that answered everything.

Before Maggie could think of a cutting retort the telephone rang. She picked it up, said, "I'll see," and told Malone, "It's Andrew Acton, calling from Tomahawk."

Malone grabbed the phone out of her hand, and said, "That you, Andy? I was just going to call you."

"This is a terrible thing," came in an agitated voice. "Thank God you stepped in as her lawyer. Malone, what are you going to do?"

"Something pretty definite," Malone said for the second time that morning. He decided to add, "Don't worry."

There was a pause, then Andrew Acton said, "Malone, Ann couldn't have done it. You just don't know her. She's a wonderful girl. Intelligent, generous, lovely—"

"She's all that and more," Malone agreed warmly, "but beauty, grace and charm aren't enough to convince the police that she's innocent."

He could hear Andrew Acton groan. "Look here. It must have been a terrible accident. Grace must have slipped in her wheel chair, or made some sudden move-

ment that pulled the pillow down over her face. She was so horribly weak. Something like that *must* have happened."

"Tell me, Andy," Malone began.

"Malone, I'm flying right down. Don't do anything until I get there. No, I didn't mean that. I want you to do everything you can."

"I will," Malone promised, "but Andy—"

"It's a terrible thing. It must have been an accident. Malone, you've got to *do* something."

"I will, I *will,*" the little lawyer almost shouted. "Now Andy, wait a minute—" He jiggled the hook frantically for a full thirty seconds, then slammed the telephone down and glared at it. "Get him back."

A few minutes later Maggie reported that the call had come from a telephone booth in a Tomahawk filling station, and that the party had already gone.

Malone said a short and very bad-tempered word. "I wanted to ask him if he'd ever told Ann McKoen that his wife wasn't his mother."

"What, Malone?"

"Never mind. I'll explain it to you someday. Maybe it isn't important."

She waited as long as she could, and then began, "Tell me, Malone, what—"

"Don't ask me what I'm going to do," Malone growled unhappily, "because I don't know." He sat thinking for a moment, then began digging through his pockets until a handful of change and several badly crumpled one dollar bills lay on the desk. "This is going to call for the emergency fund."

She brought it in, added it to the collection, and they counted up the total. "Eigthteen dollars and twenty five cents," he reported. "It isn't enough." He sighed deeply. He rose, stuffed the money in his pockets, and said, "I'm going to see Freddy Henderson, Acton's partner. Then I'm going up to the Acton house and hope that I don't get thrown out. But first I'm going to see Joe the Angel."

He paused at the door and said, "And don't tell von Flanagan where I am."

"I won't," she said. "And Malone—"

"Yes?"

"Don't worry."

He told her approximately where she could go, and slammed the door as he left.

IV

The owner, manager and bartender of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar was gazing thoughtfully at the front page of the latest *Herald-American* when Malone came in, sat down, and said, "Rye, with a beer chaser. Pretty girl, isn't she. And Joe—"

Joe the Angel recognized the look in Malone's eye, folded the

paper, and said gloomily, "Pretty, but not rich." He poured the rye and the beer. "Her fella, he is the one who has all the money, not her."

Malone said indignantly, "Don't talk that way about my clients." He waited until Joe the Angel had marked up the amount on his bar bill. "Furthermore, I happen to be in a position to know that she owns twenty thousand dollars worth of mining property."

"It doesn't say so here," Joe the Angel said suspiciously.

"That's because it's a secret," Malone told him.

Joe the Angel sighed. "All right, how much you need?" As he began counting out bills, he added, "And don't you go losing this in no poker game."

With forty dollars added to the bankroll, Malone felt a little better. He finished his drink and started off toward La Salle street.

The snow was no longer a mere hint, it had become a nasty reality. *Snizzle* was the word for it, Malone thought, a combination of snow and drizzle, damp, chilling and thoroughly disagreeable. The sidewalks had become covered with a wet, blackish mush, and the thin sleet that came down grimly and purposefully was a dismal grey.

He walked glumly down Washington street, feeling rather like a lost, abandoned and quite probably motherless child. It was a feeling that didn't go away even in the warm, comfortable and brightly lighted offices of Acton and Henderson, Investments. Instead of admiring them, he found himself wondering moodily if they were rented furnished, and without a lease.

"I'm a very good friend of both Mr. Henderson and Mr. Acton," he told the pert and pretty girl at the desk. There was no point in saying that the friendship had been limited to two brief meetings in the bowling rooms of Andrew Acton's club.

The receptionist picked up the telephone, said, "Mr. John J. Malone to see you," listened, and a smile came to her face.

"Go right in, sir!"

Freddy Henderson greeted Malone cordially but unhappily. Malone made a bet with himself that he was going to say, "This is a terrible thing," and won it.

"Poor old Andy," Henderson went on. The expression of sympathy had the dubiously sincere and unctuous ring of an excuse offered to a traffic cop.

"A terrible thing for poor old Andy," Malone agreed, wondering if Freddy Henderson was sympathizing with his partner over the loss of his wife, or the trouble his girl was in.

"It's hard for me to believe Ann McKoen did it," Henderson said. He sat down heavily behind his massive desk. "I met her a couple of times. She impressed me as being a lovely girl. I liked her

very much." He used the past tense as though Ann was dead rather than merely under suspicion of murder.

Malone looked thoughtfully at the big business man. He was the type that would always be called Freddy—never Fred, nor Frederick. Just the right combination of investment broker and playboy, outdoor style.

His clothing verged on the flamboyant, but Malone suspected that, under the circumstances, he was going to change at the first free moment into something more subdued. His small mouth looked pinched and peevish without the usual professional smile.

"Understand you're representing her," he said. "I'm glad. Andy will be very relieved, I should imagine." He shook his head sadly. "The poor, foolish child."

"Andy knows about it," Malone said coolly. "And my client is not a poor, foolish child. She's a very intelligent, self-possessed young business woman. And furthermore, she hasn't murdered anybody."

Freddy Henderson's expression, a neat blend of politeness and skepticism, seemed to say that such forbearance was very thoughtful of Malone's client, if it could be believed. His silence suggested that, without wanting to be rude about it, he wondered what Malone was doing in his office, and how long he was going to stay.

For that matter, Malone was beginning to wonder the same thing.

"I understand that Andy handled a little investment for her," Malone said warily, staring at the tip of his cigar.

Freddy Henderson's pale eyes could have been a couple of marbles. "I wouldn't know anything about that," he said.

Malone nodded. "I imagined Andy's affairs are in pretty good shape," he ventured even more warily. He expected to be told that Andy's affairs didn't have anything to do with the murder of Andy's wife. He expected to be told it wasn't any of his business. He half expected to be thrown out.

To his surprise, Freddy Henderson shrugged his shoulders. "Oh yes. Of course things are pretty quiet everywhere, right now. You know how it goes in a business like this, one day one way, the other day the next."

He managed not only to convey the impression that Malone naturally knew all about the investment of large sums of money, but that things in general were not so good for Andy Acton.

"Yes, I know how it is," Malone said, trying to look extremely wise.

"Of course, Andy's being away just now—" Henderson's voice trailed off. He gave the implication that in addition to things in general being bad, Andy had re-

moved himself from the scene discreetly until conditions improved, or permanently in case they didn't.

"But don't misunderstand me," Freddy Henderson said quickly. "Andy is a fine business man." That was the clincher.

Malone hoped with all his heart that Freddy Henderson was a poor judge of character, a dirty liar, and a false friend. Twenty thousand dollars was too much for anyone to lose, especially a client who didn't have much of anything else.

"Do you think you'll get her off?" Freddy Henderson asked.

"Get her off," Malone said, "she isn't even held for questioning." He deliberately let the pride show in his voice.

"There's bound to be more to it than that," Freddy Henderson demurred in a grave voice, shaking his head. "It all looks bad to me. I wonder if Andy—"

"If Andy what?" Malone asked sharply.

"Nothing important. I suppose you've been to the house, and met the family."

"Not yet," Malone said. "As a matter of fact I was going there direct from here."

"I'll be glad to drive you up," Freddy Henderson said. "I was just going up there myself to see if there was anything I could do." As he fastened his topcoat he added, "Curious thing, but I must have been there just about the time it happened this morning. I had to pick up some notes and papers from Andy's study.

"I didn't see anyone or talk to anyone. I just let myself in, went straight to the study, picked up the papers and went right out again. I have a key—we use the study as a kind of auxiliary office. There wasn't any excitement going on then, of course."

Malone said nothing. He was wondering why such a lot of explanation was necessary. Wondering too if Freddy's dislike of his business partner had extended to his business partner's late wife.

It was a short drive to the rented mansion that was one of the survivors of a more magnificent era. Malone spent most of the trip trying to remember everything he knew, or had heard, about Andrew Acton. Originally from San Francisco, he thought. Or was it New York? Anyway, he was an investment expert, with a rented mansion on Lakeshore Drive.

"I understand Andy's wife couldn't stand apartment houses," Freddy Henderson said, piloting his car expertly through the slush. "Always had to live in a house."

"That so," Malone said noncommittally, wondering if Freddy had just had a slight touch of telepathy.

"So I heard. Understand too that she originally had all the money and started him in business." He added, "that's just all

completely hearsay, of course."

"Interesting," Malone said, hating himself for even half-believing it.

A few blocks farther Freddy Henderson remarked, "Wonder how she got the safe open to get at the jewelry."

The car rumbled over a bridge.

Malone said nothing. He knew what Freddy Henderson had in his mind and the police would undoubtedly have in theirs. Ann McKoen, a working girl, inheriting what to her was a small fortune, putting it into the hands of a man she didn't know very well, who had let her believe that his wife was his mother, who had toyed with her affections, as von Flanagan would have put it, and who appeared to be about to lose both the money and the man.

Yes, it could be made to add up, with the looting of the jewelry vault a piece of additional insurance in case she didn't get the man in spite of the murder.

V

The front of the rented mansion looked as though a liveried butler of severely critical mien would open the door, and instinctively Malone did his best to straighten his tie. He was slightly relieved when Freddy Henderson took out his key.

The shadowy hallway had a kind of splendor. Malone looked around admiringly. It was a sinister splendor, he decided, everything just a little too big and too dark.

"The house has an unusual arrangement," Freddy Henderson whispered. Malone couldn't be sure whether the whisper grew out of Henderson's respect for the dead or a simple desire to avoid being overheard. "Because of Lora," he continued in the same hushed tone. "These were her rooms to the right. She liked sometimes to sit at the window and look out at the drive. There's a sitting room, bedroom, bath and a room for the nurse. Then comes Andy's study, and a library and a dining room—the kitchen's in the basement, of course."

"Of course," Malone whispered in echo, feeling that it was somehow expected of him.

"Then there's this one big room at the back of the house, looking over the garden. It was used as a living room. Lora—Mrs. Acton—was in her sitting room."

Malone studied the general arrangement of rooms and reflected that a drum-and-bugle corps could undoubtedly have marched up the hall and back again without being noticed.

There were voices in the room down the hall. Mostly one voice, loud and indignant.

"—but I didn't steal the damned coat. I wanted to wear it, that's all. I took it out of the storage closet—any lunkhead could get into the place—and wore it to a party. I was going to put it right

back, but she found out about it and raised hell, the old shrew!"

"Gloria!" It was a sharply severe female voice.

"I'm glad she's dead. It's about time. I wish you all were dead. And I'd like to lay hands on the skunk who told her I had the coat."

"Gloria, *dear!*" Another female voice, pleasanter but just as firm.

"You go to hell, too. All of you. I wish Andy were here. He'd tell you off. He'd stand up for me. Even if he is keeping my money from me, the crook!"

"Oh Gloria, come off it." This was a male voice, a little bored.

"Shut up, you spineless parasite. If I had my money, I wouldn't need to borrow anyone's mangy old coat."

"Gloria dear, it's been explained to you over and over again, it's a trust fund." The pleasant female voice again.

Malone and Freddy Henderson looked at each other. Freddy cleared his throat softly and started what Malone had to admire as a magnificent job of fading in.

"—and as I mentioned in the office, Mr. Malone, I know everyone will be pleased that you've agreed to defend the poor girl."

The voices ceased.

"Mr. Acton will be especially pleased. And of course, Mr. Malone—"

There was a girl standing in the middle of the enormous room, her feet planted firmly a little apart, her hands thrust into the pockets of her jacket.

"You must be Mr. Malone," she said, half accusingly and with a mixture of anger and amusement.

Malone stopped himself from replying, "And you must be Gloria," and said instead, "I am that."

He looked at her with enjoyment. Her tawny, shoulder-length hair was the color of a well-cared-for lioness, her full, generous mouth was dark red and sultry and her greenish-gray eyes made him think of flames seen through smoke.

"Well, sit down. So you're the shyster who's going to keep this Ann character out of the jug."

"Oh, Gloria, *please!*"

Malone gave the owner of the pleasant voice an indulgent look as if to say that being referred to as a shyster was a regular part of his day's work, and sat down gingerly. He looked around him while Freddy Henderson took care of the introductions.

The room was not only enormous, but enormously charming, with the kind of beautful and complete simplicity which only the very rich could achieve. Its big windows looked over an enclosed garden, their filmy, gold-colored curtains drawn aside, and through them the sleet seemed to fall more softly and be a whiter shade.

The owner of the pleasant voice was Clare Robinet. She was a

smallish woman with tiny bones, deep dark eyes, and soft dark hair that was attractively brushed at the temple with silvery-grey wings. Malone wondered if her perfectly modulated voice, her serenely cool poise, the very way she carried her head and body and used her delicate hands, were the result of generations of good breeding, and a lifetime of expensive education, or just the result of having a lot of money.

She gave him a tranquil smile and said, "How nice of you to be here," and making it sound as though she meant it.

The sharp voice belonged to a tallish, resolute-looking woman with iron-grey eyes that looked as uncompromising as a pair of paper-clips. Freddy Henderson introduced her as Mrs. Naysmith, "Andy's aunt."

"I am *Mrs.* Acton's aunt," she said, and closed her mouth as though it had a zipper on it. Malone speculated as to whether she simply disapproved of Andy Acton, or if she was worrying about her new position in the family.

"And Noel—"

"We have already met," Noel Robinet said with a smile that managed to be charming even under the circumstances. "Mr. Malone, it's early in the day, I know, but won't you have a drink?"

Gloria said, "Quit talking as if you owned the joint," but there was amusement in her voice.

"You little whatyamaycallit," Noel said, but the smile stayed.

Malone repressed an urge to ask for gin with a beer chaser, and hinted that Scotch would be fine. He looked at thirteen thousand dollars worth of chinchilla tossed carelessly on a chair and said amiably, "I see some of the loot has been recovered."

Clare Robinet shrugged deprecatingly. "This foolish child—"

Gloria said a very bad word.

"Mr. Malone," Noel Robinet began. There was anxiety, almost pleading, in his voice. "You will be able to do something for Ann, won't you? It's impossible, it's idiotic, it's—it's just plain silly to think that she could have done such a thing."

No one seemed to disagree with him. A little frown came on Malone's forehead and went away again. He'd expected at least unfriendliness, perhaps open hostility, from these people. Instead they were welcoming him cordially, and plying him with excellent Scotch.

He looked again at Noel Robinet, at a face that just missed being handsome, a wide mouth that under certain circumstances might be savage, perhaps even pitiless, but also could curve in that charming smile.

Clare Robinet spread her delicate hands. "Ann is such a dear girl. If only she hadn't had that tragic infatuation for Andy."

"She'll get over it," Noel said. "She'll have to get over it." He added with passionate confidence, "I'll make her."

"The girl's all right," Mrs. Naysmith said, and shut her mouth again.

Freddy Henderson spoke up suddenly over his Scotch. "Malone, do you want to meet the nurse? She's still here. I'll go and get her, if you'd like."

"Please," Malone said.

Yes, there was something he definitely did not like about this very agreeable and cordial atmosphere, and the general air of helpfulness. He didn't understand it, and he wasn't altogether sure he would be happier when he did. Could it be possible that these charming people had disliked the late Mrs. Acton so much that they would put themselves out to help the girl they believed to be her murderer?

There were other possible reasons, and he wasn't a bit sure he liked any of them any better.

Besides, he couldn't overlook the fact that if Ann McKoen was innocent, as he believed she was, then one of these delightful people could very likely be a murderer.

He felt distinctly glad that Ann McKoen was in a good safe place.

Freddy Henderson came back with the nurse, Ellen Olsen. She was far better-looking, Malone thought, than the *Herald-Examiner* photograph of her had indicated. Like Freddy Henderson she wore a professional smile, but hers did not come and go, seeming rather to have jelled into position at some time in the remote past. Her slate-grey eyes silently asked Malone what his position in the case might be, and whether or not it was official.

"Mrs. Acton's death must have been a great shock to you," Malone said, beginning guardedly and starting to unwrap a cigar.

"It was a surprise," Miss Olsen conceded calmly, her expression implying that finding bodies, even murdered ones, was purely routine to her.

"You heard the—the disturbance, earlier in the morning?" Malone asked, beginning to wish he were somewhere else. He was wondering whether or not to light the cigar when Noel Robinet bounded forward eagerly with a match.

Clare Robinet said, "Mr. Malone is representing Ann, Miss McKoen. If we can help him in any way—"

"So I understand," the nurse said, and Malone noticed that the brief smile she gave Freddy Henderson was not the strictly professional kind.

She turned to Malone and said in what must have been the exact words she'd used to the police earlier in the day, "At approximately nine forty this morning I ushered Miss McKoen into my patient's room and left them together, leaving to prepare my

patient's morning bouillon. At ten o'clock I returned with the bouillon and paused in the hall on hearing angry voices. The precise words I heard were, 'I'm going to marry Andy and nobody, not even you, can stop me. I don't care what happens.'

"Not wishing to intrude, I returned to the kitchen. At approximately ten thirty I prepared a second cup of bouillon, the other being cold, and returned to my patient, finding her dead." Ellen Olsen paused.

"And what did you do then?" Malone demanded.

"I observed that her pillow had been placed over her face, causing death. I immediately telephoned Dr. Renshaw and then notified the family."

"Admirable," Malone murmured, "wonderful." No outcry, no startled scream, nothing. He had a fleeting mental picture of Nurse Olsen notifying the family. "But what did you do with the cup of bouillon?" he asked.

"I poured it into the washbowl and rinsed out the cup."

"Precisely," Malone said. No surprise at the question, no wondering why it was asked. The patient was dead and therefore would not require the bouillon, hence it had been disposed of and the cup washed.

"Malone," Noel Robinet said, frowning, "what the devil does that have to do with Aunt Lora's murder?"

"Nothing," the lawyer admitted, "absolutely nothing." He was thinking of the pure delight with which von Flanagan must have received Ellen Olsen's report. No detail missing, no shadow of doubt as to the times involved. He thought too how he would love to have her on the witness stand, but only as *his* witness. He glanced toward the door.

It was Mrs. Naysmith who read his mind and said, "I'd be glad to show you the room, Mr. Malone." She picked up the chinchilla and said, "I'd best put this away before someone else borrows it."

"The hell with it," Gloria said, but this time without much passion or conviction.

Malone glanced at the dining room as they passed it, a large, beautiful, and highly restrained room.

VI

Andrew Acton's study seemed warm and almost friendly by contrast. There were a few hunting prints on the wall, and a bowl of flowers on the neat, precise desk. Mrs. Naysmith, Malone concluded, was an excellent housekeeper.

"The vault?" he murmured.

She showed it to him. He was a little disappointed. In this setting he had half expected a magnificent oil painting that would swing open, or at least a secret panel. There was simply a very ordinary door

that opened with a combination lock, disclosing a very ordinary empty vault.

The storage closet was like every other one of its kind. Mrs. Naysmith opened it with one of her keys, disclosing a chorus girl's dream of furs. She hung away the chinchilla between a blue mink and a platinum fox.

"Were they all Mrs. Acton's?" Malone asked.

The woman nodded. "She never wore them, but she liked to look at them sometimes." The glance she gave the closet as she locked it was a silent sniff. "*He'll* probably divide them up between Gloria and Mrs. Robinet now."

The late Lora Acton's rooms wore the same look of subdued and inconspicuous extravagance as the big living room. The invalid's chair and the lethal pillow had been removed by the police, Mrs. Naysmith explained. A big window looked onto the drive, and an oak-paneled door led to a bedroom, a bath, and Nurse Olsen's extremely neat and extremely simple room.

Malone looked around, and shrugged his shoulders. The rooms had nothing whatever to tell him, and he had nothing of importance to ask them.

He went back to the others, reflecting that anyone could have gone into the late Lora Acton's room, through either of two doors, quietly smothered her, and, as quietly, gone away again. It had been sometime after ten and before ten thirty, if Nurse Olsen was accurate, and he knew from the bottom of his heart that she would be. If she wasn't lying, that is.

Everyone looked up expectantly as he returned. He smiled, knocked the ashes from his cigar very carefully into a cloisonné ashtray and said, "And where were the rest of you, while all this was going on?"

It was Mrs. Naysmith who spoke first. "The police already asked that. But I was upstairs checking the linen."

Clare Robinet wasn't sure, but she thought she was just finishing her morning coffee and looking over the newspapers. In her room, of course.

She added, "I'd gone downstairs for something—nothing important. Coming back, I met Ann coming out of Lora's room. I spoke to her—told her she was making a terrible mistake—referring of course, to her infatuation for Andy. She didn't say anything. She just gave me a curious look, and went on out. Of course, I didn't realize—" She stopped there, leaving the delicate implication that at the time Ann McKoen had just come from a job of murder, and that the corpse already lay behind the door.

Noel Robinet said quickly, "I was waiting on the steps. I was down here, in this room, and I

heard Ann's voice. But I didn't hear what she said." *Liar,* Malone thought. "But I did have an idea why she'd come. I wanted to talk with her alone, and I went outside and waited for her to come out. She looked, well, upset. I told her—Oh, I think I told her I loved her."

Robinet paused. "She walked right past me. I could see she didn't want to talk to me, so I let her go on." There was deep regret in his voice. "I came back indoors and I was here in the living room when Ellen called me."

He left it right there, and looked Malone straight in the eye.

"At ten thirty I was still sound asleep, and what of it?" Gloria said. Her expression added that she hoped someone would just try to make something of it.

"Look here, Malone," Freddy Henderson said, frowning. "I've already told you about this morning. I haven't any idea what time I got here, except that it was obviously before Miss Olsen discovered what had happened. But —well, it's really nobody's business, not even the police, where any of *us* were." He didn't need to add that there was no doubt about Ann McKoen's guilt.

"Quite true," Malone said, "quite true." He fumbled for his matches. "I was just checking in case anyone here might have seen the girl." He finally found them and relit his cigar.

He sensed the feeling of relief in the room. Relief, and something else, a kind of unspoken and slightly sinister speculation, as if they knew that they could be the witnesses that would send Ann McKoen to her doom.

"And another thing," Malone said, selecting his words with care, "Ann McKoen apparently was not too well acquainted with the family. She believed that Mrs. Acton was Andrew Acton's mother, not his wife." He paused to let the information be absorbed, and went on, "Did any of you know that?"

There was a silence, and in the midst of it the doorbell rang distantly. Malone swore to himself. Oh well, he hadn't expected an answer anyway, and he'd given them something to think about.

Soft footsteps in the hall were going toward the doorway and everybody looked apprehensive and alarmed. Freddy Henderson stared at Malone.

"If it's more reporters—"

"If it is, I'll handle them," Malone said with serene confidence.

But there were no reporters. It was Ann McKoen.

The soft footsteps went with an amiable, cocoa-brown face that accompanied Ann as far as the door to the big room. She stood there for a moment, half determined, half frightened. Malone noticed irrelevantly for the first

time that she had a faint sprinkling of freckles across her nose. They stood out now against a face that was very pale indeed.

"I couldn't stand it any longer. There in that room. Not knowing. Mr. Malone, I'm not ungrateful, but I couldn't stand it. I called you. The girl at your office told me you were here. I had to come—"

Malone and Noel Robinet started for her simultaneously, but it was Mrs. Naysmith who steered her into a chair, Ellen Olsen who brought her a glass of water fast, and Clare Robinet who gave her a cigarette and lit it for her.

"Mr. Malone, I'm terribly sorry if you're angry with me. I know you wanted me to wait there. But I didn't know what was going on, and I was getting frantic. If only Andrew were here."

Malone puffed furiously at his cigar and finally said, "He's on his way, and no, I'm not angry with you."

She closed her eyes and said, "Thank God!"—not adding for what.

"Ann," Noel said, reaching for her hand. "Ann darling, listen to me."

She shook her head at him. She opened her eyes again and said, "Then I bought a newspaper. The jewels. I don't know what happened. Of course I didn't take them. I didn't even know there were any jewels. Why should I? I didn't do anything except—I came to talk to—" her voice trailed off.

"That's enough," Malone said sharply.

Gloria said, "Noel, you dope, don't just stand there pawing at her. Get her a quick snort." She added to Ann, "Just relax."

Ann choked over the brandy Noel offered her, sat up a little straighter, and said, "Mr. Malone, I'm sorry I got panicky. If you want me to go back—"

"I don't know," Malone said, chewing on his cigar and scowling.

Mrs. Naysmith said suddenly and unexpectedly, "There's no reason why she can't stay here for a while, anyway."

"Of course," Clare Robinet picked it up quickly. "She can lie down in the guest room. The poor child looks about ready to collapse, and no wonder."

"Or my room," Gloria said. "We won't let the cops get her, Mr. Malone. We won't let anybody find her."

"Ann," Noel said intensely, "you must stay. You belong here." His eyes added, "With me."

Ann's face turned anxiously toward Malone.

Malone didn't like it. He didn't like it at all. One person in the room was a killer, unless Tomahawk was nearer than he thought. And the killer would want the police to go on believing that Ann was guilty, and would want the police to find her.

That left three people who were innocent—four, if Freddy Henderson stuck around and didn't go back to the office.

"She'll be perfectly safe here, Malone," Noel said, and Malone had to pretend to believe him.

"It seems the wisest thing to do," Freddy Henderson agreed, and Malone was forced into believing him too. But he still didn't like it.

"I imagine Mr. Malone would like to talk with his client alone," Mrs. Naysmith said tactfully. She added, "I'll make sure the guest room is all ready for her."

The others didn't seem to leave as much as to drift away very casually, Freddy Henderson and the pale-haired nurse together, Noel with a reluctant backward glance toward Ann, Gloria heading for the front door, and Clare Robinet smiling at Malone as she left.

The little lawyer drew a long breath and said, "Ann—"

"I'll be all right," Ann said. "Andrew will be here soon. And Noel's right here."

"Be careful," Malone warned, "be very careful. This is—a mess," he finished unhappily.

She nodded. "I know it is."

She looked very small and very helpless sitting there in the enormous room, and he repressed an impulse to pat her comfortingly on the head.

"Remember," he said, with a calculated almost brutal candor and watching her closely, "one of the people here has a very good reason for wanting you accused, and convicted of murder."

The color went away from her face, slowly. "You mean—one of the people in this house."

"I do indeed mean just that," he said very firmly, "and for the love of Heaven, don't try to tell me she pulled the pillow over her face, or that a burglar turned himself into smoke and came in through the walls. You know and I know it didn't happen that way."

She sat very still, her hands clasped in her lap. "I see." She looked up at him. "Mr. Malone, who did kill Andrew's wife?"

"I don't know yet," Malone told her, "and I don't know who got away with the jewelry. But I will know. And the police will. Everything will soon be over, and you'll forget it all in time. So just be careful and"—he said it again—"*don't worry.*"

He said it again to himself as he went down the hall, but it didn't seem to help much.

VII

Freddy Henderson had apparently vanished. Oh well, he could always take a taxi. He stood at the edge of the Drive watching for one, shivering in what had now become a mist that couldn't seem to make up its mind whether to stay as it was or turn back into sleet and start falling again. With a squeal of brakes a rakish mus-

tard-yellow convertible stopped beside him, and a door opened.

"Hop in, you," Gloria said. "I'll take you where you're going."

Malone hopped in. "Thanks." He slammed the door. "To the Loop. And by the way, what's the rest of your name?"

She said, "You probably won't ever bother to use it, but it's Acton. I'm Uncle Andy's niece. Shall we stop at an elegant cocktail lounge, or a low dive, or just a cheap saloon?"

"The latter," Malone said, and directed her to Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar.

"I've been in the joint." She drove in silence for a few blocks and then said unexpectedly, "That old shrew!"

Malone said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Old lady Naysmith. Mrs. Parke Naysmith, the old bat. Because I borrowed that damned coat, now she thinks I swiped the damned jewels."

"And did you?" Malone asked in his most innocent voice.

"I probably would have if I'd thought of it. Malone, you're a lawyer, tell me—Oh, the hell with it. Wait'll we have a slug in front of us. I'm still half asleep."

Gloria waited until they were comfortably settled at the bar. "Malone, what do you know about money?"

"That depends. It sometimes leads to murder. Do you need it, or are you trying to give it away?"

"Neither." She grinned. "I've got it, and I haven't got it. That's my trouble. Uncle Andy has it for me. It's some kind of a trust fund, and he manages it. My old man left it in his will for Andy to administer for me, and Andy doesn't give me enough money to live on. He says it's just because it's all invested so it will bring me in a lot more very soon. In the meantime I have to go around borrowing chinchilla coats and being accused of stealing a bunch of lousy jewelry." She paused for breath.

"You put it all very clearly," Malone said admiringly. He glanced at her jungle-green suit, and at the soft brown mink draped carelessly over her shoulders. "Though you don't look to be exactly running around naked."

"A girl gets tired of wearing the same damned coat," she told him. "Oh well, it'll all be straightened out when Andy gets back. He's an all right character. Lousy time of year to fly up to Tomahawk."

"I thought that too," Malone said noncommittally.

"He's got a fishing lodge up there," she volunteered, "and he wanted it all fancied up, and redecorated this spring. That's why he went up there, to see about it. Tell me, Malone, which one of those grafters murdered the old gal?"

Malone jumped, and said, "How's that?"

Gloria grinned at him. "Little Gloria Acton has had her eyes open since she was six weeks old," she said, "or do I mean ten days? Anyway, I don't see anyone else busting in, and I like Ann."

"I like her too," Malone said. He added in an absent-minded manner, "I don't know the others very well, of course."

"They're all right I guess," she said. "And Lord knows she was hell to live with. Some invalids are, you know. Just because she fell off a horse and was in a wheel-chair, she insisted everything had to be done for her. I don't know how Andy stood it." She paused suddenly. "I guess somebody eventually didn't."

She looked thoughtfully into her glass. "She had a damned annoying business of knowing everything that went on. Noel smashed up one of Andy's cars once, and she knew it. That nurse made some fool, silly mistake once, and she knew it."

"I didn't think Miss Olsen would ever make a mistake," the little lawyer murmured.

"Oh, she probably had her mind on Freddy Henderson when she made it," Gloria Acton said cheerfully. She went on, "And I don't know how the hell she found out about my wearing the coat. Maybe she was spying out the window as usual, and saw me in it. Or she got suspicious, and wheeled herself down to the storage closet, and looked for herself. Anyway, she raised the roof with me about it. And then the old Naysmith bat, and the old Robinet hag—" She shook her tawny head sadly.

"It sounds like an enchanting household," Malone said, hoping for more.

"It wasn't too bad, really. Noel's sort of sweet, and Clare is all right, or would be if she weren't so damned superior. They've been living off Andy for years on the theory that Lora needed to have her sister with her, and Noel wanted to be where his mother was. You see, nobody ever admits that Clare is just too snippy to snare herself another husband, and Noel couldn't hold a job selling turkeys in November."

She finished her drink, nodded a "yes" to another, and went on: "The old bat is an okay character some of the time. She does a good job of running the house, but she thinks she's the boss of everything God created, and she and the Robinets stick together like the paper and the wall.

"She's had it very very good for years and she doesn't want to see any changes. And that fast-freeze nurse is so round-and-round about Freddy Henderson that she just doesn't see, hear or know from anything else. I think Freddy Henderson is nothing but a cheap crook hanging on to Andy because the Acton name helps him sell stocks and bonds. But that's Andy's business and

not mine. And did that girl, Ann, really think Lora was Andy's mother?"

Malone blinked and said, "Yes," deciding that it would be easier to follow Gloria Acton's train of thought if he himself had a Diesel engine. "Yes, she did. Do you think that Andy—" He left the sentence unfinished.

She lifted her eyebrows. "I didn't think of it that way. He might have. But—well, Lora did look like death in Texas, and at least a hundred and two years old. While Andy looks like every young girl's dream of American business-manhood."

She put away her second drink, rose and said, "Well, I hope she's innocent, and I hope she gets him, and I hope Naysmith gets a bad case of the hives. Thanks for the drinks, Malone, and I've got to go keep an eye on your client before somebody turns her in to the cops." She was gone before he could say another word.

Malone sighed, and leaned his elbows on the bar. Joe the Angel said, "Now there is a girl!" He gazed dreamily after the mink and added, "Now there would be a client!"

"It's probably rented," Malone told him. He added gloomily, "I know I owe you forty bucks, plus the last four drinks, and I'm perfectly satisfied with the client I've got." He went on out into the dismal street and started back to his office.

Well, at least he had a fair picture of the Acton house and household. And a list of seven people who might have murdered Lora Acton. Right now, he wasn't leaving out anybody. Perhaps, he thought, he'd walked in his sleep and done it himself.

Maggie looked up as he came in, and opened her mouth to speak.

"I know," Malone said. "von Flanagan has called."

"He not only called, Malone. He's on his way over to see you in person."

"Let him," Malone said heavily. He went on into the inner office and sat down behind his desk.

Gloria Acton had told him a very little, and a great deal. And something still bothered him, something he felt was important, and that continued to elude him. It had in some way to do with the extreme friendliness, the extreme amiability that had met and engulfed him at the Actons' rented mansion, where there should have been at least unhelpfulness and a faint enmity. It indicated to him that something, somewhere, was very wrong, and he didn't know just what it was.

He shook his head and sighed, picked up the telephone and called one Charlie Hine, a disbarred lawyer with an incredible nose for information, mainly financial, and the ability to get it fast. Malone didn't know his methods and thought it was just as well not

to, but he did know that Charlie Hine could get him anything from the exact financial status to any business firm he cared to name to a hot tip in the fifth at Belmont.

"Just a few things," Malone said into the phone. "Acton and Henderson. Oh, you do know them. No, not any one special thing, but as much as you can find out. In particular, I'm interested in a trust fund for one Gloria Acton, Acton's niece, and an investment for a girl named Ann McKoen, of roughly twenty grand. Of course it's the same girl, you muttonhead. Why the hell do you think I want to know? Naturally you're to keep it under your fedora. What do you think I'm paying you for?" Or with, he thought. "And I need it in a hurry."

He slammed down the telephone and wheeled his chair around to stare out the window. The mist was heavier now, almost fog. Spring would get around to coming back, he told himself sternly, this was just a temporary relapse. A little matter of months and all the pretty girls would have as delightful a tan as Gloria Acton's.

That reminded him of something. He picked up the telephone again, called the Acton number, and asked for Gloria.

"No it's not just a social call. I wish it were. Tell me, I got the impression you met Ann McKoen for the first time this afternoon. Am I right, and if so, how come?"

Gloria's explanation was perfectly simple. Since Christmas she had been in Florida, having fun, and what fun! She'd come back, arriving only yesterday, in the mistaken belief that the weather was going to turn pleasant any hour now, and the apparently vain hope that Uncle Andy would double her monthly allowance. Why? Was the call prompted by something important he was concealing from her?

"Not at all!" the little lawyer said. "Just wanted to hear your voice again, and this seemed as good an excuse as any. How is my client?"

Malone's client was comfortably tucked up in the guest room. Malone wasn't to worry. If the cops should call she, Gloria, would personally hide her, probably under a bed. And when all this was over with, and Malone had some spare time to kill—

"It's a definite date," Malone said, and hung up. He felt a little happier, for reasons that had nothing to do with Ann McKoen or the murder of Lora Acton.

He began to think about Andy Acton and the mood vanished as quickly as the sun had done earlier in the day. He reflected on how little he really knew about the man. Likable, yes. Good-looking, in a rugged sort of way. The type that would be excellent company anywhere, indoors or out. Young in appearance, even for his

thirty-three years. Trustworthy type. And what else?

Damn, Malone thought. The mansion on Lakeshore Drive was a rented one, and Freddy Henderson had indicated, ever so delicately of course, that the Acton affairs were a little on the shaky side. But Lora Acton didn't want to live in an apartment, and there could be any number of reasons why the mansion was rented rather than owned.

Everything in the world was explainable, he told himself. He was fairly sure, positive, in fact, that Andy Acton had not attempted to deceive trusting little Ann McKoen. Perhaps he had never come right out and said, "Mrs. Acton, my mother." But he had not said, "Mrs. Acton, my wife," either.

It simply hadn't occurred to him that Lora Acton's physical appearance made her seem far older than her actual years. A man who sees a woman daily is a poor judge of her age.

Nor did the obviously simple business of investing Ann's little legacy in "mining property" smack of fraud. Andy Acton was a very smart business man despite his partner's insinuations. He must be, in order to have his name on the door of such an impressive and expensive suite of offices.

Certainly there could be nothing suspicious about the handling of Gloria Acton's trust fund. Especially since it must involve a very considerable sum, if it had enabled Glioria to live in the style to which she seemed to have become accustomed. No one would entrust such a sum to a man who lived in a rented mansion and had lived there only a short time unless that man had managed to prove himself scrupulously honest.

There must be some good reason why Gloria couldn't have her allowance increased, and had to go around borrowing fur coats. Maybe she was extravagant, and Andy was trying to cure her.

VIII

It was just at that moment that Maggie came in from the outer office and said, "I just checked. It's a little less than three hours by air from Tomahawk to Chicago, and back again."

"Damn it," Malone said, but not to her, "I like Andrew Acton." He scowled. "Besides, he'd have had to get to the airport in Tomahawk, take off, land here, go by car or taxi to the house, get in and out of the house, and reverse the entire procedure, all without anybody noticing him." Not, he reflected, that it couldn't be done. He added, out loud to himself, "Poor old Andy!"

"Poor old Malone!" von Flanagan roared from the doorway.

"I was expecting you," Malone said wearily. "And hello, Klutchetsky, I suppose you make this official. If you'll just wait a minute

till I call my lawyer—"

"Damn you, Malone," von Flanagan said. He stuck his big fists belligerently on his hips and glared at everybody, including the grinning Klutchetsky. After a moment the crimson began to recede a little from his face and he sat down on the corner of Malone's cluttered desk. "Look here, Malone," he began placatingly, "I'm only here because I'm your friend."

"Prove it," the little lawyer said pleasantly.

"I will!" von Flanagan told him. "I tried and tried and tried to reach you by phone. Heaven knows I tried. *She* knows I tried."

"Maggie," Malone said, in his most innocent voice, "do I understand correctly that—"

"You understand perfectly well, and don't try to fool me," von Flanagan growled. "I just wanted to make the statement that, because I'm your friend, I tried to reach you by phone, first."

"All right, and I believe you," Malone said. "And what do you mean by *first?"*

"Malone," the big man said smoothly, "we have always been good friends. Since you were driving a taxi and going to law school nights, and I was a rookie cop on Cottage Grove Avenue."

"This is no time for reminiscences," Malone said, "and anyway, the girl isn't here."

"Good friends in spite of the fact," von Flanagan went on as though Malone hadn't said a word, "that I believe you have no ethics and no principles." His voice was rising slowly but ominously towards a bellow.

"Right now I ought to run you in. Obstructing justice! It was all right for you to have the girl when I was just holding her for questioning about a murder. But now there's seventy-eight grand worth of jewelry and furs missing, and that makes a difference."

"Yes, that makes it grand larceny instead of just a nice little murder," Malone said, nodding agreeably. "Only it's just jewelry. The fur-piece turned up. You cops get everything wrong."

"Malone! Where are they?"

"She didn't take them," Malone said. "And I'm damned if I know where they are." Well, at least he was sure of the truth of half the statement. "Is there a reward?"

"I suppose so. That isn't the point. I just came here to say this. Because I am your good friend I came to tell you first. Understand this, now. I came to tell you *first* that I have known for a very long time that you hide out suspects in room seven thirteen in that broken-down old fleabag where you live, and I am on my way there right now with Klutchetsky to pick up the girl."

"Do that," Malone said. He took out a cigar and began to unwrap it slowly and deliberately. "Go right ahead. What's holding you up?"

"And another thing!" Von Flanagan glared. "Damn you, Malone! If she isn't there, I am going to get you for obstructing justice." He paused. "Do you want to come along?"

"No," Malone said.

"Do you want to meet us down at headquarters?"

"No," Malone said. "I'm busy and it's a nasty day outside. 'Bye, Klutchetsky."

Von Flanagan continued to glare at him menacingly for a full half minute, said two very short and very indignant words, and was gone.

Malone waited until he heard the distant clang of the elevator door, and grabbed the telephone.

"You'd better call and find out the plane fare to Bermuda," Maggie said moodily. "One way."

He waved at her to be silent and dialed the number of the Acton home. An irritating buzz-buzz came over the wire. He slammed down the telephone and gave it a furiously profane look. It promptly answered him with a loud ring. The little lawyer jumped, picked it up again and automatically said, "Hello, Gloria."

It happened to be Gloria. She said breathlessly, "Malone, I got the phone fast before anybody else did and called the cops. You'd better get up here right away. Somebody's tried to murder Mrs. Naysmith."

Malone swore. "Try to keep everybody from yelling 'police!' until I'm there. And Gloria—" But she'd already hung up.

He swore again, grabbed his coat with one hand and his hat with the other, and started for the door.

"Malone," Maggie called. "Where—"

"Bermuda," the lawyer said. "Someday."

Bermuda would be nice right now, he reflected, silently cursing the succession of cars, trucks and busses that passed him in the damp and dismal mist. He grabbed the first cab that came along, jumped in, gave the driver the address and added, out of breath, "Don't spare the horses. It's an attempted murder."

"Yours, or hers?" the driver said and headed for the Drive. He added soothingly, "Happens all the time."

It was Noel Robinet who met him at the door, his face very pale, his dark eyes burning. "Malone! You got here! Malone, she—"

Malone pushed him aside and said "Ann—"

"She's gone. That's just it."

The little lawyer stopped and stared at him. Gloria hurried up to him in the hall, a melon-colored robe sweeping about her feet, her tawny hair in curlers, and looking wonderful despite her frightened pallor.

"I don't know where she's gone, Malone," she said. "Or why, or who with, or anything at all. Malone, she's just gone."

"Damn," Malone said. "Double damn and triple damn." He leaned against the wall. "Where were you? Where were you, Robinet? Where was everybody?" He caught his breath at last and said, "Damn it, where is everybody now?"

"Clare and Miss Olsen are upstairs with Mrs. Naysmith," Gloria said, "and the servants are in the kitchen scared spitless."

"Mrs. Naysmith is all right now," Noel Robinet put in. "Just shock, and fright. It's Ann I'm thinking about."

"You," Malone told him, "and Gloria, and me, and the whole infernal police department of the city of Chicago." But they wouldn't be looking for her here, he thought, realizing what a perfect hiding place the scene of the crime made for a murder suspect.

"Nobody's called the police, Malone," Gloria said.

"Good," Malone said, breathing easier. "Why?"

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I guess—everybody thought somebody else would."

Malone nodded and said, "Just as well." He looked up the stairs. "Before we can start looking for Ann, I suppose I'd better go up and see the victim."

They trailed him as far as the door and apparently decided to wait out in the hall. Mrs. Naysmith's room was large, comfortable and pleasingly old-fashioned, with soft-looking furniture and a lot of family photographs everywhere. She was sitting up in the big mahogany bed, looking a little shaken, but still determined. Clare Robinet was fluttering, in a well-bred way, around the bed, and Ellen Olsen was doing something extremely efficient and probably quite unnecessary with a spoon and a glass.

"Yes, I know," Malone said, irritation in the very way he stood still, "you're all glad that I'm here, and it was so nice of me to come. Now tell me what the hell happened, and what have you done with my client?"

Clare Robinet gave a lady-like little moan and sat down in the nearest chair. Nurse Ellen Olsen gave Malone a look carefully calculated to freeze him solid, then replaced her smile.

"Nobody's done anything with the girl," Mrs. Naysmith said testily. "At least as far as I know. If she tried to murder me, she's probably run away."

"My dear lady," Malone began, with mounting exasperation, "why would she try to murder you? Why would anyone, as a matter of fact?"

"But someone did murder Lora," Clare Robinet said faintly. "And now—this."

Nurse Olsen said decisively, "The circumstances were similar, Mr. Malone. Mrs. Naysmith retired to this room to take a nap, at approximately three o'clock. While she was dozing, someone apparently placed a pillow over

her face and held it firmly in position."

"And then?" Malone asked, admiring the way she phrased it.

"I fought," Mrs. Naysmith said with a grim set to her jaw, and a certain look of satisfaction. "Hard. I kicked. Hard. Somebody has a nasty bruise."

Malone suppressed a fleeting impulse to ask everyone to strip, and said, "Do you have any ideas?"

"None," Mrs. Naysmith said, setting not only her jaw but her whole face even more grimly.

Noel Robinet took two tentative steps into the room and said, "The important thing—what's happened to Ann."

No one had seen her go. No one had seen or heard anything. Except, of course, the commotion following the attack on Mrs. Naysmith. By the time Ellen Olsen had come in response to Mrs. Naysmith's scream, the attacker had vanished. Ellen Olsen, of course, had efficiently gotten there first.

"But where the hell *was* everybody?" Malone demanded savagely.

Gloria Acton had been washing her hair, she hadn't heard the scream. Clare Robinet had been downstairs in the living room. Noel Robinet had been looking up something in one of the books in Andrew Acton's study. Nurse Olsen had been packing, preparatory to her departure. And Mrs. Naysmith had been busy with a would-be murderer in her room.

No one seemed to know just when Freddy Henderson had left the house, or where he had gone.

"Perhaps," Clare Robinet said brightly, "he went to the airport to meet Andrew, and took that girl with him."

"That clunk," Gloria said bitterly. She didn't need to add that she wasn't referring to Ann.

Noel Robinet looked a little relieved. "I'll telephone the airport and make inquiries. And I'll telephone his office." There was still deep anxiety in his voice. "The police?"

"No!" Malone said quickly, and Gloria added, "God forbid!"

"She could have been kidnapped?" Noel said vaguely and unhappily, and went away.

Mrs. Naysmith said sharply, "Ellen, whatever you're doing with that glass, I don't need to have it done. And Clare, please be so kind as to stop that dithering about with your hands." Her manner made it very plain that she wanted to talk privately with Malone.

"*I* can take a hint," Gloria said amiably, and went away.

Clare Robinet rose, smiled vaguely, and said, "I would like to have a word with you while you're here, Mr. Malone." She walked out of the room like a well-brought-up empress, or a well-trained lady's maid, Malone couldn't make up his mind which.

Ellen gave him a look as she

left that was almost in danger of being friendly, and that made it plain that she too had either something to ask or something to confide.

Mrs. Naysmith waited a moment and then said, "It was I who insisted that the police not be called. I'm perfectly all right now. I shall be more cautious in the future, and when the police do find the person who brought about Mrs. Acton's death, they will obviously have the same one who attempted to do away with me."

Malone pointed out blandly that the additional information might be of considerable assistance to the police, and Mrs. Naysmith stated bluntly, and with a sniff, that she did not propose to do the police department's work for them.

"Although," she said, "I had rather hoped that this—incident, if it occurred, might enable me to learn exactly who the person is. But unfortunately I wasn't able to get a good look."

Malone raised startled eyebrows and said, "What do you mean by that?" He guessed exactly what she meant.

"Exactly what you think," she said, outguessing him. "Everybody who might have been the murderer was in the house, including Mr. Henderson and that girl. Everybody knew I was going to take a nap. I had my eyes closed, of course, pretending to be asleep. I hadn't realized it might happen so quickly and that I might not have time to open them and see who it was, and scream for someone to come. By the time I did, the person was gone."

Malone said, "But just because you'd created what looked like a heaven-sent opportunity for an ambitious would-be murderer, doesn't mean anybody would take advantage of it. The house doesn't seem to be harboring any homicidal maniacs. Unless, of course, you had delicately intimated to everyone concerned that you knew all about what had happened to Mrs. Acton, and why."

"I did," Mrs. Naysmith said wearily. "Naturally." She paused and closed her eyes for a moment. "Mr. Malone, the people here have many undesirable traits. Clare Robinet, for all that she's my own niece, is selfish, vain and stupid. Her son is just the same, and he gambles every cent he gets. Neither of them have ever been in the least bit grateful to Lora for her bounty to them.

"Freddy Henderson I consider a despicable character who is taking every advantage he can, and Gloria Acton is a spoiled, bad-tempered snit. And I do not like that nurse."

She looked him straight in the eye and concluded, "But not one of them would be capable of murder. Even if one of them were actually that low, he or she would not have the courage. And from

the circumstances of the household this morning—I refer to where people were and what they were doing—I am convinced that none of them had the opportunity."

Leaving, of course, Ann McKoen, who had had the opportunity.

"She seems like such a nice girl," Mrs. Naysmith said.

"She is," Malone said firmly. He considered adding that after all, the attempt at murder might have taken place while Ann McKoen was still in the house, or after she had so mysteriously and quietly vanished.

Mrs. Naysmith said, "I suppose it was very foolish of me."

"It was definitely not the cautious thing to do," Malone said in agreement, "and I would definitely advise you not to try it again."

She gave him a very weak and very fleeting smile.

IX

All very fine, Malone reflected as he went down the hall, and no doubt a lot of fun, too. But where was Ann McKoen? He had enough worries without adding in a bossy and probably eccentric old lady who went around trying to set traps for killers.

He found Clare Robinet in the good-sized sitting room that adjoined her bedroom. It was a rather over-charming combination of greys, roses and greens. She motioned him to a chair and indicated a big carved crystal ashtray nearby.

"I hope you don't believe any of us in this house had anything to do with this frightful business, Mr. Malone," she said. A fastidious gesture made it plain that she considered the entire affair in the very worst of taste.

Malone tried to give the impression that he didn't, and wished she would hurry up.

"Of course, some of the people here are—" She shrugged her dainty shoulders, "—disagreeable. When I say 'here' I include Freddy Henderson, of course. He's in and out of the house all the time, but whether it's because of Andrew's business, or just to meet that nurse, I don't know. It's easy to see that she'd have a strong appeal for someone of his character. It's all very unpleasant, really." She closed her eyes as though to shut out the unpleasantness, and opened them again very sadly.

"How I wish that I could get away for a while! Go to Florida, as that noisy, really vulgar, little Gloria does! But travel is so expensive, and Lora did think she needed me here—though why, I don't know. It must be said for Aunt Aggie that she makes a thoroughly efficient housekeeper, anyway. I suppose I ought to try to look after Gloria, but I simply don't want to be responsible for her. The whole situation is impossible, really."

Malone murmured something sympathetic and rose to his feet.

"If only Noel were more of a comfort to me. But he leads such a lively life, and he is *so* extravagant! I do feel that he never quite appreciated everything poor Lora gave him, although it's true that she did do things so grudgingly." She sighed. "I do feel so sorry for that poor girl," she added.

"I'm glad you do," Malone said almost grimly. "And if that's all, Mrs. Robinet—"

"Oh, of course, of course! I know you're busy. I just wanted you to know how I felt. How we all feel, I'm sure." She gave him a smile that had just the right mixture of sadness and fatigue and closed her eyes again. They were still closed when Malone left.

Gloria popped out of her door just as he reached the head of the stairs. She'd combed out her lioness-colored hair and it waved softly around her shoulders.

"Malone, I was just wondering if Lora, with her spying habits, had stumbled on the fact that Freddy Henderson hasn't gotten his divorce yet. Not that he's going to marry that Olsen wench, or anybody who doesn't have money. Neither is Noel. They both had their eye on me until my pinch of poverty came along and they found out my dough was all tied up in that damned trust fund." She started back for her door.

"Nice kitty," Malone told her pleasantly, and went on down the stairs.

Nurse Ellen Olsen was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs. She'd changed into a pale grey woolen suit with a pale blue linen blouse, but she didn't look any less stiffly starched white cotton. Malone wondered which member of the family she particularly disliked, and decided she would be completely impartial with her hostility.

"Mr. Malone," she said precisely, "I thought I ought to inform you that when I reached Mrs. Naysmith's room, I saw nothing in her respiration or color to indicate that she had been at the point of suffocation."

"Thank you," Malone said.

She said, "You're welcome," and went off towards her own room.

Noel came rushing toward him from the study. "Malone! What'll I do? I've just been in touch with the airport. She didn't go there and neither did Henderson. Andy just got in. He took his car and went right off without saying where he was going. That's all they know. I called the office, but Henderson didn't go back there and they don't know where Andy is. I called Ann's apartment, and I waited and waited, but there isn't any answer. I called your office."

Noel Robinet paused for breath. "The girl there doesn't know anything about Ann or about Freddy

Henderson. But she did say that Andy had called and left a message that he was coming to see you right away. And she said to tell you that someone else has been calling every five minutes, that you'd know what she meant. Malone, what's happening, and what shall I do?"

"I don't know," Malone said.

"Malone. What are *you* going to do?"

"I don't know that either," Malone said savagely, "but I'm going to do it in a hurry."

Noel Robinet said urgently, "Listen a minute. These people—even my own mother. None of them liked Aunt Lora, but none of them would have killed her. And they want to see her murderer found. Malone, they all believe Ann did it. One of them must have done it and wants to pin it on Ann. Malone, should I go with you, or should I stay here? I should go and try to find Ann. I should tell the police."

"They're looking for her already," Malone said wearily. "Stay here. And *don't worry,*" he added, promising himself he'd said it for the last time that day.

He himself began getting down to really serious worrying even before he'd hailed a taxi, but it was still in a formless and not yet useful stage when he walked into his office.

"Don't even bother to tell me about von Flanagan," he snapped at Maggie before she could even open her mouth. "I'm probably happier just the way I am."

He slammed the door of the inner office behind him, walked over to the window and stood glaring out at what was now definitely sleet again.

Everything still kept coming back to that curious and almost extreme friendliness and helpfulness of everyone involved. It didn't seem right to him. No, it didn't seem right at all. Was the attitude because they were so relieved at knowing Lora Acton was out of their way forever that they would gladly see a smart defense lawyer save her murderer from the just retribution of society and the law? He paused to remind himself that he was talking to himself, not a jury, and that anyway he was on the other side.

No, disliked Lora Acton they most certainly had, but surely not that much. And in any case all the suspicion that fell on Ann McKoen was automatically lifted from them. They had certainly made it plain to him that they believed her guilty, and would undoubtedly do their best to prove her guilty when the time came. Dislike each other and suspect each other of Lora Acton's murder they quite probably might. But in a pinch—literally a pinch, he reminded himself—they would very definitely alibi each other.

Why? He didn't know. And there wasn't a blessed thing he could do about it.

Where was Ann McKoen? He didn't know, and there wasn't anything he could do about that, either. It might even be as well if the police did find her. He was beginning to be a little afraid that she would be safer in jail.

He sighed, walked over to the filing cabinet, pulled out the drawer marked EMERGENCIES and poured himself a generous drink from the bottle of gin, with a silent word of thanks for the fact that he had no allergies.

That damned friendliness! He scowled. The members of the Acton household were all subtle people, very infernally subtle. They had, separately and individually—perhaps even collectively—elected Ann McKoen. Therefore they were *not* doing the expected. Lora Acton, aunt, sister, niece, patient, business partner's wife, had been murdered, not brutally, of course, and in a nice way, but murdered. From all of the appearances, Ann McKoen had committed the crime and he, Malone, was defending her. They should have been hostile.

One of them had murdered Lora Acton and had good reasons for being subtle to the extreme in being almost overly friendly and helpful to Malone. But not all of them. No, definitely not all.

It all and always came back to that, and he was getting nowhere. Just the vague, uncomfortable feeling that he should understand perfectly, that he knew something that made everything add up to an answer. And it didn't.

He was relieved to see Andrew Acton come into the office, a tall, muscular, deeply tanned man with lightish brown hair. Right now he was a shade pale under the tan.

"Malone!" he said. His voice was hoarse. "Where is she?"

"I wish to God I knew," Malone said unhappily.

"I'll pay you anything you ask," Acton said. "She didn't kill Lora. She couldn't have. And what the devil would she want with the jewelry?"

He sat down and mopped his brow. "I'll tell you the truth, Malone. Eleven years with a wheel-chair invalid—it was, well, difficult. And Lora wasn't a—nice invalid. She was peevish. She was exacting. She was suspicious of everybody and everything. We had the devil's own time keeping servants and nurses, until we got Olsen. But—I didn't even look around at other women."

He mopped his brow again, crumpled his handkerchief and shoved it into his pocket. "I like the outdoors. Hunting, fishing, polo. Lora resented it. I don't blame her."

He fished nervously for a cigarette, started to light it, changed his mind and threw both it and the match in the waste-basket. "I met Ann. I'm being honest with you, Malone. I love her. If I'd been free, I'd have asked her to marry me. But you

don't divorce a wheel-chair invalid, a cripple."

According to the strictest etiquette, you don't kill them, either, Malone thought. He said nothing.

"I thought—at least, I could do something for her. Make her a little money. I had a feeling she was just a little interested in Lora's nephew, Noel. Not much get-up-and-go to him, but he's a very attractive young man."

"I've met him," Malone said laconically.

"If she should like him," Andrew Acton began, "if she should want him—" He paused. "I don't know. I don't entirely trust him. There's a weak spot there, tricky, almost sneaky. Takes after his mother." A wry smile crossed his face. "She's been getting away with things—mostly little things —for years. Thinks nobody knew. Didn't figure on Lora, though. She managed to know everything."

Malone wondered if he ought to ask if the late Lora Acton had known how her husband felt about Ann McKoen, and decided it wouldn't be tactful. Not, at least, right now.

"Same way with Aggie. Aggie Naysmith. Been putting away little sums here and little sums there for years and years, out of the household money. Storing it up for the future, poor soul. Must have a tidy sum by now. I knew about it, didn't worry about it. Lord knows, I'd never miss the money."

Especially, Malone thought, if it was Lora Acton's money to begin with.

"Lora wanted to get rid of her," Andrew Acton said. Again he fished out a cigarette and this time, succeeded in lighting it. "Wanted to fire the nurse, too. She was carrying on with Henderson. What of it? Nobody else's business. Malone—"

He paused, his lips tightening.

Malone knew what he was going to say, and said it first. "I know, I've got to do something."

"Find Ann. Prove she didn't do anything to Lora."

"I've got the proof," Malone said wearily. "Definite proof that she's not guilty. But the police are still going to want to know who did." He wasn't liking any of this. "Did you ever," he plunged in at last, "give Ann McKoen the impression that Lora Acton was your mother?"

Andrew Acton stared at him, bewildered.

"All right," the little lawyer said. "Did you ever, in so many words, actually tell Ann McKoen that Lora Acton was your wife?"

The tall man seemed even more bewildered. "I don't know. I must have. Not in so many words, no, I don't think so. I'm not sure. I suppose I must have assumed that she assumed—" his voice trailed off vaguely.

"Exactly," Malone said. "Not

that it makes things any easier right now."

He was adding it all up in his mind, the rented mansion, the office that was probably rented furnished, Lora Acton's money, the looting of Gloria's trust fund, the "investment" of Ann McKoen's tiny fortune in Canadian mining property, everything. He was on the brink of asking Andrew Acton the flying time between Chicago and Tomahawk when the tall man took out his check-book.

"All right, Malone," he said, "I'm leaving it all up to you. Handle it whatever way you think best. And how much do you want for a retainer?"

Blood money, Malone thought with a little chill. Blood money! And at that moment the phone rang. Charlie Hine.

Five minutes later when he put down the telephone, he looked at Andrew Acton with different eyes. He finally opened the EMERGENCIES drawer and pulled out the bottle of cognac that he saved for real emergencies.

"I think you can use this," he said, respect in his voice. He rinsed out the glass.

Andrew Acton had been born a rich man's son, and he'd done more than well with the fortune left to him. His wife had been born poor, and had married him from behind a stenographer's desk. He'd spent a great deal of the money he'd made in attempts to have repaired the damage done to her spine in the tragic accident that had taken place the first year of their marriage.

They'd lived in a series of rented mansions because she disliked apartments and did like grandeur, and because she liked to move about a great deal. Just as they'd moved to Chicago because she was not happy in New York.

He'd provided more than lavishly for her aunt, for her sister and for her nephew. He'd sent the nephew through Yale, and tried more than once to set him up in business.

The Gloria Acton trust fund was in magnificent shape, greatly increased in value and provided an income that would have been ample for anyone except Gloria.

The expensive office furnishings were the personal property of Andrew Acton, who had brought them here from New York.

Freddy Henderson's financial affairs were in even shakier condition than his personal ones, and Andrew Acton had had to pull him through more than once before now.

And Ann—

The little lawyer said, "You invested about twenty thousand dollars for Ann McKoen."

Acton nodded. "Actually, it was eighteen thousand, nine hundred and eighty."

"And according to my information," Malone said almost

reverently, "you've practically doubled it."

Again Acton nodded. "I know a good investment when I see one. If she leaves it in, she'll own half an iron mine, now in operation, and a third of a railroad. How did you know?"

"I too know a good investment when I see one," Malone told him. No point in bringing Charlie Hine into this.

"About this retainer—" Andrew Acton began again.

Malone said, "About this stolen jewelry—"

This time Acton shook his head. "No idea. It could have been taken any time, I suppose—isn't necessarily connected with Lora's murder. She'd never worn—well, any of it. I never sold it for—Oh, call it sentimental reasons. Used to add to it from time to time, as a matter of fact.

"I kept hoping, for years, that she'd be able to wear it someday. Never even had it insured. She used to take it out now and then —have her nurse take it out for her, I mean—and look at it. Maybe it gave her a little hope, too."

"But it could have been taken this morning," Malone said, almost too casually.

"Ann? Nonsense! She never would have stolen, any more than she would have killed! She didn't need to. One of the nurses, one of the maids, anyone. I don't know. And it still could have happened any time. It doesn't matter."

Seventy-eight thousand dollars worth of jewelry, Malone reflected, and it doesn't matter. *The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.*

"What did you say?" Andrew Acton said sharply.

"Talking to myself," Malone said.

"Now this retainer—"

The telephone rang again and Malone grabbed at it. He said "Ann—" in a half-strangled voice.

Andrew Acton almost snatched the telephone from him. "Where is she? Find out where she is."

Malone waved him aside. *"Where are you?"* he asked.

"At the airport. Of course." It was a very shaky, very frightened little voice. "Where are *you?"*

"I'm right here." He had a sudden and terrifying feeling that he had either gone mad or was dreaming.

"But—Malone, I got your message all right—"

"What message?"

"Why, when you telephoned. That you knew what had happened and you were going to get the proof. That I was to rush out to the airport and get a ticket for you but not in your name. That I was to wait for you and that it was very important for me to keep out of sight until plane time. I've been hiding in the ladies' room, but it's practically plane time now, and you're not here.

And I've got your briefcase with me, the one you left at the house and wanted me to bring to you."

Malone said, "Oh *hell!*" He scowled at the battered old relic that had seen twenty years of going in and out of courtrooms and that was lying, limply and wearily, against the corner coat-tree.

"Ann, listen to me, this is terribly important. Get out of there without being seen, if you have to go through the ladies' room window. Find a taxi in a hurry. Go to—" He hesitated only a moment. There was just one thing to do, and he had to do it this way. Anyway, Ann would be safe. "Go straight to the Acton house, and hurry. We'll meet you there."

"Let me talk to her," Andrew Acton begged.

Malone shook his head, glared at the telephone for a second or two, and then called von Flanagan.

The dial tone seemed raucous.

The first words he said after "Hello," were "Shut up!" Then "I know where she is, and I'm going to tell you right now if you'll just *shut up* for a minute. She's in a taxi, on her way to the Acton house. So call off your dogs. Yes, I'm on my way there too. I'll probably be there before you are. No, I'm not trying to make things hard for you." He slammed down the telephone before he had to say "Shut up!" again.

"Damn you, Malone—" Andrew Acton said, jumping to his feet.

"You be quiet, too," Malone said. "I know what I'm doing. I'm on my way right now to present the police with proof that Ann McKoen couldn't possibly have murdered your wife."

He was, he reflected, if some small miracle occurred. There was still something in the back of his mind that stubbornly refused to reveal itself, and it was the one thing he needed. "As far as everything else is concerned—" He let it go at that. If only he could think what that something was.

X

Andrew Acton's big sedan was downstairs, and the tall man drove it as though he were trying to make it sprout wings and take off at any moment. Malone spoke only once along the way.

"The important thing is—which one of them it was that did the actual work with the pillow." *A pillow to feather a nest,* he told himself. And then suddenly, he knew.

Andrew Acton had his key in the door by the time Malone was still only half-way up the steps. From somewhere in the house came a shrill, startled scream.

Malone took the rest of the steps in one bound, pushed Andrew Acton to one side, and shot through the door.

The scream had come from Clare Robinet, who stood at the

door of Nurse Ellen Olsen's room, her mouth still hanging open. Malone got a vague and fleeting impression of Gloria and Mrs. Naysmith appearing on the landing above, of Freddy Henderson coming out of the study, of a light brown, moon-shaped frightened face at the dining room door, and of Noel Robinet shoving past him.

Nurse Ellen Olsen lay on the floor of her neat little room, a pillow over her face. Malone bent down and examined her. She was unconscious, but she was still alive.

There was commotion and the noise of movement in the hall, and he went in its direction. He felt, more than saw, that the front door was still flung wide open and that rain was beating in. The rest was a whirling distortion of shapes and motion.

Two cars were outside at the curb, a taxi and a police car. Ann McKoen was hurrying up the steps, a shining new briefcase in her hand, and the police were close behind her.

Malone saw Klutchetsky step up quickly and take her arm. But he made no move of protest. For Noel Robinet, white-faced and desperate, had also glanced toward the doorway, seen that avenue of escape blocked to him, and wheeled about, running blindly, frantically and with no idea of destination, up the long, curving stairway.

Andrew Acton was close after him, and then suddenly it was hard to tell what was happening. It could have been Andrew Acton's out-thrust hand, it could have been Gloria Acton's upflung arm, it could even have been a foot catching and slipping on a stair's edge.

Malone wanted to close his eyes and couldn't, as Noel Robinet fell, in what seemed like a hideous slow-motion, rolling, twisting, screaming and scrambling down the stairs, to lie very still and very silent at their feet.

The people who had been standing frozen, like living statues in a nightmare dream, all came to life at once.

Andrew Acton came down the stairs very slowly, his handsome face drawn and a little gray. Gloria and Mrs. Naysmith came down after him, startled into silence.

Clare Robinet said very faintly, "He fell."

Malone caught her arm and pushed her into a chair in what had been Lora Acton's room. "Yes," Malone said very gently, "he did fall. I saw him. He didn't do it on purpose."

It was Klutchetsky who announced that Noel Robinet was dead, that his neck was broken.

And it was von Flanagan who growled, "On purpose? Why would he have done it on purpose?" He looked suspiciously at Malone.

"Pretty obvious," Malone said. He was very tired now, and he wished that he were a long ways off.

"Ellen!" Freddy Henderson said. "Miss Olsen!" But he didn't make any move.

"Everybody forgets the victim," Malone told him, leading the way to her room. "In a dog-fight, nobody cares what happens to the bone."

She opened her eyes just as they came in, looked around dazedly and questioningly. She looked a little efficient, but not much.

"You'll be all right now," Malone promised. Freddy Henderson and Klutchetsky lifted her on to the bed.

"I only asked for—half of them —" she whispered, and then she closed her eyes again.

"Half—of—what?" von Flanagan demanded wrathfully. He added, "Don't mind us, we're only the police. Don't bother to say what the hell is going on here."

Malone jerked his head toward the briefcase. "Open it up, my dear."

"It's locked," Ann McKoen said weakly. "I haven't any key."

"Look in your purse," Malone said. "He probably put it there. He wouldn't slip up on a small thing like that."

Everybody looked at him, bewilderedly and expectantly.

Malone said wearily, "Noel Robinet gave her a fake message from me. He told her to go to the airport and buy a ticket for me to somewhere, but not to use my name. He gave her the briefcase and told her I'd left it at the house, and to take it to me." He looked at her. "Is that right, my dear?"

"He told me—a ticket to New York. He came in my room and gave me the briefcase. And it was all false!"

Malone nodded. "Your being at the airport, buying a ticket under a phony name, and having the briefcase with you was to be the clincher. No one would know exactly when you'd left the house, whether it had been—" He paused.

"Had been what?" von Flanagan asked, still belligerently suspicious and scarlet with stifled rage.

"Nothing," Malone said placatingly. No point to bringing Aggie Naysmith into it now. "Robinet felt reasonably sure the cops would pick her up if she bought the ticket, hid till plane time, and then tried to board the plane."

Just then Klutchetsky got the briefcase open with the key he'd finally located in Ann McKoen's purse. Seventy-eight thousand dollars worth of jewels and baubles spilled out onto the grey-blue carpet, sending up flashes of purple and green and red, and pure white fire.

"He didn't need them any longer," Malone said. "Not with Lora Acton dead. Probably he

meant to pawn them, pay up his debts, and then somehow redeem them and put them back. Or maybe he meant to kill her all along—though it's far more likely that she found out about the jewels, in the way she had of finding out about everything. It's far more likely that she faced him with it, threatened him—and he picked up the nearest weapon—a pillow—and held it on her face until he was sure she was dead."

Malone suddenly realized that, seen through the still open door, the sleet had changed at last to an almost gentle rain.

"But her," von Flanagan said. "The girl."

Malone said a few well-chosen words about the general intelligence of the police officers present, and added, "Any fool could have seen that she had to be innocent. Feathers."

Von Flanagan remembered where he was just in time to choke back some equally well-chosen comments on Malone.

"Ann, my dear child," the little lawyer said. "What would have happened if you had picked up that feather pillow and held it long enough to smother someone—even if that someone were a helpless invalid and it wouldn't take long?"

She stared at him, understanding it immediately.

"Feathers," Malone told them. "An allergy. In a little while her face would have been blue. She'd have been half-choking, with an attack of asthma. But nothing of the sort happened." He decided he might as well add, "That's why I knew all along that she could be proven innocent."

This time, even von Flanagan had nothing to say.

What happened then seemed to take very little time. Nurse Olsen sat up, asked for a glass of water, and announced that she was perfectly all right. Malone signaled her with his eyes that she didn't need to say much, and she didn't. She'd accused Noel Robinet of taking the jewels, he'd tried to kill her, she'd struggled, and Clare Robinet had come along and screamed just in time. That was all.

Andrew Acton put a protecting arm around Ann McKoen's shoulders, nodded to Malone, and said, "I imagine we could do very well with a drink."

In a very short while the police had gone, taking away the body of Noel Robinet, and leaving a uniformed policeman at the door to say "No," to reporters.

Malone sipped the very good Scotch and closed his eyes tiredly. It was finished, as far as the police were concerned. They were satisfied. Everyone here in the big beautiful room was satisfied, and more than a little relieved. Ann McKoen and Andrew Acton sat near each other. It would only be a matter of a decent interval of time before they would be

legally and, he hoped, permanently together. Perhaps it would be just as well to let it go at that.

But, he told himself sternly, Andrew Acton had become a client, and he owed a duty to his client—especially in view of the fee he planned to ask. He opened his eyes, lit a fresh cigar, and sighed.

"Everyone has been very pleasant and very helpful," he said. "That's what bothered me." He sat suddenly bolt upright. "Too damned pleasant, and too damned helpful."

Andrew Acton scowled and said, "What the devil do you mean?"

"That only one of them should have been," Malone said. "The murderer. He would have been smart enough to be very pleasant and very helpful to me, because he knew it would be just enough of the unexpected to throw me off. But they were all pleasant and helpful. That's when I should have realized that they were all in it together."

He felt that if someone had dropped a pin, it would have shaken the walls and made the windows rattle in their frame. He wondered if he looked as unhappy as he felt.

"All except Gloria," he said. "She didn't have anything to do with it."

"I was plenty pleasant and helpful," Gloria told him, "but only because I liked your all right personality." She grinned at him.

He managed to grin back, and promised himself that she'd have a better chance to get acquainted with it.

"The others—" He paused, frowned. "It doesn't matter now, really, whether it just happened, or if it was all planned out in advance."

"It wasn't—" Clare Robinet started, and then closed her mouth fast.

"I didn't think so," Malone said, "and I'm glad. But there was plenty of reason all around. Noel's, you all know. Clare Robinet wanted to protect her son, and besides, Lora Acton had been threatening to get rid of them."

Keep on guessing, he told himself, it's a perfect score so far.

"There was Freddy Henderson. He was aware, and his little sugarfoot there was aware, that Lora Acton knew all about the financial shenanigans that were going on in the firm of Acton and Henderson, behind Andrew Acton's back. Her murder spelled safety to them, and Ann McKoen's being accused made everything perfect."

That guess even bettered the score.

"I suspected something of the sort," Andrew Acton said. His face was impassive. "I've been thinking about some changes."

No one else said a word.

This was going to be harder,

because he wasn't guessing now.

"And Mrs. Naysmith has been busily making sure of her future. She knew—or must have known—that it would only be a matter of time before Lora Acton told her to get out."

He drew a long breath. "They all wanted the murder to happen, so when it did happen—almost by accident—they agreed that Ann McKoen was the logical fall guy." He paused. "Mrs. Naysmith tried to make it absolutely certain by staging that phony attack on herself at a time when she thought Ann was still in the house.

"By that time it was beginning to be, every man for himself. Everyone wanted to make damned sure that if Ann McKoen turned out to be proved innocent, the suspicion would fall on someone else in the household. The party was beginning to fall apart at the seams when I got up here for the second time."

He sighed again and knocked the ash from his cigar. "It's a lucky thing I happened to drift into von Flanagan's office just when I did this morning."

There was a long silence.

Andrew Acton said at last, his good-looking face a little haggard, "I would not want any of Lora's people to ever be in need. But in addition to changes in my office—naturally, I will be giving up this house."

This time the silence was very long. Malone put down his empty glass and rose to his feet.

"But Malone," Gloria said. "Why didn't you tell the police all this?"

He smiled at her, at them all. "I believe," he said, "in letting the police make their own mistakes."

Half an hour later, back at the office, he opened the emergency file drawer and took a small drink of gin to take away the taste of the excellent Scotch, sat down behind his desk, cocked his feet up on it, took out the check and looked at it, and whistled two bars of "Did Your Mother Come From Ireland." Outside, the rain had stopped and the sky was clearing.

Maggie came in and said, "Malone, what—?"

He beamed. "The innocent have gone free, and the guilty will not be unpunished, my client owns half an iron mine and two thirds of a railroad, and I—"

She fairly snatched the check from his hand to look at it. "Malone," she said, "you'd better get this to the bank first thing in the morning."

He nodded at her. He wasn't tired any more now. "I'll not only get up at the crack of dawn," he promised her, "I'll get up and crack it myself." And tomorrow, he knew, it was going to be spring.

the paper trail

by . . . Corey Ford

If you blank out completely when your best friend is charged with murder—it's a good idea to be a pipe smoker and collect matches.

I'VE ONLY blanked out three times in my life. I mean really blank, so I couldn't remember what happened. The first time was at a B-29 base on Guam when the news about Hirohito came over and Tex Hubbard opened his footlocker and broke out a quart of twelve-year-old Scotch. The two of us killed it together. The second time was when I ran into Tex again, here in Chicago, after three years.

It must have been quite a reunion, because when the telephone woke me out of a dead stupor I discovered I was still wearing my shirt and necktie. I was in my own room, but I had no idea how I'd got there, or where I'd been or what time it was. I sat up in bed and groped for the phone, but what I heard sobered me as swiftly as a cold shower.

"Homicide Bureau," the voice said. "You know James Hubbard?"

I said I did.

"A girl name of Powys was murdered last night. We're holding Hubbard."

I stammered: "What for?"

"What do you think, chum?"

Corey Ford, whose stories frequently appear in the slicks, is a master of the economy plot precision-meshed with suspense. It's a joy to watch him extricate a murder suspect from a tragic plight in a tale such as this.

the voice inquired dryly. "We found him in her apartment."

"But that's impossible," I said, trying to hold the phone steady. "I was with him all night."

"Where?"

I had sense enough to say: "Look, I'll come right over," and I hung up, and sat on the edge of the bed with my head in my hands, and tried to think.

It was hard to think. The evening was all in fragments in my mind, like a shattered mirror. I had a vague memory of getting into a cab with Tex, and arguing which one of us would drop the other first. I had insisted on taking him home, and he had insisted on taking me home, but who won the argument I couldn't remember.

I picked my coat up off the floor and got out my pipe and fished in the pocket for a match. The cover of the paper match-safe said, "Pump Room." We must have hit the Pump sometime during the night, but whether it was early or late I couldn't recall now if my life depended on it. Or, I thought grimly, Tex's. . . .

He was pale and pretty shaky when they let me in to see him at the precinct station. I was a little shaky myself; I'd been cross-questioned for an hour, and it hadn't proved a thing. It was like trying to fix a dream. Tex wasn't any help, either.

"Tell me what happened," I asked him.

"You tell me," said Tex, squashing his cigarette. "I woke up in a strange apartment. The girl was dead. Pretty soon the place was crawling with cops."

"You don't remember how you got there?"

"All I remember," said Tex, taking out another cigarette from his case and tapping it thoughtfully, "you and I were in a cab somewhere. I don't remember anything after that."

I got a pack of matches out of my pocket. I noticed that it said "606" on the cover. "Who was the girl?" I asked, lighting his cigarette.

"Marie Powys. A night-club singer."

"Did you ever know her before?"

Tex hesitated for a tick of a second. "Yes," he said, "I used to know her."

"Oh, brother!" I groaned.

"It was during the war," Tex said. "I met her when I was on leave in New York, and later she wrote me overseas and sent me her picture and stuff."

"The one in black tights on the wall over your sack?"

Tex nodded. "She was a nice kid. Matter of fact, this cigarette case is a present from her."

The inside of the cover said, "To my one and only Tex from Marie." It was engraved in her handwriting. I looked at Tex.

"Yeah, I know," Tex said sheepishly. "She took the thing pretty serious, I guess. I got a

couple of letters from her after the war, but I tore them up. I'm engaged to a girl back home, and I didn't want to get involved."

"Tex," I said, "how was she killed?"

"Whoever it was went to work on her with a knife." He ground out his cigarette. "These things taste lousy this morning," he said, taking another.

I lighted it for him. The match folder said, "Wrigley Bar."

"And you don't remember going to her apartment after we left each other?"

"How could I go there?" said Tex. "I didn't know her address."

The inspector from the Homicide Bureau was named Hourihan. He had his feet on the desk, and he was gnawing the stub of a cigar when I came in.

"Sit down," he said, exhaling sour smoke. "All I need is to fix the time. When did you leave Hubbard last night?"

"I don't know."

"Was it after three?"

"I don't know."

He shifted impatiently in his chair. "The girl was killed sometime before four. Hubbard phoned from her apartment about four and gave us the address and said to come over. When we got there, the receiver was still off the hook and he'd passed out."

"How do you know it was Hubbard that phoned?"

He gave me a pitying look. "He said so himself."

I had the first bright thought I'd had all morning. "Look, Inspector," I said, lighting my pipe, "there's another thing that strikes me. Why isn't there any sign of blood on Hubbard's clothes?"

The inspector took his feet off the desk. "I'll ask the questions, chum," he said. "Where were you and Hubbard last night?"

"We were a lot of places. I'm a little hazy. I know we must have been at 606 and the Pump."

"How do you know?"

"I found the matches in my pocket." The inspector looked puzzled. "I'm a pipe smoker," I explained. "I borrow matches. Every time I see a pack of matches, I automatically pick it up and slip it in my pocket." I reached in my pocket. "For instance, here's some with 'JBH' on the cover. Whose initials are those?"

"Mine," he said. "You just borrowed them."

I went across the street, and had some black coffee. While I was sipping it, I emptied all the matchbooks out of my pocket and spread them out on the table, and tried to reconstruct the evening. There were a couple with "Pennsylvania Drug Company" or "Ex-Lax" which I discarded, because I couldn't tell anything from them. I had the Pump Room, the Buttery, the Wrigley Bar, 606, The French Casino, and something called the El Bee Diner. The Wrigley Bar was out, because I

remembered that was where I had met Tex about five o'clock. I decided to start with the Pump Room.

They were just getting ready for the luncheon trade when I arrived at the Pump. Ernie Byfield remembered seeing me the night before, and said we had dinner there. He thought we left about nine. Red, the starter, said he'd tried to get us to take a cab—evidently we weren't too steady—but we'd insisted on walking to the Buttery.

So the Buttery was next. We'd spent quite some time in the Buttery, the headwaiter recalled when I asked him. There'd been a little matter of upsetting a tray of glasses, so it stuck in his mind; and the doorman said we left about eleven thirty for the French Casino.

The Casino was harder. I had to wait a couple of hours until the captain arrived, and he didn't seem particularly glad to see me. He said there had been some kind of argument about a ringside table, in the course of which I had untied his tie, and he had suggested that we leave. He said he didn't remember where we went, so long as we didn't come back.

It was even worse at 606. Frank, the headwaiter, remembered that we got there about midnight; so we must have come direct from the Casino. Thus far the chain was unbroken. Frank said we'd had a lot of drinks, and we'd insisted on joining the chorus in the floor show, and Frank kept trying to get us to go home, he said, but Tex had other ideas.

"He wanted to go to the Club Catalina," Frank said. "He hadn't been there in a long time. That was about two o'clock, I'd say."

The Catalina was a pseudo-Spanish club on Clark Street, near Ontario. The stucco walls were painted with undressed *señoritas,* glaringly unfunny by daylight—have you ever seen a night club in the afternoon?—and the tables were piled up, and a colored man was sweeping up last evening's butts.

The proprietor was very courteous, but he said he'd never seen me before. He was sure he'd have remembered me if I had come in, he said. He offered to buy me a brandy, but the air was foul, and I was glad to get out on the street again.

I'd reached a dead end. The only other matchbook I had was the El Bee Diner, on Logan Square. I didn't see how we could have got all the way out to Logan Square last night, but I figured I'd better make sure.

The El Bee was just what it sounded like; a long counter with stools, a juke box, bacon and eggs with coffee forty-five cents. Several customers were perched along the counter, eating with their hats on. I sat down on the end stool, and ordered coffee.

"Do you remember by any

chance if I was in here last night?" I asked the counterman.

"Nope," the counterman said, "I never seen you that I know of, bud."

The man on the next stool turned to stare at me, and I felt embarrassed. "I'm just trying to figure out where I was," I explained to the counterman. "I thought I might have come here."

"You didn't come here, mister," the man beside me said. "You wasn't in any shape to go anywheres."

"How do you know?"

"I took you home in my cab," the man said. "I remember you very well. You borrowed my last pack of matches to light your pipe."

"Where did you pick me up?"

"In front of the Catalina," he said. "You and another fella was arguing which one of you would drop the other off, but you passed out, so I took you home first."

"Where did you take the other fellow?"

"Back to the Catalina."

I sat forward so suddenly that I slopped some coffee.

"He remembered he'd forgotten his cigarette case," the man said, "and he went back to look for it. He told me to wait outside, but after a while the boss came out, Luigi, and he paid me off and told me not to wait, he'd take the fella home in his own car."

"Do you remember what time that was?"

"Just a little after three-ten."

"Where's your cab now?"

"Outside."

"I want to go to the Catalina," I said.

The colored man had finished sweeping the floor when I arrived, and the tables were back in place. Some waiters were setting the tables, and one of them directed me to Luigi's office, in the rear. He looked up from his desk as I entered.

"Sorry to bother you again," I said.

"Not at all." He shrugged, gesturing with a cigarette holder. "Please sit down."

I sat down opposite him, and got out my pipe. "I'm still trying to figure out where I was last night. You're sure I wasn't in here?"

"Quite sure," he said. "I certainly would have seen you." He inquired casually, "Why are you so anxious to know, if it's any of my business?"

"A friend of mine thought he might have left something here," I said, lighting my pipe. I watched his face over the flame of the match. "A cigarette case."

His face did not change expression, but I was watching his eyes, and it seemed to me that the pupils got smaller.

"No, there is no cigarette case here," he said. "I am sure one of the waiters would have found it. I'm so sorry."

There didn't seem to be much

else to say. "Well," I said, rising, "if you ever happen to come across it—"

"I shall save it for you, of course," he said, leading the way to the door, "but I am sure you are mistaken about being here. Sometimes when you are celebrating," he added over his shoulder, "you have trouble to remember later, eh?"

I glanced at his desk as I followed him out. There was a picture of a girl in black tights, in a silver easel frame. It said, in the same big up-and-down handwriting as Tex's case, "To my darling Luigi from Marie."

"That's right," I said to Luigi. "The next morning everything's a blank."

"It is bad to forget." Luigi smiled, holding open the door.

The colored man was standing in the lobby as I went out, leaning on his broom and reading a tabloid. Marie's picture was all over the front page, under big headlines.

"This Marie Powys," I asked him, "didn't she work here once?"

"I don't know nuthin' about it, mister," he said quickly.

"She a good friend of the boss?"

"I don't know nuthin'," he said. "I ain' even seen her in a couple of weeks."

"Did she walk out on him or something?"

"I don't know nuthin', I tell you," he said. "The less I knows about the boss's women, the healthier I remains. The boss he don' like people messin' around his women."

"Thanks," I said, and I gave him a dollar and went out into the street.

My pipe was out, and I knocked out the ashes and filled it again as I strolled down the sidewalk, trying to figure what to do next. The thing seemed pretty clear to me now. Luigi had found the cigarette case after we left, and that was how he knew who Tex was. Probably he'd known about Tex for a long time; probably that was why he and the girl quarreled.

Then when Tex blundered back, looking for his case, Luigi decided to kill two birds with one stone. It was as easy as that. The only thing was to prove it. I had the taxi driver's word that we had been at the Catalina, but Luigi would deny it, of course.

Tex had got back his cigarette case, so that wouldn't prove anything. My trail of paper matches had led me around in a complete circle, and I was right back where I started.

I struck a match to light my pipe, and glanced at the cover of the pack. It said, "Presto Dry Cleaners, 1137½ N. Wabash Avenue." I didn't have that matchbook a few minutes ago. There was only one person I'd been talking to.

The Presto shop was crowded; the distracted proprietor behind the counter was trying to make

deliveries and take new orders and handle a half-dozen impatient customers at once.

"I'm all alone, my helper walks out and leaves me flat," he was complaining. "I only got two pairs of hands."

"I'm from the Catalina," I said, forcing my way to the counter. "Is Luigi's suit ready yet?"

The proprietor threw his arms in the air. "He only brought it in this morning, and he wants it back this afternoon. What does he expect, miracles?"

"He's got to have it right away," I said. "He's in a hurry."

"So everybody's in a hurry," he retorted. "Such a shape it was in, all blood on the pants from that taxi smashup he had, it would take another day at least."

"That's too late," I said. "He's got to have it now."

"Take it, then!" the proprietor yelled, his patience exhausted. He ran back into the shop, grabbed a rumpled suit and flung it down angrily on the counter in front of me. "Take it somewhere else. You got a better place to take it?"

"Yes," I said, gathering the blood-stained trousers under my arm, "I got a place."

As I said, I've only blanked out three times in my life—and that night when Tex was released, was the third time.

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secret nightmare

by . . Jean Forbes-Robertson

There is nothing harder to erase than the ghastly fright of a child—a child with a doll called "Poppy!"

SHE SAID, "Oh, but you must be the girl who kicked my husband's shins."

My eyes goggled and my mouth fell open as I stared at the woman sitting opposite me in the train.

She was large, over-fat, but it suited her. She had wet brown cowlike eyes, a full, smiling mouth and an attractive dimple.

It was New Year's Eve and I was going to stay with Aunt Chris. The woman and I had got into conversation during the usual interminable wait at the junction, and my name, which I had let slip, had touched off this alarming piece of reminiscence.

"Oh, yes," she went on gaily. "Roger was talking about you only the other day, wondering if you ever came down here now. You remember my husband, Roger Chatham?"

An appalling and very sudden wave of faintness came over me. I managed to answer something and fought to keep the sickliness out of my smile as the ghastly memories of thirteen years ago came flooding back. I was back

A scene of imagined violence seen through the bewildered eyes of a sensitive and terrified child, and remembered long afterwards has supplied more than one mystery story writer with a theme of entrancing possibilities. But seldom has that theme been developed with quite the memorable, heart-warming convincingness that Jean Forbes-Robertson has imparted to it here.

again in my secret nightmare.

"We live in the Lodge now," she went on pleasantly. "Roger's people sold the house years ago, of course. But six months ago we saw the Lodge was for sale and Roger (irresistibly returning to the scene of the crime, I thought) decided it would be fun to buy it, so. . . . Anyway, you must come and see us . . ."

I murmured something polite. Some people got into the carriage, the train started, and I was left to allow my all too vivid memories to run riot.

The last time I had seen Roger Chatham I had been ten years old and Roger twelve. Roger would be twenty-five. The woman opposite must be well over thirty . . .

My parents, for three consecutive summers, had rented the Lodge of the Manor House for the summer holidays. It had been recommended by Aunt Chris, who had a tiny house in the village. At the big Manor House lived the owners, Colonel and Mrs. Chatham, with their two children, Roger and Millie. Millie was about my age and we became great friends. She had a wonderful collection of dolls. We used to play gorgeous games together; sometimes Roger, whom we both adored, if he wasn't in one of his sulky moods, would inspire us to play Red Indians and Cowboys with him: Roger being an Indian, and Millie and I a couple of terrified, giggling cowboys.

I can see him now, and always will, I suppose: a big hulking boy of twelve, with thick, rough, mousy hair, and features that didn't mean anything particular until he smiled or grinned, and then he could charm a bird off a tree. Oh, Roger . . . and my scalp began to prickle as I tried to keep my mind on the bouncing telegraph wires swooping up and down outside the train window.

Roger's wife leant forward and tapped me politely on the knee with a scarlet fingernail, and screeched against the chatter and rumble of passengers and train:

"Millie, you know . . . you remember Millie, Roger's sister? Millie married and went to South Africa; we haven't seen her for years . . . it seems so sad," she said, trying to ease herself back in her seat again, "so sad to go so very far away . . ."

Far away from what; I thought. What a perfect wife she must be for Roger, with her charming chubbiness and cowlike placidity. I imagined her, settled comfortably, but firmly, in the sitting room of the Lodge, calmly doing her nails, while Roger flew into one of his unreasonable, fierce, secret rages. She would look up slowly from whatever she was doing to say: "Oh, no, *really,* Rog . . ." I felt sure she called him 'Rog.'

But why on earth had he told her about my kicking his shins? He *couldn't* have forgotten the reason. And now that he lived

again so near to Aunt Chris would I have to meet him face to face?

Round and round went my silly head (with a smart hat on top of it to make Aunt Chris laugh) until the train slowed down, and we heaved our suitcases off the rack and said polite 'goodbyes.'

Mrs. Roger repeated her invitation: "Now, *mind* you come and see us. Roger will simply love to have a chat with you about old times. . . ."

I didn't say anything to Aunt Chris about my encounter in the train. I hoped to get through the weekend without running into the Chathams. But next day at lunch Aunt Chris announced that we had both been asked to a cocktail party by some new people called Broadbent.

I feared the worst and of course, almost the first people I saw were Mrs. Chatham and Roger, a lot taller and heavier of course, but looking quite painfully like the Roger I remembered.

And so strong was my memory of that face, twisted with fury, of the uplifted spade and the sobbing voice, that I stood stock still in the doorway of the Broadbents' drawing room until Aunt Chris caught me by the sleeve and dragged me towards them.

The next moment Roger was wringing my hand and saying: "Gosh, it's good to see you, Lorna, after all these years. I had a letter from Millie last week, she's just had a baby. She's in South Africa now, you know. You and your aunt simply must come over to lunch tomorrow . . ." and before I could begin to think of an excuse, his wife was saying: "Oh, yes, do," and Aunt Chris had accepted: "We'd simply love to."

Of course, all that night I dreamed and kept waking in a cold sweat, falling asleep and dreaming again . . .

The little wood, where the tiny ancient cemetery lay almost hidden among the trees, a little cemetery for animals it was. Millie and I loved to read the old inscriptions on the small tombstones. We were particularly fond of one that ran: "Joky, Beloved Pug, Passed Away 1895, Happily of Over Eating."

We often used to play there with her legion of dolls.

I always took the short cut through this little wood, from the Lodge where my parents and I stayed. It saved going the long way round all down the twisting drive to the Manor House, to play with the Chatham children.

Did Roger ever go into that little wood now?

A week before that last fatal summer holiday ended, I had gone as usual to play with the Chatham children at the Manor House, and came upon Millie hopping round the garden with excitement, with one of her dolls in her arms, crooning a weird, wordless song.

"What *are* you doing?" I asked,

stopping dead on the lovely front lawn.

Still rocking her doll in a sea-sick-making way, she crept up to me with exaggerated care and whispered: "We've got a *new baby* brother!" And then, forgetting to whisper, she shouted: "And we're going to call him *Dickon!*" and she went on hopping about, her face beaming with bursting pride and joy . . . Little did we know that late summer afternoon what was in store for us all.

I woke from my restless sleep in Aunt Chris's minute spare room, still remembering the fun we'd had, Millie and I, over the new baby, Dickon, and how Roger hadn't seemed at all interested . . . and as I heaved myself sleepily down to breakfast with Aunt Chris, I found myself startled that I wasn't still crooning over little Dickon, or staring into Roger's furious eyes . . .

I thought of crying off lunch with the Chathams, but I finally decided to brave it out; for Aunt Chris's sake. After all, Roger couldn't do anything to me . . .

He must know that I'd never tell now, having kept silent for thirteen years. I'd wondered so often if, perhaps, he might try to kill me, if we ever met again . . . and the memories came pouring back . . .

That last evening before going back to school for the Autumn Term, trotting along in the dusk by the short cut to the Manor House, to say 'goodbye' regretfully to the Chatham children, I can feel the sensation now of my thick school walking shoes scudding silently along the grass verge of the footpath, as I ran towards the little wood. And how I switched on my pencil torch when I got amongst the trees, so that I shouldn't trip over any roots. I was just going to scoot past the animals' cemetery when I saw him.

He, too, had a torch, but it was lying on the ground beside him; and he was digging furiously with a garden spade, furiously but furtively digging a deep hole next door to the tombstone of 'Joky-beloved-pug-passed-away-happily-of-over-eating.'

It was only a few seconds before he heard my hurried breathing and looked up; but in those few seconds I had seen on the ground what the dim beam of his torch shone upon. A tiny, still, baby's face . . . a glimpse of a frilly-necked nightgown . . . And then he was on me.

He came for me with the spade in one hand raised high above his head and grasped me with the other, but before he could bring the spade crashing down on me, with the strength of desperation, I ducked and caught the handle, and, butting my head at his chest, I kicked and kicked and kicked and kicked at his shins with my heavy walking shoes.

He was sobbing and sobbing,

"I'll kill you . . . I'll kill . . . if you ever tell . . . I'll kill you . . . I'll kill you . . ."

And then, suddenly I was running and running . . .

I don't remember how I got home or anything clearly after that for some time. I was sent back to school the next day in a daze of shock and misery. My parents put it down to the effects of the disappearance of the Chatham baby, which was convulsing the neighbourhood. And no sooner was I back at school than I developed measles.

I think I must have had a sort of partial black-out or hysterical fugue or whatever it's called about the whole experience, and for years afterwards I was never quite certain whether it was something that had really happened or part of a nightmare. I kept it all locked up inside me and never breathed a word about it to a soul.

My mother wrote to me later in the term to say the Chathams had given up all hope of finding the baby, and though the police were still working on the case they had no clues at all, and thought it must have been done by some wandering lunatic. Before the term was over the Chathams sold the house and left the neighbourhood, and though Millie and I wrote to each other from time to time, I never saw any of them again.

And now here I was going to lunch with Roger Chatham and his wife.

The Lodge looked much as I remembered it only smaller, of course, to my grown-up eyes. They had done it up very prettily inside. Roger was gay and charming over lunch, and I sat hardly able to swallow a mouthful.

After lunch, Clare took Aunt Chris upstairs for the usual reasons, I suppose, and to show her some alterations she had made in the bedrooms saying to me, with her fat dimpling smile: "I'm sure you and Rog will enjoy going over old times. . . ." I was left alone with Roger.

I looked at him. He was standing with his back to the pleasantly roaring fire, looking very much at home, and rather pleased with himself. He smiled down at me affectionately, and started to reminisce.

"What fun we had," he said, "except when I was in one of my ridiculous jealous moods!" He looked at me quizzically, and laughed. And then it came. Through a mist of horror I heard him saying lightly:

"But you needn't have kicked my shins so hard, Laura dear, on that last evening, really you needn't. It was a beastly way to say 'goodbye' to an old friend, and, after all, I don't think Millie would have minded much. She forgot all about it directly we left the Manor."

"Wouldn't have *minded?*" I

murmured, feeling an awful constriction in my throat, *"Forgot all about it?"* And I covered my face with shaking hands and began to cry.

"Well!" Roger exclaimed, still laughing, "It wasn't a *crime,* was it?"

"Not a crime? I whispered. *"Murder,* not a *crime?"* A helpless weepy rage shook me. "Oh, Roger . . . that poor little Dickon . . ."

I heard him give a sort of gasp, and then he burst into a louder laugh than before: a very affectionate, rather condescending sort of laugh, as he might have laughed at a child who had misunderstood something. I felt the chair move as he put his two hands on the arms, and bent over me to try to see my face.

"Oh, Laura! My poor silly goose! Laura, Laura, stop crying, Laura, darling . . . you soppy Laura . . . listen, it was the *Poppy!"*

I took my hands slowly away from my face which by now was dripping.

"The Poppy?" I echoed stupidly.

"Yes, yes, don't you remember the Poppy? Poor old Millie had given it a much grander name, something like 'Euphrasia,' but it had such a stupid red face that I always called it 'The Poppy.' Laura, dear Laura: Millie's *doll. In long clothes. The Poppy."*

I looked up at him then, with tears dropping down my chin, and slowly it began to dawn on me: The Poppy, Millie's doll in long clothes.

Then, such an enormous wave of relief swept over me that I felt quite faint, as the nightmare of the years was swished away in that one small word 'Poppy.'

"Didn't that ever occur to you?" Roger said, in a deep, kind voice. "Oh, Laura dear, I'm so sorry, so very sorry . . ." He stood up straight again, and ruffled his mousy hair.

I could only stare at him and murmur, "The Poppy."

"I remember now," he went on, "after the baby disappeared, I did vaguely wonder . . . I *was* a bit puzzled at you making such a fuss over a doll . . ."

"The Poppy," I said, drawing a deep breath. "Oh, Roger! What a heavenly relief!"

And then I was laughing, and he was patting my shoulder, and I was trying to blow my nose. After I had tidied up my face, presently we were sitting side by side on the sofa close to the lovely fire.

"But why did you *do* it, Roger?" I asked. "What made you bury the poor Poppy?"

Roger looked rather self-conscious. "Oh, well," he answered, looking down at his hands, "I was a jealous little beast about everybody and everything, although I hope I've grown out of it now; and the 'new baby' was the last

straw . . . after all I *had* been 'cock of the walk' for a long time . . . 'mother's darling' and all that . . . and now it was 'dear little Dickon this' and 'sweet little Dickon that,' with Mother and Millie and you all crooning over him, and even Father leaving me out in the cold.

"So in a fit of ridiculous rage, I took Millie's baby doll . . . I'd always hated the way she used to fuss over it, so in a vague childish way it seemed a sort of symbol to me . . . and hardly knowing what I was doing I smashed its head in and buried it in the animals' cemetery, as a sort of protest, I suppose.

"I know it must sound awfully silly now, and rather stupid and horrible, but I felt it very strongly at the time."

"Poor old Roger," I murmured.

"And when you caught me," he went on, "in such a childish fit of jealousy, I suppose I felt such a fool, that I was angrier than I realise. All I can do now, dearest Laura, is to apologise, after all these years, for giving you such a horrible fright. It's too awful . . ." and then he gave me his smile. "But gosh, you certainly got your own back! I can feel those kicks to this day," and he rubbed his shins, so that I laughed.

"But you *had* wondered if I'd thought it was Dickon?" I asked.

"Only for a minute, when Dickon disappeared, but I see now that the Poppy's bright red cheeks must have looked rather like blood in the dim light . . . Oh, poor Laura, how ghastly for you. Can you ever forgive me? And you kept what you thought was a terrible secret all these years, for me."

He got up and shook his broad shoulders, and then he smiled rather ruefully. "You know, Millie didn't miss the Poppy for some time, until we'd packed and moved; then she consoled herself by learning that sentimental piece 'I once had a dear little doll, dears, the prettiest doll ever seen,' and reciting it to herself and crying over it."

"Poor Millie," I said, "I expect she was really crying over Dickon. What *did* happen, do you think, Roger?"

"God knows," he answered soberly. "We never had a clue. Must have been a lunatic. It's the only possible explanation."

When I got home, I wrote at once to Millie to tell her what a lovely time I had had with Roger and his wife. Millie answered ecstatically by return post from South Africa. Part of her letter ran:

"My first-born, Charles, is gurgling beside me this minute in his cot, clasping one of my appalling old dolls which still survives. I wonder if you remember her, 'Anastasia,' the one with the red face, that Roger would call 'The Poppy'?"

death on the river

by . . Lawrence G. Blochman

Keetson was such a rotter it was a pity anyone should swing for his murder. So John Long had to search for a different way out.

AS THEY SAT down to dinner John Long wished he had not invited Keetson. Ordinarily he was overjoyed at the prospect of a guest for a few days. Even infrequent contact with the fruit company personnel scattered over some fifty miles of banana plantation, had, over the years, become as monotonous as the vast verdant sea of bananas was to the eye.

A new face was a treat, even a pasty face like Harry Keetson's, whose features gave the impression of having been molded with a putty-knife and whose black eyebrows seemed to have been stuck on as an afterthought. But Long felt strangely disturbed as he looked at Keetson across the table.

Keetson had not changed much in the three years since Long had last seen him. There was still the noisy self-assertion about him that had repulsed Long before, kept him from becoming more friendly with Keetson. There was still a sly intangible insincerity ever present beneath Keetson's boister-

For some reason very few fictional murder mysteries seem to avail themselves of the lush passionate backgrounds of the American tropics. Why this should be so is difficult to understand. Unless it lies in the fact that most North Americans are convinced murder is too much of a commonplace there to give a detective much of a show. Mr. Blochman, in this story, does a great deal to dispell this illusion—and for good measure throws in a fine portrayal of a truly evil man in a fascinating setting.

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ous, and over-confident exterior.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Keetson, beaming at his plate. "Black-bean soup and pigs' tails! Promotion to district superintendent hasn't changed your menu, I see. Same food you favored when I was growing bananas on the next farm. Don't tell me you still have the same cook you had when I quit the fruit company?"

Long nodded. "Same cook," he said. "And she still has the same scar on her cheek to remind her of you and the time you hit her with a bottle."

Keetson burst into loud grating laughter. The sound affected Long's spine as painfully as the screech of a file drawn sharply across a metal edge. He struggled to keep his repulsion from showing in his tanned square-cut face; a mature, virile face.

"I always was a cut-up when I had a few drinks in me," roared Keetson. "I'll bet that cook wished she'd put arsenic in the soup when she sees who's eating dinner with you tonight." Keetson guffawed again, added, "There's plenty of people around this district that wouldn't mind poisoning old Harry Keetson. Remember that *caporal* I threw off the launch that time? What *was* his name?"

"Gaetano. He still furnishes labor for us."

"That's it—Gaetano. He thought he was touch *hombre* but he sure was scared of the 'gators when I knocked him in the river." Keetson chuckled at the memory. Suddenly he pointed his soup spoon at a third place set at the end of the table. "Who else is going to eat with us?" he asked.

"My clerk," said Long. "He lives in the bungalow with me; young chap by the name of Schulbacher."

"Schulbacher?" Keetson's eyebrows lifted slightly.

Long nodded. "He's been here only a few months. His name's Juan Macimo Schulbacher. Comes from one of those German coffee families that try so hard to Latinize themselves. They sent him to Europe to school but when the coffee market went bad he came back to the Caribbean to go to work. He'll do all right. He's a smart boy. Speaks English with a Spanish accent and Spanish with a German accent."

"Is he the fellow that owns that drugstore in the bathroom?"

Long smiled. "Schulbacher *is* a bit of a health crank," he said. "Always gargling or spraying. He uses such strong germicidal soap that whenever he washes himself the bathroom smells like a hospital. Here he comes now."

A screen door slammed on the veranda and Schulbacher appeared in the doorway.

He was a frail, blue-eyed youth, one of those fair-skinned, tow-headed men who seem as much at home in the tropics as a well-groomed maltese on a back fence. His pale, transparent skin seemed

even a shade paler, today, Long thought.

"Schulbacher, meet Harry Keetson," said the superintendent.

Schulbacher remained standing, clutching the back of his chair, staring at Keetson with his mouth open. Long stared at him, surprised. Then the clerk nodded curtly at Keetson and sat down clumsily, knocking against the table as if drunk, spilling soup on the tablecloth.

"What was that name again?" asked Keetson, as he extended his hand across the table with exaggerated heartiness.

"Schulbacher," said the youth through tight, colorless lips. He shook hands stiffly, jerked his own hand back abruptly.

"Of course, of course—Schulbacher. Now let me see." Keetson's sallow forehead wrinkled in thought but a smile hovered about the corners of his mouth. "Maybe my memory is better than yours . . . I wonder where it was that we first met?"

"I've been pretty much all over the Caribbean. I was born in these parts, you know," said Schulbacher with an obvious effort to be casual. He started eating his soup. Long noticed that his hand trembled as it lifted the spoon to his mouth.

"Mr. Keetson used to be overseer at Zoltec Farm," Long broke in.

"Are you back with the fruit company, Mr. Keetson?" Schulbacher inquired.

"Not me," Keetson replied heartily. "I'm on my way to New York but my steamer put in at Puerto Justo for two days to load bananas. What's a man to do with two days in Puerto Justo, anyhow? So I dropped in to see if any of my old sidekicks were still in the fruit company division and here I am."

"You'll find a few old-timers around," said Long. "Bender is overseer at Zoltec now."

"Nervous Ned Bender! So that long-legged old son-of-a-gun is still here? I'll run over and see him tomorrow."

"I suppose you remember Don Carlos Vida?"

"I'll say I remember Don Carlos Vida! And I'll bet he remembers me. He's another guy who'd probably like to see me kick off."

Long shook his head. "I don't think he bears any grudge. Don Carlos is a gentleman and a philosopher."

"Well, of course it wasn't altogether my fault that he got in that mess, you know." Keetson turned to Schulbacher. "Vida was my timekeeper when someone robbed a commissary car and killed the Jamaican clerk. Evidence indicated Vida did it."

"Investigation cleared Don Carlos completely," said Long firmly. "He's growing his own bananas now on an independent's

agreement with the company."

"On that land of his across the river?" asked Keetson.

Long nodded. "He's made a damned good *finca* of it," Long said. "He's giving us fine fruit—plenty of nines."*

"I took Carlos on his first river pick-up from Zoltec," mused Keetson. "Are you still picking up fruit along the river?"

Long nodded. "We have a pick-up in the morning," he said.

"Say, I'd like to go along, for old time's sake."

"If you like," said Long. "The launches still start at three A.M., you know."

"I've got an alarm clock," said Keetson. "Will you have one of the launches stop back of the bungalow for me?"

While the houseboy was carrying out the soup plates and bringing in a platter of boiled beef Long got up, cranked the phone to ring the *campo marino*. He gave orders for Keetson to be picked up.

After the meal Keetson pulled a handful of long, shapely cigars from his pocket. "Have a *magnifico?*" he offered. "Or can you stand a real cigar after your steady diet of *puros* and King Bees?"

Long accepted the cigar, peeling off the red-and-gold band. Schulbacher refused. "No, thanks. I—I rarely smoke," he said.

"What's the matter, young fellow? You're looking kind of peaked."

"I'm not feeling well," said Schulbacher, getting up from the table. "I think I'll go to bed now."

"Better take some quinine," Long suggested.

"I'il be turning in early myself, if I'm to get up at three," said Keetson, lighting his cigar. "But first I'm going to smoke, directly in the path of whatever trade winds you can furnish tonight, Long, old boy."

As they walked toward the veranda Keetson was a picture of untidy elegance, his silk suit rumpled, silk shirt soiled at the collar, his black bow-tie knotted almost under one ear.

In distinct contrast was the neat fit of Long's whites to his compact well-muscled form. There was something quietly stolid about John Long, something that suggested the sea, old traditions. He was the only man in the division who could wear a sun helmet and get away with it. His colleagues, addicted to felts and Stetsons, regarded sun helmets as "Limey swank."

But they accepted one on Long since he gave the impression of having been born with a sun helmet on his head, a pipe in his mouth and a knowledge of India, the tea gardens of Ceylon and the tin-fields of Malaya in his infant experience.

* A banana stem with nine "bands" or clusters.

Half an hour later Long said good-night to Keetson and retired to his own room. The presence of Keetson under his roof stimulated his mind to recall the unpleasant details of Keetson and Don Carlos Vida and the commissary car robbery.

Don Carlos was a Guatemalteco, one of a few among his educated countrymen willing to forsake the picturesque highlands to work in the coastal plains that North Americans have reclaimed from jungle and miasmic swamps. He had shocked his family by refusing a political career and by using his birthright to acquire banana lands. In order to learn the rudiments of banana culture Don Carlos had gone to work as timekeeper on an Allied Fruit Company farm for a year before starting his own farm.

During his year with the company, the robbery of the commissary car occurred.

The car had been marooned by floods about half a mile from Zoltec Farm. The same floods had kept the armored pay car from making its usual rounds over the company's narrow-gage railway lines and a large amount of payroll cash had been stored in the safe of the rolling commissary.

The Jamaican commissary clerk in charge was killed when the safe was robbed. Keetson, first fruit company executive to arrive on the scene, found Don Carlos' revolver in the car and promptly turned the timekeeper over to the authorities.

Don Carlos had an airtight alibi. Witnesses established the time of the crime by the sound of the shot. Don Carlos could prove that he was three miles away, with Ned Bender, a fellow timekeeper, at that moment. The mystery was never solved.

There was some indignation among the banana farmers at the readiness with which Keetson had accused Don Carlos. But Carlos, an easy-going man, had never held it against Keetson.

"Keetson is Anglo-Saxon," he used to say with a good-natured shrug. "He was born with that impartial sense of duty peculiar to his race. It is different from our illogical, elastic Latin loyalties. But I quite understood it."

It was no doubt coincidental, Long reflected, that Keetson should make a casual stop at Puerto Justo and ask to be allowed to go along on the river pick-up tomorrow. But one of the launches would collect some two-hundred-and-fifty stems of bananas from Don Carlos' farm during the morning, so the two men would probably meet again.

Long stood looking out of the window. The night was unusually sultry, with not a breath of breeze in the banana leaves. Heat lightning flickered faintly behind the hills piled along the Honduranian border. Long turned from the

window, went to bed. He fell asleep, wishing for a good thunderstorm to clear the atmosphere . . .

He awakened with the idea that he had heard a bell ringing. He sat up, filled with a vague sense of apprehension. The ringing of a telephone at night was not unusual, since there were perhaps twenty phones on the district line. But he had the definite impression of having heard his own signal—one long ring and two short. He listened. A muttering that swelled to a rumble and exploded in an earth-shaking thunderclap came then, followed by rain beating down with deafening monotony in a gigantic tattoo on ten thousand acres of broad banana leaves. Then he heard the phone—one long ring and two short . . .

He swung his feet to the floor and started for the phone. As he opened the hall door he was surprised to find an oil lamp burning there. Then he remembered he had left the light for Keetson's early morning rising, since the district power plant ceased to function at ten P.M.

The bag of sandwiches and the thermos bottle of coffee which he had told the cook to fix for Keetson were gone from beside the lamp. He looked at the clock over the phone. It was nearly 3:30. The phone rang again—one long and two short. Long lifted the receiver.

A series of scratching, sputtering line noises sounded in his ear as the electric storm harassed the company's phone system. He said, "Hello."

"Long?" asked a voice, barely audible through the humming of the wires.

"Yes . . . Who's this?"

"Harry Keetson there?"

"Keetson's gone out on the river pick-up," said Long.

The reply, in an excited voice that caused the diaphragm of the receiver to vibrate unpleasantly in Long's ear, was half-lost in the whir of line noises. Long heard only snatches.

"Keetson . . . Good God . . . follow . . . Keetson's heading . . . follow him . . ."

"Who's speaking?" Long demanded. Only a buzzing answered him. "Who is this?" he repeated. Still the line noises but no voice. He moved the hook, calling hello. The connection was broken.

Long hung up, sat staring at the instrument a moment. Because of the bad connection he had not recognized the voice of the man who called him. He lifted the receiver again, rang the central operator at fruit company headquarters at Platanera.

"This is John Long, the district superintendent at Dos Rios," said Long. "Did you call me within the last five minutes?"

The Jamaican operator said he had not.

"Did you put through a call to

me from Puerto Justo or Lobos district?"

No, the operator had not handled any calls whatever for the past hour.

Again John Long hung up. The call had evidently come from someone on his own local line. He ran over in his mind the persons who might have called. Then he turned the crank of the phone, ringing the number of the *campo marino*. He was not going through the lengthy process of trying to trace the call. The voice had been earnest in its excitement and determined in its purpose. He would follow the advice it gave.

After several minutes a sleepy voice answered. Long spoke in Spanish. "Hello . . . I want a launch immediately . . . What's the matter with the *Embustero?* . . . Why isn't it . . . It's in the water, isn't it . . . All right, tell the mechanic to do the best he can. Get the crew out and have the engine running . . . No, don't come for me. It will be quicker for me to go up to the *campo* by motor."

He hung up. Throwing a slicker over his shoulders he ran down the veranda steps. In the center of the lawn a large bell was mounted on a post. Long rang the bell as a signal for his motorboy. The clangor resounded in the night for a full minute.

When he re-entered the bungalow he was met by Schulbacher, rubbing his eyes.

"What's happening?" demanded Schulbacher in sleepy alarm.

"Nothing. I've got to go down to the *campo marino,* that's all."

"Did Mr. Keetson get off all right?"

"His launch is gone so I guess he did." He glanced across the hall to the two doors, one leading to Schulbacher's room, the other to Keetson's. Keetson's door was ajar. Long stepped over, threw it open. The bed was empty.

"Apparently he's gone," said Long.

Schulbacher mumbled something about a headache and went back to bed.

Long dressed hurriedly, slipped an automatic into his pocket.

The motor had been rolled out of the shed and stood on the rails in front of the bungalow. The motorboy said he had already called the dispatcher and got his *via.* Long climbed on the car, switched on the ignition and hooked his forefinger around the throttle. The motorboy pushed the car until the engine coughed into action, then he jumped on.

The rain had stopped and the air was cooler. The motor rapidly gained speed as it sputtered down a straight stretch of track between dark overhanging cliffs of banana plants. Tiny winged insects beat against Long's face. The car rushed through the night, the flanged wheels rattling and screaming against the rails.

Rounding a curve, approaching

Zoltec Farm, Long saw a light in the overseer's bungalow. Bender usually sent Smith, his timekeeper, on the river pick-up. Bender had known Harry Keetson. Bender had furnished Don Carlos with an alibi three years ago.

Perhaps Bender was the one who had telephoned.

Long pulled the brake, sprang off the car and ran between hibiscus hedges to Bender's bungalow.

A mantel lamp stood on a table, flooding the veranda with a greenish glow. Long called. No one answered. He went in, looked into all the rooms. Neither Smith nor Bender was there. Bender must have gone on the pick-up after all.

Long went back to the motor, sped along a Y, at the base of which was the *campo marino.*

As soon as Long stepped aboard the *Embustero* the lights in the launch winked out. The craft nosed away from the shore, swung upstream. The Guatemalteco captain navigated best in the dark, feeling his way among the shifting shoals and snags of the tropical river by watching the reflection of the vague light of the sky on the dull gleam of the current.

The overcast sky was of a uniform lead color except for darker patches on the somber bellies of rain clouds. Scraps of jungle along the banks made weird black silhouettes, with ceiba trees raising imperious monarchial heads above the confused shadows of tangled growth. Inside the launch a single point of light glowed above the engine—the mechanic smoking an odorous stogy.

The launch chugged steadily against the current. On one bank a stretch of banana plantation pointed skyward, the black outlines of numerous curved, crossed blades, like the sabers of spectral troops of dragoons.

These bananas belonged to Don Carlos Vida. His house was half a mile farther upstream. Long debated about going ashore here, decided he had better continue after the other two launches, which would ordinarily stop at Don Carlos Vida's only on the trip back after they had picked up the lighters spotted upstream.

Rounding a bend, they caught sight of the two launches, far ahead, mere dark blurs with grey tails of exhaust vapor.

A few seconds later the engine of the *Embustero* coughed and died. Long swore one of his rare and restrained oaths as the launch began to drift backward, downstream. The captain swung it into the bank. A boy jumped out to make fast a line to a clump of *Cana brava.*

The mechanic explained to Long that he had been overhauling the engine the day before, that he had not finished, that he had merely thrown in the last few bolts hurriedly when Long had

phoned he would need the launch. He thought he could fix it fairly quickly . . .

Long lighted a *puro* and smoked while he waited. The trees and the objects on the bank began to take on a little anemic dawn color. The mechanic tinkered with the engine. In forty minutes he had it running again.

It was broad daylight. The river was now a wide, swift, coffee-colored torrent. Parrots screamed as they flew overhead in pairs.

Rounding a bend ahead one of the launches hove into sight. She was carrying two lighters, one tied to each side, and had the awkward squat appearance of a mother duck trying to spread protective wings over two overgrown ducklings. The launch with its lighters came about, swung into the bank heading upstream and tied up. Peons laid planks over the lighters and made contact with the shore.

The *Embustero* came alongside and Long hailed a figure he saw lying prone in the stern. The figure sat up, adjusting its Stetson and rubbing its eyes. It was Smith, curly-headed timekeeper from Zoltec.

"Did you pick up a man named Keetson back of my house this morning?" asked Long. "Or did the other launch take him?"

"We picked him up," said Smith in a Southern drawl.

"Where is he?"

"Why, he asked to be put ashore at Don Carlos' on our way up. Said Carlos was an old buddy. Gaetano walked a piece with him to show him how to get there. He told Gaetano to pick him up on our way back."

John Long glanced toward the bank where Gaetano stood, a wiry figure in black trousers and a shirt brown with banana sap. In his left hand gleamed the nickel of a tabulating machine as he clicked up the number of stems of green bananas passing him on the backs of peons, as they walked up the planks onto the lighters. From his right hand dangled a long murderous-looking machete. Gaetano ignored the district superintendent's presence.

"By the way, Smith," said Long suddenly, "how did Bender happen to come along on the pick-up today?"

"He didn't, sir."

"You're sure he isn't in the other launch?"

"Quite sure. I know he was at the house when we started out, because I phoned him there from the *campo marino*. I forgot to tell him about an errand I wanted him to do for me this morning."

"Did you tell him you were picking up Keetson?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I mentioned the matter."

"Thanks. See you later, Smith."

Cold with apprehension the district superintendent gave an order. His launch drifted away

from the lighters, the engine started and he was headed back downstream . . .

Ten minutes later they put in at a break in the thick growth along the bank. Half of a banana leaf, trimmed like a flag, was stuck upright in the silt of the cleared bank as a signal to the launches that fruit was to be picked up here.

Hurrying to the house Long found Don Carlos Vida eating breakfast alone. Don Carlos was still young but he had begun to grow portly. He wore leather puttees, bright pink shirts and stiff-brimmed Stetsons. He always wore one of his many ornate pistols.

"Buenos dias, amigo mio," he greeted Long, immediately switching to breezy English. "How the hell are you?"

Long lost no time in formalities. "Where's Harry Keetson?" he inquired.

Don Carlos cocked his head to one side. "Keetson? Didn't you tell me last year he was in Colombia? Or was it Brazil?"

"Keetson's here on your *finca,* Don Carlos," said Long. "He came up on the river pick-up this morning and the launch put him ashore here less than an hour ago. Do you mean you haven't seen him?"

Don Carlos made an extravagant gesture of protest. "But I have been up and dressed scarcely ten minutes, my friend," he said. "I have just this minute sat down to eat my *desayuno."*

"Then Keetson hasn't been in your bungalow?"

"He may be wandering around among the bananas," said Don Carlos. "You know it is not so easy to find this house, for a man who has never been here before."

"Then I'll have a look round," said Long.

He left Don Carlos' house and headed toward the river. He hoped to find Keetson's footprints on the bank and trace their direction. He expected difficulty, since the ground among the banana plants was covered knee-deep with grass and rank growth.

Halfway to the river he stopped. Off the main path he noticed that the high grass had been flattened out in a considerable swath, as if a man or animal had floundered in it. Some ten feet away he saw a shovel on the ground. About twenty feet farther, at the end of the depression in the grass, he found Harry Keetson.

Keetson was lying on his back, staring at the sky with startled bulging eyes. His usually sallow face was dark with congestion. The fingers of one hand were twisted into the breast of his silk shirt. In the fingers of the other, stretched away from his, was a half-smoked cigar that had been extinguished by the wet grass.

It took Long but a few seconds to satisfy himself that Keetson was dead. Two minutes later he

was giving orders at the river.

"Cross to the Zoltec labor camp," he told the captain of the launch. "Tell the foreman to phone the *comandancia* that there is a dead man at Don Carlos Vida's. Then have him phone Dr. Paz at the company hospital, tell him the same thing and have him come at once. Wait for them and bring them both across the river."

On his way back to the house John Long tried to analyze a confused train of ideas. He thought of Gaetano standing on the bank, a machete in his hand, checking fruit. He thought of his cook, with a scar on her face put there by Harry Keetson. He thought of the mysterious telephone call, and Ned Bender's strange absence from his bungalow . . .

Don Carlos was still at his breakfast. Long sat down at the table opposite him. As he did so his eye caught sight of a bit of red-and-gold paper on the floor. Another thought rushed to his mind, a thought he had been deliberately avoiding. He stooped, picked up the gaudy bit of paper but kept it within the closed fingers of his right hand.

"Well, did you find Señor Keetson?" asked Don Carlos.

"Yes," said Long.

"Is he not coming in to say hello to an old friend?"

"He is not," said Long, drawing two native stogies from his pocket with his left hand. "Have a *puro?*"

"You know I don't smoke cigars, Señor Long," Don Carlos smiled.

"I thought you had changed your habits," said Long. "I just found this *magnifico* cigar band on the floor."

Don Carlos' smile faded. Anxiety flickered in his friendly brown eyes. "What does that mean, Señor Long?" he asked softly.

"It means that you weren't telling the truth when you said that Harry Keetson had not been in your house."

"I did not say Keetson had not been here. I only said he was not here when you asked for him. What is the matter, my friend?"

"Let's go outside, Don Carlos," said Long. "I want to show you something."

Don Carlos was nervously voluble as he walked beside the district superintendent to where Keetson's body lay. As he looked at it the glib chatter suddenly stopped. He stared, his mouth open.

A bright cloud of white-and-green butterflies whirled lightly above the purplish face of the dead man, then deserted him for a black rotting stem of bananas on the ground nearby.

"Por Dios! How did this happen?" Don Carlos gasped as Long studied his face.

"I thought perhaps you might be able to tell me, Don Carlos," said Long quietly.

Don Carlos stared at the body. And suddenly he clutched Long's arm, pointed. "Look!" he exclaimed.

The dead hand that protruded from Keetson's soiled silk cuff was turned palm upward. On the underside of the exposed forearm were two tiny red marks like pin pricks.

"A snake bite!" Don Carlos said. "See the fang marks? Our friend has been struck down by a *barba amarilla,* no doubt."

"I hope so, Don Carlos," said Long slowly. "For your sake."

Don Carlos' brown eyes searched the face of the superintendent. "You believe I killed Keetson, my friend?"

"I can't imagine you killing anyone, Don Carlos. Still—there is strong motive and there is circumstantial evidence."

Don Carlos groaned. "Circumstantial evidence again!" he said. "I am to be eternally condemned by circumstantial evidence, it seems."

"Listen to me, Don Carlos." Long gripped his hand. "I know you had good reason, if you did this thing. Still I must send for the *comandante.* He cannot get here for at least half an hour. In that time you can be in Honduras. I can look after your *finca* until this blows over."

Don Carlos shook his head. "Thank you, *amigo,*" he said quietly. "But I will wait for the *comandante.* Let us go to the house for a drink of *olla* while we are waiting."

When the perspiring Guatemalteco had poured out two stiff portions of clear potent sugar-cane spirits, Long asked once again, "Why did you conceal the fact that Keetson had been in your house, Don Carlos?"

Don Carlos downed his *olla* at a gulp and wiped his lips before he said thoughtfully, "Perhaps I will tell you that—after the *comandante* has come."

The *comandante* and Dr. Paz arrived together. Dr. Paz, a grey-haired kind-eyed Guatemalteco, was fatter than Don Carlos and the *comandante* was several bulges larger than the doctor.

Dr. Paz nodded his head gravely as he looked at the body. "So Mr. Keetson has come back to us," he said in a soft voice that liquefied all consonants.

Long pointed to the two red marks on the arm of the corpse. "Could a snake's fangs have made those, Doctor?" he inquired.

Dr. Paz nodded. "Yes. But the snake that did it was one that Keetson has been carrying in his bosom for some time. See here—" He pulled the sleeve higher to display similar marks. Then he showed the other arm to be full of tiny scars. "Morphine," he explained. "He started using it before he left the fruit company. One had only to look at him."

"Then an overdose of morphine

might have killed him?" Long asked.

Dr. Paz shook his head. He was bending over the body, his skillful fingers—fingers which had saved scores of lives—seeking the cause of death.

"No," said Dr. Paz. "Mr. Keetson's death, from all outward symptoms, was caused by asphyxia. Such discoloration of the face comes from suffocation, strangulation."

"But there are no footprints near the body," said Long. "He seems to have been alone where he fell."

"And he fell face up," commented the *comandante,* who was watching the proceedings. "So he did not smother himself to death against the soft ground."

"And there are no marks of fingers on the throat," added Dr. Paz thoughtfully.

"Perhaps apoplexy?" suggested Don Carlos.

"This man was not apoplectic," said the doctor, going through Keetson's pockets.

Long waited, wondering.

He removed a stubby automatic which he handed to the *comandante,* and an empty hypodermic syringe wrapped in a silk handkerchief. After a casual examination, Dr. Paz replaced the syringe in its handkerchief and put it into his own pocket.

"Who was the last person to see this man alive?" asked the *comandante.*

Long avoided looking at Don Carlos.

"I suppose I was," said Don Carlos. "I offered him coffee in my house about one hour ago. He refused."

"There may have been another," Long offered. "A *caporal* on one of our launches, a man named Gaetano, walked up to the house with Keetson."

"Please get him," said the *comandante.* "It grieves me much that I must ask you, Don Carlos, to place yourself temporarily in my custody. And you as well, Señor Long. And this Gaetano—at least until we have a report from Dr. Paz."

"I am taking the body to the hospital for autopsy," said Dr. Paz. "Can you move your investigation there?"

"I suggest my bungalow," said Long, "inasmuch as the dead man's belongings are still there."

"Then I will join you there this afternoon," said the doctor.

As they were loading Keetson's body aboard the *Embustero,* another launch swung into the bank. It was loaded with bright green bananas that also gleamed in the dull red lighters alongside.

The *comandante* took Gaetano into custody. The labor chief seemed neither surprised at the death of Harry Keetson nor much concerned over his own arrest.

At Long's suggestion Smith gave Keetson's thermos bottle to

Dr. Paz for analysis of the remaining coffee.

The timekeeper seemed pleased by Keetson's death and asked that he, too, be taken into custody. "You collect your fruit," Long directed. "We're loading a ship at Puerto Justo tonight."

The arrival of John Long, the *comandante,* Don Carlos and Gaetano at the district superintendent's bungalow was followed by much confused bustle. The *comandante,* faced with the problem of not knowing whether he was investigating murder, an accident or merely death from natural causes, temporized by ordering a detail of two soldiers from the *comandancia* to stand guard outside the bungalow while he questioned Gaetano.

While the *comandante* held court on the veranda, Long was on the telephone, trying to locate Ned Bender. He was curious to know where Bender was at 3:30 in the morning. But Bender could not be found.

Long returned to the veranda in time to see Juan Macimo Schulbacher leave the little yellow office building next door and walk rapidly toward the bungalow.

"Excuse me," said Schulbacher as he stepped onto the veranda, "but I happened to lift the receiver and overheard you asking for Mr. Bender. I came to tell you that Bender came by here about two hours ago. He had heard that someone was dead at Don Carlos Vida's *finca* and he was trying to find out who."

Schulbacher scanned the faces on the veranda, nodded at Don Carlos, smiling. "I am glad it was not you, Don Carlos," he said.

"It was Harry Keetson,'" said Long.

Schulbacher's mouth opened, Long decided his surprise was genuine.

"Where is Bender now?" asked Long.

"Riding his farm. Said he'd come by again at noon."

"You'd better stay, Schulbacher. The *comandante* will want to ask you questions about last night."

Schulbacher sat down. Long called the houseboy and ordered a light lunch for his uninvited guests. The houseboy, looking upset, said the cook was not there.

"Where is she?" demanded Long, thinking again of her scarred cheek and a thermos bottle of coffee that she had prepared for Keetson.

The houseboy said a man had come with word that the cook's mother was ill and the cook had started walking to the town of Dos Rios early that morning.

"Then bring some cold meat, bread and cheese," ordered Long. He wondered if he ought to give the news of the cook's absence to the *comandante,* decided to await a report of Dr. Paz's analysis of the coffee in the thermos bottle.

At that moment, Ned Bender

rode up on his mule outside Long's hibiscus hedge. A few seconds later he joined the group on the veranda.

Bender was a tall bony man with dangling arms and nervous hands. He seemed relieved to see Don Carlos, but showed continued agitation as he lighted a cigarette, smoked in short nervous puffs.

"Where were you at 3:30 this morning, Bender?" Long asked abruptly.

"At home."

"You weren't there when I looked in."

"I was there. I phoned you from there as soon as Smith told me he was picking up Harry Keetson. I couldn't hear you, the connection was so bad, so I dressed and started over to talk with you. You were gone when I got here."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"I was surprised to hear that Harry Keetson was back. I thought the reason he tried to frame Don Carlos at the time of the commissary robbery was because Don Carlos knew something irregular about him. The only reason I could see for Keetson's return was to seek revenge against Don Carlos. So I thought Carlos ought to be protected. I'm glad to see it wasn't necessary."

Don Carlos shifted uneasily in his chair. The *comandante* cleared his throat. "We all sympathize with you, Don Carlos," said the *comandante*. "But in my official capacity there are certain explanations due."

"I will explain," said Don Carlos solemnly. "I will begin at the beginning. I was awakened at dawn today by Mr. Keetson. I was surprised to see him. 'Do you hold a grudge against me, Don Carlos?' he asked. I said I did not. 'Then promise on your honor that what passes between us now will be for no other ears.' I promised.

"I break that promise now, gentlemen, not because I consider myself released by Mr. Keetson's death—for I was taught that it is more wicked to injure the dead than the living—but as the lesser of two evils. Since I stand accused in your eyes I would rather have you look upon me as a violator of confidences than as a murderer.

"I offered Mr. Keetson coffee. He refused. I drank coffee as he talked. He said, 'Carlos, do you know who robbed the commissary car three years ago?' I said no. He said, 'I did, Carlos. I killed that black fool and robbed the safe.' I was speechless. He went on, 'Where is the giant ceiba tree that used to stand where your land makes a *bolsa* into the river?'

"I said it was cut down when I cleared the land for planting. He said, 'But the stump? I have searched everywhere but I cannot find it.' I told him the river had flooded the *bolsa* last year and the stump was probably buried in silt.

" 'You must help me find it, Carlos,' he said. 'The money from the commissary is buried in a metal box in the roots of that ceiba. Half the money is yours, Carlos, if you will help me.' I told him I could not make such a bargain. I would keep his secret, since I had given my word, but I would have to give back the money to its rightful owners. Keetson sneered. 'Why do you suppose I hid the money on your land?' he asked. 'Because the other evidence pointed to you. Finding the money on your land will incriminate you further. I will see that it does—unless you show me where the ceiba stump is.' He was very angry.

"I wanted time to think. I gave him false directions. He showed me a pistol. 'If you are playing tricks on me, Carlos . . .' he said. Then he took a shovel and left the house. That was the last I saw of him—until Mr. Long showed me the body. That is the truth, gentlemen. I swear it."

There was silence on the veranda—oppressive silence that was as heavy as the steamy atmosphere surging in from the somnolent sunstruck outdoors. Long was tensely aware of the slightest movements on the veranda.

Bender nervously mopped his perspiring face. Schulbacher blotted the palms of his translucent hands on the knees of his white drill trousers. Gaetano seemed to be asleep. The *comandante* nodded sympathetically at Don Carlos, who was running fat restless fingers through his gleaming black hair.

Suddenly Schulbacher leaned forward in his chair. His lips moved as though he wanted to say something yet no words came out. He was staring at the *comandante.*

Long got up, walked quickly to his side, took the youth's arm. "Come inside, Schulbacher," he said. "I want to ask you about those cleaning and pruning reports."

Long turned to the *comandante* for permission. *"Permiso, Señor Comandante?"*

The *comandante* nodded. Long and Schulbacher went inside to the latter's room and closed the door.

"Sit down," said Long.

Schulbacher complied, again began nervously pressing the palms of his hands against his knees.

"Schulbacher," said Long, "I've been thinking about the way you acted last night when I introduced you to Harry Keetson. Obviously you weren't telling the truth when you tried to give the impression you'd never met him before. You knew him, didn't you?"

"Yes," replied Schulbacher in a hollowed voice. "I knew him—in Santa Juana."

"What were you doing in Santa Juana, Schulbacher?"

Schulbacher's blue eyes were dilated. "I was a pharmacist," he said, "in a drug importing firm."

"And Keetson?" Long asked.

Schulbacher swallowed several times, moistened his lips. He half rose from his seat. "You *know!*" he burst out. "Keetson told you about me! You—"

Schulbacher broke off, dropped back into his chair, buried his face in his hands. Long waited silent.

"I may as well tell you everything," Schulbacher resumed, his voice shrill and unsteady with emotion. "The secret has been like a cancer in my breast. I am glad to get rid of it at last.

"Harry Keetson was a friend of my boss in Santa Juana. Keetson was representative for some American chemists. I had frequent contact with him as I did much of the buying for my company.

"One day, out of a clear sky, I was arrested for embezzlement, accused of defrauding my firm out of thousands of dollars through purchases that I did *not* make. But there was a perfect case against me. I was amazed at the details someone had devised to incriminate me.

"Any judge would have found me guilty, with that evidence. Keetson testified against me and I knew then where the money had gone, who had framed me. But I had no proof. Keetson was a trusted friend of my boss.

"I was convicted, sentenced to twenty years in prison."

Schulbacher paused, mopped his face with agitated fingers.

"Twenty years," he repeated. "I served a hundred years the first six months, in that tropical prison. They are hell-holes. I am afraid of nothing any more—nothing except a return to that prison. I was starved. I had scurvy. I nearly died of dysentery and fever. I was devoured by insects . . . After six months I escaped . . ."

Again Schulbacher paused. He closed his eyes.

The sound of a motor vibrated on the hot silence in a crescendo of explosions, then stopped. Long opened the door, saw Dr. Paz getting out of the automobile with flanged wheels which stood on the rails in front of the house.

The doctor beckoned to the *comandante* as he came through the double screen doors to the veranda. The two men joined John Long. There was a suppressed excitement manifesting itself beneath the doctor's usually benign and placid mien.

"Did you analyze that coffee, Doctor?" asked Long.

Dr. Paz ignored the question to ask one of his own. "Where did Mr. Keetson sleep last night?" he inquired.

Long showed him. The *comandante* and Schulbacher came along.

The doctor went through the dead man's effects. He seemed particularly interested in another hypodermic syringe, a tin box of white cubes and two bottles of

colorless solution. He sniffed at everything he touched.

He went into the adjoining bathroom and examined at length a medicine cabinet containing a regiment of bottles—antiseptic sprays, mouthwashes, germicidal soaps. He placed the tip of one tapering forefinger on the cork of a bottle labeled hydrogen peroxide, seemed about to remove the bottle, then thought better of the idea.

"Who owns all these bottles?" asked Dr. Paz.

Long said nothing.

"I do," said Schulbacher.

"Where did you sleep last night, Mr. Schulbacher?"

Schulbacher indicated the room opening off the other side of the bathroom.

"And you, Mr. Long? Still on the other side of the house?"

Long nodded.

"Were you in Mr. Keetson's room at all yesterday or last night, Mr. Long?"

"Only after he left," said Long, "at three-thirty this morning."

Dr. Paz nodded. "Señor *Comandante,*" he said, "I analyzed the coffee in the thermos bottle—it contained no poison. There was no trace of poison in Mr. Keetson's blood or stomach. He was neither shot nor stabbed. He was not killed by a blow. He did not die of apoplexy, cerebral embolism or a heart attack. Considering that he was a drug addict his body was in a remarkably healthy state."

"But what caused his death, Doctor?"

"As I said before," declared Dr. Paz slowly, "symptoms show death was caused by suffocation." He paused, turned to Schulbacher. "Mr. Schulbacher," he asked, "do you know any chemistry?"

"A little," Schulbacher admitted.

"Then you know," said the doctor, "that hydrogen peroxide is an unstable compound, breaking up ultimately into water and oxygen."

Schulbacher nodded. He was pale and scared-looking.

"What has hydrogen peroxide to do with suffocation?" asked Long.

"Just this," said Dr. Paz in a quiet voice. "Hydrogen peroxide, injected into the blood stream, forms bubbles in the blood. The bubbles put a froth on the lungs, a foam that suffocates a man. The freed oxygen disappears in a few hours. The residual water is unnoticeable in the blood."

Schulbacher's lips moved and his face muscles relaxed. He seemed more composed as he asked, "Was it hydrogen peroxide, Doctor?"

Dr. Paz said, "In a hypodermic in the dead man's pocket I found a few drops of hydrogen peroxide. In the dead man's valise I found two bottles—one full, containing a morphine solution, the other half empty, containing hydrogen

peroxide. In the bathroom adjoining the dead man's room there is a large bottle of peroxide, half empty, which you say belongs to you."

"Yes," said Schulbacher. There was quiet resignation in his voice. His head was up, his shoulders back.

"Then it's quite clear," said Long quickly, speaking in Spanish, "that Keetson got up during the night for his usual injection of morphine and, fumbling in the dark, accidentally filled his syringe from the wrong bottle. Isn't that what happened, Doctor?"

Dr. Paz studied John Long's face, shifted his gaze to Schulbacher. When he did not reply at once, Long resumed quickly. "I'd call it poetic justice, Señor *Comandante*, that Keetson should come back to die—by mistake—at the scene of his crime. While you were performing your autopsy, Dr. Paz, Don Carlos told us that Keetson confessed to him this morning that he was the one who killed the Jamaican clerk in that commissary car robbery.

"The reason Harry Keetson came back here was to dig up the loot he had hidden on Don Carlos' land. This was his first mistake—not as serious, of course, as the mistake of filling his syringe from the wrong bottle in the dark . . . You think that is what happened, don't you, Doctor?"

Dr. Paz looked John Long in the eyes, nodded his head slowly. "Yes," he said. "Quite possibly that is what happened."

"In that case," said the *comandante* briskly, "my investigation is closed. I will spend the afternoon digging for buried treasure . . . Don Carlos!" He called to the veranda. "I am going back with you to your farm. You must lead me to that ceiba tree stump."

the adventure of the penny magenta

by . . . August Derleth

A tiny thing was the precious penny magenta. But in the flimsy stamp Solar Pons saw the flowing, guilt-dark watermark of murder.

STANDING BEFORE the window one summer morning, Solar Pons said, "Ah, we are about to have a visitor, and, I trust, a client. London has been oppressively dull this week, and some diversion is long past due."

I stepped over to his side and looked down.

Our prospective visitor was in the act of stepping out of a cab. He was a man somewhat past middle-age, of medium height and spare to the point of thinness. He wore a greying Van Dyke and eyeglasses in old-fashioned square frames, a greening black bowler and a scuffed smoking jacket, beneath which showed a waistcoat of some flowered material. He carried a cane, though he did not walk with any pronounced impediment.

"A tradesman?" I ventured.

"The keeper of a small shop," guessed Pons.

"Dry-goods?"

"You observe his clothing, Parker. His square spectacles and his walking stick are both old-fashioned. I submit he is in an-

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***August Derleth** has so many distinguished strings to his literary bow that it is a little difficult to evaluate them judiciously. He's an anthologist, a publisher, a Guggenheim Fellow, a mystery story virtuoso, and a regional novelist of no little renown. And most wonderfully—he created Solar Pons. To read Solar Pons is like welcoming home an old friend who has been away for a long time. That friend is—Sherlock Holmes!*

tiques or something of that sort. The nature of his business is such as to permit the casual, since he evidently wears his smoking jacket at his work."

"Perhaps he came directly from his home?"

"No. It is now ten o'clock: My guess is that, after he arrived at his shop this morning something occurred that has brought him to us."

Our caller was by now at the door, and in a moment our good landlady, Mrs. Johnson, ushered him into our quarters. He bowed to her, and, his glance passing over me, he bowed to Pons.

"Mr. Solar Pons?"

"I am at your service. Pray sit down."

Our visitor sat down to face Pons, who was now leaning against the mantel, his eyes twinkling with anticipation.

"My name is Athos Humphreys. I have a small shop for antiques, old books and stamps, near Hampstead Heath," said our client. "Other than that I doubt you need to know."

"I know also that you are a member of the Masonic order, a bachelor or widower who lives alone, without an assistant at your shop and with insufficient business to demand your unremitting presence there," said Pons. "Pray continue, Mr. Humphreys."

Our client betrayed neither astonishment nor displeasure at Pons' little deductions. His glance fell to his Masonic ring, then to the torn and worn cuffs of his smoking jacket, which no self-respecting woman would have permitted to go unmended, and finally to the lone key depending over the pocket into which he had hastily thrust his chain of keys after locking his shop.

"I am glad to see I have made no mistake in coming to you, Mr. Pons," he continued. "The problem concerns my shop. For the past three mornings I have had indisputable evidence that my shop has been entered. Yet nothing has been taken."

A small sound of satisfaction escaped Pons. "And what was the evidence that the shop had been entered, if nothing was taken, Mr. Humphreys?" he asked.

"Well, sir, I am a most methodical man. I maintain a certain order in my shop, no matter how careless it looks, that is by design, for an antique shop ought to have an appearance of careful disorder. For the past three mornings I have found that some object has been moved from its place during the night and put back not quite where it stood before. There is no evidence that shows how entry into the shop was made, so I can only suppose that whoever entered my shop did so by means of the door. But, to my knowledge, I have the only key."

"You are fully aware of your inventory, Mr. Humphreys?"

"Positively, sir. I know every item in my shop. Actually, there is nothing there of sufficient value to tempt anyone but a sneak thief content with small reward for his pains."

"Yet, if what you say is true, someone is going to considerable pains to search your shop night after night," said Pons. "A man in your business must lead a relatively sedentary life, Mr. Humphreys. Did you, prior to this sequence of events, do anything to attract public attention to yourself or your shop?"

Our client hesitated, as if he were about to speak, yet thought better of it. "No, sir," he said finally.

"Something caused you to hesitate, Mr. Humphreys. What was it?"

"Nothing of any consequence. About a week ago I did put in the newspaper a small personal notice asking that relatives of the late Arthur Benefield call on me, at the shop."

"Who was Arthur Benefield?"

"A patron of mine."

"Surely an unusual patron if you did not know his address," said Pons.

"That is correct, Mr. Pons. He left no address. He appeared at my shop for the first time about a month ago, bringing with him a manila envelope filled with loose stamps. He had mailed the envelope to me, then retrieved it, and brought it in person. He was an American gentleman, and asked me to keep the stamps for him. He paid a rental fee of five pounds for that service during the month following his visit. He also bought several stamps from my collection and added them to his own.

"Mr. Benefield was run down and killed by an automobile ten days ago. I saw his picture in the papers, together with a request for relatives to come forward. But, Mr. Pons, if you are thinking that the entry to my shop has anything to do with Mr. Benefield, I am afraid you are very much mistaken. I took the liberty of examining the contents of Mr. Benefield's envelope as soon as I read of his death. It contains no stamp worth more than a few shillings. Indeed, I doubt very much if the entire lot of stamps would command more than ten pounds."

Pons stood for a moment in an attitude of deep thought. Then he said, "I think a look at your shop is in order. Will you take us there, Mr. Humphreys?"

"I should be honored to do so, Mr. Pons. I have a cab waiting below, if you can return with me now."

Our client's was indeed a little shop. It was one of those charming, old-fashioned places not uncommon in London, standing as if untouched by time from 1880 onward. A pleasant, tinkling bell rang as Mr. Humphreys shoved

the door wide and stood aside to permit us to pass. Then he in turn passed us, hanging his bowler on a little rack not far from the door, and throwing his keys carelessly on the counter.

His shop was crowded, and had that air of planned carelessness which intrigues the searcher after curios or unusual pieces for the household. Shelves, floors, tables, all were filled with bric-a-brac, knick-knacks, and period pieces. One wall was lined with books neatly arranged on shelves which reached from floor to ceiling. At the back of the shop, next to a curtained-off alcove which was evidently a small place in which our client could brew himself tea—for the sound of boiling water came from it—stood Mr. Humphreys' desk, a secretary of Chippendale design.

Our client went directly to a Chinese vase which stood on top of a lacquered box on a table beside the counter.

"If you will look here, Mr. Pons, you will see that the position of this vase varies by a quarter of an inch from the faint circle of dust which indicates where it stood before it was moved. I have not moved this vase for at least a week. Of itself, it has no value, being an imitation Han Dynasty piece. Nor has the lacquer box on which it stands. The box, I have reason to believe, has been opened. But it is empty too."

Pons did not seem particularly interested in our client's demonstration.

"And where do you keep Mr. Benefield's stamps?" he asked.

Our client went around his counter and placed his right hand on a letter rack which stood on his desk. "Right here, Mr. Pons."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Pons, a smile twitching his lips. "Is that not an unorthodox place for it?"

"It was where Mr. Benefield asked me to keep it."

"So that anyone would think it part of your correspondence, Mr. Humphreys?"

"Perhaps that is what he had in mind," said Humphreys thoughtfully. "I am accustomed to eccentricities in my clients so I gave it no thought at the time."

"Let us have a look at Mr. Benefield's collection of stamps."

"Very well, Mr. Pons." He handed the manila envelope to Pons. It was perhaps four and a half inches by six and a half or thereabouts, but it bulged with its contents, and it had been stamped heavily with British commemorative stamps of larger than common size. It had been addressed to Mr. Humphreys, and the stamps on its face had been duly cancelled; manifestly, if Mr. Humphreys' story were true, Mr. Benefield had had to apply to the post office for its return to his hand so that he could bring it in person to our client's shop. Pons studied the envelope thoughtfully.

"It did not seem to you strange

that Mr. Benefield should make such a request of you, Mr. Humphreys?"

"Mr. Pons, I am accustomed to dealing with all manner of strange people. I suppose the collector is always rather more extraordinary in his habits and conduct than ordinary people."

"Perhaps," pursued Pons. "Still, the circumstance of your possession of this envelope suggests that it contains something of value—of such value, indeed, that its owner was extremely reluctant to let it out of his sight long enough for the postman to deliver it, and left it here only because of dire necessity."

"But if that were true," objected our client, "what had he to gain by leaving it here?"

"In such plain sight, too, Mr. Humphreys," said Pons, chuckling. "I submit he had to gain what he most wanted—effective concealment. There is a story by the American, Poe, which suggests the gambit—a letter hidden in a torn envelope on a rack in sight of anyone who might walk into the room. What better place of concealment for an object—let us say, a stamp—than in the letter rack of a man who does a small philatelic business?"

"Mr. Pons, your theory is sound, but it does not apply. I have gone over the stamps in that envelope with the greatest care. I assure you, on my word as a modest authority in philately, that there is not a stamp in that collection worth a second glance from a collector. There is most certainly nothing there to tempt a thief to make such elaborate forays into my humble establishment."

"I believe you, Mr. Humphreys," said Pons, still smiling. "Yet I believe that this is the object of the nightly intruder's search."

"Mr. Pons, I would willingly give it to him, if he could prove he had a right to it, of course."

"Let us not be hasty," said Pons dryly.

So saying, he calmly opened the envelope and unceremoniously emptied its contents onto the counter before us. Then, giving not a glance at the stamps, he turned his attention to the envelope, which he now took over to the window and held up against the sunlight. The manila, however, was too thick to permit him to see through it.

"It seems to be an ordinary envelope," he said. "'And these stamps on the outside of the envelope?"

"They are only British Empire Exhibition adhesives of 1924, not very old, and not worth much more than their face value."

Pons lowered the envelope and turned to look toward the curtained alcove. "Is that a tea-kettle boiling,, Mr. Humphreys?"

"Yes, sir. I keep hot water always ready for tea."

"Let us repair to that room, if you please, Mr. Humphreys."

"It is not large enough for us all."

"Very well, then. I will take the liberty of using it while you and Parker guard the door."

"Our client flashed a puzzled glance at me, but I could not inform him of Pons' purpose. That, however, was soon clear, for Pons went directly to the teapot on Mr. Humphreys' stove and proceeded to hold the stamps over the steam.

"What are you doing, Mr. Pons?" our client cried in alarm.

"I trust I am about to solve the first part of our little problem, Mr. Humphreys," said Pons.

Our client watched in fascinated interest as Pons peeled back the stamps on the oustide of the envelope.

"Aha!" exclaimed Pons, "what have we here?"

Beneath the stamps, carefully protected by a thin square of cellophane, lay a shabby-looking stamp of a faded magenta color. It was crudely printed and it had also been clipped at the corners. Pons, however, handled it with the greatest care.

"I daresay this is the object of the nightly search, Mr. Humphreys," said Pons. "Unless I am very much mistaken, this is the famous one-penny magenta rarity, printed in British Guiana in 1856, discovered by a boy of fifteen here in our country and originally sold for six shillings. After being in the collection of Philippe Ferrari for many years, it was sold to a rich American at auction for the fabulous price of seventy-five hundred pounds. Correct me if I am wrong, Mr. Humphreys."

Our client, who had been staring at the stamp in awe and fascination, found his voice. "You have made no error of fact, Mr. Pons, but one of assumption. There is only one penny magenta known to exist, despite the most intensive search for others. That stamp is still in the collection of the widow of the American millionaire who bought it at the Ferrari auction in 1925. This one must be a forgery—a very clever, most deceptive counterfeit. But still, Mr. Pons, a forgery, with only the value of a curiosity. The original would now be worth close to ten thousand pounds. But this copy appears to be scarcely worth the labor and care it took to make it."

Pons carefully replaced the stamps on the envelope, keeping the penny magenta to one side. Then he returned to the counter, and put the loose stamps back into the envelope.

"Take a larger envelope, Mr. Humphreys, put this into it and label it 'Property of Arthur Benefield,'" said Pons. "I am curious now to know more of your late customer. Was he a young man?"

"I will show you the clipping from the *News of the World*. It

conveys all I can tell you," said Humphreys.

He went back to his desk, opened a drawer, and took out a newspaper clipping.

Pons bent over the clipping.

The photograph was that of a young man, not over thirty-five. He was not ill-favored in looks, and wore a short mustache. He appeared to be of medium weight. The story beneath it said that the photograph had been found in the dead man's bill-fold, but that no address had been discovered. From the presence of American currency in his wallet, authorities had concluded that Benefield was an American tourist in London. They had had no response to official inquiries at the usual sources, however.

Benefield had been found dead in a London street one night. Evidence indicated that he had been struck and killed by a car, and police were looking for one which must have been severely damaged by the force of such an impact.

Pons read this in silence, and turned to our client. "Our next step," he said, "will be to catch the intruder. I have no doubt but that he will return tonight."

Mr. Athos Humphreys paled. "Mr. Pons, I am not a wealthy man. I did not inquire about your fee . . ."

"As to that, Mr. Humphreys," replied Pons with animation. "If you will permit me to retain this little stamp for its curiosity value, I shall feel amply repaid."

"By all means, Mr. Pons."

"Very well, then. Parker and I will return here late this afternoon prepared to spend the night in your shop, if that is agreeable to you."

"It is indeed, sir."

We returned to Mr. Athos Humphreys' antique shop just before his closing hour that evening. Shortly after our client locked us into his shop and departed.

Pons had insisted that both of us be armed. In addition, he carried a powerful electric torch. So protected, we took up a position behind the curtain in the little alcove at the rear of the shop. Pons warned me to keep my eyes on the front door to the shop.

"You are so positive he will come by the door," I said. "Suppose he opens a window and drops in from behind us?"

"No, Parker, he will enter by the door. He has a key," said Pons. "Surely you observed how careless Humphreys was with his keys when he came in with us this morning. He simply threw them to the counter, in plain sight. Anyone prepared to do so could have made wax impressions of the lot. I have no doubt that is what took place. When our client's advertisement appeared, informing an interested party that Humphreys possessed something be-

longing to Benefield, that person came to this shop on another pretext, got an impression of those keys. I see him as a patient and dangerous man, determined to get what he is after."

"The penny magenta? But why would anyone take the trouble to conceal a forgery so carefully?"

"Why, indeed!" answered Pons enigmatically. "It suggests nothing to you?"

"Only that the man who wants it thinks it is the real thing."

"Nothing more?"

"I can think of nothing."

"Very well, then. Let us look at the problem anew. Mr. Athos Humphreys, a comparatively obscure dealer in antiques, is sought out by an American as a repository for a packet of stamps, all of little value. Mr. Benefield has gone to the trouble of stamping the envelope, attaining a cancellation, and then recovering the packet from the post office, to bring it in in person. He pays at least half what his packet of stamps is manifestly worth to make sure that Humphreys keeps it where he directs. And where does he direct that it be kept? In plain sight, in Humphreys' own letter-rack, after Benefield has made certain that it bears every appearance of a letter that was mailed to Humphreys. Does all this suggest nothing to you, Parker?"

"Only that Benefield seemed certain that someone wanted the packet."

"Right! You are making progress."

"So he made sure that it would not attract attention, and, if seen, would be ignored. The envelope bore no return address, and the address was hurriedly printed in blocks. That, I presume, was so that the man who wanted it would not recognize Benefield's handwriting, which very probably he knew."

"Ah, it gives me pleasure to see how handsomely your capacity for observation has grown, Parker. No more?"

"I fear I have shot my bolt, Pons."

"Well, let us just say a few words about Mr. Benefield. It does not seem to you suggestive that he should have so conveniently met with a fatal accident soon after reaching London?"

"Accidents happen every day. It is a well-known fact that the accident toll exceeds the mortality rate in wartime."

"I submit that the late Benefield and his pursuer were in this matter together. I suggest that Benefield slipped away from his partner and came to London alone, to offer the penny magenta for sale without the necessity of dividing the spoils with that partner, who followed and found him but has not yet found the stamp. I conclude that it was his hand at the wheel of the car that caused Benefield's death."

"Ingenious!" I said.

"Elementary, my dear Parker," said Pons.

"Except for the fact that the penny magenta is a forgery," I added.

"Ah, Parker, you put my poor powers to shame," he answered with a dry chuckle. "But now I think we had better keep silent. I should tell you I earlier today notified Inspector Taylor, who is outside, in hiding, waiting upon our signal."

My surprise was genuine.

I had begun to drowse when Pons' light touch on my arm aroused me. The sound of a key in the lock came distinctly to ear. In a moment the front door opened and, from my position behind the curtain, I saw a dark figure slip into the shop. In a moment the shade of a lantern was drawn cautiously a little to one side and a square of light fell upon the counter, moved until it framed the envelope on which our client had written Arthur Benefield's name.

Then, I saw his hand reach out and take up the envelope.

At that moment Pons turned on his electric torch and silhouetted a well-dressed, thin-faced young man whose startled glance gave him a distinctly feral look. He stood for but a split second in the light; then he dropped into a crouch, spun around, and leaped for the door.

Pons was too quick for him. He caught up a heavy object and threw it with all his force. It struck our quarry cruelly behind one knee; he went down and stayed down.

"Keep your hands out of your pockets; we are armed," said Pons, advancing toward him. "Parker, open the door and fire a shot into the air. That will bring Inspector Taylor."

Our quarry sat up, one hand gripping his knee, the other clinging to the envelope of stamps. "The most you can charge me with," he said in a cultured voice, "is breaking and entering. Perhaps theft. But this is as much my property as it was Arthur's."

"I fancy the charge will be murder," said Pons, as Inspector Taylor's pounding footsteps sounded outside . . .

Back in our quarters at 7B Praed Street, Pons lingered over a pipe of shag. I, too, hesitated to go to bed.

"You seem satisfied with the conclusion of this matter, Pons," I said. "But to me its motivation seems far too slight to justify the crime of murder."

"You are right, Parker," he answered with maddening gravity. "Does that not then suggest anything further to you?"

"No."

"I submit there is a basic error in your reasoning, Parker."

"Indeed?"

"It has occurred to you that one would hardly commit murder

for a counterfeit stamp worth, at best, five pounds. Yet it does not seem to have occurred to you that the penny magenta I have here, as a gift from our client, may indeed be worth, as he put it, ten thousand pounds."

"But he said the single copy of that stamp exists in an American collection."

"Say, rather, he *believed* it does. Actually, *this* is the only genuine British Guiana penny magenta rarity, and the one in the American collection is a counterfeit. I took the liberty of sending a cable this afternoon, and I fancy we shall have a visitor from America as fast as an aeroplane will make it possible."

Nor was Pons in error.

Three days later, a representative of the American collector presented himself at our quarters, and paid Pons a handsome reward for the recovery of the penny magenta. Both Benefield and his partner, who had been identified as a man named Watt Clark, had been agents for the collector. They had manufactured the false penny magenta and exchanged it for the genuine stamp. The substitution had not been noticed until Pons' cable sent the collector to a stamp expert, whose verification of Pons' suspicion had resulted in the dispatching of the collector's representative to retrieve the fabulously valuable penny magenta.

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the laughing buddha

by . . . Sax Rohmer

The Buddha seemed to laugh. But behind its gilded face lurked a secret men would kill to uncover.

A MAN STOOD looking in a small shop window in Lychgate's High Street. He was a well-built man wearing an expensive but rather shabby tweed suit; his dark skin, cleanly chiseled features, and drooping eyelids made for good looks, but good looks of a vaguely Oriental sort. The sign over the shop said: *Brown, Madder & Co., Artists' Requisites.*

The ancient bow window had latterly contained two or three water colors of Lychgate Heath by the well-known illustrator, Martin Brown. These, however, were now removed, and the sole exhibit consisted of a wooden figure, eight inches high, obese but joyous, arms upflung, possibly of Chinese workmanship. A girdle about its pendulous belly was crudely gilded and some of the gilt had worn off. The right hand of this figure had been damaged and carelessly restored. A card announced: LAUGHING BUDDHA . . . *A Bargain. Price £100.*

When the inquirer who stood outside turned and glanced to right and left along High Street, he was

Insidiousness may be a characteristic of Sax Rohmer's most renowned creation, Dr. Fu Manchu. But we've always believed that he has instilled a rarer and more utterly fascinating insidiousness into his stories of continental intrigue pure and simple. It is in these stories that he seems to us to reap the full measure of his fame, and the continuously mounting suspense, mystery and terror of this story in particular illustrates what we mean.

smiling, and one saw that his eyes were of the same color as the cloudless sky above Lychgate. He opened the shop door, so that a bell jangled, and went in. He carried a drawing under his arm.

From behind a painted screen which masked an inner door, a man appeared. A tall but stooping figure in careless gray flannels, wearing a silver mustache and Vandyke beard and a wide-brimmed hat; a man of distinctive personality, in fact, Martin Brown. English illustrators had fallen on hard times, and Brown was no longer young. *Brown, Madder & Co.* was his final bid to cheat bankruptcy.

"Hullo, B.B.," he rumbled; he had a voice which suggested casks being rolled along a wine cellar. "Glad to see you."

"Any bids?"

Martin Brown shook his head. "Don't expect any."

He fixed a glance of mock severity upon his visitor. During a year spent painting in Egypt, Martin Brown had met Mohammed Ibrahim Brian Barûk of the Camel Corps and had become his friend for life. This fascinating product of an Anglo-Arab marriage had made a strong appeal to the painter, and Bimbashi Barûk and he had gone on a number of expeditions into the desert, once as far as Siwa; for the bimbashi aspired to paint. But, alas, not even Martin Brown's untiring tuition had enabled him to do more than daub.

Bimbashi Barûk unwrapped the water color which he carried and propped it up on a chair.

"Any improvement, Martin?"

Martin Brown studied the work. "Do you ever clean your brushes?"

"Whenever I think of it; but I don't clean them in my mouth as you do."

Brown let loose a bellow of deep laughter. "Try it," he said, when the storm had subsided. "Paint hasn't such a bad flavor as you'd suppose. Yes, B.B.—there's some improvement. But use clean brushes. Let me sell you some!" He obliged with an encore bellow: "Come into the factory."

Through the small shop one entered a fairly large studio which in turn gave access to a garden. The studio was bewilderingly untidy. French windows were wide open to the sunlit garden and a number of birds busily finished the remains of a frugal lunch which Martin Brown had thrown onto the steps. A charcoal sketch was removed and the bimbashi's work set on an easel in its place. There followed a short, trenchant lecture, and then:

"It won't do," Martin Brown concluded. "It is far from hot. But you are not past praying for."

"Thanks, Martin," said the bimbashi with humility, and began to fill his briar pipe. "Has nobody at all inquired about the Buddha?"

"Nobody?" growled the painter.

"You make me laugh. It's the bane of my existence. I really can't put up with this sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

The doorbell jangled, and Martin went into the shop. A choleric, elderly gentleman of military appearance was there. He wore a check suit and undeniably yellow gloves.

"Good afternoon. What can I do for you?"

"You can answer a simple question, sir," was the hoarse reply. "It concerns that figure in the window."

"Do you want to buy it?"

"Buy it! Buy it, sir! I could buy a dozen for a pound in Singapore! I merely wish to know how, at times like this, you dare to ask a hundred pounds for—for—"

"That is my client's price."

Following a snorting sound, came the visitor's final words: "In my opinion you should either be locked up or medically examined!"

The bell jangled, the door banged, and Martin Brown came back. "You said 'What sort of thing' " he remarked. "Well, *that* sort of thing. It's only a question of time for me to slosh one of 'em, and then I shall have confirmed an opinion already favored around here, that I am a dangerous lunatic."

Bimbashi Barûk nodded sympathetically.

"I think," the painter continued, extracting a jar of beer from behind a canvas stretcher, "that in fairness I should know the facts. A man who is trying to build up an honest business excites the wrong kind of interest by asking a hundred pounds for a thing that is worth about four-pence."

"It cost me ten shillings."

"You were swindled. I have never been able to make out what you are doing here, in the first place. You appear to spend your time haunting all the pubs in the neighborhood. But when it comes to trying to sell a bit of old junk for the price of everything else I have in the shop—"

"I agree. You are right. I will explain, Martin."

And behind the bimbashi's explanation of his presence in England a remarkable story lay. This was the story:

It began more than two years back (in fact just before France was over-run) on the French Riviera, where Bimbashi Barûk was spending a short leave. During this time he made the acquaintance of Janson Runmede, the famous Harvard physicist who had once assured New York reporters that Einstein really *had* a theory. Runmede was living in a villa at Cap d'Ail and was popularly believed to be engaged upon abstruse experiments. Here, one evening, the bimbashi attended a small dinner party which formed the prelude to a tragedy.

Those present were Dr. Runmede, his secretary, Ann Mert-

sham, Mr. and Mrs. Vandersen, of Philadelphia, Bimbashi Barûk, and a Mrs. Vivian. Mrs. Vivian was a lustrous brunette, whose exact nationality he failed to determine but whose eyes held for the distinguished physicist an expression of rapturous surrender which embarrassed even the bimbashi.

However, it was a pleasant evening. The excellent dinner was cooked by members of the staff of a nearby hotel. John Vandersen had a grand fund of anecdote, and his wife was a good mixer. Ann Mertsham would have been a pretty girl without her spectacles but her persistent intelligence was a trifle exhausting, the bimbashi thought. Mrs. Vivian rather defeated him, until he decided that she didn't matter provided that Runmede didn't permit her to matter.

The Vandersens were first to leave. Ann Mertsham lived at the big hotel in sight of the villa garden, and as it appeared that Mrs. Vivian lived there also, these two later set off together, observing a septic politeness to each other. Runmede detained Barûk.

"It's not fifteen minutes into Monte Carlo," he said (the bimbashi who loved a gamble was quartered there), "so let's have a leisurely 'old-fashioned' and a quiet chat."

They had their whisky and their chat, and it was largely his memories of that final hour with Runmede which marked out Bimbashi Barûk's course some two years later.

Windows opening on the garden were thrown wide, and the night was still.

"Bit lonely at night, isn't it?" the bimbashi suggested.

A breeze stirred the curtains and bore with it a fragment of conversation from Ann Mertsham as, with Mrs. Vivian, she walked back to the hotel: "One instinctively distrusts these sudden winds from the Alps . . ."

Perhaps her words subconsciously prompted Dr. Runmede, for as he replied he closed shutters and windows.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, I have been warned that some crook or another has been seen around. But I'm not afraid."

Bimbashi Barûk often recalled those words later, but what he said at the time was: "You are just enjoying a long vacation?"

"Just enjoying every minute of it. A Harvard group put up a substantial sum two years back to finance an inquiry of mine, and I worked like a pack mule to justify their confidence. I may have overdone it a bit. Certainly I needed this rest and isolation."

He said no more about his work, although the bimbashi would have been glad to listen, but talked of life on the Cote d'Azur, queer people one met, and, casually, of Mrs. Vivian. He had run into her, apparently, at

the Sporting Club at Monte Carlo. She was lonely, rather down on her luck, and, according to his own account, he had cultivated the acquaintance in a mood compounded more of quixotic chivalry than of passion.

It was not until Bimbashi Barûk was leaving that Dr. Runmede suddenly reverted to the subject of his isolation. A hired car was waiting at the lower or garden entrance and, as Runmede led the way down:

"Did you ever read *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe?" he asked.

"Yes," said the bimbashi, conscious of confusion.

"I know what the Britisher calls a 'sahib' when I meet one. You are a sahib. I'm going to take you into my confidence. There is one thing in this villa which, to a man who could understand its value, would represent a considerable fortune. Listen: what was the first object you noticed when you stepped into the front lobby?"

The bimbashi, whose powers of observation were inherited from a line of desert hunters, remembered immediately that he had noticed a figure which stood in a niche facing glazed double-entrance doors. Some eight inches high, it was that of a man obese but joyous, arms upflung; a more or less standardized Chinese ornament, he thought, and said so.

"Sure. You see it as you come in," said Runmede. "Can't miss it. Some people would lock it in a safe. Others would bury it. But Edgar Allan Poe would have put it just there. I don't have to emphasize the fact that this is between ourselves. Good night."

Heavy clouds swept the face of the moon, creating a weird lighting effect, so that as Bimbashi Barûk looked back, Runmede's tall figure was alternately exhibited and obliterated as he stood there at the gate. Less than half an hour later (according to medical evidence) Dr. Runmede was murdered on that very spot. The villa was ransacked and found in wild disorder by Marcelle, the daily help, when she arrived in the morning. But (on the evidence of Ann Mertsham) nothing had been stolen except the laughing Buddha.

The manner of the killing was not hard to see. The murderer had rung the bell at the lower entrance, and Dr. Runmede, thinking no doubt that one of his guests had returned for a belonging mislaid, had gone down and opened the door. He had been struck on the head by some blunt weapon, a sandbag or a loaded tube, and had died of concussion.

From its very outset, the case presented unusual features, and Monsieur Foubert of the Service de Surete was sent down posthaste. With him, from Paris, came Mr. Lord, of the United States Inteliigence; and everyone present at that last dinner party was closely interrogated—with one ex-

ception. The bimbashi's evidence was recognized to be significant.

"Was this figure in its place when you left, monsieur?" he was asked.

"I left by another door."

Ann Mertsham was positive on the point that nothing else was missing. Every scrap of paper in the villa had been examined by the thieves but nothing had been removed.

"It is the work of expert agents," declared the officer from Nice. "Paris must be advised."

But before the arrival of Messrs. Foubert and Lord, one highly curious fact came into possession of the police: Mrs. Vivian had disappeared! Ann Mertsham deposed that they had parted in the hotel lobby, Ann going to bed. But the management asserted (and proved) that Mrs. Vivian had given up her room at noon that day and had removed her baggage. She had left no forwarding address.

An intensive search was instituted, but no trace of her could be found. However, Inspector Brun, of Nice, threw fresh light upon the woman's history.

"She was also known as Mme. Byas, and was formerly associated with the Byas-Ardopolis group, a gambling syndicate, which went broke. Not a desirable friend for the poor Dr. Runmede, you understand. But beautiful!"

"Just the sort of woman who might be employed as a spy," the bimbashi said. "But what did she expect to find in the Buddha? If she is innocent, why doesn't she come forward?"

Then the celebrated Paris detective arrived.

Monsieur Foubert was a little, fat round man, who resembled an overpainted cherub of the Flemish School, and who took snuff. He had an oddly sly smile. Mr. Lord, tall, grim, angular and taciturn, was the only American known to Bimbashi Barûk who used a monocle. His voice suggested the presence of steel filings. Their arrival coincided with the discovery by Inspector Brun, that a certain Jean Caron, of Monaco, who owned a motorboat and was licensed to carry passengers, had set out on the evening of the tragedy, telling a friend that he was going to Cap d'Ail. He had never returned. It was feared that his craft had floundered in the violent squall.

"One asks," said Inspector Brun, "if Mme. Byas was on board."

But it was Mr. Lord (following an uncommunicative period during which he studied Bimbashi Barûk as an Egyptologist studies an unfamiliar scarab) who finally enlightened him concerning the probable purpose of the murderer.

"Professor Runmede had been at work for more than two years on an atomic bomb," he explained. "Its general principle is known to three governments; but

there remained just one formula —some question of stresses— which he had failed to complete. The Runmede bomb, if perfected, could obliterate most of London or Berlin, or New York City. That missing formula is the thing we must assume to have been hidden in the Chinese image . . ."

The unforeseen collapse of France occurred so soon afterward that Bimbashi Barûk lost touch with the inquiry and the inquirers. His military duties wholly absorbed him. No trace had been found of Jean Caron, Mrs. Vivian, or the motorboat.

A crime that would have held world interest for several weeks was forgotten amid the greater horrors of war.

The bimbashi, however, was unable to forget the fact that an instrument of destruction, possession of which might well decide the issue, was perhaps already in being. But two years had elapsed before the Cap d'Ail mystery again flashed across his path.

Walking through the streets of Port Said one evening on his way back from the docks, he was brought up as if by a blow outside the window of a dirty little junk shop. Among a litter of trashy objects stood a laughing Buddha . . . the upflung right hand had been carelessly restored and from a gilded girdle part of the gilt was worn off!

Almost beyond possibility of error here stood the figure stolen from Dr. Runmede. But the shop was closed—nor could the bimbashi discover to whom it belonged, nor where this person might be looked for.

He went to a hotel, called up Cairo and explained that a matter of great urgency would detain him in Port Said overnight. Early on the following morning he returned to the shop near the docks, found it open—and the laughing Buddha missing! Mohammed Abd-el-Musir, the proprietor, extended apologetic palms.

"How could I know, sir, that you wished to buy this thing?"

He was an aged but agile Egyptian, whose long face, short beard and small, pointed ears lent him a pleasing resemblance to a camel. Bimbashi Barûk fixed a threatening stare upon Mohammed: he knew how to handle camels.

"This is a serious matter, O Mohammed. It is a matter of the *police*. Listen, then, attentively. To whom did you sell the Buddha?" The bimbashi's manner, his elegant Arabic, the word *police,* reduced Mohammed Abd-el-Musir to a state of abject servility.

"To a soldier on the transport which sailed at dawn, my lord."

"To what regiment did this man belong?"

But Mohammed did not know.

"Very well. Tell me: where did you get the figure and how long have you had it?"

"I have had it for many months, my lord, and no one ever wished to buy it except this soldier who said that it reminded him of his wife's mother. I swear in the name of the Prophet (May God be good to him) that I acquired it by honest trading from a French sailor. It chances, my lord, that I can even tell your excellency his name, for the following reasons—"

"Forget the reasons. Tell me his name."

"It was Jean Caron. He was mad, I think, for he believed that the piece had great merit and threatened to slay me when I offered him a just price. But, when he had visited many other dealers and had been thrown out of the great bazaar of Simon Artz, he came back most disgustingly drunk. It was then that I learned his name and also how he had once owned a vessel of his own in Monaco, which was lost with his passenger, a woman.

"He is now an ordinary seaman in a ship trading between Marseilles and Port Said. And so—" Mohammed spread eloquent palms—"the thing is worth very little. I buy it for a little less than it is worth, and this morning I sell it for a little more. *Ma'Lesh!*"

Such evidence was indisputable. Mrs. Vivian had returned to Runmede's villa that night and had stolen the laughing Buddha. She was, therefore, a foreign agent. Why her unknown accomplices had ransacked the house he was unable to imagine, since Mrs. Vivian evidently knew the hiding place of the formula. (Q.: Had she double-crossed them?)

Jean Caron was not in the plot. This conclusion was based on his subsequent behavior. Mrs. Vivian had probably been drowned, and Caron had recovered the figure which she had had in her possession. Learning later of the Cap d'Ail murder, he had become convinced that the Buddha was worth a large sum.

Accordingly he had disappeared until a time when he thought that it might safely be offered for valuation. That the Buddha itself possessed no value but contained something which possessed much, was an idea which had never occurred to poor Jean. The circumstances of its sale clearly pointed to this.

Bimbashi Barûk took instant steps. The transport carried the first battalion of a London regiment homeward bound to England. He presented his case to the responsible authorities. They experienced no small difficulty in grasping its urgency, since they knew nothing of the story and had never heard of Dr. Runmede.

The merciful return to Cairo of the bimbashi's old friend, Colonel Roden-Payne, saved the situation. Colonel Roden-Payne knew all about the Runmede bomb—and the bimbashi had great trouble in dissuading him from sending radio instructions to the officer in charge

of the draft. This, he pointed out, was risking too high a stake upon that officer's tact. A matter so delicate demanded delicate handling.

After infuriating delays, therefore, it was arranged that Bimbashi Barûk should be sent by air to meet the transport on arrival. He arrived in good time—to learn that the ship had been lost off the Irish coast!

It looked like the end of the laughing Buddha, but it was not. Every man on board had been safely transferred, with full kit and equipment, to an auxiliary cruiser. From a West Country port the battalion was drafted to Lychgate and accommodated in billets . . .

"So now you see, Martin," the bimbashi concluded, "what I am doing here."

"I don't," said Martin Brown, refilling two glasses from the beer jug. "I would say, without much hesitation, that you are wasting valuable time. I would add that you are making Brown, Madder & Co., the laughing stock of Lychgate—not that that bothers me. What powers have you?"

"Full powers. But what are you thinking?"

"Of the simple, direct way."

"Parade the battalion and fall-out all men home from Libya; then question them one by one?"

"Why not? We may wait weeks for the fellow who has this thing to see, or hear that its twin brother is marked 'Price £100.' When that occurs, I grant you we shall hear from him—but think of all that could happen in the interval. He might give it to his mother-in-law. Why not go ahead and tell him it's wanted?"

Bimbashi Barûk abstractedly filled his briar. When he spoke he did not look up: "The best way to catch a camel is to pretend you don't want him."

"I shall recommend any unhappy lover to buy a camel."

"You have noted, apparently with disfavor, that I haunt the local pubs. I converse with the troops and invariably ask them if they have glanced in your window?"

"Please accept my grateful thanks," said Martin Brown. "What should you do if someone really bought the thing?"

"I should know that he was a foreign agent, and I should count on you to hold him pending arrival of reinforcements."

And just such a contingency actually arose. News of it came to the bimbashi in this way: He was seated two days later, a morning destined to be memorable, on Lychgate Heath, patiently endeavoring to immortalize the ancient windmill in water colors, when a sound of running footsteps interrupted his concentration. He turned as a small boy came sprinting toward him.

"Major, Major!"

"Hullo, Bungo."

"He's phoned!" The sprinter halted beside the painter. "Mr. Brown! He says please dash!"

Bimbashi Barûk frowned regretfully at his work, then made the best of stowing it away, forgot to wash his brushes, and packed the whole outfit onto a push bike which lay beside him. Bungo, only son of the bimbashi's landlady, panted, watching with wide-open eyes: his excitement was a form of worship.

"Good man, Bungo. I'll tell you a story tonight."

"Honest?"

"Honest to goodness—a long one."

"Something that really happened to *you?*"

"It's a bet."

Ten minutes later the bimbashi was propping an art-laden bike against the out-jutting window of Messrs. Brown, Madder & Co. An important car in charge of an important chauffeur stood near—and the laughing Buddha was absent. Bimbashi Barûk made a mental note of the car's number and pushed the shop door open.

Martin Brown came in as the bell jangled, making cabalistic signs.

"Where is he, Martin?"

"In the studio," Brown's whisper was like distant gunfire. "And he is a *she*. Nice time I've had hanging onto her until you came. Began by bargaining and finally agreed to pay the full price! Phew! The temptations that assail artists: a hundred quid for nothing!" He removed his wide-brimmed hat and used it as a fan. "Surreptitiously, B.B., she's been trying to find out if it opens."

"Who is she?"

"I've no idea. Let me introduce you."

He led the way through, and as they entered, a tall, slim woman from whose shoulders a sable wrap had slipped so that it lay across the chair behind her, stood up, slowly and faced them. She was dressed expensively but well, a small hat of such ridiculous shape, poised on gleaming black curls, that the bimbashi knew it must be smart.

"My dear Mrs. Vivian! What a delightful surprise!"

Her change of expression was so slight, so instantly effaced by a welcoming smile and that flame of glad surrender in her dark eyes, that the bimbashi saluted a worthy antagonist.

"It is really too wonderful!" She extended both hands; her hands were beautiful. "Let me think. Is it two years, Major?"

"Rather more—but so much has happened."

She forced him to hold those slender hands longer than formal courtesy demanded; and, when they sat down facing each other, Mrs. Vivian, her lips slightly apart, was registering with perfect artistry the emotions of a woman unexpectedly thrown into the company of a man with whom she

is hopelessly infatuated. Martin Brown withdrew, on some mumbled pretext, and listened behind the screen . . .

"It seems like fate that we should meet again, Major. What brought you to this place—at this very moment?"

Bimbashi Barûk had decided upon his opening tactics, and he simply pointed to the laughing Buddha which stood upon a small table between them.

"Then you are a sentimentalist, too," murmured Mrs. Vivian.

"But I cannot afford to pay for it."

"Ah, that beastly money! Yet how helpless we are without it." She paused, meeting the gaze of dreamy eyes. "Have you ever wondered what became of me?"

"Often."

"Let me tell you. On that night we met" (she infused into the words a universe of meaning), "I was nearly at the end of things. I did not wish to confess my—destitution. I hired the old motor-boat of a man called Jean Caron to bring me to Cap d'Ail and to take me back. A frightful storm" (she shuddered, and it was not acting), "swept the boat out to sea. The motor failed. Jean Caron gave me a life jacket. Great waves were sweeping over us. Hours there were of this agony, and then the boat sank.

"I am uncertain about what happened after that. I remember next, finding myself on board a Corsican fishing vessel. They carried me ashore at a place near Ajaccio. I was ill, desperately ill, for weeks. When I recovered—France was no more. What could I do?"

She leaned forward and rested both her hands on one of the bimbashi's which lay on the arm of his chair. He smiled sympathetically. He had not overestimated his adversary.

"What indeed, could you do, Mrs. Vivian?"

Mrs. Vivian withdrew the caressing hands and opened a bag. She took out a case and offered a card to Bimbashi Barûk. He read: LADY TREVELLIS — *Abbotsway, Surrey.*

"I was fond of Janson Runmede," the soft voice continued. "He was the only friend I had in those days of misfortune. This morning, driving past, I saw—that figure. Now, I have plenty of money. Although I know little of such things, I think the price is ridiculous. But I truly believe it is the figure which used to stand in the lobby of his villa at Cap d'Ail—and we had shared many happy hours. I am a fool, perhaps; but, you see, I am a woman."

Bimbashi Barûk was keenly conscious of the fact that Lady Trevellis was a woman, but nothing told him that she was a fool. During part of the time that she had spoken he had become aware of a disturbance in the shop—muted by the sudden closing of a

door. Now, heralded by peremptory taps, entered Bungo—still breathless. Blue eyes fixed gravely upon the bimbashi, he offered a scrap of paper, nodded significantly and retired.

"Please excuse me, Lady Trevellis."

Unfolding the chit, he read, in Brown's sprawling script: "Have got the real Buddha." There was no expression whatever upon his face when he looked up—but he had completed his plan of campaign.

"My landlady's son," he explained. "An urgent caller. Please don't think me impertinent, but is your husband" (he invented a name at random) "Sir Edward Trevellis?"

She shook her head. "Sir George. He was on holiday in Corsica, and became marooned by the new turn of affairs. I was a fellow maroon. When at last we managed to get away, we found that there was—mutual understanding. Life is very insecure for a lonely woman, and so—"

"I quite understand. May I call?"

"No one would be—so welcome. But—" she indicated the Buddha.

"It is yours."

A check for a hundred pounds was made out in favor of Brown, Madder & Co., and signed "Estelle Trevellis." Bimbashi Barûk conducted Lady Trevellis to her waiting car, handed her wrapped-up purchase to the important chauffeur and returned to the shop.

Martin Brown was executing a Highland reel. Without missing a beat, he opened a drawer and produced a laughing Buddha. Then he paused.

"The man who had it was doing fourteen days in the guardhouse. The moment he got out he came in. He said if the thing we'd had in the window was worth a hundred pounds, 'wot about this 'ere?' I told him to leave it and come back in half an hour."

The secret of the Buddha was ingenious but simple. One hand had been removed and made to screw on and off. A small rod fixed to it ran down and clamped into the base. This locked it firmly. The figure had been sawed in half and a cylindrical space cut out. Metal threads were attached to the two parts so that they could be fastened together again. Good paint had been used to hide the joint.

Bimbashi Barûk drew out a roll of thin paper. "Make your own terms with the owner, Martin. What's left of the hundred is yours—you've earned it."

Lady Trevellis dined alone that night (Sir George was away) and had just retired to a restful and daintily feminine room, half library, half boudoir, for her coffee and a cigarette, when Bimbashi Barûk was announced. The

shabby suit of the morning had vanished; he was in correct evening dress, and experienced eyes appraised him as a distinguished figure.

"Please try the armchair, Major Barûk. I was expecting you."

"I thought you might be, Lady Trevellis, and my first duty must be to offer my apologies."

"For what?"

"For swindling you."

She laughed—a low-pitched, pleasant laugh. "Surely you realized that I was a consenting party? I bought the figure as the best way of getting out. I wanted time to think."

"And I was willing that you should have it—at a price. You see, I required the money for another purpose."

She watched him collectedly. She wore a simple gown which left her arms bare, with an implication of ivory shoulders, but he had sensed at once her abandonment of Delilah tactics and wondered what new form of onslaught he must anticipate.

"You have secured the original figure, I suppose?"

He inclined his head. "Jean Caron has been traced," he said quietly.

Lady Trevellis shrugged resignedly, and something about the gesture gave him a clue which had long eluded him.

"Am I right in believing you to be Italian?" he asked.

"I am a French *citoyenne,* born of Italian parents and educated in England. Is it sufficient? How did you know?"

"The way you shrugged—shrugs are so patriotic. Perhaps I begin to understand."

Brilliant eyes flashed a challenge.

"Your words tell me that you don't, Major Barûk. Allow me to amplify my story a little. All that I told you today was true. A whole month elapsed before I heard of the tragedy at Cap d'Ail—and I was utterly, profoundly horrified. You see, during my brief friendship with Janson—Dr. Runmede—he told me all about his experiments. He was a strangely trustful man in certain respects. In return, I was able to tell him that a dangerous spy was covering the villa. I moved in queer society at that time and had means of information. Janson laughed; and do you know what he said?"

"I am anxious to learn."

"He said that his great experiment had failed. There would never be a Runmede bomb. One formula, an essential one, would not, in his own words, 'add up.' So he was—murdered, for no purpose."

Following a clash of glances, the bimbashi nodded. Lady Trevellis was speaking the truth.

"Your own behavior becomes all the more remarkable."

"If you refer to my taking the Buddha, which I am not going to deny, I cannot agree with you.

What you don't understand is that I took it with me when I left with Ann Mertsham. I had slipped it inside my handbag before she joined me in the lobby. I must have been at sea when the tragedy occurred. This, Jean Caron can prove."

"Pardon my stupidity," said the bimbashi. "This simple possibility had escaped me. Jean Caron's testimony shall be obtained on the point—but I don't doubt your assurance. You had engaged him in order that you might get a start, if the—theft—should be discovered immediately?"

"Of course. I had come that night with the intention of taking it, and I did take it. I knew that what I wanted was hidden in the figure, because Janson once asked me, as we stood near it, if I had read *The Purloined Letter*. I had not, but I made a point of doing so."

"He asked me the same question," murmured Bimbashi Barûk. "Am I to understand, then, that the remarkable document hidden in the figure, a document which I have in my pocket, was the one you sought?"

"If it is a roulette system, it is."

"It is."

Lady Trevellis betrayed momentary excitement, and then fell silent, hands clasped, but at last: "Janson Runmede met me in the Monte Carlo Sporting Club," she said. "I was a broken gambler. He told me that he would show me how to win enough to clear my immediate debts, but no more. He sat down beside me at a roulette table.

"I had a hundred and twenty francs—my last. He directed every stake. In less than an hour I had won a hundred thousand That was the beginning of our friendship. Later, he explained to me that he had perfected a system against which no casino could play, and which he proposed to publish—in order that roulette might be abolished. He regarded it as a social evil. Well—the day came when I realized that he was —only amusing himself with me."

"You were wasting your time?"

"I was sure I knew where Janson's secret was hidden—a secret which meant a fortune. It was Fate that sent someone else to murder him later that very night."

"Presumably this same Kismet," said Bimbashi Barûk, "sent me from Egypt to England in pursuit of a gambling system—which, since Dr. Runmede's wishes must be respected—I cannot even try out!"

He spoke without bitterness.

into thin air

by . . . Herbert Harris

There was a police officer in the house—and a writer of crime stories. You'd almost think the stolen ring had sprouted wings.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF Mrs. Lillian Wyley's ring did not get into the papers for a good and sufficient reason. Inspector Allsop of the New York City Police Department was that estimable lady's cousin, and he happened to be at her Long Island estate, Hillside House, the week-end of the robbery, with his attractive wife. The work he did was unofficial.

It was a party to celebrate Mrs. Wyley's birthday. My friend Colin Marsh had married her younger sister Arlene and another sister, Paula—a brassy widow of fifty-three—was there, and Mrs. Wyley's son Robert, down from Harvard for the occasion.

I was the only outsider—invited as a friend of Colin's—and it put me in a bit of a spot. I was the only one in the house who was not a member of the family, except the grey-haired Mrs. Maggs, the cook, who had been with Mrs. Wyley for twenty years.

So you can imagine how I felt when Mrs. Wyley's ring vanished from her dressing-table just before dinner on Saturday evening. The loss of the ring was a severe

We're covetously proud of this exciting little yarn, for it epitomizes so brilliantly the detective's greatest dilemma. If doors, windows and chimneys remain sealed in a house that has been searched from cellar to attic how can a purloined object slip away and vanish? Herbert Harris has come up with an answer that is perfection itself, in a framework wholly new.

blow to our hostess. It had been given to her by her late husband as a wedding anniversary gift.

Left in none-too-affluent circumstances, Lillian Wyley had sold many things, but never the ring—a handsome affair worth, perhaps, $2,500 at today's prices.

There was no question of an outside job. The windows of her room had been securely fastened, for she was no lover of fresh air, and the ring had been taken from her dressing-table during the ten minutes or so she had spent drying her hair in the bathroom.

We heard her shout, "Charles! Charles!" while we were finishing dressing. Charles was her cousin, Inspector Allsop, whom she naturally thought of the moment the ring had gone.

Allsop took charge at once, and it completely ruined the evening which became one of questioning, conjecture and general discomfort.

On one occasion I thought there would be words between the inspector and my friend Colin.

Colin Marsh saw every conundrum, criminal or otherwise, as copy for his novels (he had thirty mystery novels to his credit) and his theories could be fanciful to say the least. Allsop preferred hard facts.

Mrs. Lillian Wyley knew exactly where she had laid the ring down, and it had vanished completely. Nobody had called. Nobody had left the house. Allsop didn't say so in so many words, but we could tell what he was thinking. *The ring is still in the house and somebody has got it.*

It was Paula, Mrs. Wyley's elder sister, who broke the impasse. "The quickest way would be to search every one of us. That at least would clear the air," she said, and I didn't like the way she glanced at me.

"I second that," I said promptly.

Mrs. Wyley protested that it would be a distasteful procedure. But she was over-ruled. So every room in the house was searched methodically. Suitcases and clothes were examined minutely. Beds were stripped, carpets lifted, drawers turned out.

At midnight Allsop said we should call it a day. He parked himself in a chair in the lounge, facing the hall with the door open. That, of course, was just his way of telling us he was not going to bed, and that nobody was going to slink out of the house without his knowing it.

The rest of us retired, though I knew Colin wouldn't sleep. He would sit up, smoking cigarette after cigarette, applying his agile mind to the problem as he might have applied it to the labyrinths of his latest plot. And at breakfast he would produce another theory.

As I saw it, it was going to be one hell of a breakfast. But I was wrong.

At the breakfast table there

were only Colin Marsh and his wife Arlene, the inspector's wife Alice, young Robert and myself. The absentees, or more probably, latecomers were Allsop himself, Mrs. Wyley and the brassy Paula.

We had just finished coffee when Allsop came in. He looked tired, yet strangely relaxed. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and glanced through the smoke at Colin, who was about to say something.

"If you've any further theories, smother them," he said. "It's all over."

"The ring has been found?" Colin asked. He sounded annoyed.

Allsop nodded, and Robert demanded: "Where?"

"Six miles away—at Felpsham," Allsop told us. "I know who stole it, and I took a trip into Felpsham at the crack of dawn and got it back."

"So it was nobody in the house?" I ventured.

The inspector smiled. "As a matter of fact, it was," he said. "So, being in the family, as it were, nothing will be said about it." It was an instruction, and had obviously emanated from Mrs. Wyley.

We sat in silence for a moment, and then Allsop turned to Colin. "In your eagerness to join in the search last night," he said, "I'm surprised you didn't wonder why one of the guests had two week-end cases for comparatively few belongings. If you *had* noticed that simple fact, you might've had another look at the spare case. It was punctured with small perforations."

He smiled as Colin frowned, and went on: "After getting a rush of brains to the head, I ran over to Felpsham as soon as it got light—to a house called Cobwebs."

Robert leaned forward. "Aunt Paula's house?" he said.

"Correct," Allsop replied. "And I made a bee-line for Aunt Paula's pigeon cote. The pigeon which Paula brought in the case, and which she released from her bedroom window immediately after stealing the ring, flew straight back home as a homing pigeon should.

"All Paula had to do when she got home was to take the ring—a two thousand five hundred dollar one—from the bird's leg. Only, as it happened," Allsop concluded with a wry smile, "I got there first."

women are poison

by . . . Brett Halliday

The Kid had the instincts of a cobra. But his vanity was elastic enough to cover his every act of viciousness—until he met Mona.

THE FANCY KID was scared. His lips were twitching, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead and ran down the tip of his nose, dripping off in a continuous stream.

He held a hand to his stomach and fought nausea as the door of his hotel room closed behind him. It was only a few steps to the bathroom. He was pale and shaken when he came out a few minutes later, still scared stiff but able to think more coherently about the mess he was in.

His eyes flickered as he went to the window and stared down at the city street, deserted save for stray pedestrians at this early morning hour.

They weren't coming for him —yet. He swallowed hard and reminded himself that he had a couple of hours leeway—no more than that, though. Katie would soon be coming back to the furnished apartment she had shared with Jeanette.

Katie would find Jeanette as the Fancy Kid had left her. He grimaced and turned away from

There are few writers of mystery novels more industrious than Brett Halliday, or more consistently dedicated to a high level of excellence in the genre. He has written more than thirty whodunits, most of them about that tough, irrepressible Irishman, Mike Shayne. Although this isn't a Shayne story you'll find in it the author's characteristic vigorous realism, as he explores a career of fiendish criminality and deftly bares a killer's mind.

the window as the damning picture formed before his eyes.

The pitifully frail body of Jeanette outstretched on the rug. The bluish hole above her left eye.

The Fancy Kid sighed. Everything was going to be all right. He had a couple of hours. More than enough. A passing fire engine had covered up the sound of the single shot that had been necessary.

And it had been Jeanette's fault. Dames were poison. He hadn't wanted to do it. He'd shied clear of murder for years. If he hadn't had the gun on him . . .

He took a .32 automatic from his coat pocket and regarded it intently. One little *pouf!* And that was the end of Jeanette.

He lit a cigarette and took a turn about the room. Had to get hold of himself. Two hours wasn't much time. He and Jeanette had been together in the apartment when Katie went out. His fingerprints were all over the joint . . .

Well, he knew just what to do. He'd planned what to do a long time ago—a long time before he'd seen this coming on. Just in case of a jam like this.

He hadn't meant to kill her. It was just that something had happened inside him when she grabbed at the money and threatened to squeal. He nervously reached in his breast pocket and took out a thick sheaf of bills, paused in the center of the room to regard them broodingly.

The price of murder. A thick packet of hundred and half-G banknotes. Twenty grand. There was a splotch of blood on the outside bill. He folded it back, averting his eyes.

He wasn't squeamish, but girl-murder—and his first time—bothered him. The little gun had leaped in his hand as though endowed with life, as though eager to do the job for him.

Twenty grand. A sweet haul with no heat attached—until this had happened. Now, blood money because a dizzy dame had demanded marriage as her share.

The Fancy Kid's thin lips drew back from his teeth. All right. It was blood money. Wouldn't it spend just as well as any other money? Buy just as much champagne and entertain just as many girls?

But he didn't have much time. The Fancy Kid laid the packet of loot with the .32 and stepped across the room to survey his reflection in the triple mirror.

He stood there a long moment before he could drag his eyes away from the image he admired most and loved best. It was tough saying good-bye to the Fancy Kid. But it had to be. His plan called for the complete obliteration of the Fancy Kid.

He nodded approvingly at himself. His monicker was well deserved. Sleek black hair was care-

fully combed back from a low forehead. Even in this time of stress, not a single lock was out of place. The thin line of a black mustache was faintly discernible upon his upper lip. He touched it lingeringly with his finger tips.

An uncouth figure slipped from the Fancy Kid's hotel room half an hour later, a flat leather money belt about his waspish waist, a .32 automatic concealed in a holster suspended from the money belt directly below his stomach.

He crept down the hall to a rear stairway and out to the shadowed alley. Thence he went by a devious route to the railroad yards from which freights moved westward hourly. A group of hoboes whom he outwardly resembled were gathered about a flickering fire in the jungle at the outer end of the yards. A red-ball was being made up in the yards.

They received him into their ranks without question and he was one of a group who swung aboard a gondola when the westward-bound freight highballed.

Things worked out just as he had foreseen. If a police net was thrown about the city, it did not concern itself with the freight bearing him westward—away from the city and from the former haunts of the Fancy Kid. Cops were dumb, he told himself caustically. Too dumb to figure that a guy might be smart enough to do what he was doing.

The twenty G's and automatic were heavy about his waist, but his traveling companions were like the cops—too dumb to suspect a fortune was concealed beneath his ragged clothing.

He was one of a stream of drifters set in motion by economic forces, haphazardly riding freights because motion helped allay the unrest within them; aged bindle stiffs placidly acceptive; younger men with bitter faces.

The Fancy Kid became a part of this restless tide without causing a ripple of interest among them. With nearly a hundred dollars in small bills distributed about his clothing, he bought food judiciously and sparingly, keeping in mind the necessity of not touching the larger hoard until this phase of his escape plan was definitely ended.

He bought a newspaper the first day out of the city and enjoyed reading the front-paged, inaccurate account of Jeanette's death. He was gratified to learn that he had not fled the city an hour too soon.

His monicker was prominently displayed in heavy print, and a muddled photograph of the Fancy Kid in a front-page box over the caption:

WANTED FOR MURDER

Katie had turned in the alarm as he had anticipated, and the police had staged a raid on his hotel room at daylight. The paper stated that he was definitely known to be hiding in the city; that his

capture was but a question of time.

He appreciatively noted the space devoted to his reputation for sartorial splendor. The source of the Fancy Kid monicker was mentioned, followed by a statement that his vanity was certain to be his undoing because he would be a marked man no matter where he attempted to hide.

The Fancy Kid glanced down at himself and could not repress a grin.

Things were breaking perfectly. He wanted to talk about his smartness—boast about it. That satisfaction was the one thing he had passed up by taking it on the lam like this. He couldn't resist the impulse to point out the item about himself to two fellow knights of the road lounging under the culvert with him.

"A dog like that deserves to fry," the burly fellow on the Fancy Kid's right rumbled. "He looks like a girl-killer. Lookut the mustache on the lip of him!"

A strong-jawed youth on his other side agreed. "They'll get him all right enough. They're callin' the G-men in on jobs like that nowadays."

The Fancy Kid mumbled something indistinguishable, sternly fighting back the impulse to speak up in his own defense. The incident had proved one thing. He was safe from detection. Both the mugs had looked at the photograph without recognizing him.

But something turned over inside him at mention of the Feds. That was something he hadn't counted on.

"Hell, murder ain't no Federal offense," he managed to say after a little time.

"Girl-murder," the jerseyed youth pointed out, spitting across the stream. "That's where the G's come in. Some sorta white slavery angle," he added vaguely.

The Fancy Kid shuddered and shut up. He got away from the pair as soon as he could, caught the next westbound freight that came puffing out of the yards.

Westward he rode away from the cities. The farmlands of the Middle West lay behind him. Rugged wastes of New Mexico and Arizona beckoned. He'd seen movies of this country. One inhabitant to every few square miles.

A man could hole up out there. It didn't take an Einstein to figure that a fugitive was less likely to be recognized by six people than by six thousand.

Things looked sweet until the fourth night, in southern New Mexico. Somehow, he had gotten switched off onto a little branch line and was trying to make it to Tucumcari where he could catch another red-ball.

It happened through no fault or knowledge of the Fancy Kid's. There had lately been a series of box-car pilferings on this branch line, and a national detective

agency had been retained to halt the thefts.

One of the agency operatives was riding the caboose of the train the Fancy Kid was on. At a water stop, he noticed a figure jump out of an empty and slink to the water tower for a drink. As hoboes rarely made the branch line, the detective suspected he had discovered a car thief.

He ran up the track as the figure darted back to the empty, swung his body aboard behind the Fancy Kid as the engineer gave her the throttle.

Crouching in the darkness, the Fancy Kid thought another 'bo had hopped aboard. "Crawl in," he called cheerily.

The detective grunted and sat up on the floor. His flashlight picked out the Fancy Kid's crouching figure, brought his lightly bearded face into focus.

A trained sixth sense brought the detective recognition of these features. He reached for his gun and roared: "The Fancy Kid! Put 'em up, you rat!"

The Fancy Kid screamed shrilly and threw himself out of the beam of light. The detective's shot went wild as the train lurched.

The Fancy Kid's bullet didn't go wild.

He squatted on the floor and cried after getting rid of the detective's body by rolling it out of the car. This was too much. Fate was against him. The Feds had picked up the trail. What chance had even a smart guy with the Gs after him?

He wasted thirty minutes giving a swell exhibition of hysterics, getting rid of a lot that had been bottled up inside him since his finger touched the trigger that sent a bullet into Jeanette's head.

He stood up in the doorway of the rocking car after the storm was over. The light of desperation gleamed in his eyes. There would be another F.B.I. man aboard. They always traveled in pairs. He was trapped. Concealment was virtually impossible here on the open desert. He would be mercilessly hunted down the next time the train stopped.

He crouched on the edge of the doorway and peered out into the night. There was a full moon. Sagebrush, mesquite and cacti filed past in the limpid moonglow. The open country beckoned alluringly.

He closed his eyes and his body tensed, then launched itself from the moving train into the night. He struck the ground rolling, ploughing on his face through sand and the unfriendly mesquite. The lights of the caboose faded into the distance. The rumble of the train receded into the dreadful nothingness of silence.

Arising, dazed and bruised, with blood dripping from his face, he plodded doggedly away from the twin lines of steel, into the

encompassing solitude of the New Mexico desert.

The morning sun found him still forging onward through the sand, his hat gone, a vast sea of loneliness surrounding him. The rising sun was welcome as it came over the horizon, dispelling the before-dawn darkness that had been peopled with phantasms of fear.

It ceased to be welcome as he trudged onward, its direct rays transforming the desert into a blazing inferno. Limitless distance encompassed him.

A snarl came from his dry throat. Anyway, he had escaped from the Federal trap. The Fancy Kid had pulled another fast one.

The solitude and silence of the desert mocked at him, tore down the bravado of unfounded hope. He had escaped.

To what?

The question danced before him upon the shimmering rays of heat, scourging his weary body and fear-drugged mind. A dull apathy took possession of him. He roused himself with tremendous effort and trudged onward.

The burning sand, and the swarms of flies about his head were sun-devastating sources of hellish torture. The specter of death by thirst became a fearsome visitant to the disordered imaginings preying upon him. His head became a ball of fire; dry cracked lips were drawn back to twist his face into a snarling mask of agony.

A buzzard spiraled in flight above him before the morning was half gone. He cursed the vulture in a snarling monotone, his puffed lips and parched tongue rendering articulation difficult. But the buzzard did not seem to mind. It floated lazily in concentric circles as though moored to the stumbling figure below by an invisible bond.

The Fancy Kid knew what that meant. He had read in numerous stories how the western buzzards were content to wait patiently, gloatingly, until heat and thirst provided them with a victim.

A merciful interlude of insanity came. That was when he began seeing the mirages. Vast lakes, cool and glimmering. Lush grass and tall trees—luring him to a stumbling trot; receding into the shimmering heat haze when he fell gasping.

It was well into the afternoon when he came upon the Meredes homestead at the headwaters of Crystal Creek. Let this be marked down to the Fancy Kid's credit. A night on the trail and a morning beneath the searing New Mexico sun and he was still going. There was a strain of desperation inside the Fancy Kid, driving him on to accomplish the impossible.

He didn't believe it when Mona Meredes met him at the front gate with a cry of pity and lent her strong young arm to support him to the four-room house built

upon the edge of the miracle of cool water gurgling up from the floor of the desert.

The Fancy Kid thought it was all another mirage; a continuation of the hallucinations that had played havoc with his mind for past hours. He tried to push Mona away from him, cursed her in a mumble that she did not understand.

She fought with him to hold him back from the spring, called her grandfather from the hay field to help her save a life she didn't know was not worth the saving.

It was not until the next morning that the Fancy Kid knew his rescue was a reality. He awoke on a lumpy cornshuck mattress above taut rawhide for bedsprings. A shaft of sunlight came through the small window above his head, illumining the rude lean-to that was the Meredes guest room.

He sat up with a groan, fully clothed but not yet fully conscious. A curtained doorway attracted his gaze. He pitched forward on hands and knees when he tried to stand up, crawled across the dirt floor.

"Mornin', stranger." Grandfather Meredes' twangy voice greeted him from the inner room. "Take it easy till you git squared around."

A tall, gaunt man was bending over him. A mustached, aged face, burned the color of the New Mexico sun. A gnarled hand helped him to a rawhide chair. Mona Meredes came in from the kitchen, hands floury with biscuit dough, a blend of curiosity and hope upon her young face.

The Fancy Kid kept his wits about him. The money belt was still about his waist and the weight of the automatic comfortingly remained. He kept his mouth tightly closed and his ears open for the slightest nuance of danger.

None came from the old man or girl. They were simple pioneering folk, obviously overjoyed at this welcome break in the monotony of desert life, eager to proffer the best their means afforded.

The Fancy Kid fabricated a weak story about starting out alone on a prospecting trip and getting lost from camp. They accepted it without question, acting as though it was the most natural thing in the world for a tenderfoot to do.

"It's nigh on forty miles to town," the old homesteader told the Fancy Kid frowningly after he and Mona had eaten an ample breakfast and the guest had partaken of more water.

"We don't make it in to Huerto more'n once a month or thereabouts," he went on, biting off a chew from a plug of eating tobacco and gazing ruminatively across the little irrigated meadow of alfalfa, luxuriantly tall.

"I . . ." The Fancy Kid paused and licked his lips, his eyes intent upon Mona passing back and forth in the kitchen. She smiled

at him with friendly reassurance.

"I dunno . . ." The old man hesitated, rubbing his chin in embarrassment. "I don't want to be presuming on your hard luck, stranger. But Mona and me have been talkin' it over . . . that is, we wuz last night after you come . . ." He paused again and cleared his throat rumblingly.

"Go on," The Fancy Kid was bunglingly making a cigarette out of the flaked tobacco and brown papers the old man had apologetically offered him. He could see Mona standing in the kitchen, listening hopefully.

"This is how 'tis." The gaunt New Mexican lifted his arm and pointed to the irrigated meadow outside. "See that there alfalfy field? Worth its weight in gold and hay. It will be used this winter for feedin' our range stock."

The Fancy Kid lit his cigarette and his eyes met those of the listening girl. She seemed to be pleading with him.

"I started mowing yesterday," the homesteader explained. "Mona, she can help me some, but we need a man bad for gatherin' and stackin' the hay soon's it's cured. Rains come up mighty sudden this time o' year. We can't afford to hire no hand steady and me and Mona wuz thinkin' . . ." Meredes paused and cleared his throat.

Mona was through the door and standing by the Fancy Kid's side. Close to him.

"Please," she begged tremulously. "I told Grandpa it seemed like Providence had sent you to us in our hour of need. I . . . I prayed last night that you'd stay and help us."

The Fancy Kid swallowed hard and lowered his eyes from her pleading gaze. What a break!

He had all he could do to keep from laughing out in the dame's face. So, she thought Providence had sent the Fancy Kid to them as a hired hand. That was one for the book. Forty miles from town and they wouldn't be going in for a month. No newspapers. It was being handed to him on a silver platter.

He said: "I'll stay . . . for your sake, sister," sending her a meaning glance from his low-lidded eyes.

"We can't pay much," the old man put in quickly.

"Forget about pay," the Fancy Kid said magnanimously, rewarded by a quick look of gratitude from Mona. "This is between friends, see?" He held out a blistered hand to the old man who took it with mumbled relief and thanks.

Looking past him, the Fancy Kid stiffened. He tensed like a trapped animal, his hand dropping to his waist and hovering there. He was staring at an old-fashioned battery radio set.

He hadn't thought of that. They were playing him for a sucker, eh? They probably knew who he was

when he came stumbling up the path. Holding him while they sent for help.

"Why didn't you tell me you have a radio?" he snarled.

"Why . . . why I didn't know . . ."

"I'm sorry," Mona's clear voice broke in. "The battery's run down." She was smiling at him, a hint of appeal in her blue eyes. "If you stay to do the haying you'll have to make out without any news of the world for a month."

The Fancy Kid exhaled a sigh of relief. "I'll make out, sister."

He went into the hayfield with the old man that morning, fooling around and getting his strength back, watching the swath of ripe hay fall before the clacking arm of the mower.

He was able to eat lunch at noon, and awkwardly took his place on a rickety rake behind a team of flop-eared mules after lunch.

There wasn't anything to it except sitting on the hard seat and tripping the contraption in even windrows so it would cure in the sun. A pipe. He'd do this month standing on his head.

The Fancy Kid was in the corral with the old man at dusk when the sound of hoofbeats heralded the coming of riders from the east. He stiffened, shading his eyes to see a group of armed men approaching on horseback. The old man was milking a cow in her stall, unconscious of the arrival of the posse.

The Fancy Kid knew that's what it was. Instinct told him the game was up. Mona was in the house. The riders came up to the front gate. There was nothing for it—no place to hide—nothing except make some of them wish they hadn't come after him.

He ran, stooping, to the shelter of a small tool-house, got the automatic out with trembling fingers. Mona was going out to talk to them.

The Fancy Kid squatted with a snarl on his lips and the .32 out-thrust as the girl motioned toward the barn in response to a question.

The automatic was shaking and the sweat on his brow was cold. There were only three cartridges left. There were six riders. Sombreroed, booted men, heavily armed, grim and dusty from their long ride.

An amazing thing happened while the Fancy Kid waited for death with cramped limbs.

The men trooped back to their horses after asking Mona a few questions, remounted and rode on westward into the dusk.

The Fancy Kid sat down on a box until his shakiness passed. A cunning leer crept over his face as he dropped the gun back into its holster.

He'd been a fool to think the girl would turn him in. He recalled the way she had looked at

him that morning. She was gone on him. Had lied to the posse so he wouldn't be taken away from her.

The Fancy Kid rubbed his bearded chin and nodded with satisfaction. Things were certainly breaking. Of course the dame had fallen for him. Didn't they all?

She was frying sow-belly for supper when he and her grandfather came in from the barn together. She didn't look at the Fancy Kid as she said to the old man:

"Sheriff Ormsby was by with a posse. He was in too much of a hurry to bother you. They're looking for a murderer they thought might have come this way."

The old man grunted something about Crystal Creek being a poor place to look for murderers. Mona went on frying meat and refused to meet the Fancy Kid's gaze.

The days following were a tortuous novelty to the Fancy Kid. He'd never done any harder work than pushing pool balls about a table. He drove himself to the unaccustomed labor with a savage disregard of his body which could have sprung only from the desperation of a hunted man who has felt the shadow of the electric chair pass very close to him.

A month wasn't long. He was determined to stick it out. After that, freedom, with twenty grand to buy forgetfulness of this month.

The real hell came when the mowing, raking and curing of the hay was an accomplished fact. Following that came the Herculean task of pitching the cocks onto a hayrack, hauling each load to the center of the field and stacking it in one inconceivably huge stack that would later be covered with tarpaulins to protect it from rain.

The long-handled pitchfork became an instrument of torture to the man who had always been too smart to work. For weeks his hands were two huge blisters.

Then finally—the crop was under canvas. Nothing else was important. His month of torture was ended.

They drove away from the lonely homestead before daylight the next morning. The old man and his granddaughter on the front seat of the springless wagon; the Fancy Kid sitting on a board behind them.

He waved sardonically to the little house as they rolled away behind the team of mules. It was all over but the shouting. He was tanned like any ranch hand. A month had elapsed since the Fancy Kid had been in the headlines.

Huerto was a dreary collection of frame shacks in the middle of a cactus flat, dozing somnolently beneath the desert heat.

Twin lines of gleaming steel stretched to the north and south —a gladsome sight to the Fancy Kid's eyes when they pulled in from the west in late afternoon.

He leaned forward and touched the old man's arm.

"Just drop me off at the railroad station. I won't bother to go on into town with you."

"Sho, now, you'll have to go to the bank with me. You got wages comin'. Dollar a day, like I promised."

"Let it go." The Fancy Kid pinched himself to keep from laughing in the old man's face. "Let Mona buy some ribbons with it. I'm getting off at the station."

The Fancy Kid stood up and moved toward the rear of the wagon. They were approaching the depot. Mona leaned forward and picked up something from the floor that had been concealed beneath the folds of a slicker. Her voice came clear and precise:

"You're not getting off at the station."

He faced her with a sneer. The sneer turned into a look of blank astonishment. The girl held a double-barreled shotgun. Both hammers were cocked, both barrels pointed unwaveringly at the Fancy Kid's middle.

"Best pay heed to Mona." The old man clucked to the mule team. "The gun's loaded with buckshot. I'd 'a' used it long ago if I'd knowed what Mona did."

The Fancy Kid's fingers twitched toward his belt.

"Don't try it." Mona's voice was scornful. "I like to kill skunks. Keep your hands high." His face was bloodless beneath the newly acquired tan. "Like—you promised the sheriff?" he faltered.

Mona nodded, holding the gun steadily trained on his belly. "When he came to the ranch looking for you for murdering a girl and trying to kill a detective. I knew all about you by the radio the first night you came—after Grandpa was asleep—before I disconnected the radio. I told the sheriff what a good hand you were in the field and how much we needed you. I promised to bring you in after you finished up the haying for us."

The Fancy Kid gritted his teeth and said something under his breath as the wagon neared a squatty building with barred windows. Something about . . . *poison.*

the defunct blonde

by . . . Joe Archibald

Detective Willie Klump had stiff competition indeed. Some of the troublemakers were dead on ice.

WILLIAM J. KLUMP, president of The Hawkeye Detective Agency, Inc., but wishing to high Heaven he was not, walked quite disconsolately up Lexington Avenue one balmy spring morning toward his office. Clients, for the past several weeks, had been only a little less plentiful than penguins in Cuba, and he told himself that things could not get any worse. Not any worse, that is, until he turned a corner and met two citizens he'd hoped were well on their way to Indo China. They were Aloysius Kelly and Roscoe Hafey, better known to the cops and robbers trade as Satchelfoot and Hard Hat respectively. Willie's aversion to Satchelfoot came close to being psychopathic.

"Well, look who's here!" Hard Hat said sourly. "The poor man's Spade Samuels, Kelly."

"Yeah," Satchelfoot snapped. "I thought you'd thrown away your tin badge and mail order handcuffs an' gone to work, Willie!"

"You two should always travel in pairs," Willie sniffed. "Between you both there is almost one good

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head. Or do I exaggerate?"

"Let's poke this private eye!" Hard Hat said, pushing Willie against the window of a lunchroom.

"Leave him be," Kelly snapped. "I never hit anythin' when it is down. I happen to know he is ripe for a pauper's oath and he's about to be evicted from his office, also his rooming house. I promised Gertie Mudgett if I saw him—"

"My status crow is none of your business, you big slob!" Willie yelped at Kelly. "It so happens I am on my way to collect a sizable detainin' fee from a rich client an'—"

"Oh, then you couldn't have breakfast with me, Willie," Kelly said.

Willie Klump immediately swallowed his pride, he was that hungry. He also thought of the two stale crumb buns waiting for him at the office. "Why—er—Satchelfoot, you should know by this time what a great kidder I am! Of course I'll take a bite with an old pal!"

"Sure, come on," Hard Hat growled. "You're as welcome as the truth in Russia."

Willie followed the flatfeet into the filling station. He ordered orange juice, a double order of toast, three scrambled eggs with bacon, and coffee. Satchelfoot nodded approvingly and grinned at Hard Hat. Hard Hat took a soiled card from his pocket. He asked the blonde waitress for the loan of a pencil.

"I feel sorry for you, too, Willie," Hard Hat said. "This is a pal of mine you can call when you get a chance. He runs a lodging house of a sort downtown. No tellin' when one of his tenants will skip out on him."

"Thanks, Hard Hat," Willie said. "I have misjudged you." He pocketed the card and then asked his apparent benefactors why they were so far uptown so early in the morning.

"It is no secret," Satchelfoot said. "It is in the papers this A.M. Last night the cops find a citizen on a bench up on Riverside Drive and he looks out over the Hudson. When they shake him they find he is really gazing out over the Styx. It was quite plain that some rough boys had knocked him off somewhere else and had brought him there. There was no indentification on him, only a telephone number on a card he carried that me and Hard Hat will check on after we eat."

Willie had never enjoyed a meal more. He did not leave enough on his plate to satisfy an ant. He sighed with utmost delight. "After this breakfast, Satchelfoot," Willie said, "I feel like I could solve two cases whicht never were. I mean Judge Crater and the Blink armored car caper up in Beantown."

"Yeah?" Satchelfoot said, and motioned to the blonde. The

lumpy doll sidled over and took her pad from her pocket. "Separate checks," the flatfoot said.

Willie stiffened in his chair. He stared open-mouthed at Satchelfoot. Hard Hat laughed and Willie knew he would never hear a nastier laugh for the rest of his days. "Look, Kelly, you invited me in here an'—why, you low-down, no good—"

"It will learn you never to trust strangers, Willie," Satchelfoot said. "Leave us be on our way, Hard Hat."

"Boy, I hate myself for this!" Hard Hat laughed, and followed Satchelfoot out.

The blonde hovered near Willie. "Did I hear you say you was a detective? A private eye? I lissen to all of them radio pogroms. Spade Samuels, Derry Crake, an' Mr. Skeen. If you ever need a seckatary like they have got—"

"They are silly," Willie sniffed. "Every time they walk into their office they fall over a blonde corpse. How corny can they get?"

The president of The Hawkeye Detective Agency looked away from the goggle-eyed blonde and at the check. It was for one dollar and thirty-seven cents and until he could contact Gertie Mudgett, his assets totaled forty-nine cents.

"I—er—that is, I have been the victim of a practical joke, Babe," Willie gulped at the blonde. "I come away without my wallet an' them two gools—"

"Hee hee, how did you know my name was Babe," the blonde said to Willie. "Leave me lend you the dough an' I'll give you my phone number. You can pay me back t'night just before we go to the movies. An' after that I know a joint that jumps an'—"

"Yeah," Willie said, and marveled that there could be another blonde opportunist on a par with Gertie. "Thanks, Miss—?"

"Tallulah Klipspringer," the blonde said, and handed Willie two one dollar bills. "An' maybe we can take a boat to Playland on Sunday. Wait until I tell Sadie my new boy friend is a private eye. Is there really a perfect crime—er—Mr.—?"

"Smith, John," Willie choked out. "I hope there is as I am plannin' one, Babe." He got out of there and ran for almost two blocks before he thought of the card Hard Hat Hafey had given him. He took it from his pocket and turned into a cigar store. He called the number. A voice answered, "City Morgue!"

William J. Klump hung up, reeled out of the booth and nearly spilled a portly female character buying a pack of butts.

"Hmph, this time of the mornin' and still loaded," the fat citizen sniffed.

"I wisht I was, sister!" Willie snapped back. "I sure do!"

Willie got to his office twenty minutes later and was surprised to find his door unlocked.

"H-m-m," he concluded, "the cleanin' woman fergot to unsnap the lock."

He went in, tripped over something just inside the door, and skidded on the lower part of his physiognomy all the way to his desk. A solid smack on the noggin smogged his eyes for several moments. Finally he spun around on the seat of his shiny, blue-serge pants and stared at what was on the floor. It was a blonde. A belt had been taken from around her meridian and tied too tightly around her pretty neck. She was more defunct than last year's tulips.

"It can't happen," Willie gulped. "Not even to me, even though everything does."

And then he heard footsteps outside he knew only too well and made a dive for the door. But before he could turn the key Gertie Mudgett banged it open and put him back on the seat of his dilemma. Gertie took a gander at the corpse and screeched, then pointed an accusing finger at William Klump.

"You murdered her!" Gertie yelped. "Or you made her commit suicide because of you. Elst why is she dead here?"

"You are bein' sillier than usual," Willie gulped, the sweat rolling off his brow. "I just got here. There she was, Gert. What beautiful doll like her would fool around with the likes of me, huh?"

"Which means I'm an old bag, don't it?" Gertie Mudgett howled, and wound up her strong right arm that had a beaded handbag at its extremity.

"Gert, wait!" Willie yowled. "You are at the scene of a crime and you can't disturb nothin', not even me. Don't go half crocked an' simmer down as I am innocent as you. If you will leave I will try an' figure it out. Now, I just walked in here an'—"

More footsteps pounded along the hall outside and then Satchelfoot and Hard Hat barged in, and Hard Hat yelped, "The card I writ on in the beanery, Willie. Leave us have it as—awk!"

"Yes, it is a corpse," Willie said, and Satchelfoot Kelly's eyes bugged out and he did a half-spin and caught hold of Gertie to keep from falling. "I an innocent. She just walked in an', I mean she—"

"Well, we got one of our own," Hard Hat choked out. "An' that phone number was on that card I give you—ha, hope you can take a joke, Willie. Ha!"

"Yeah, it was the lead to the killer who left the stiff up on the Hudson," Satchelfoot said.

"Hope you can take a joke," Willie said. "I tore it up."

Satchelfoot sat down and pawed at his face, and Hard Hat jumped up and down as if he was stamping out a fire. "Now we don't even have one clue. Awright, this case looks easier so we'll just take over, Willie."

"This is my client," Willie said.

"The way it looks like she come here to consult me about some unlawful or two-timin' citizen an' he trailed her, knocked her off here, then beat it down the back way."

"A likely story," Gertie sniffed. "That's a nice compact fell out of her handbag. She won't need it no more so—"

"Keep your mitts off, you gool!" Satchelfoot yelped. "An' scram out of here as this is police business!"

Gertrude Mudgett shoved Satchelfoot and he fell over the one chair William Klump owned and landed alongside the defunct blonde. "They make a nice couple," Gertie said, and went out.

"High spirited, isn't she?" Willie gulped.

Kelly called the specialists from headquarters and soon the citizen who was paid to diagnose the time of departure of the deceased informed all concerned that the doll had gone over the edge around nine-thirty A.M.

"That proves I'm innercent," Willie pointed out. "I can prove where I was. You just call Tallulah."

"Come—now, Klump," the stiff appraiser said. "You can think of a better alibi than that. Ha ha!"

"He means a blonde waitress," Satchelfoot reluctantly admitted. "We was with him at that time, too, I'm sorry to say."

Satchelfoot Kelly and Hard Hat cased the contents of the handbag that had belonged to the loser, and warned the private eye to keep his distance or he would be in no better shape than the victim.

"I will consult a lawyer," Willie griped. "You tampered with my client."

"I did not hear her object," Kelly laughed, and then took a close gander at a snapshot he'd found in the deceased's reticule. "Hard Hat, I've seen this character somewhere. Most likely was her finance. Anyway, if it is, he will claim the remains and should tip us off who was jealous of him. Oncet we put our heads together, Hard Hat, we—"

"You still have only half a brain," Willie added. "Why don't you go and look for the citizen who knocked off the guy on the Hudson and stop stealin' my bread and butter."

"Why it always has been ladies first with us, Willie," Hard Hat said tauntingly. "We are gentlemen."

"And I am Ally Kahn," Willie sniffed. "And I will thank you to git out of my office!"

"Come on, Hard Hat," Willie said. "He has no manners."

The phone rang and Willie picked it up. "This is Tallulah, Mr. Klump. Isn't it lucky I called now instead of later as the operator said she was sure your phone was discontinued. How are you, doll? There is fireworks at Playland tomorrer night an'—"

"I'm sorry," Willie said hurriedly. "I know a dame makes them—I mean—look I am busy. I will pay you back the two bucks—"

"Of courst. I just thought you was lonesome an'—"

"G'Bye," Willie gulped and banged the phone down.

Willie glanced wearily around him. On his desk there was a half-roll of life savers, a crumpled kleenex, and a couple of books of matches Satchelfoot had not deemed worth holding for evidence.

"If he left only a toothpick it would have to be important," Willie sniffed. He ate the life savers, wiped his brow with the kleenex and studied the books of matches. One advertised a finance company, the other, Ginkle's Bar & Grill. They sort of went together, Willie thought. The interest you sometimes had to pay drove you to the giggle water.

Willie went to the finance company and described the blonde who had expired in his office. A big character in a plaid suit eyed Willie askance at first as the president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency took a chair. He said fast, "No, you don't look like even a poor risk to me, Klump. Sorry, if you need carfare—"

Willie was indignant. "I did not come here for sucker," he said, then stated his business.

"She was never in here, the way you describe her," the loan shark said. "Nor nowhere else. Look, I'm a busy man."

"Sure," Willie snorted. "So was the other James boys," and stalked out. He went to Ginkle's Bar & Grill, and there the barkeep remembered the blonde. "Yeah, she was in around four o'clock every afternoon. Worked in a beauty parlor a block from here. Every afternoon she called a number, the same number. Always said about the same thing to the same guy, I could tell. What did she do? Who did she knock off?"

"It was in the reverse," Willie said, "Much obliged." He went to the beauty parlor and a thin female with a henna rinse told him the blonde had to be Clarimonde DeLancy, as she hadn't been to work. "If you know where she is, Klump, tell her to show up quick or she's fired."

"I'll have to holler extra loud," Willie said. "She is in the deep freeze."

Twenty-four hours later Satchelfoot Kelly and Hard Hat came to Willie's office more perplexed than was Willie himself.

"I'm stumped," Kelly admitted. "No male citizen has made no claim on the blonde's remains, and we find no trace that the babe had relatives. Now, I wonder whose pitcher she was packing in the handbag. She hived up in that fleabag, the Avista Hotel on Forty-sixth, Willie, and there we find a book with some phone numbers in it, and called maybe seven in a

row who was either in the numbers or made book. I wisht we'd stuck to the other corpse, Hard Hat."

"It comes from bein' hoggish," Willie sniffed.

Satchelfoot Kelly tossed a little black notebook up and down in the palm of his hand. He finally heaved it to Willie's desk. "You are welcome to it," he said in disgust.

"That one I called," Hard Hat growled. "The guy said I must of had the wrong number as it was a fish hatchery over in Jersey. His name was Bass, he said."

"Ha ha," Willie enthused. "His wife's name was maybe Porgie. You two are gettin' nowhere, like the Pittsburghs."

Willie, when the two legitimate detectives had departed, realized that he was hungrier than a convicted spy behind the iron curtain, and checked his opulence that came to seventeen cents. Quickly he called Gertie Mudgett.

"Yeah, this is Willie," he said. "We could have lunch, huh? I'll meet you at—"

"Throw the chisel away, you crumb," Gertie yelped back. "I am eatin' at the Sovoir Plasma with a bobby-pin salesman, a real gentleman, Mr. Klump!" *Bang!*

Willie sighed and drew in his belt another notch, and then he decided very fast that indiscretion was the better part of starvation and went over to the lunchroom where Tallulah Klipspringer worked. The lumpy doll was overjoyed to see Willie.

"But you didn' have t' run over this quick an' pay back what you—"

"Ah, er, I am still short, Talloo," Willie said. "I wondered if a little more credit could be arranged as—I expect a very substantial fee from a client an'—"

"Why, of corst, doll!" Tallulah said very loud. "I got one investment in you and why not more, huh? Of course, Willie I expect dividends like maybe the fireman's ball next Sat'dy or—he-e-e-e-e-e!"

"Ha ha," Willie said. "I will take a steak sandwich with plenty lilacs."

The bill came to two and ten and the blonde seemed very happy about it. "You find a man, you gotta feed him good," Tallulah said to everybody there, and Willie's face was as red as Moscow as he made his exit. Back in the office, Willie looked at the phone numbers the extinct blonde had jotted down in her little book. The New Jersey number made him snicker. Pa 4-7711.

"They call themselves detectives," Willie laughed. "They sure smelt on that case. And Hard Hat jots down a number on a card an' then forgets an' uses it for a gag on me an'—the card!"

Willie plunged a hand into the coat pocket of his shiny blue serge and came up with the card Satchelfoot and Hard Hat had found on the stiff uptown. There

was a phone number written across the printing on the card which said: FRENCH HAND LAUNDRY. Willie Chu, Prop.

"H-m-m-m, it is familiar," Willie said. "Pa 4-7711." He got up and yawned, picked up the phone to see if it was still connected, and then jumped up as if he'd sat down on a rodent with quills. "No, it can't be!" He looked at the card again, picked up the address book and compared. His hair stood up on end, and his eyes crossed.

"Both of the characters are dead!" Willie gulped. "They both carry the same phone number. So they must of knew each other an' not in passin' by. No wonder he could not identify his doll if he was also on ice, even before she was. B-B-But why would they be callin' a place that hatched fish?" A suspicious gleam came into the private eye of William H. Klump. "There *is* something fishy awright!"

Willie hurriedly called information. "This is Police Headquarters. Emergency. This is Inspector Wmblephum Franistan, and I want to know quick who is listed under the Jersey number, Pa 4-7711. It is urgent! Callin' all c—yes, hurry!"

Willie ate a pencil up to the eraser before the information came over the wire. "Inspector, that number is listed under the name of Dinsmore L. Quigg. Pleasant Manor Apts., Weehawken. Be careful, Inspector, won't you?"

Willie hung up. "Mr. Bass indeed. He is quite a joker, huh? Well, I see nothin' funny in slayin' people!"

The temptation was too much for Willie to stand. He called up Satchelfoot Kelly at headquarters. "This is William Klump, Kelly. President of The Hawkeye Detective Agency. Skip tracin' or any other caper worthwhile. Fees reasonable an'—"

"Aw-w-w sha-a-ddap! What you want, flathead?"

"Remember the pitcher you got out of the dead babe's bag. You an' Hard Hat said it looked familiar?"

"So what? Listen, I can't waste my time talkin' with the likes of you. Goodb—"

"It should've, you dumb beast," Willie gloated. "It was a pitcher of the stiff you an' Hard Hat found up on the bench on the Hudson. That is all. Over an' out."

Willie hung up and chuckled to himself. It was fun sometimes, being a louse. At times it was anything else but, for less than twenty minutes later Satchelfoot Kelly and Hard Hat Hafey invaded his sanctum and got hold of his neck and bore him to the linoleum and threatened to maim him for life if he did not tell them what he was hiding from the cops.

"I am hidin' nothin'," Willie choked out. "I only put two and two together. I mean one and one.

This is illegal attackin' a private eye an' I will sue."

"Leave him up, Hard Hat," Kelly sighed. "We can't prove nothin' only that he is a mental case."

Willie was put horizontal. He loosened his tie and the purple went out of his face. Satchelfoot sat in Willie's chair and took a late paper from his pocket. "We'll see if there's any developments sincet noon. They finally indentified who the male victim was. He was Herman Lint and lived in a roomin' house on West End, but had no visible means of support. Now let's see—"

Satchelfoot opened the newspaper and his eyes nearly fell out and dropped in his lap. "Hard Hat, they looked up the prints of both the deceased, and they are both crooks with records. Their fingerprints told the cops they was Flo Del Bella and Hymie Ott, and was once members of Benny 'Angel Face' Coogan's Five-State gang. This is getting hot, Hard Hat."

"Both criminals, huh?" Willie said. "Now all they got to do is prove they was still with Angel Face and to also find Angel Face who might have had his puss lifted since his last stay in the pokey."

"You know somethin', Satchelfoot," Hafey said. "I remember somethin'."

"Amazin'," Willie mocked.

"That gang was mentioned of maybe havin' pulled that Brinker armor car robbery," Hafey said, and looked switch-blades at Willie.

"Name one gang that wasn't," Willie sniffed. "You are makin' a marshmaller out of an aspirin tablet."

"Dames, especially blondes look all alike," Hard Hat philosophized. "When I saw that corpse on Willie's floor, she looked like Helen Brown, a girl I—"

"But she looked good in green," Willie snickered.

Satchelfoot Kelly sighed. "Leave us go, Hard Hat. I am sure this lemonhead has dimension peacocks or worst."

"Let me know if you have any more good phone numbers, Hard Hat," Willie said. "An' look out for chipmunks. And the hives to you, Kelly."

Now William Klump had a mind as retentive as a sieve, and once a real important thought occurred to him he had to get it down on paper or kiss it goodbye forever. With a stub of a pencil he wrote:

"Two corpses. One on a bench on the Hudson, one in my office. Each had a telephone number, Pa 4-7711, whicht Hard Hat called an' got a fish hatchery. This is a fake. Each defunct victim had their prints on file an' belonged to a very tough citizen's gang. The only thing to do is call on Dinsmore Quigg."

The phone rang. It was Tallulah Klipspringer. "Hello, doll,"

the waitress cooed. "There's a swell pitcher with Philo Brander t'night at the—"

"I have very important business," Willie sighed. "I—"

"Don't give me no runaround," the lumpy blonde threatened. "I thought we had an understandin' an'—"

"G'bye," Willie said and hung up. The phone rang once more. This time it was the public untility that served the Metropolitan area, and a sweet voice notified William J. Klump that his phone was now as dead as a fish in Mindy's window.

The president of The Hawk-eye Detective Agency went over to Jersey on the Weehawken ferry and at about four-thirty in the P.M. he rapped his knuckles against a door of an apartment in the Pleasant Manor apartments. A very gorgeous number with titian locks and sloe-eyes opened the door, and Willie's eyes rolled around in their sockets. At first he thought the babe had simply been sprayed with blue ink, but a second gander convinced him she wore a dress.

"Well?" the portion of cheese-cake inquired.

"Is Mr. Quigg in?" Willie asked.

"No, he ain't—isn't," the red-head said, and started to close the door on Willie's foot.

The private eye cased the surroundings fast. He grinned. "You smoke nice cigars, Ma'am. Havana, huh? Smells good. An' don't tell me it is perfume you wear like canal number four."

"I said Mr. Quigg is not in!" the eyeful snapped, and Willie remembered seeing eyes in a zoo less baleful.

"Then maybe Benny Coogan is," Willie said sternly, and the redhead's reaction was the same as if she'd backed into a pin-cushion. "Ha, tooshay!"

A door opened and a large character came out, a smaller one behind him. "What goes on, banjo-eyes?" the party of the first part asked rudely. He wore a shirt with initials on the pocket and a pair of plaid slacks and brown suede shoes. Willie noticed the shirt needed a little laundering in spots.

"Them shoulder-holster straps leave marks, Benny," Willie said. "Especial when the weather is warm an' the leather starts sweatin'. So you answered the phone just after Flo Del Bella was erased an' told a dumb flatfoot this was a fish hatchery. If you ain't Angel Face it is easy to tell. Just come with me an' we'll have your prints took. If you are innercent we won't search the joint an'—"

"Awright, Louie," the big character said. "My disguise won't do no good if the cops nab me an' take my prints. Go out and git the car! Bring Sammy back, too." Benny Coogan caught a roscoe the redhead tossed to him

and he leveled it at Willie. "Sit down, punk. We're goin' across the river for a little ride."

"That stuff is old-fashioned," Willie gulped. "You are not keepin' up with the times."

"Shaddap!" Angel Face said. He took a pair of glasses off, peeled some gold leaf off a front tooth. "Mamie, get your wraps. Havin' a doll along will make it look like we was just out for a lark."

Willie shivered. He was also afraid, and nearly regretted not having tipped off the cops where he was going before he left.

"Those two jugheads!" Benny griped. "Had to fall in love with each other."

"Hymie an' Flo, huh?" Willie said. "So is that the worst crime they ever committed?" He stared at Coogan. The public enemy did have a big round cherubic face if you forgot his eyes. They were small and very ugly and belonged in a weasel's head. Willie got even more scared.

And then the redhead came out, and Louie and Sam came in, and Louie said, "The heap is ready out back, boss."

"Okay," Benny Coogan said, and strapped on his artillery.

Louie pressed a persuader that was not plastic against the ribs of the Hawkeye Detective Agency. "Awright, git movin', punk!"

They put Willie in the back seat of the sedan with the redhead and the torpedo named Sammy. Sammy's eyes were too bright and Willie was positive he had been sniffing dream dust. Angel Face took the front seat, and Louie was at the wheel. They drove to the Lincoln Tunnel.

Angel Face said, "Over on Tenth, Louie, near the slaughter houses. It is a good place." The dishonest citizen seemed to think of something and he whirled around and took a gander at Willie. "Who elst knows about this?"

It was a straw tossed to a man going under for the third and last time, and William J. Klump grabbed at it. "Er, only one other, Angel Face. My doll, Tallulah. She is over at Charlie's on West Thirty-fourth. With the reward we was goin' to git married an' settle down an'—"

"You still can!" Coogan laughed nastily. "At the bottom of the river. Louie, drive to Charlie's."

"You'll be sorry for this," Willie gulped.

The redhead laughed. "Just how dumb can anybody git, even a private eye, Benny? If he was a kitten he'd walk into a tiger's cage an' steal its milk."

"You know I think Hymie was gittin' yellow," Coogan said. "They maybe wanted to go straight, Mamie. There is a law says a wife can't testify against her husband or vice versa. We could of been hooked good."

"Yeah," the redhead said. "Flo

must of thought we had rocks in our heads."

The car finally stopped in front of Charlie's. Angel Face and Sammy went into the restaurant and came out with Tallulah who had thrown a coat over her working rags. The blonde looked very worried and looked in at Willie.

"They said you was sick," she yelped. "Was callin' for me, doll! Why you don't look worse'n usual. What is th—?"

Angel Face heaved her inside and shut the door of the sedan, and Louie threw the engine in second and swung away from the curb, nearly taking some fenders belonging to a truck with him. Tallulah got to all fours in the back of the car and demanded an explanation.

"Stop yellin' or I'll tap you on the scalp!" Sammy snarled. "We are goin' to take this punk somewheres an' knock him off, sister. An' you will—"

"He owes me over four bucks," Tallulah yelped. "You won't git away with this! Willie, who is this babe with the dyed hair an'—"

"Why, you sloppy lookin' hamburger braiser!" the redhead countered. "I'll—"

"You'll what?" Tallulah screeched, and just as the sedan turned down a one-way street off Eighth, she jumped the traces.

Sammy pulled his roscoe and the waitress grabbed it out of his fingers and shoved the butt into his mouth which was about to let out a bellow, and he was nearly choking on three teeth that had been knocked loose when Tallulah wrapped her arm around Angel Face's neck and flattened his windpipe.

"So do somethin', Willie," the waitress yelled. "Don't just sit there!"

"Okay," Willie shouted, and saw that the redhead had removed something from her handbag which was very illegal to tote without a permit, and he ripped the ashtray loose from the back of the seat and tossed the contents into her sultry physiognomy. The gun went off and the bullet creased Louie's pate, and there they were in a sedan in heavy traffic with no hands on the wheel.

"Quick, Willie, grab it!" Tallulah screeched, and kept hammering away at Angel Face's noggin with a fist as big as Marciano's. The redhead, her headlights dimmed, was clawing Sammy who was sadly in need of a dentist.

"Look, you thtupid broad! I'm on your thide. I—" he cried.

The sedan took the rear end off a delivery truck, hopped the sidewalk and entered a delicatessen store via the plate glass window, and the crash could be heard over at the UN.

When Willie opened his eyes, he discovered he had quite an armful of salami, liverwurst, and cole slaw. And then Tallulah

crawled out from under some auto parts, a string of frankfurters around her neck, and reached for him.

"Willie, are you hurt?"

"Nope, I guess not. It is not blood on me, just ketchup, Tallulah. How did we git here?"

"We'll have to ask somebody, doll. Wait, I remember, I think—"

The cops came from all over, even Brooklyn. They had quite a time recognizing Angel Face until they had the potato salad, sauerkraut, and glass removed from his rough person. The water from a smashed radiator was trickling down his throat, and a fan belt was dangling from around his neck. The other rough citizens were in no better shape.

"Now, what happened here?" A cop asked Willie.

"I don't think I can tell it in one installment," the private eye said, and then looked up into the wide-eyed faces of Satchelfoot Kelly and Hard Hat.

"You," Kelly gasped.

"Thanks for indentifyin' me, Satchelfoot," Willie sighed. "I am still not sure."

"They was goin' to bump Willie off," Tallulah told the cops. "An' he owed me four bucks. Not that, ha ha, was the reason I got sore. It was this way—"

"That big slob just comin' to is Benny 'Angel Face' Coogan," Willie said, "and it is no bluff." "He and his punks knocked off Hymie Ott and Flo Del Bella because they—ask him why!"

"Wha-a-a-a-a?"

"Yeah, Satchelfoot. You see around me the rest of the Five-State gang, and if I was cops, I would ride fast to Weehawken an' comb that flat they was hidin' out in as respectable citizens. It is not a fish hatchery, Hard Hat. Haw-w-w-w!"

In due time the redhead sang to save at least five to ten. The gendarmes found loot enough in the false bottom of a Layne cedar chest to finance a small war, and finally Angel Face confessed the loot had come from the Brinker armored car robbery.

"Yeah, we was goin' t' wait five years before we spent the big money," Coogan said. "Nobody was supposed t' leave town. They had to report t' me every afternoon where they was. The knuckleheads, they was supposed to memorize them numbers. You can't trust nobody. An' then Hymie an' Flo got tough an' says they was gettin' married no matter what I said, and would even leave town if they felt like it, so I—you want maybe I should draw you a pitcher?"

Satchelfoot Kelly sat in the interrogation room chewing on his hat, and talking to himself like a shepherd. Hard Hat sat at a table his head cradled in his arms, making little animal sounds.

"Klump," the D.A. said. "Let's start from the beginning. I don't

think the members of the press here believe any of it yet."

"That is an understatement," a police reporter said. "Compared to this caper, that investigation down in Washington is as easy to understand as why DiMag married who he did."

"Why, it is simple," Willie said. "Hard Hat over there, after findin' the first stiff, scribbled a gag phone number on a card he took off the corpse, forgettin'—I found two telephone numbers, one from each corpse, and Tallulah put me on the cuff for chow at the—then when the fingerprint boys indentified Hymie and Flo, in comes the fish hatchery gag once more. So I sits down an'—you know it isn't so simple at that, D.A.!"

"Yeah, Klump." The prosecutor thrust a new snorkle pen into his mouth and tried to light it, and made an attempt to write something down with his cigar.

Satchelfoot Kelly threw what was left of his hat away. "Him?" he said to the reporters, and pointed at Willie. "He could go to a desert and catch tuna fish, believe me!"

"Oh, you're just sayin' that!" Willie said with mock modesty. "With the reward I can git me a new suit, pay off Tallulah, buy a new hot plate for the office, and even a pound of fresh coffee. It is amazin' how much of a fee a defunct blonde paid me, isn't it? I hope all my clients in the future will be so generous."

"I can't stand no more," Hard Hat said, and shuffled out like a sleepwalker.

William Klump got a call at his rooming house two hours later. It was an SOS from a precinct station. Gertie Mudgett was at the other end of the wire.

"You git down here at oncet, Willie Klump," she said. "Bring plenty bail, you hear?"

"What for, Gert?"

"Damages to a lunchroom an' that babe you've been chastin' around with, as if you didn't know!" Gertie yelped.

"You mean you licked her? Tallulah?"

"If you don't think I got the nod, go and look at the loser."

"I have to wait at least a week or two for the reward, Gert," Willie said, and tried not to sound jubilant. "Right now I could not pay a parkin' fine. It is terrible, ain't it?" He hung up. Five minutes later the phone rang. It was from a hospital.

"William Klump, this is Tallulah Klipspringer, and I am goin' to sue you as you never told me you was engaged to no lady prizefighter!"

Willie hung up. He wondered what the plane fare was to Tibet, and suddenly remembered he was more afraid of planes than he was of Gertie.

"Well, I'll figure out somethin'," Willie told himself as he took off his shoes. He always had. Ask Satchelfoot Kelly!

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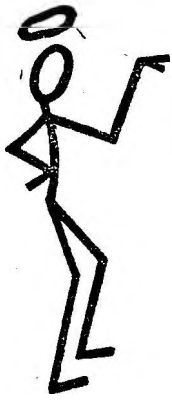

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dirty business

by . . . Ralph Bennitt

Matt had gone wrong, and Joe had become a cop. But the shining memories of boyhood can forge a link too firm for crime to break.

THIRD-GRADE DETECTIVE Joe Span slowed his steps after turning off Griswold Avenue into Karnopp Street. His broad, slightly uptilted nose twitched a little at the once familiar smells of the old neighborhood, and as he headed toward the river a wariness came into his hazel-green eyes. In the old days, a cop patrolling those six blocks had to dodge an occasional ripe tomato.

Joe Span did not recall any special boyhood escapade. He only felt vaguely thankful he was not wearing his best suit that morning. The light gray one he'd selected fitted his supple, medium-sized figure neatly, and, with a Panama hat set jauntily on his dark brown hair, he looked more like an earnest young salesman than a cop. His errand made him feel earnest.

"Matt Vickers has been released from Muirville prison." The word had gone speedily around much of Caxton, particularly along Karnopp Street. Matt belonged in the neighborhood and, Joe figured, was almost certainly still something of a hero to the young punks there.

It is a pleasure to reveal in this new short story by a gifted California writer that crime has often a quite startling way of tieing itself into a Gordian knot, with strands that are far from ugly making a separate pattern against its dark texture of cruelty, violence and death.

None of them were in sight this warm June morning. Joe saw only little kids playing around ash cans, and a few old folks peering cautiously from doorways and windows. Karnopp Street would be expecting the law to appear for a routine check-up. If any old-timers recognized the young fellow who had moved away ten years ago, they gave no sign.

Headquarters got the word soon enough. "You and Matt used to be buddies, Joe," Chief Fenton had advised. "Work on him. Maybe he'll spill something about the dope racket."

Not Matt, Joe told himself. But he had listened, his greenish eyes thoughtful. So far, the new Narcotics Detail had brought in only small fry—marijuana and junk pushers who knew nothing of real help. The old man wanted the "Biggie." Caxton newspapers were yelling about what would happen in the Fall elections if this new racket wasn't stopped.

Joe said: "The redhead won't talk, Chief. Especially not to me. If it's an order I'll do what I can."

"That's all I expect." Chief Fenton glared at his telephone as if expecting the Mayor to call again. "I know it's a stinky job —I used to be young myself. A five-year hitch in the Big House hasn't trained a smart cookie like Matt Vickers to be a Boy Scout leader. So don't be an eager beaver and get yourself rubbed out. If you turn up something hot, phone headquarters."

"What's on Matt's record in Muirville?"

"Not so good." The chief scanned some papers on his desk. "He's an incorrigible. Served his full five years for the Peden caper. He learned the machinist's trade and probably figures to crack boxes."

"Maybe so," Joe Span said. Strangely, he felt glad they hadn't broken the redhead's spirit, but you didn't argue with Chief Fenton. Joe put on his hat, and left, hating the job he had to do, remembering that his own testimony had sent Matt to Muirville.

Damn him! Matt *could* have gone straight but he'd laughed at the idea of anybody from Karnopp Street joining the cops. Then he'd fallen in with a couple of new hands, old at holding up gas stations. Off duty one night during his first month on the force, Joe had happened along. He'd seen Matt waiting in the getaway car, had shot it out with the other two. One had died there and the other had burned for killing Peden, the gas station man. Matt's first job. Five years!

By the time Joe passed the old red brick school on the corner of Karnopp and Third, he felt drained. He could hear young voices back of the school, kids playing basketball. Good enough. Wear some of the hell out of 'em. He looked at the small, ivy-grown

church opposite, the parsonage beyond. "Education, Salvation, Damnation," some wag had called the corner.

Practically forcing each step, he passed a patch of lawn fronting the church. Once, till their voices changed, he and Matt Vickers and Clarence Held and Vinnie Vincent had sung in the choir. The pastor's name on the bulletin board wasn't "Old Eagle-Beak's" any more. The text for tomorrow's sermon brought a sardonic grin to one of Joe's ruddy cheeks: "Brand From The Burning."

If Matt *had* come home, he'd be in the third house. His old man had stuck after other families had moved out of the old neighborhood. From the tail of his eye Joe watched for movements at the drawn shades. He saw none but that didn't prove Matt was not on the lookout. He'd learned things up in Muirville.

Plodding on toward the river, Joe told himself again he was no do-gooder. Ex-cons went straight mostly in the movies. Give 'em a chance, they turned on you. Buildings went bad too. Like the old apartment building below Fourth. Pa and Ma had lived there twenty years, until Joe had turned sixteen. The first and second floors now housed a used-furniture store. "Howling" Harold Held's old tobacco store on the corner of Fifth stood vacant. So did Paddy Clancy's bar, opposite.

At the river, Joe lighted his pipe and sat down on a chunk of driftwood. The water was low just as it had been in his boyhood every late June. They'd slosh through the mud to swim or to fish from their raft. Once, fat Clarence Held had smacked mud into Joe's eyes, and after Joe washed them he'd found Matt pounding the stuffing out of "Fat." Swearing, Joe retraced his steps.

Again he passed Howling Held's old store. Clarence Held now had a pipe shop uptown on Griswold. In the line of duty, Joe had gone there two weeks ago. He had found "Fat" as big and noisy as ever, and still better dressed than anybody else. And still playing the angles.

"For old times' sake," he had tried to stuff Joe's pockets with four-bit cigars, and when Joe insisted he smoked only a pipe, had slid a pound of his Special Mix across the glass counter.

"Nor that, Clarence," he'd protested. "I mix my own."

"A straight cop!" Clarence had shrugged his heavy shoulders when he got only a steady stare. "Okay, copper, look around. I keep my nose clean unless you're worrying about a friendly penny-ante game now and then." Joe wasn't, but he'd poked around the back rooms, anyway.

Again passing Matt's old frame house, he felt suddenly hot and tired. He walked a few yards to

the church steps and sat down in the cool shade. How many times he and the other kids had done that! Old Eagle Beak used to like seeing them sitting there even after they quit singing in his choir. Sometimes his "old lady" would bring iced lemonade from the parsonage next door.

As Joe half expected, Matt soon came out of his house. He glanced up and down the street, then turned west and paused on the sidewalk. "Hi, copper," he said. "Checking your pals, huh?" There was a dead-pan look on his thin face, yet his blue eyes held the half defiant light Joe had always seen there. No hat covered the wavy red hair. He wore a decent suit of light tan.

Joe sat still. How could he deny the accusation? What can you say to an old pal gone wrong, the one you booted the rest of the way? Warn him to go straight? Offer him a job? Money?

"I'm not keeping tabs on you, fella." Joe tried to summon a grin. "Sit down a minute."

"What I got to say won't take that long," Matt muttered between his teeth. He jerked his red head in the old way. "Just keep—"

"Don't say it, guy." Joe Span swore half under his breath. "You think I *wanted* to testify against you?"

"I guess you couldn't do anything else," Matt admitted in a rasp. "It's water over the dam, see? I'm not saying I'd warm up to a flattie. I'm just laying it on the record, case something ever happens to you."

"Sure," Joe said. "How you fixed for dough, fella? And if you'd take a good machinist's job, I know a guy who—"

"So you checked on what I did in stir, huh? Well, don't try the soft stuff on me." Matt backed away, glaring at the church bulletin. "A brand from the burning? What a laugh! But that's me sure as hell. Keep away from me, flatfoot. I'm warning you."

"I only figured a man could use a little dough while he's looking around."

"Forget that too, copper. I got a couple of yards."

Two hundred dollars! Joe took his hand off the fifty he'd been saving toward a TV set for Pa and Ma. His greenish eyes grew hard as they appraised the neat figure.

"Go ahead, be a damn dumby!" he blurted out, unconsciously using a kid's epithet. "I know what you've been through. You had it coming. And I know stir birds keep better check on the cops than we do on them. Get that straight. You're sore because you know *why* I came here."

"Maybe I do, copper, maybe I do." Matt stalked off toward Griswold whistling an old tune he may have remembered Joe disliked—"Happy Days Are Here Again." Minutes later, he hailed

a green cab and headed uptown.

Joe had parked his black department Chevvy on Griswold. He didn't use its radio, but he kept the taxi in sight amid the heavy noontime traffic. Slow rage crawled up into his throat when Matt got out and went into Clarence Held's swanky pipe shop.

"Pretty crude," Joe muttered. It wasn't like Matt. He might be reckless, but he was smart. Was this a red herring, or a bona fide scent because Matt had grown careless?

Not till midnight did Joe get an answer. For four hours he had sat behind the ash cans across the alley from the unloading space in back of the pipe shop. With hardly even a hunch to back his play, he felt foolish and almost sure Matt had purposely pulled a fast one on the law. If it hit the pal who'd turned him in, so much to the good. Joe grunted at that last thought.

He moved cramped muscles when a delivery truck with lights off turned into the alley. It stopped almost directly in front of him, and in the dim sky glow he saw two men get out. A short, stocky fellow, driving—the other, taller. The tall one stumbled over a low heap of paving bricks next to the alley, and a package fell from beneath his coat. Joe had piled the bricks there to stop any car turning into the open area, but he hadn't expected to hit pay dirt.

The package could be lunch for a late poker game, or—the hell's powder he had been chasing for three months! He waited till the two men were well away, then drew his .38 regulation revolver. At the front of the truck he was out of their sight, but he screened his pocket torch with one hand as he crouched low to read the license number.

As soon as the two entered, he'd make it to the Chevvy and radio-call for help. A faint shaft of light came into the rear yard when the back door of the shop opened. A bulky figure as large as Clarence Held's stood dimly limned in the doorway. Sweat studded Joe's brow as he waited. Better get close, make sure.

The moment the door closed he made a quick dash, and vaulted to the top of a low loading platform. The spring lock was latched. He groped about looking for old wrapping paper he could roll up, and quickly found something better. A short length of rope.

The business inside took less than three minutes. When the two men came out, Joe gently laid his rope over the top of the door, crouching down behind it. After a whispered, "Yeah, boss, we know," the two ran for the truck.

Bitter gorge came into Joe's throat as he watched them make their escape. Small fry! Punks! *Get the Biggie,* the chief had

ordered. Also, he had said, "Don't be an eager beaver. Call for help."

Things happened, partly, at least, as Joe had planned. Cussing, Clarence opened the door wider when the lock failed to click. The move revealed blue steel under his expensive coat.

"You yell, Clarence, and I'll blast you," Joe whispered.

He got the automatic, thumbed its "safety," and prodded the fat back. Once in the dimly lighted corridor, he saw two other men in a back room. Cards, chips, drinks, littered a round table. Joe didn't know either of Clarence's companions but they looked well-fed and prosperous.

"It's the law, boys," Clarence called jovially, as if he had recovered his old assurance. "My, my! You joining our penny-ante game, Joe, or putting the arm on us?"

"Raise 'em, you birds," Joe said knowing there'd be hell to pay if he hadn't guessed right. As he peered around the door jamb he could see the package, about eight inches square. It lay under a chair in the near corner as if someone had kicked it there. He swung one of his guns toward the half opened door.

"Only three for a poker game?" he began. "Don't tell me—"

Two pistol shots roared in the alley, then three more. Joe was as startled as the others. The men at the table went for their guns as he took a half step forward. Clarence let out a choked yell, and a fourth man fired, stomach high, through the thin door panel. The slug smashed into Joe's right forearm before he could leap all the way into the room.

He came down, twisting, his left-hand gun roaring death. The man behind the door went down scrabbling at his chest. A second fell across the table and let his gun drop. Instead of using his weapon, the third poker player toed a chair at the lone cop. Joe dodged it, heard Clarence's swift intake of breath behind, and whirled. He saw the chair coming down for his head, got a glimpse of the heavy, sweat-grimed face. Then a blast of pain and darkness hit him.

The room was full of uniformed cops when he opened his eyes. A medic had patched his arm and head, but both places hurt. Matt Vickers was struggling in the arms of two cops.

"Let him go, boys," Joe said faintly. "He saved my life. Got here just in time."

"Okay, Joe, it's your neck," a beefy cop said. "He says he called us from your car, but how come an ex-con gets to pack a rod? The chief's gonna ask that, and so is the DA."

"I fixed him up earlier," Joe said, and passed out again. . . .

"You sure fixed me, fella," Matt said a couple of hours later, and there was some of the old lilt

in his voice. Again they were sitting on the church steps talking, and it was like old times. "You figured it right all around Joe. This bunch in the Big House propositioned me, but I cold-shouldered them. They wanted me to work between the shippers, and Clarence."

"I guessed you wouldn't mix in the dirty business."

"Just the same, it made me sore seeing you down here on my first day out. I led you to Clarence's on purpose, then tailed you. For kicks, call it."

"That'll do," Joe admitted. He knew now what had started the shooting in the alley.

Matt had drifted up to the truck while Joe and the two "delivery boys" were absent. He'd bopped the tall man with a loose paving brick and seized his gun while the driver was unlimbering his own artillery. The driver had a bad shoulder, now, and was in custody along with Clarence and three more in the racket. Two of the poker players had shoved in their last chips.

"I wouldn't have tried it except for one thing—what you called me this morning."

Joe peered into Matt's flushed face. "You mean telling you you're a damn dumby?"

"Yeah. It sounded like old times." Matt stretched his arms. "Where's that job you were bragging about?"

"Waiting for you," Joe said.

Continued from back cover

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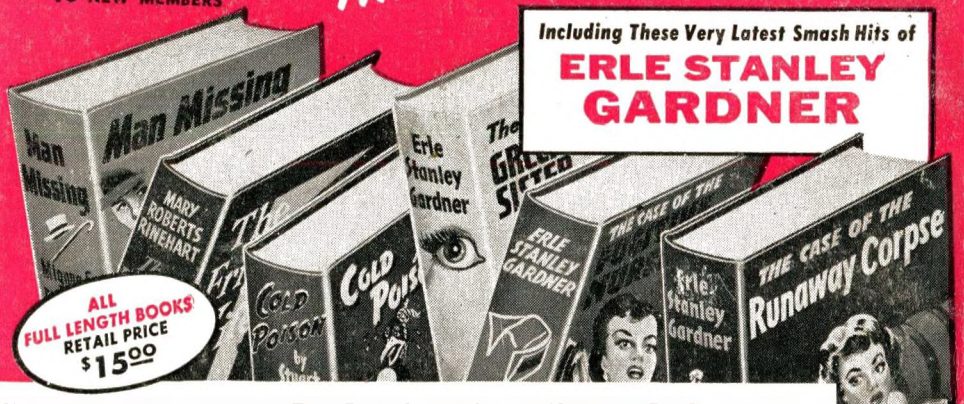

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