saint
DETECTIVE MAGAZINE

SEPT
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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Plum Colored Corpse
by VAN WYCK MASON

A Sort of a Story
by BEN HECHT

The Vanishing Man
by WILLIAM MacHARG

The Jaws of Darkness
by HAL ELLSON

The Unfortunate Financier
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

THE BRIDAL NIGHT MURDER
A NEW STORY BY OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

75 PUBLICATION

ALTHOUGH this magazine is now three venerable years old, we seem to be able to go on finding new "firsts" to celebrate, somehow.

Our milestone for this month is the news that Columbia Pictures is about to release a movie made from Octavus Roy Cohen's THE MIDWAY MURDER, which we had the honor of first publishing in our May, 1954 issue. This is the first motion picture sale made directly from our pages, and makes us feel almost as if our precocious brat were coming of age—the magazine, we mean, not Mr. Cohen.

So to commemorate this event we could think of nothing more fitting than to present the same author's very newest story, THE BRIDAL-NIGHT MURDER, in the Royal Box on our cover this month. This tightly knit anecdote of a highly abbreviated honeymoon, we can reveal, is motivated by more than mere commonplace marital discord, as you'll find out as you follow some brilliant sleuthing. Hollywood should grab this one too.

Another first for this number is Hal Ellson's debut with us. Everyone who has been gripped by this hard-hitting writer's tales of New York streets and juvenile delinquents (*Rock, Tomboy, Summer Street, I'll Fix You,* and the most famous of all, *Duke,* which sold over a million copies as a pocket book) will be fascinated by his brand-new yarn, THE JAWS OF DARKNESS—a powerful, compassionate, starkly realistic psychological suspense story which we rate as another landmark in our editorial progress.

As a sort of orchestral counterpoint, Van Wyck Mason and his redoubtable hero Captain Hugh North are old habitués of our pages. THE PLUM-COLORED CORPSE is a short novel which gives both of them room to display their full virtuosity in a somber mystery of the Deep South.

Other veterans of our circuit are William MacHarg, whose well-loved Officer O'Malley continues to murder the English language while trying to solve a less harmless slaying on the trail of THE VANISHING MAN, and Ben Hecht, who contributes one of his most grimly ironic cameos under the excessively disarming title of A SORT OF A STORY.

All these old-timers, however, look like neophytes beside me and the Saint, who have snuck more stories into this magazine than any eight other writers. THE UNFORTUNATE FINANCIER is our 33rd. You wanna know how we do it? We got influence.

Leslie Charteris

Paul Harvey Hails New Way For Deaf To Hear Clearly Again

NEW YORK CITY (Special)—A sensational new discovery in the miracle science of electronics that helps the hard-of-hearing hear clearly again was hailed by Paul Harvey, famous news commentator, on his American Broadcasting Co. broadcast Sunday night.

Harvey revealed that this new discovery helps even those suffering a severe hearing loss to hear again with unbelievable clearness. It is so revolutionary it makes vacuum-tube hearing aids obsolete. Nothing shows in the ear except a tiny, almost invisible device.

"This new invention changes the lives of the hard-of-hearing overnight," Harvey said. "I've seen it happen to someone I know intimately."

Harvey urged his listeners to find out how this amazing discovery can bring new happiness and success to their loved ones who need better hearing.

To acquaint readers of this magazine with this new way to hear clearly again, a fascinating book with complete facts will be sent free, in a plain wrapper. No cost or obligation. Send your request on a postcard to Electronic Research Director, Dept. B-100, Belton Hearing Aid Co., 1227 Loyola Avenue, Chicago 26, Illinois.

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the unfortunate financier

by . . . Leslie Charteris

It amused Mr. Oates to claim descent from one of England's famous conspirators. But the Saint was quite a plotter himself.

"THE SECRET of success," said Simon Templar profoundly, "is never to do anything by halves. If you try to touch someone for a tenner, you probably get snubbed; but if you put on a silk hat and a false stomach and go into the City to raise a million-pound loan, people fall over each other in the rush to hand you blank checks. The wretched little thief who pinches a handful of silver spoons gets shoved into clink through a perfect orgy of congratulations to the police and the magistrates, but the bird who swindles the public of a few hundred thousands legally, gets a knighthood. A sound buccaneering business has to be run on the same principles."

While he could not have claimed any earth-shaking originality for the theme of his sermon, Simon Templar was in the perhaps rarer position of being able to claim that he practiced what he preached. He had been doing it for so long, with so much diligence and devotion, that the name of the Saint had passed into the Valhalla of all great names: it had become a household word, even as the

SIMON TEMPLAR MATCHES WITS WITH A CRAFTY STOCK MANIPULATOR-PHILATELIST—IN A SURPRISING DOUBLE PLAY.

From THE SAINT INTERVENES, published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.

name of Miss Amelia Bloomer, an earlier crusader, was absorbed into the tongue that Shakespeare did not live long enough to speak—but in a more romantic context. And if there were many more sharks in the broad lagoons of technically legal righteousness who knew him better by his chosen *nom de guerre* than by his real name, and who would not even have recognized him had they passed him in the street, that minor degree of anonymity was an asset in the Saint's profession which more than compensated him for the concurrent gaps in his publicity.

Mr. Wallington Titus Oates was another gentleman who did nothing by halves.

He was a large red-faced man who looked exactly like a City alderman or a master butcher, with a beefy solidity about him which disarmed suspicion. It was preposterous, his victims thought, in the early and expensive stages of their ignorance, that such an obvious rough diamond, such a jovial hail-fellow-well-met, such an almost startlingly life-like reincarnation of the cartoonist's figure of John Bull, could be a practitioner of cunning and deceit. Even about his rather unusual names he was delightfully frank.

If he had been an American he would certainly have called himself Wallington T. Oates, and the "T" would have been shrouded in a mystery that might have embraced anything from Thomas to Tamerlane. In the more reserved manner of the Englishman, who does not have a Christian name until you have known him for twenty-five years, he might without exciting extraordinary curiosity have been known simply as W. T. Oates. But he was not. His cards were printed W. Titus Oates; and he was not even insistent on the preliminary "W." He was, in fact, best pleased to be known as plain Titus Oates, and would chortle heartily over his chances of tracing a pedigree back to the notorious inventor of the Popish Plot who was whipped from Aldgate to Newgate and from Newgate to Tyburn some three hundred years ago.

But apart from the fact that some people would have given much to apply the same discouraging treatment to Mr. Wallington Titus Oates, he had little else in common with his putative ancestor. For although the better-known Titus Oates stood in the pillory outside the Royal Exchange before his dolorous tour, it is not recorded that he was interested in the dealing within; whereas the present Stock Exchange was Mr. Wallington Titus Oates's happy hunting ground.

If there was anything that W. Titus Oates understood from A to whatever letters can be invent-

ed after Z, it was the manipulation of shares. Bulls and bears were his domestic pets. Mergers and debentures were his bedfellows. It might almost be said that he danced contangos in his sleep. And it was all very profitable—so profitable that Mr. Oates possessed not only three Rolls-Royces but also a liberal allowance of pocket-money to spend on the collection of postage stamps which was his joy and relaxation.

This is not to be taken to mean that Mr. Oates was known in the City as a narrow evader of the law. He was, on the contrary, a highly respected and influential man; for it is one of the sublime subtleties of the laws of England that whilst the manipulation of the form of racehorses is a hideous crime, to be rewarded with expulsion from the most boring clubs and other forms of condign punishment, the manipulation of share values is a noble and righteous occupation by which the large entrance fees to such clubs may commendably be obtained, provided that the method of juggling is genteel and smooth. Mr. Oates's form as a juggler was notably genteel and smooth; and the ambition of certain citizens to whip Mr. Oates at a cart's tail from Aldgate to Newgate was based not so much on the knowledge of any actual fraud as on the fact that the small investments which represented their life savings had on occasion been skittled down the market in the course of Mr. Oates's important operations, which every right-thinking person will agree was a very unsporting and un-British attitude to take.

The elementary principles of share manipulation are, of course, simplicity itself. If large blocks of a certain share are thrown on the market from various quarters, the word goes around that the stock is bad, the small investor takes fright and dashes in to cut his losses, thereby making matters worse, and the price of the share falls according to the first law of supply and demand. If, on the other hand, there is heavy buying in a certain share, the word goes around that it is a "good thing," the small speculator jumps in for a quick profit, adding his weight to the snowball, and the price goes up according to the same law. This is the foundation system on which all speculative operators work; but Mr. Oates had his own ways of accelerating these reactions.

"Nobody can say that Titus Oates ain't an honest man," he used to say in the very exclusive circle of confederates who shared his confidence and a reasonable proportion of his profits. "P'raps I am a bit smarter than some of the others, but that's their funeral. You don't know

what tricks they get up to behind the scenes, but nobody knows what tricks I get up to, either. It's all in the day's work."

He was thinking along the same lines on a certain morning, while he waited for his associates to arrive for the conference at which the final details of the maneuver on which he was working at that time would be decided. It was the biggest manipulation he had attempted so far, and it involved a trick that sailed much closer to the wind than anything he had done before; but it has already been explained that he was not a man who did things by halves. The economic depression which had bogged down the market for many months past, and the resultant steadfast refusal of stocks to soar appreciably however stimulated by legitimate and near-legitimate means, had been very bad for his business as well as others. Now, envisaging the first symptoms of an upturn, he was preparing to cash in on it to an extent that would compensate for many months of failure; and with so much lost ground to make up he had no time for halt measures. Yet he knew that there were a few tense days ahead of him.

A discreet knock on his door, heralding the end of thought and the beginning of action, was almost a relief. His new secretary entered in answer to his curt summons, and his eyes rested on her slim figure for a moment with unalloyed pleasure—she was a remarkably beautiful girl with natural honey-golden hair and entrancing blue eyes which in Mr. Oates's dreams had been known to gaze with Dietrichesque yearning upon his unattractive person.

"Mr. Hammel and Mr. Costello are here," she said.

Mr. Oates beamed.

"Bring them in, my dear." He rummaged thoughtfully through his pockets and produced a crumpled five-pound note, which he pushed towards her. "And buy yourself some silk stockings when you go out to lunch—just as a little gift from me. You've been a good gal. Some night next week, when I'm not working so hard, we might have dinner together, eh?"

"Thank you, Mr. Oates," she said softly, and left him with a sweet smile which started strange wrigglings within him.

When they had dinner together he would make her call him Titus, he thought, and rubbed his hands over the romantic prospect. But before that happy night he had much to do; and the entrance of Hammel and Costello brought him back to the stern consideration of how that dinner and many others, with silk stockings and orchids to match, were to be paid for.

Mr. Jules Hammel was a small rotund gentleman whose rimless spectacles gave him a benign and owlish appearance, like somebody's very juvenile uncle. Mr. Costello was longer and much more cadaverous, and he wore a pencil-line of hair across his upper lip with a certain undercurrent of self-consciousness which might have made one think that he went about in the constant embarrassing fear of being mistaken for Clark Gable. Actually their resemblance to any such harmless characters was illusory—they were nearly as cunning as Mr. Oates himself, and not even a trifle less unscrupulous.

"Well, boys," said Mr. Oates, breaking the ice jovially, "I found another good thing last night."

"Buy or sell?" asked Costello alertly.

"Buy," said Mr. Oates. "I bought it. As far as I can find out, there are only about a dozen in the world. The issue was corrected the day after it came out."

Hammel helped himself to a cigar and frowned puzzledly.

"What is this?"

"A German 5-pfennig with the 'Befreiungstag' overprint inverted and spelt with a P instead of a B," explained Mr. Oates. "That's a stamp you could get a hundred pounds for any day."

His guests exchanged tolerant glances. While they lighted their Partagas they allowed Mr. Oates to expatiate on the beauties of his acquisition with all the extravagant zeal of the rabid collector; but as soon as the smokes were going Costello recalled the meeting to its agenda.

"Well," he said casually, "Midorients are down to 25."

"24," said Mr. Oates. "I rang up my brokers just before you came in and told them to sell another block. They'll be down to 23 or 22 after lunch. We've shifted them pretty well."

"When do we start buying?" asked Hammel.

"At 22. And you'll have to do it quickly. The wires are being sent off at lunch-time tomorrow, and the news will be in the papers before the Exchange closes."

Mr. Oates paced the floor steadily, marshalling the facts of the situation for an audience which was already conversant with them.

The Midorient Company owned large and unproductive concessions in Mesopotamia. Many years ago its fields had flowed with seemingly inexhaustible quantities of oil of excellent quality, and the stock had paid its original holders several thousand times over. But suddenly, on account of those abstruse and unpredictable geological causes to which such things are subject, the supply had

petered out. Frenzied drilling had failed to produce results. The output had dropped to a paltry few hundred barrels which sufficed to pay dividends of two per cent on the stock—no more, and, as a slight tempering of the wind to the shorn stockholders, no less. The shares had adjusted their market value accordingly. Drilling had continued ever since, without showing any improvement; and indeed the shares had depreciated still further during the past fortnight as a result of persistent rumors that even the small output which had for a long while saved the stock from becoming entirely derelict was drying up —rumors which, as omniscient chroniclers of these events, we are able to trace back to the ingenious agency of Mr. Titus Oates.

That was sufficient to send the moribund stock down to the price at which Messrs. Oates, Costello, and Hammel desired to buy it. The boom on which they would make their profit called for more organization, and involved the slight deception on which Mr. Oates was basing his gamble.

Travelling in Mesopotamia at that moment there was an English tourist named Ischolskov, and it is a matter of importance that he was there entirely at Mr. Oates's instigation and expense. During his visit he had contrived to learn the names of the correspondents of the important newspapers and news agencies in that region, and at the appointed time it would be his duty to send off similarly worded cablegrams, signed with the names of these correspondents, which would report to London that the Midorient Company's engineers had struck oil again—had, in fact, tapped a gigantic gusher of petroleum that would make the first phenomenonal output of the Midorient Oil Fields look like the dribbling of a baby on its bib.

"Let's see," said Mr. Oates, "this is Tuesday. We buy today and tomorrow morning at 22 or even less. The shares start to go up tomorrow afternoon. They will go up more on Thursday. By Friday morning they ought to be around 45—they might even go to 50. They'll hang fire there. The first boom will be over, and people will be waiting for more information."

"What about the directors?" queried Hammel.

"They'll get a wire too, of course, signed by the manager on the spot. And don't forget I'm a director. Every penny I have is tied up in that company —it's my company, lock, stock, and barrel. They'll call a special meeting, and I know exactly what they're going to do about it. Of course they'll cable the manager for more details, but I

can arrange to see that his reply don't get through to them before Friday lunch."

Costello fingered his wispy moustache.

"And we sell out on Friday morning," he said.

Mr. Oates nodded emphatically.

"We do more than sell out. We sell short, and unload twice as much stock as we're holding. The story'll get all over England over the week-end, and when the Exchange opens on Monday morning the shares'll be two a penny. We make our profit both ways."

"It's a big risk," said Hammel seriously.

"Well, I'm taking it for you, ain't I?" said Mr. Oates. "All you have to do is to help me spread the buying and selling about, so it don't look too much like a one-man deal. I'm standing to take all the knocks. But it can't go wrong. I've used Ischolskov before—I've got too much on him for him to try and double-cross me, and besides he's getting paid plenty. My being on the Midorient board makes it water-tight. I'm taken in the same as the rest of 'em, and I'm hit as hard as they are. You're doing all the buying and selling from now on—there won't be a single deal in my name that anyone can prove against me. And whatever happens, don't sell till I give you the wire. I'll be the first to know when the crash is coming, and we'll hold out till the last moment."

They talked for an hour longer, after which they went out to a belated but celebratory lunch.

Mr. Oates left his office early that afternoon, and therefore he did not even think of the movements of his new secretary when she went home. But if he had been privileged to observe them, he would have been very little wiser; for Mr. Oates was one of the numerous people who knew the Saint only by name, and if he had seen the sinewy sunburned man who met her at Piccadilly Circus and bore her off for a cocktail he might have suffered a pang of jealousy, but he would have had no cause for alarm.

"We must have Bollinger champagne cocktail, Pat," said the Saint, when they were settled in Oddenino's. "The occasion calls for one. There's a wicked look in your eye that tells me you have some news. Have you sown a few more wild Oates?"

"Must you?" she protested weakly.

"Shall we get him an owl?" Simon suggested.

"What for?" asked Patricia unguardedly.

"It would be rather nice," said the Saint reflectively, "to get Titus an owl."

Patricia Holm shuddered.

Over the cocktails and stuffed olives, however, she relented.

"It's started," she said. "Hammel and Costello had a long conference after lunch, but I'd heard enough before they went out."

She told him every detail of the discussion that had taken place in Mr. Titus Oates's private office, and Simon Templar smiled approval as he listened. Taken in conjunction with what he already knew, the summaries of various other conversations which she had reported to him, it left him with the whole structure of the conspiracy clearly catalogued in his mind.

"You must remember to take that microphone out of his office first thing in the morning," he remarked. "It might spoil things if Titus came across it, and I don't think you'll need to listen any more.... Here, where did you get that from?"

"From sowing my wild Oates," said Patricia angelically, as the waitress departed with a five-pound note on her tray.

Simon Templar regarded her admiringly.

"Darling," he said at length, "there are no limits to your virtues. If you're as rich as that, you cannot only buy me some more Bollinger, but you can take me to dinner at the Caprice as well."

On the way to the restaurant he bought an *Evening Standard* and opened it at the table.

"Midorients closed at 21," he said. "It looks as if we shall have to name a ward in our Old Age Home for Retired Burglars after Comrade Oates."

"How much shall we make if we buy and sell with him?" asked the girl.

The Saint smiled.

"I'm afraid we should lose a lot of money," he said. "You see, Titus isn't going to sell."

She stared at him, mystified; and he closed the menu and laughed at her silently.

"Did you by any chance hear Titus boasting about a stamp he bought for his collection last night?" he asked, and she nodded. "Well, old darling, I'm the guy who sold it to him. I never thought I should sink to philatelism even in my dotage, but in this case it seemed the best way to work. Titus is already convinced that I'm the greatest stamp-sleuth in captivity, and when he hears about the twopenny blue Mauritius I've discovered for him he will be fairly purring through the town. I don't see any reason why our Mr. Oates should go unpunished for his sins and make a fortune out of this low swindle. He collects stamps, but I've got an even better hobby. I collect queer friends." The Saint was lighting a cigarette, and his blue eyes danced over the match. "Now listen carefully while I tell you the next move."

Mr. Wallington Titus Oates

was gloating fruitily over the closing prices on the Friday evening when his telephone bell rang.

He had reason to gloat. The news story provided by the cablegrams of Mr. Ischolskov had been so admirably worded that it had hit the front page of every afternoon edition the previous day and a jumpy market had done the rest. The results exceeded his most optimistic estimates. On the Wednesday night Midorients had closed at 32, and dealings in the street had taken them up to 34. They opened on Thursday morning at 38, and went to 50 before noon. One lunch edition ran a special topical article on fortunes made in oil, the sun shone brilliantly, England declared for 537 for six wickets in the first Test, all the brokers and jobbers felt happy, and Midorients finally went to 61 at the close. Moreover, in the evening paper which Mr. Oates was reading there could not be found a breath of suspicion directed against the news which had caused the boom. The Midorient directors had issued a statement declaring that they were awaiting further details, that their manager on the spot was a reliable man not given to hysterical exaggerations, and that for the moment they were satisfied that prosperity had returned to an oilfield which, they pointed out, had merely been suffering a temporary set-back. Mr. Oates had had much to do with the wording of the statement himself; and if it erred somewhat on the side of optimism, the error could not by any stretch of imagination have been described as criminal misrepresentation.

And when Mr. Oates picked up his receiver and heard what it had to say, his cup was filled to overflowing.

"I've got you that twopenny blue," said a voice which he recognized. "It's a peach! It must be one of the most perfect specimens in existence—and it'll cost you nine hundred quid!"

Mr. Oates gripped the receiver, and his eyes lighted up with the unearthly fire which illuminates the stare of the collector when he sees a coveted trophy within his grasp. It was, in its way, a no less starkly primitive manifestation than the dilating nostrils of a bloodhound on the scent.

"Where is it?" barked Mr. Oates, in the baying voice of the same hound. "When can I see it? Can you bring it over? Have you got it yourself? Where is it?"

"Well, that's the snag, Mr. Oates," said the Saint apologetically. "The owner won't let it go. He won't even let it out of his safe until it's paid for. He says he's got to have a check in his pocket before he'll let me take

it away. He's a crotchety old bird, and I think he's afraid I might light a cigarette with it or something."

Mr. Oates fairly quivered with suppressed emotion.

"Well, where does he live?" he yelped. "I'll settle him. I'll go around and see him at once. What's his name? What's the address?"

"His name is Dr. Jethero," Simon answered methodically, "and he lives at 105 Matlock Gardens, Notting Hill. I think you'll catch him there—I've only just left him, and he said nothing about going out."

"Dr. Jethero—105—Matlock—Gardens—Notting—Hill," repeated Mr. Oates, reaching for a message pad and scribbling frantically.

"By the way," said the Saint. "I said he was crochety, but you may think he's just potty. He's got some sort of a bee in his bonnet about people trying to get in and steal his stamp, and he told me that if you want to call and see him you've got to give a password."

"A password?" bleated Mr. Oates.

"Yes. I told him that everybody knew Titus Oates, but apparently that wasn't good enough for him. If you go there you've got to say, 'I was whipped from Aldgate to Newgate and from Newgate to Tyburn.' Can you remember that?"

"Of course," said Mr. Oates indignantly. "I know all about that. Titus Oates was an ancestor of mine. Come and see me in the morning, my dear boy—I'll have a present waiting for you. Goodbye."

Mr. Oates slammed back the receiver and leapt up as if unleashed. Dithering with ecstasy and excitement, he stuffed his note of the address into his pocket, grabbed a check book, and dashed out into the night.

The taxi ride to his destination seemed interminable, and when he got there he was in such a state of expectant rapture that he flung the driver a pound note and scurried up the steps without waiting for change. The house was one of those unwieldly Victorian edifices with which the west of London is encumbered against all hopes of modern development; and in the dim street lighting he did not even notice that all the windows were barred, nor would he have been likely to speculate upon the reason for that peculiar feature if he had noticed it.

The door was opened by a white-coated man, and Mr. Oates almost bowled him over as he dashed past him into the hall.

"I want Dr. Jethero," he bayed. "I'm Titus Oates!"

The man closed the door and looked at him curiously.

"Mr. Titus Oates, sir?"

"Yes!" roared the financier impatiently. "Titus Oates. Tell him I was whipped from Aldgate to Newgate, and from Newgate to Tyburn. And hurry up!"

The man nodded perfunctorily, and edged past him at a cautious distance of which Mr. Oates was too wrought up to see the implications.

"Yes, sir. Will you wait in here a moment, sir?"

Mr. Oates was ushered into a barely furnished distempered room and left there. With an effort he fussed himself down to a superficial calm—he was Titus Oates, a power in the City, and he must conduct himself accordingly. Dr. Jethero might misunderstand a blundering excitement. If he was crochety, and perhaps even potty, he must be handled with tact. Mr. Oates strode up and down the room, working off his overflow of excitement. There was a faint characteristic flavor of iodoform in the air, but Mr. Oates did not even notice that.

Footsteps sounded along the hall, and the door opened again. This time it admitted a gray-bearded man who also wore a white coat. His keen spectacled eyes examined the financier calmly. Mr. Oates mustered all his self-control.

"I am Titus Oates," he said with simple dignity.

The gray-bearded man nodded.

"You wanted to see me?" he said; and Mr. Oates recalled his instructions again.

"Titus Oates," he repeated gravely. "I was whipped from Aldgate to Newgate, and from Newgate to Tyburn."

Dr. Jethero studied him for a moment longer, and glanced towards the door, where the white-coated attendant was waiting unobtrusively—Mr. Oates had not even noticed the oddity of that.

"Yes, yes," he said soothingly. "And you were pilloried in Palace Yard, weren't you?"

"That's right," said Mr. Oates eagerly. "And outside the Royal Exchange. They put me in prison for life, but they let me out at the Revolution and gave me my pension back."

Dr. Jethero made clucking noises with his tongue.

"I see. A very unfortunate business. Would you mind coming this way, Mr. Oates?"

He led the way up the stairs, and Mr. Oates followed him blissfully. The whole rigmarole seemed very childish, but if it pleased Dr. Jethero, Mr. Oates was prepared to go to any lengths to humor him. The white-coated attendant followed Mr. Oates. Dr. Jethero opened the door of a room on the second floor and stood aside for Mr. Oates to pass in. The door had a barred grille in its upper panels through which the in-

terior of the room could be observed from the outside, an eccentricity which Mr. Oates was still ready to accept as being in keeping with the character of his host.

It was the interior of the room into which he was shown that began to place an excessive strain on his adaptability. It was without furnishings of any kind, unless the thick kind of mattress in one corner could be called furnishings, and the walls and floor were finished in some extraordinary style of decoration which made them look like quilted upholstery.

Mr. Oates looked about him, and turned puzzledly to his host.

"Well," he said, "where's the stamp?"

"What stamp?" asked Dr. Jethero.

Mr. Oates's laboriously achieved restraint was wearing thin again.

"Don't you understand? I'm Titus Oates. I was whipped from Aldgate to Newgate, and from Newgate to Tyburn. Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, yes, yes," murmured the doctor peaceably. "You're Titus Oates. You stood in the pillory and they pelted you with rotten eggs."

"Well," said Mr. Oates, "what about the stamp?"

Dr. Jethero cleared his throat.

"Just a minute, Mr. Oates. Suppose we go into that presently. Would you mind taking off your coat and shoes?"

Mr. Oates gaped at him.

"This is going too far," he protested. "I'm Titus Oates. Everybody knows Titus Oates. You remember—the Popish Plot—"

"Mr. Oates," said the doctor sternly, "will you take off your coat and shoes?"

The white-coated attendant was advancing stealthily towards him, and a sudden vague fear seized on the financier. Now he began to see the reason for the man's extraordinary behavior. He was not crotchety. He was potty. He was worse—he must be a raving lunatic. Heaven knew what he would be doing next. A wild desire to be away from number 105 Matlock Gardens gripped Mr. Oates—a desire that could not even be quelled by the urge to possess a twopenny blue Mauritius in perfect preservation.

"Never mind," said Mr. Oates liberally. "I'm not really interested. I don't collect stamps at all. I'm just Titus Oates. Everyone knows me. I'm sure you'll excuse me—I have an appointment—"

He was edging towards the door, but Dr. Jethero stood in the way.

"Nobody's going to hurt you, Mr. Oates," he said; and then he caught the desperate gleam in

Mr. Oates's eye, and signed quickly to the attendant.

Mr. Oates was seized suddenly from behind in a deft grip. Overcome with terror, he struggled like a maniac, and he was a big man; but he was helpless in the expert hands that held him. He was tripped and flung to the floor, and pinioned there with practiced skill. Through whirling mists of horror he saw the doctor coming towards him with a hypodermic syringe, and he was still yelling feebly about the Popish Plot when the needle stabbed into his arm. . . .

Dr. Jethero went downstairs and rang up a number which he had been given.

"I've got your uncle, Mr. Tombs," he announced. "He gave us a bit of trouble, but he's quite safe now."

Simon Templar, who had found the name of Tombs a convenient alias before, grinned invisibly into the transmitter.

"That's splendid. Did he give you a lot of trouble?"

"He was inclined to be violent, but we managed to give him an injection, and when he wakes up he'll be in a straitjacket. He's really a most interesting case," said the doctor with professional enthusiasm. "Quite apart from the delusion that he is Titus Oates, he seems to have some extraordinary hallucination about a stamp. Had you noticed that before?"

"I hadn't," said the Saint. "You may be able to find out some more about that. Keep him under observation, doctor, and call me again on Monday morning."

He rang off and turned gleefully to Patricia Holm, who was waiting at his elbow.

"Titus is in safe hands," he said. "And now I've got a call of my own to make."

"Who to?" she asked.

He showed her a scrap of paper on which he had jotted down the words of what appeared to be a telegram.

"Amazing discovery stop have reason to believe boom may be based on genuine possibilities stop do not on any account sell without hearing from me."

"Dicky Tremayne's in Paris, and he'll send it for me," said the Saint. "A copy goes to Abe Costello and Jules Hammel tonight—I just want to make sure that they follow Titus down the drain. By the way, we shall clear about twenty thousand if Mid-orients are still at 61 when they open again tomorrow morning."

"But are you sure Jethero won't get into any trouble?" she said.

Simon Templar nodded.

"Somehow I feel that Titus will prefer to keep his mouth shut after I've had a little chat with him on Monday," he said; and it is a matter of history that he was absolutely right.

the jaws of darkness

by . . . Hal Ellson

Igor's desperate need to love and be loved need not have made him a killer. But a journey into night may lead to self-betrayal.

THE book lay open with the soft yellow light falling on its pages. Igor sat side-wise to the table, one pale hand hung limply over its edge. Between two fingers he held a cigarette, delicately, as if afraid of crushing it. A thin wavering line of smoke came from it, and the two fingers that held it were black.

Profiled, he turned his face slowly to the light. He was pale, drawn, tired-looking. Dropping his eyes to the book, he caught the sentence . . . "Recalling it afterwards, that moment stood out in his mind vividly, distinctly, forever; he could not make out how he had had such cunning, for his mind was as if it were cloudy at moments and he was almost unconscious of his body."

Igor turned away again. His lips moved, and he repeated the sentence. The pencil-line of smoke wavered up before his line of vision but he failed to notice it. He looked across the room, kept staring, then turned to the window and suddenly tensed. It

In the novels of Dostoyevski normal, well-adjusted men and women are tragically outnumbered by the lonely and the lost. Perhaps this is why CRIME AND PUNISHMENT *is not only one of the world's great novels, but a superlative crime suspense story. Here Hal Ellson, whose* DUKE *sold well over a million copies, takes a leaf from Dostoyevski's case book to explore with gripping realism the mind of a mad killer, compulsively self-tormented by insecurity.*

was dark out. He looked at the door, and got up and crossed the room.

He locked the door. But first he went out on the landing and gazed down the stairs into the shadowed depths below, and above to the next landing. Then he went to the windows and drew the shades. Before returning to his chair he pulled one shade slightly aside and peered down at the empty street, at the lamp-light, then at a row of shadowy doorways. Still tense, he sat down again, crossed his legs, placed his arm on the table and allowed his hand to hang over the edge.

I mustn't sleep, he thought. They want to get me, kill me for what I did, but I'm too smart for them.

He smiled, got up, paced the floor for a while, then went to the door and stopped to listen. Sitting down again, he stared at the page of the open book. "Dostoyevski is a great writer," he said aloud. "One should always read him, not once or twice but a hundred times, otherwise he remains unread. And Proust. Read Proust if you wish to know something about life, I mean about his sickness, something of that world of his, and of style. But Dostoyevski is the g r e a t e r writer."

Now the cigarette drew Igor's eye. He stared at it, put his hand out to pick it up and suddenly stopped himself. His arm remained out-stretched, his whole body tense again except for his hand which trembled slightly, then became perfectly still. He turned his head slowly, breathed heavily, stared at the door, listened, moistened his lips. Finally he went to the door, put his ear to the crack. A blue vein swelled out on his forehead. He remained with his head bowed, his face tensed and strained.

Finally he walked away from the door, sat down, looked at his cigarette. He picked it up slowly and blew the ash from it. Unnoticed, it fell on his suit. Once more he looked at the door. The vein on his forehead was less prominent, the signs of tension in his face were fading. He closed his eyes, and put his hand to his head.

A minute passed before he opened his eyes again. He arose quickly, went to his desk, took out a gun, faced the door and walked toward it. His face was contorted with fear now.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, reached the landing, passed on, ascended the next flight. A door opened above, closed. Igor still faced the door, his mind was far from the room. He did not seem aware of the gun in his hand.

Something in the drawer that he had half seen as he took the automatic from it froze him

where he stood, brought back the past like a blurred vision.

He went back to the table, put down the gun. His cigarette still burned. He stared at it, picked it up, put it down again and turned round.

The desk drawer was still open. He crossed the room, looked in the drawer, and there lay the picture he had half seen.

He brought it to the table, set it against the lamp, a picture of a pretty blonde girl. He sat down, placed his arms on the table and stared at the picture. Curious expressions touched his face, a faint smile, melancholy, bitterness. Suddenly he took the picture, flung it across the room, and lit another cigarette.

Smoking quickly, he refused to turn his head, but he still saw the smiling face of the girl in his mind. He closed his eyes, and it was still there. When he opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling, her face was there. He turned his head.

The picture lay on the floor. He stared at it, arose, picked it up, brought it back to the light and examined it again, kissed the face, then suddenly tore the picture to pieces. Finally he picked up the pieces, put them in an envelope and sealed it.

"They're all prostitutes," he said. "Every woman is. You can't trust them. They're all alike, and they'll do anything for money. I hate her. I. . . ."

He stopped, his mouth open. An odd thing happened. It had happened before but not quite like this, for he lost the room, lost the feel of everything about him. Suddenly he was part of a huge void, outside the earth.

From afar, he saw the whole of it whirling through space. It expanded and came rushing at him. He covered his eyes, nothing happened. He looked again and found himself walking toward an abyss. Below, lay cold blue water.

He tried to stop himself, tried to cry out and couldn't. He was drawn to the edge and looked down. If he fell, he knew it would be the end. Something black and cold would envelope his mind.

He remained at the edge, and noticed grass growing below. It rose higher and higher, luxuriated in sudden violent growth, became as giant trees, and wavered like sea-grass stirred by a current.

Suddenly the vision broke. Igor found himself back in the room and his head pained him.

I mustn't do that again, he told himself. I mustn't think of it, I've got to keep hold of myself.

He looked at the book before hi monce more and the same line caught his eye—"Recalling it afterwards, that moment stood out in his mind vividly, distinctly, forever. . . ." Again he read the line, this time aloud. Finished,

he grasped the book and hurled it across the room.

He closed his eyes, shook his head and the pain left him. When he opened his eyes, his face was vacant of all expression. Turning, he saw the room as if for the first time, noticed the book on the floor and wondered why it was there. He arose, picked it up, put it back on the table and began to pace the floor.

His gun lay on the table but he didn't look at it. Now and then he stopped at the door and listened. It was always the same, footsteps on the stairs that faded as they approached and never reached the landing. Each time he heard them he broke into a sweat, he knew they wanted to kill him and he couldn't permit himself to sleep.

Presently he sat down again but was still listening. A sound alerted him. Slow distinct footsteps echoed in the hall. He didn't move, his breath stopped, the gun lay on the table but he didn't touch it.

The footsteps reached the landing, came along it. A knock sounded on the door.

"Igor!"

He arose, went to the door, opened it and saw his mother.

"Igor, you must go to bed."

"I can't," he said. "They want to kill me."

She put her hand on his arm. "There's no one. Believe me, Igor."

"They want to kill me," he said. "They know I'm here."

"You're going to get sick staying up. Go to bed."

"No."

She looked at the table, saw the automatic and was frightened.

"Go downstairs," he ordered. "Don't worry."

The old woman stared at the automatic as if she hadn't heard. He had to take her by the arms and force her from the room. He slammed the door. When he sat down he knew she had not moved from behind it. He waited, finally heard her footsteps and listened till they reached the floor below. The house went quiet.

Downstairs, Igor's mother stared at the ceiling, heard him walking and looked at her daughter. "I'm afraid of him now," she said. "He had a gun. He might kill us in our sleep."

The daughter was frightened. "Why don't you do as I told you?" she said, and the old woman dropped her eyes.

Igor continued to pace the floor. Now and then he stopped to listen and heard those phantom steps on the stair which never reached the landing.

At dawn the light was still lit in his room. He sat at the table, tie unloosened, a tray of burned-out cigarettes beside him. He

faced the door, the gun in his hand, features worn, eyes half-closed.

When his mother knocked he got up and opened the door for her. She saw the light burning, the gun in his hand and went to the window to let up the shades. The pale morning light streamed in.

"They didn't come, Mom. They knew I was awake," he said, and the old woman stared at him.

He stood there with the gun in his hand but as if not aware of it. Finally he went to the table, put down the gun, recrossed the room, stretched on the couch and closed his eyes.

His mother watched him, looked at the automatic and turned to Igor again. His eyes were closed. She reached for the gun.

"Let that alone," he said, head turned sidewise now and his eyes on her.

The old woman hesitated, then left the room.

He awoke an hour later, looked round the room, then went to the table, picked a butt from the tray and lit it. His hands shook. He put the automatic in his desk, and went downstairs, carrying his coat and hat. He put them down, went upstairs, looked round the room, felt his pockets, then went to the desk, took out the gun and slipped it into his pocket.

Downstairs again, he sat at the table, pushed his plate away and lifted his cup of coffee. As he tasted it his mother watched him and he felt her eyes.

"What are you looking at?" he said, and she sat down nervously, dropped her eyes. In a moment she was staring again.

He looked up slowly, his eyes widening. "Well?"

"Igor, you're not going to eat?"

He stared at her without answering, felt the pain in his head. Moistening his lips, he bent his head again and drank the coffee. His hands were thrust between his legs now, trembling so much that he pressed his thighs against them to hold them still. "Let me have some more coffee," he said, and he watched his mother as she went to fill the cup. As she poured he kept his eyes down, his hands still between his legs.

Finished with the second cup, he stood up, took the gun from his pocket and laid it on the table. While his mother stared at it, he donned his coat and hat.

"Where are you going?" the old woman asked.

"Let me have a quarter," he said, ignoring the question.

"I haven't got it."

"Don't give me that. I know you've got it."

The old womans lips trembled. She wanted to refuse, but she was afraid of what he might do and she left the room.

Igor smiled to himself, slipped the gun into his coat pocket. When his mother returned he put out his hand for the money and walked from the house.

Bright sunlight flooded the streets, white clouds drifted slowly across the sky. It was not quite warm yet, but the intangible presence of spring filled the air, a feeling of anticipation as if the whole earth were awakening again and something new, strange and wonderful that had never happened before was about to happen now.

Igor felt none of this. The light bothered his eyes. He walked to the avenue, bought a pack of cigarettes, tried to light one, but his hands shook so much that he left the store when he found the clerk watching him.

It was still early. He looked at his watch, walked to the subway and boarded an almost empty train. A nurse dozed at one end of the car he had entered. He took a seat close to her. As the train started, he turned his head with infinite slowness, and stared at the nurse. She was unaware of his interest. He looked away. A moment later he shifted position and moved slightly closer. A pause and he moved even closer. His head turned slowly, he stared at her and suddenly the impulse struck. He wanted to touch her, had to, but he knew he mustn't get caught.

Casually, he lifted his elbow to the top of the seat and watched the nurse. His hand was next to her coat and he could almost touch her. He was about to when the train pulled into a station. As the wheels ground to a halt, the nurse opened her eyes. She didn't notice Igor and closed them again.

Slowly he withdrew his hand as the train pulled out. His eyes dropped and he stared at the nurse's foot, grew brighter as his eyelids almost closed. He pretended sleep.

His foot began to move, slid slowly toward the nurse's with an inperceptible movement that almost belied mobility. His head came forward, his eyes grew wide, and a terrible strained look possessed his face. He was about to touch her foot when the train roared into the next station.

He waited. As the train started again, he looked at the nurse with an almost frantic expression on his face. His eyes dropped to her foot. His own foot moved, slid forward slowly.

The nurse stirred uncomfortably and almost seemed to sense danger. The train roared toward its next stop. As it entered the station Igor was about to touch the nurse's foot when she opened her eyes and looked at him. He shut his own immediately, but the nurse stood up, moved away from him and closed her eyes again.

It was done with now. In a state near-to panic, he got off the train at the next station and waited on the platform till the violent trembling that shook his body ceased.

Finally he saw a man enter the station lavatory. He followed him in, lit a cigarette, stared at him. The man left quickly. Another man entered. With his eyes half-closed, Igor watched him, but the man was aware and hurried out.

Igor followed and went up the street. He wandered aimlessly for an hour. A young woman caught his eye, he began to follow, eyes on her feet. Finally she turned, saw him and crossed the street.

He stopped. Something was shaping in back of his mind. He groped for it. He had meant to do something, go somewhere, but he couldn't recall now. A terrible yawning blackness filled his brain, threatened like a giant wave. He saw the crest begin to topple and tried to cry out. . . .

Suddenly everything was clear again. He heard the sharp clatter of a trolley, motor traffic, voices, all the random sounds of the city. He saw sunlight on the sidewalk, the street, buildings, windows, the sky. All like it had been, yet strange and new to his eyes. He turned his head slowly.

A woman entered a house across the street. When the door closed behind her, he crossed the gutter, mounted the steps of the house and entered the vestibule. There were two letter-boxes, two bells. He rang one. No one answered. He rang the other, and the woman he'd followed came to the door.

"Please," he said, "If you will let me kiss your foot."

The woman froze.

"Please!"

The woman swung the door, but he put his hand against it, tried to force it back, begging as he did. The door closed slowly against him, running footsteps sounded in the hallway, and he hurried away.

Now he knew. Something was wrong with the houses, streets, telephone poles. They leaned sharply out of line, ready to topple. He felt a sensation of walking almost side-wise.

He had to stop. A bell rang faintly. Turning, he discovered it was in his brain and growing louder. Sharp pains accompanied the ringing. Buildings, street, telephone poles and sky started to whirl furiously, to break up and come topping down on him.

He put up his hands to protect himself, but nothing happened. Normality returned, and he knew now why he had come out. It had been in his mind all the while, lodged in back of his brain, and he started to walk rapidly. He had been going there all the while without knowing it.

A three-block walk brought him to an old house. Stopping across the street, he stared at it,

crossed the gutter and rang the bell. A fat woman opened the door, he stepped inside.

"I want to see Jean," he said.

The fat woman left him and he heard female voices above, a radio, someone laughing.

A short ugly woman with a pock-marked face came down the stairs. "Jean ain't here," she said. "Maybe you'd like to see one of the other girls."

"I want to see Jean," he said."

"She ain't here, I told you."

"I know she's here."

"You better go," said the woman. "Don't cause any trouble."

"There won't be any trouble. I just want to see Jean."

"Jim! Jim!"

At the woman's call for help, a man appeared at the top of the stairs. When he saw Igor, he ran down the steps, struck him in the face and knocked him against the wall. Igor slid to the floor. Powerful hands hauled him up and he was shoved out the door.

Igor went to the corner, watched the house from there, then walked to a tenement on another street, ascended a flight of dark stairs and stopped on the first landing. He knew the door he wanted, tried it and found it locked. A bunch of keys came from his pocket. He tried the first one and opened the door.

He waited an hour and finally heard rapid footsteps on the stairs. The door swung open and a blonde girl entered the room. This was Jean. She stopped, startled, then faced him calmly.

Igor smiled faintly.

She took off her coat, lit a cigarette and looked at him again. "Why don't you go away?" she said, and received no answer. She tried to ignore him then, and began to go through a bureau drawer.

Igor watched her, and she turned to him again. "What do you want?" she said.

"You know I love you."

"You're crazy," she answered, laughing at him.

"Even though you are what you are I love you."

"You're crazy," she said again.

"No, I know perfectly well what I'm doing. But you killed me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You killed me. Nothing but endless blackness. That's what I see all the time."

"What did I do to you?" she said. "You were no more than the next one."

"You only killed me. I found something and you killed it."

She watched him, frightened. "Look, if you don't leave, I will."

"Don't bother." He walked to the door, watching her as she went to a closet and opened it, her back to him now.

Quickly, soundlessly, he moved back across the room and

put his arms around her before she could turn. When she tried to cry out, he clapped a hand over her mouth. His other hand went to her throat. She struggled against him, went limp. Her body sagged. He held her a moment, released her, and she slipped to the floor.

Automatically, he picked her up and put her in the closet, pushed her legs in, propped them up and closed the door. That done, he turned the key and flung it across the room.

He was trembling violently but he managed to steady himself and walked from the room. His mind had gone blank and he had no memory of the incident, no idea that he had killed.

In the street, he walked like a man in a dream, with no awareness of direction. Dusk came, lights began to glimmer along the avenue, a sleepy murmur arose from the surrounding streets. The gigantic patterned web of life moved through the city, a throbbing humanity, but he was not part of it. He felt he was walking against a tide.

Dusk was a great blue veil, the amber fire in the western sky was burning out. As it faded, night alighted upon the city with great black wings. The soft murmur of restless life throbbed in Igor's ears, the wheels of traffic spun faster, he saw an endless shoal of unknown faces and grew frightened.

He stood before his own house at last, looked at it and did not know how he'd found the way. It didn't matter. He went in, climbed the stairs to his own room, locked the door, lowered the shades and turned on the light. For a moment he stood listening, then turned and examined the room.

A strange idea possessed him. He felt he was somewhere outside the room and looking in at himself. A haze lent it a shimmering unreal quality, made it seem that everything was submerged in sunlit water.

This didn't last. The walls expanded, crumbled suddenly, and everything began to spread. This had happened before and there was no emotional impact now. Instead, he viewed the transformation calmly, though he was aware that he was trembling. Physical and mental s e l v e s seemed entirely divided now.

Distortion continued and he felt on the verge of a unique, greater than human perception. Then, out of the distance, a girl came toward him. Far away in the shimmering blue unreality of this room which had become a universe w h i c h encompassed everything—life, d e a t h, all knowledge.

"Speak to her and you will die," a voice warned him.

He closed his eyes, heard a great roaring as if the sea were washing over him, and felt him-

self flung into infinity. When he opened his eyes he saw himself dead. A great shadow rose above the horizon.

Eternal night, he thought, and he saw the room again. It had changed. He was able to look down into it. It was divided into run-ways to compose a maze.

Someone was trapped in the maze, running the endless passages, bumping into walls. At last a blank wall stopped the man. It disintegrated before him, and he stepped out into darkness. In that moment Igor recognized himself.

A moment later he found himself staring at his gun. He picked it up, put it down, arose, stared at the room, started to pace back and forth. A sharp pain lanced through his head.

He stopped, listened, a look of cunning on his face, looked at his own reflection in a mirror and failed to recognize it. His hand went to his head where the pain stabbed at him. He closed his eyes.

What had he been talking about? It seemed so long ago, years back. Something had intervened, and d i s r u p t e d his thoughts.

Now he knew. He looked at the still unrecognized image of himself and said, "We were discussing that, weren't we? Life is not just physical, set, bounded by a limited number of years. There is a continuous, everlasting life after the body ceases to be, and death is not an end but a beginning, beautiful rather than tragic. If one lives fully, with all one's soul, the dark becomes eternal light.

"But it's night now. They'll be coming for me," he said, and he looked toward the door. A vein in his forehead pulsed and swelled. He heard someone on the stairs and grasped the gun.

He went to the door, put his ear to it. A violent thumping brought a deluge of sweat from his brow. Fear enveloped him till he realized the sound came from the frantic pulsing of his heart.

He walked away from the door, and told himself, "They won't get me, I never sleep at night."

Facing himself in the mirror again, he smiled, put his cigarette to his lips. "No, they won't get me," he assured himself.

There was no answer. The house was silent now, from outside came the low murmur of the city. It was starting to rain. A soft pattering sounded on the window-ledges, and a vision of the city came to him, the dark sprawling metropolis dotted with clusters of lights, the intricate maze of a thousand desolate streets, ten million darkened window eyes that watched the night, a million doors that opened to eternity.

The vision shimmered and

faded. Pain numbed his mind, and he felt lost. He felt he was walking in the maze of visionary streets, and that from every window eyes were watching him.

He tried to grope out of it. Night had come, he realized, but sometime during the day just passed, which now seemed lost in eternity, he knew he'd done something, gone somewhere.

Let me get my bearings and I'll be all right, he thought. But what had transpired was lost, the past was plunged in darkness. Behind him there was nothing but a shadowy chasm which threatened annihilation.

Tensed and listening, he continued to pace the floor. Finally he stopped, went to his desk and opened the drawer. A brown envelope caught his eye.

He opened it and several yellowed clippings fell to the desk. He read one. It concerned a man who had been molesting children. All the clippings concerned the same theme, and dated back ten years.

Igor didn't connect himself with these happenings, nor know now why he had them. He tossed them aside, and a peculiar odor struck him, a smell of burning flesh.

He looked around, then raised his hand. The cigarette between two of his blackened fingers was burning the flesh. He smiled faintly, there was no pain.

Squeezing the lit end of the cigarette, he snuffed it out, dropped it, then looked at himself in the mirror and felt the whiskers on his face.

I better shave, he thought.

He began immediately. He lathered himself, put the razor to his face, drew it down and left a clean sweep of skin exposed.

A knock interrupted him as he lifted the razor again.

"Igor!"

"Yes?" he said without turning from the mirror.

"I'm bringing you some coffee and sandwiches."

He walked to the door, unlocked it and went back to the mirror. His mother followed him in. About to draw the razor down his face again, he noticed her face in the mirror, then saw the others behind hers. His hand stopped, poised in the air. Now he recognized the faces, blue coats, caps, shiny brass buttons and badges of the policemen, and the great black shadow behind them in the mirror.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked, turning to them.

They took him away then, like that, with his face lathered on one side, clean and glazed on the other where he had stroked it with the razor, and he didn't know where he was going or what was happening for, when they put their hands on him, he felt the jaws of darkness close over him.

the bridal-night murder

by . . . Octavus Roy Cohen

Espionage and an ill-fated bridegroom may be pin-pointed on the same small square. And its color is apt to be scarlet.

THE BRIDE looked lovely in a white chiffon velvet negligé over a sheer nylon nightgown. The bridegroom, more formally attired, wore a business suit of oxford gray, a white broadcloth shirt, dark gray tie, black shoes and a bullet in his heart.

The house detective was engaged in doing nothing and trying to look efficient when two uniformed cops arrived in answer to the emergency Code 3 radio call which had been broadcast from City Hall a minute or two before midnight. The men in blue merely held the fort pending the arrival of two detectives from the Homicide Division.

One of these was Lieutenant Marty Walsh, commander of the night watch. He was slender, wiry and alert. He looked impassive, which he wasn't, and competent, which he was. His partner was Sergeant Don Mason, a big, handsome man of thirty-seven with the figure of a college athlete and prematurely gray hair.

For three decades the mystery story on both sides of the Atlantic has swayed backwards and forwards between the leisurely approach and free-swinging, tough-textured, realistic action. For every Raymond Chandler or Frank Kane we have the counterbalancing influence of a scholarly Michael Innes. But Octavus Roy Cohen adheres to one unvarying pattern—that of a suspenseful story well told. And here he is in a brand new mystery yarn, confirming again his right to be hailed as one of America's truly great story tellers.

They introduced themselves to Mrs. Nancy Otis Pegram, recently a bride and more recently a widow; made a quick and expert survey of the bridal suite, examined the body sufficiently to establish the fact that John Pegram was completely dead, looked at the stub-nosed .32 caliber revolver with which he apparently had been killed, dismissed the house detective, put one of the uniformed officers on guard in the hallway, telephoned the coroner and the crime lab and tried to curb the impatience of reporters who were asking questions which were at the moment unanswerable.

After a preliminary inspection of the two hotel rooms on the seventh floor of the new Hollywood-McKinley hotel, the detectives walked to one of the windows where they conversed in discreet whispers. Said Lieutenant Marty Walsh, "If I was married to a swell-looking dame like that, I'd sure hate for her to be a widow."

Don Mason nodded agreement. "Yeah," he said. "Especially on our bridal night."

Despite the fact that Mrs. Nancy Pegram displayed marked evidence of grief and shock, nothing could conceal her physical charm. She sat dry-eyed, a filmy handkerchief crumpled in one well-shaped hand, her feet —encased in white satin mules— planted side by side on the floor, and her face expressing disbelief and horror.

The detectives were tolerant, patient and solicitous. They, and the lovely young widow, waited until the arrival of the coroner, the police photographer and the technicians who dusted for prints, examined the physical evidence—such as the gun—and asked a few routine questions. During this time Marty Walsh conducted Mrs. Pegram into 712, which was the bedroom of the suite, so that she would not be subjected to unnecessary strain. It was not until the technical boys had taken themselves and the body of the bridegroom away that the two men from Homicide took Mrs. Pegram back into the sitting room and settled down to the task of getting information.

These things both detectives knew before their interrogation started: That until four o'clock that afternoon Mrs. Pegram had been Miss Nancy Otis, that she had lived—and planned to continue living—in San Diego, that she was twenty-five years of age, four inches better than five feet in height, and that she weighed approximately 125 pounds.

In advance of their questioning, Marty Walsh had sounded a word of warning to Sergeant Mason. He said, "Watch your questions, Don. This dame is trying to keep a tight grip on herself. But I know from experience that the ones who look the calm-

est are most likely to throw a wingding when you least expect it."

Now that the mortal remains of the ex-bridegroom had been carried away, Lieutenant Walsh made a tactful introductory statement in which he explained that he was compelled to ask questions, some of which might prove difficult and/or embarrassing . . . and he asked her to bear with him. She nodded as she answered in a low, husky voice, "I understand. I'll try to help.

"I have been living in San Diego almost two years," she said after a brief silence. "My parents are dead, and I was provided for financially by Dad's life insurance. Until a couple of years ago, I traveled with my parents. My father was in the export-import business. I speak French and Spanish rather fluently. After the folks died, it was a relief to settle down in a small apartment of my own.

"I met John Pegram about six months ago. I knew he was doing research in electronics at a private plant in San Diego, and I had the impression that the work was really for the Government, and was what you call top secret. All I'm sure of is that he never discussed it with me except in general terms. I wouldn't have understood, anyway. I haven't what you'd call a technical mind.

"At the time I met John I was engaged to a friend of his: Ivan Gregory. Ivan introduced us. Later, Ivan and I decided that we didn't belong together and our engagement was broken. It was when I found myself again free that my friendship with John developed into something more. I fell deeply in love with him. That's why . . ." She made a pitiful gesture toward the spot where the body of her husband had been lying, and this time the tears came despite her efforts to control them.

After a long minute, Marty Walsh said gently, "You were telling us about this man you were engaged to . . ."

"Ivan. Yes. He was also engaged in scientific research at the plant where John worked, though not on the same project. Ivan was some sort of an aeronautical expert. He was always gay and lively and full of fun—not the least bit stuffy.

"He is American by birth. He told me that his parents were born in Russia and I believe their original name was Gregorovitch. In addition to English, he speaks Russian, Spanish and German. He graduated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was John's best man when we were married this afternoon."

Marty Walsh thought for a moment before framing his next question. "Did you say this Ivan is Russian?"

"American. His parents were

Russian. But if you're thinking what I believe you are—"

Marty made a quick gesture of apology. "It's an angle, Mrs. Pegram. Nowadays everybody with a Russian name seems suspect."

Nancy said, "You've only to meet Ivan to know how wrong that idea is."

During the latter half of the dialogue between the widow and Lieutenant Marty Walsh, Sergeant Mason had been wandering about the two-room apartment. It was lavish in an impersonal hotel way, though several vases of flowers delivered by local florists and bearing cards of San Diego friends brightened the suite. On special little racks at the foot of each of the twin beds were suitcases, both containing feminine garments, both partially unpacked. On a similar stand in the sitting room was the larger suitcase which obviously had been the property of the late John Pegram. On an end table near the big, overstuffed couch was a brief case. It bore the initials J. P.

Each room had a door leading into the hallway. The sitting room door bore the number 710, the bedroom door was inscribed 712. The key to 710 was on a corner table.

Marty said, "You saw the gun on the floor near your husband's body, Mrs. Pegram. Pending official word from ballistics, we'll presume that it was the gun which was used to kill him. Had you ever seen it before?"

"Yes. I saw it when John started to unpack. I asked him why he had it and he made some light answer about a man of his importance having to keep a gun handy. Then he showed me his permit, not only to own a gun, but also to carry it."

Marty said, "You registered at eight-fifteen p.m. What happened after that?"

"Well—" She hesitated and a bit of color came to her cheeks. "It was the first time we'd really been alone since the ceremony and we sat together on the couch for a while. John was an unusually shy person, and I suppose I was acting as a bride usually does. Anyway, after a while we both realized that we had forgotten to eat, and we decided to go out for dinner. We drove in his car to a restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard. We got back here about ten o'clock and came right up to our rooms."

"You found everything as you had left it?"

"No. Several things were different."

"What, for instance?"

"Some of the clothes I had left on the bed had been hung in the closet, and some had been put in the dresser drawers. My cosmetics had been placed on the dresser. Both beds had been made down for the night."

"The maid, of course. Anything else?"

"Yes. I hate to say this, Lieutenant, because I have no proof. I might have left it in San Diego, though I distinctly remember packing it."

"What?"

"A beautiful little diamond brooch John gave me as an engagement present. It had disappeared."

"Any other indications," asked Walsh, "that someone other than the maid had been in the room?"

"Yes. A vase of flowers—those pink r o s e s—had been brought in while we were out. They came from a friend in San Diego. You'll find the florist's card on the table over there."

"That would be the bell captain or a bellhop. Usual procedure, I believe. We'll check. Anything else?"

Nancy Pegram got up suddenly and walked to the window. For perhaps a minute she stood there in picturesque silence, her back to them. She spoke without turning.

"That brief case," she said slowly. "It was John's. It must contain something of importance because all the way up in the car he kept it on the seat beside him. He left here when we decided to go out for dinner. I don't think either of us noticed it when we first returned to the hotel. I looked at it after—after he—Oh, it's so hard—"

"I understand. Go ahead, please."

"I'm sure it had been locked. Apparently, the lock had been tampered with while we were out."

The two officers made a quick inspection. It was a simple lock, and could have been forced by using any small sturdy instrument as a lever.

Marty Walsh glanced at the contents. He found nothing except a stack of papers covered with intricate mathematical calculations, and a dozen or so sketches of technical devices which meant nothing to him. He said to Don Mason, "We'd better let the FBI know about this. Our answer could be right there." To Mrs. Pergram he said, "Do you u n d e r s t a n d these things, ma'am?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

Marty Walsh came back to the immediate subject of the murder. He said, "You and your husband got back here at ten o'clock. The hotel manager telephoned us just before midnight. What happened between ten and twelve?"

The merest fragment of a smile touched her lips. She said, "When something tragic like this happens, everything takes on a new significance. What I mean is that I never thought . . ." She bogged down and Marty prompted her with, "Take your time, Mrs. Pegram. Tell us what you

mean—and tell it in your own way."

"It was my handbag," she said. "I suppose I was no more or less jittery than the average bride. Anyhow, I did a silly thing. I left my purse in the restaurant where we ate dinner."

"Isn't that it on the dresser?"

"Yes. I missed it right after we returned. John insisted on going back for it."

"Did you go with him?"

"No." Again that faint touch of color appeared in her cheeks. "I made a joke of it. I said that it was an old-fashioned custom for a bridegroom to leave the room to smoke a cigar while the bride got ready for—for the night. We laughed and were properly embarrassed."

Marty allowed a reasonable time for her to get her feelings under control. Then he said, "We understand, Ma'am."

"I finished unpacking. Then I took a shower."

"When?"

"Not until after he returned with the purse. I had been arranging my things, and . . . well, thinking about how happy I was, and how bright the future seemed. Anyway, after John returned I took my shower. That was about half past eleven."

"Where was he?"

"Here. In the sitting room. I took a long shower. Then I tried to—to make myself look like a very desirable bride." The detectives looked at her in a manner which stated, as plainly as words, that she couldn't ever look any other way. "I put on this new negligé and . . . and a new gown . . . and these white satin mules. Just before midnight I walked into this room—as though I were a model trying to joke to conceal a natural embarrassment. Then I saw him . . ."

"Did you touch him?"

"Naturally. I didn't see the gun at first. I thought perhaps he was ill . . . Then I telephoned the manager. He came up here for a few moments and then sent the house detective to stay with me until the police arrived."

"When did you notice that the brief case had been tampered with?"

"While I was waiting for you."

Marty Walsh said, "You were in the shower between eleven-thirty and eleven-fifty. Did anyone other than your husband enter the apartment during that time?"

"Yes . . . What I mean is: the answer has to be Yes. Someone killed him."

"But you saw no one—heard no one?"

"No. The shower was making a lot of noise."

Sergeant Mason said, "That seems to pinpoint the time of the killing, Lieutenant. Looks as though we'd better talk to some of the others."

The hotel manager, a tall, thin, sad-looking man, presented himself promptly. He said that he had known nothing until the operator switched Nancy Pegram's frantic call to his personal suite. Then, he said, he called the police and sent the house detective to stand guard. He had also issued orders that no member of the staff was to leave the hotel until the police had finished with them.

The detectives summoned the night maid, whose province was the sixth, seventh and eighth floors. She was nervous and frightened. She was about thirty years of age, of medium height and was considerably overweight without being downright fat.

"You straightened up these rooms and turned down the beds?" asked Marty.

"Yes, sir."

"What time?"

"I—I don't know for sure. A little after nine-thirty, I think."

"Your name is Bertha Kroner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where were you born?"

"Right here, sir. In Los Angeles."

"How many times were you in either of these rooms tonight?"

"Just that one time, sir."

"Did you hear the shower going?"

"Oh, no sir. There wasn't nobody here then."

"I mean the second time you were in. Let's say shortly after eleven-thirty."

"I—I wasn t in here only once."

Marty's instinct was working overtime. He bluffed magnificently. "You'll get farther by telling the truth, Bertha. We know you were in here at approximately eleven-forty."

"No . . . no . . ." Big tears streaked down her cheeks. "Who told you I was?"

"You were seen. Why didn't you report finding the body?"

"I never—" She dropped into a chair, cupped her heavy face in two big hands and started to sob. "He was lying right there on the floor when I come in. I didn't know he was dead. I got scared. I run right out."

"If you had fixed up the rooms a couple of hours before that, why did you return?"

"I don't know. I—"

"Murder is a tough rap, Bertha. If you've got any talking to do, you'd better do it now."

"Well," she said, "I *was* in here at eleven-forty. The shower was running in the other room. The door between these two rooms was closed, so I didn't actually see her. But I heard the shower. Then I seen him."

"What brought you in here?"

"This!" She probed into her ample bosom and brought forth a little jeweler's box. She started talking fast, hysterically, the

words tumbling over each other. "I never done nothing like this in all my life, Officer. I swear I didn't. When I was fixing things the first time, I seen it lying on top of the open suitcase. I figured it wouldn't be missed, or else they'd think they had lost it. So I took it, and then later I got scared. You've got to believe me. I took this brooch, and I come in to give it back and ask them please not to say nothing about it. But I didn't get no chance."

Marty said, "So you stole a piece of jewelry. And you came back in here while John Pegram was alone in this room and his wife was taking a shower. He refused to keep quiet about it. You saw the gun. You shot him."

"That's a lie! She was on her feet again, her voice high and shrill. "Yes, I took the brooch, but I never saw no gun and I didn't kill nobody. He was already dead when I come back."

Marty turned to Sergeant Walsh. "Take her away," he said. "Put her in a room with one of the uniformed boys. She's not to be questioned until I get around to her again."

Don left the room with Bertha Kroner in tow. Nancy Pegram looked at Walsh a long time and then shook her head. She said, "It doesn't seem quite right, Lieutenant. I know she stole the brooch and that she returned when I was taking my shower. She could have killed him."

"So what's wrong with that theory?"

"The brief case. When did she force that open—and why?"

He said, "That's just what I've been thinking, Mrs. Pegram. Of course, she could have been paid by some foreign espionage agent."

Nancy Pegram shook her head. "You've been seeing too much television, Lieutenant. Things like that don't really happen to everyday folks."

"Your husband's not average, Mrs. Pegram. He was a research man on an important government project."

She said, "There's still a flaw in your reasoning. I don't know what's missing from that brief case, or if anything is. But I *do* know that a lot of it is still there. How would a hotel maid know which papers to take and which to let alone?"

Marty shrugged. "You're very discouraging," he conceded. "Sure, I could build up an awful strong case against Bertha Kroner. And if it wasn't for the brief case, I'd have it already."

Sergeant Don Mason popped into the room. He said, "I brought the bell captain along, Lieutenant."

The bell captain had been christened Anthony Billings and was called Tony. He was thirty-four years of age, of slightly less

than medium height, and slender. In manner he was resentful, even a trifle pugnacious.

He gave his biographical background without being prompted. He said he'd been drafted early in World War II and had been in the Signal Corps where he had achieved the rank of staff sergeant. He had served in combat areas in the European Theater of Operations and had been stationed in Berlin for about six months after the end of hostilities. Having had some previous experience as a bellboy, he had qualified as bell captain at the Hollywood-McKinley early in 1946, and had been on the job ever since. Somewhat superciliously he offered to furnish a list of all his friends of both sexes. By the time he had finished talking, the two detectives were looking at him with profound distaste.

"Your attitude ain't nice, Tony," said Marty Walsh. "It ain't nice at all."

"Whatcha want me to do? Give you a sweet smile?"

"That'd help—so long as you got any teeth left."

Tony uttered a single dirty word. He said, "You wouldn't dare lay a finger on me. There's been too much stink already about the cops rough-housing suspects."

"What makes you think you're a suspect?"

"I ain't as dumb as I look. I got a pass key. I could get in here any time I was on the floor at least twice during the time you're interested in."

"How do you know what time that was?"

"Aaaah! come off it, Lieutenant. I know because I been hearing things downstairs."

"You were in the room alone, weren't you, Tony?"

"Sure. I brought in them roses over there."

"What time was that?"

"About nine-twenty."

"See anybody in here?"

"No. I knocked on both doors: seventeen and seven twelve. I thought I had seen Mr. and Mrs. Pegram go out. So I came in and fixed the flowers."

"Were you on the hall between eleven o'clock and midnight?"

"I already told you I was. I'm on all floors all the time."

"Why so busy if you're the bell captain? Why not let the regular bellboys answer the calls?"

"Shall I draw a picture? Okay. Lots of times when guests want service late at night, it means a party. That means big tips."

Marty Walsh pointed to the brief case with its battered lock. "Ever see that before?"

"I don't know. Maybe so, maybe not. I wouldn't remember."

"Did you break the lock?"

"What's that question for, Lieutenant? To make you feel

like a detective, or because you expect an answer?"

Walsh kept his temper under control. He said, "You can go now, Tony. But don't leave the hotel. We'll do some more talking later."

The bell captain departed with Sergeant Mason, swinging his shoulders arrogantly. Lieutenant Walsh leaned back in his chair and regarded Nancy Pegram with tired eyes. "In every case," he said, "there's at least one guy like that. They work on the premise that they'll never get a fair shake from any cop."

"Then you don't think . . ."

"I'm afraid I don't. I've got a feeling there's more to this than—"

As though in response to his unfinished sentence, the silence of the suite was suddenly shattered by a wild burst of jive. It seemed to come from the bedroom, but it reverberated from the walls and hammered against their eardrums. Walsh said, "What the—" and Nancy Pegram looked startled.

Both started searching for the source of the racket. And eventually they found it. It was a small but powerful clock radio concealed behind the dresser. It was one a.m. and it was obvious that the mechanism had been set to turn on the music from a station which had a disc jockey on duty at that hour. Marty hauled out the instrument, being careful not to touch any portion of the surface where fingerprints might have been left.

Nancy Pegram said, "A bridal-night gag. I have an idea that—"

"That what?"

"It could be Ivan," she stated. "It's the sort of thing he'd think was funny."

"By 'Ivan', you mean Ivan Gregory?"

"Yes."

"American-born son of Russian parents who were originally named Gregorovitch?"

She said, "That isn't fair, Lieutenant."

"Neither is murder. But if you're right about Ivan being our radio boy, he must be—or have been—in Los Angeles. Have you any idea where he usually stays when he visits here?"

"I believe so." She gave the name of a new, small hotel. Marty Walsh telephoned Wilshire Division. He talked to the watch commander and gave the important information about Ivan Gregory—without, however, giving any hint as to why he was wanted for questioning. Ten minutes later Wilshire reported that Gregory had been found sleeping peacefully—or appearing to do so—at his hotel, and that they'd bring him in as soon as he finished dressing. Walsh smiled his thanks at Mrs. Pegram.

"I don't wish anybody any hard luck," he said, "but Ivan

could be our man. I believe that the papers in that brief case will give us the motive for your husband's death. A research man would understand such things. He'd know just exactly what to look for, whereas a person such as Bertha Kroner or that snooty bell captain wouldn't. Now tell me this: What was the relationship between your husband and Gregory after you broke your engagement to Ivan and announced you were going to marry Pegram?"

"They remained close friends. Probably Ivan was never seriously in love with me, anyway. He was our best man when we were married this afternoon, and he probably flew up here just to pull this childish trick of hiding a radio in our room."

There was a knock on the door. It opened to admit two uniformed radio car officers and a third man whom Lieutenant Walsh identified as Ivan Gregory. The officers were thanked and dismissed. Walsh invited Gregory to be seated, and then informed him curtly that John Pegram had just been murdered.

Gregory took it big. He displayed all the emotions anyone could have anticipated. Then, when the atmosphere had cleared a trifle, he said, "I hid the radio behind the dresser. At that time, I thought it was funny. Now I realize that it was stupid."

Marty asked, "What time were you here?"

"About nine o'clock."

"How did you know you would not run into the Pegrams?"

"I telephoned first and was told they were out."

"How did you get into this suite?"

"Simple. There was a crowd at the desk when I got here. I knew what rooms they had reserved. I simply walked up to the clerk and asked for the key. I left about nine-fifteen."

"And turned the key in at the desk?"

"No-o . . . To tell you the truth, Lieutenant—I forgot to." He took the key to room seven ten out of his pocket and tossed it to Marty. "They usually have two keys to each room. That's probably why this one was never missed."

Marty said, "So if you had happened to return to this hotel around eleven-thirty you could have let yourself into this sitting room with that key, couldn't you?"

"Obviously. But I didn't."

Walsh picked up the brief case, and showed Gregory the broken lock. "Did you do that?" he inquired.

Ivan glanced at it, and then looked at the lieutenant with an expression of disgust. He said, "In the first place, I didn't. In the second place, if I had done it,

you can be sure it would be a neat, workmanlike job."

"Unless," countered Marty placidly, "unless you deliberately botched the job to make it look like you didn't do it. That would have been the clever way to figure."

Ivan Gregory glanced at Nancy and spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. "Looks like a guy can't win against these cops." He returned his attention to Lieutenant Walsh. "My family name originally was Gregorovitch. Does that make it plain that I'm a Red espionage agent?"

"It helps."

"I'd suggest then that you check with the FBI. Doesn't it occur to you that I would have been cleared before I was given my present job?"

"I've heard of lots of men who were cleared by FBI and who later changed their loyalties." Marty lighted a fresh cigarette. "Look, Mister," he said, "I'm not accusing you of anything. I'm just a journeyman cop trying to earn my wages. It's my job to find out what happened, when it happened and why it happened. I've got enough on you to book you, but it's against my principles to do that unless I think I can make it stick."

Ivan Gregory stared at him coldly. "Let's have it, Lieutenant."

"Okay. You are an ex-fiancé of Mrs. Pegram's: that presents the possibility of jealousy. You sneaked in here at—you say—nine o'clock. You planted the radio as a gag—again your version. You could have opened the brief case at that time. You're a scientist. Those sketches and mathematical calculations could have meant something to you, whereas to me, and to other persons I have interviewed, they would be just so much gibberish.

"You didn't turn in the key when you left the hotel. You could have come back between eleven and midnight while Mrs. Pegram was in the shower. There could have been a showdown between you and John Pegram. He could have accused you of rifling his brief case. There could have been a quarrel over Mrs. Pegram. You could have shot him."

The big, blond man turned to Nancy Pegram. He said, "Do *you* think I killed him?"

"Of course not," she answered. "I told the Lieutenant that idea was absurd."

"Thanks. What's next on the agenda, Lieutenant?"

"I don't know." Marty beckoned to Sergeant Don Mason and strolled with him into the bedroom. But before starting a conversation, Walsh made a meticulous inspection of the room. He looked into the hanging closets and pulled open the dresser drawers. He probed through Nancy's two open suitcases. He went into the bathroom and ex-

amined everything. Finally he said, "If a person was in that stall shower, Don, and it was running, they sure couldn't hear what was happening in the sitting room, especially if all doors were closed."

They returned to the sitting room. Sergeant Mason placed himself near the couch where Ivan Gregory and Nancy Pegram were sitting. Lieutenant Walsh seemed restless.

Keep it simple, he kept telling himself. Quit trying to figure it the hard way. What have you seen without understanding it?

He lighted a fresh cigarette from the butt of the one he was about to discard. When he spoke, his voice had an edge to it. He said, "Bring Bertha Kroner and Tony Billings in here, Don. It's time for all of us to have a talk."

Alone with Ivan Gregory and Nancy Pegram, Marty wasn't communicative. He rambled with apparent aimlessness through the two rooms of the bridal suite, trying to make up his mind. And then, finally, they were all together: Marty Walsh, Don Mason, one of the uniformed cops, Nancy Pegram, Ivan Gregory, Tony Billings and Bertha Kroner.

"What we're up against is this," stated Walsh in a flat expressionless voice. "Between eleven-thirty and midnight, when Mrs. Pegram was taking her shower, John Pegram would logically have been in this room. You—or you—or you . . ." he pointed at the three major suspects in turn, "could have come in here, quarreled with Pegram, killed him and walked out.

"There's one thing I want to repeat," continued Walsh. "I still connect the brief case and the murder. But I'll leave it to the Feds to discover whether anything has been taken from that brief case, and if so—how important it is. Me, I'll be content merely to snag the person who fired the bullet that killed John Pegram."

Walsh directed his attention to the group, rather than to an individual. "And now," he said, "the time has come for me to name the person who shot Pegram."

The silence was almost audible. Don Mason knew that Marty was studying the faces of the suspects for confirmation of a belief at which he already had arrived.

"The killer," stated Lieutenant Walsh calmly, "is *you!* I'm arresting you, Nancy Pegram, for the wilfull murder of your husband!"

Nancy Pegram did not move. Not by so much as the flicker of an eyelid did she betray what she was thinking. And when she spoke, her voice dripped with honey.

"What is this, Lieutenant?" she asked pleasantly. "A device

to lower the guard of the really guilty person?"

Marty shook his head. He said, "No, ma'am, it ain't. I'm not that smart. Would you like me to explain just what happened?"

"I'd be fascinated."

"As I said before, I'm not concerning myself with the part of the investigation which the FBI will eventually handle anyway. Just who employed you to probe for certain plans or documents in your husband's brief case, I don't know. But you can be sure, ma'am, that when the government men finish their investigation, they'll know the works. Just keep that in mind. All I'm talking about now is what happened, not *why* it happened.

"You and your husband," continued Walsh quietly, "checked in here around eight o'clock. You decided to go out for dinner. I don't question that you were hungry, but I don't think eating was your primary motive. I believe your thought was to conveniently leave your purse—to leave it somewhere far enough away to give you time to examine the contents of Pegram's brief case while you were alone.

"That's what happened. Of course, leaving your purse could have been an accident. But that isn't the way it adds up. You see, ma'am, from the minute I started talking to you, you had that brief case on your mind. You called my attention to it, you high-lighted it."

"Wouldn't that be rather silly if I were guilty?" she asked.

"No, ma'am. I'd have been bound to notice it sooner or later —so the smart thing was for you to mention it first.

"I believe that after you had returned to the hotel and had sent your husband back to the restaurant for your handbag, you opened the brief case. I think you used one of the instruments from that fancy manicure set I noticed on your dresser. It may interest you to know that our crime lab can establish for sure whether that was the implement used."

Nancy Pegram said, "It wouldn't prove that *I* used it."

Walsh shrugged. "By your own story, Mrs. Pegram, your husband returned with the purse about eleven o'clock. As nearly as we can time the killing, it happened about eleven-fifty. My belief is that John Pegram returned sooner than you expected, that he found you going through the brief case, and therefore suspected the truth about you."

The bride made an impatient gesture. "I'm not a lawyer," she said. "But I still think you'll have a hard time making this case stand up in Court."

Walsh rose and started for the bedroom. "I'd like you all to see for yourselves why I'm convinced that Mrs. Pegram is lying."

He led the way into the bath-

room. "Mrs. Pegram said she took a shower," he reminded his listeners. "I ask you first to examine the hotel soap in this bathroom. It hasn't been touched. Neither has the fancy soap she had put on the dresser. Look at the bath towels: They're all dry, none of them have been used. When a person showers they use towels to dry themselves. Mrs. Pegram used neither: therefore I say she never took a shower."

"But the maid heard—"

"Of course she did, Mrs. Pegram. She heard the shower running. That was after you and your husband quarreled. You knew that what you had to do must be done quickly. You went into your bathroom and turned on the shower to cover the noise of the gun. You came back into the sitting room and shot him. Then you returned to your room and let the shower continue to run for a while, until you could be certain that nobody had heard the gun.

"During that time Bertha Kroner entered the sitting room and found your husband's body. But you probably didn't know she had been there. Finally, when you felt safe, you turned off the shower and a few minutes later you telephoned the desk."

Marty went on unemotionally, in the manner of a teacher explaining a difficult problem: "I'll diagram it simply and clearly, folks. Mrs. Pegram claims to have been taking a shower at the time when her husband was killed. She did not take a shower. The shower was running. She turned it on."

He drew a deep breath. "Now, then, I am merely making this assertion: When a person turns on a shower and doesn't use it, there has to be a reason. The reason in this case was the protection afforded by the noise of running water. Mrs. Pegram had a good idea. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't quite *good* enough."

He stopped talking. For the first time Nancy Pegram looked frightened. She glanced at the others. In every eye there was belief and accusation. The steel core of her self-control snapped.

"You win, Lieutenant," she said quietly. "If these people all believe you—if my friend Ivan believes you—then I'm afraid a jury would believe you, too."

They prepared to take her downtown to Homicide. For perhaps half a minute, Lieutenant Marty Walsh and Sergeant Don Mason stood together near one of the windows.

Don was watching Nancy Pegram. "Nice going, Marty," he commented. "But I was thinking—"

"Thinking what?"

"I was thinking that John Pegram was robbed of a mighty interesting honeymoon."

the vanishing man

by . . . William MacHarg

Officer O'Malley said: "A lady got knocked off. Seeing her didn't tell us nothing." But that called for a grain of salt!

"A LADY NAMED Mrs. Markin got knocked off," O'Malley said. "I don't know much about it yet, except it happened where she lived. I got to go look at her and then go out there. A cop don't get much chance, so it'll probably turn out a routine case, or they wouldn't put me on it."

We went and looked at her. She was a housewifely-seeming person some twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. I could guess she had lived a domestic sort of life. She had been beaten and choked to death. There was nothing distinctive about her. But I liked her looks.

"Seeing her don't tell us nothing," O'Malley remarked. There is a million dames like her in this town."

We went out to where it had happened. It was a huge apartment building on the West Side with half a dozen entrances. We found the right entrance and then the right apartment. There wasn't much sign of murder in the place. There were some cops there.

"Got anything on this?" O'Malley asked them.

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"We got it all."

"That's good news. It saves a lot of work. How was it?"

"This Mrs. Markin had drawn a bunch of money out of the savings bank. We found the bankbook. She had the money here in the apartment. A guy named Eddie Davit that came here sometimes to see her came here and knocked her off."

"Why do you think Davit done it?"

"The neighbors all say that. We sent a call out to pick up the guy."

"What did she draw that money for?" said O'Malley.

"We don't know that."

"How do you know the dough was here?"

"She told the dame across the hall. A motherly-looking woman asked us to come in. There were half a dozen neighbors gathered in her living room.

"How come you found that dead lady?" O'Malley asked her crisply.

"Her husband tried to telephone her. They didn't have a phone, so when he wanted to speak to her he called her on mine. I went across the hall to call her. She didn't answer but I was sure that she was in. So I tried the door and found it was unlatched. Then I went in and found her. I called some of the neighbors and the janitor and went back and told her husband. The janitor called the police."

"What made you so sure that she was in?"

"Because of the money. She told me this noon she had too much money in the house. She didn't say how much, but I knew she wouldn't go away and leave it."

"You one of them that figures this Davit done it?"

"I know he did." The other women all nodded. "We all know he did. He came here to see her when her husband wasn't here, and he was here this afternoon. Some children saw him. Besides, she wouldn't have let a stranger in."

They gave us a description of Eddie Davit. It was a good description. We went around and rang the bells of some of the other apartments and talked with the people. They all knew Davit by sight and name and gave us the same description.

"This looks remarkably simple, O'Malley," I remarked. "Davit will be easy to pick up. He has a personal peculiarity. Heavy-set and black-haired does not mean much, because too many men can be described like that. But he had a stiff left arm which he can only bend part way, and that will mark him out in a crowd."

"Yeah, sure it would."

The cops told us Markin was at the station house and we went there to see him.

"I can't understand this," he

told us brokenly. "Why should anybody kill Annette?"

"It looks like some guy had about a thousand reasons. Where was you when this happened?" O'Malley asked.

"At the real estate office where I work."

"I guess you got some witnesses."

"I don't need them. But I've got a dozen."

"Okay. We just check up on them things. What did your wife draw all that money for?"

"That's another strange thing. I didn't know she'd drawn it. The police say she did. I can't think of anything she'd want it for."

"How long you known this Davit?"

"Several months. I met him at a ball game. We ran into one another a couple of times and got acquainted and one night, and several other times, I took him home to dinner. I saw him other places and he and my wife and I went to picture shows together."

"You know he come to see your wife when you wasn't there?"

"I didn't. The neighbors say he did, but I can't quite believe it."

"Where does the guy live?"

"I've told the police. He lives in the Bronx somewhere near One Seventy-seventh Street and Jerome Avenue. He used to work for the telephone company but they laid him off and lately he's been looking for a job."

"You think he killed your wife?"

"I don't know anything about it, but it seems it must have been him."

O'Malley went in and talked with the captain, who had the bankbook, and afterwards we went to the bank to check on Mrs. Markin's drawing the money. I waited while O'Malley talked with one of the vice presidents.

"She drew the dough all right," he said when he rejoined me.

"Well, you guessed this one right," I told him. "The case is routine. Davit came there and learned she had the money and he killed her for it."

"Yeah? You tell me how it's routine. This dame saves her money, a few dollars at a time, without ever drawing out a penny. In about ten years she's got three thousand dollars. All at once she draws out a thousand bucks and there don't nobody, even her husband, know the reason.

"You can't tell nothing by how a woman looks, but she don't look to me like no dame that might be paying blackmail, or like one that would have some love affair. The neighbors think she maybe did with this guy Davit. Well, supposing she was

figuring to run off with him, would she draw out part of her money or would she draw it all? But still she gets knocked off."

"Those things don't matter," I informed him. "You'll learn them later. The important thing is you know Davit killed her."

"If there is any such guy."

I was astonished.

"They ought to lock you up anyway," I told him. "A dozen people at that apartment house have known the man for a couple of months."

I didn't see O'Malley for a couple of days. The papers said Davit was being sought and kept merely repeating that. The third day I found O'Malley at headquarters.

"How is it?" I asked.

"How's what? You mean about Davit? There isn't no guy named Davit ever work for the telephone company. There ain't no guy by that name ever lived in that neighborhood in the Bronx. In my opinion there ain't no such guy."

"This is the worst example of police inefficiency I have ever known," I told him. O'Malley grinned.

We were leaving headquarters when we met Markin coming in.

"Have you got anything yet?" he asked.

"Not a thing, brother."

"It seems incredible," Markin declared. "They ought to put better detectives on it."

"I guess we're dumb. How much money was it your wife drew out of the bank?"

"The police say she drew a thousand dollars."

"The bank says she drew two thousand."

"What!" Markin exclaimed.

"I don't know only what they told me."

O'Malley was going out to lunch. I didn't go with him. The next day he called me up.

"You ever visit Brooklyn?" he inquired.

"Not by choice. I've been there."

"If you'd like to see what it looks like now, I'll pick you up."

He stopped for me with a police car. A plain-clothes cop and another cop in uniform were with him. We drove to Brooklyn and parked the car and left the two cops in it and went into a drugstore.

O'Malley showed his shield to the proprietor. "You got a billhead around?" he asked.

The druggist gave him one of his billheads and O'Malley made out a bill for a dollar and seventy-five cents to somebody named Harrison. Then we went around the corner into an apartment building and went upstairs and rang the bell of a second-floor apartment. A man inside asked who it was, but didn't open the door.

"I got a bill for you from the druggist on the corner."

"I don't owe no money to the druggist."

"Sure you do."

The man opened the door. He was heavy-set and black-haired but he didn't have a stiff left arm. He looked at the bill.

"You're nuts!" he told us. "This is made out to Harrison. My name is Hamison."

"Sure. I wanted to hear you tell that, fellow."

Two plain-clothes caps were coming up the stairs and another one was descending from the floor above. Hamison tried to shut the door but we forced our way in. He fought, but the cops put handcuffs on him. They searched the place and found nine hundred dollars. Then we went back to the car and took Hamison to headquarters.

Markin was there, and a pretty dark-haired girl about nineteen years old, and they all went into the inspector's room. I waited and thought it over until O'Malley finally came out.

"Is Hamison's other name Davit, O'Malley?" I inquired.

"That's right."

"He's the one who murdered Mrs. Markin?"

"Right again."

"Well," I said, "this isn't very understandable. He must have used the name Davit only that once or you would have traced him easier. But he'd known the Markins for two months. He can't have known two months ago that Mrs. Markin would draw out the money. So why did he give a false name? Or was it blackmail? Or was there really something going on between Hamison and Mrs. Markin? Has Markin any explanation of the affair?"

"He ain't saying a thing, because we've locked him up."

I thought about that. "Oh!" I comprehended.

"Don't be that thick in the head. This Markin planned the murder. He wanted to get rid of his wife. He met Hamison at a ball game, just like he said, and found out he was a hard egg, and proposed Hamison should knock off his wife. Hamison bargained he'd do it for a thousand bucks. Markin didn't have no thousand, but his wife had, and Markin's a smart guy and figured to make his wife pay for her own murder."

"But," I objected, "why did they wait two months? Every time Hamison was seen as Davit made his detection more probable."

"It took that long to get Mrs. Markin to draw out the money. Markin told his wife he had a chance for a real estate deal, done on the quiet with a guy named Eddie Davit, that would net a lot.

"At first she wouldn't do it. Then she wanted to meet Davit.

Then she wanted all the particulars. Hamison, as Davit, had to see her quite a few times to tell her more about it. Well, finally she said she would. She was to go to the bank and draw the money and Markin and Hamison would call for her and they'd go to a lawyer and sign up the papers.

"Markin wouldn't even go to the bank with her, because he didn't want to appear in it. She drew the money and called Markin up from a pay station to say she'd got it. Then Markin called Hamison up and Hamison went and knocked her off and took the dough. Then Markin tried to get her on the phone to show he was in the clear."

"It was cleverly planned," I said. "But you seem to have seen through it."

"Yeah? When? I didn't see nothing except that this Davit guy looked phony. Everybody that seen the guy, even if it was only once, knew he had a stiff arm. A guy with a stiff arm don't go around making a show of it; he tries to hide it. Everybody knew his name was Eddie Davit like he was running for office. A bonehead guy does a murder and then disguises himself to try to get away. But a smart guy does the murder in disguise and escapes by going back to himself. I figured this guy's name wasn't Davit and he didn't have no stiff arm, but that didn't leave us any way to trace him. A heavy-set guy with black hair don't mean nothing."

"I see."

"We wondered did Markin know more than he told, but we couldn't find no sign of it. He was too well covered up. The neighbors said he and his wife got on all right. His wife didn't carry no insurance. We couldn't find he took no interest in any other woman. But finally I seen we wouldn't never solve the case without he had been in it."

"Wait a minute!" I said. "What Mrs. Markin drew out of the bank was just one thousand, wasn't it?"

"You got it. I seen them people at the bank and said, if someone asked 'em, would they say two thousand and they said they wouldn't. But I told 'em we wouldn't never solve the case unless they did, so then they said they would. I knew Markin would believe the bank, no matter what the police or his wife or anybody else had told him.

"If he was innocent it would not hurt him. But if he was in on it, he was a smart guy and a crook, and a smart crook is always worrying and suspicious somebody is putting something over on him. So Markin checked at the bank. He and Hamison had agreed they wouldn't communicate with each other, but when the bank said two thous-

and, Markin called Hamison. He had to have him called to a saloon to answer the phone, and that give us time to trace the call and learn who answered. And Markin did more than that.

"You seen the girl them cops had here? She's why he wanted to get rid of his wife. The girl didn't know there was to be a murder. Markin was so smart he hadn't been near her since he first planned it. But Hamison knew about the girl. She was with Markin the day the guys first met. So when Hamison denied there was two thousand, Markin got more suspicious still and went to see the girl to find if she knew anything about it. Of course he was being followed, and while I and you were over in Brooklyn picking up Hamison, some other cops picked up Markin and the girl."

I thought it over again. "It was a shrewd trap," I commented.

"It worked. A cop's job ain't very tough when once you come to think of it. It ain't no trouble for us to catch the dumb guys, and the smart guys catch themselves for us."

---

a sort of a story

by . . . Ben Hecht

The little man was pathetically mixed up. But his worst mistake wasn't a criminal one at all.

A LITTLE MAN who looked like a carpenter followed the cell-keeper out into the steel-walled anteroom. It was in the basement of the detective bureau. In the cells which filled one-half of the basement the police held offenders captured in Chicago and wanted in other cities, and some who were awaiting transportation to the penitentiary at Joliet.

The basement was gloomy. The daylight came in faintly through a single-grated window above the cell-keeper's desk which was in the anteroom. The desk was covered with dust and empty. The cell-keeper sat in a rickety chair in front of it and slept through the long day. He was a heavy, white-haired man in a faded uniform. He had once been a police sergeant, but had been shot by a young hoodlum and incapacitated.

A few electric lights burned dimly in the depths of the anteroom. The little man who followed the cell-keeper stopped in the center of the room and shifted uneasily on his soles. His clothes were wrinkled and his

Ben Hecht has scored so many brilliant triumphs as a novelist, Broadway playwright and independent Hollywood producer that we may sometimes forget that he began his writing career as a Chicago newspaper man. Few professions offer a writer of discernment a better opportunity to explore life's incongruities and tragic ironies, illustrated in a story such as this.

collar crumpled. The cell-keeper growled something unintelligible and returned to his desk. He folded his hands gently on his paunch and resumed his interrupted slumber.

A young man who was a newspaper reporter stepped out of the shadow of a basement upright and approached the little man.

"Are you Mr. Harry Brown?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm from the—" And the reporter named his newspaper. "I've come to see what we can do for you. My name is Graves."

Graves intended to do nothing for Mr. Harry Brown. He lighted a cigarette and stared out of the grated window. He was vastly disinterested in the little man who was weaving about in front of him.

He was thinking at the moment that if the little man would tell his story quickly he would have time to browse in the second hand book shop around the corner. He would have preferred to have the little man refuse to talk. Such stubbornness right from the start would have given him more time in the second-hand book shop.

He was interrupted in his minor meditations by the little man clutching his arm. He felt fingers trembling eagerly through his coat sleeve.

"Mr. Graves—"

The reporter turned and said: "All right, let's go over here." He moved away from the cell-keeper's desk.

"Now," he said, "tell me your story if you want to. We'll see what we can do to help you. You were arrested last night," he threw in helpfully, calculating as he did so that if the little man would begin with last night he might get through the thing in a few minutes.

The little man gulped. He had a long neck and his face, which was vaguely old and full of little crooked lines, was half in shadows as he turned furtively toward the cell-keeper's desk.

"My name ain't Harry Brown," he said.

"Never mind that," Graves said. "Just tell us your story and —we'll see what we can do for you."

He had resigned himself. This was quite obviously one of those incidents which could not be avoided. Sometimes it was a stubborn fool lingering on the point of death and you waited, fuming and cursing, not daring to leave the hospital in order that you might get right on the phone to the city desk the instant it happened.

Sometimes it was a woman with a divorce complaint. Sometimes a conceited jackass who kept you fretting while he prepared some senseless statement. Sometimes—good Lord! Graves glowered down upon the little

man. Instinct warned him that the second-hand book shop had become impractical.

"My name ain't Harry Brown," the man began, and then said: "I—I—I—" and stopped short.

Graves sighed and flicked his cigarette. He fumbled around in his pocket until he encountered a clipping. It was the wrong clipping. It concerned a Red Cross chapter meeting in a fashionable residence.

He swore and tore it up. In another pocket he found another clipping. He looked at it intently and then said: "The paper this morning had a story about your arrest. See? It says right here that you escaped from Joliet about three years ago after a ten year stretch and that you got married last week. You might tell me—"

The little man interrupted him. "That's it," he gulped. "I'll tell you—"

Again his fingers sought the reporter's sleeve and he seemed to be steadying himself in the gloom.

"My name ain't Harry Brown," he began again.

Graves frowned and relit his cigarette. He found himself meditating upon the stupidity of the race in general. If the man had a story to tell, why didn't he tell it. What, in the name of the seven gods of idiocy, was the object of reiterating the fact that his name wasn't—

"No, my name ain't Harry Brown," pursued the little man, and began to cry bitterly.

Graves was always irritable in the presence of what he often referred to in his copy as the human drama. He disliked talking to people who wept and clung to him, although such unpleasant ordeals was often a part of the job.

"My name's Smith," whispered the little man, and remained trembling after the revelation. "Bill Smith."

"All right," said the reporter. "If you'll tell me your story, Mr. Smith, I'll see what we can do for you."

Graves tried another cigarette and conceived the idea of sometime writing a magazine story about the heavy, white-haired cell-keeper who was sleeping in his rickety chair at the other end of the basement.

"I was sent up," said Mr. Bill Smith, "for murder. I was only a kid then, and I did ten years."

Graves removed a few sheets of white copy paper and wrote with the stub of a pencil, *"Bill Smith, ten years."*

"Yes?" he inquired.

"You remember the escape Henderson and I pulled three years ago?"

Graves wrote *"escape, Henderson, three years."* He nodded, "Go on."

"Well," said the little man, talking in a whisper as if the

whole matter were a great secret, "I came to Chicago and changed my name. That's how I happen to be Harry Brown. It was after listening to a song I heard in the pen."

"What song?" demanded Graves abruptly. Here was a feature, if he handled it right.

"I—I—"

The little man thought deeply and then whispered in what was supposed to be a tune: "Every Sunday I go down to that old Long Island barbicue—"

He paused. Graves was writing swiftly the words of the song. "All right, go on now."

The little man seemed to be confused. He stared blankly at his questioner and then reached for this sleeve again.

"I came to Chicago and changed my name."

The great, the colossal dullness of the little man was fast removing the reporter's patience.

"All right," he almost shouted. "Go on."

"Well," said the little man eagerly, "I changed my name and I got a job in a piano factory. I got a job in a piano factory and worked for three years and never took a day off, and I got promoted three times. I got promoted three times and I was making—"

The little man's dovetail style of address brought a desperate frown to Graves' face.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "If you don't hurry I'll miss the edition of the paper and we won't get your story in. Go on tell me your story as briefly as you can. I've got to beat it back to my office—" And then he added automatically, "We'll see how we can help you."

"Oh," said the little man, "all right. I'll begin at the beginning."

He wiped his eyes with a clean handkerchief; then blew his nose. "I met her there and I got going around with her. I didn't tell her."

"Who'd you meet—where?" Graves interrupted irritatedly.

"Lily Schlosser, my wife. She was a stenographer in the company. I used to see her when I brought the bills into the office. We got to talking, and then I went around with her. She was the first one I'd met in three years I'd talked to. I'd kept away from people, never talking to women, because I was afraid I might give myself away.

"But she was nice to me and didn't mind my being a little old and plain looking. She was nice to me. And I hadn't met anybody nice—I was in for ten years. I had ten more to serve when I got away. I hadn't met anybody nice, anybody nice to me for all that time. I hadn't met anybody nice for all that time, and I was glad—"

The little man had evidently relapsed into his peculiar style of

diction, and the reporter looked up from his copy paper. He had written down the words, *"Lily Schlosser, three years—lonely as hell, hell, hell!"*

"Go on," he exclaimed jerkily.

"I didn't tell her."

"Didn't tell her what?" demanded Graves after waiting all of twenty seconds for the information.

"I didn't tell her," said the little man. "I didn't tell her I was—"

The little man resumed his crying.

"You mean you didn't tell her you were a convict, and an escaped convict at that," said Graves, and with a sense of rare penetration warming him to his task. "You mean you married the girl, letting her believe you hadn't ever—"

"That's it," said the little man. "I was going to tell her, but I kept putting it off. She was fine to me. I kept putting it off. I was going to tell her. I was going to tell her on our wedding night, but I put it off. On our wedding night I put it off."

"And she didn't know anything about it when the police came in and arrested you last night?" said Graves with the elation of one unraveling unfathomable mysteries.

"No," said the little man. "I was in my slippers reading the paper and she was out in the kitchen putting the dishes away when there was a knock on the door.

"I jumped up. 'Who's there?' I asked. Somebody said, 'Open the door.' I knew who it was and what he wanted. I opened the door and he came in. I asked him to let me say goodby to my wife.

"He said all right. So I went in the kitchen and said goodby. I didn't have much time. I didn't have much time. I said goodby—"

The little man had struck a track again. Graves wrote down the words, *"Goodby, kitchen, slippers, tragedy."*

"Say," cried the little man suddenly. "Will you write it so's to tell her—so's to let her know about it. I wasn't fooling her. But she was the only one who'd been nice to me. I had a good job and planned to settle down for the rest of my life. I was only a kid when I was sent up. And I didn't think any one would find me out and run me down. I didn't think they'd run me down, and I was going to make good.

"I was going to make good. Will you tell her I wasn't fooling her and that I'm all right. She'll hear about me being a murderer and she'll shiver and stop loving me. Tell her—tell her—"

The little man had hit his track hard. He threatened to go round and round in circles.

"Go on," prompted Graves.

"Tell her," said the little man, "my—my name's Bill Smith. I

was always wanting to tell her my real name. I was always thinking of myself as Bill Smith and having to listen to her say Harry to me. Tell her"—the little man clutched hard at the sleeve—"tell her to love Bill Smith."

He said the word with a certain fury, as if they were wrong, desperate words.

Graves wrote down *"Bill Smith"* and shook his head.

"When are they taking you back?" he asked.

Just then the door leading into the basement from above opened and the lieutenant of detectives appeared.

"Harry Brown," he cried out.

The little man jumped. He whispered again to the newspaperman: "Tell her to write to me. Will you? Please. I'll wait for a letter. I thought she'd come down, but she don't know where I am or she'd come down. Tell her I wasn't fooling her. But—tell her my name's Bill Smith."

"Harry Brown," cried the lieutenant again, and the little man who looked like a carpenter stepped out of the shadows of the basement and approached him.

He turned once and looked back at the reporter, his eyes streaming with tears, his face working crazily. He apparently was sobbing in the manner of a child.

"All right, Brown," said the lieutenant, "the van's waiting."

He meant the police van was waiting to take the little man to the railroad station where he would be put on a train and sent to Joliet.

The little man, just as he was following the lieutenant up the stairs, turned and cried out: "Hey, wait a minute!"

The lieutenant swore and the little man dashed back to where Graves was endeavoring to light another cigarette.

"Tell her," he cried fiercely, "not to try to see me for the first six months. They'll put me in solitary for the first six months. They'll put me in solitary, and—and tell her after that to come to see me."

He followed the lieutenant up the stairs. Graves wrote down on his copy paper, *"solitary six months,"* and thrust the sheets into his pocket.

"Go out and see the girl, of course," said the city editor a few minutes later over the phone. "You've got plenty of time. And hurry in."

Graves went out to see the girl. The house in which the little man had moved after his marriage was empty. He fumed at this, but found out the address of the bride's mother. He went there.

Here he found the girl. She had been crying. She wouldn't speak to him at first, but a tall, pale faced young man thrust him-

self out of another room and said, "It's all right. We're going to have the wedding annulled. You see, Lily did it out of spite—married him out of spite against me. Didn't you?"

The girl nodded her head and looked at the pale-faced youth with a furtive smile.

"I was mad," she said.

"Well, we've made up. So if you're putting anything in the paper, say how we've made up and are going to get married. We've got the house and everything where this jail-bird lived in."

"I see," said Graves. He smiled and thanked the pale-faced youth; and as he hurried toward a bus he wrote down on the copy paper the words, *"Tears, furniture, romance."*

He broke into a run, an old elation for his work returning. The time hadn't been wasted.

After all, he had a sort of story.

---

the plum-colored corpse

by . . . Van Wyck Mason

There's a legendary glow about Southern hospitality when it runs true to form. But Captain North walked into a nest of vipers.

THE DECREPIT car was rattling along so comfortably beneath the eerie banners of Spanish moss that Captain Hugh North relaxed. Presently he was moved to reflect yet again upon a pair of singularly dissimilar letters which, received two days earlier, had headed him for South Carolina. There was no need for him to pull out and re-read Virginia Seabrook's totally unexpected invitation. He knew its contents by heart. She had written:

"Dear Captain North:

It was such a pleasure to meet you at Iris Brandon's house party. I was ever so fascinated with the stories you told me and the places you've been to. You really have a wonderful life and such a fine, worthwhile career.

Now I guess I'd better get practical. Didn't you say you are taking your vacation round this time? I think so, so I'm

---

Van Wyck Mason's Captain North has a genius for keeping readers on the edges of their chairs while engaged in investigating murder in the protectorate of Jonkhar and Mr. Mason can just as brilliantly thrill us with a novel of the "River War" in the West of 1862, when the Union was trying to split the Confederacy in twain. Here the redoubtable Captain and his famed creator join forces in a deep South murder mystery that is a spellbinder indeed. . . .

---

hoping you'll spend part of it with us. It would be a real treat to show you 'Magnolia Hill.' Besides I'd like to continue that conversation we had out in the moonlight in the Brandon's garden. I do hope you'll be terribly sweet and accept and I might even be able to furnish you with more excitement and mystery than you'll find in the north woods. *Please* come.

Cordially,
Virginia Seabrook."

And there was that other note, less pleasant, but equally intriguing. Someone had, with considerable neatness and patience, snipped from a magazine words and letters which, pasted on ordinary yellow duplicate paper read:

"Hugh North:
Mind your own busness and keep away from the Seabrook plantation if you value your life. This is no joke."

Of course, there had been no signature. In fact, the only things the two missives had in common were identical postmarks. Both had been mailed in Charleston on the same day and at the same hour, a fact which had given him, as the French say, *"Furieusement à penser."*

So here was Captain North of G-2, U. S. Army, jolting along a drowsy South Carolina lane with a hastily packed bag at his feet and a strictly utilitarian .32 nestling beneath his left arm. While yielding to the ancient vehicle's lurches he tugged his short black mustache and considered the vaguely disquieting fact that when the train rumbled into Queen's Oak, that somnolent little flag station mentioned in Virginia Seabrook's ecstatic telegram, there had been no car from Magnolia Hill to meet him. A half hour wait had produced no conveyance—so he ended by hiring this gaunt sharecropper to undertake the four mile trip to Magnolia Hill.

"Yessuh," that worthy drawled. "Ol' Mist' Seabrook, he own near half this county now. Jest like the Prenderburys used to."

"Prenderburys, eh? Who owned it before them?"

Tobacco-dimmed teeth glinted, "Injuns, I reckon. Ain't no 'befo' the Prenderburys' 'round these parts." There was a high meaningless chuckle in his voice.

The car slowed to negotiate a hairpin bend then, with the hardy abandon of a whippet tank, plunged into a gulley dug by some torrential summer rain. The jolt threw North sidewise so violently that his hat was sent spinning. Simultaneously, the staccato report of a rifle drew reverberations from live oaks towering all about and a bullet sang over North's shoulder to

flick a neat, bright-rimmed hole in the car's side.

Artistically, convincingly, Captain North slumped onto the floor at the same time snatching out the .32. Nevertheless, another report cracked out and this time the windshield shattered with a brittle jangle as, amid a sunlit cloud of red dust, the car went careening over into the ditch. The instant its wheels stopped turning, North utilized the billowing dust to slither into the underbrush lining this lonely thoroughfare.

To his surprise, the gaunt share-cropper had not been killed, and was not even terror-stricken. He only stood up on the front seat cursing a blue streak and shaking his gnarled fist at a clump of second growth pines across the road.

"Hey, mister, don't git scairt," he shouted. "Reckon that wuz just one o' the Pearce boys shootin' turkeys out of season."

"If they generally shoot turkeys hereabouts with high-powered rifles," North acidly remarked, "everything's all right. But if they don't, I wouldn't get too interested in yonder clump of pines."

"Rifle?" The hungry looking share-cropper paused with mechanical abruptness and bent to inspect the hole in his windshield.

"Why, why, damned ef that ain't a bullet hole! Well, jest the same he's goin' to pay for my windshield!"

"No, he's not," North snapped. "He's gone. Hear him?"

Faint, but quite perceptible was the faint crackle as of someone hurrying through not very distant underbrush.

"There another road near here?" queried the Northener.

"Yep. T'other side of yonder ridge — leads to Charleston. Fork's a piece ahead." The share-cropper's red-rimmed eyes narrowed and he seemed to arrive at a conclusion. "Say, Mister, I ain't got nobody down on me so I reckon it must ha' been *you* they was shootin' at."

Casting a suddenly wary look at the pine woods, the sharecropper suddenly shoved North's bag onto the roadside. "I'll jest trouble you fer two bucks. I ain't goin' no further."

Since no persuasion short of violence could alter the share-cropper's decision, Hugh North very shortly found himself standing beside the road and regretfully watching a comet's tail of dust recede in the direction of Queen's Oak. During a long moment he deliberated. Then, leaving his bag where it was, he eased his cut-down .32 in its holster and went over to the pine clump.

"Um," he murmured to himself. "Our pal fired two shots. Do you suppose, he could have been just a mite careless?" All

the time keeping an eye open for the least untoward movement, North commenced a painstaking reconnaissance of the sniper's position.

At the end of several minutes he retrieved a spent cartridge case from a tangle of myrtle and to his astonishment noted that it fitted a .22 high-powered rifle. Such a weapon he knew was capable of developing terrific velocity with a minimum of recoil, a fact which he labeled with a bright red tag and filed for later consideration. More thoughtfully he resumed his survey of the area. But unfortunately the summer had been both hot and dry and the ground recorded little save a single small and indistinct footprint.

"Apparently the writer of that second letter really meant business," he murmured transferring his .32 into a side coat pocket before hiding his suitcase beside the road.

Quail were raising their melodious calls on all sides and the sun had swept out of sight behind a series of towering live oaks when, some five minutes later, a roadster came roaring into sight, spewing up furious billows of dust.

Reaching a decision, Captain North stepped suddenly into the road and signaled the driver to stop. Once the motorist's brakes had squealed to a halt, North found himself regarding a long-limbed young woman very cool and trim in a smart little sports hat and an effectively tight bouclé dress. Promptly he noticed that this girl with the copper-hued hair wasn't merely looking at him. She was observing him from dusty shoes to equally dusty panama.

Her eyes, large and a trifle heavy-lidded, widened as she queried coldly, "What do you mean by stoppin' me? What do you want?"

Hugh North standing very tall and brown-faced beside the roadster flashed a singularly winning smile. "You see, there seems to be a lamentable dearth of taxis around here. I was wondering whether you'd consider giving this lonely wayfarer a lift? My name is North."

"North?" The girl at the wheel knit her brows, as if she were testing the name. "You are not from around heah, are you?"

"No, afraid not. I'm down here on a visit."

"But surely, you aren't walkin' for pleasure in that rig?"

"Hardly," Captain North's rather Indian-like face broke into a smile which held the infectious quality of a laugh. "Some pot-hunter got careless and a couple of his bullets struck the car I'd hired. My driver was fool enough to take it seriously and turned back. So," he shrugged,

"I was doing a bit of shank's mare."

"Shots—what kind of shots?" The red haired girl's manner was careless but there was more than casual interest beneath the surface of her words.

"Don't know—sounded a bit like a rifle, though."

The girl wrinkled a delightfully piquant little nose. "You'll be fo'min' a dreadful opinion of Southern hospitality, Mr. North, so I reckon I had better take pity on you. Where are you goin'?"

"I was on my way to Magnolia Hill. You know where it is?"

"Oh!" A fluid mask seemed to drop over her delicate features, dusted with gold-brown like a bee's wing. "So, *you're* it!"

"It?"

"Yes, Ginny's big surprise!" Soft laughter echoed among the ragged gonfalons of Spanish moss. "She—she's kept us all guessin'."

" 'Fraid I'm not going to live up to such a dramatic build-up."

"Somehow, I think you will, Mr. North." Deliberately her look engaged and held his, asking a hundred silent questions. "Jump in and we'll go back for your baggage. By the way, I'm Stephanie Bartram, Ginny's stepsister."

"I thought you were a hold-up man, for a fact," she said, once North had settled in the seat beside her.

"Do you have many? I thought this road was the most peaceful thing I'd seen in years."

A momentary tenseness gripped the Bartram girl's expression. "Generally it's right quiet, but just now what with crop failures and the hard times, there's been some lawlessness, I'm afraid."

It was when he got out to reclaim his suitcase, that Hugh North for the first time noticed the existence of several badly pulled threads in his rescuer's bouclé skirt. Then another item caught his eye. Above one ankle a raw, red scratch was bleeding through the girl's stocking. Yet the silken fabric was intact.

"So, you're goin' to stay with us," Stephanie murmured, expertly backing the car about. "My goodness, it'll be right excitin' to have a real live Yankee at Magnolia Hill." She treated him to a warm wide-eyed glance, "You are in the—the brokerage business?"

"I wish I were," he evaded. "But tell me, didn't Miss Seabrook get my telegram last night at Magnolia Hill?"

" '*Miss*' Seabrook?" The girl seemed a trifle startled but hurried on. "Oh-h of course she didn't get it, or we'd have had you met at the station. Reckon old Dixon must have lost it. He's so forgetful. I don't see why Scott doesn't get rid of him."

For some little time, the car

sped smoothly along through a countryside of increasing charm. Now its tires rattled on a plank bridge above a drowsy emerald hued streamlet to the annoyance of many snowy egrets wading in hopes of an incautious frog or minnow and now the rather sombre pine woods opened to disclose vistas of long-abandoned rice fields.

"You spoke of 'the others' a while back," North said. "Do I gather I have been invited to a house party?"

"Yes. Sort of. Only close friends of the family," the girl replied. "You see Scott—Daddy's planning to marry again next month. He's givin' a dinner tonight for Mrs. Lawton."

"Mrs. Lawton?" Sensing a tinge of resentment in his companion's voice, North lingered on the name with elaborate casualness.

"Yes, Lucretia's a widow. She comes from Charleston. Scott fell in love with her last fall." The girl's slim shoulders rose in a little shrug. "So that's that, I reckon. Besides you, there'll be Scott's two partners, Mr. Jameson and Cliff."

"Cliff?"

"Clifford Rowan," the girl amplified curtly. "He's a cousin of Ginny's. Then there'll be Uncle Bill, and yo' humble chauffeur. Your most humble chauffeur!"

"Yes. You're Miss Seabrook's half sister?"

"No, step-sister. Ginny is a darling!" Nothing but genuine enthusiasm seemed to tinge the Bartram girl's declaration. "Don't you agree?"

"She's very attractive," North cautiously admitted.

"Attractive!" laughed the girl. Then, as if struck by a sudden realization, she flung him a puzzled glance. "I declare, there's a conservative Yankee for you. A Charleston boy would still be ravin' about Ginny's honey-colored hair, eyes like dawn stars and such pretty things."

"And perhaps not meaning it half so much?" suggested the wiry figure at her side.

"Maybe not, but compliments always sound nice. Yonder's Magnolia Hill," Stephanie stated turning her car into a long, magnolia bordered drive. With the speed of a flung lance it sped up towards a stately white-pillared plantation house, classically ante-bellum.

So gracefully did those slim columns rise amid their setting of live oaks that Captain North was soothed by an impression of enduring and unshakable serenity. Yet, abruptly on recalling the shots from ambush, the watch dogs of his brain commenced to bark again. Only chance had prevented the sudden bullets from ending his career then and there.

II

THE ROADSTER'S tires had barely ceased to crackle on the graveled driveway than a clatter of hoofs drew Captain North's attention to a horseman cantering easily up from the right. The rider seemed in his thirties and he sat on his chestnut thoroughbred with the unique ease of one schooled in polo or fox hunting. As he dismounted, Stephanie's lips perceptibly tightened.

"Heyo, Stevie," he hailed. "Beat me to the wire by a neck—"

Stephanie's face was calm but her voice was metallic as she queried, "Were you out ridin' alone?"

Hugh North sensed rather than read a tension in the horseman's healthily tanned face as, looping the reins over his arm, he put a foot on the roadster's running board.

"No, Ginny went along," he replied. "Funny, she was possessed to ride over to Rosetree. I—I stopped off to see Tim Boykin's pointer puppies," he hurriedly amplified.

"Oh." The Bartram girl's monosyllable was eloquent of disbelief.

The horseman offered a broad hand. "Since Stephanie seems determined not to do the honors, I'm Cliff Rowan."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Rowan. I'm Hugh North," smiled the man from Washington. "So sorry my missing telegram has caused so much inconvenience."

"Missing telegram?" The thoughts passing behind Rowan's bright blue eyes were not readily to be interpreted. "Oh, so that's why Ginny was so set on riding over to Rosetree."

"I can't imagine what happened to that wire," North apologized. His eyes, frankly admiring the thoroughbred sniffing dubiously at the roadster, "I sent it yesterday."

"Oh, it was not the least bother," Rowan continued with a smile. "The road to Rosetree's right pretty. Follows the top of a ridge and you can see for miles."

"Ridge?" North started to say, noting mud high on the thoroughbred's pasterns. Instead he queried, "I'd like to greet my hostess. Do you know whether she's back yet?"

Apparently Clifford Rowan had no idea—but Stephanie, slipping a cigarette between her lips, nodded at the mansion's wide front steps. Almost running down them was a slender young woman looking very trim in a turtle necked sweater and jodhpurs. Eyes sparkling, she ran up to North with both her hands extended.

"Why, Hugh dear! How in the world did you get here? Why

didn't you let me know your train?"

"Hugh dear?" For a second time in less than an hour North experienced surprise. Why such a sudden assumption of intimacy? At the Brandon's house party, Virginia Seabrook had intrigued him, but during all her stay in Washington they had never progressed beyond the "Captain" and "Miss" stage. Save for one delectable moonlight hour, he had been granted small opportunity to talk with this honey-haired girl whose eyes just now seemed so fervently to plead for understanding. Um—the cue had been given just a trifle late. The Bartram girl had missed nothing of the discrepancy.

"So sorry, Ginny," he hurried to say. "I expect the doorman at my club has a conscience that's more of an accomplice than a guide. It looks as though he pocketed the money and tore up my wire."

"Oh, so you *did* send one?" Virginia Seabrook's features became pinched, but she went on smoothly. "I'm so dreadfully sorry you weren't met."

"Don't be. Everything turned out all right. Miss Bartram happened along and gave me a lift. Just in time."

"Good thing Stevie went in to Charleston," Clifford Rowan drawled. "Well, I guess I'd better put Tarheels away and send Dixon to fetch in Mr. North's luggage."

Was it quite natural, Captain North asked himself for dark-eyed Stephanie Bartram to make no mention of the shooting?

At that moment, there appeared among the pillars above a rather plump woman whose mouth suggested a lavender-tinted ruler mark. She retained faded traces of beauty like a print long exposed to sunlight. Silently she surveyed the newcomer, then without a word turned and disappeared.

"That's Mrs. Prenderbury," Virginia explained firmly slipping her arm through North's. "She's a distant relation of Stevie's."

"Hardly threw out the welcome mat, did she?" North grinned.

"Oh, I expect she's annoyed because she wasn't told when you'd get here," Stephanie advised from behind. "Besides, Cuz'n Emily's always like that to strangers—Yankees in particular."

"I'll forgive Mrs. Prenderbury about anything," North laughed, "if she doesn't pull the chestnut about not learning that 'damn Yankee' was two words until she was twenty."

"She probably will!" Virginia Seabrook's soft laughter echoed among the lofty Ionic pillars, "She calls Dad a Yankee even though he comes from Maryland.

When he bought Magnolia Hill he kept her on as housekeeper."

It was into a dim, slightly damp-smelling hall that Captain North followed Stephanie Bartram and his hostess. Almost immediately he was struck with an indefinable sensation of uneasiness. Perhaps this reaction was attributable to the old mansion's Kilkenny cat scheme of decoration. In the foyer old Chippendale chairs and a "moderne" hall table simply swore at each other.

"Well, Honey, reckon you and Mr. North will have a lot of sweet nothin's to tell each other," Stephanie drawled, her sullenness seeming to vanish in a slow smile for North's benefit. "I know you're Ginny's beau, Mr. Hugh North, but please save a little time for me." She paused. "I could tell you some mighty interestin' things about Magnolia Hill. By the way, you didn't tell me what you do."

"Don't you ever read the newspapers, Stephanie?" boomed a hearty voice. "Why, Hugh North's a famous—"

"Civil engineer," Virginia smoothly interpolated. "Hugh, this is Daddy."

"A pleasure, sir, and welcome to Magnolia Hill," boomed the big white-haired man who had appeared in the hall doorway.

"A civil engineer?" A mocking smile dragging at her mouth corners, Stephanie paused at the foot of a wide, grand staircase. "My, I never knew it was such a dangerous profession."

"Dangerous?" Virginia demanded in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Mr. North evidently believes that fore-armed's 'most as important as being forewarned. Look out, Honey, I saw a gun under his left arm." She laughed and with a distinctive flutter of neat heels, vanished upstairs.

Instinctively, North wanted to like this big man standing in the doorway to the left. His white hair, florid cheeks, and blue eyes were so crisp and clean looking.

"Well, well, so *this* is the famous Captain North!" Mr. Seabrook chuckled. "I followed the Freeman case from beginning to end and by God, I still can't figure out how you caught the Guardsman. You remember, Ginny, he was the fellow North caught bribing government officials?"

Virginia darted to her father's side. "Please, Daddy, don't tell anyone about Captain North's bein' a detective." And forthwith this ravishing young woman in the fawn-colored jodhpurs poured more words into her guest's mouth. "He—he thinks it makes people uncomfortable. You know how it is, Dad. Even the most innocent of us don't like the sensation of being watched by a trained observer."

Though Scott Seabrook seemed puzzled to the point of being

ill at ease, he nodded. "Why, why, of course, Virginia I'll respect your guest's wishes."

What the devil *was* this? All at once North felt like a hunter, who, intending to traverse a stretch of marshy woods, suddenly finds himself involved in an increasingly bewildering swamp.

"Then a civil engineer you'll be, Capt—er, Mr. North," Seabrook went on in his big, hearty voice. "I'd no idea you knew such a celebrity. And now, we mustn't keep Capt—er Mr. North from his shower. His trip has left him hot and dusty, I see."

"Why, why so it has." Virginia's slim shoulders rose to her quickly caught breath. "How in the world did you get all that red dust on you?"

"County Commissioner forgot to sprinkle the road to Queen's Oak this afternoon," North smilingly evaded.

"Juleps in half an hour," Scott Seabrook called, but into his voice had crept a preoccupied note.

Very slight and slender beside Captain North's wiry five feet ten, the Seabrook girl accompanied him up a wide staircase.

"Look here, Miss Seabrook," North began in an impatient undertone, "a joke's a joke and all that, but just why this—"

"Oh, please," she implored. "Please don't ask me to explain just now. I—I'm so afraid for Dad."

North permitted himself to look incredulous. "A f r a i d? Why? I've seen nothing more alarming than a beautiful old house and some very charming people in it."

"It's a house of death," whispered the girl. "It's rotten with hate, greed, and fear. Oh, you'll see. You'll meet nice people with nothin' but polite chatter on their lips—and murder in their hearts!"

The grip on his arm tightened surprisingly for such soft and helpless looking hands. "I know I'd no right to drag you into this," she cried, lifting a pathetically quivering face, "but—well, you seemed so strong, so capable there at Iris Brandon's and I couldn't think of anyone else I could turn to."

"Surely, your father—"

She hesitated.

"Oh, that's just the worst of it, Captain. He just won't listen to me." She paused on a landing and her wide eyes softly blue in the glow of the hall lights, swept up to meet his in trustful appeal.

She blushed. "You will fo'give my callin' you by your first name? I had to make your presence plausible. This isn't quite an ordinary house party—just family and old friends. You were so awfully sweet to me in Washin'ton." Impulsively her hand tightened on his arm.

"I was glad to come. I really did want to see you again."

When they reached the head of the stairs, Virginia beckoned him into a small study. "I just can't imagine what could have happened to your wire. They're usually 'phoned over from Rosetree but I ordered yours to be written out and delivered because I didn't want anybody to know who you really are. Oh, you've no idea how relieved I was when I saw you."

"Whatever's wrong must be pretty serious," he said.

"Why?"

"Somebody sniped at me, twice—on the road from Queen's Oak."

It seemed impossible that one could go so white, and not lose consciousness. *"Shot at you!"* Her hand crept out to rest on his. "Oh, how perfectly awful! Did you see who it was?"

"No, unfortunately. Then there was this letter." He gave it to her. Frowning, Virginia scanned the note.

"How perfectly awful," she gasped.

"It came in the same mail as your invitation. You've no idea who could have sent it?" the captain asked.

"That's just the trouble, Captain—er, Hugh, a lot of people might have sent it."

"Who else knew that you'd invited me?"

"Only Daddy and Cuz'n Emily. But even they didn't know your name."

"And you merely told the other guests you'd a surprise for them?"

"Yes."

From his pocket, North pulled out that deadly little cartridge case found above the road. "Do you know if anybody around Magnolia Hill uses a rifle this might fit?"

"Where did you get that?" Virginia gasped.

"Answer my question first, please."

"Why it looks like Daddy's twenty-two high power."

"Your father's!" North suddenly began to feel like a puppy that has been played with by small boys. Things were being done to him which he did not understand. "Does anybody else own one?"

"Why—why no. Not that I know of."

"Where was your father this afternoon?"

"In Charleston as usual." Green shadows dimmed the Seabrook girl's eyes. "Usually old Dixon drives him. He's been with us for years."

"Hi, you-all," Stephanie's lazily rich voice hailed from down the hall. "You'll be late for dinner if you don't call off the chin-chin, and Mrs. Prenderbury will look daggers." In a negligee trimmed with marabou, the Bartram girl hovered at the

library door, tinder to kindle any normal man's admiration.

"You're a fine hostess, Ginny," she jibed. "Sho' now, look at the poor man caked with dust and dinner not half an hour off." Her teeth sparkled in a swift smile. "While you've been talkin' his head off, honey, I've been fixin' up his room. Don't I deserve special consideration for that, Mr. North?"

"You do," laughed that wiry individual, "and I'm rather famous for my consideration. Well, perhaps we'd better let the cold light of Miss Bartram's reason shine upon us, Ginny. We can get caught up on our gossip after dinner."

He gave her a warm smile that hinted much by way of encouragement but Virginia's bright little mouth remained taut when she nodded.

"Of cou'se. Steve's right. I'll see you in about half an hour."

Doubts and suspicions were rushing about North's brain like cats with their fur afire when he tramped into a rather gloomy high-ceilinged room dominated by a vast four-poster complete with mosquito bar. Already his clothes and linen had been neatly laid out. A nice bit of hospitable consideration, or a thorough search of his effects?

Moonlight was already silver-plating Magnolia Hill's wide lawns when he stripped off his grimy shirt. As if arranged for by an impresario, a mocking bird began to pour out its heart in song.

As Captain North paused in the center of the room revelling in a cool wind's play over his body, three items nagged at his memory: that small cartridge case, the fresh scratch beneath Stephanie Bartram's undamaged stocking and the muddied legs of Clifford Rowan's thoroughbred.

As minor dissonances there recurred the hostile gleam in Mrs. Prenderbury's eyes, Virginia's penchant for putting words in his mouth, and Scott Seabrook's business worries. Following a practice of long standing, Hugh North passed an eraser over his mental blackboard and, with whole-hearted anticipation, entered the adjoining bathroom.

Light beating in from the bedroom revealed that the strife between old and new had extended even to the plumbing. An old-fashioned tub was incongruously at odds with an elaborate glass-enclosed shower and a neat washstand boasting scientifically lighted mirrors. On the threshold North paused, amused to note that whoever had prepared the bathroom had overlooked quite an extensive puddle before the washstand. His mind still running on the matter of Stephanie Bartram's ankle, or rather the scratch upon it, North

pulled over the bath mat and blotted up the moisture.

"Looked like a thorn scratch," he reflected, "and there were plenty of cat briars beside that road. Um—I wonder, Hugh, my boy. Just why did the fair Stephanie bother to change her stocking?"

Absently tossing aside the damp mat, Captain North advanced over the dried area, pulled the light switch, and instantly went reeling back. So great was the ensuing shock it seemed as if a stone from some giant's sling had struck him between the eyes. Badly dazed, he staggered back to collapse onto the bedroom floor. For a moment he could see nothing, so dazzled had he been by a jewel-bright burst of flame springing from the shaving light's switch. A sharp hissing noise died away as the pungent reek of burnt rubber began to sting his nostrils.

"And that was a new switch, not an old one," he thought. "Suppose my feet had been in that puddle when I snapped the switch?" Weakly North sat up chilled to note how the little pool had contacted the washstand's nickeled feed pipes.

"Neat idea, *very* neat. Puddle in dark room forms perfect ground, dumb detective enters, throws switch and gets every volt the system carries *and* a pine kimono. Yes, my lad, the cheery soul who arranged this is a bit of a genius. A deplorable accident, but so very easy to explain. Just a faulty connection."

Forthwith came another realization. His telegram had been received by someone at Magnolia Hill. How else would the cheery soul have known when to arrange this diabolically simple trap?

Down the hall a babel of voices was demanding to know what was amiss for apparently his near execution had burnt out at least part of the mansion's electric lighting system.

"Hello, hello in there!" A voice North could not identify rose over a crescendo of rapping. "Had a short circuit?"

"He doesn't answer!" Stephanie's contralto was definitely strained and breathless. "Try the door, Uncle Billy!"

As the doorknob clicked, Scott Seabrook's voice swelled from the left. "What's wrong? What's happened to the lights? Is Mr. North hurt?"

"He doesn't answer," Stephanie cried as the door swung open and an uncertain beam of candle light crept across the green carpet. Through half-closed eyes North beheld a curious tableau. The foremost intruder was a small mousey looking man with a discouraged wisp of a mustache. Behind him stood Stephanie with her hair a coppery snare for the light of a candle

held on high by the master of Magnolia Hill.

"He's been hurt!" the girl gasped and in an instant she was bending above North and quite expertly testing his pulse with soft, warm fingers.

"How bad is he?" Seabrook's voice quivered like a taut cable as he added, "Quick, Bill, run and fetch some brandy from my room."

"Be all right in a minute," North gasped and a few moments later was sitting up with a sheepish smile.

"Managed to short circuit the bathroom light—"

"Why! Why, that's a brand new fixture! I can't understand it." Scott Seabrook's apologies were both profuse and profound, and in his eyes shone a very troubled gleam. "I'll give those contractors plain and fancy hell. There's no excuse for such carelessness."

By the time rather frightened servants appeared bearing candles, North had gulped a liberal tot of Uncle Billy's brandy and seemed himself once more. Accordingly, his visitors prepared to depart.

"As long as there's no current now, I'll throw the bathroom switch closed," North announced. "Then the fuse can be replaced and we'll have light."

Tonight of all nights North wanted modern illumination in Magnolia Hill, and plenty of it.

III

CAPTAIN NORTH was knotting a black bow tie of conservative cut when a rap sounded at his door. He called, "Come in," and a swift rustle of silk marked the entry of Stephanie Bartram. She made a dashing and unforgettable picture in a flattering white evening gown supplemented by a jade green shawl thrown with effective carelessness about her shoulders. Just inside the door, she halted, her hands held behind her on the brass knob.

"Please don't ask questions, now, Mr. No'th," she begged in an undertone. "I—I feel you ought to know—somethin'. May I speak?"

"Of course!" He smiled reassurance and offered a well-dented silver case.

After accepting a cigarette, Stephanie dabbed at her hair and went on. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Why? I'm flattered, Miss Bartram, but I don't understand."

She came closer—so close, in fact, that her perfume, fragile as it was, enveloped him in its intimate aura.

"You—you're so kind of reassurin'. Oh, I know you're Ginny's friend and all that, but I'm afraid for you. When those lights went out just now, I—" She looked at him, her face distraught.

"You what?"

"I—I went cold."

Beneath Captain North's mustache appeared a small smile. "So did I—almost on ice. Your cigarette's gone out."

Deliberately, the man from Washington struck a match and offered it.

"That's just what I wanted to find out about. That bathroom light isn't a month old."

"It's been used?"

"Oh, yes. We've had guests here. There are always guests at Magnolia Hill. Scott's, Ginny's and mine, and there's been no trouble before. Why should *you* have had this narrow escape?"

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"I'm not a great believer in coincidence, Mr. No'th. And I'm so worried about Scott."

"Why should you be?"

"I don't know," She hesitated, eyes fixed on the glowing tip of her cigarette. "Cliff has been actin' mighty queer for over a week. He's terribly nervous and jumpy. He drinks a lot more than he used to. I—I've been wonderin—"

"Wondering what? You think something may be wrong with the business?"

For an appreciable second, Stephanie hesitated. "I don't know what else it could be worryin' Scott so. I overheard him talkin' with Mr. Jameson on the phone the other night."

"I see. Did you mention the matter to Mr. Rowan?"

Little splinters of light gleamed in Stephanie's violet-blue eyes. "Why do you ask that?"

North drew a deep breath and to the crisp crackle of starched linen pulled on a coat. "Excuse a seeming impertinence, but I've an idea you and young Rowan are—er—quite interested in each other?"

"Oh, no!" The denial was so little short of explosive that he recalled Queen Gertrude's observation about ladies who protested too much. Wary of pressing the point, he selected a boutonnière from the spray of gardenias decorating his dresser.

While fixedly regarding the bathroom door, the girl stiffened a trifle. "Wish I could think I'm just dreamin', Mr. No'th, but I've a feelin' you're in terrible danger. You see, only you stand between—"

North could have cursed because just then footsteps paused momentarily before his hall door, whereupon Stephanie disappeared wraith-like through another entrance opening upon the stair landing.

On descending, North discovered that, as too often happened, punctuality went un-rewarded. There being no sign of either Virginia or Stephanie, he seized the opportunity to satisfy a question which had been nagging at his brain with relentless insis-

tence. Smoking and moving at a leisurely gait, he circled Magnolia Hill and was depressed to see how in the sickly light of a quarter moon, the big old mansion lost its friendly air and now loomed austere and cold as a mausoleum against its background of encircling towering oaks.

This impression, the visitor presently decided, was due to the fact that all blinds had been drawn, giving to the plantation house a lifeless air. Puffing at a pipe and a trifle uneasy about the effectiveness with which his white linens showed up, he made his way towards a stableyard in which, by the light of a lantern, a Negro was singing while currying Rowan's mount.

"My, my, but Tarheels is sho' one dirty horse," grinned the youth. "Miss Vriginia's Lady Bird was kind o' dirty but she weren't a patch on this heah critter. Mist' Cliff must have rid him mighty hard."

"There's a lot of marshy land between here and Rosetree?" North ventured.

"Not much, suh," the colored boy chuckled. "You-all must be thinkin' of the trail to Queen's Oak. Ain't nothin' but high land 'twixt here and Rosetree."

So? North was careful to conceal his surprise.

"I want to send a telegram," he said. "Where is the nearest station?"

"Rosetree, suh. But ah reckon she's shet by now."

"In that case I'd better wait until morning." North smiled. "Oh, by the way, did a telegram come for me today?"

"They was one telegram come this morning, suh. But 'twas fo' Miss Ginny. Ol' Dixon he give it to me an'—"

"And you delivered it to her?" North's breath hovered in his throat.

"No, suh." Vigorously the boy shook his melon-shaped head. " 'At ol' white butler he took it an' put in on a silver tray on de hall table. He 'llowed Miss Ginny done gone out."

Um. So Virginia Seabrook had been circumvented despite her precautions lest someone else receive his telegram over the phone and so learn of his arrival.

"That's a fine horse," he commented patting the animal's gleaming quarter.

"Sho' is, sir. Ah figures to win a big pile of money on him on the point-to-points next spring. You won't let me down, will you Tarheels?"

Lost in thought, the man from Washington skirted a row of picturesque slave quarters dominated by a great iron bell which, brooding beneath its wooden hood, seemed tired of waiting to recall slaves from the fields.

Gathered downstairs he found collected a singularly pleasant

looking group, among whom were several persons he had not previously seen. The most outstanding of these was the rather tall, and strikingly handsome woman who stood talking with Stephanie. Her eyes were very dark and a high comb set in the back of hair as blue-black as a raven's wing, emphasized her Creole cast of countenance. Aside from a glittering emerald and diamond bracelet, and earrings of similar design, a gigantic solitaire blazed on her fourth finger from which North swiftly deduced that this much bejewelled lady was Lucretia Lawton, Scott Seabrook's fiancée.

To Mrs. Lawton's left was standing a powerful looking man of about fifty. He had pale brown eyes, a ready smile and a goodly number of humorous lines about his mouth and eyes and the last traces of his hair had vanished with snows of yesteryear.

"Mr. North, even before you have had a julep, I want you to meet my partner, Mr. Jameson," Scott Seabrook beamed. "He's the brains of the firm. Young Rowan over there is our charm expert."

"And what's your speciality, Mr. Seabrook?" North smiled.

"Oh, I guess I just do the worrying," laughed the host. But his smile was not reflected in his eyes. "Come along, I want you to meet my fiancée. She's knocked about the world almost as much as you."

Mrs. Lawton's manner was graciousness itself. But nevertheless it contained a definite reserve.

"So, you are Virginia's old friend," she said. "Hugh North? North? Surely I've heard the name before. Could it have been in Hawaii?"

"Perhaps."

"Or Shanghai?"

"Possibly, I've traveled a fair amount, Mrs. Lawton," North said. "But I've seldom seen a more beautiful estate than Magnolia Hill. I'm sure you'll be very happy here."

Mrs. Lawton's tawny shoulders rose in an airy shrug. "I'm sure I will be—with a few changes. Ah, Mr. Rowan, did you have a nice ride?" she queried and, as if walking to inaudible music, sauntered away just as Virginia hurried up.

"Where did you go before you came in a moment ago? I—I was dreadfully worried."

"Worried? Why?"

"Because—" She paused, her wide eyes lingering on Mr. Jameson and Stephanie Bartram. "Well, you were so easy to see in that white suit. I happened to look out when I was dressing. You stopped at the stables?"

"Yes. I like horses and that one of Rowan's is a beauty. Incidentally, I inquired about telegrams."

She started and her look quickly swept the big brightly-lit living room. "And what did you find out?" she asked.

He caught and held her eyes as he said, "I discovered that my telegram was delivered to this house!"

"You don't mean it! Why I—" The girl in pale blue fell silent. A butler upholstered in the best English tradition was bearing down on them with a tray of juleps.

"I do. I must see you right after dinner," North murmured. Then he sought out Mrs. Prenderbury and exposed her to a charm which had unlocked more lips for him than the most brutal of third degrees.

"I was just admiring this room," he announced. "Even on the Continent I've never seen more exquisite paneling and mouldings."

"It's not strange," she said with a bleak smile. "Every moulding in Magnolia Hill is copied from designs brought over by my great, great grandfather."

Skilfully, North fed the flame of Mrs. Prenderbury's enthusiasm, until that saffron complexioned lady was spontaneously unfolding details of the plantation's history.

"I can see, Mr. No'th, that you understand why I love this old place?"

"Of course. I don't imagine you like to see changes," suggested the man from Washington, his lean features dark above his white linen coat.

"I don't. It was bad enough when they moved the kitchen upstairs, but when they dared to—" Her voice died away as, in company with a sultry looking Stephanie, Scott Seabrook came bearing down with fresh juleps.

"Oh, so there you are, Mr. North," he said. "Ten to one Miss Emily's been sentimentalizing about Magnolia Hill."

"I begged her to. What a magnificent old place you have here, Mr. Seabrook."

"Oh, I suppose so," shrugged Virginia's father. "But it needs modernizing."

"Really? It seems rather charming as it is."

To North's surprise, Scott Seabrook drained easily half of his julep at a gulp.

"It's quaint all right if that's what you mean. But its present plan is too cut up. Next week I intend to pull down a partition between the study and the old powdering room and make a breakfast room for Lucretia—er, Mrs. Lawton."

"Oh, Mr. Seabrook!" Mrs. Prenderbury winced as from a hot iron.

"Scott," Stephanie cried. "*Please* don't. Why, it'd just ruin the lovely old mantelpiece in the study."

Seabrook laughed a trifle stri-

dently. "Hanged if you're not your ma all over again. She wouldn't even let me put in tile bathrooms."

"That's one trouble you'll never have with me," Mrs. Lawton said, interrupting a conversation with mousey little Uncle Bill. "There are so many things I want to do, Scott. I want to tear up that smelly boxwood maze and put in an Italian garden back of the house. And then those ratty old slave quarters will go, won't they, Scott?"

The host's glistening silvered head inclined as he turned away. "Magnolia Hill will soon be yours to do with as you please, my dear."

Dinner was announced, whereupon the company seated themselves in a time-mellowed room which had seen scarlet British uniforms, Continental blue and buff and the Confederacy's gray and gold.

Dinner proved such a triumph of Southern cuisine that a measure of the tautness departed from North's nerves and casually, his deep-set eyes wandered down the long table, briefly inspecting the guests. Which of these people, he asked himself, had devised the murderously simple trap in his bathroom?

He was about to speak when a breath of air, beating suddenly in, blew out one of the candles gleaming in an antique candelabrum.

"Oh," cried Stephanie, "that's bad luck! Light it again quickly, someone!"

"Bad luck?" queried North.

"Yes." It was Mrs. Prenderbury who answered him, her faintly yellowish features devoid of expression. "Some would say it means that one of the people at this table is going to—"

"Oh, don't say it!" Virginia cried quickly. "It's utter nonsense to believe—"

Her remark ended in a little gasp. As the butler struggled to close the window against a wind which had commenced to sigh uneasily about the house, a sudden puff of air extinguished a second candle—one located directly before Stephanie Bartram. She turned so pale that a light application of rouge was visible on her cheeks.

Mr. Jameson, an alert individual with penetrating dark eyes laughed a trifle too heartily. "Why so upset, Miss Stephanie? You always jeer at superstitions."

"I—I'm not upset!" Stephanie snapped.

"Good. I don't believe in such nonsense e i t h e r." Jameson paused as Seabrook hastily relit the candles. "Well, here's hoping the bad luck has been averted, eh Rowan?" The speaker's tone was casual, but his voice had a serious undertone that did not escape Hugh North.

"Funny," the bald broker

went on, "all day I've had a feeling that something lay on the lap of the gods. Ever had a feeling like that, Mrs. Lawton?"

Mrs. Lawton started and smiled a little nervously. "Why —why no."

"Not even in Ecuador?"

"Not even in Ecuador," evenly returned Scott Seabrook's fiancée. "I'm afraid I'm not of the imaginative sort, Mr. Jameson."

North felt inclined to agree, if ever cold common sense was written on a woman's face it was on Lucretia Lawton's. Indeed, she seemed one of those rare females who knew what she wanted and proposed to have it.

"Speaking of bad luck, Scotty," Jameson went on drumming gently on the table, "my secretary came down with malaria again. You'll have to lend me a hand tomorrow."

Seabrook's brows met and he shot his partner a suspicious look as Rowan grunted. "She would. I notice her malaria shows up just about two days ahead of the auditors. You'd better get rid of her. I've enough of a job keeping my accounts straight."

"Really?" sniffed Stephanie, toying with her soup. "I'd always heard you were very clever with figures."

A slow tide of crimson welled into Rowan's brown countenance. "Thanks, Steve, for the bouquet."

"Oh come now," Seabrook was looking definitely unhappy. "Shop's ruled out—eh, Jim? Later we can go into that matter we spoke of yesterday."

The grim lines which had hardened Seabrook's mouth vanished when he stood up and tapped on his wine glass.

"My family and friends, it is for us all a special pleasure to have with us on this happy occasion Virginia's old friend, Mr. North. As all good South Carolinians know," he bowed a little in Mrs. Prenderbury's direction, "Magnolia Hill has long been famed for the charm and beauty of its chatelaines. My first wife, Virginia's mother, unfortunately never lived here, but Stephanie's mother knew and loved this old plantation which is now to have another chatelaine worthy of its best traditions."

Many miniature candle flames glistened on Scott Seabrook's upraised champagne glass. "To the future Mrs. Seabrook!"

As the guests arose North was intrigued to see how straight Mrs. Lawton sat and how her beautiful eyes sparkled and danced. She suggested to him a figure in chromium, brilliant, beautiful, and as hard.

"On your feet, Jim," Seabrook called. "You haven't had enough yet to be sleepin'."

Turning quickly, North realized that Jameson was staring empty-eyed at his plate and when

Stephanie playfully nudged him on the shoulder, the broker toppled heavily forward to lie nuzzling his soup plate.

IV

FOR AN instant the silence of overwhelming astonishment held the diners in its grip, all save Captain North. He immediately darted from his seat and bent above the fallen man. With deft strength he tilted Jameson's sagging form back onto the chair and wiped soup from his cheek. And as he did so he was suddenly aware of an odd quivering in the stricken man's fingers. The broker's face had gone a hideous purple-blue.

"Heavenly days!" squeaked Mrs. Prenderbury, her garnet earrings the epitone of genteel agitation. "What ails him? You don't think he's, er—under the influence?"

"Not with color like that," Seabrook snapped in a bewildered tone. "And, Emily, this is no time for hysterics."

"It must be his heart, Scott," Stephanie said, loosening Jameson's necktie. "He'd a stroke last year. Don't you remember?"

"Of course that's it," exclaimed Uncle Billy, his dim old eyes very round. "It's poor Jameson's heart."

"I'm going to 'phone for Dr. Kane," Virginia said. Casting a frightened look over her shoulder, she hurried out.

As for Mrs. Lawton, she remained where she was, looking rather fixedly at young Rowan who was offering a glass of water.

"No, not now!" cried North over Jameson's stertorous breathing. "Help carry him into the living room. There's a sofa there I think."

On sliding a cushion beneath Jameson's hairless head, the man from G-2 got a surprise when he saw that Jameson's eyes were wide and lucid.

"Can you speak?" North queried, but from Jameson's throat came only an incoherent gurgling.

"Maybe he can write," Virginia suggested in a low voice. "It'd help so much if he could tell what's wrong."

"No, he can't. All the motor centers are affected," remarked Stephanie as if to herself.

"You've been in training?" North shot the copper-haired girl a searching glance.

"Only a year at Charleston General," the girl replied. "I—I didn't finish."

"Will everybody please go outside?" North's request was deferential, yet it held the quality of a command. "Mr. Jameson's only chance is to rest and gather strength. There is nothing to be done until the doctor arrives."

Young Rowan showed signs

or rebellion. "Say, for a stranger in these parts aren't you taking a good deal on yourself?"

North straightened and his cheeks bones were suddenly pronounced. "I'm sorry. I thought Mr. Seabrook—"

"For a civil engineer you seem right experienced in such situations," Stephanie pointedly observed.

"Say, Ginny, who is he anyway?" Clifford Rowan had straightened, a big but quick athletic type who would play end on a football team.

"He's a friend of mine and my father's guest," Virginia said, "as I'll trouble you to remember, Cliff Rowan. Dad asked him to handle this."

The statement was entirely untrue, and it plunged North still deeper into uncertainty. Purely by habit he had taken command of a situation jammed with grim possibilities. Thanking her with his eyes, he smiled at her and asked, "How soon will the doctor be here?"

"In about fifteen minutes," Virginia replied slipping her arm through that of her father.

"Can't I stay?" Stephanie pleaded with a scarce suppressed eagerness. "I think I could really be useful."

Uncle Billy frowned as North shook his head. "Thanks just the same."

As the others filed out he registered a series of impressions. Seabrook, haggard and desperately worried; Uncle Billy, vague and blinking short-sightedly; Stephanie, frozen-faced and very beautiful; Mrs. Prenderbury, very straight of back and wearing a nervous half smile which signified nothing in the way of amusement; Clifford Rowan, frowning and lost in thoughts which could not have been entirely agreeable; and last of all Virginia, her sweet features haunted with poignant anxiety.

He beckoned her back. "For God's sake, watch what goes on. I have to stay here."

He drew a deep breath, locked the door and, thinking fast, bent over Jameson who was writhing under some agonizing pang.

What the devil was wrong with this man? Certainly his symptoms indicated a stroke. But, never before had he seen an attack of the disease attended by such a convulsive twitching of the hands and feet. He recalled an impression of the dinner table. To Jameson's right had been Stephanie, and to his left Mrs. Prenderbury. Could either of the two women have borne the stricken man a grudge? No telling. There were so many unplumbed depths to this unsavory situation.

Bending, he steadied the broker's shoulders, peered into his blood-injected eyes and murmured, "Mr. Jameson, please

close your eyes if you understand me."

When both eyelids dropped, the Intelligence officer speeded up his thinking as a pilot accelerates on taking off.

"Close your right eye for 'Yes,' your left for 'No,' and both eyes if you can't answer my question." Bending lower North then asked: "Are you growing weaker?"

Jameson closed his right eye, but to "Do you think you've had a stroke?" he gave a negative signal.

"Do you know who killed you?"

When the left eyelid fluttered down, North stifled a groan. But he shot a fresh question.

"Had you an enemy at the dinner table?"

To North's sharply rising interest, Jameson's right eye flickered shut twice. *Two* enemies! What new and unsuspected depths were now opening in this quagmire?

"Is anyone else in danger?"

It was dreadful to watch Jameson's efforts to speak as once more his right eyelid sagged twice.

His face grew steadily a deeper crimson and his fingers' febrile picking quickened. But only meaningless sounds issued from his throat. Apparently of all his body's complex mechanisms only his eyes remained faithful to a still living brain.

"Then two people are in danger?"

An affirmative wink.

While a shutter began to bang in the rising wind North felt impatience boiling near the rim of his self-possession. Oh damn! There were *so* many things he wanted to know. Doggedly he resumed the weird vital game of "Twenty Questions."

"Who is in danger? I'll call off the names—"

The result of his roll call was a jolt to certain of North's preconceived theories. Apparently Clifford Rowan and Stephanie Bartram were also scheduled for death!

"Who do you think wanted to kill you? I'll call the names again—"

But before he could begin, a loud and insistent knocking started and Virginia Seabrook's voice hailed. "Oh, Hugh! Here's Dr. Kane! Come and unlock the door."

North was preparing to comply when Jameson's twitching cheeks suddenly went gray and in a fever of anxiety he bent, trying to forestall the Dark Angel's call.

"Who do you think wanted you dead?" he repeated. "Was it Rowan—"

"Hey in there! Open up please!" called an authoritative voice. Almost immediately someone knocked so loudly on the drawing room door that though

North raised his voice Jameson could not understand.

"Stop that infernal racket!" raged the Intelligence officer over his shoulder. "Be there in a minute."

"What's that?" queried the other and began rapping again.

Certainly poor Jameson's failing perceptions could not function over such a din. Cursing Dr. Kane's impatience, North ran over and unlocked the door. But when he regained the sofa the patient's face had gone purple-black and his eyeballs, tinted scarlet by bursting blood vessels, were glaring blankly at the elaborate plaster mouldings about a massive crystal chandelier. Giles Jameson would answer no more questions.

Tightening about his neck, North felt a noose of circumstance. If that idiotic banging had been delayed only a minute he might have been well on his way towards an understanding of this grim business. But now—

In the doorway stood Virginia and a neat, round-shouldered individual who carried a doctor's bag in one hand. Behind them loomed a double row of pallid and uneasy faces.

"I came as quickly as I could," Dr. Kane explained a little lamely. "We had guests to dinner."

"Even if you'd been in the house, Doctor, I doubt if anything could have been done. As it is, Mr. Jameson died just as you began rapping."

Scott Seabrook came striding into the room and his voice quivered like a tuning fork when he cried, "What's that? Oh, Jim can't be dead!"

"Dead! Oh, how perfectly awful." Virginia swayed and turned stricken eyes toward her father. "Oh Dad! Dad! You will be careful tonight, won't you?"

Clifford Rowan passed dazed fingers before his eyes and turned aside. Mrs. Prenderbury, her garnet earrings eloquent of some deeper agitation than was visible on the surface, sniffled quietly into her handkerchief until Uncle Billy went over to put an arm about her.

"There, there, Emily," he murmured. "Don't take on so, my dear. We all have to go."

It was on Stephanie Bartram that Hugh North's eyes lingered as she stood beside a vast grand piano, a sculptured Sybil brooding with compressed lips and nervously kneading her handkerchief of green silk.

Presently Scott Seabrook roused himself. "I believe we'd better let Dr. Kane take charge from now on. Come along, Mr. North. A drop of old rye will do none of us any harm."

With enforced briskness he started towards the dining room from which the awed and silent butler was clearing away the last of the dinner dishes. Other serv-

ants were busy closing windows, for now the wind was grieving among the live oaks and a dull rumble of thunder could be heard.

Alone at one of the dining room's French windows stood Mrs. Lawton smoking and peering fearfully out into sickly moonlight already intermittently eclipsed by furious, fast-scudding cloudlets.

For good and sufficient reasons Captain North made a pretense of following his host. But at the same time managed to tip Dr. Kane a wink. Immediately that individual earned his undying gratitude by calling out, "Just a minute, Mr. North. I want you to answer me a few questions."

Once Captain North had closed and locked the door, his eyes met Kane's over the dead man's incredibly twisted body.

"Well?" queried the doctor.

North hesitated a moment before he said: "Do you think Mr. Jameson died of a heart attack?"

"No," the other replied. "Ever since I laid eyes on the body, I've been puzzled and trying to recall similar symptoms. What's happened to him?"

"That," Captain North said with a bleak smile, "is what you and I have got to find out in a big hurry."

Dr. Kane started and stared. "In a big hurry? Just what do you mean?"

North stripped off his linen coat and hung it on the back of a chair before he said very quietly, "Somewhere in this house there's at least one killer—as clever and conscienceless a murderer as I've ever met up with. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Doctor, the murderer *must* kill again."

V

DR. KANE drew a slow, deep breath. Rain had began to peck at the windows of Magnolia Hill, and a fine mist covered the panes.

"Why are you so very sure?"

"People have tried twice to murder me," North said. "It's as simple as that."

"In that case," said Dr. Kane a little helplessly, "I'll do whatever you ask. But there isn't much I can find out without performing a regular autopsy." Curiously his bright brown eyes probed North's bronzed countenance. "Just *who* are you? I've got to know before we go any further. Obviously that nonsense Virginia chose to tell about your being a civil engineer isn't right. Hold on!" The country doctor's features, etched by South Carolina's hot sun into myriad tiny wrinkles, contracted. "You aren't —why, you are. You *must* be the famous Captain North!"

Almost shyly he offered a lean brown hand. "By George, Captain, ever since I read about the

Freeman case I've been hoping to meet you. This is a very pleasant surprise. I'd no idea that so famous a detective was in Carolina."

"I fear you've a weakness for exaggeration," North smilingly deprecated. "The papers can make a tolerably big mountain out of a very small mole hill. In the meantime, we better find out if there's a wound of any sort?"

The gray-haired doctor sobered immediately when his companion began to unbutton the murdered broker's coat and, working in silence, aided him in stripping the plum-colored corpse to its waist. Expertly the two studied every inch of skin, utilizing the light of the old chandelier which had cast its gay little rainbows over many a dance, rout and ball.

"This is a new one on me," Dr. Kane admitted while undoing the dead man's belt.

"It's a facer all right," North agreed and deftly slid the trousers down to the ankles, "when without any warning a man keels over at a dinner table and *doesn't* lose consciousness. Of course, he may—"

The Intelligence officer's flow of conversation came to an abrupt termination as he bent to peer intently at the dead man's badly swollen left leg. On the outside of it and perhaps an inch above the ankle was an angry, red-black swelling.

"It's a bite!" Dr. Kane cried sharply. "Look, there's the puncture!" With a quivering forefinger he indicated a ruby drop no larger than a pinhead.

"There's no doubt the skin has been broken," North admitted in a low voice. "That simplifies matters somewhat."

"Well, I'm damned," grunted the doctor, his blunt fingers testing the tight and shiny skin about the little wound. "If this hadn't happened in Scott Seabrook's dining room I'd have sworn Jameson suffered a snake bite—say a moccasin with one fang. See? The incision's quite deep—"

"And not a bit ragged," North added thoughtfully. "Whatever inflicted that wound was sharp. Um. It *does* look very like a major bite or sting of some sort." He paused, turning on the cold showerbath of commonsense. "But, Doctor, have you ever heard of moccasin or even rattlesnake venom *instantly* paralyzing a victim—a human being, that is?"

In growing agitation Dr. Kane wiped his eyeglasses. "Why, no, Captain, I haven't. But death can follow swiftly if venom is introduced into one of the victim's arteries. No, I never heard of a venom acting quite like this. Have you?"

Deliberately North straightened. "No. But the vegetable poisons of certain primitive

races have a paralytic effect. *Curare, antiaris toxicana* are among them. The paralytic action of *antiaris* for instance is practically instantaneous if it is introduced directly into the blood stream."

"Even supposing we have met a combination of two blood poisons." Dr. Kane said slowly, "how could it have been administered when Jameson was at the table in a roomful of people? I understand that Jameson himself made no complaint and no one noticed anything wrong with him before he fell over."

"Ask me something easy! The only thing I can say is that I've an idea of how the thing might be done," North said slowly. "But it's pretty fanciful. Now if you'll try to determine the depth and direction of the wound, I'm going to take a look at the dining-room."

He found Clifford Rowan standing in the big, oak-paneled room beside a hunting board agleam with a heavy load of old Sheffield silver. Though the youngest partner was very innocently smoking his pipe, North noted faint smudges on the knees of his white-linen trousers.

"Going to be quite a storm. It's a good night to stay where one belongs," commented Rowan, nodding towards a French window beyond which a sizzling flash of lightning had briefly revealed wet, funereal looking magnolias whipping under gusts of wind. There was, North decided, a current of warning beneath the surface of Rowan's words.

"Yes. It's quite a tempest as they say down East," North observed equably. "A storm like this is nothing to take chances with. I hope no one gets hurt. I wonder if you'd tell Miss—er, Ginny. I want to talk with her a minute?"

"Be glad to, I'll look her up." Rowan, evidently relieved to quit the scene, nodded and strode from the room—very silently for a man of his build.

Left alone, North paused at the foot of the table at which Giles Jameson had been stricken and mentally replaced the guests in their various chairs. "Um. Granting that a very obliging snake, spider or scorpion didn't get in, and out again, let's see who sat opposite the late Mr. Jameson?"

"Well, well," sighed the Intelligence Captain and gingerly seated himself in the chair which had been occupied by the youngest member of the firm of Seabrook, Jameson & Rowan. Even a short-legged man could very easily have reached a person seated opposite.

"Suppose," North told himself, "that some bright person fixed a pointed implement between his shoe's upper and its sole leather?" A fleeting grin re-

laxed the clear bronze of his features on recalling schooldays, a pin so arranged could deal a very satisfactory job to the rear of some urchin sitting all of two desks away.

While the rain tapped with a million insistent fingers on darkly streaming panes, he reconsidered the position of that tiny puncture which had taken Jameson's life. It had been on the left *side* of the left leg, and towards the back. A glancing frontal blow, however, might have accounted for it. He blinked. At the murdered man's left had sat Stephanie Bartram. To the right? Mrs. Prenderbury.

If he clung to his present concept of the attack, Seabrook's housekeeper could not possibly have scratched Jameson on the ankle facing away from her. Had anyone at the table made an untoward movement? No. In his wary frame of mind, he would almost certainly have noticed it.

North arose and went around to Jameson's chair, a graceful Sheraton piece glowing with the mellow patina of age and years of faithful polishing. North, however, wasted small time in artistic appreciation. Risking a smudge on his knees, he knelt to examine the chair *in situ*. When nothing of interest attracted his attention he dragged it over to the light and turned it onto its side. Turning it this way and that he exposed legs, seat and back to various planes of light. As he had expected many fingerprints were registered on the old mahogany's lustrous surface—too many.

With the harsh glare of lightning continually beating in through the Venetian blinds North suddenly seated himself and began to sight up the chair's various legs.

Distinctly visible on the polished wood of the left foreleg was a dull quadrangular area about the thickness of his little finger. Further, he noted that this area was roughly bisected by a narrow lane of untarnished finish!

Snatching out a pen knife, the Intelligence officer carefully removed from a worm hole a tiny lump of grayish matter which he dropped onto a match box. The dull spot he estimated as being about three-eighths of an inch in width. He registered its dimensions by making little nicks on a match stick.

Definitely discarding his previous theory, he then dropped onto all fours and commenced a survey beneath the table, keenly aware that the passage of every moment would afford the killer more leisure to escape or to prepare for a fresh attempt. His apprehension was growing by leaps and bounds with the conviction that his quarry was the most gifted malefactor he had faced in many a blue moon.

All at once he gave a little grunt of satisfaction and with the point of his knife dislodged from the rug's deep nap what appeared to be a long sharp pin. When he straightened and realized what had come to light, his heart began thumping like a bushman's tom-tom. This was no pin but the broken-off shank and point of a hypodermic needle!

It was, he saw, perfectly ordinary except for the fact that near the point some little streaks of an oily substance glowed ruby red in the electric light and that more of the stuff was clogging the needle's canal. A very close peal of thunder shook Magnolia Hill and its lights wavered as he raided the sideboard for a second match box.

"Cliff said you wanted to see me?" Big-eyed and with anxiety written in every line of her slim body, Virginia appeared, not headlong, but swiftly and silently like a doe traversing a thicket.

North nodded and, motioning her to a chair, began by detouring his true objective. "Well, Ginny, what happened since you left me in the drawing room?" he asked.

"Everybody went into the library and sat 'round lookin' mighty thoughtful," she replied. "All except Stevie, that is. She went off to the dinin' room and didn't come back to the library 'til just recently."

"Anybody else leave?"

The girl hesitated. "Yes. Mrs. Lawton went up to her room and only came down a few minutes ago. She said she wanted to put her jewels"—a note of bitterness crept into her voice—"in a safe place."

"And was Rowan with you all the while?"

"No. He went out lookin' for Stevie. I—I heard them talkin' in here then she came back. I think she'd been cryin'."

"Does she cry often?"

"Oh, no! She's 'most like a man about that."

This item Captain North stored for future reference. To help his hostess regain her composure, he lit a short-stemmed pipe before approaching his main line of inquiry.

"What does Mr. Rowan do with his leisure time?"

A slight flush dispelled the pallor of the Seabrook girl's cheeks. "Hunts, rides and pays cou't to Stevie. That is, he used to."

Someone must have opened the library door for quite clearly Uncle Billy's voice reached him. "Yes, indeed, a cup of coffee can be very bracing at moments like these. How about you, Mrs. Lawton?"

"I would like some, Mr. Mosby," Seabrook's fiancée could be heard saying. "I never take sugar, and now please tell me more about Chichen-Itza."

Then the voices faded into the

boisterous booming of the wind and North resumed, "Was it a serious disagreement?"

"Worse than usual," Virginia replied. "Reckon Stevie tried to boss Cliff about just once too often. He's been shinin' up to me for over a week," she added with something suspiciously like a school girl's giggle.

"And you haven't discouraged him?"

The sleek honey-colored head nodded emphatically. "I should say not. Cliff's a mighty nice boy and he's goin' to be awful rich someday and if Stevie doesn't quit foolin' about she's sure goin' to lose him. I keep tellin' her no man worth the powder to blow him up is willin' to be stomped on."

A thoughtful smoke ring burst from North's lips and went whirling across the dining room, vanishing in the shadows.

"Mr. Rowan doesn't really care for you?"

"Me?" Virginia's eyes flew wide open. "Land sakes, no! It's Stevie he's wild about."

"Then," North chose his words carefully, "I wouldn't keep up the game much longer. Your step-sister doesn't impress me as the kind to turn the other cheek. But about Rowan. You said he's fond of horses and dogs?"

"Mercy, yes. He's always out with some of the swamp people. It pretty near broke his heart when some of his pointer pups died of distemper last fall."

Increasingly satisfied with the trend of conversation, North suggested, "If he was so fond of them, it's funny he didn't bother to inoculate them."

"Oh, but he did," Virginia defended. "Only he tried a new kind of serum which was no good. Daddy says Cliff could make a very good livin' at vetting."

Hugh North took care to conceal his rising interest. So young Rowan injected his own dogs? Well, well. . . .

"Well, Ginny," he said, rising, "I've been pestering you long enough—so I'll be getting back to Dr. Kane."

"Oh, Hugh, please don't go. I was just beginnin' to un-lax." The haunted look reappeared in her eyes and convulsively she covered her ears as a particularly defeaning crash of thunder shook the plantation house. "It—it's only when you're around I feel something dreadful isn't going to happen any minute. Cliff's actin' so very queer."

"I'm sure nothing more is going to happen," North lied. "But if you're that worried you'd better stick close to your father."

Momentarily Virginia's wide brows merged. "I—I can't. Daddy's nervouser than a bunny rabbit's nose and Mrs. Lawton is cooing and fussing over him in that sticky sweet way of hers.

You should have seen the look Cuz'n Emily gave her."

"Isn't it natural that Mrs. Lawton should be attentive?" North returned. "She seems very much in love with your father."

"S-she ought to be," blazed Virginia, then averted a quivering face. "The w-way Dad-Daddy's been plasterin' her with j-jewels while Stevie and I have had to skimp along on half our old allowance. It—it isn't fair."

She accepted North's silently proffered handkerchief, made hasty repairs and summoned a tremulous, gallant smile. "Please Hugh, be a sweet lamb and forget what I just said. It—it's Dad's money and he's a right to do what he pleases with it. I—I reckon I'm just a nasty little cat."

"You're far from that," North gently objected. "You're something rather special in the way of girls. Oh, one last thing, Ginny, does anyone living here require a special diet?"

"Why, yes, Cuz'n Emily and Mrs. Lawton don't eat anythin' with much sugar in it." An elusive dimple flushed. "I do believe that's about the only thing Cuz'n Emily and Lucretia have in common."

They reached the dining room in time to see Mrs. Prenderbury go drifting down the corridor, silent as a dried leaf sailing across a forest's floor. Uncle Billy must have been expecting her return for he immediately appeared at the library door.

"My dear Emily," he said. "I told you you left your glasses upstairs. May I get you a glass of sherry? You look so very tired."

"Yes," said she, "I fear I shall be faint. Where's Mr. Seabrook?"

"He was so dreadfully upset he's gone to his room. Perhaps I'd better go up and comfort him."

To Virginia's cold hand North gave a reassuring pat. "Now if you're a wise girl you'll go find Stephanie and straighten out that nonsense about Rowan. And please tell everyone I shall want to see them in the library before long."

He found Dr. Kane in the act of disinfecting a slender probe.

"Well, Doctor?"

"The wound is not more than half an inch deep and appears to have been made from the left rear," Kane said.

"Good! That about settles it." North chuckled. "Take a look at this."

Dr. Kane carefully began to stir the clue with the blunt end of a match.

"As nearly as I can tell it's part of an ordinary hypodermic —no different from a hundred thousand others."

"That's what I was afraid of," North admitted with a grimace of disappointment, and produced the little lump of grayish matter.

"Would you say this is gum from a piece of adhesive tape?"

"Yes." His features brushed with desperate anxiety the doctor glanced up over his glasses. "Then Jameson *was* really murdered?"

"Yes," Captain North affirmed, his strong features gilded in the light of a table lamp Dr. Kane had placed beside the body. "Someone smeared this needle and its canal with deadly poison and fastened it with adhesive to the leg of Jameson's chair. Of course even a scratch would have eventually been fatal but poor Jameson managed to jab himself with real efficiency and got the poison with his post tibular artery. The murderer removed it later but there's a mark made by the adhesive on the chair leg roughly three-eighths of an inch wide."

Dr. Kane stared. "Three-eighths of an inch! You're pretty thorough."

"No more than you are in your profession," said North, smiling.

The country doctor's kindly face contracted as from a blow. "What a cowardly, fiendish device! I wonder, Captain, who hated Jameson so much?"

"Or feared him so much," suggested the Intelligence captain. "If we could find the rest of the hypodermic it would help a lot. But—well, I don't think our killer is that careless. Where are the nearest police to be found?"

As if he were donning a garment, Dr. Kane regained his self-possession. "I don't know whether we can locate a state trooper at this time, but I'll put in a call if you wish."

"I'd appreciate it," North said.

As the doctor's heels clicked hastily down the hall, North wondered grimly who in the dim old house was familiar with hypodermics and their uses? Stephanie, who had studied nursing; Mrs. Lawton, who "didn't use sugar," and the handsome Mr. Rowan, who doctored his own dogs. Mrs. Prenderbury? Well, perhaps. He was startled by the return of Dr. Kane.

"Well, Doctor, you got your call in quickly."

"I didn't," the doctor panted. "Somebody has cut away and hidden the handset!"

VI

THE REALIZATION that Magnolia Hill had been practically isolated prompted Hugh North to accelerate his plans.

"We've two jobs, Doctor," he stated. "First we must learn who killed Jameson. Then we must forestall another murder."

"Another murder?" gasped the round shouldered doctor.

"Or murders, Doctor."

Dr. Kane's calm was reassur-

ing. "What do you wish me to do?"

"Please send the butler to me and then ask the household to come here in about five minutes. Doctor, please keep your eyes skinned. We can't afford to overlook any bets."

Every fibre of Otis's figure indicated conservative disapproval of current events.

"In regard to the telegram which arrived this morning," North began. "Who received it?"

"Telegram, sir? I don't recall one. Telegrams are customarily telephoned to Magnolia 'ill."

"This one wasn't. Think back carefully. Did you receive a message of any sort this morning?"

Otis mopped his brow. "Yes, sir. One of the colored 'elp brought in a note addressed to Miss Virginia. Could that 'ave been the telegram, sir?"

"It could have been, Otis."

"Thank you, sir. Then it arrived about eleven of this morning, sir."

North regarded the butler with deceptively indifferent eyes. "You gave it to Miss Virginia?" he asked.

"No, sir. Miss Virginia was out marketing in Queen's Oak, sir. That's why I left it on a tray in the 'allway where she would be sure to notice. Later it was gone, so I fancied Miss Virginia 'ad found it."

"When was that, Otis?"

"It must 'ave been about twelve, sir. I remember because I'd just finished discussing dinner with Mrs. Prenderbury."

"Was anyone else in the house at that time?"

"All the 'ousehold sir."

"Mr. Seabrook and Mr. Rowan, too?"

"Mr. Rowan was 'ere all day, sir, and Mrs. Seabrook only went in to Charleston after luncheon; 'e returned just before Miss Virginia returned from 'er ride in fact, sir."

"Then you've no idea who took that letter from the hall?"

Otis emitted a cough eloquent of distress. "No, sir, it is not my place to notice such matters. Miss Stephanie attends to the mail as a rule, sir."

Suppressing a small sigh, North sat back. So the letter had lain on the hall table until someone had stolen it and had thus learned by what train a visitor from the North would arrive. An odd realization came home. Barring Mrs. Prenderbury and possibly Uncle Billy, every one of the residents of Magnolia Hill had been out of the house around the time his train was pulling into Queen's Oak.

With a reassuring word, Captain North dismissed the Seabrook's butler and attempted to correlate his gleanings.

Five minutes later a silent, or nervously vivacious group of people filed into the library in

response to Dr. Kane's summons and it was hard to realize that one of them was a singularly able killer. In self-conscious silence the group disposed themselves about that charming little library which Lucretia Lawton had doomed to make into a breakfast room.

"Before we go any further," North said from behind a handsome chippendale desk, "I'd better explain that I'm at present detached to duty with the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

"Then you—you're a G man?" Uncle Billy remarked.

A brief smile flitted over North's features. "No. But I have similar authority."

"Well," harshly demanded Rowan, "what are you leading up to?"

"Just this," coldly North's gaze swept the crowded little library. "Someone in this room has murdered Giles Jameson."

A stunned silence gripped the group and tension spread like oil over water. But inexorably Hugh North's voice went on, low-pitched but impressive.

"It follows that everyone in this house is under suspicion. There are no exceptions."

"Mercy!" Mrs. Prenderbury uttered a small gasp. "You can't suspect *me*, Captain. I know nothing about this horrible business. Why, I—I hardly knew Mr. Jameson at all. Besides I don't believe he was murdered, anyhow."

"Neither do I!" thundered Seabrook. "How could he have been? Weren't we all sitting there when poor Giles keeled over?"

"Why leave yourself out, Captain?" sneered Rowan. "A Yankee might be smart enough to—"

"That'll do!" North's voice flicked like a whip. "Try disobeying orders and you'll find yourself in plenty of trouble. I'm sure all of you understand why you're not to leave Magnolia Hill without permission? Meanwhile, if you wish to make a declaration of innocence all you have to do is to write: 'I know nothing about this dreadful business. So help me God, I am innocent of Giles Jameson's death.' "

"Really, Captain," Stephanie was sitting very straight, "I don't see why we all should have to do this."

"Nor do I!" Mrs. Lawton's accents dripped resentment. "I warn you all, this is merely a crude subterfuge to get samples of our handwriting! But here's mine!" Defiantly she raised her chin and scratched the suggested statement. "There! Mr. Yankee, see what you can make of that!"

"You'll find this specimen a little old-fashioned I fear," Uncle Billy commented, placing an example of Spenserian script before North.

"I'm not going to say anything 'til I get a lawyer, much less write it," young Rowan announced and turned angrily on Virginia. "I'm sure we all feel flattered, Ginny. I'll say you were right clever to invite a detective down here."

Under the oblique glances of her companions Virginia went crimson. But she drew herself up straight as a Caryatid.

"I reckon I would insult the whole state of South Carolina, Cliff Rowan—if I thought it would help my father. Here you are, Hugh."

"Thank you, Ginny," he said and casually surveyed the sheet she laid before him.

"If there is nothing more, Captain," snapped Scott Seabrook when all but Rowan had complied. "I must go to write some letters. With the auditors due so soon, Jameson's unexpected death will mean hard work for Clifford and me." With a transparent attempt at cheerfulness, he then glanced about. "Despite Captain North's very natural suspicions, I feel confident an autopsy will show that poor Giles died a natural death."

When all save Dr. Kane had gone out, North slowly ran through the various statements and said, "Please ask Miss Virginia to come back here in about five minutes."

Once the old doctor had shuffled out, North absently fingered the household's samples of writing and spelling. Why had Rowan refused to submit a sample? Was it sheer cussedness—or something else? B-u-s-n-e-s-s was the way the writer of the threatening letter had spelt it. Among the specimens before North someone, too, had spelt it thus and so raised a new whirlwind of doubts.

A light rap sounded at the library door and in response to his "Come in" not Virginia but her step-sister entered, quick as a lizard.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he said, thrusting forward a chair. "I've been looking forward to a talk with you."

"Captain No'th," the Bartram girl cried. "Please tell me how Mr. Jameson was killed. It seems so—so incredible with all of us sittin' right beside him."

"Isn't it?" Captain North agreed blandly. "I'll tell you my theory—"

"Will you?" she cried, an uprush of eagerness in her look.

"Yes," Captain North nodded, "if you'll tell me exactly where you'd been just before you picked me up on the road."

Instantly the brightness departed from Stephanie's eyes and they became dull, uninformative. "Why, I drove over to a movie at Randall Cou't House. I'd go miles to see Robert Taylor any time. Don't you think he's a lamb?"

"If you think so, he's to be congratulated. Incidentally, the theater at Randall Court House isn't an open air one, is it?"

"Why—I don't understand what you mean."

"Don't you?" North queried from under politely incredulous brows. "Well, when we met on the Queen's Oak road I noticed a fresh scratch on your ankle and thorns don't grow in a movie theater—unless it's in the path of virtue."

"Really, Captain No'th, I've no i-dea what you are talkin' about."

"No?" He fixed her with an eye gone suddenly coldly blue and as penetrating as a bayonet point. "Well, I've a theory you weren't at the movies at all and that you scratched your ankle in the woods not very far from the point where I was shot at. Explanations are always a bore, but *why* did you think it imperative to drive all the way to Randall Court House—or was it Queen's Oak?—to buy a fresh pair of stockings?"

"I—I didn't!"

North laughed.

"Come, come. Even a bachelor can recognize the faint crease down the front of a brand new pair of stockings. But I'll overlook your scratched ankle, Miss Bartram, if you'll tell me why you took such a violent dislike to a man who'd never had a chance to tell you how very stunning you can look when you're angry."

Stephanie lips trembled just a little but she managed to retain her composure. "Really, Captain, are you implyin' that I shot at you?"

North clasped his hands behind his head and regarded the doorway with care. No telling just who might appear there next.

"Doesn't it look that way? You'd time, opportunity and," he almost said "motive" but substituted, "a rifle, a gun a woman would choose, because even a twenty-two magnum doesn't kick much. Besides I found a small footprint in the ambush."

"Most well-bred Southerners have small feet," Stephanie pointed out, vibrant and suddenly very pale. "The Seabrooks included."

"You beg my question very skilfully." North smiled. "But unless you tell me where you really were before you met me this afternoon I—well, you must consider yourself under arrest."

"*Arrest!*" she cried in a masked voice. "Really, Cap'n, you wouldn't be so ungallant."

"Really I would. In my profession, gallantry is a side-issue."

"Oh, Captain, do you know you're right cute?" Stephanie declared with a burst of single note laughter. "You've evidently forgotten you've no authority in Carolina."

"Dear, dear! Is it possible, Miss Bartram, you don't know that a Federal officer has jurisdiction in any state in the Union? Come now, I'm all attention. Where were you, really, this afternoon?"

"No one but an impertinent Yankee would insist on a lady's answering a question," Stephanie flared. "If you go any further with this absurd accusation *you'll regret it!*"

"I'll chance that, Miss Bartram. You're not to leave Magnolia Hill if you don't want to be locked into a stuffy closet."

"You—you can go to hell! I'll do as I please!" And rigid as a store window mannequin, Scott Seabrook's step-daughter swept from the room. But Hugh North, observing her closely, remained at the library desk with doubts and theories running around his brain with the frenzied orderliness of ants about a disturbed hill.

Presently he sketched the following questions on a sheet of note paper:

1. Who wrote that threatening note?
2. What were Rowan and the Bartram girl doing in the dining room?
3. Who fired that shot at me?
4. Who doctored that switch in my room?
5. Who killed Jameson?
6. Was it the same person who has been gunning for me?

When Virginia Seabrook appeared, lovely and trim as a millionaire's yacht, he beckoned her to his side.

"I wish," said he, "that you'd look again at the threatening letter I got in Washington and compare it with these specimens of handwriting."

Virginia's breath came in with a little click when from an inner pocket he produced the note composed of clipped out letters and smoothed it out on the desk.

"But—but the threatening letter wasn't written and these notes are. What can you possibly tell from a comparison?"

"Please compare them, just the same."

"Hugh North:

Mind your own busness and keep away from the Seabrook plantation if you value your life. This is no joke."

"You know who wrote this?" he asked without change of inflection.

"Why, why no, Hugh," the girl in pale blue replied lightly. "What makes you t h i n k I might?"

"Just this." With the stem of his pipe North underlined the word "busness." "Didn't they teach you at your school that

'business' is spelt with an 'i'? You see, dear hostess, yours is the only specimen which also omits the 'i'."

"I didn't—write that threatening letter," and with an absent gesture she wafted away the idea.

"Oh yes, you did. You see I know it was posted at exactly the same hour as your invitation and *at that time* no one else knew you had even thought of inviting me."

The smooth oval of Virginia's face crumpled. "Oh, please, please, Captain, please forgive me. I—I was so awfully scared you wouldn't accept my invitation." She made small pathetic pleas with agitated hands. "I—I reckoned that maybe if I tried to scare you, you *would* come sure 'nough."

The girl looked so very contrite and unhappy North stifled a natural irritation.

"You'll—you'll forgive me?" she pleaded.

North leaned forward, his cheek bones etched into prominence by the desk light. "Just what frightened you enough to risk prosecution for writing a threatening letter?" he demanded.

The girl dropped into a chair and sat there as if dumped. "One day last week Daddy was suddenly called to the phone just before I went in to check his shirts and socks for the laundry. In the top drawer I found a letter—or the last part of one. It said:

> 'know the phone is better, but I've been unable to reach you, so I'm warning you that I'm not afraid of what you can do or say. I mean to go through with my original idea and if you know what's good for you, you'll forget about that $15,000. The records don't prove a thing so watch your step.'

The rich contralto of her voice faltered and broke. "That was all, but do you wonder I was frightened?"

North's straight dark brows merged. "No. Did you ask your father about it?"

Much sadness drew shadows beneath the girl's eyes. "Oh, yes. But he insisted it was only a joke. Ever since then he's been short tempered and jumpy and —and Daddy isn't a scary person."

"You didn't recognize the writing in that letter?"

"No, Hugh, the page was hurriedly typed and unsigned."

"Repeat the message, please," North invited, both to engrave the threat on his memory and to make sure that this was no hurried invention on the girl's part. Experience had long since taught him that liars, even practiced ones, are seldom able to repeat their lie word for word.

Virginia's repetition surprisingly did not vary by so much as a syllable.

"You'll—you'll forgive me? You see, Hugh, I really wasn't crying 'wolf.' "

"This time," he smiled, "I'll give you the Texas jury's verdict —'Not guilty. But don't do it again.' "

"Oh, you *are* sweet!"

Uttering a smothered little cry Virginia flung her arms about his neck. What could be more natural than to press the freshness of her young body close and to kiss the bright lips so blindly offered?

After a bit he gently led her back to her chair and offered her a cigarette. "By the way, Ginny," he remarked, "that telegram of mine was delivered."

"What! Why, *I* didn't see it, honest I didn't! I'll bet Cuz'n Emily took it for me—she's deadfully forgetful."

"You'd told her a mysterious someone was coming. Do you think she'd forget a thing like that?"

"I suppose not," Virginia admitted. "I wonder who did take it."

"I'd give a lot to know," North said grimly. Then he continued with apparent irrelevency, "Your father must be a very busy man."

"Oh, he is," Virginia nodded. "The firm's been right busy lately and he's been doin' well in the market. Stephanie was wishin' Cliff would trade for himself—"

A violent squall pounced on Magnolia Hill, and shook the old mansion until the tall windows ratled. Ever sharper grew Hugh North's premonition—a premonition that again the Dark Angel was ready to enter the plantation house.

"About your Uncle Billy," he invited. "Isn't he rather fond of Mrs. Prenderbury?"

"He's devoted to her in his old-fashioned way," Virginia smiled, smoothing the blue dress over her knees. "He has been for nearly twenty years. Trouble is, he's shy. That's why he lost her in the first place and went off to Mexico."

"What did he do there?"

"He helped to build a big power dam—you know, for electric current."

Um. If William Mosby had been an electrical engineer in Mexico, North felt no need to comment on this discovery.

"And why is he called Uncle Billy?"

"Oh, he's an uncle of Stevie's. His mother was a Prenderbury and was born right here in Magnolia Hill."

"I see, and does he live here regularly?"

"No, he's been on a 'plantation visit.' " Virginia's laugh rippled forth like a satin ribbon unrolling. " 'Round here when

we go visitin' there's no tellin' whether we'll stay six hours or six months. Uncle Billy's leavin' though. He doesn't want to complicate things during Daddy's wedding."

The next item on North's list concerned a certain .22 rifle, so he arose.

"Why don't you stay here, Ginny?" he said. "I'm going up to see your father a few minutes."

"Oh do!" She clasped her hands in gentle enthusiasm. "He'll be so glad to see you. He's so terribly upset."

And this was no less than the truth. Scott Seabrook seemed badly shaken, though Mrs. Lawton was keeping him company. Apparently Seabrook's fiancée had not forgiven North, for she straightened and spoke coldly.

"Well, Captain North, I'm sure by this time you must have found out how Mr. Jameson was killed—and by whom?"

The Intelligence Captain paused, his tall figure nearly filling the doorway. "You flatter me," he declared and stepped inside, leaving the door significantly ajar, "but I wouldn't be surprised if we make an arrest before dawn."

VII

THERE COULD be no doubt that Scott Seabrook was laboring under a terrific tension, for as soon as Mrs. Lawton departed, he got up and splashed a generous tot of bourbon into a glass.

Next he crossed to a half-open window and stood for some time staring out into the storm and quite ignoring the fine mist which was beating in over his writing desk. At last the master of Magnolia Hill summoned a wan smile and turned with the air of a man who has steeled himself to face an ordeal.

"Well, Captain, my daughter Virginia did better than she realized when she invited you down here."

"I'm glad to be of use, Mr. Seabrook," North said. "Since our first concern is to forestall further tragedy, I wish you'd tell me if you've any firearms in the house."

"Only a little thirty-two. It's in my desk. Would you like to have it?"

North inclined his narrow dark head and accepted a small snub-nosed automatic. "Any others?" he asked. "By 'firearms' I include shotguns and rifles—even a twenty-two."

Seabrook smiled. "I've a twenty-two high-power, but I gave it to Stephanie to leave at the gunsmith in Charleston. The ejecter was out of order. Why do you ask?"

"Because, Mr. Seabrook, I'm convinced that unless prompt measures are taken there's going to be another murder."

The white haired man before him looked up sharply. "Murder! Impossible! Why, who could be in danger?"

"You," came the deliberate reply.

"I? You can't mean—"

"I do. So please tell me frankly if there's anything wrong with your business."

"Wrong, Captain?" Scott Seabrook moistened his lips. "Whatever gave you such an idea? Why, we have been coining money hand over fist."

"Then I'm to understand," North said, his eyes on the murky tumult beyond the open window, "that you've done well?"

"Yes. I bought in a few thousand shares of Aztec Copper at the right time and made a neat profit. It comes in handy these days."

Aztec Copper? Somewhere in the dim recesses of the gaunt Captain's memory a recollection stirred. But it refused to be identified.

"What about young Rowan, then?"

Virginia's father looked very unhappy. "I don't pry into my partners' affairs, Captain."

No change of manner marked North's shift of tactics as he asked, "Have you noticed any hypodermics about this house?"

Scott Seabrook made a little gargling noise and sweat sprang out on his forehead. He gulped a mouthful of straight bourbon.

"I presume Stephanie has one in her nurse's kit. Why do you ask?"

North ignored the question to put another. "Does anyone of the household take Insulin?"

Anger flared hot in Seabrook's bright blue eyes. "Really, Captain, I don't know! Why these questions?"

"I was wondering because two of the household take no sugar in their coffee." North was at pains to remain friendly.

"Now that you mention it," Seabrook's florid features had gone an unhealthy pink gray, "I believe that Cousin Emily is troubled that way."

Leaving the matter there, North interrupted the loading of his pipe to terminate a mosquito and lead the talk into other channels.

"I believe you said you were once a civil engineer?"

Seabrook nodded. "Yes. Those were the days!" He sighed and visibly relaxed. "But it was no picnic building in the Matto Grosso and Sao Paulo—what with snakes, Indians, and Yellow Jack."

"Indians?" North lingered on the word and stared into the crimson bowl of his pipe.

"Yes, nasty brutes, too. You'd be working when *zing* you'd get a reed arrow in your back."

"That must have been fun."

"It was. We'd pull the damn

things out and pray they'd no *lagrimas* on them. It'd be curtains if there were."

"Lagrimas?"

"Yes. It's nice stuff made of decayed dog's liver impregnated with juice of the antiaris plant and the venom of a small red toad. The natives call the stuff *las lagrimas del escuerzo rosa*—the Red Toad's Tears. They carry it about in rather pretty little amulets. Lots of people buy them for souvenirs without knowing what's in them. I had a couple of these amulets around. In fact, I threw them away only last spring."

"Threw them away? *Are you sure?"*

"Yes," Seabrook declared firmly, "I did. I remember distinctly."

As his host continued, many of North's preconceived ideas dissolved like sand castles under the onslaught of a wave. So Seabrook had had Indian amulets in the house.

Firmly he reminded himself that knowledge of blood poisons was not confined to the South American Indians. The Zunis, Apaches, and Yaquis of the Southwest all were quite gifted in that respect. What if such knowledge flourished nearer at hand? Somewhere in the back of his mind dwelt the impression that deep in the vast swamps forming the Santee's delta existed a sinister breed of humans—half Negro and half Indian. From such wily hunters could not an enthusiastic sportsman coax a bit of ancient lore?

Increasingly troubled, North wandered over to the window and thanks to frequent flashes of lightning caught impressions of live oaks whipping like shrubs under the force of a storm which was rapidly assuming gale velocity. What a dismal, disturbing vista met his eye—and the phone was dead! He started violently when a storm-twisted wet leaf plastered itself on to the glass. Oddly enough it resembled the outline of a bat.

Reaching a sudden decision, the Intelligence officer resettled his white coat and, preceded by his shadow thrown gigantic on the wall, started for the door.

"I'll be back soon," he said. "And by then I'll know who the murderer is."

"You—you will?" Scott Seabrook at a gulp finished the rest of his bourbon.

"Yes. If I were you I'd not go strolling around."

"Why?"

"Everybody's nervous and—well, I just wouldn't."

So saying, North sought Stephanie Bartram in her room and had a most unsatisfactory interview. For her former sullenness, she substituted a caustic flippancy which gave the harassed Intelligence officer less than no help.

"Of co'se, I had Scott's rifle," she admitted with a stiletto stare. "Didn't you notice it in my stockin'?"

"Please, Miss Bartram—"

"Dear, dear Captain North, you disappoint me. I've been told I've right pretty legs. Cliff?" she mocked. "Oh, Cliff's all right and besides he's smart. It takes a right clever fellow to clean up in the stock market these days."

"Clean up?" North wondered. Was the ring of truth in her last statement?

"Sho' now. Cliff has done mighty well lately. It's gone to his head, or hasn't the great detective noticed it?"

"Yes. Virginia *is* lovely, isn't she?"

Scarlet swept into Stephanie's features. "You Yankee boor!"

"Tut, tut, my dear!"

"Ginny's a fool!" Stephanie blazed. "She can't hold him. Not when Lucretia knows—"

"Mrs. Lawton? Do I detect a jealous note?" North smiled.

"No, but she gets what she wants and pretty soon Cliff will be the one to buy her diamond bracelets and emerald rings! And won't dear Lucretia coo and slobber over him?"

"And take away your inheritance just the same?" North gibed. He was immediately contrite; tragedy was poignant in the red-haired girl's eyes.

"She's not going to get it!" Stephanie's bright lips set savagely. "Not that schemin' greedy cat! Oh, damn her for comin' here and spoilin' our home! She will tear us down like she wants to turn this grand old place inside out."

"Your Cousin Emily doesn't enjoy the prospect either," North suggested over the febrile tapping of rain on the window panes.

"No! Oh, if only she were a man!"

"She has your Uncle Billy."

"She has, but what can Uncle Billy do? He's 'most as poor as we are and he's so gentle."

Hugh North, however, entertained certain odd convictions regarding gentle people with an old-fashioned concept of chivalry. But he said nothing.

"You wouldn't care to tell me how your ex-friend Rowan made his money?"

"I don't know and I don't care! But he made it. Not that I care whether he's rich or po' as Job's turkey!" Then her reserve cracked badly. "I love him more than—well, I'm not lettin' anybody take him from me. Get that straight, you damn' Yankee snooper!"

"Thanks to you, dear Miss Bartram, I've now got a number of things straight," North murmured with a sardonic smile and hurried down to the library where he found Dr. Kane mechanically playing an intricate form of solitaire.

"Doctor, have you seen a daily paper about?"

"Yes, over there."

Grateful that this was Saturday evening and that he would therefore find a summary of the week's stock prices, North flung back the sheets and hurriedly sought the financial section. To his rising alarm he read that Aztec Copper had only a few days before risen eleven points!

"Here's bad news, Doctor, we'd better be—" He paused, his voice becoming lost amid the heart stilling crackle of a thunderbolt. A split second later, every light in Magnolia Hill blinked out.

VIII

"I'VE A FLASHLIGHT in my bag," came the doctor's voice. "Do you want it?"

"Very much. Let's get it. I don't like this," North added as, ignoring startled cries, he followed the doctor towards the front hall.

Captain North took the stairs three at a time. But hating dramatics, he unostentatiously shifted the familiar .32 to his coat pocket.

"Please put out the flashlight," he requested when they found the upper hall plunged into an almost tangible darkness. There was no sense in deliberately inviting trouble.

Dr. Kane's hand closed on North's elbow with the force of a vise.

"Look!" he whispered. *"Look down there!"*

But the Intelligence Captain had already seen something just a little more deeply black than the rest of the shadows drift out of Scott Seabrook's room and vanish down into the darkened hall. Instantly he started in pursuit, glimpsing the fugitive darting into a doorway further down the passage.

"Keep flat to the wall and turn on your flash when I whistle," North advised his companion. Thus presenting a minimum target they approached the doorway in which the unknown was standing.

Balancing on the balls of his feet for a quick leap to right or left and squatted, he whistled a single soft note whereupon Dr. Kane pressed the button of his flash.

"Why, why, Mr. Mosby," Dr. Kane gasped when his light's beam illumined a tense, dead-white face. "What are you doing there?"

Uncle Billy failed signally in affecting a casual manner. "Why, Doctor, I reckon I was just goin' to get a candle out of Scott Seabrook's room."

"Which is your room?" was North's brusque query.

"Second door to the right, suh."

With his right hand still

buried in his coat pocket, North borrowed the doctor's flash and directed it through the indicated door. Almost the first object it revealed was a candle set on the mantelpiece.

"Your explanation won't do, Mr. Mosby," he said. Then sharply he added, "No. I wouldn't reach into that pocket, if I were you."

North turned to Dr. Kane and his voice was as metallic as the click of a cocked pistol. "Please take the gun in his pocket and keep this man covered with it. I'll be back in a second."

Mental sirens were howling an alarm in the Intelligence officer's brain when he regained Seabrook's door and flicked out his light. He dropped to all fours and gently thrust open the door. He listened, and thanks to a lull in the storm was able to detect a faint *pat-pat-pat* which set the flesh to tingling on his neck.

Training Dr. Kane's flash towards the sound he flicked it on and uttered a surprised gasp. What lay before him was not a scarlet but a sable pool. Into its center great jet drops were slowly falling, causing a spatter which had stained a pair of white shoes and the trouser cuffs above them. Climbing slowly, North's light then illumined a limply dangling hand which the gaunt detective recognized with a pang of dismay.

Virginia Seabrook's worst fears had undoubtedly been realized. Loosely sprawled across his writing desk lay Scott Seabrook's big body, its silvery hair awry, its shoulders gruesomely huddled together. One outflung arm had knocked over the inkstand, and in so doing had created that Stygian pool below.

A quick search of the bedroom, and a bathroom beyond revealed nothing which leaped to the attention. Aware of a growing babel of voices, North lit three or four candles and directed Dr. Kane to bring in the prisoner.

He appeared grimly urging Uncle Billy, agitated but very dignified, before him. Over the shoulders of these two hovered a series of faces so tense and varied in expression that it almost seemed to North as if a collection of Benda masks were converging upon him.

"Daddy! Oh-h!" Virginia's cry was heart-rending. She started for the tragic figure before the writing desk, but fainted before she had taken two steps.

"May I?" Uncle Billy cast a quick glance at the doctor and taking assent for granted knelt to lift the girl's head onto his lap.

Stephanie, standing straight as a candle, was seemingly deprived of all reaction. But her nostrils opened and shut convulsively like the gills of a stranded fish.

Mrs. Prenderbury did not even enter the room but remained in the doorway, her eyes narrowed with the tense look of a trained nurse witnessing a critical operation. As for young Rowan, he studied the scene for a moment with feverish interest. Then he crossed to Stephanie and put his arm about her shoulders. As for Mrs. Lawton, she swept into the scene, quite lovely in a filmy negligee and wept obtrusively. But North would allow none of them, aside from Virginia, more than a step or so inside the room.

"Mr. Seabrook is dead," he announced succinctly, and then added in a suddenly authoritative voice, "You will all go to your rooms and stay there until the police arrive."

As soon as they were gone, he carried Virginia to her room and left her with Mrs. Prenderbury in whose eyes shone a glitter as of many tiny knives.

In leaving he paused. "Where were you, Mrs. Prenderbury, just before the lights went out?" he asked.

"In my room, packing," came the acid reply.

"Have you been in Mr. Seabrook's room all evening?"

"No. I know when not to bother people."

Regretting that more pressing matters claimed his attention, North returned to Seabrook's room and subjected Uncle Billy to an expert search which yielded a curious object. It consisted of a long darning needle the blunt end of which had been securely fixed into a lump of sewing wax.

"Well?" North asked, grimly holding up the device. "Where did you get this?"

"Mrs. Prenderbury gave it to me," Uncle Billy explained mildly. "You see, Captain, the canvas lining of my gun case had ripped and I had intended to sew it up. You can't arrest me for that," the old man declared stoutly.

"I don't suppose I can, Mr. Mosby," North admitted. "But I can arrest you for driving these three inches of steel into the base of Scott Seabrook's brain."

"Into the medulla," Dr. Kane amplified.

"But I—I didn't," cried the prisoner, dropping his eyes. I was only going to sew—"

A rasping laugh burst from North. "That's splendid, Mr. Mosby—very credible. A murder has just been committed, and you suddenly take up sewing. Dr. Kane, please lock him in some closet with a strong door and then send one of the servants for the police. Come back as soon as you can."

Left alone, he gathered the candles and by their inadequate light inspected the murderous implement William Mosby had fashioned from Mrs. Prenderbury's gifts. With a grimace of

sickening disappointment, North noted no trace of any red substance on the needle's shank. Seabrook's snow-white hair was gleaming frostier than ever because now his skin was turning a deep plum color. Moreover, the wound and the swelling about it was identical with that which had caused Jameson's death, for among the silvery hairs on the back of Seabrook's neck a single drop of blood glowed like an evil ruby.

"He *must* have cleaned that needle," North mused. "But where?" A cursory search, however, gave him no satisfaction and at last he paused undecided, his eye attracted by a gentle stirring of the murdered man's hair. Aware that rain was still beating in through the partially opened window, he closed it softly.

By the light of a candle held above the corpse he saw that death had stilled Seebrook's hand so swiftly that his pen, though broken in half, was yet gripped tightly in his fingers. Squarely under the head several sheets of stationery lay on the blotter—all of them perfectly blank. Consequently, North was deeply interested to observe small imprints on the blank sheets. Ink still wet the penpoint.

"What a horrible, horrible affair," sighed Dr. Kane, closing the door quietly behind him. "And they all seem like such nice people here. You haven't any idea who did it?"

North nodded. "I have. But to prove it is something else again."

"You don't think it was old Mosby?"

"I'd rather not say until we see if we can find the message Seabrook was writing and which the murderer removed."

Little gray bristles on Dr. Kane's chin glistened when he bent to survey the body. "What are our chances?" he asked.

"Poor. There's a fireplace in almost every room of this old place."

Gently he lifted Seabrook's horribly bloated head and removed the top sheet of notepaper from beneath it. His lips compressed, he then held his specimen to the candle light. Nothing in the least legible materialized and he had no better luck when he played his flash over it from the sides and rear.

"What a shame poor Seabrook didn't use a pencil and bear down harder," Dr. Kane sighed. "Not even you can read that impression, I'm afraid. What are you going to do, Captain?"

The Intelligence officer hesitated, his gray blue eyes roving over the disordered desk until they came to rest on one or two drops of rain which had reached it from the window. Hopefully, he picked up for the second time the limp sample of note paper.

It was pretty soft and fortunately highly glazed. Given a decently equipped laboratory real results might have been attained. But no laboratory was nearer than Charleston and time was as pearls and much fine gold.

"It all depends," he said as if to himself, "if there's an atomizer in the house."

"An atomizer? The doctor's grizzled brows shot up. "What in the world do you want an atomizer for?"

"You'll see. What I need is a very fine vaporizer such as people use for treating head colds, asthma, and so forth. Then I'll want some iodine and plenty of adhesive. Mr. Rowan or some of the ladies might have some.

With bewilderment written large on his features, Dr. Kane hurried out.

Much as North deplored the necessity, he was forced to leave Scott Seabrook's body unguarded by no more than an ordinary doorlock while he sped down to the kitchen and ranged about until he found a large tin cracker box. Especially convenient was the little glass window in its front designed to reveal its contents. Lastly he appropriated a can opener and bounded back upstairs.

In the hall Dr. Kane was waiting for him, looking distinctly apprehensive.

"You'd better take care," he warned, glancing over his shoulder. "I just met Rowan downstairs. He had a shotgun in his hands and an ugly look on his face."

"As if that will do him any good," came the level reply. "Come inside, Doctor. We've work to do."

In anxious silence, the doctor watched North strip off his coat before carefully wiping out the cracker box. Next North employed his can opener to cut a small round hole into one side of the box near the top. This done, he held to the candle light a nasal vaporizer which Dr. Kane produced, and then quickly rinsed out its container before he measured into it a few drops of iodine. These he presently diluted with water until the container was. half full of a pale amber fluid.

"Please hold the flashlight," he directed. He tried the atomizer and immediately a light golden haze went drifting across the room.

North nodded. "Um. It may do. Let's have that adhesive."

Using great care he clipped the sheet from beneath Seabrook's head to a length of cardboard removed from the bosom of a dress shirt in the dead man's bureau. He propped it at about an eighty degree angle inside the cracker box. The container's lid he then made comparatively airtight with a band of adhesive

tape. Then, employing the same material, he sealed the vaporizer's nozzle to the hole he had cut.

"Where did this adhesive come from?" he asked.

"Some from Mrs. Prenderbury and the rest from Mrs. Lawton," Dr. Kane replied. "I was afraid there wouldn't be enough—it was so narrow. Apparently three-eighths is the standard width around here. I didn't dare tackle young Rowan."

"I don't blame you. Now, Doctor, please direct your flashlight into that little window."

Gently North squeezed the atomizer's bulb and squatted on his heels staring into the lighted box and watching the downward drift of the vapor particles. He continued to squeeze the bulb at intervals until the vaporizer and the box's interior were all but lost to sight amid a lazily floating yellow mist.

"If it's going to work at all, that should do it," he declared, straightening to light a cigarette. "It'll take some minutes for the vapor to settle; and in the meanwhile we'll see if we can find a rag or a piece of paper with a red smear on it."

North paced back and forth, with powerful, restless strides now regarding Seabrook's corpse, now peering into the wastebasket and occasionally stealing a glance at the cracker box. Was an answer to this ghastly affair materializing within it? Not since his rookie days had he been so desperately anxious.

Dr. Kane, too, was feeling the strain as at last North said with a faint smile, "We mustn't be too disappointed if there's nothing. Our apparatus is pretty primitive and after all Seabrook might have not yet started to write."

Anxious lines, however, hovered about his mouth as he gingerly pulled off curling strips of adhesive. Then he lifted out the paper and the cardboard, which was now stained a deep and even yellow.

"My God!" Dr. Kane burst out. "How is it possible?"

Faintly brown but perfectly legible, line after line of a closely written message had materialized. "The page was absolutely blank. Why, damn it, this is incredible! How did you do it?"

North sighed with relief and frankly mopped his brow. "The explanation is simple enough. Thanks to the open window all the writing paper on the desk was damp—so damp that the pressure of Seabrook's penpoint on the page above was enough to disturb minute surface particles on the sheet beneath. This page being, like most expensive note papers, made of rags, was particularly sensitive. It contains long fibres which on being disturbed out of their glazed bed

—even less than now—catch every down-drifting particles of the vapor."

"It's very pale," Dr. Kane said dubiously. "Do you think we can read it?"

"The fibres will turn darker as they dry."

Under the judiciously-applied heat of two candles, the note paper gradually dried and turned a pale amber.

Bending like schoolboys over a forbidden book, both men read the now legible message.

My darling Virginia:

Isn't it one of life's supreme ironies that you, loving me as you do, should have brought your own father to justice? I can't begin to tell you how greatly I regret the disgrace I have brought upon you. Try to forgive me and realize that I'm attempting restitution by the only means I know.

Only chance saved me from committing more serious crimes than embezzlement. A lurch of the car, and Captain North's surprising quickness alone saved his life on the road from Queen's Oak. Then again only his caution saved him when he threw that light switch. It was simple matter for an ex-engineer and when I failed in that, too, I began to lose my nerve.

No doubt you are wondering why I tried to kill your friend. You see, I took the telegram saying he was coming from the hall table and was terrified that he'd discover what I can no longer hide. I bought Aztec Copper short and staked everything on a slump. But it went up and up and to cover my margin, I took money from some clients' accounts for, thanks to some recent extravagancies, I hadn't any ready money of my own. Somehow Jameson came to suspect and tonight he threatened to expose me if I did not immediately make restitution, though I told him that with a little more time I was sure I could pay back the embezzled sum.

Well, I can, and I will. My life insurance is very heavy and is made out to you and Stephanie. Please pay back my clients with it. There'll be plenty left over so look out for Cousin Emily.

Before I shoot myself, I must tell you that poor Jameson was killed with poison from an amulet I'd brought back from South America. I recognized the symptoms at once, but didn't dare say anything. Please believe, my darling, that I had no willing part in his death. To kill a stranger is one thing, but to murder a life long friend is—

The letter ended there.

IX

THE STORM'S tumult was diminishing rapidly when into the oak-paneled warmth of the library filed the household—some willingly, some sullenly. Rowan, deprived of his shotgun after a clash of wills with North hovered alert and dangerous at Stephanie Bartram's side, and Uncle Billy walked stiffly before Dr. Kane, his face faded and crumpled-looking, like a Japanese lantern with its candle gone out.

"Well, Captain," Rowan began truculently, "to what do we owe this particular Star Chamber session?"

North made no immediate reply. He cast a compassionate look at Virginia sobbing softly and sunk so deep in an arm chair as to seem deflated. Mrs. Prenderbury was scowling nervously, her features the color of old ivory and her black eyes restlessly flitting about the room. As for Mrs. Lawton, she sat tense and her eyes never left North's gaunt features.

"I have here," the Intelligence officer said, tapping the yellowed sheet of note paper, "a confession written by Mr. Seabrook."

"A confession!" Virginia started as if touched by a live wire. "Oh, he couldn't have hurt Mr. Jameson! He was so kind and—"

"And so generous to others that he ruined himself and took to embezzling," North cut in. "It is unfort—"

"What! What's that?" Rowan seemed to grow inches taller. "Why, I thought it was Jameson!"

"Quiet!" Stephanie gasped and clapped a hand over his mouth. "For God's sake, be quiet, Cliff."

The Intelligence officer threw her a curious look before turning back to the sheet of paper.

"Where did you get this so-called confession?" Mrs. Prenderbury demanded with fingernails in her voice.

Briefly North explained the process of reconstruction and then read the confession aloud. Though low-pitched, his voice rang out clearly in the sepulchral silence which immediately descended.

"I'm sure you all now see why the murderer didn't hesitate to kill Scott Seabrook in order to silence him and to suppress the original of this."

"But," Mrs. Prenderbury pointed out, "Mr. Seabrook didn't have time to name Mr. Jameson's murderer."

"Ah, but he did," North quickly corrected her. "There was a *second* sheet which the killer failed to notice."

"You're lying!" Mrs. Lawton cried in shrill triumph. "There wasn't any second sheet! There was only one!"

The tension in the room mounted as Hugh North made a little deprecatory gesture. "You are quite right, Mrs. Lawton. I am lying. But, please, just how could you be so sure there was no second page?"

"Why, why—" She attempted to recover. "You showed us only one sheet. I—I don't know what you're talking about. I just spoke on impulse."

"No doubt. And on impulse you murdered Seabrook when he refused to keep quiet about your killing his partner."

"What's that? What are you saying?" Dr. Kane cried. "*She* killed Jameson?"

"Yes. Seabrook told her that Jameson knew everything."

"He's lying!" screamed Mrs. Lawton, suddenly terror-stricken. "Scott told me nothing!"

The others were silent.

"Oh, but he did," declared North inexorably. "Or you'd never have forced his hand by silencing Jameson. You wanted Seabrook's secret kept until he could extricate himself from the mess into which your greediness and his generosity had plunged him! You desperately wanted this place and all that went with it and you killed a man to keep from losing it."

"I didn't! I didn't, you devil!" Shaking with fury, Lucretia Lawton sprang to her feet. "Scott killed him!"

"How?" North snapped.

"With poison from an Indian trophy!"

A vast grin of satisfaction lit the Intelligence officer's countenance. "Ah, I see you recognized those amulets for what they really were." He risked a shrewd lie. "Isn't it too bad that the gum on the adhesive you used to fasten the hypodermic's point to Jameson's chair perfectly matches a sample you gave to Dr. Kane. The other lengths were of a darker gray."

Like a harpy Mrs. Lawton shrilled, "He's lying! He's making all this up!"

If she had been a mewing kitten the man from Washington could not have ignored her outburst more completely.

"Ah, but I'm not. You see, I'm certain a clever chemist is going to find a trace of insulin on that needle point you used."

"Well, he won't," snarled the woman in green. "It was boiled."

"Oh, was it?" North chuckled as Mrs. Lawton gasped in loose-mouthed confusion. "Isn't it nice to find that out before so many reputable witnesses?"

X

As if contrite for her nocturnal fury, Nature was bestowing on the world one of her sunniest mornings when Captain North, in company with Uncle Billy, approached the portico of Magnolia Hill. Judiciously he

surveyed a lawn all littered with broken branches and wet leaves and reflected that in much the same fashion the storm which had raged within the plantation house had also blown itself out, leaving wreckage behind.

An hour ago Mrs. Lawton, alternately hysterical and defiant had been driven away by a pair of state policemen, and since dawn Virginia had lain in her big room and, thanks to an opiate, had been lost to tragic realities.

Uncle Billy drew a deep breath and expelled a sigh. "It's a glorious mornin', isn't it, Captain? For me especially, suh, because" —he shrugged a little as he lit a slender cigar—"I had made up my mind that Emily should not be driven from her home on account of a woman who was not even a lady."

North drew several little puffs on his pipe. Skirting puddles, they descended the steps and started off down the long drive.

"It was you who tore away the telephone, wasn't it?" he asked.

William Mosby blinked before jerking a nervous little nod. "Yes, I reckoned that if the police came I'd have no chance to —to—"

"To kill Seabrook," North finished. "By the way, was it coincidence that you, too, were going to use a needle?"

"No, Captain, not quite. You see, down in Mexico I'd seen people hurt like Jameson was and I knew he'd been poisoned. Since there was no arrow hole or other wound to be seen right off, I reckoned he must have been poisoned by a right small wound —such as a needle might make."

Stooping, Uncle Billy brushed rain-spattered loam from the bright face of a pansy. "Somewhere in a book, one of that fellow Oppenheim's, I think, I read how a man could be killed by drivin' a needle into the base of his skull." He straightened slowly and looked up into the sky. "God has been very kind to me, suh, so I think I'll go down by the pool. I—I need to give thanks."

Hugh North, very neat in his gray flannels, smiled. "I understand, Mr. Mosby. And I think I'll take a *pasear* down to the stables. That horse of Rowan's is the grandest thing I have seen in a month of Sundays."

He was rounding a wisteria-smothered corner of the slave quarters when a low voice called his name and he beheld Stephanie Bartram waiting as if she had expected his arrival. Her eyes were red but the sullen look was gone.

"Mornin', Captain," she murmured, "I—I just wanted to tell you how awful sorry I am I wasn't more of a help to you last night. But—but what with the prospect of losin' this place and Cliff at the same time, I was

near crazy. Reckon I acted just like an ornery brat. I should have told you, when you asked, that Scott never did give me that rifle."

He laid a reassuring hand on her arm. "Forget it, but remember one thing when a crisis comes along. It doesn't always pay to be selfish."

He paused watching a nearby catbird give grim battle to a singularly pink and resielient worm. "Why wouldn't you tell me how you got that scratch?"

"I—I was ashamed."

"Ashamed to confess you'd been spying on Virginia and Cliff?"

She averted a flaming face. "I reckon that's about the size of it, Captain. You see I overheard Cliff tell Tim Boykin he'd go over to see the puppies after he rode over to Rosetree with Ginny. I wanted to catch Cliff alone and tell him—well, never mind."

She broke off and used the edge of her slipper to collect a little mound of gravel. "Well, they were still together when they passed my hidin' place and I near died of jealousy. I did see Cliff later, in the dining room when Mr. Jameson was dyin' but he wouldn't pay any heed because he was right sure his partner had been murdered. He even went crawlin' all around under the table lookin' for—I don't know what.

"That was the last straw and I just about went wild and—even yet he hasn't spoken to me. If only I didn't l-love him so damn' much!"

She broke into a sobbing so sadly soft that North put a comforting arm about her shoulders.

"I wouldn't worry too much, Stevie," he advised. "I noticed it was you he stood beside when the showdown came last night. I think he'd have killed anybody who even looked cross-eyed at you. You're going to have your hands full with that temper of his."

She raised brimming eyes. "Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it," he smiled. "I'm supposed to be a detective, remember. In fact right now I deduce—thanks to good eyesight—that young Mr. Rowan is heading this way as fast as he can, and I don't want him to catch me with my arm held tightly around you."

a perfectly natural murder

by . . . Robert Arthur

There are two obvious ways of disposing of a body on a high cliff overlooking the sea. But the killer had a subtler idea.

"NEVER UNDERESTIMATE the power of an invalid," John Redrum said briskly as we sat down to dinner on the balcony of our room in the Old Cliff Hotel, the ocean thundering right below us.

As if by way of demonstration he swung himself unaided from his light folding wheel chair into the straightback chair the waiter held for him. The waiter moved the wheel chair back out of the way and began serving.

As a vacation spot, East Point is not ideal. The swimming is poor, with cliffs dropping down a hundred feet to boulder-strewn ledges at the water's edge. But the Old Cliff Hotel serves the best seafood in New England, in my opinion. To enjoy it I travel summer after summer almost to the end of Maine.

We had a seafood dinner with all the courses from local waters, caught that morning. John Redrum, normally a light eater, devoured everything in sight, and by the time the coffee came

Murder is always a catastrophe for the killer as well as a tragedy for the victim. No matter how ingenious or successful the former may be, he cannot escape from the knowledge that there are eyes in the world sagacious enough to call his hand. He may occasionally escape and go calmly about his affairs, but his calm will be largely a mask and his plight will remain an unenviable one, as this new suspense thriller by Robert Arthur makes terrifyingly plain.

he had an air of relaxed contentment.

"Now," he asked, looking at me almost plaintively, "may we discuss the remarkable disappearance of Mr. Jordan Maxwell?"

I burst out laughing. "Redrum," I protested, "you're on vacation. You're up here to get away from mysteries, not to manufacture them."

"Manufacture?" He raised his dark eyebrows. "For a writer you use the English language carelessly. A man has vanished. No one knows what became of him. Ergo, a mystery exists. I certainly did not manufacture it."

"But Jordan Maxwell disappeared three months ago," I protested. "In any case he probably left without telling anyone, that's all. He never gave a damn for anyone around here."

Redrum shook his head. "There is a type of man who can, and often does, vanish. He simply departs and no one notices his going. From what you have told me Maxwell is—or was—the exact opposite of that type. He is—or was—loud, blatant, aggressive, demanding. It is not in character for such a man simply to fade from public sight."

He leaned back, studying the rocky shore of the bay across from us. It was almost dusk, but the air was pleasantly warm for Maine in late August—an indication of the oppressive heat that still held further south.

Ten years earlier John Redrum had been a first grade detective on the New York Police Force. He had been on the Loft Squad, and one evening, surprising a gang of fur thieves, he had been shot through the back. Lying crippled he had killed two fleeing thugs. In the hospital he had faced the fact that he could never hope to walk again.

Most men would have been crushed by the news. Not Redrum. He had to spend a year in bed and he put that year to use in educating himself. Having only a grammar school education plus a year of high school, he studied intensively in English and science.

When he was able to be up, in a wheelchair, he wangled a job in the technical lab of the New York police department. Here he spent four years, learning directly from the many brilliant specialists who work for the department. In the meantime he continued with his general education at Columbia. Ten years after becoming an invalid he probably knew more about criminology than any other man in the city—perhaps in the entire East.

He was not, of course, the equal of the specialists in their own fields, but his knowledge made up in scope what it lacked in specialization. He was often

called upon to analyze documents, to assess evidence other investigators gathered, to act as an expert witness and to devise security systems for large corporations who wanted to keep their research secrets intact.

His hobby and entertainment was the solution—or at least investigation, for he did not always solve them—of mysterious murders and disappearances. Of these he had an enormous file from historical records. He was also an avid reader of detective fiction, both for his own pleasure and because, as he said, Nature is constantly imitating Art.

Redrum's original colloquial New York speech had gradually altered. If at times it now seemed a trifle bookish for one of his background, I secretly attributed it to that very phenomenon he had mentioned—Nature imitating Art.

As a writer, I contacted Redrum originally to get material for a story. We found we hit it off well together, and in time developed such an easy relationship that I moved in to share his apartment and sometimes assist him with his work, gathering facts and evidence for him to digest in the quiet of his study and laboratory. Because of the heat in New York, I had this summer managed to get him to come with me to Maine for the first time.

"Admit," I said, "that your interest in Jordan Maxwell arose from the moment I mentioned that his next-door neighbor, Franklin Cherryman, is an invalid like yourself, confined to a wheel chair."

"I confess it freely," Redrum smiled. "You tell me the two men were enemies. One, as strong as a bull, weighing two hundred pounds, suddenly disappears. His neighbor, who hated him, a mere wisp of a man in a wheel chair, continues quietly about his business. Naturally I am intrigued. What was the source of the enmity?"

"Five years ago," I said, "Maxwell came roaring out of his driveway, drunk, in a big car, just as Franklin Cherryman was starting to town in an Austin. He smashed into Cherryman and turned his car over. Cherryman's legs were crushed and had to be amputated near the hips."

"Ah!" Redrum's eyes gleamed. "Did Cherryman collect compensation?"

"Maxwell's insurance company paid him fifty thousand dollars, if you consider that 'compensation.'"

"I was using the term only in its legal sense. I think we can take for granted Cherryman's secret desire to avenge himself. In his place I certainly would have felt the same desire."

"Perhaps we can assume that Cherryman would have liked to

kill Maxwell," I conceded. "But supposing he had done so? What did he do with the body? He certainly couldn't move it—not even with the little electric car he uses to get around his garden in. He couldn't have dug a hole and buried it. The State Police made an investigation, during which they searched the houses and grounds of both Maxwell and Cherryman.

They didn't find anything—not a sign of disturbance, no evidence of digging, no minutest trace of blood. So there you are. There may have been a motive, but for Cherryman to have murdered Jordan Maxwell is manifestly impossible."

"Never say anything is manifestly impossible," Redrum said mildly. And with that he dropped the subject, though continuing to glance speculatively from time to time at the cliff on the opposite side of the bay.

The next morning was warm and sunny. Redrum suggested that I drive him about and show him the countryside. Half an hour later we were down by the docks where barrels of lobster bait — rosefish carcasses — were being lowered into waiting lobster boats. A rich brinish aroma pervaded the air.

"It takes me back to my days as a rookie around the Fulton Fish Market," Redrum remarked, sniffing. "However, I'd like to see the view from the cliffs up there."

"You mean from Maxwell's place?" I asked with pretended innocence.

We both laughed, and I took the route which carried us through the small, cluttered business section at the head of the bay, past the old village inhabited now chiefly by artists, and so to the cliffs on the far side of the bay.

A few expensive homes had been built up there, and a good many very modest ones. The closest the road comes to the cliff edge, except at the very tip, is two hundred yards, so the land around almost every house extends from the road to the cliffs.

Jordan Maxwell's place was ornate without being attractive. It was set well back from the road and screened by hemlocks and maples, so that only the red tile roof was visible. I turned up the narrow driveway and pulled the car up beside the empty house. It showed the obvious signs of neglect. A green awning was torn and flapping and the grass was a tangle of weeds. Dead branches had fallen on the driveway.

I stopped at the turnaround behind the house, where Maxwell's empty garage was. Jordan Maxwell, large, red-faced, loud and pugnacious, especially when drunk, had disappeared on an

afternoon early in May, more than three months before. He hadn't driven away, because he had taken his car to the garage for a motor-tuneup only that morning, walking home. Nor had he been seen to leave later either by train or bus. He didn't own a boat and he hadn't rented one. He was a well-known, if not well-liked figure in East Point, and he could hardly have left, even on foot, without someone in the little town noticing him. But no one had.

There was a graveled walk extending from behind the house into the woods, in the direction of the cliffs.

"That will take us to an observation point," I told Redrum. "If it's the view you want to see."

"By all means," he answered.

I got out, took the folding wheel chair from the back of the car and set it beside the car door. Redrum, who was a six-footer before his crippling, slender but wiry and powerful, had broadened through the chest and arms in the intervening years. He handled himself easily, requiring no assistance to swing by his arms into the wheel chair. Once settled, he wheeled himself easily down the gravel path.

It went through a grove of hemlocks and after about two hundred yards ended at the top of the cliffs. The sea was a hundred feet below us, the blue water churning itself white as it wove endless patterns around the jagged rocks. Sea gulls dipped and soared. The sun was warm, the wind from the Atlantic chilly.

Redrum wheeled himself up to the stout log barrier that prevented the incautious from venturing too close to the edge.

"Beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Have you any idea if Maxwell came here often?"

"Practically never, I'd guess," I told him. "Money, liquor and women in that order were his interests. Not scenery."

"Does Cherryman have a similar observation spot."

"I don't think so. The ground is rougher and more sloping. But we can go investigate, if you like."

"We'll find him at home, no doubt?"

"Not today," I answered, giving him a hand up the slight slope as we started back. "Today is the annual Fall Flower Exhibit of the East Point Garden Club. Cherryman will be down at the Town Hall, collecting blue ribbons. A good chance to look over the grounds for Maxwell's body," I added facetiously. But Redrum took me seriously.

"No," he said. "That would not be quite fair, would it? But if we can get him to invite us . . . Suppose we visit the exhibit? I have a feeling Cherry-

man and I have a great deal in common."

In the modest gymnasium of the Town Hall, we found a very respectable display of fall flowers—zinnias, gladioli, chrysanthemums, dahlias, tithonias, asters. There were a score of middle-aged women present, and one man. He sat in a wheel chair similar to Redrum's.

Franklin Cherryman had always been slender. Now, in his wheel chair, with his thin, bright-eyed features and light-colored hair, he looked as slight as a teen-aged boy. The idea that he could have killed and disposed of a man weighing more than two hundred pounds was patently absurd.

I introduced Redrum to him, adding as Redrum had insisted that my friend was a consulting detective on vacation. Then I turned away and fended off the chairlady of the exhibit, a buxom summer resident named Mrs. Logan. Pretending an interest in flowers, I kept her away from Redrum and Cherryman. She and I toured the exhibits, moving as slowly as I could manage.

I noted that in the dahlia class Cherryman had won blue, red and yellow ribbons, and I admired the magnificent colors and elaborate petalage of his blooms. Mrs. Logan gushed that even in New York they would have created a sensation, and I found it easy to believe her.

We finally worked our way back to where the two men were chatting. His thin features animated, Cherryman was apparently instructing Redrum in floriculture. As we came up Redrum brought the conversation deftly to a close.

"This afternoon, then," he said. "At five." He turned to me. "We've been invited for cocktails after the exhibit closes."

"And to see my gardens," Cherryman smiled. "The cocktails are the bait, but to earn them all visitors have to admire my flowers first."

As we left the Town Hall, Redrum asked me to take him to the local library. This was just down the block, so we did not take the car. But when we reached it, it turned out to be closed—being open only three days a week, somewhat to Redrum's annoyance. Next to the little brick building, however, was Charlie Lamb's real estate office, and pasted on Charlie's window Redrum spotted a picture of Jordan Maxwell's home with a *For Sale* legend over it.

Redrum's eyes immediately lit up. Over my protests—I didn't want to miss lunch at the Old Cliff Hotel—he insisted that we go in and talk to Charlie.

Charlie Lamb is a tall, spare New Englander, with a prominent Adam's apple and a habit

of prefacing every second sentence by "E-yup." He approaches life with a relaxed attitude which should sustain him to great age, if not at the height of prosperity. After considerable prodding, Redrum extracted from Charlie the information that early in May Jordan Maxwell had requested him to put his house on the market. Charlie had advertised in the local papers and the Sunday *New York Times,* putting out fifteen dollars of his own money to do so. You could see it had hurt him.

It was Charlie, apparently, who had first discovered that Maxwell was missing, though he had not realized it at the time. Driving out to tell him that the ads had brought no inquiries—and to be reimbursed for his fifteen dollars—Charlie had found Maxwell's house empty, and a bottle and glass on the living room table—as if Maxwell had just had a drink and was coming back for another.

With fifteen dollars at stake, Charlie had waited for an hour, and had then walked next door to Cherryman's to inquire if the latter had seen his neighbor. Franklin Cherryman had been able to tell Charlie that Maxwell had dropped over for ten minutes earlier in the afternoon, to discuss a complaint of Cherryman's that some of Maxwell's trees were shading his garden. Then he had left, not saying where he was going.

Charlie had gone back and waited still another hour, not leaving until it became dark. The next day he'd tried again. Maxwell was still absent. On his way home Charlie had stopped in at Ferguson's garage for gas, and seen Maxwell's red sedan on the greaserack. Learning that Maxwell had left the car the previous morning for a general overhauling, and had walked home, Charlie had become alarmed—not so much about Jordan Maxwell, he admitted readily, as about his fifteen dollars.

He'd consulted with Heck Whitingham, the constable, and he and Heck had first gone out to search the Maxwell house. Then, finding no trace of the missing man, they had phoned the State Police. Two troopers had answered the call, and the four of them had gone again to look over Maxwell's house and grounds.

Finding no clue whatever to the missing man, they had interviewed Franklin Cherryman again. Because Cherryman had been the last person to see his neighbor, and because their enmity was well-known in the region, the troopers had—with the invalid's permission—searched his house and grounds. They had found—to use Charlie's words—"Not a ding-danged thing."

Further inquiries in and around the village had merely established negative facts—no one had seen Maxwell Jordan since he had left his car at the garage. His whereabouts was still a mystery, though the local residents generally agreed that he had either gotten drunk and fallen in the ocean, or had gotten drunk and wandered off.

"Sure would like to find him," Charlie's voice trailed after us as we thanked him and left. "E-yup, sure would. So I could get my fifteen dollars back."

Outside, Redrum made a gesture of comic despair.

"Twenty-four hours!" he said. "A man vanishes and it's a full day before anyone even realizes it. Why, in twenty-four hours I could—" He paused, looking thoughtful. "But you could only count on an hour or two," he added. "Any plan to dispose of Maxwell would have to be based upon an outside time limit of two hours."

"Surely, Redrum, you don't still think Frank Cherryman murdered him!" I expostulated.

"No." Redrum smiled as we went back to my car. "Now that I have learned Maxwell put his house up for sale, I don't *think* Cherryman murdered him. I know it."

Then he became irritatingly silent as we drove back to the hotel—where, fortunately, we were just in time to get lunch: New England fish chowder, piping hot, and boiled lobster with butter sauce.

After lunch Redrum bought some gardening magazines and retired to our room. I went for a hazardous swim at the one passable beach. When I got back, Redrum looked annoyed.

"A lot of pretty pictures," he said, indicating the magazines, "and a little information."

We arrived at Cherryman's just before five. It was a pleasant little one-story cottage nestling close to the road among white oaks and sugar maples. It was set off by a well-tended lawn, and behind it to the south was almost an acre of flower garden, now a mass of bloom.

As we stopped beside the house and Redrum swung out into his wheel chair, Cherryman came out to greet us. A ramp took the place of steps from the driveway to the low porch. He rolled down this to us.

"I'm not really such a tyrannical host," he greeted us. "We can skip the guided tour of my garden. The drinks are waiting inside."

"Not at all," Redrum answered. "I want to see your garden and particularly hear how you manage it. I'm sure I don't see how you can."

"Nor can I see how you became a successful detective," Cherryman said blandly. "I sup-

pose it comes down to the fact that a man can succeed at anything that interests him enough, no matter how badly he's handicapped. All right then. This way and I'll show you my garden buggy."

In the rear of the cottage was a two-car garage. One side held a light sedan fitted up to be driven entirely by hand—a model developed originally for wounded war veterans. The other held a contraption rather like a child's toy automobile, except that it was larger. Behind this was a miniature trailer which held, on clamps, a short rake, a hoe, a leaf spear, clippers, hand sprays, and a small compressor attached to a tank sprayer.

"Electric," Cherryman said, swinging himself into the miniature auto. "I charge it from the house current."

He touched a button and the small car glided out of the garage, pulling the tool trailer after it. Redrum and I followed easily along the hard-packed gravel walk to the garden. It was in full bloom—zinnias, chrysanthemums and dahlias, with a few late gladioli making magnificent plumes of color.

As we came closer we saw that the rows of plants were spaced almost four feet apart. On the far side of the garden a man was loading something into a wheelbarrow. He looked up and nodded as Franklin Cherryman approached, but went on working.

The little electric car ran easily between the wide-spaced rows. Cherryman steered in between two rows of dahlias and waited for us. A few small weeds had taken root. He reached back, got the short-handled hoe from the trailer, and was able to exterminate the offending plants without having to leave his runabout. Then he reached for the spike-tipped leaf spear and dextrously stabbed a few early maple leaves which had drifted into the garden, putting them into a burlap bag on the side of the little car.

"Now you see how I manage," he said as we came up. "Of course I have help, especially in the spring. Jud there digs and plows for me, puts the tubers and bulbs in under my direction, and does all the heavy work. Later he'll dig up the glad bulbs and the dahlia tubers for me, spread mulch and fertilizer, and help me get everything ready for the winter. But much of the actual cultivation I do myself. I can spray, hoe, weed and trim."

"Beautifully worked out!" Redrum said admiringly. "Did you plan it all in advance or come to this scheme through trial and error?"

"Oh, I did it all in my mind first," Cherryman said with an airy gesture. "I'm a great be-

liever in advance planning. Trial and error involves so much waste motion."

He waved toward the dahlias all around us. "Dahlias are really the most fascinating of all flowers, for me," he said. "Did you know that no dahlia ever breeds true? They are the result of so many crosses that it's impossible to know what kind of flower the seed will give you."

"Sounds awkward," I said, "not knowing what you're going to get when you plant."

"That's the fascination of it," Cherryman said. "You're constantly getting new varieties and hoping for something special. If you do have a plant which you like, you can propagate it by green slips or by separation of the roots. I won't bore you with the technical details.

"Just let me show you some of my varieties. There are two thousand varieties of dahlia on the market now, and at least fourteen thousand others have been introduced at one time or another. So you can see that being a dahlia enthusiast is a full-time job."

Prattling on, Cherryman led us down one row and up another. It was true that he had an incredible variety of blossoms. To my untrained eye it seemed impossible they could all belong to the same species.

He assured us that they did, and added: "I don't cultivate the showiest varieties for a very good reason. They may grow to a height of five or six feet and that's awkward for me. I concentrate on pompoms and miniatures. They're quite enough to keep me busy."

Redrum, as was his habit when encountering a subject new to him, seemed to be drinking in every word and storing it away for possible future reference.

After ten minutes or so Cherryman steered his electric car out of the rows of flowers and stopped on a stretch of clipped grass.

"There isn't much more to my estate," he said. "I wish I could show you the view of the sea. It's quite remarkable. But the rough ground and the woods makes it impossible for me to get to the edge of the cliff."

He waved his hand, indicating the screen of pines which hid the sea from us. "However, there's an oddity which might intrigue you," he said.

He rolled forward a hundred feet and stopped, just at the edge of the trees. A little circle of rocks, like a miniature well coping, had been built there. We heard a regular, rising and falling soughing sound, like the breathing of a large animal. The sound came from a dark hole, no more than six inches wide, which plunged into the earth.

"A blowhole," Cherryman explained, pleased at our obvious interest. "A tiny fault in the rock which reaches all the way down to sea level. I believe there's a cavern beneath us into which the sea makes its way, though no opening has ever been discovered from the water."

Redrum and I leaned over the hole. The rhythmic sound of waves, translated into a soughing respiration of air, became louder. A faint salty smell was noticeable when one was close enough.

"Extraordinary!" Redrum exclaimed. "Are there any other blowholes around here?"

"Not in this region," Cherryman answered. "This one is quite unique. I tried to enlarge it, but it can't be done. The underlying rock is granite and six inches is the approximate width all the way down."

He chuckled. "Do you know what the family who owned this property before me used the blowhole for? Garbage disposal! Any trash that wasn't too big they just dumped down here. At least it was efficient—no garbage ever showed up on the beaches. There must be a natural trap of some kind down there."

I picked up a small stone and dropped it into the hole. It rattled against the rocky sides for a moment, then silence. I could hear no splash.

"I can understand the impulse," Redrum observed. "It seems ideal for garbage disposal."

"Yes," Cherryman agreed, turning his electric car about. "But I have better uses for my garbage. I'm an organic farming enthusiast."

"Organic farming?" Redrum asked. "You mean only natural fertilizer, and so on."

"That's it," Cherryman agreed. "No chemicals for me. Leaf mould, humus, manure, compost — especially compost. Compost is the decomposition product of any organic material which is left to rot. Jud here knows what a bug I am on compost, eh, Jud?"

We had reached the overalled hired man, who was stolidly forking a large pile of brownish material into a wheelbarrow. He looked up and nodded briefly. There was no smile on his face, which was like seasoned oak.

"E-yup," he said. "Can't burn a leaf, or Mr. Cherryman gives me hail Columbia." He paused, and spat on the pile.

"Horrible practice, burning leaves," Cherryman said. "Robs the soil of organic material which would normally go back to it. 'Ashes to ashes, dust to dust' you know—the immutable law of nature. The only way we can keep from exhausting the soil. As it is we've lost about half of the precious topsoil this country had when Columbus

discovered it. And it takes a thousand years for nature unaided to create a single inch of topsoil."

He gave us a rueful glance. "Don't let me get started on the subject," he said. "I'm a conservation fanatic. I do my part by composting—every scrap of organic material that is discarded becomes compost, unless it's diseased or insect-infested. This particular pile was an experiment, incidentally . . . How would you say it worked out, Jud?"

Jud, forking up the last of the material, leaving a bare spot on the ground some seven feet long by four feet wide, paused again.

"Well, now," he said, with deliberation. "Worked all right. Pretty near ready to use, just since Spring, too. Would've been better, though, if'n you'd let me turn it over, couple of times."

"I know," Cherryman agreed. "I was digging into it just the other day, to see how it had come along. But I didn't want it turned over. I wanted to see how it progressed the lazy man's way, just being left alone."

Jud spat again, picked up the wheelbarrow handles, and started off toward a spot behind the garage.

"Jud likes chemical fertilizer," Cherryman smiled. "It's easier. But he humors me. This particular pile was a load of fresh garbage only last Spring. I had Hank Selden, the town garbage collector, dump a truckload here for me. Then I sprinkled it heavily with some new goo that just came on the market—actually a powder, a concentration of decay-producing bacteria which are the agents that cause the breakdown of organic material. I kept it sprinkled, and the pile turned into well-decayed compost just over the summer.

"You know—" he started toward the house and we followed —"out in California they've succeeded in processing raw organic material into the finest compost in three weeks under ideal conditions. The bacteria will decompose anything organic rapidly —leaves, vegetation, grass cuttings, garbage, cloth, paper—anything you choose. They're working now on making fertilizer out of sawdust and down in Louisiana a man is dredging up the lillies that are choking the rivers there, and turning them into fertilizer.

"But I keep forgetting you're city people—not truly interested in the sort of thing that we country folk find exciting. So now for the drink, eh?"

Presently we were having the drink, efficiently mixed by Cherryman himself. We chatted for a few minutes more, then took our leave. As soon as we reached the hotel Redrum plunged once more into the gar-

dening magazines he had bought and did not emerge until supper was served—oysters on the half shell, followed by a casserole of seafood au gratin to which we both gave undivided attention.

"Well," I said, when we had finished and settled back for a cigarette, our gaze on the cliff across the bay, "are you ready to agree now that Cherryman couldn't possibly have killed, concealed and disposed of a man weighing over two hundred pounds and accomplished it without leaving a trace?"

When he did not reply, I added, ironically: "Of course, he *could* have stabbed him in the back with that leaf spear he uses so proficiently. Then he could have chopped Maxwell into small pieces—given the time—and dropped the pieces down the blowhole. But butchery is quite an art, besides being bloody. And the blowhole will accommodate no object more than six inches wide. So it would be a rather tedious business. Not to mention one which would surely have left traces for the State Police to find the next day."

Smiling, Redrum shook his head. "No," he said, "that theory doesn't appeal to me—at least not in its entirety."

"I suppose you have a better theory!" I said, nettled.

"No, not a theory." Redrum poured himself more coffee. "I did have one, but since Cherryman confirmed it for me it's no longer a theory. It's a fact."

"Now really, Redrum!" I protested. He raised his eyebrows.

"You're not using much imagination," he chided. "I repeat—never underestimate the power of an invalid. Cherryman no doubt spent a couple of years deciding just how to kill the man who had crippled him. Without condoning murder under any circumstances, I can understand his motivation. When he learned that Jordan Maxwell had put his house up for sale—no doubt by reading Charlie Lamb's advertisement in the local paper—he was impelled to act at once.

"He knew, you see, that if Maxwell moved away he would lose his opportunity. So he made his preparations. Then he phoned Maxwell and asked him to drop in, using as a pretext his concern over the way in which Maxwell's trees shaded his garden. Maxwell probably came over. Cherryman talked him into walking out into the garden with him—and then, as you suggested, killed him with one expert stab of that leaf picker. Maxwell fell dead on the spot."

"And then what did Cherryman do with the body?" I asked, exasperated. "I've never denied that Cherryman could have killed him. But he couldn't have dis-

posed of the body—not even by dragging it away behind that little electric car."

"He had help," Redrum said calmly. "I've known all along he must have had help. I just didn't know at first where the help came from. Now I do. It came from a few hundred billion bacteria, concentrated into the compost-making mixture that Cherryman called 'goo.' He undoubtedly left Maxwell's body just where it fell. After spreading a good many pounds of that bacteria 'goo' over him, he simply raked the pile of fresh garbage on top of the body, spread the rakings with the composting agent too, and left the whole pile to nature's devices.

"All told, it probably didn't take half an hour. When the troopers searched the premises the following day, they paid no attention to the two or three low piles of leaves, vegetation—and garbage—on the grounds. Who would hide a man in such an obvious way? Besides, Cherryman's idosyncracy for organic gardening is well-known in the community. So you see, he didn't have to dispose of the body. He let the body dispose of itself for him. He got the living man where he wanted the body to be later."

"Then you mean—" I stared at him—"that all summer Maxwell's body has been resting beneath a compost pile right beside Cherryman's garden? It's there now?"

Redrum shrugged.

"Not now," he said. "You saw his hired man spading up the last of the pile. Obviously Cherryman moved the remains several days ago. After a summer of being—shall we say composted?—Jordan Maxwell no longer weighed two hundred pounds. He was probably pretty well reduced to bone, and perhaps sinew. In such case, the bones would be easily separated and broken up with the tools Cherryman had handy. And there would be no blood, of course.

"Undoubtedly Cherryman put the separate bones and pieces of bones down that blowhole. Maxwell's clothing would have composted too. The odds and ends—the soles of his shoes, belt buckle, pen, watch and so forth—would go down the blowhole easily. Only the skull would remain. A human skull is a tough nut to crack. But it's easily hidden and disposed of. It wouldn't surprise me if it came to light yet.

"If we had been a few days earlier, we might have caught Cherryman. As it is I'll have the pleasure of putting this down in my notes as the perfectly natural murder. Cherryman's motive was a natural one, and so was his method of disposing of the evidence."

Redrum's eyes twinkled. "He

just let nature dispose of him, as she has disposed of some billions of us over the year—helping her along a bit, of course. As he said himself, so meaningfully, 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.' Even in murder he was true to his principle of letting nothing organic go to waste."

We did not get to see Cherryman again before we went back to New York. But the following spring Redrum received a package and a note from him. With the note was a newspaper clipping. The clipping said that a human skull had been found washed up on the beach at East Point, and identified by the local dentist as being Jordan Maxwell's. The authorities had decided that Maxwell had somehow fallen in the ocean and drowned, probably while intoxicated, and a watch was being kept for any further remains that might wash up... The note said:

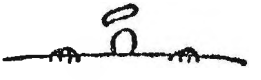
I felt you would be interested in the enclosed, having been so intrigued by the mysterious disappearance of my ill-fated neighbor—who, it seems, came to a natural end after all.

In remembrance of your kindness in letting me show you my garden, I am venturing to send you a few tubers of a new dahlia variety I have developed. Perhaps someone you know would be interested in planting them. I call the variety "Jordan Maxwell," in honor of my late neighbor and to show that I feel no ill-will toward his memory. It is a gross feeder, so warn whoever plants the tubers to fertilize them well.

Sincerely,
FRANKLIN CHERRYMAN.

My sister, who lives in Connecticut, was happy to put the tubers in her garden.

She reported later that they turned out very well. The flowers were large, of an almost brick red color, and would have been very handsome had there not been a certain unpleasant coarseness about them.



"What's New in Crime" will be resumed in the November issue.

a pushover

by . . . Dal Stivens

It's easy to get that skull-and-crossbones feeling — when you're walking along the top of a cliff!

"I DON'T know if you have observed the fact, but it would be extremely easy for me to murder you," said lean Mr. Fotherby to his friend, Mr. Morrice.

"Oh," said round Mr. Morrice, conversationally.

"And, moreover, make it appear as an accident," said Mr. Fotherby.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Morrice.

"Beyond a doubt," said Mr. Fothreby. "It would only be necessary for me to give you a gentle push."

Mr. Fotherby and Mr. Morrice, two public servants in late middle age were walking along the top of a cliff towards the cottage which they had shared for twenty years. At the foot of the cliff where they stood was a jagged apron of rocks.

Mr. Morrice, who was almost at the edge, peered over and shuddered delicately.

"Two hundred feet," said Mr. Fotherby. "There would, I fear, be no hope for you."

"I might conceivably catch on a bush," suggested Mr. Morrice.

There's a superb undercurrent of humor in this small yarn—a humor as grimly sardonic as it is paradoxically effervescent. It stems from the wonderful simplicity of Dal Stivens' narrative technique. As every writer knows, such simplicity is the hardest thing in the world to achieve, and cannot exist apart from maturity and craftsmanship of a high order. It explains, we think, why one of Mr. Stivens' yarns was quickly snatched up by COLLIER'S*—and others by us!*

"There would be little hope of that," said Mr. Fotherby. "I have observed the cliff at this spot from the sea and there is no vegetation."

"Then I should be unfortunate," said Mr. Morrice.

"I fear so," said Mr. Fotherby. "You would be killed and I should achieve a perfect murder, if I might be so immodest."

"Very likely," said Mr. Morrice. "But have you considered you might be seen—by the coast-guard, for example?"

"The mist would prevent him from observing me," said Mr. Fotherby.

"It would indeed be as you say," said Mr. Morrice. "But there is one other thing—if I might be so bold as to mention it?"

"Oh, and what's that?" asked Mr. Fotherby.

"A small matter and perhaps of no consequence," said Mr. Morrice.

"I should like to hear it, nevertheless," said Mr. Fotherby.

"Your motive," said Mr. Morrice. "I realize it is not essential for a murderer to have a motive but it does make the crime more interesting."

"Oh, I have the best of motives," said Mr. Fotherby.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Morrice.

"Yes. There it is!" said Mr. Fotherby, dropping back behind Mr. Morrice. "There's my motive. Your irritating habit of saying, 'Indeed!' like a startled parrot which I have had to endure for twenty years. I assure you that I have the best of motives for killing you."

Mr. Fotherby ran forward lightly and swiftly. Nearing Mr. Morrice he shoved out with both hands.

But Mr. Morrice had dropped down to his knees and Mr. Fotherby tripped forward over Mr. Morrice and rolled over the edge of the cliff. Mr. Fotherby screamed. As he went over, he clutched with both soft white hands and managed to dig them into a fissure in the turf. He hung there with his feet over the rocks. The fissure in the wet soil began to open very slowly but certainly.

"You too, have irritating habits which I have endured for twenty years," said Mr. Morrice, snatching off his scarf and throwing an end to Mr. Fotherby. "One of them is the habit of talking in your sleep about what irritates you, and, more recently, of what you proposed doing about it."

Mr. Fotherby clutched at the scarf but he was too late. The slice of turf came away from the cliff and fell, with Mr. Fotherby underneath it.

I KNOW YOU'D DO THE SAME FOR ME

By STEPHEN BOND

IT WAS surprising how long it took Red to die.

We hit the bank a few minutes after it opened.

Everything was going fine. The fat vice-president who'd picked that morning to get there early was quivering like a jelly-fish as Johnny stood there staring at him, a thin, hungry smile doing damn little to improve that mug of his. The old man knew who Johnny was, after all—the papers had played up Johnny's little bursts of temper—and he knew it'd take very little to set Johnny off.

Then Jack Gomez—you remember "Lefty" Gomez who was killed in Nashville by the Feds later that year—Jack sees this kid in the back making a suspicious move, so he lets him have it.

The shot echoed loud and clear in the big hall. Johnny swung around, gun out, covering the bank people—covering us too, I suppose—snapped out a brisk, "Come on," and headed for the door, satchel full of bills in one hand, gun in the other.

Somebody must have gotten brave then—or maybe a passerby had turned in an alarm—because the cops were coming down the street, even while we were piling in the car.

Red got hit then.

We didn't realize it was serious at first, not until we got back to the city and old "Doc" had examined him and shaken his head.

We took turns walking Red up and down the apartment that night. All night. The whole damned night.

Red was conscious most of the time. "Doc" said he was bleeding inside, but you couldn't tell it really.

About five o'clock the next morning he coughed once—Johnny woke up and looked disgusted as the carpet got messed up—and then that was that.

We woke up two of the other guys then—stopped by at the garage for half a dozen cans of lye—and headed for the country.

The boys dug a good grave, while we two who'd been up all night stood by, watching. Johnny stood off to one side, forehead furrowed like he was thinking of something.

Finally they were ready. They laid Red down in the grave while Johnny stood over him, one of the cans of lye in his hand.

As he started pouring it, his eyes blank as if he wasn't quite there, I thought I heard him mumble something like, "I know you'd do the same for me . . ." but maybe I was wrong. Johnny Dillinger never used to explain these things. . . .

—Continued from back cover

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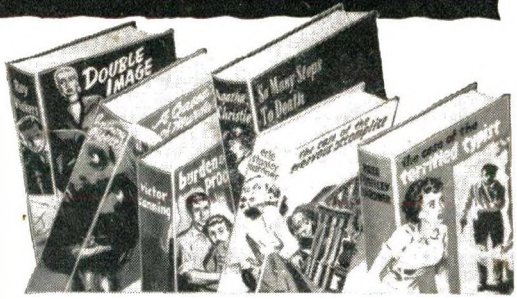

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