Suspense

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The LAST DIVE

By WILLIAM BRANDON

DR. Cromarty stayed in the boat checking his charts while the skin-diver he had hired, who called himself Captain Tully, explored the ocean bed.

There was a ledge some twenty feet below the surface, a lace-work coral landscape rippling in green light. Beyond the ledge, shafts of azure and ultramarine sank down to cold and still and shadowed depths. Dr. Cromarty thought it must be like diving into a stained-glass window. The floor of the sea was nineteen fathoms down. It made two little hillocks, and then stretched away in a plain overgrown with rooted creatures that looked like fans and cushions, and weeds that looked like football crowds with arms waving.

The motor dinghy was piled with extra goggles, fins and air bottles, so there was not much space left and Dr. Cromarty always felt crowded. When it wasn't too windy, he rigged up a makeshift awning of an old beach robe hooked to fish spears, and crouched under it, drinking tea from the Thermos and smearing himself with lotions. He also wore a linen blazer, a wide-brimmed straw hat and dark glasses, but the fierce Mediterranean sun cared nothing for these artifices and burned him scarlet.

Tully would laugh at his predicament, and Dr. Cromarty would force a pleasant smile. He had seldom met anyone he disliked so much as young Captain Tully, but Dr. Cromarty was of a timid nature, and always tried to be agreeable with everyone. And Tully made him excessively nervous.

" What a lovely lot of cash, to be sure," Captain Tully would say, peering into Dr. Cromarty's bulging wallet when the doctor paid him his daily fee of five thousand francs. Captain Tully's

tone was only bantering, but there was no mistaking the covetousness on his face.

Dr. Cromarty grew so uneasy about his wallet that he did what was, for him, an extraordinary thing; he bought a small pistol to carry in his pocket—and he made sure that Tully saw it. Captain Tully laughed, his eyes as bright as needles. But the remarks about the wallet stopped.

He was no more a captain, Dr. Cromarty was sure, than Dr. Cromarty was an admiral. He supposed Tully had been a rating in the British Navy during the war, probably engaged in undersea demolition work. He was an expert skin-diver. Dr. Cromarty would look through a glass-bottomed box held over the boat's side and watch him examining the ledge or sailing down through translucent space.

Once, at Tully's urging, he had put on his old bathing suit, a mask and an aqualung and had gingerly lowered himself a few feet under water, clinging to the anchor rope. He'd insisted that Captain Tully dive first and wait below for him, both to give him encouragement and to ensure that Captain Tully wouldn't be alone in the boat with the wallet.

But Dr. Cromarty hadn't been able to get down even so far as the ledge. The water closing over his head had terrified him. He never tried diving again.

Each day they spent several hours at the site while Tully made a series of dives, sometimes staying down ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes nearly an hour. During this time Dr. Cromarty took endless observations on the three check points of the Ile d'Or, the headland of the Pointe du Dramont and the little mountain called Milou, pinpointing the site again and again with the greatest exactitude.

It was lonely work. They had only one near neighbour, a little fishing launch that drifted between them and the Pointe for exactly one hour each afternoon. It belonged to a retired marine officer known as the Commandant, who liked to fish for sea bass in the morning and to take his afternoon siesta afloat.

Once or twice he had run near the dinghy to watch a dive. He was a friendly fat man in a striped jersey and a peaked cap, and he was blackened by the sun to a sumptuous old-leather colour.

" A demain! " the Commandant would shout each afternoon, and Dr. Cromarty would wave in reply and watch him cutting across the bay until his boat became a tiny flicker.

They stayed out during the hottest time of the day, when the water was at its maximum warmth and the light best for diving. The boat danced in a blazing sapphire world, the hot wind came in lazy searing puffs, and sunlight ricocheted from the sparkling bay in showers of fire.

" I must say you stick it well, Guv'nor," Captain Tully said. " I ask myself why, exactly? There wouldn't be a bit of treasure in those old ships we're looking for, would there? "

" Treasures for the mind," Dr. Cromarty said coldly.

Tully laughed and slapped him on his sunburned shoulder. " You're a tough lot in your own way, you brainy chaps."

The eleventh and twelfth days were stormy and kept them shorebound in the little hotel in Saint Raphael. On the thirteenth day the sea calmed and they ventured out. After the first dive Tully reported that the storm had laid waste the sea floor, and a landslide had taken a bite out of one of the two hillocks. During the second dive he took a crowbar with him and was below a long time; and when he surfaced he brought up with him a curl of sulphurated metal that looked like a fragment of a dog collar. He had also seen a corner of stone, he said, too heavy to move and too square to be the work of nature. It could be the base of a piece of statuary.

The metal fragment was clearly of great age. Dr. Cromarty examined it with trembling hands. At last he risked an identification—that it was the remnant of a manacle that had chained a galley slave to his bench.

Captain Tully, still shivering from the cold of the deeps, said, "Think of that now! A rare, ugly way to drown—chained fast."

"One hundred and sixty-eight slaves drowned with each of the two ships of Lese," Dr. Cromarty said gravely.

"Then these are the old wrecks we've been after, are they? This is the big moment, is it?"

"I really think it may be."

"He thinks it may be!" Captain Tully burst into his sudden laugh. "You don't look excited, oh no, not half!" He pinned his sharp, bright eyes on Dr. Cromarty's face and said, "And now tell me, Guv'nor, what's it all worth?"

"Worth? I don't understand."

"I mean, there's a bit of cash in it for you—am I right?" Captain Tully, chuckling, thrust a finger at him. "If you could see your face! Come off it, Guv'nor. Deal straight with me and I'll deal straight with you. There'll be plenty for two, won't there? The ships of Lese, you said, and it didn't take long for a bright chap like myself to find out that they were loaded with marble statues, that they sank four hundred years ago, and that one of the statues was a famous one that would bring a tidy little fortune by itself. I wrote down the name of it."

"The lost Ion of Michelangelo," Dr. Cromarty said acidly.

"The same. So you happen to find an old chart somewhere, or the records of some old go at salvaging, and hop down here to pick up a simple lad like me. You'll have a look to make sure. And now you know. And I'm just asking, what's it worth?"

"Do you have some absurd idea that I intend raising those statues myself, to sell them?"

"It might be a thought. But you wouldn't be beyond tipping somebody else off about them, would you?"

"Of course not. That's the whole object of this investigation. I happen to be employed by a museum and a university, both of which shall have priority, naturally, to this discovery."

"For a price, I take it?"

"Certainly. I receive funds from both these institutions. I've spent well over a year on this project. This is my profession."

"And a jolly good profession it could be right now, is all I'm saying. Follow me?"

"I most assuredly do not follow you," Dr. Cromarty said indignantly. "Precisely what are you trying to say?"

"I'm saying what's to stop you from taking the best bid from other universities and museums, now that you've really got the goods? It might run into a whopping fat figure, and you could afford a slice to me for keeping nice and quiet. That's all I'm getting at, Guv'nor."

"You must be insane," Dr. Cromarty said in amazement. "Start the engine. We'll return at once."

Captain Tully shrugged, his high spirits unshaken. "If you don't want a good turn, you don't have to take it. But if your lordship don't mind, I'd like to go down to pick up my tools."

"Very well, go ahead. Of course."

Tully arranged his equipment, lowered himself over the side and kicked away for the depths. He descended very fast, passed the ledge, and Dr. Cromarty turned away and began taking down his awning.

Suddenly Captain Tully shot back to the surface, struggled, thrashing, for a moment or two, then sank again. He drifted down to the ledge and lay still, his body clumsily sprawled, rocking a little now and then in the current.

Cromarty, looking down into the water, could see him plainly, even without using the glass-bottomed box. With the mask on his face, and the tubes running to it from the air bottles on his back, he looked like some giant beetle. It seemed to Dr. Cromarty that the current was nudging him still closer to the edge. If he rolled over he would sink to—what was it?—nineteen fathoms, a hundred and fourteen feet.

Had he descended too quickly? Made some mistake in adjusting his equipment? Cromarty felt helpless and indecisive. The sensible thing to do was go for help at once. But by the time he returned Captain Tully might have fallen off the ledge to the sea bed, and it would be much harder to find him and bring him to the surface. Had he enough air to last while Cromarty made the trip to the distant beach? As for that, could he get sufficient air, anyway, if he was unconscious? Suppose the air tube had fallen from his mouth?

Even as he was thinking these things, Dr. Cromarty was throwing off his blazer and straw hat and struggling into the spare set of diving gear Captain Tully kept in the boat. He was fitting on the mask when he heard the faraway whine of the Commandant's boat. Of course. It was the hour for the Commandant's siesta. The Commandant would know what to do. Dr. Cromarty grabbed the beach robe and waved it, hoping to attract his attention.

He waved the robe wildly with both hands, but the hum of the engine was sliding down the scale to a stop. The Commandant hadn't seen him—he'd have to go nearer and give the Commandant a shout. But another look into the water showed him that Tully had drifted to the very brink of the ledge. He would slide over and sink to the bottom in a very few seconds . . .

Dr. Cromarty gave the robe a final desperate wave and shouted at the top of his voice, then he adjusted his mask, clamped the bit of the breathing tube in his mouth, and climbed over the bow of the boat, where he could hang on to the anchor rope.

He was gasping for breath even before he got under water, and panic rose in him in exact ratio to the swinging surface of the sea. He had not taken off his shirt and trousers and they clung uncomfortably to him, adding to the feeling that he was smothering. When he felt the water close over the top of his head he stopped, clinging to the rope, and took a long, slow breath to prove to himself that he really could breathe. He wanted to hurry down the rope, hurry to Captain Tully and hurry back with him, anxious to get back to the open air again. He forced himself to move slowly.

It grew increasingly difficult to breathe and he felt an almost overpowering desire to open his mouth and yawn. He put down his panic with a stern effort of will, and felt his feet touch the ledge. He let go of the anchor rope and swam along the ledge with an angry, clumsy breast stroke, settled beside Captain Tully and grasped his shoulders.

He was astonished to see that Tully's eyes were wide open, watching him. They seemed to be smiling. With a calm unhurried movement, Captain Tully sat up and reached out to seize Dr. Cromarty's jaw between a thumb and finger, and with the other hand he jerked the breathing tube from Dr. Cromarty's mouth.

Cromarty choked and struggled wildly, flailing his legs and trying to back away, but he was held by Captain Tully's grip on the air tube. He managed to close his mouth and hold his breath. He felt that his eyes were bursting out of his head.

He flung himself, struggling, upon Captain Tully; but with a business-like flip of his feet Tully moved away from his grasp, continuing to hold the disconnected breathing tube.

A branch of coral brushed before Dr. Cromarty's face. He thought of his beloved Shakespeare, and some long-forgotten lines spun through his mind. He wondered, was it true after all that this sort of thing did happen to drowning men?

He put down his hands, clinging to the brink of the ledge and trying to jerk away, but Captain Tully, swaying just out of reach, casually restrained him as if on a leash. ". . . *Or dive into the bottom of the deep . . .*"

His lungs were knots of pain and his pulse thudded like a drum. ". . . *Where fathom line could never touch the ground . . .*"

He reached to his pocket and he could have sworn that Captain

Tully's goggled face was laughing; but he brought out not the pistol, but his wallet.

". . . *And pluck up drowned* . . ."

With a convulsive gesture he moved his arm over the ledge and let the wallet fall.

Captain Tully reached for it and missed.

Dr. Cromarty prayed: *Let him think I'm too far gone to move*, and he flung back his head and held himself rigid and still, blackness thrusting at the corners of his vision like tearing spears.

The wallet drifted down, bloated with its thick sheaf of sodden banknotes. If it vanished it would be lost, undoubtedly for ever, in the weeds and darkness of the sea bed.

A fraction of a second passed and then Captain Tully released him and dived after it.

It seemed to take an impossibly long time for Dr. Cromarty to reach the surface and, looking back, he saw that Tully had already retrieved the wallet and was shooting up after him. Cromarty burst unexpectedly into the miraculous open air and gulped a breath that burned like steam. But before he could take a stroke towards the dinghy or even find his voice for a shout, Tully reached his feet and, unmoved by his desperate struggles, drew him under again. As he sank, Dr. Cromarty was spun round . . . and found himself looking into the startled face of the Commandant, hanging over the gunwale of his boat, not ten feet away.

In the same glance he saw the Commandant dive neatly, trailing a line from his hands.

Cromarty did not know until later that the Commandant had passed the line round Captain Tully's ankles and hauled him back to the boat as he would a shark. Or that Captain Tully—again like a shark—did not cease his frenzied, helpless fighting until the Commandant stunned him with a boat-hook—after first dragging Dr. Cromarty aboard.

" I'd never have found you in time if you hadn't managed to get away long enough to break the surface," the Commandant said when Dr. Cromarty was sufficiently recovered to talk. " That was luck."

" Yes," Dr. Cromarty murmured. He saw that Captain Tully, unconscious on the deck, still clutched his wallet. " I dropped my wallet."

" Your wallet? "

" Yes. It seems that, in his way, Captain Tully is quite dependable."

DEVIL in the BUSH

By ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

What SUSPENSE reader could forget HIGH DIVE, the story of District Patrol Officer Falk and the life-or-death plunge that proved him to the Bush Kanaka? Meet him again as he faces a fresh challenge—a sinister encounter with a devil-devil and his savage tribe of headhunters

THERE should have been something helpless and tragic about the gaunt figure of the missionary woman as she stood alone in the deserted New Guinea clearing. At least, District Patrol Officer Peter Falk thought so. But as Kaki, one of his three Kanaka patrolmen, lifted the last palm frond, allowing Falk to step into the clearing unscratched, he found himself changing his mind.

He had forgotten that Miss Rine, so cold and unfeminine, had given her entire life to the savages. He hesitated for a moment, looking, and realized that this woman in the Baden-Powell hat, heavy wool skirt and mud-clogged boots, had something about her which set her apart—something amazingly direct and extremely determined.

Falk lifted a hand and called, " Hello, there! "

Miss Rine made no move. She waited, as detached as a statue in a Roman ruin.

Falk lowered his head to shelter a grin and, followed by his three men, trudged towards the spare, uncompromising figure of the missionary. The district was new to Falk; he'd been there only a year. He had already met Miss Rine twice before, and they didn't get on.

It was regrettable, he decided absently, because in a sense they

were in business together. He guarded the Kanakas' bodies, she their souls.

Miss Rine watched him come without change of expression. Her glasses, illuminated in the direct glare of the sun, gave her a blind, boggle-eyed stare. Falk touched the brim of his cap jauntily.

"I came as soon as I received your runner, Miss Rine. I trust—"

But Miss Rine had no patience with formalities. Her voice, clipped and colourless, cut him dead. "I know I'm a nuisance, Mr. Falk. If I hadn't thought this affair a police matter, I shouldn't have bothered you."

It amused him that to her he was always *Mr.* Falk. She would never refer to him by his rank.

"No trouble at all, Miss Rine," he said with studied courtesy. "What seems to be the problem?"

It seemed Miss Rine was impatient, too, with those who failed to see the obvious. Her narrow underlip punched into her upper, making a thin, curved line of annoyance. She waved a hand towards the village and mission house, all strangely still and lifeless.

"Surely you can see that I've been deserted."

Falk took the slam with an inward wince. He nodded, ran his eyes along the rattan shebangs, and placed them deliberately on the mission house. "Looks rather like a tomb, doesn't it? But what caused it?"

"Superstition and fear," Miss Rine snapped. "My oldest enemies."

Falk wondered idly if there was an implication here—that *he* was her newest. "Yes, Miss Rine," he murmured. "But before he took to the bush, your boy mentioned something about murder. He was frightened, that boy. Very frightened."

"He was scared silly!" Miss Rine charged vehemently. "They're all scared silly. Yesterday three old men from the village went down to the river to net fish. They never came back. A girl fetching water found them on the shore that evening. They had been decapitated."

Falk stared at her blankly. "*Headhunters?* Here?"

A sick, leaden feeling weighted Falk's body. Headhunters! And in his district. He turned and stared at the vast, secretive wilderness, knowing that he had to move, and fast, yet feeling suddenly incapable of calling up any active will. "Have you any idea how many of them?" he asked. "Or in which direction they were going?"

"Certainly," Miss Rine said primly. "There are exactly a

baker's dozen. At the moment, they are not travelling in any direction. They're encamped in the old Dutch sago plantation, two miles away from us."

Falk stared. "How do you know all this, Miss Rine?"

"By paying them a visit."

"You went into their camp? *Alone?*"

"Certainly not. I took one of my boys. That was before this silly, superstitious nonsense began. Soon after we'd discovered the decapitated men, a Kanaka came to warn me that a raiding devil-devil and his party were encamping in the old sago place. I went with Omoo, my boy, to see this heathen and to demand that he gave himself up to the law."

Her lips clamped shut for a moment. "They wouldn't listen. Wouldn't even answer when spoken to."

"Perhaps they didn't know English."

"I am not so stupid as to think they would, Mr. Falk. I speak Papuan like a native. The devil-devil was making his childish medicine. And when I saw that it was hopeless and turned to go, he ordered Omoo to remain. The boy obviously did not wish to do so, but seemed incapable of helping himself. Wouldn't even obey *me*. He returned to the village that night, very sick, and died before dawn. I think they poisoned him. At any rate, my other Kanakas ran for the bush when they saw what had happened to Omoo. Fortunately I'd already sent a boy over to you."

Falk almost reached for her hand, but checked the impulse. "You've been here alone for a whole day? With thirteen head-hunters only two miles away? Your villagers have left you completely?"

Miss Rine nodded, looking at her silent village. For the first time Falk felt a sense of pity for this raw-boned woman standing alone in a howling wilderness with nothing but a battered Bible and a purpose ribbed with steel. It had been a great blow to her pride; he could see that. And he thought, *There must be times when she thinks as I do—that it's hopeless, that we'll never make any headway against this savagery.*

Duty, he knew, was scarcely recognized among the Papuans. For all Miss Rine and Falk taught them, superstition—the law of the *Tambo*—was still their god.

"I'll leave for the sago plantation now," he said quietly.

But she detained him with a gesture. He could tell from her sudden hesitation that she was embarrassed, and it startled him to realize she was going to ask him for a favour.

"Mr. Falk, I hate to pester you, but Omoo . . . this heat . . ."

He understood. "Yes, Miss Rine. We'll take care of it."

The body of the dead " boy ", a Kanaka of fifty, was prone on a mat in the supply room, and Falk suggested to Miss Rine that she wait outside.

" Don't be silly," she snapped. " Do you imagine that in twenty one years of tropical missionary work, I've never smelled death? "

Falk shrugged and looked at the face of the dead man, the open mouth, the tight-drawn lips and nostrils.

He heard a gasp behind him, four or five muttered words, then " *Nahak!* " in an urgent whisper.

He spun and found his patrolmen pushing backwards to the door, their eyes marble-round and fixed on the corpse. Immediately he knew he'd been a fool to think the devil-devil had used poison on Omoo. There were many names for what had happened to the Kanaka, and they all sifted down to one time-aged belief. Black magic.

" What name you so much fright? " Falk demanded.

Kaki stopped and pointed a trembling finger at the body " That fella catch'm *Tévoro*! All fella Kanaka run like hell. We no run like hell, plenty soon we catch'm strong fella devil-devil. Close up we die altogether! "

" Nonsense! " Falk shouted. But he knew it wasn't nonsense. Not to a Kanaka. To be " *nahaked* " was to have a *Tévoro*, a demon, placed in your stomach. Omoo had died because the devil-devil at the sago plantation had told him he would. It was murder by suggestion. And to the Kanakas, Omoo's body spoke plainer than words.

Again Falk felt the hopelessness emanating from the darkly smiling land that surrounded them. *The familiar old brick wall*, he thought.

The patrolmen had almost edged themselves from the room, and for a moment Falk was tempted to order a halt. But when he looked at the total terror in their eyes, he felt ashamed of himself.

" Dismiss," he muttered. They bolted.

Miss Rine was watching Falk with a rapt gaze. " Well," she said finally, " I've never heard such foolishness in my life. One would think that your patrolmen at least would be above this mumbo-jumbo."

" One would also think the same of *your* converts! " he shot back. Then he was sorry he'd said it because he could see he'd hurt her.

" Well," she said, not looking at him, " I don't believe we'll accomplish anything by insulting each other. What had we better do? "

" We'd better bury Omoo."

" I'll help you. Then I'll go for my Book."

It was unpleasant work, digging there in the rotting, dank earth in a sweltering palm grove behind the mission house. And to keep their minds from the reality of the chore, they discussed their position, for once placing all their cards on the table.

" It's no good closing your eyes to ' *nahak* ', Miss Rine. It's a method of murder that medical science has not yet come to grips with, but it still exists. Trouble is, the law can't recognize it. I can't arrest the devil-devil for something the law can't charge him with. In fact, if we—*I*—don't catch him with those heads, I can't touch him at all. There were no witnesses to the crime and, without the evidence, I'm sunk."

" Will you simply give it up, then? "

" No, I shan't simply give it up. I'm going to the sago plantation to try and find the evidence."

Miss Rine made a chopping nod of satisfaction. " Good. I'll go too."

" You'll stay here."

" Don't be silly. You don't talk Papuan. Those savages don't talk *Béche-de-mer*. You'd get nowhere without me."

" I have my men. They *are* Papuans, you know, Miss Rine."

" Scared-to-death Papuans, you mean," she said complacently. " They'll run for the bush the first time the devil-devil points his finger at them." She fixed her fierce, birdlike eyes on Falk.

" Let us be honest with one another. I don't approve of a military organization because it means firearms and violence, while I teach love and charity. And you, I believe, hold the usual secular view that missionaries are no more than sanctimonious bumblers. Nevertheless, Mr. Falk, at this moment you and I need each other desperately. I vote that we set aside our differences and join forces."

Falk smiled boyishly and put out his hand. " All right, Miss Rine. Partners."

Miss Rine beamed. " Please excuse the roughness of my hand, Mr. Falk. I was helping my boys erect a mud hut the other day."

Falk called the patrolmen into the clearing and gave them a pep talk. " You fellas follow big fella me. This fella Mary "—pointing to Miss Rine—" savvy speak'm Bibley talk. Plenty devil-devil, this fella Mary. Smash'm *Tévoro* close up. My word, yes! "

But the Kanakas eyed Miss Rine and her ' Bibley Book ' with distrust. It was mutiny, of course, if they refused to obey Falk. And that was the rub. Falk couldn't ignore disobedience, but on the other hand, he didn't want to turn them over to the District Commissioner with a charge against them. They were good men,

excellent trackers, brave, loyal. It wasn't their fault that they had been born in these hills.

Miss Rine must have guessed at his dilemma. She began speaking in the Papuan tongue, and whatever she was saying was making an impression on the patrolmen. They watched Miss Rine's Bible as though its covers contained snapping teeth, and at the end of the talk they were ready for duty. They stood at attention, staring at Falk, awaiting his orders.

" What did you tell them? " he asked.

" That if they refused to follow their officer I would place a *Tévoro* of my own upon them from the Book. I described for them the horrors of the disease with which Job had been smitten."

" Why, Miss Rine," Falk said, " is that being quite honest? "

" You forget, Mr. Falk," she said simply, " that we've joined forces in this war of wills. *You* must adopt some of my faith, and *I* must resort to some of your strategy. Shall we go? "

The sago plantation had been abandoned during World War II, and only a few remnants of buildings suggested that a community had once lived there. The jungle, in its silent march, had taken back its own.

When Falk cleared the forest, the headhunters were grouped at a small fire. One of them looked up, saw the officer and shouted. A scramble for spears, clubs and knives followed, and a clamour of defiance hit the stillness. Kingfishers and mound birds went winging off through the trees, leaving a tinny wail of terror behind.

To show fear was to show your hand. Falk continued his march straight towards the fire, and when a bone-ornamented savage sprang in his path, brandishing a spear, Falk struck him aside with a backhand blow. They gave ground grudgingly, eyeing the armed patrol with dark respect. Falk came to a standstill at the fire.

Eleven warriors, the devil-devil, and a woman—an amazon of no definable age—were squatting sullenly on a rattan mat, fashioning small *tobies* with nimble fingers. Falk ignored the woman and the warriors, and directed his scrutiny to the face of the enemy—the devil-devil.

He was in that ageless group between forty and sixty—squat, prow-chested, a cunning old veteran of the bush. His teeth, red with betel, were pointed; a rifle shell pierced the soft cartilage of his nose, and a darning needle spitted his lower lip. Greasy crocodile teeth were strung about his neck, and he held in his hand a long, pointed stick, which supported at its end a *vasa*, or magic bag, and below that on a bit of rusty chain, a single dangling tooth.

Falk squatted near the devil-devil and looked into the man's eyes. There was hate, deep-rooted; he'd expected to find that. But there was also something that frightened him more than savage anger ever could. Intelligence.

Falk spoke to Miss Rine. "Tell him we know his men killed the three Kanakas from your village. Tell him to produce the heads."

She spoke to the savage rapidly, and he answered with one word that Falk recognized. "Lies."

Falk called to his patrolmen. "You fellas walkabout. Look along eye belong you. Find'm heads close up."

Kaki made a tentative move. The devil-devil raised his pointed stick and the Kanaka patrolman froze.

Falk's hand swung to his pistol-butt, then he felt Miss Rine's hand on his arm.

"You *can't* shoot him," she warned.

That only made him angry because he knew it was true. He knew he couldn't touch any of them unless they tried to harm him, or unless they tried to run *after* he had placed a charge on them.

But he kept his grip on the pistol because it was a good threat, and because the devil-devil might not know the law. "Go on, Kaki. This fella no fright big fella like you."

The patrolmen also knew it was a bluff. They moved off warily as though stepping on broken glass. The devil-devil watched them obliquely, the suggestion of a smile flickering on his lips.

You know all right, Falk thought grimly. *You know the law—but you don't care because you know we won't find a damn thing.*

"Tell him I'm not here to harm him or his people—only to take him back for a fair trial," he said, knowing it was a waste of time.

The devil-devil gave no sign that he was listening to Miss Rine. He placed a handful of twigs on his fire, poked at them with the stick. The amazon finished one of the crude little *tobies* and started to get up. But the devil-devil glared at her, heaved himself to his feet and went over to snatch the *toby* from her hand. He set the little effigy on top of the fire, made a pass over it with his stick and mumbled something.

"Making magic again," sighed Miss Rine.

Falk nodded. He was staring at the amazon. Something worried him. He swivelled back to the devil-devil and caught the savage studying him with mocking eyes.

"It's obvious just how stupid this heathen is," Miss Rine commented suddenly, and began fanning herself with a palm frond. "Why should anyone want a fire in the middle of the morning in

this heat? It isn't as if they are preparing a meal or anything."

"Yes," Falk murmured reflectively. "But don't you know the reason for the fire?"

"Why, I—" Miss Rine stopped short. "Oh! Oh, they . . ."

"Yes. They cure heads over a slow fire, turn them in the smoke." He tried to appear unconcerned as he said, "This shaman has those heads. I'm certain of it. But where?" He looked over the ruined plantation. "Might be anywhere."

The search continued for the better part of an hour. Then the patrol returned and Kaki reported, "No catch'm those fella."

The devil-devil was watching the patrolmen. Suddenly he raised his stick and began to speak to them in a low tone. They almost dropped their rifles in trying to out-back each other from the fire and the pointing stick.

"What is it?" Falk demanded, knowing already.

"The usual gibberish," Miss Rine replied with a sniff. "This creature with the unclean teeth told your men to go away, or else he would '*nahak*' them."

So there it was. First the devil-devil had cost Miss Rine her village of converts. Now Falk was losing his patrol. It would all look very pretty in the report he'd have to send to the D.C.—"This district completely out of my hands. Miss Rine and I baffled by a ragged old witch doctor with a stick and twelve savages." For a wild moment he wanted to reach across the fire and smash the devil-devil's face.

The amazon spoke, and the devil-devil left the fire to receive another effigy from her. He returned and repeated the ritual of *toby*-burning. But it was only a blind. Both he and Falk knew the real reason for the fire.

Yet something was wrong with the set-up. He looked at the amazon, at the devil-devil, at the surly Kanakas. What was it that eluded him?

Falk stood up. "Let's go," he murmured.

Miss Rine stopped short, blinking at him, birdlike. "You're not going to leave it like this, are you?" she demanded.

"What do you want me to do—arrest them without evidence?" he snapped. "You know I can't touch them." He stalked after his patrol, leaving the missionary to follow through the *mulga* scrub in his wake.

She caught him up by the crumbling platform of the old plantation house. "Mr. Falk!" she called. "Have you forgotten that we made a bargain? You *must* have a little faith."

The patrol was standing close by in shamed silence. Falk glanced at them. Even if he uncovered the evidence, they'd be

afraid to help him round up the headhunters. "Did you notice anything strange back there at the fire?" he asked Miss Rine hopefully.

"Only yourself," she replied. "That devil-devil knew he had you. He was laughing at you."

Falk stared across the scrub at the savages. Miss Rine was watching them too.

"Haunting, isn't it?" she said at length. "Once a thriving community—now a wilderness camp for thieves and murderers. I suppose my own village will look like this in a year or two." She sighed.

"Well," he muttered, "it's happened to better places."

Miss Rine passed that over. "If you listen carefully, you can almost catch the ghost voices: see the Kanaka recruits beside their evening fires, their women bringing them firewood, betel, *kava*. It's a pity what man with his wars can do to God's serenity."

Falk was staring at her. He reached for her hand, startling her.

"What was that you said?" he barked. "Women bringing them firewood? No, never mind." He let her hand go and snapped his fingers. "It's a chance," he said.

Miss Rine appeared nonplussed. "Really, Mr. Falk!"

Falk snapped "Attention!" at his patrol, and planted himself before the three trembling Kanakas.

"You fellas savvy big fella me, I speak'm! We fetch'm heads from devil-devil close up. *Tévoro* belong devil-devil no good altogether. That fella devil-devil give'm big fella me *Tévoro*. I no fright, no sick—I laugh! You savvy?"

They did, but preferred to pretend they did not. They began backing off, shaking their heads and rolling their eyes.

Falk grimaced and lifted the service revolver from its holster. He aimed it at them. "Halt!"

"Mr. Falk," Miss Rine gasped, "you *dare not*!"

Falk grinned nervously. "I know. But don't tell them." And to his patrol, "You fellas march along legs belong you, back to the fire close up." They marched—close up.

The devil-devil watched Miss Rine and Peter Falk seat themselves across the fire from him with sullen suspicion. He rattled the *vasa* stick suggestively and glanced towards the amazon.

Falk kept a level stare on the savage when he spoke to Miss Rine. "Tell our friend his *Tévoro* isn't worth a darn. Tell him to try and place a *Tévoro* in me. Tell him my magic is better than his and will turn his to my use. In short, tell him his own magic will disclose to me the secret of the heads. I defy him to '*nahak*' me."

Miss Rine's expression was accusatory. " Mr. Falk, are you bluffing? "

Falk's smile was terse. " In a way, yes."

Miss Rine turned to the devil-devil and began to speak.

It was evident that the devil-devil was disturbed. His eyes shot like twin rapier thrusts from the missionary to the patrolman. Falk knew he'd put the savage in a spot. When Miss Rine fell silent, the devil-devil raised his stick and pointed at her.

" *O ho,*" he chanted quietly. " *O ho ho.*"

" What is this? " Falk demanded.

" Be patient," Miss Rine said placidly. " Your turn is coming. I invited him to take us both on. We're in this together."

The stick stirred. The tooth began to spin. The stick pointed at Falk. The devil-devil spoke.

" The spirit of rottenness has given birth in thy stomach, " Miss Rine translated. " It is the *Tévoro.* It is a great, squirming white worm. It is as smooth, as bright with slime as this tooth moving before thy eyes. It, in turn, is giving birth to a thousand squirming, white worms. Feel them turning in thy stomach. Feel them eating the red meat that is in thee."

The stick moved, pointing. The tooth revolved. Falk wet his lips, watching the devil-devil's eyes.

" The fire, which is the pain of the eating worms, is devouring thy stomach. Feel the flesh melt away, thy bones crumble . . ."

The devil-devil's eyes were fixed on Falk. And Falk saw beyond the hate and the intelligence: saw a dull gleam of sadness that implied deep tragedy.

" *Oooo ho,*" the savage wailed softly, as if calling to, listening for, the lost voices of dim ancestors. And suddenly Falk saw in this man, this devil-devil, the embodiment of an ancient people's despair in face of civilization.

Stop it, he warned himself. *It's a part of the game. He's trying to appeal to me, to hypnotize me into his way of thinking.*

And then something moved slightly in his stomach.

What is superstition? Falk wondered. *A blind belief in the unknown, far older than the faith of Christianity.*

Then suddenly Falk pulled himself together. It was time for the law to call the tune.

Falk grinned at his patrol and said, " That fella devil-devil no good. Belly belong me feel'm fine, my word." And he patted that portion of his body to give emphasis to the claim. Next he cocked a finger at the amazon. " Look'm under mat belong big fella Mary. Plenty heads stop in dirt."

The devil-devil must have caught the significance of the order. His mouth cracked open, and with an animal cry of hate, he

lunged across the fire, spearing the pointed stick at Falk's neck.

Falk was half-turned, off guard. The devil-devil had him cold. Or would have if it hadn't been for Miss Rine. Her scrawny right arm whipped in the air and her Bible slammed into the devil-devil's face. His head snapped back and the stick-thrust shot harmlessly over Falk's shoulder.

Then Falk had him by the throat, shaking him.

Miss Rine adroitly snatched her Bible from the embers and half-consumed *tobies*, gave its worn surface a quick brush, and said authoritatively, " Don't hurt him, Mr. Falk. Vindictiveness is a primitive instinct."

Peter Falk released the gagging Kanaka and stepped clear.

" Yes, Miss Rine," he said obediently.

As Kaki intimidated the headhunters with his levelled rifle, his comrades lashed them into a human chain with liana vines.

Falk turned to Miss Rine and smiled, not without embarrassment. " You saved my life. I want to . . ."

But Miss Rine wasn't looking for gratitude. " That," she said primly, " was a natural reaction on my part. And now tell me how you knew the evidence was buried under that woman."

" That," he said truthfully, " was a last-ditch guess. You suggested it when you were talking about Kanaka women bringing firewood to the men. Kanakas will never make a move if they have a woman handy to work for them. And it's against decorum for a devil-devil to wait on himself. That's what was bothering me every time our shaman got up to fetch the *toby* himself. You see, *she* should have brought it to *him*. But he didn't want her to budge—not as long as she was sitting on the evidence."

" Well," Miss Rine said brightly, " that was very ingenious of you, Mr. Falk. I'll write to the District Commissioner and tell him just how capable you were in handling this entire affair."

" No," Falk said. " It was only a lucky guess."

For a long moment they stood in awkward silence, smiling.

" Miss Rine," Falk murmured finally, " did you happen to feel anything uh—inside, when he was *nahaking* us? "

Miss Rine's eyes widened at the suggestion. " Feel anything? Certainly not! What nonsense." Then she hesitated, giving the patrolman a shrewd look. " Why? *You* didn't, did you? "

Falk nodded. " Yes, I think I did. I think I felt some of your faith . . ." He turned abruptly and ordered Kaki to march the prisoners out. Then, with a gracious wave of his hand, " Miss Rine, after you," he said.

Miss Rine smiled and took her place at the head of the procession. " Thank you, Officer Falk," she said.

The Incautious Burglar

by John Dickson Carr

TWO guests, who were not staying the night at Cranleigh Court, left at shortly past eleven o'clock. Marcus Hunt saw them to the front door. Then he returned to the dining-room where the poker-chips were now stacked into neat piles of white, red, and blue.

"Another game?" suggested Rolfe.

"No good," said Derek Henderson. His tone, as usual, was weary. "Not with just the three of us."

Their host stood by the sideboard and watched them. The long, low house, overlooking the Weald of Kent, was so quiet that their voices rose with startling loudness. The dining-room, large and panelled, was softly lighted by electric wall-candles which brought out the sombre colours of the paintings. It is not often that anybody sees, in one room of an otherwise commonplace country house, two Rembrandts and a Van Dyck. There was a kind of defiance about those paintings.

To Arthur Rolfe, the dealer, they represented enough money to make him shiver. To Derek Henderson, the art critic, they represented a problem. What they represented to Marcus Hunt was not apparent.

Hunt stood by the sideboard, his fists on his hips, smiling. He was a middle-sized, stocky man, with a full face and a high complexion. Equip him with a tuft of chin-whisker, and he would have looked like a Dutch burgher from a Dutch brush. His shirt-front bulged out untidily. He watched with ironical amusement while Henderson picked up a pack of cards in long

fingers, cut them into two piles, and shuffled with a sharp flick of each thumb which made the cards melt together like a conjuring trick.

Henderson yawned.

" My boy," said Hunt, " you surprise me."

" That's what I try to do," answered Henderson, still wearily. He looked up. " But why do you say so, particularly? "

Henderson was young, he was long, he was lean, he was immaculate; and he wore a beard. It was a reddish beard, which moved some people to hilarity. But he wore it with an air of complete naturalness.

"I'm surprised," said Hunt, "that you enjoy anything so bourgeois—so plebeian—as poker."

"I enjoy reading people's characters," said Henderson. "Poker's the best way to do it, you know."

Hunt's eyes narrowed. "Oh? Can you read my character, for instance?"

"With pleasure," said Henderson. Absently he dealt himself a poker-hand, face up. It contained a pair of fives, and the last card was the ace of spades. Henderson remained staring at it for a few seconds before he glanced up again.

"And I can tell you," he went on, "that *you* surprise *me*. Do you mind if I'm frank? I had always thought of you as the Colossus of Business; the smasher; the plunger; the fellow who took the long chances. But you're not like that at all."

Marcus Hunt laughed. But Henderson was undisturbed.

"You're tricky, but you're cautious. I doubt if you ever took a long chance in your life. Another surprise"—he dealt himself a new hand—"is Mr. Rolfe here. He's the man who, given the proper circumstances, would take the long chances."

Arthur Rolfe considered this. He looked startled, but rather flattered. Though in height and build not unlike Hunt, there was nothing untidy about him. He had a square, dark face, with thin shells of eyeglasses, and a worried forehead.

"I doubt that," he said seriously. Then he smiled. "A person who took long chances in my business would find himself in the soup." He glanced round the room. "Anyhow, I'd be too cautious to have three pictures, with an aggregate value of thirty thousand pounds, hanging in an unprotected downstairs room with French windows giving on a terrace." An almost frenzied note came into his voice. "Great Scott! Suppose a burglar—"

"Damn!" said Henderson unexpectedly.

Even Hunt jumped.

Ever since the poker-party, an uneasy atmosphere had been growing. Hunt had picked up an apple from a silver fruit-bowl on the sideboard. He was beginning to pare it with a fruit-knife, a sharp, wafer-thin blade which glittered in the light of the wall-lamps.

"You nearly made me slice my thumb off," he said, putting down the knife. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's the ace of spades," said Henderson, still languidly. "That's the second time it's turned up in five minutes."

Arthur Rolfe chose to be dense. "Well?" he asked. "What about it?"

"I think our young friend is being psychic," said Hunt,

good-humoured again. "Are you reading characters, or only telling fortunes?"

Henderson hesitated. His eyes moved to Hunt, and then to the wall over the sideboard where Rembrandt's "Old Woman with Cap" stared back with the immobility and skin-colouring of a Red Indian. Then Henderson looked towards the French windows opening on the terrace.

"None of my affair," shrugged Henderson. "It's your house and your collection and your responsibility. But this fellow Butler: what do you know about him?"

Marcus Hunt looked boisterously amused.

"Butler? He's a friend of my niece's. Harriet picked him up in London, and asked me to invite him down here. Nonsense! Butler's all right. What are you thinking, exactly?"

"Listen!" said Rolfe, holding up his hand.

The noise they heard, from the direction of the terrace, was not repeated. It was not repeated because the person who had made it, a very bewildered and uneasy young lady, had run lightly and swiftly to the far end, where she leaned against the balustrade.

Lewis Butler hesitated before going after her. The moonlight was so clear that one could see the mortar between the tiles which paved the terrace, and trace the design on the stone urns along the balustrade. Harriet Davis wore a white gown with long and filmy skirts, which she lifted clear of the ground as she ran.

Then she beckoned to him.

She was half sitting, half leaning against the rail. Her white arms were spread out, fingers gripping the stone. Dark hair and dark eyes became even more vivid by moonlight. He could see the rapid rise and fall of her breast.

"That was a lie, anyhow," she said.

"What was?"

"What my Uncle Marcus said. You heard him." Harriet Davis's fingers tightened still more on the balustrade, and she nodded her head vehemently, with fierce accusation. "About my knowing you. And inviting you here. I never saw you before this week-end. Either Uncle Marcus is going out of his mind, or . . . will you answer me just one question?"

"If I can."

"Very well. Are you by any chance a crook?"

Lewis Butler was not unwise enough to laugh. She was in that mood where, to any woman, laughter is salt to a raw wound.

"To be quite frank about it," he said, "I'm not. Will you tell me why you asked?"

"This house," said Harriet, looking at the moon, "used to be

guarded with burglar alarms. If you as much as touched a window, the whole place started clanging like a fire-station. He had all the burglar alarms removed last week. Last week." She took her hands off the balustrade and pressed them together hard. " The pictures used to be upstairs, in a locked room next to his bedroom. He had them moved downstairs—last week. It's almost as though my uncle *wanted* the house to be burgled."

Butler knew that he must tread warily. " Perhaps he does."

She looked at Butler quickly, but did not comment.

" For instance," he went on idly, " suppose one of his famous Rembrandts turned out to be a fake? It might be a relief not to have to show it to his expert friends."

The girl shook her head.

" No," she said. " They're all genuine. You see, I thought of that too."

Now was the time to hit, and hit hard. To Lewis Butler, in his innocence, there seemed to be no particular problem. He took out his cigarette-case, and turned it over without opening it.

" Look here, Miss Davis, you're not going to like this. But I can tell you of cases in which people were rather anxious to have their property ' stolen '. If a picture is insured for more than its value, and then it is mysteriously ' stolen ' one night—? "

" That might be all very well too," answered Harriet, still calmly. " Except that not one of those pictures has been insured."

The cigarette-case slipped through Butler's fingers and fell with a clatter on the tiles. It spilled cigarettes, just as it spilled and confused his theories. As he bent over to pick it up, he could hear a church clock across the Weald strike half past eleven.

" You're sure of that? "

" Quite sure. He hasn't insured any of his pictures for as much as a penny. He says it's a waste of money."

" But—"

" Oh, I know! And I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. You're a stranger, aren't you? " She folded her arms, drawing her shoulders up as though she were cold. Uncertainty, fear, and plain nerves flicked at her eyelids. " But then Uncle Marcus is a stranger too. Do you know what I think? *I* think he's going mad."

" Hardly as bad as that, is it? "

" That's easy enough to say," the girl suddenly stormed. " But you don't see him when his eyes seem to get smaller, and all that genial-country-squire look goes out of his face. He's not a fake: he hates fakes, and goes out of his way to expose them. But if he hasn't gone clean out of his mind, what's he up to? What can he be up to? "

In something over three hours, they found out the answer.

The burglar did not attack until half-past two in the morning. First he smoked several cigarettes in the shrubbery below the rear terrace. When he heard the church clock strike, he waited a few minutes more, and then slipped up the steps to the French windows of the dining-room.

A chilly wind stirred at the turn of the night, in the hour of suicides and bad dreams. It smoothed grass and trees with a faint rustling. When the man glanced over his shoulder, the last of the moonlight distorted his face: it showed less a face than the blob of a cloth mask, under a greasy cap pulled over his ears.

He went to work on the middle window with the contents of a folding tool-kit not so large as a motorist's. He fastened two short strips of adhesive tape to the glass just beside the catch. Then his glass-cutter sliced out a small neat square inside the tape.

It was done not without noise: it crunched like a dentist's drill in a tooth, and the man stopped to listen.

There was no answering noise.

With the adhesive tape holding the glass so that it did not fall and smash, he slid his gloved hand through the opening and twisted the catch. The weight of his body deadened the creaking of the window when he pushed inside.

He knew exactly what he wanted. He put the tool-kit into his pocket, and drew out an electric torch. Its beam moved across to the sideboard; it touched gleaming silver, a bowl of fruit, and a wicked little knife thrust into an apple as though into someone's body; finally it moved up the hag-face of the " Old Woman with Cap ".

This was not a large picture, and the burglar lifted it down easily. He pried out glass and frame. Though he tried to roll up the canvas with great care, the brittle paint cracked across in small stars which wounded the hag's face. The burglar was so intent on this that he never noticed the presence of another person in the room.

He was an incautious burglar: he had no sixth sense which smelt murder.

Up on the second floor of the house, Lewis Butler was awakened by a muffled crash like that of metal objects falling.

He had not fallen into more than a half doze all night. He knew with certainty what must be happening, though he had no idea of why, or how, or to whom.

Butler was out of bed and into his slippers as soon as he heard

the first faint clatter from downstairs. His dressing-gown would, as usual, twist itself up like a rolled umbrella and defy all attempts to find the arm-holes whenever he wanted to hurry. But the little flashlight was ready in the pocket.

That noise seemed to have roused nobody else. With certain possibilities in his mind, he had never in his life moved so fast once he managed to get out of his bedroom. Not using his light, he was down two flights of deep-carpeted stairs without noise. In the lower hall he could feel a draught, which meant that a window or door had been opened somewhere. He made straight for the dining-room.

But he was too late.

Once the pencil-beam of Butler's flashlight had swept round, he switched on a whole blaze of lights. The burglar was still here, right enough. But the burglar was lying very still in front of the sideboard; and, to judge by the amount of blood on his sweater and trousers, he would never move again.

" That's done it," Butler said aloud.

A silver service, including a tea-urn, had been toppled off the sideboard. Where the fruit-bowl had fallen, the dead man lay on his back among a litter of oranges, apples, and a squashed bunch of grapes. The mask still covered the burglar's face; his greasy cap was flattened still further on his ears; his gloved hands were thrown wide.

Fragments of smashed picture-glass lay round him, together with the empty frame, and the " Old Woman with Cap " had been half crumpled up under his body. From the position of the most conspicuous bloodstains, one judged that he had been stabbed through the chest with the stained fruit-knife beside him.

" *What is it ?* " said a voice almost at Butler's ear.

He could not have been more startled if the fruit-knife had pricked his ribs. He had seen nobody turning on lights in the hall, nor had he heard Harriet Davis approach. She was standing just behind him, wrapped in a Japanese kimono, with her dark hair round her shoulders. But when he explained what had happened she would not look into the dining-room; she backed away like an urchin ready for flight.

" You had better wake up your uncle," Butler said briskly, with a confidence he did not feel. " And the servants. I must use your telephone." Then he looked her in the eyes. " Yes, you're quite right. I think you've guessed it already. I'm a police officer."

She nodded.

" Yes. I guessed. Who are you? And is your name really Butler? "

" I'm a sergeant of the Criminal Investigation Department. And my name really is Butler. Your uncle brought me here."

" Why? "

" I don't know. He hasn't got around to telling me."

This girl's intelligence, even when overshadowed by fear, was direct and disconcerting. " But if he wouldn't say why he wanted a police officer, how did they come to send you? He'd have to tell them, wouldn't he? "

Butler ignored it. " I must see your uncle. Will you go upstairs and wake him, please? "

" I can't," said Harriet. " Uncle Marcus isn't in his room."

" Isn't—? "

" No. I knocked at the door on my way down. He's gone."

Butler took the stairs two treads at a time. Harriet had turned on all the lights on her way down, but nothing stirred in the bleak, over-decorated passages.

Marcus Hunt's bedroom was empty. His dinner jacket had been hung up neatly on the back of a chair, shirt laid across the seat with collar and tie on top of it. Hunt's watch ticked loudly on the dressing-table. His money and keys were there too. But he had not gone to bed, for the bedspread was undisturbed.

The suspicion that came to Lewis Butler was so fantastic that he could not credit it.

He started downstairs again, and on the way he met Arthur Rolfe blundering out of another bedroom down the hall. The art dealer's stocky body was wrapped in a flannel dressing-gown. He was not wearing his glasses, which gave his face a bleary and rather caved-in expression. He planted himself in front of Butler, and refused to budge.

" Yes," said Butler. " You don't have to ask. It's a burglar."

" I knew it," said Rolfe calmly. " Did he get anything? "

" No. He was murdered."

For a moment Rolfe said nothing, but his hand crept into the breast of his dressing-gown as though he felt pain there.

" Murdered? You don't mean the *burglar* was murdered? "

" Yes."

" But why? By an accomplice, you mean? Who is the burglar? "

" That," snapped Lewis Butler, " is what I intend to find out."

In the lower hall he found Harriet Davis, who was now standing in the doorway of the dining-room and looking steadily at the body by the sideboard. Though her face hardly moved a muscle, her eyes brimmed over.

" You're going to take off the mask, aren't you? " she asked, without turning round.

Stepping with care to avoid squashed fruit and broken glass, Butler leaned over the dead man. He pushed back the peak of the greasy cap; he lifted the mask, which was clumsily held by an elastic band; and he found what he expected to find.

The burglar was Marcus Hunt—stabbed through the heart while attempting to rob his own house.

"You see, sir," Butler explained to Dr. Gideon Fell on the following afternoon, "that's the trouble. However you look at it, the case makes no sense."

Again he went over the facts.

"Why should the man burgle his own house and steal his own property? Every one of those paintings is valuable, and not a single one is insured! So why? Was the man a simple lunatic? What did he think he was doing?"

The village of Sutton Valence, straggling like a grey-white Italian town along the very peak of the Weald, was full of hot sunshine. In the apple orchard behind the white inn of the *Tabard*, Dr. Gideon Fell sat at a garden table among wasps, with a pint tankard at his elbow. Dr. Fell's vast bulk was clad in a white linen suit. His pink face smoked in the heat, and his wary lookout for wasps gave him a regrettably wall-eyed appearance as he pondered.

He said:

"Superintendent Hadley suggested that I might—harrumph—look in here. The local police are in charge, aren't they?"

"Yes. I'm merely standing by."

"Hadley's exact words to me were, 'It's so crazy that nobody but you will understand it'. The man's flattery becomes more nauseating every day." Dr. Fell scowled. "I say. Does anything else strike you as queer about this business?"

"Well, why should a man burgle his own house?"

"No, no, no!" growled Dr. Fell. "Don't be obsessed with that point. For instance, now"—a wasp hovered near his tankard, and he distended his cheeks and blew it away with one vast puff, like Father Neptune—"for instance, the young lady seems to have raised an interesting question. If Marcus Hunt wouldn't say why he wanted a detective in the house, why did the C.I.D. agree to send you?"

Butler shrugged his shoulders.

"Because," he said, "Chief Inspector Ames thought Hunt was up to funny business, and meant to stop it."

"What sort of funny business?"

"A faked burglary to steal his own pictures for the insurance. It looked like the old, old game of appealing to the police to divert

suspicion. Until I learned—and proved—that not one of those damned pictures has ever been insured for a penny."

Butler hesitated.

"It can't have been a practical joke," he went on. "Look at the elaborateness of it! Hunt put on old clothes from which all tailors' tabs and laundry marks were removed. He put on gloves and a mask. He got hold of a torch and an up-to-date kit of burglar's tools. He went out of the house by the back door; we found it open later. He smoked a few cigarettes in the shrubbery below the terrace; we found his footprints in the soft earth. He cut a pane of glass . . . but I've told you all that."

"And then," mused Dr. Fell, "somebody killed him."

"Yes. The last and worst 'why'. Why should anybody kill him?"

"H'm. Clues?"

"Negative." Butler took out his notebook. "According to the police surgeon, he died of a direct heart-wound from a blade (presumably that fruit-knife) so thin that the wound was hard to find. There were a number of his fingerprints, but nobody else's. We did find one odd thing, though. A number of pieces in the silver service off the sideboard were scratched in a queer way. It looked almost as though, instead of being swept off the sideboard in a struggle, they had been piled up on top of each other like a tower, and then pushed . . ."

Butler paused, for Dr. Fell was shaking his big head back and forth with an expression of Gargantuan distress.

"Well, well, well," he was saying, "well, well, well. And you call that negative evidence?"

"Isn't it? It doesn't explain why a man burgles his own house."

"Look," said the doctor mildly. "I should like to ask you just one question. What is the most important point in this affair? One moment! I did not say the most interesting; I said the most important. Surely it is the fact that a man has been murdered?"

"Yes, sir. Naturally."

"I mention the fact"—the doctor was apologetic—"because it seems in danger of being overlooked. You are concerned only with Hunt's senseless masquerade. You don't mind a throat being cut, but you can't stand a leg being pulled. Why not try working at it from the other side, and ask who killed Hunt?"

Butler was silent for a long time.

"The servants are out of it," he said at length. "They sleep in another wing on the top floor; and for some reason"—he hesitated—"somebody locked them in last night." His doubts, even his dreads, were beginning to take form. "There

was a fine to-do about that when the house was roused. Of course the murderer could have been an outsider."

"You know he wasn't," said Dr. Fell. "Would you mind taking me to Cranleigh Court?"

They came out on the terrace in the hottest part of the afternoon.

Dr. Fell sat down on a wicker settee, with a dispirited Harriet beside him. Derek Henderson, in flannels, perched his long figure on the balustrade. Arthur Rolfe alone wore a dark suit and seemed out of place. For the pale green and brown of the Kentish lands, which rarely acquired harsh colour, now blazed. No air stirred, no leaf moved, in that brilliant thickness of heat; and down in the garden, towards their left, the water of the swimming-pool sparkled with hot, hard light. Butler felt it like a weight on his eyelids.

Derek Henderson's beard was at once languid and yet aggressive.

"It's no good," he said. "Don't keep on asking me why Hunt should have burgled his own house. But I'll give you a tip."

"Which is?" inquired Dr. Fell.

"Whatever the reason," returned Henderson, sticking out his neck, "it was a good reason. Hunt was much too canny and cautious ever to do anything without a good reason. I told him so last night."

Dr. Fell spoke sharply. "Cautious? Why do you say that?"

"Well, for instance. I take three cards on the draw. Hunt takes one. I bet; he sees me and raises. I cover that, and raise again. Hunt drops out. In other words, it's fairly certain he's filled his hand, but not so certain I'm holding much more than a pair. Yet Hunt drops out. So with my three sevens I bluff him out of his straight. He played a dozen hands last night just like that."

Henderson began to chuckle. Seeing the expression on Harriet's face, he checked himself and became preternaturally solemn.

"But then, of course," Henderson added, "he had a lot on his mind last night."

Nobody could fail to notice the change of tone.

"So? And what did he have on his mind?"

"Exposing somebody he had always trusted," replied Henderson coolly. "That's why I didn't like it when the ace of spades turned up so often."

"You'd better explain that," said Harriet, after a pause. "I don't know what you're hinting at, but you'd better explain. He told you he intended to expose somebody he had always trusted?"

"No. Like myself, he hinted at it."

It was the stolid Rolfe who stormed into the conversation then. Rolfe had the air of a man determined to hold hard to reason.

"Listen to me," he snapped. "I have heard a great deal, at one time or another, about Mr. Hunt's liking for exposing people. Very well!" He slid one hand into his breast of the coat, in a characteristic gesture. "But where in the name of sanity does that leave us? He wants to expose someone. And, to do that, he puts on outlandish clothes and masquerades as a burglar. Is that sensible? I tell you, the man was mad!"

"There are five other explanations," said Dr. Fell.

Derek Henderson slowly got up from his seat on the balustrade, but he sat down again at a savage gesture from Rolfe.

"I will not, however," pursued Dr. Fell, "waste your time with four of them. We are concerned with only one explanation: the real one."

"And you know the real one?" asked Henderson sharply.

"I rather think so."

"Since when?"

"Since I had the opportunity of looking at all of you," answered Dr. Fell.

He settled back massively in the wicker settee, so that its frame creaked and cracked like a ship's bulkhead in a heavy sea. His vast chin was out-thrust, and he nodded absently.

"I've already had a word with the local Inspector," he went on suddenly. "He will be here in a few minutes. And at my suggestion he will have a request for all of you. I sincerely hope nobody will refuse."

"Request?" said Henderson. "What request?"

"It's a very hot day," said Dr. Fell, blinking towards the swimming-pool. "He's going to suggest a swim."

Harriet turned appealingly to Lewis Butler.

"That," continued Dr. Fell, "will be the politest way of drawing attention to the murderer. In the meantime, let me call your attention to one point in the evidence which seems to have been generally overlooked. Mr. Henderson, do you know anything about heart-wounds, made by a blade as thin as a wafer?"

"Like Hunt's wound? No. What about them?"

"There is practically no external bleeding," answered Dr. Fell.

"But—!" Harriet was beginning, when Butler stopped her.

"The police surgeon, in fact, called attention to that wound which was so 'difficult to find'. The victim dies almost at once; and the edges of the wound compress. But in that case," argued Dr. Fell, "how did the late Mr. Hunt come to have so much blood on his sweater, and even splashed on his trousers?"

"Well?"

"He didn't," answered Dr. Fell simply. "Mr. Hunt's blood never got on his clothes at all."

"I can't stand this," said Harriet, jumping to her feet. "I—I'm sorry, but have you gone mad yourself? Are you telling us we didn't see him lying by that sideboard, with blood on him?"

"Oh, yes. You saw that."

"Let him go on," said Henderson, who was rather white round the nostrils. "Let him rave."

"It is, I admit, a fine point," said Dr. Fell. "But it answers your question, repeated to the point of nausea, as to why the eminently sensible Mr. Hunt chose to dress up in burglar's clothes and play burglar. The answer is simple. He didn't."

"It must be plain to everybody," Dr. Fell went on, "that Mr. Hunt was deliberately setting a trap—for the real burglar.

"He believed that a certain person might try to steal one or several of his pictures. He probably knew that this person had tried similar games before, in other country houses: that is, an inside job which was carefully planned to look like an outside job. So he made things easy for this thief, in order to trap him, with a police officer in the house.

"The burglar, a sad fool, fell for it. This thief, a guest in the house, waited until well past two o'clock in the morning. He then put on his old clothes, mask, gloves, and the rest of it. He let himself out by the back door. He went through all the motions we have erroneously been attributing to Marcus Hunt. Then the trap snapped. Just as he was rolling up the Rembrandt, he heard a noise. He swung his light round. And he saw Marcus Hunt, in pyjamas and dressing-gown, looking at him.

"Yes, there was a fight. Hunt flew at him. The thief snatched up a fruit-knife and fought back. In that struggle, Marcus Hunt forced his opponent's hand back. The fruit-knife gashed the thief's chest, inflicting a superficial but badly bleeding gash. It sent the thief over the edge of insanity. He wrenched Marcus Hunt's hand half off, caught up the knife, and stabbed Hunt.

"Then, in a quiet house, with a little beam of light streaming out from the torch on the sideboard, the murderer sees it... He sees blood from his own wound seeping down his clothes.

"How is he to get rid of those clothes? He cannot destroy them, or get them away from the house. Inevitably the house will be searched, and they will be found. Without the blood-stains, they would seem ordinary clothes in his wardrobe. But with the blood-stains there is only one thing he can do."

Harriet Davis was standing behind the wicker settee, shading

her eyes against the glare of the sun. Her hand did not tremble when she said: "He changed clothes with my uncle."

"That's it," growled Dr. Fell. "That's the whole sad story. The murderer dressed the body in his own clothes, making a puncture with the knife in sweater, shirt, and vest. He then slipped on Mr. Hunt's pyjamas and dressing-gown, which at a pinch he could always claim as his own. Hunt's wound had bled hardly at all. His dressing-gown, I think, had come open in the fight; there was only a tiny puncture in the pyjama jacket.

"But, once he had done this, he had to hypnotize you all into the belief that there would have been no time for a change of clothes. He had to make it seem that the fight occurred just *then*. He had to rouse the house. So he brought down echoing thunders by pushing over a pile of silver, then slipped upstairs.

"The burglar could never have been Marcus Hunt, you know," he added. "We learn that Hunt's fingerprints were all over the place. Yet the murdered man was wearing gloves."

There was a swishing of feet in the grass and a tread of heavy boots coming up the terrace steps. The local Inspector of police, steaming in his uniform, was followed by two constables.

Dr. Fell turned round a face of satisfaction.

"Ah!" he said, breathing deeply. "They've come to see about that swimming-party, I imagine. It is easy to patch up a flesh-wound with lint and cotton, or even a handkerchief. But such a wound will become infernally conspicuous on anyone who is forced to climb into bathing-trunks."

"But it couldn't have been—" cried Harriet. Her eyes moved round. Her fingers tightened on Lewis Butler's arm, an instinctive gesture which he was to remember long afterwards, when he knew her even better.

"Exactly," agreed the doctor, wheezing with pleasure. "It could not have been a long, thin, gangling fellow like Mr. Henderson. And it could not have been a small girl like yourself.

"There is only one person who, as we know, is just about Marcus Hunt's height and build; who could have put his own clothes on Hunt without any suspicion. That is the same person who, though he managed to staunch the wound in his chest, has been constantly running his hand inside the breast of his coat to make certain the bandage is secure. As Mr. Rolfe is doing now."

Arthur Rolfe sat very quiet, with his right hand still in the breast of his jacket. His face had grown smeary in the hot sunlight, but the eyes behind those thin shells of glasses remained inscrutable. He spoke only once after they cautioned him.

"I should have taken the young pup's warning," he said. "After all, he told me I would take long chances."

By THEODORE R. COGSWELL

THERE is an evil in thirds that Joseph Cruthers should have recognized: the swimmer going down for the third time, the crowd instead of the company, the violence implicit in the eternal triangle. If he had been satisfied with two, things might have worked out differently; but Joseph Cruthers fancied himself a shrewd operator. At the moment he was operating shrewdly in the realm of the supernatural.

The girl at the classified-ad desk read through the text on the slip he had handed her, yawned, and then asked for a dollar and twenty seven cents.

" You're sure it will be in tomorrow morning's paper? " asked Joseph anxiously.

The girl gave a bored nod. " Just look under ' Miscellaneous for Sale '."

" Thanks," he said, started to turn, and then swung back suddenly. " No, wait a minute. I wanted that in the ' Personal Column '. In fact, it has to be. I don't think the party I am trying to contact is interested in second-hand fridges."

" Sorry." She didn't sound sorry. " Ya got something you want to sell, it ain't real estate, used cars, or livestock, it goes in ' Miscellaneous for Sale '. That's the policy of the paper. Me, I just work here."

Joseph started to argue but stopped when he saw he wasn't getting anywhere. " Look," he said finally, " if I've got it right, all you are objecting to are the words ' For Sale '. Am I correct? "

" That's right. Ya got something for sale, it ain't real estate, used cars, or—"

" All right, all right," interrupted Joseph hastily. " So I strike out ' For Sale '. Now can it go into the Personal Column? "

She picked up the slip of paper and read it through again.

" ' Soul in good condition available at usual terms. Box 1379 '. Sure, that'll go. Like I said, mister, I just work here. The boss tells me, ' Myrtle, ya can get an ad that wants to sell something that ain't real estate, used cars . . .' "

Joseph had to renew the ad six times before he finally got a reply. An envelope was forwarded to him by the newspaper—it contained nothing but a slip of paper with a telephone number on it. Hardly able to believe that he had made contact at last, he rushed to the telephone and dialled. At the third ring he heard the receiver lift at the other end and a harsh voice answered.

" Yeah? "

Joseph had trouble making his vocal chords operate. " I was told to ring this number," he said huskily.

" Who told ya? "

" I had an advertisement in the paper and this morning a letter came with a telephone number in it. I naturally assumed—"

" Hold on," interrupted the other. His voice fell as he turned away from the phone to call to somebody else.

" Hey, Mac, you send out our number to some creep who had an ad in the paper? You did? O.K." There was silence for a minute and then the sound of a typewriter clicking. At last the voice returned.

" What church ya go to? "

" To tell the truth," said Joseph diffidently, " I haven't been in one for years. I suppose you could call me a nominal agnostic."

" Age? "

" Thirty seven."

" Hold on . . . Hey, Mac, what's the list price on a thirty seven agnostic? "

Joe strained his ears to catch the reply, but all he got was an indistinct mumble.

" The boss says your model is a drug on the market," said the voice at the other end.

" Listen," said Joseph plaintively, " you do *buy* souls, don't you? "

The man at the other end sounded surprised. " Why, sure . . . If the price is right, that is," he added hastily. " But you're in the buyer's market, and you might as well face it. What's your asking price? "

Joseph took a deep breath, hesitated, and then took the plunge. " Three wishes. I believe that's the usual limit, isn't it? "

There was a snort and a side comment that Joseph couldn't help overhearing. " Hey, Mac, guess what? Another threesie! "

" I beg your pardon? " said Joseph.

" What for? Come right round. The boss says it's a deal."

Joseph jotted down the address on the back of a match folder and set off to meet his destiny.

The beetle-browed man didn't bother to introduce himself, but the name on the door said J. CUTLER. He pulled a thick sheaf of forms out of his desk drawer and tossed it to Joseph.

" The usual contract," he said. " You might as well start filling in the blanks."

Joseph, who had expected a single sheet of hand-illuminated parchment, was momentarily appalled at the multiplicity of divers-coloured forms. He leafed through them timidly. There were eleven green ones, eight white ones, twelve blue ones, and three of pale magenta.

" I have to fill in all of these, Mr. Cutler? "

The other nodded.

" In my own blood? " asked Joseph apprehensively. Making a quick estimate of the number of questions, he doubted whether he had that much.

" Naw, we got rid of all that nonsense during the last reorganization. It wasn't our idea to begin with. Back in the Middle Ages, unless they had a lot of fuss and flurry, they didn't feel they were getting their money's worth. Then once the tradition got established it sort of hung on. But when you look at it from a common-sense point of view, what do coagulated red corpuscles have to do with whether a deal's a deal? "

" I don't know . . ." said Joseph. " Just now I wonder what filling in forms in thirty-four-plicate has to do with it either."

Cutler looked at him shrewdly. "We've got to satisfy the average customer, you know. When he thinks blood works magic, he gets blood. When he thinks forms . . ." He took out a cheap ballpoint pen and tossed it on the table. "You can use that desk over there," he said. "Let me know when you're finished."

Joseph obediently carried the stack of printed forms to the other side of the office, sat down and began busily filling in the indicated blanks. An hour went by, and then another.

"Excuse me," he said.

The big man looked up from his racing form. "Yeah?"

"Question ninety seven has me a bit confused."

"Why?"

"When it asks for the date and place of my grandfather's marriage, it doesn't say which one it's referring to."

"Which what? Marriage or grandfather?"

"Grandfather."

"Is that on the blue sheet?"

Joseph checked and then nodded.

"Then it's asking about your father's father. The other side of the family is covered on the green sheets."

Joseph made a quick estimate of the forms still unfilled and ventured a timid objection. "Those questions about when I first decided to kill my father and marry my mother—are they really necessary? I mean, after all, I've got something you want and you've got something I want. Couldn't we make a simple exchange and call it a day?"

"Look," said Cutler sternly. "When in a business this big, HQ has to keep in touch, see? It's got to be able to get the big picture. To get the big picture you've got to have reports to consolidate, lots of reports." He frowned at Joseph. "If you don't want to co-operate, that's O.K. with me."

Joseph was filled with sudden alarm and held up his hands placatingly. "Please don't misunderstand me. I wasn't criticising. I was just curious—that's all." Bending over the forms he began to scribble hurriedly.

An hour and a half later, he stumbled across the room to Cutler's desk with every single question completed and his name written neatly at the bottom of each form. The fingers of his right hand were gnarled and twisted with writer's cramp, but he didn't care. It was done.

"I hadn't realised this would be such a complicated business," he said as he laid down the pile of paper with a sigh. "None of the old books made any mention of this sort of thing."

"It was simpler in the old days," admitted the beetle-browed

man. " But terribly inefficient," he added hastily as he began a quick check to see that all the questions were answered. " We've got a big statistical analysis section now, and all the central records bureaux have been converted to IBM. Like the Old Man says, we gotta keep up with the times."

Joseph stole a surreptitious glance at the big electric clock on the wall, but couldn't make any sense out of it. There was an infinity sign at the top where the " 12 " should have been, and the number-spacing suggested some sort of geometrical progression. " It must be getting rather late," he ventured. " If you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if—"

The big man obviously didn't like being interrupted. " Like I was saying," he said severely, " we gotta keep up with the times. About the only job we haven't been able to mechanise is de-souling. That's such a tricky job it still has to be handled in the old way."

" *De—what?* " said Joseph.

" De-souling. You sold us your soul. Now it's up to us to get it out of you."

" How? "

" Stick around. You'll find out."

Joseph found himself filled with a sudden sense of malaise. " It doesn't hurt, does it? " he asked apprehensively.

There was no answer.

Joseph let out a nervous smile and started to edge towards the door. " I'm a little tired after all that name signing. Suppose I call back tomorrow to clear up the rest? "

The big man jumped up with an ugly growl. " Oh, no, you don't! It's the collection station for you! "

Before Joseph could escape—or even protest—he was seized by the scruff of the neck and propelled towards a small door that had suddenly opened in the opposite wall. As they approached it, a gnome-like figure popped out and stood rubbing his hands. He wore blood-stained overalls, and over his shoulder Joseph saw a long wooden table with rusty arm and leg clamps attached to it. Beyond the table was a rack containing an extensive array of blunt and pointed instruments. He tried to twist out of the big man's grip, but couldn't. So he did the next best thing: he fainted.

When he came to, there was the sharp sting of smelling salts in his nose and he found himself securely strapped to the table. The attendant in the once-white jacket was testing the point of a particularly ugly knife on his thumb. A drop of emerald blood oozed forth and he grunted his satisfaction.

" Just relax," he said in a conversational tone. " This won't

take more than a couple of hours. A soul's a mighty hard thing to get out—it's all mixed up with blood and bone and muscle—but in me you've got the best de-souler in the business! There's some as need five hundred incisions to get the job done. Me, I usually don't run over three hundred and fifty."

The little man must have had an off-day. He ran considerably over his quota before he finally obtained what had to be obtained, smeared Joseph with an evil-smelling salve that healed all his cuts the minute it touched them, and shoved him out of the little door into the office.

"My wishes!" croaked Joseph to the beetle-browed man when finally he was able to talk again.

"Go ahead and make them. I ain't got all day."

Joseph's head whirled and there was a sudden weakness that made it difficult for him to stand up. If he'd had any inkling of the horror that awaited him in the de-souling room when he first thought of selling his soul, he would never have had the courage to go through with it. But it was over now. The pain was behind him. Now it was his turn . . .

"First—wealth!" he snapped.

Cutler groped in his desk drawer, took a bank book off the top of a large pile, and handed it over.

"Is a million enough to start with?"

Joseph's eyes bulged slightly, but he attempted a nonchalant gesture as he tucked the book away in his breast pocket.

"Next—immortality."

This time, instead of a book, he received a pill. He gulped it down, ignoring a slightly bitter taste as he did so. A moment later he felt a tingling sensation, but that was all.

"When does it start to work?" he asked anxiously.

"It already has," said Cutler. "You're immortal. That was what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Joseph nodded mutely.

"All right then, what's your third? Like you said, it's getting late; and there ain't no overtime paid on this job."

This was Joseph's moment of triumph. He drew himself up to his full five-feet-four and said slowly, "My third wish is for three more wishes."

Cutler's reaction was all that Joseph could have asked for. He swore, he thumped both fists on his desk, he stamped up and down the office. When that didn't work, he recaptured control of himself with an effort and said in a panicky voice: "I don't think you realize what you're asking!"

"I am perfectly aware of what I'm asking," said Joseph coldly.

"But one soul—especially in the condition your soul is in—

just isn't worth the energy expenditure required. We'd be well in the red on the deal! Suppose we settle on making you the handsomest man in the world, and call it square?"

Joseph was adamant. "I've got a contract. It's down in black and white that I can ask for anything I want. So I'm asking."

"But look at it from our point of view," said Cutler in a plaintive voice. "On *three* wishes we just about break even. And if we didn't have a big turnover we wouldn't even do that. What you're asking is an infinite number of free throws, because every time you use up two wishes, you'll use your third to get three more!"

Joseph was beginning to enjoy himself. For the first time in his life he found himself in command of an important situation. "Agreed," he said smugly. "The next time you sign something, I suggest you read all the small print!" His voice sharpened and he slapped his fist down on Cutler's desk. "Either you pay up—now!—or I'm going to take this up with higher authorities."

Cutler winced. "But to adjust your probability path to infinite reduplication would require a terrific wrenching of the continuum—"

"You refuse to honour this contract?" interrupted Joseph.

The beetle-browed man stuttered to a stop, glared wildly at the other, and then threw up his hands in defeat. "All right," he muttered. "Three more wishes you want—three more wishes you'll get. But head office ain't going to like it when they see this month's balance sheet." He pushed a button on the intercom on his desk and spoke into it.

"Yeah?" creaked a rusty voice.

"Trouble, Mac."

"What kind?"

"I got a threesie who insists on using his last wish to get three more. What'll I do?"

"The contract already signed?"

"Yeah. And he's holding us to it."

There was a groan from the other end. "And just when it looked like we were going to end up in the black."

"What'll we do?" asked Cutler.

There was silence at the other end, and finally: "Guess he's got us. There's nothing the competition would like better than to catch us welshing on a contract. When does he want delivery?"

"Now!" broke in Joseph.

"Well, if we got to, we got to. Here goes!"

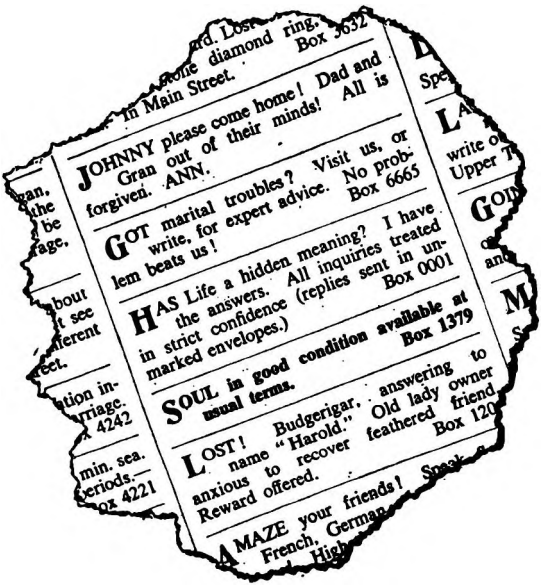
Joseph waited triumphantly—a song in his heart, a chip on his shoulder, and the world at his feet.

When it happened there was a sudden twisting all around him and he went spinning down into darkness. When the lights went on again, he—or at least a conscious immaterial part of him—was sitting in a murky place, feeling but not felt, looking out through a familiar pair of male eyes and listening to a familiar, bored female voice.

Technically, the terms of his contract had not been violated. To satisfy his last demand, his path through the space-time continuum had been turned back on itself until Joseph found himself suddenly tossed back a week in time. His third wish had been granted: he was getting three more.

Ahead of him was the waiting, the agony of the de-souling room, and finally the insistence on the third wish that would throw him back to begin the whole horrible cycle again as the bored voice said, "Ya got something to sell, it ain't real estate, used cars . . ."

He wanted to scream but he heard himself say anxiously, "You're sure that it will be in tomorrow's paper?"



HIT AND RUN

by Joan Aiken

HARRY LUPAC was waiting for the girl he was going to murder. He was on edge with expectation—he had never planned murder before, and planning made him fretful. It was not his way to work things out beforehand, and only sheer necessity was making him do it now.

He stared out of the window at the track up which she must come.

Nobody yet.

Would she be pretty? It would be odd if she was, and at this thought, which had not occurred to him before, a sort of excitement took hold of him. He looked at himself in the mirror, pulling complacently at the dark green tie complemented by the pale green shirt. He had a long, mobile face, airily haggard, red pouting lips, hazel eyes; a lock of hair fell over his forehead constantly, and was constantly thrown back.

" My dear young lady," he said to the mirror. " How do you do? I am so sorry that our first meeting must be our last. I regret it especially now that I see you are a lady of such beauty and charm." He began to giggle, and then stopped, scowling at the sound of his voice in the empty cottage. Crossing to the window, he consulted the silent road again.

There was no sign of her. Reassured, he threw himself into a kitchen chair, cocked his legs on the table, and went on, gazing at the ceiling:

" But as you *have* to die—and this, I am afraid, is quite essential—is there any little celebration, any treat that would sweeten your last moments? It is the least I can do for you. Let me pin this bunch of violets to your lapel."

There were no violets, but he removed a scabious from a bunch of wildflowers and flourished it at his invisible companion. " What is this you say? You don't see the necessity for dying?

Ah well, let me explain. It was that unfortunate occurrence last Sunday . . ."

Last Sunday had been rainy, closing down like a weeping grey lid by teatime. The trees surrounding Thrupp House hunched their shoulders under the downpour and kept out what light there was. By five the disused nursery was almost dark. Its gloomy expanse of bare floor palely reflected the dismal sky, but the two people who sat there were in shadow and could hardly be seen.

" But I tell you, I recognized him—I knew his face! Why it's as familiar as—as Bernard Shaw! "

" All right. You recognized the face." The other voice was weary. " But honey, even supposing the face *was* familiar, are you *sure* you didn't just dream up the whole thing? You know, you've been imagining a lot lately. Remember the telephone bell you thought you heard in the night? And the candle light in the garden and the snake you swore you'd seen in the bathroom? "

" *Don't !* I know I saw it—I know I did." The first voice was agonised, trembling. " The—the blood. It was horrible. I couldn't have imagined it."

" And you've been sleep-walking so, and losing things and forgetting things. If we went to the police—well, everyone round here knows you and frankly, sweetie, the way things are at present, I doubt if they'd believe your story for one moment."

" But Hilda, *you* could make them believe. You'll help me, won't you? He's got to be punished! "

" And then, you see," the second voice was running on persuasively, " it's a tricky legal position, too. You might find yourself in a slander action. Tim would hate that, wouldn't he? Honestly, I should forget the whole thing. You see, it isn't as if you have a shred of proof, have you? "

" But I have. I have! I saw his car number—CC 5000."

The silence changed its quality and became suddenly dynamic.

" Look," Hilda's voice had become hard, purposeful. " Leave it to me. Don't say a word to anybody. They'll only think you're nuts if you do—and you want the doctor to say that you're well enough to go back to Tim, don't you? *I'll* take care of this. I'm going up to town on Wednesday, and I'll see a lawyer and tell him the whole story. Two days won't make any difference. O.K.? "

" O.K." It was the faintest sigh, hardly more than a whisper . . . and it was suddenly drowned by the violent shrilling of an alarm clock somewhere nearby. " Hilda! What was that? "

" What was what? "

" That—that noise. That bell."

" Bell? There hasn't been any bell—there hasn't been any noise at all."

" You *must* have heard it, Hilda! It was *deafening*."

" Ducky, you know you're still tired and overwrought. Don't start to fuss about bells *or* the other thing. You just concentrate on getting better and going back to Tim."

In London, on Wednesday, Harry Lupac was alone in his flat near Victoria. He was examining the strings of a violin, softly plucking, tuning and listening. The room was opulent but masculine: the rugs and curtains were thick, rich, and sound-proof; heavy leather pouffes and massive armchairs in bizarre and brilliant colours occupied the space round the fireplace, and a concert grand took up most of the other end of the room. Half unrolled on top of it was a Festival Hall poster; Harry's face, staring remotely at the ceiling, appeared over the single word, LUPAC, followed by a recital programme.

Outside, London was growing dark. The sound of traffic was far away and blurred; there were no nearby noises. Lupac lived among offices and shops, where his practising in the small hours would not irritate neighbours. After five o'clock he was the only soul alive in the block.

Harry rejected the A-string, removed it and replaced it with a new one. He was tuning again and listening when the doorbell rang. He sighed and went to answer it.

" Hilda! " His voice held a dry surprise and no particular pleasure, but the girl came in gaily, dropped an armful of shopping on the table and, when he had shut the door, walked across and stood close to him, smiling up at him.

" Well! Aren't you going to kiss me? "

Still smiling, with her hands behind her back, she leaned up against him and pressed her closed lips to his.

" Do I get anything to drink? "

He poured her a Martini and set it beside her on a table. She had taken his armchair and was lying back, staring at the window.

" Aren't you having one? "

" I'm on the air in three quarters of an hour."

" Oh, I'd forgotten your broadcast this evening."

" Are you planning to stay the night? " As when he had let her in, his voice was dry and held no particular emotion.

" No, I'm catching the late train down. Caroline's meeting me with the car."

" Is she safe to drive yet? "

Her soft laugh ran round the room. "She's got to start sometime. But she's still very jittery; she's getting Mother down—Ma never could stand her."

"But sweetie—" his foreign pronunciation was scarcely noticeable, save on these long vowels "—sweetie, there's no time to talk now. I must be changing."

"Swee-eetie," she mocked him, "there's got to be time. I've something important to say. Go ahead and change, but you *must* listen carefully."

"O.K.," he sighed, "but you can hardly expect me to concentrate." He began to move purposefully about the room, getting out another violin, selecting a small pile of sheet-music and sliding it into a zip-case. He walked into the other room, and Hilda slewed round in the chair, eyeing him sharply.

"Come and dress in here," she called.

While she waited she lit another cigarette.

"What is it, this important thing?" He was back in shirt-tails, fastening a tie.

"Only this—I know somebody who saw you run over little Garry Vernon . . ."

There was a moment's silence.

"What is this nonsense?"

"Just what I say. I know somebody who saw you run over Garry Vernon. You thought you were all alone in the middle of the country. Well—somebody was watching you."

"I don't know what you are talking about. Who is this Vernon?"

"He was the little boy you ran over." She paused, looking down at her hands. She had picked up the rejected A-string and twined it round her finger. "It was last Sunday afternoon, on the Maidhurst Road—a couple of miles from the turning on to your track. I expect you were driving back from Whistle Cottage . . . you might have told me you were going to be down for the week-end." She stopped, looking at him interrogatively; but he made no response and she went on. "I don't suppose you were driving very fast—a moderate fifty? Little Garry must have been playing in the wood, and he suddenly ran out into the road, right under your wheels . . ."

Harry, fully dressed now, was minutely inspecting a bow and did not look up.

"It must have been unpleasant for you. Of course, this person who was watching said that you *could* have avoided him if you'd tried harder, but we don't know that's true—do we? You stopped and got out. He was lying in the road, bleeding. You took a bit of cloth out of the car and tried to mop up the

blood. But you could see he was done for. So you panicked—wiped your fingers on the rag and threw it away into the bushes. Then you drove off without looking back.

" I suppose it wouldn't have looked so good for Harry Lupac, violinist of international repute—and a ' sensitive interpreter of cradle-songs and lullabies '—to have run down a child and killed him? Much better to get away quick. It was a pity someone happened to be watching."

" Very well," he said. " Who was this watcher? You? "

His voice had not altered, but it was now oddly plain how lacking in emotional colour it was.

" No—not me," said Hilda. " But someone I know well."

" It was you," he said again.

She shook her head. " No, my sweet. Unluckily for you. *I* should probably keep quiet . . . But my informant has a conscience, she recognized you, quite by chance, and she came to me and asked my advice."

" Knowing about you and me? " Harry was sweating slightly now.

" No, darling." Hilda laughed. " Oddly enough, nobody knows about you and me. But this person thought I might have known who should be told—the police, perhaps."

" And what did you say? "

" I told her not to breathe a word till I'd seen a lawyer and asked his advice. I said you might be able to sue for slander unless she was very sure of her facts."

" Of course," he said, breathing more easily. " How sensible of you, Hilda. But look, darling, I really must go now; I cannot, simply cannot, be late for this recital. We must finish our conversation later, but tell me, who is this person? It is your sister Caroline, isn't it? The one just back from Aden? "

" No," said Hilda lightly, " it's not her—and I shan't tell you who it is. What was it you learned in that Japanese camp—*Never let out more than one piece of information at a time?* "

Lupac smiled. " What do you want? " he said gently. " Money? Or do you want to make a scandal and have me charged with manslaughter? Will that make you happy, wrecking my career? I thought you loved me? "

" I do," she said softly. " I want to marry you."

" That is out of the question," he said, firmly and coldly.

" Not if it's the price of me keeping quiet, Harry. And the other person too, of course. I shall be a good wife to you; and you need a wife."

" This is foolishness! You must be mad, out of your senses! How do you *know* this person will keep silent? "

" She will if I tell her to," Hilda said confidently.

Lighting a cigarette, he gave her a long, narrow look. " It is blackmail, in fact? " he said.

She nodded. " I've had enough, you see, of being a week-end amenity for you—living with Mother and the dogs, so usefully at hand when you come down to Maidhurst. It's a gruesome life at home, and now's my moment to get away while Caroline's there. Mother loathes her, but she'll do to take the dogs out and see Hudson doesn't pinch the brandy."

" She will go back to her husband when she is better? "

She blew a puff of smoke. " I doubt it. *I'm* going to get away this time. I don't like rotting down there while you go off to Rome, Paris, Milan. Next time you do a world tour, I want to come with you."

" What if I say I have a wife already? "

" Then I go straight to the police with Ca—with this nasty little story! I'm in earnest, Harry! "

She glanced up at him. His eyes were blazing oddly. He picked up the metal comb he had been using, seemed about to put it in his breast-pocket and then paused, staring at it in concentration.

" Is this an ultimatum? "

" Yes."

One rapid stride brought him behind her chair. As she half turned, his left hand thrust under her hair, pushing her head sideways so that the upward blow with the comb caught her on the neck just below the ear. As he took his arm away she slumped over the arm of the chair.

" And that was another thing I learned in the Japanese camp, sweetheart," he said. Hilda did not reply. It was hardly surprising, for her neck was broken . . .

Harry's preparations were complete. He ran downstairs to the car with his violin, music and Hilda's parcels. Not a soul to be seen, and it was beginning to rain; so much the better. Returning, he picked up Hilda with unexpected wiry, tensile strength, and carried her down to the car, admonishing her in a gentle, cajoling voice. " Silly girl to come out when you were feeling ill. I shall tell your mother to take better care of you! How can I leave you when I have to go off and give a recital? I must take you home first."

There was nobody within earshot to benefit by his monologue, but he carried on just the same, with the relish of a good actor for his part. He put Hilda in the back of the car, on the floor and threw a rug on top of her so that to the casual eye the car

appeared empty; then upstairs again to remove any traces she might have left in the flat. There were none.

He had intentionally misled her about the time of his broadcast, and he still had forty minutes before the recital was due to begin. Driving south, he crossed the river and turned east past Waterloo, threading through a maze of side-streets until he came to a wide arterial road running south-west to Brixton. At this hour on a wet evening it was deserted. Dusk had settled in early and the road-surface shone black as glass under the infrequent lamps.

He stopped and twitched the rug off Hilda's body, then went on for half a mile or so, keeping a careful eye on the road ahead and behind. Steering with his left hand, he reached behind him and eased open the right-hand rear door. The weight of Hilda's body forced it wide and she fell into the road, deep into the shadows. The door swung back and Harry slowed without pulling in to the kerb, shut it, and drove on. Rain was falling fast now; his tyre marks would probably be obscured already.

Fifteen minutes' moderate driving brought him to the studios with several minutes in hand.

There were call-boxes in the hall and he went into one and asked for a Maidhurst number. A young voice answered him.

"Caroline? Is that you, honey? It's Hilda here."

It would have been odd, for a watcher, to have heard Hilda's high, emphatic voice emerging from his mouth. Imitating voices was one of his skills, one that he kept to himself. "Listen, sweetie, don't meet me tonight. I've decided to stay in town. And Caroline, about that other thing—about the accident—you haven't said a word to anybody?"

"No, of course not. I was waiting— "

"Good. Well, listen carefully. I'm coming down tomorrow with a lawyer who wants to talk it over with you. Don't say *anything* to *anybody*—particularly not to Mother—but come up to Whistle Cottage, the empty cottage up by the woods, you know, tomorrow evening. I'll be there with the lawyer. Will you do that?"

"What time?"

"About six. Don't tell a soul—say you're going for a walk. Right, sweetie? I must ring off now. I'm going to the pictures with some people I've bumped into. In Brixton."

"Have a good time," the faint voice said.

Harry rang off.

Caroline was brushing her hair as she listened to the morning weather forecast. She listened to the forecast for company: it

was the only male voice she heard and made a change from shrill female tones. He had a pleasant, friendly voice, the announcer, with his businesslike chat about cold fronts and anticyclones. It was going to be hot; temperatures would be above normal. She smiled a little at that; as if an English summer day could ever come up to the heat that she had learned to know as normal!

"That is the end of the weather forecast," the announcer said, "and now there are two SOS messages. One for Tennant. Will Mrs. J. D. Tennant, believed to be touring Devonshire in a Ford Consul . . ."

Caroline's thoughts trailed away. If I were dangerously ill, she wondered, would they ask Tim to come? Would they broadcast a message? But no, of course not. They know where he is. All they would have to do would be to send a cable. But when I *was* ill they said he was too busy to come . . .

"Now a police message," the announcer was saying. "A woman was knocked down and killed last night in Brixton, near the junction of Brixton Road and Whittington Crescent, by a car that failed to stop. Will anyone who saw the accident or can give any information please communicate with— "

Caroline sat rigid, her eyes fixed and sightless as a trapped rabbit's. Tim, I'm frightened! Tim, oh Tim, come back! A motorist who failed to stop . . .

The door opened.

"Oh, there you are, Caroline," said a sweet, weary voice. "Why don't you come down? Why do you sit mooning up here listening to the wireless? As if the news meant anything to you, you silly girl."

Caroline switched off the wireless, put the hairbrush back on on the dressing-table.

"Yes, Mother," she said, "I'm just coming."

On the roof of Tim Conroy's bungalow in Ras al Abdan the sun struck with pitiless strength. The faulty air-conditioning unit had gone wrong again, but he was used to that. He sat with a wet towel round his head and neck. There was a sort of desperation in his big, ugly, intelligent face as he read the scribbled letter for the fourth time:

Darling Tim—Oh, I wish, I wish I was with you. It wasn't my fault, was it, whatever Mother says? I couldn't have saved him and heaven knows I would if I could—you *know how much I loved him. Darling, they say you'll never want me again, but please come and get me. I am well enough to come back and I hate it so here—I'm frightened and unhappy. Something's happened, a dreadful thing, but I can't tell you about it. I'm not allowed to.*

I can only say please, please don't forget me, please come for me soon . . .

It was blotted and unevenly written and Tim compared it with another letter, efficiently typed, which read:

Dear Tim, Don't worry about Caroline. As you know, she is still in a highly neurotic state, but her physical condition is improving. Dr. McAdam does think, though, that it will be a long time, if ever, before she is fit enough to go out to Ras al Abdan and face the hot weather—and inevitable unhappy memories—again. In the circumstances, though it seems hard, we feel that it would be better if you didn't give her false hopes by writing too often or making any promises which might be hard to keep. She gets upset at the slightest thing. Of course, we are taking the greatest care of her. Your affectionate sister, Hilda.

His eye went back to the first letter. " Please, please don't forget me, please come for me soon— "

He put it on a little heap of a dozen other letters, all crumpled, all blotted, all saying the same thing . . .

Whistle Cottage was the perfect place for a murder. It lay far from the village, up a long, wooded track which led to quarries and a disused lime kiln.

It was dark when Harry Lupac drove there after his recital. The warm night air cut softly past like unseen wings on either side of his car, and Harry, humming the sonata theme again, tasted triumph and sorrow like wine. Life spun in his hands like the wheel of the car, unfolding for him like the road.

He grieved, of course, for Hilda, for her gaiety and brilliance, but as a companion she could be replaced, and no marriage trap, however beautifully baited, would catch Harry this side of the tomb. He would sleep long and quietly, spend a leisurely morning, and then prepare the cottage for his visitor.

" Going out, Caroline? " said Lady Trevis, meeting her daughter in the hall.

Damn. " Yes, Mother."

" Which way are you going? "

" Up Hunter Hill," lied Caroline.

" Oh, you could just as easily go down to the village, couldn't you? I'd like you to take some flowers to Mrs. Vernon. I meant to send a wreath, but I forgot."

Oh, no—no, pleaded Caroline soundlessly. Aloud she said : " You don't need to now, surely? *I* sent a wreath."

" Don't be so damned negative all the time, sweetie. If I say I want you to take some flowers, just take them without all

this argy-bargy. Now—where *has* Hudson got to? I've been standing with my finger on this bell for five minutes."

"Yes, ma'am?" said Hudson, appearing by her shoulder.

"Oh, Hudson. Find the dog, will you? Miss Caroline is going to take him for a walk."

The old man turned and plunged into an evil-smelling cupboard under the stairs which housed raincoats, old umbrellas and hockey-sticks and also, it appeared, a moulting bull-terrier. At the suggestion of a walk the dog began to show maniac enthusiasm.

"Come on, Caroline," snapped Lady Trevis, "I'll walk down to the gate with you and find some flowers."

The front door slammed behind them and Lady Trevis collected a large, awkward bundle of mixed flowers from the unkempt garden and thrust them at Caroline. "Don't let Rhiny loose, will you? He chases sheep nowadays. And ask Gladys Vernon when she can come and wash the curtains."

"We can't ask her yet, Mother. It's not four days," said Caroline desperately.

"Rubbish. She probably needs something to take her out of herself."

Lady Trevis stood watching as Caroline fumbled herself, the dog, and the toppling bouquet through the shabby white gate. Having made sure that Caroline departed in the right direction, she walked back to the house, staring with detestation at its flinty Victorian facade. The flicker of spirit derived from persecuting Caroline had left her.

"Here's my hubby coming now, Inspector," Gladys Vernon said. But the footsteps halted at the front door instead of going round to the back, and there was a light knock. Gladys went to the door; her cried-out blue eyes were beginning to recover their colour; her blonde curls kept an improbable, babylike prettiness above her flabby features.

"Miss Caro, love," she said warmly. "It's ever so nice of you to call."

"Hello, Mrs. Vernon," Caroline said. "You're looking better—I'm so glad." She hitched Rhiny's chain on to a staple by the front door.

"Come in a moment, Miss Caro. Inspector Gleason's here, waiting to see Joe. I was just going to put the kettle on for a cuppa."

"I won't stop," Caroline said. "I'm going for a walk. Mother sent these flowers with her love and said—" But, faced with the baldness of her next message, she allowed herself to be

persuaded into the parlour where Inspector Gleason, kindly, shrewd-eyed and stocky, was looking with discomfort at the ornate sympathy cards on the mantelpiece.

"That's very kind of your Mother. Aren't they lovely, Inspector?" Gladys said. "You know Mrs. Tim Conroy, don't you? I'm sure Joe won't be a moment." Flustered, she looked uncertainly from one to the other. "There, the kettle's on the boil."

Caroline and the Inspector stood in silence, Caroline, still helplessly holding her bouquet, staring down at its wilting petals. I could tell him now if I hadn't promised Hilda; it would be so easy to say, *Inspector, I saw the man, I recognized him.* But Hilda said he wouldn't believe me. They think I'm hysterical, mad. The lawyer will know I'm telling the truth, though. Only an hour to wait, and then I can tell the whole story.

"Back home on a bit of holiday are you, Mrs. Conroy?" said the Inspector heartily. "Staying with your mother?"

Gladys, returning with the tea, wished it were permissible to kick her husband's superior's ankle. For the Inspector hadn't heard the village gossip about Caroline.

"Yes, that's right." Caroline's throat tightened. She looked down at the flowers and to her horror saw a tear splash on them, and then another.

"Let me put these in something," she muttered, and fled to the scullery.

"Here's Joe," said Gladys with relief, and followed her.

P.C. Vernon came in, his pleasant, open face miserable and harassed. "I've had another look round where it happened," he said heavily to the Inspector. "To see if we'd missed anything. I found this bit of rag chucked away in the bushes."

Gladys and Caroline came back just as Joe passed it to the Inspector—a soft cloth, which had once been white and was now stiff with dried blood and coated with dust.

"What's that?" said Gladys, her eyes dilating. Joe put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Don't take on, love. I didn't mean you to see it."

"Did you find it—along *there*?" He nodded, and Gladys's face crumpled. "Oh, burn it, burn it," she sobbed.

"We can't burn it, Mrs. Vernon," the Inspector said gently. "It's evidence, you see. I'll take it to the lab and let them work on it." Gladys was crying in great choking gulps, her hands clenching and unclenching. Caroline, herself white as death, put an arm round Gladys and helped her upstairs.

Caroline waited until Gladys had calmed down a bit, then

slipped downstairs and out of the back door. She felt she couldn't go back through the room where the men were with that bit of rag. Round at the front, Rhiny was almost strangling himself in his efforts to get loose. She unhitched him and turned back up the village street, oblivious of the fact that his chain was cutting deep red weals across her hand. She felt as if someone was hammering with vicious strokes at her brain. Oh please heaven, she thought, let the rag be his handkerchief or something that will tell them who it was. Oh Tim, Tim, I wish you were here to help me!

Into her agonised mind came those two visions which had never really left it: the tiny dark bundle, crumpled in the middle of the road, and the cot, stripped and bare, its blue blankets folded away. Punch, my baby, I couldn't do anything for you—they wouldn't even let me come near . . .

The two men stood unhappily drinking their tea.

" Mrs. Conroy looked upset," Gleason remarked.

" Thinking about her own little boy, I dare say," Joe said. " She came home when he died, you know, three months ago. Calling in here will have brought it all back to her." Joe told him the rumours about Caroline.

" Poor girl," the Inspector said.

" It comes hardest on a woman, I suppose," Joe sighed. " Though I miss our little chap terribly. What is it, sir? "

Gleason was sniffing in a puzzled way at the rag. It was a piece of sheet, torn square. " Smell reminds me of my dad," he said frowning. " Can't think why. He's been dead these twenty years. I know the smell, but can't put a name to it."

" What did your father do, sir? "

" Had a little music shop in Westchester."

LONGFORD IN HOSPITAL, the cable said, CONROY RETURN LONDON URGENTEST STOP SPECIAL PLANE CHARTERED STOP COMPANY REPRESENTATION ESSENTIAL OIL PRODUCERS' CONFERENCE MESSAGE ENDS. It had been sent by the General Manager's Secretary.

The dawn wind was blowing, and Tim Conroy had all the windows open. The cable fluttered to the floor as he strode about, packing clothes and papers, checking passport and money and keeping an eye on the clock. His plane was due at six.

He walked swiftly into the bathroom, hesitated a moment, and then took from the shaving mirror frame a photograph of Caroline with her baby in her arms, and slipped it into his wallet. He gave a final glance round the room, picked up his holdall and walked over to the airfield.

"Got everything?" said Nicolson, his assistant. Conroy nodded.

"Lucky devil! You'll be able to see your wife. Aren't you thrilled? Will she be coming back soon?"

The roar of the incoming plane was deafening, sparing Tim the need for reply. He waved his hand at Nicolson and moved towards the runway.

It was an earth track and her feet made little sound on it. The banks were thick with summer growth, withered cowslips, campion, bellflower—

"Archangels," she said aloud. "Bedstraw. Bindweed. Scabious."

If she could remember these, why couldn't she remember her own name? She looked at her shoes and her hands as if they might give some clue. Shoes—scuffed, whitened with chalk dust. Hands—ringless, thin; a young person's hands. She felt her face, pulled a strand of hair forward to look at it. Darkish soft hair, hanging to neck-length. Tucked in her waistband was a handkerchief. Initial C.

Who was she?

Fighting down a surge of panic, she went on walking. Her thoughts raced, trying to fix on something. It was no use.

It's summer. I'm a girl. In the country, in—in England? It felt like England. I'm not hungry. Nor tired. I don't feel ill. I don't feel unhappy or frightened. When did I start walking up this path? Where am I going? She looked at the watch on her left wrist—it said ten minutes past six. Then she rubbed with slow, puzzled fingers at two deep, painful bruises over the back and side of her hand. What did that? Have I been in an accident?

At the word *accident* a little warning light seemed to flash; but no, it was no use . . .

If I go on, she thought, I shall reach the place I was making for. I feel I had a purpose. Sooner or later I shall remember.

"Resin," said Inspector Gleason. "Of course. Powdered resin. Off the strings of violins. Or cellos."

He stood beside Saunders the lab assistant. "I knew the smell had some association for me."

"It's used for lots of other things too," pointed out Saunders. "And, unfortunately, there's nothing else on the rag. It's the Vernon boy's blood-group, as we expected. Doesn't get us much further."

Gleason nodded, sighing. "I don't suppose—" he began,

and then his assistant put his head round the door and said:

"You're wanted on the phone, sir. London."

"Well, thanks, Saunders," Gleason said, and went back to his office. "Gleason here. I beg your pardon? Yes, Miss Hilda Trev—oh yes. Has been what? Oh Lord. Yes. Yes, of course. Right away—I'll go up there. It's only twenty minutes by car. Have you any idea? None. In Brixton? Found a what—? A *violin string*?" He paused, an expression of great astonishment crossing his face. "What a curious thing. Yes. I'll go to the mother right away. You'll want her to come up for identification tomorrow? Naturally. Goodbye."

He glanced at his watch—nearly six. On the way to the Trevis house his mind went over the facts again and again. Was it odd, or just a coincidence? Two hit-and-run deaths, both victims from the same village—though one occurred in Maidhurst and one in London. Of course, accidents happened every day—but then the resin, and the violin string found twisted round the dead girl's finger?

Tim was met at the airport by Longford's secretary.

"Thank heavens you made it, Conroy. The Old Man doesn't trust anyone else not to make a shambles of the discussions."

"Nice to be valued," said Tim wryly. Three months ago, when Caroline was ill, he'd been the only person Longford had trusted to handle a difficult labour situation at the Kuwala field. The work had been a relief, but all the time he'd been thinking of Caroline . . . ill, needing him, sent home on doctor's orders to that old harpy of a mother. At least now he'd see how she really was, and if he wasn't satisfied that she was getting stronger, nothing—nothing—was going to prevent him from taking her away.

"Ah, Tim—" The Old Man shifted with angry impatience on his pillows. "Grand to see you. How's it going?"

"Fine," said Tim dryly. "We got the new rig up this week and ought to bring in the fourth well by the end of the month."

"I didn't mean that," the Old Man said. "I meant you, personally. Wife O.K.?"

"I'm going to see her," Tim said. "Soon as this job's tidied up."

"Good. Take a week off. Don't want my right-hand man cracking up. It was a bad business." The Old Man's eyes clouded.

"About the discussions . . ." Tim said, steering away from the subject. They plunged into technicalities.

The conference lasted for more than three hours. Tim reeled

out, feeling as if his eyeballs had been rubbed in more sand than lay between Aden and Bahrain. Swiftly he made his way to his mother's home in Addington Square.

His mother met him in the doorway. "Darling," she said, "before— "

Then she took a careful look at him and changed her mind.

"Off with you into a hot bath this minute," she said, "while I mix you an egg nog. You look like an old shoe and I don't wonder— "

Tim knew his mother's edicts were not to be ignored, and he staggered off gratefully to the unspeakable comfort of a boiling bath in a civilised bathroom.

"I rang up Lady Trevis as you asked," Mrs. Conroy said when half the egg nog was safely swallowed. "I can't stand that female! "

Tim grinned in spite of his anxiety. "How's Caroline? Did you speak to her? "

She looked at him compassionately. "I'm afraid there's worrying news, Tim dear."

"What is it? She's not worse? Did you speak to Hilda? "

"Darling, that's what's so awful. Hilda's been run over and killed."

"*Hilda* has? When? "

"In London, last night."

"Good God," he said blankly. "What an appalling thing. Are you sure? "

"I'm sure."

"Sorry—being tired makes one stupid. Poor old Hilda . . . That settles it though! I'm not leaving Caroline alone with that old witch. I don't care what they say—she's coming back with me. I'll hire a car and run down tomorrow. Can you put us up here for a few days? Poor Caroline—to have all this on top of the other— "

"But darling," his mother said, "that's just what I was going to tell you."

"What? "

"Caroline's *missing*. She went out with one of the dogs, and the dog came back and she didn't. The police are looking for her."

Tim stared at her, his face whitening under its tan. "She knew about Hilda? "

"No. That's the odd part. She'd gone out before the news came."

"*Between ourselves*," Lady Trevis had croaked confidentially, "*Caroline has been so odd lately that I shouldn't wonder if she's*

gone completely round the bend. They're dragging the rivers. That would really be the best thing for your Tim, wouldn't it? Of course, I'm absolutely shattered, two daughters at a blow . . ."

Tim picked up the telephone. "I'll get a car and drive down right away."

Harry Lupac was growing restless and disturbed. The girl was nearly an hour late. He flung from side to side of the room like an irritated bluebottle, and when he heard the light tap at the door he hurled himself at it with the enthusiasm of a child opening a parcel.

"My dear Mrs. Conroy! You will be surprised, no doubt—"

But the girl on the threshold looked at him without the faintest glimmer of recognition.

"It *is* Mrs. Conroy, isn't it? Caroline? Hilda's sister?"

"I—I don't know," she said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but I'm lost. I've lost my way and forgotten who I am. Please could you ring up a doctor?"

He looked at her blankly: a small, fragile-looking girl, fine-boned, with feathery darkish hair. Not at all like Hilda; that meant nothing though, for Hilda had once told him that she and her sister were quite different.

"It's so silly, isn't it?" she said. "But rather frightening, for me. I should be so grateful if you could phone someone."

"I'm not on the telephone," he said.

He was wild with annoyance. Was she Caroline? Was she bluffing? Had she recognized him instantly and guessed the danger? If that was so, his only course was to outplay her; she could hardly keep it up for long.

"Come in and sit down," he said, forcing a friendly, easy manner. "You must be tired. I'll give you a drink and we'll see what's best to be done."

He watched her like a hawk as she came in. She hardly glanced at her surroundings, but sat down obediently in the chair he pulled up for her.

"Can you remember *anything* about yourself?" he asked. He had his back to her, pouring an extremely stiff gin.

She shook her head. "I can remember a few *things*—a leather needlebook, a picture of mountains, a dressing-gown with rabbits on the sleeves. Nothing else."

"Here, drink this," Harry said, giving her the glass. He rummaged in a drawer and found a couple of photographs of Hilda. "Do you know that person?"

He watched her acutely as she studied the pictures. Not a muscle moved in her face. Disappointed, he took them back

and tearing them in half dropped them indifferently into the grate. " Do you think you've had a shock or fright? " he asked carefully. " People sometimes lose their memories for a short time when they're subjected to strain."

" I don't know." She pressed her fingers against her eyelids. Was there anything there—fear, like an evil old man with a candle, lurking at the back of her mind? Fear of what? Of whom?

Harry's eyes studying her were as bright and opaque as sequins. He could not decide what to do. It seemed so likely that this girl was Caroline that he felt tempted to go through with his original plan to finish her off and dispose of her body in Piper's Patch, a stretch of quaking and odoriferous bog in the woods near the cottage. If it *was* Caroline. No one would have cause to associate a missing, unbalanced girl with Harry Lupac the violinist.

He had been careful to keep his identity concealed from the local dullards, bringing week-end food with him from London and using the cottage as a hermitage. His meeting with Hilda in the woods, one sunny Sunday, had been an accidental departure from this rule which was now to be regretted, yet it had led to a long, pleasant association . . . And he'd give up the tenancy of Whistle Cottage now.

But if the girl was *not* Caroline? What if she was a summer visitor, or a local girl who had told her family she was going for a walk past Whistle Cottage; a girl subject to fits of amnesia, who always told her mother . . .

" Please, don't you think you'd better take me to the nearest hospital? I'm sorry to be a nuisance, but if anyone is out looking for me they'd be sure to contact the hospitals."

" Slowly, slowly," Harry said. " For all we know, someone may be coming up the lane searching for you this moment. It would be silly not to give them the chance of appearing."

She smiled faintly. She looked very young and vulnerable. He tried to remember if Hilda had told him Caroline's age. He knew she had not been married long; Hilda was still nursing her raw, savage resentment over Caroline's marriage when he first met her, and he had drawn it out of her one evening, uncovering a bitter stratum of hatred.

". . . Good grief, Harry, she's not even pretty! I suppose some men just find that bewildered childish expression attractive, though I can't imagine why— And all the time, while Mother kept telling her she'd have to wake up if she wanted to catch a man, she was sneaking off, meeting Tim Conroy in the woods! Mother was livid—almost withheld her consent to the marriage

Of course, in public she was all for it. *So* suitable, *such* a good match—it makes me sick."

He tried to fit this girl into the picture—hiding her romance from the inimical mother and sister, stealing off to meet her lover. She fitted in very well; she would be well cast as Juliet. He was almost sure she must be Caroline.

"Try to remember your childhood," he urged. "Begin with anything you can remember—details, fancies, it does not matter."

She looked at him helplessly. "I can't."

He was friendly, persuasive, encouraging. "I'll start you off. Walking to school—picture yourself—heavy satchel over your arm, the sun shining, the green hedges, the other children in the road, children scattering as a car comes by—" His eyes darted to her face, and he beat an impatient little tattoo on the arm of his chair.

"I think," she said in a troubled voice, "I do remember something. There was a boy . . ."

"A boy, yes?"

"He used to call out 'Who's Medusa?' I was frightened of the other children. They used to tease me. One day—I'd been reading the Greek myth about the Gorgons who turned people to stone—I shouted, 'I'll set Medusa on you'. They thought it was a tremendous joke, and after that this boy shouted 'Who's Medusa?' whenever he saw me."

"*Who were you?*"

"I pretended I was Medusa. I knew I was ugly . . ."

"*Who were you?*"

She frowned with concentration, holding her breath, "It's no good, it doesn't come."

Harry giggled softly. "What a ridiculous situation this is. Do you not find it so? Shall I tell you my name? It is Lupac, I'm a violinist, quite famous. Does the name mean anything to you?" He came to an abrupt halt, staring at her. But she gave no sign.

He wanted to smack her head, beat knowledge out of her somehow. This guessing game would be amusing any other time, but minutes were slipping by, evening was coming . . .

"When you walked to school," he said, "were you by yourself? Or was your sister with you?"

"No," she said at once. "My sister went to boarding-school."

"Ah!" he pounced. "What was your sister's name?"

She thought for a moment. "Dee. It was Dee."

"Not Hilda?"

She sat rigid, then put her hands over her face in despair. "Oh, I don't know. I can't remember . . ."

" How *wonderful* of you to come so fast, Tim," Lady Trevis said, but there was no cordiality in her voice. She looked haggard. Her eyes were very sunken, very bright, and there was a flush on each cheekbone. " What can I say? It's all too shattering for words. I'm a wreck, absolutely. I have to go up to town, you know, to identify poor darling Hilda. Oh, I forgot. This is Inspector Gleason; his men are searching for Caroline. Inspector, this is my younger daughter's husband."

The Inspector had plainly taken an extreme dislike to Lady Trevis. " No news yet. Just ringing back to the station for more equipment."

Tim looked round the familiar room with horror. There was the well-remembered smell of moulting dogs, dry-rot, stagnant flower-water, decaying leather upholstery . . . How could Caroline ever get better in this house? Three months ago it had seemed the only solution: the doctor was insistent that she should get away from the scene of the tragedy; she was ill, grief-stricken, near breakdown; his own mother was in hospital and he himself run ragged with the job.

" —hundred feet of rope," the Inspector was saying. " We're going to try the quarry-face over at Martlesham. And drag-nets for the lake; the ones they have aren't long enough."

A dumpy, familiar figure came in carrying a tea tray. With an effort Tim remembered her: Gladys, the maid who had left to marry a policeman. She had always been fond of Caroline.

" Oh, poor Miss Caroline, sir," she said. " I do hope she's all right. It was all my fault, in a manner of speaking, because if I hadn't got so upset this afternoon it wouldn't have unsettled her. I keep blaming myself."

" Nonsense," Lady Trevis said. " It wasn't your fault. Miss Caroline has been getting more and more peculiar. Look how she lost things—clothes, keys, money, jewellery. And she'd even started walking in her sleep—Hilda was always meeting her wandering about the house. Did Hilda tell you about her tearing pages out of books? " she said to Tim.

Tim felt sick; this was nightmarish.

" We had to put all the books away because if there was anything about children or babies in them she'd tear out the pages and burn them."

Tim stared at her in horrified disbelief, but Gladys interupted.

" Oh, no, ma'am. It was Miss Hilda did that. I came into the room once and saw her and she said ' I'm doing this so Miss Caroline won't be upset '."

" You're dreaming," Lady Trevis said. " Go and get on with the packing."

"The girl's little better than half-witted," she said to Tim when Gladys had gone. "She lost her own child four days ago and Caroline had some fanciful idea that they were sisters in misfortune. She insisted on taking flowers to Gladys and working her up into a state—working herself up too."

The Inspector ended his telephone conversation.

"You're sure you can't think of any particular spot your daughter might have gone?" he asked.

Lady Trevis shrugged.

"She did a lot of walking."

"Nothing special you recall about her behaviour during the last twenty-four hours?"

"At breakfast she was sulking—as usual. Last night she argued and argued, insisting she was well enough to go out and join her husband." Lady Trevis gave Tim a sudden disconcertingly artificial smile. "So I turned the radio on to drown the row, and she burst into tears and ran out of the room."

"What time would that have been? Did she go straight to bed?"

"I'm afraid I really couldn't say. It was just after Hilda rang up to say she wasn't coming back—between ten and half-past. I know that, because I turned on the Lupac violin recital."

"Violin recital?" The Inspector suddenly sat straight and still.

Wearily humouring him as one who probably didn't understand the term, Lady Trevis found the place in the *Radio Times*. "Here you are—Harry Lupac, ten-fifteen."

Conroy could not stand the inactivity of the room. "I'll go with you, Inspector, when you leave, if I may. Meanwhile Lady Trevis, do you mind if I have a look at Caroline's room? It might give me some ideas."

"Certainly, if you want to," Lady Trevis said coldly. "I'm going to take some tablets and get to bed."

Tim had never seen the bedroom of Caroline's childhood. He waited until Lady Trevis had gone, then went softly up the stairs. At the top he met Gladys.

"Can you show me my wife's bedroom?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir. It's this way, sir, next to Miss Hilda's. I'm just going into Miss Hilda's room to pack up her things."

"Pack them?"

"Lady Trevis said to get them out of the house. She doesn't want to see them again. I think she was more upset about Miss Hilda than—than she cares to let on, sir."

Tim went through the door she showed him and switched on a light to dispel the sad summer dusk. It was a square

room with a brass bedstead and white counterpane, a violet carpet the colour of cheap boiled sweets. It smelt of mildew. His own photograph smiled at him falsely from the bedside table. There was no trace of Caroline, save a pair of sandals.

Tim sat on the bed, wondering what Caroline had been thinking, intending. Next door he could hear Gladys bumping about and he went in to speak to her.

Hilda's room was similar to Caroline's, but made intimate by a scattering of cosmetics, letters and jewellery. At present it was heaped with clothes which Gladys had taken out of drawers, and wore a sad, dishevelled, breaking-up air.

"You saw my wife this afternoon, Gladys?" he said.

"Yes, sir. She wasn't the same after she saw that dreadful bit of rag. White as a ghost, she was. I was lying down on the bed, see, and she gave my hand a squeeze. The minute she'd gone I thought, what did she mean by that? She ran off through the gate with the dog, crying her eyes out, and no one has seen her from that minute to this."

She had filled two cases and now climbed on a chair to drag down a third from the top of the wardrobe. It was locked, and she opened it with a key from a bunch.

"Well, there's a funny thing," she said, staring at the contents. "That's Miss Caro's silver slipper that she lost."

"That's Caroline's cameo brooch," Tim said, looking over her shoulder at the jumble of articles in the case.

"She lost that too, last month. Real miserable she was. Gracious! You don't think Miss Hilda had it all the time?"

"And here's her address-book—and her fountain pen—and her purse. These are *all* Caroline's things," Tim said.

They stared at each other over the little heap.

"You don't think Miss Hilda—oh no, that would be wicked!"

"What was that story you were telling downstairs about tearing pages out of a book?" He listened carefully while Gladys repeated it.

It all seemed to hang together in a horrible way—the cache of stolen articles, the pages from the books, Caroline's desperation, Hilda's bright, nurselike letters . . .

"Deliberately driving her into a breakdown!" he said. "But why? Why should she do such a thing?"

Gladys's round pink face was shocked into shapelessness. "How horrible!" she whispered. "And Miss Caroline still so upset and grieving over—over little Master Punch." She looked down and took out the last things from the bottom of the case: half a dozen gramophone records. "Would these be Miss Caroline's too, sir?"

" Shouldn't think so. She hadn't any records before—before. What are they? Mozart violin concertos? I expect they were Hilda's—you'd better pack them with the rest of her stuff. I'll take this lot."

Inspector Gleason put his head round the door. " Just off now, Mr. Conroy, if you care to come along." His eye fell on the pile of records. " Harry Lupac . . . whose are those? "

" Hilda's, we think."

" That's odd. Put them on one side, Mrs. Vernon; I'd like to have another look at them. Now, Mr. Conroy— "

Tim followed the solid, reliable back of the Inspector down the stairs, wondering what Gleason's reaction would be if he told him that Hilda had been intentionally trying to frighten Caroline out of her wits. What was the reason behind it? Was it jealousy? And then, getting into the car, he glanced back at the hideous, shadowy bulk of the house. The reason suddenly dawned on him. It was to prevent Caroline escaping again. Once, she had got free . . . run off to a happy marriage, leaving the elder sister still a prisoner, hag-ridden by Lady Trevis's moods. Hilda was just making sure it didn't happen again! He flailed himself inwardly. " How could I ever have trusted her? "

" Martlesham first," the Inspector said grimly. " There are all sorts of ledges and crevices on that quarry-face. We have to try everything."

" I really do think— " the girl was beginning.

" Write your name," Harry commanded, handing her a pencil and paper. " Scribble it down quickly."

She took the pencil. It felt long and awkward in her fingers. She looked nervously at the white surface of the paper and then, fast and clumsily, in the centre of the page, she wrote " Punch ". The word stared at her from the paper. It gave her an unhappy feeling, but she didn't know why. Punch—Punchie, my lamb—

" Punch," said Harry irritably. " That can't be your name. Write something else—anything that comes into your head." With a pretence at ease he strolled to the French window, and then he started. " Hey! " he yelled. " Who the hell are you? What are you doing there? "

The pencil rolled from her fingers, and she jumped to her feet.

" Who is it? " she said.

The garden was a tangled wilderness of unpruned roses and raspberry canes. Slowly, timidly, a small boy was making his way towards them. He held a red-stained chip basket, and in the late evening light his eyes were shadowed pools of fear. His legs were scratched, his face grubby; a bloodstained handkerchief

was tied round one knee. There were raspberries in the basket.

"Oh—" the girl said. She pushed the back of her hand against her forehead. Something was coming through now—the oil derrick and the hot, hazy sky, and Punchie's blue-and-white striped pyjamas; he always had a graze and a bandage on one knee or the other . . .

But Harry was not attending to her. "Who are you?" he said furiously to the child. "What are you doing in my garden? Answer me! What's your name?"

The boy's lips parted soundlessly. She looked down to be spared the sight of his terror, and her glance fell on the violin. Immediately her mind performed a violent somersault. The old memories which had been assailing her slid into place. Lupac! Of course, *this* was Lupac! But what was he doing here? Where were Hilda and the lawyer—?

The torn photographs of Hilda caught her eye again. Why did he have those pictures? And—now she came to think it over—why had he been behaving so oddly, trying to discover her identity when the natural thing would have been to take her to the nearest doctor? He had been expecting her—he had said, "It *is* Mrs. Conroy, isn't it?" He must have found out Hilda's plan and managed to come down ahead of her.

"I was only pickin' raspberries," the little boy said desperately. "Didn't know this house belonged to no one. Down in the village everyone thinks it's empty."

Everyone thinks it's empty . . . A feeling of cold, deadly terror took possession of Caroline. She was in an empty house with the man she had seen kill a child. But he didn't know that—or did he? He didn't know who she was—*or did he?*

"All right," said Lupac in quite a new voice. "Never mind about the raspberries. Forget it. I'm sorry I was angry. Now, look at this lady. Do you know who she is?"

Caroline caught her breath. What would the boy say?

"Yes, I knows her," he said, puzzled. "But I don't know her *name*. She's the lady who always gives me sixpence."

Harry struck his hands together in exasperation. Then his mind began to race. It must be Caroline. In any case he couldn't wait here any longer—they would soon be searching for the girl. It had been a mistake to call the boy in; now he would have to be disposed of as well.

Thinking coldly, clearly, and with lightning precision, he said to the boy, "Is there a doctor in the village?"

"Yes, sir. Doctor Malthouse. He lives next to the church."

"Good. I'll get the car and run you both down there. This lady's not feeling well, and it'll save you a long walk home—I

daresay your mother's wondering where you've got to."

Harry went upstairs and slipped a gun out of his music-case into his pocket.

"Please don't bother to drive us," Caroline said when he returned, "I'd rather walk. The boy can show me the way. It might do me good—bring back some of my memory." She forced a trembling smile.

"Oh, no, I insist," said Harry. And she could see that he meant it.

"Let me bandage Bill's knee then," she said hurriedly. She realized her slip. "You *did* say your name was Bill, didn't you?" The boy nodded. "He shouldn't go about with that dirt on it," she told Harry. "May I use your bathroom?"

Caroline hurried Bill upstairs without waiting and, opening doors, found the bathroom at the end of a narrow, dark passage. The house was larger than it seemed, for the upper storey ran back into the hill itself. Locking them both into the bathroom she turned the taps full on and began dabbing at the small bony knee. She *knew* her instinct was not mistaken—she had seen something like murder in his eyes as she looked back from the stairs. Her own murder, and the murder of the child as well. What could she do to save them? Was it possible to explain to the child without terrifying him out of all reason?

"Sit on the bath," she ordered, and steadied him. The feel of the small, jerseyed body gave her courage and determination. "Bill," she said, "can you be brave and sensible? Listen—I don't trust that man downstairs. He means to do us some harm. If we go in his car I think he might take us to—to somewhere we don't want to go. Now look—you could get through that window . . . it's big enough for you but not for me. It's only a step to the ground, and you can creep off into the bushes while I pretend to be still washing your knee—"

"And run down to the village and get help," interrupted Bill enthusiastically. "I'll go now. Will you be all right, miss?"

"I'll be all right. Now you just go to Mr. Vernon—Mr. Vernon the policeman—" He nodded. "And say Miss Caroline's here with Mr. Lupac, and to come quickly. Mr. Lupac who ran over Garry Vernon. Can you remember that?"

He repeated "Loopatch", after her. She glanced round quickly—what could she give him? She pulled a handkerchief from her belt. "Here, this will show you're not telling a story—it's got my initial on it. Now then, up with you."

Grinning, he wriggled through the tiny square window.

"Hurry up," came Harry's impatient voice from downstairs. "Anyone would think he'd broken his leg off."

Caroline waited till the small figure disappeared into the bushes, then sank onto the edge of the bath, weak with reaction. She must pull herself together now and try to find some means of escape for herself. But at least the child was safe . . . Not another child. Not a third.

The terrible memory of the oil fire and Punch's death flamed back into her mind. The little boy had been so proud to be allowed to watch the drilling. It was his birthday, and Caroline —against her better judgment—had said he could go along under the escort of Miller, the watchful old Yorkshire timekeeper, who promised to keep him well out of harm's way. Then Caroline, dressing in the bungalow, had heard the explosion, had run down the sun-scorched sandy road to the rig. For the rest of her life she would remember that bit of road.

Colossal flames like giants' torches were raging straight upwards . . . the men racing about the site were like puny black ants. They would not let her come near. "Punch? Where's Punch?" she called frantically to one and another. No one answered; she could not have heard if they had; the noise of the fire was a steady roar, louder than any gale. Then she had seen Tim coming towards her, seen the expression on his face . . .

She had gone with Miller in the ambulance while Tim stayed to direct the fire-fighters. She had tried to comfort the old man, himself terribly burned. "Don't, Peter, don't . . . It was quick, he couldn't have known anything." She had no tears. She felt numb and stupid. At the hospital she fainted; a confused nightmare had followed—delirium, anguish, narcosis, delirium . . . and Tim's drawn, desperate face when he came and sat, holding her hand. After the fever the doctor allowed her one brief, searing visit to the bungalow to superintend the packing of her clothes. It was a dead house. Punch's things had been put away, except for his cot.

Tim accompanied her as far as London, where Hilda had met them; then he had to race back to deal with the chaos resulting from the fire. She bowed her head over the basin. Who would care if Lupac did murder her? Tim would be better off without her. Hilda had been saying for a long time that Tim would never want to live with her again—though not in so many words. "You weren't the type to get married in the first place. You're not sufficiently well-balanced. Tim needs someone solid and dependable."

"For the love of mike," said Harry's furious voice outside the door, "how much longer are you going to be?"

He rattled the latch. Caroline turned off the taps, shot back the bolt, and faced him breathlessly.

" He's gone! " she said. " You—you scared him. I think he thought you were going to take him to the police. He wriggled out of the window."

Harry switched on the light and stared at her. His nostrils were pinched and white, and she noticed that he was breathing very fast.

" Gone! " he said. " You let him go, didn't you? Why? "

" I couldn't stop him."

" You're a bad liar, aren't you?" he said. " Let us understand one another. You have remembered, have you not, that you are Caroline? Come along. You will accompany me in the car; there will be plenty of time to overtake the child. It is a pity about what I shall have to do to you both, but it cannot be helped."

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

" No? But you understand this, perhaps? " She saw the gun he had taken from his pocket. He gestured her to precede him down the stairs. With insane courage she pushed his hand and the gun aside, flinging herself into the doorway opposite the stairhead. The gun exploded as the door slammed, and the key jarred in her hand. He was shooting into the lock. She guessed it would only hold for a moment or two, and she ran desperately to the window and threw it up.

As Gleason shuttled the police car through a series of narrow lanes, Tim's mind battled with weariness. What was the " dreadful thing " that had happened, of which Caroline was not allowed to speak? Was it connected with the Vernon child? Where could she have gone? Who would she turn to?

The car stopped with a jerk.

" Here we are," the Inspector said. " You'll be wanting a torch! We've plenty of spares. If you'll take the bottom of the quarry, I'll search the sides and the top. Watch out for yourself. There are some deep holes among these bushes."

The cliff face rose above him, high and menacing in the dim light, as he forced his way through alder and sloe.

" Caroline! " he called, " Caroline! " The echo came drifting back down the quarry.

" Well, nothing here," the Inspector said, materializing beside him after half an hour. A couple of other men followed him. " We've been right round the hill. We'll go back through the village and call in at Vernon's to see if there are any messages."

" You don't think there's any connection between Hilda's death and Caroline's disappearance? " Tim asked, as they left the quarry.

"Don't see how there can be—unless she was psychic. Your wife was already missing when I went to Thrupp House to tell Lady Trevis about Hilda. She'd been very upset about the little Vernon boy, we do know that; and this afternoon I thought she looked as if something was weighing on her mind."

Tim nodded. "We lost our own boy three months ago in very tragic circumstances," he said, his throat tight. "She couldn't help being reminded. It's an odd coincidence, isn't it, two very similar accidents."

"The whole thing's odd. Miss Trevis was found with a violin string round her finger—did you know that? Why? She doesn't play the fiddle, nor, so far as we can find out, do any of her friends. And we can't trace who she was with last night."

Tim told the Inspector what he had found in the suitcase. Gleason whistled reflectively.

"Nasty," he said. "Human nature's an odd thing, isn't it? When you hear something like that, it makes you wonder what else is going on behind closed doors. You'll be glad to get your wife away from there."

Tim was comforted by this calm assumption that they would find Caroline, as the Inspector had meant him to be.

"The violin string round her finger," he said presently. "You say none of Hilda's friends played. But that pile of records in the case—they were all violin concertos; and they were all inscribed on the cases, 'H from H'."

"*Were* they?" Gleason incautiously jabbed his foot on the accelerator and the car shot forward. "'H from H'? You're sure of that? And they were all Harry Lupac records?"

"Yes they were. You don't suppose Lupac gave them to Hilda, do you? She didn't know him, did she? Caroline never mentioned him."

"Lupac," Gleason mused. "There was powdered resin on the rag that was found by Garry Vernon's body. Hilda died with a string round her finger. Caroline burst out crying when her mother turned on the Lupac recital after the telephone message from Hilda, which must have been just before Hilda's death—she was found at ten-twenty. Hilda had a pile of Lupac records inscribed 'H from H'. Is there some connection—or is it a lot of moonshine?"

"If there is a connection," said Tim, "I don't understand it. What's Lupac got to do with the Vernon child's death? Or with Caroline's disappearance? He hasn't ever been down here, has he?"

"Not so far as we know," Gleason said. They were among the lights of the village now, and he pulled up outside a cottage.

" I'll just call in here; I told them to put messages through to Vernon's house." He peered at the lighted porch. " Mrs. Vernon's home, I see."

Gladys was waiting in the doorway. " Oh sir, I'm glad you've come— " She and the boy who was with her spoke together, and the Inspector found it hard to disentangle their words.

" Easy, son. What's that? You've seen Miss Caroline—yes, where? Up at the old cottage by the lime-kilns? The one place we haven't looked yet! "

" And she's in deadly danger, sir," Bill said earnestly. " She gave me her handkerchief "—he flourished it—" and said to come as quickly as you could. She's going to be kidnapped by Mr. Loopatch."

" Mr. *who*? "

Bill repeated the name and added, " He's foreign. I bet he's a gangster, sir."

But the Inspector was already running back to the car.

There was a tiny leaded balcony outside the window, but the drop was daunting. The ground sloped away from the lower end of the house, and in the half-light it looked about sixteen feet down. She turned to survey the roof. The window she had come through was in a gable, and from the corner of the balcony a gully ran up to the roof-ridge. Without a second's hesitation Caroline cautiously began going up the gully on toes and fingers, trying not to make a sound. If she could work her way along to the other end, where the house ran into the hill . . .

She heard a muffled crash below. The bedroom door had given way and in a moment, though she couldn't see him, she knew Lupac was on the balcony; she heard him grunt, and the scrape of his feet on stone. She was on the roof-ridge now, frantically clambering sideways. It was like a nightmare. Would Lupac think she had jumped down from the balcony—could she dare to hope that? A dark blob, his head, appeared above the slant of the gable—she saw a flash, and something cracked on the roof beside her. A tile went clinking and slithering down.

" You are an easy target there, Caroline," he called. There was an almost caressing note in his voice.

Caroline did not reply. She threw herself over to the far side of the ridge and hung by her hands. Could she work her way along like this? The tiles were wet with dew, and one hand slipped. Then she heard another shot; a bullet whacked the ridge between her hands, and bits of tile flew into her face. Automatically she let go with both hands and felt herself begin to slide, slowly, horrifyingly . . .

Then, unbelievably, something stopped her. She had slid on to the ridge of a dormer window. She did nothing for a moment but take great gulps of breath. What was Lupac doing? Was he climbing down and would he then come round to the terrace? She had got to move, and fast.

She tried to climb back up the roof, but it was too slippery. She clung on the cold tiles like a terrified fly. She must think of some other plan. The window. Was the window open?

It was open, and there was only a foot-span between the dormer roof and the broad window-sill. With a final effort Caroline pushed herself across, and then huddled paralysed on the ledge. Supposing he expected her to do this? Supposing he was inside the dark room, waiting to pick her off as she climbed in?

She could not stay on the window-sill though; she inched her way through and crouched on the floor inside, her heart thudding.

She was in a bedroom. It smelt of hair-oil, and of leather and tweed. There was no voice, no shot; she listened fiercely, passionately. The house was too full of silence, packed with it, bulging with it. Where was he waiting for her, secure in the knowledge that she must come his way? He must be indoors somewhere. Once she was out she was safe: there were twenty impenetrable hiding-places in the undergrowth.

The stairs. He would be on the stairs, waiting for the door to open, confident that her self-control would give way and that she would make a panic-stricken dash for safety.

Caroline stood up, took a deep, calming breath, and began to move slowly, with the utmost caution, towards the dark end of the room where the door must be. Before every step she stood still, listened, and felt before her with her hands, reining in the thought that she might put out a hand and touch *him*, motionless, waiting for her . . .

She reached the wall.

Step by step to the right—no, that's the side wall. The door must be to the left, then. Yes! Her left hand brushed the ridged newel-post. The door was not quite shut. She stood pressed against the wall, so that when the door opened she would be behind it. Now, wait; don't move. He wants you to come out—so wait, keep as still as death.

Half an hour went by.

Every muscle in her body was begging leave to give way and let her sink to the ground. She made herself rigid and fought off the drowsiness that came over her in waves. If I can get out of this house alive, she thought, I can do anything; the future is not dead for me if I can do this.

No sound in the house. Perhaps he'd become scared and given up, run off into the dark. She remembered the old fancy that her Medusa-face could turn enemies to stone. It had taken Tim to teach her that her face was beautiful; that it could turn stone into flesh and blood.

Then, suddenly, shattering her composure, the front door banged. Brisk footsteps crossed the hall and a light flicked on somewhere. She could see its reflection through the crack of the door.

For a moment she felt sick with despair. Had he been outside all this time, looking for her in the bushes? Had her elaborate game of hide-and-seek been a futile manœuvre, while she could have been escaping?

She heard Harry's cough downstairs, rather loud, the scrape of a chair being pushed, the clink of a glass. He was in the kitchen.

Now what?

Then it struck her that the noises were too loud; he was not the sort of man who banged or scraped or coughed. He *meant* her to think he had just come in and sat down. Why? Now there came the unearthly squeak and scrape of violin tuning. Her nerves screamed in silent protest at each rasping note. She pictured him sitting below, a smile on his mobile red mouth and at the corners of his down-dropped eyelids, deliberately drawing out discordant sounds to torture her. After a few minutes he evidently had the instrument tuned to his liking, for he began to play a Bach partita. The rigid music rose up in the house like barbed wire.

Caroline hesitated. Was this the moment for her to move? Had he really relaxed his watchfulness? She put out her hand towards the door-knob—and then snatched it back. She felt the door slowly opening. He must be standing within a foot of her outside—and yet all the time the see-saw contrapuntal music was coming from downstairs. He must have a record on, she thought, the devil, the unspeakably clever devil. To her exhausted mind it seemed utterly disproportionate that someone should devote all this ingenuity to killing *her*. He must enjoy it. He must consider it even more fascinating than playing the violin.

Almost dispassionately she watched as a pencil-point of light stole forward across the floor. She heard a sound outside, a soft giggle, and the door came back towards her until it stood wide. He took a cautious step forward into the room.

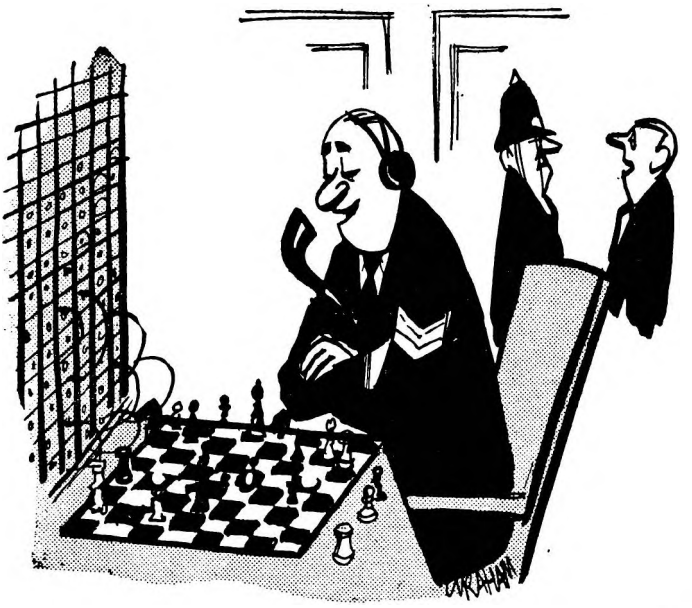
Caroline hardly realized what she was doing until she had her shoe off and in her hand; then she flung it with all her might

at the dressing-table by the window. Something slipped and crashed. Lupac started, then jumped sideways—and in that instant Caroline whipped behind him out of the door. The stairs were to her left, opposite; she darted down them and rushed towards the front door.

A moment's desperate fumbling with the door, bolted and chained . . .

She heard his steps start down the stairs, and his voice, agonised, sobbing, " Caroline! " like the voice of a lover who sees his beloved slipping away. A shot scuffed beside her on the path as she got the door open and ran out. The sharp gravel bit into her unshod foot and she thought hopelessly, " It's no good. 'Even now he'll get me."

But even as she thought it, she saw through the trees ahead the beaconing light of Inspector Gleason's headlamps coming up the hill.



" Calling Car 69 . . . Queen's Rook takes Bishop . . . Over . . ."

A Tommy Hambledon story

by

MANNING COLES

All that Glitters

IN the dock stood Joseph Joseph, aged fifty-seven, charged with receiving stolen goods—knowing them to have been stolen—to the estimated value of £32,675, mainly diamonds. His Counsel did his best for the old reprobate, but the case was hopeless from the start since the gems had been found in Joseph's safe.

The defence offered by the accused alleged that the gems had been planted in his safe to incriminate him. Asked who he thought was responsible, he said some enemy, jealous of his (Joseph's) high reputation and superior business acumen. Some crook; if the police would interrogate a man called Butler Harry they would find that he knew something about it. Joseph was checked for making unsupported allegations against a person not under suspicion, and Butler Harry, sitting modestly at the back of the court, covered his mouth with his hand.

Asked—by prosecuting Counsel—why, if someone wanted to frame Joseph Joseph by planting stuff in his safe, they had done it in such a wholesale manner when one diamond bracelet would have been enough, accused said that it was probably done to get the insurance company's rewards. At this hideous suggestion Butler Harry left off laughing and looked scandalized instead, murmuring that it was a shocking thing to say, so it was.

Joseph Joseph also complained bitterly that he had been robbed of an extremely valuable antique pendant known as the Luck of Kenilworth, which he had bought in the open market for a valued American client. Everybody knew about the Luck

of Kenilworth. There had been bits in the papers about it at the time of sale. This jewel, Joseph said, had been in his safe together with a comparatively worthless replica—that pendant now lying upon Counsels' table before his Lordship, there. The replica had been left in the safe but the Luck itself was missing, and what were the police doing to find it? The police probably—

At this point Joseph's defending Counsel stopped him. Joseph said that he was a poor man and was not getting a square deal, but he was removed from the witness box and returned to the dock; the jury had no hesitation in finding him guilty of "receiving", and since this was not his first conviction for this offence the sentence was seven years. Nobody likes receivers.

The court rose, the Judge and Mr. Joseph retired, though in quite different directions, and the crowded chamber cleared slowly as the people edged out of the rows of benches and sidled along the packed gangways. Chief-Superintendent Bagshott of Scotland Yard, who had attended the trial, returned to his office and found there Thomas Elphinstone Hambledon, who was waiting to see him about quite another matter.

"Everything go off all right?" asked Hambledon, who had his reasons for being interested in the Queen v. Joseph Joseph.

"Seven years," said Bagshott. "Your friend Butler Harry was there to see, and had the impertinence to give me the thumbs-up sign. That man will have me crawling up the wall yet. That pinchbeck replica of the Luck of Kenilworth was on Counsels' table as one of the exhibits. It has now completely and utterly vanished."

"But why blame Harry?" said Hambledon. "What would he want it for? The whole thing isn't worth more than a hundred and fifty pounds, if that, and even then it's all in the workmanship. Broken up it's practically worthless, and you couldn't sell it whole—it's much too well known. If Harry had palmed anything off that table, it would have been something worth having. Besides, with all that insurance money he's getting soon—"

"Joseph said so, and he wasn't far wrong, was he?"

"Well, somebody's got to get rewards, haven't they? But Harry's not going to risk going to jail now he's rich for once. Be reasonable, Bagshott. Were there any more doubtful characters there besides Harry?"

"Of course. Half the rogues in London."

"Well, there you are. It's my bet somebody took it for a memento of a valued customer, and that means anybody, as we both know only too well."

Just before the trial, while Joseph Joseph was still on remand,

two Dutchmen named Jan and Dirk Maes, brothers, came over from Holland and obtained permission to see him on business. They had done business with Joseph before, and he could speak Dutch helped out with Yiddish, which was of service in keeping the interview private.

" We are sorry," said the Maes brothers politely, " to find a valued client in such jeopardy."

" I shall be acquitted," said Joseph confidently. " The case against me will collapse in court."

" Without doubt," said Jan Maes. " The courts of England are famous for impartiality and perspicacity, but even so the cost of defence must be high. We came over thinking that it would help you to dispose of the Luck of Kenilworth at a fair price."

Joseph tore his hair with a splendid gesture and said that he no longer had the Luck of Kenilworth. " It was stolen from my safe."

" But we," said Dirk Maes winningly, " are trustworthy."

" Eh? But it is gone, I tell you."

" Really? Not really? "

" Yes, really and actually, in truth. It is terrible, terrible. Six times every night I dream of the—"

" Oh," said Jan Maes, " is it? We naturally assumed that you had insured it."

" I did, of course," said Joseph. " But the insurance money is nothing near the price my American client was prepared to pay."

" Naturally, naturally," said Dirk Maes. " But if you had both the insurance money and the sale price—"

" Whereas now, all involved as you are in legal matters," said brother Jan, " the detailed arrangements for transferring the jewel to your American client might be well-nigh impossible at the moment."

" We discussed this matter quietly between us," said brother Dirk, " and decided to come over and offer you our services."

" We being, as you know, eminently trustworthy." The brothers smiled upon him with duplicate smiles, for they were very much alike. " You can confide in us."

" I would trust you with all my possessions in this world," said Joseph mendaciously, for he knew them both very well. " It is perfectly true that it was stolen, but I think I know who took it."

" Oh! Oh, that is different. If you cared to tell us—"

" A man called Butler Harry—"

Two or three days after the trial, Butler Harry received word that two Dutchmen wanted to see him on business; so a meeting

was arranged at a quiet café at an uncrowded hour. The Maes brothers, who could speak English when they chose, came to the point with surprising directness.

"We are in the market for the Luck of Kenilworth and we understand that you can help us obtain it."

"Old Joe-Joe tell you that?"

"We are not at liberty to disclose the sources of our—"

"Come off it. Listen, gents. Me and Joseph Joseph haven't always seen eye to eye, granted. We've had our disagreements, granted. Well, I don't bear no malice, live an' let live, that's me. But poor old Joe-Joe—where I'm concerned he isn't 'ardly sane. Give you my word, if it rained on his birthday he'd think I'd turned the tap on. You don't want to take no notice of what he says, not when it's about me."

The brothers looked at each other and Dirk Maes spoke.

"Three thousand pounds?"

Butler Harry sat up as though someone had stuck a pin into him.

"You think I took the Luck! You think I waited till the poor old basket was up to his neck in trouble and then went in and pinched the one thing he'd got between him and the work'ouse in his old age? He told you so, I suppose, and you swallowed it. You don't know me. I'm a skilled craftsman, I am, I don't 'ave to steal pennies from a blind man's cap. Decency between gentlemen, I say, if you know what that means," he added with rising indignation. "Me, to do a thing like that? Me?"

"Let us be calm and reasonable—"

"Calm? Reasonable? If you wasn't a pair of silly foreigners as don't know any better, I'd knock your 'eads together, put some sense into 'em. Now then."

Jan Maes pulled himself together.

"We did not ever say you had the thing. We ask, can you help us?"

Butler Harry paused for thought.

"I do know one man as could tell you where the Luck is, if he saw fit," he said slowly.

"Who is that? You tell us, we pay."

"Mister Blooming Joseph Joseph." He grinned in their faces, got to his feet and walked out.

"Could that possibly be true?" said Jan.

"We thought that ourselves, but Joseph insisted it was not so," said Dirk.

"Now he is in prison we cannot see him for a long time."

They brooded.

"I have had an idea," said Dirk.

" What is it? "

" That man said that Joseph could tell us where the Luck was."

" Yes? "

" And Joseph said that that man had it."

Jan Maes held his head in both hands.

" How I dislike the English! " he said bitterly.

Two nights later, when Butler Harry was having his usual modest half-pint in his usual bar, he was approached in an oblique and serpentine manner by a red-eyed little man called Stiffy the Squeak, a useful person who carried messages. He led Harry aside and started on a rambling prologue about how it might not be anything to do with Harry, maybe not, but then on the other hand it might, and some of the boys thought he ought to be told just in case, and then he could make up his own mind . . .

" Look, Stiffy, could you cut the cackle and let's have it? "

" Might it be that you've heard of two Dutchmen just come over, name of Mars or some such? "

" It might."

" They've been asking about for someone as can open a safe, and the boys seem to think it might be yours, see? "

" Oh. Why mine? "

" Well, it seems these Mars boys are after the Luck of Kenilworth, see? They seem to think you might have it, see? "

" I see. Well, it's quite true I've got a safe, Stiffy, but I don't keep valuables in it. Dangerous things, safes—people come along and open them, you know. Still, ta very much, Stiffy. Nice of you to tell me." Harry gave the man a five-pound note and cut short his thanks. " Maybe I might want you again, who knows? "

Harry finished his beer slowly and thoughtfully and then went out to find a friend of his, a reasonably honest man who earned an honest living as a conjurer, though at the moment he was resting. He was standing before his kitchen table juggling with five coloured balls when his wife showed in Butler Harry.

" Come in, Harry. Pleased to see you. Don't mind if I go on practising, do you? "

" Not a bit," said Harry, and carried on polite conversation until the conjurer's wife, who was no fool, made an excuse and left the room.

" I was wondering," said Harry, " if you aren't too busy at the moment, whether you'd do a little job for me."

" Ah," said the conjurer, and added a teacup and saucer to the five balls rotating in the air. " I don't start at the old Colly till the seventeenth. What is it? "

" Quite simple. Only a little job of opening a safe."

The conjurer gathered his five balls together, substituted a plate and an egg-cup and went on practising.

" Look, Harry. I can make things disappear and I can bring live ducks out of a top-hat, but as for opening safes, I can just about open a tin of salmon. What's the big idea? "

" Well, it isn't really opening a safe at all, not really. It's a little matter of a diamond pendant. Come round to my place and I'll show you. You can switch packets, can't you? "

" Two alike, you mean, made up beforehand? Harry, our nipper was doing that in his pram, honest."

" Come round to my flat," said Harry.

The next morning he went out to find Stiffy the Squeak.

" Look, Stiffy, I've got a little job for you; you might get yourself a fiver out of it, I shouldn't wonder. Could you put it round among all good friends that there's a wonderful safe-cracker come over from the States? A real wizard, he is. Started life as a snake-charmer and now he just sits down in front of safes and waves his hands, like, and the door slowly opens. No, no, better not say that, they mightn't believe it. Just say he's the greatest safe-cracker the world's ever seen, and he's over here to get a bit of practice on British types, see? His name is Chicago Slim. Got that? "

" Chicago Slim," said Stiffy obediently.

" That's right. When the Dutchmen start taking notice, come and tell me and I'll tell you the next move. Right? "

" Right."

Stiffy did his work so well that in twenty-four hours the news reached the long, gently twitching ears of Chief-Superintendent Bagshott. Now Chicago Slim is a real person and a very famous one; all the police in all of the fifty States of the Union have his description and history; Scotland Yard has his full particulars complete with photograph and fingerprints in case he ever comes over here on business, and even Butler Harry, that quiet and unassuming person, had heard of him. Bagshott was immediately interested. Naturally.

" Circulate his particulars at once. I won't have a fellow like Chicago Slim in the country, even if he has only come to visit Shakespeare's England, the Tower of London and the Harwell Atomic Research Establishment. He will be found, Ennis, caught and returned to his native land at once, before he starts in practice over here."

" Our 'nose' says," continued Detective-Superintendent Ennis, " that he's come over here to put in a little practice on

British-made safes. He is prepared, it seems, to take on a few small jobs more or less for the experience."

"Where's he staying?"

"Nobody knows. Nobody's seen him—"

"Probably at the Harlington Court—"

"But he is said to have taken on a job for these Dutch brothers, Dirk and Jan Maes. If you remember, they went to see Joseph Joseph while he was on remand."

"Oh, yes. Of course. The Luck of Kenilworth. They were so sure Joseph had got it salted away somewhere. I don't know whether they really believed him when he said that Butler Harry'd got it."

"Probably thought it was worth trying," said Ennis.

"And Butler Harry's got a safe. We'll have a man watching his place from now on, Ennis, in addition to the general alert. See to it, will you?"

Chicago Slim was a tallish skinny man with a long nose on a thin face, long arms and legs for his height, and ears that stuck out. Harry's conjurer friend, on the other hand, was an inconspicuous man below medium height with small neat features and always tidily dressed.

Butler Harry noticed a newcomer in his street who seemed to have time to waste, but who took no notice when the conjurer entered the block of flats where Harry lived—and why should he? The little man, who might have been a piano-tuner, was nothing like Chicago Slim; besides, it was nearly midday and Butler Harry was almost certainly at home. Not a moment for burglary.

The conjurer received his instructions and went away. An hour later he and Stiffy the Squeak were strolling innocently in the Green Park near Hyde Park Corner, enjoying the air and listening to the song of birds.

"There they are," said Stiffy. "On that seat over there."

"Two fat men, just like Harry said."

"That's right."

They turned off the path towards the bench to meet the concentrated gaze of two pairs of eyes trained mostly upon the conjurer.

"Afternoon, gents," said Stiffy. "This is a friend of mine, name of Slim."

"Good afternoon," said Dirk Maes, and Jan added: "Your friend comes from Chicago, yes?"

"That's right," said Stiffy.

"Howdy, folks," said Slim awkwardly.

" I'll be getting on," said Stiffy, and drifted away.

" Will you not sit down? " said Dirk Maes, and the conjurer perched himself on the end of the bench like a friendly robin.

" Nice here," he said, jerking his head in the general direction of Buckingham Palace, and adding carefully: " Yes, sirree. It sure is."

" We are here on business," said Jan Maes.

" Me, too," said Slim.

" Good. We want you to go to a place "—he gave Butler Harry's address—" when the man is out. In his safe there is this jewel." Jan produced a newspaper cutting of a photograph of the Luck of Kenilworth and showed it to the conjurer. " You will take it out and bring it to us and we will give you two thousand pounds in notes."

" Two thousand? Only two, for a thing as was bought for fifteen thousand? " said Slim indignantly. " Says so there, look." He pointed to the caption under the illustration. " Whaddya think I am? Santa Claus or somepin'? "

" This jewel—" began Dirk.

" Two thousand! You can double that an' then add on five hundred and then maybe I'll think about it."

" We speak," said Dirk carefully, " of English money pounds. Not dollars."

" Me, too," said Slim firmly. " Yes, sirree. Good old English nickers, by heck! 'Sides, I don't know as I'll do it. That's Butler Harry's safe and I'd have him and all his pals after me. Lookit, mister, they'd cut my throat! Lookit, mister, I ain't over in this cockeyed burg to—to lay my bones here. No, sir. I am here, sir, on a va-ca-tion. That's so."

The Maes brothers turned a little pale.

" Excuse us," they said, and consulted together in their own tongue, which the conjurer did not understand. He lit a cigarette from a packet of Lucky Strikes, which Butler Harry had thoughtfully provided, and wished he had made a closer study of the American language. Still, it seemed to be going over good.

" That is a big lot of money," said Jan Maes suddenly.

" That is a big lot of diamonds," said Slim coldly.

" But we will pay it upon certain conditions. You will get the Luck at once—within twenty-four hours. You will choose your own time, naturally—"

" Call me a boob? "

" No, no. We are going back to Holland at once—we cross from Harwich to the Hook by the night boat tomorrow night. The ship leaves Harwich at twenty-two hours. You will bring the Luck to us there, at Parkeston Quay railway station, at half

past twenty-one hours. Do not be late. We shall be in the bar. Do not be late," repeated Jan Maes firmly.

" Says you," said Slim. " Me, I'm never late for money."

" You are wise," said Dirk Maes. " Do not speak to us in the bar. When we see you, we walk away and you follow. Understood? "

" Yeah," said Slim out of the corner of his mouth. " Mind and bring the lolly or there's no dice."

" Lolly? Oh, yes. Be careful to bring the real diamond pendant. You may not be aware that there is a paste replica."

" Lookit, wise guys," said Slim, rising to terminate the conversation before he ran out of Americanisms, " you pop along home to wherever you come from and start an infant school, see? So long, folks. Be seein' ya."

The Maes brothers had been staying at a small hotel in South Kensington, a fact which was already known to the police. On the following morning they said that they were leaving for home that day, and paid their bill. The Management made a little light conversation of a suitable kind, and the moment the Dutchmen were out of sight they rang up Scotland Yard as arranged.

" They're off home," said Ennis, reporting this.

" Oh, are they? Any sign of Chicago Slim? "

" Not a sausage."

" Oh. They came via Harwich, didn't they? " said Bagshott. " It doesn't matter, we shall know. Whatever terminus they go from, we shall have time to lay on a reception. They will be pulled in at the Customs, Ennis, of course."

" Naturally," said Ennis. " I was wondering whether Chicago Slim would meet them there and hand the stuff over. They wouldn't want to walk about with the Luck on them, not knowing whom to avoid in a strange land, you know."

" It's an idea," said Bagshott.

The boat train drew in at Parkeston Quay dead on time at nine-thirty that night. Jan and Dirk Maes, carrying their small suitcases, were among the first to alight, but no matter how constantly they looked about them, there was no sign of the neat little man they knew as Chicago Slim.

" He is not on the train," said Jan.

" Calm yourself," said Dirk. " Come into the bar."

With rising anxiety admirably concealed, they stood at the bar drinking Bols for a very long ten minutes until at last the man for whom they waited strolled unhurriedly in at the door. They emptied their glasses and walked quickly away to the only really private place available at railway stations, and Slim, thoughtfully chewing gum, followed after.

"You are late," snarled Jan, when they were alone. "You make us miss the boat—have you got it?"

"So what?" said Slim. "There's another tomorrow, huh?" He unbuttoned his coat and fumbled in the breast pocket. "Held up on the road; I was. Bit of trouble with Butler Harry's gang if you're interested." He pulled out a flat washleather bag tied round the top with red-and-white twine, opened it and showed the contents. "Pretty, ain't it?"

Jan snatched the glittering pendant out of his hand, stuck a jeweller's glass in his eye and went over it rapidly but thoroughly while Slim leaned against the wall with a sardonic grin and Dirk fidgeted.

"Are these men still following you?" Dirk asked.

"I guess I shook 'em at Colchester, mister, but I could be wrong. You guys best get aboard good and smart."

"This is all right," said Jan, and took out his handkerchief to wrap up the Luck; but the conjurer whipped it away.

"Oh, no, you don't . . . not till I have the money."

He put the pendant back into the bag and tied the string tightly round the top while Jan Maes brought out a thick wad of notes.

"Ten-pound notes. Now the bag—"

"Oh, no," said Slim, pocketing it. "Maybe you aren't so good at counting, I wouldn't know. Four hundred and fifty there should be." He counted with astonishing speed but the Maes brothers were dancing with impatience and crowding him. "Relax, brother, relax. Four hundred and—and fifty. O.K., here's the stuff. Now run!"

"And I give you my word," said the conjurer, reporting to Butler Harry in London, "you wouldn't think two fat Dutchmen could run like it. Talk about grey'ounds! One whizz and they were gone. I followed more slowly, picked up my car outside and just drove quietly away. I say, Harry, there wasn't half a gang of rozzers there, the place was stiff with them."

Butler Harry smiled slowly.

"You don't know how famous you are," he said.

"So the Customs people drew them aside," said Bagshott to Hambledon next day, "and we went through them with some care. They made a fuss about losing the boat, but they didn't mind their little suitcases being turned out; it was when we proceeded to search their persons that the fun began. However, you can't kick much with your boots off.

"In Jan Maes' underpants, next his skin, we found a flat washleather bag tied round the neck with red-and-white twine.

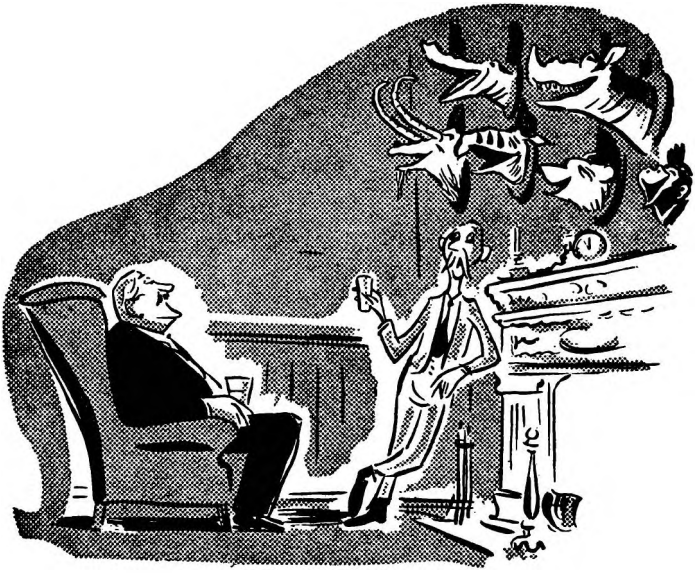
He didn't like that at all—he knows all about smuggling diamonds and what happens if you do—but what really finished them both was when we opened the bag and took out the contents. They both took one look and Dirk let out a screech you could have heard for miles and Jan fell down flat on the floor. They complained they had been cheated, they had been robbed, that Chicago Slim was a scoundrel and why didn't we catch him instead."

" I gather they'd got the replica," said Hambledon. " Somebody worked a switch on them, of course—those fellows know diamonds. What happened next? "

" We roped them in, of course. Possession of goods stolen from the Central Criminal Court. But there was another switch, Hambledon. We asked them to describe Chicago Slim, and the description was nothing like him."

" It wouldn't be," said Hambledon. " Chicago Slim can open safes but I never heard he was any good at sleight of hand."

Another highly entertaining Tommy Hambledon story will appear in next month's SUSPENSE.



" Yes, I got every one of them in a face-to-face encounter."

WANTED —ALIVE

by IAN HAMILTON

THERE was somebody moving about. He was a light sleeper, accustomed to sleeping on the edge of wakefulness. Now, suddenly, he was awake, and not alone.

He did not open his eyes immediately. He lay there and listened, tense and still. He could hear the continuous roar of the falls, and the early-morning scent of the bush was sharp in his nostrils. Then, over the sound of the falls, he heard it again. A footstep, cautious, gentle, and very close.

Under the blanket his fingers tightened round his Winchester .300 and his thumb groped back for the safety catch. He opened one eye just enough to know that the sun had risen and it was something like five a.m. The footsteps started running, up the slope of the valley, crashing headlong through the dense, clutching undergrowth.

He threw back his blanket and whipped to his feet, rifle already at his hip. He was as stringy and sinewy as the tall mountain gums that looked down and made his rangy six feet two seem tiny. His hair was as blond as dry grass.

His visitor was still in sight, frantically running up the steep side of the valley and having as much trouble as if she were running in soft sand against a strong wind.

Mike Farrell loped off after her, moving through the scrub with a gangling but practised gait. When she looked back and saw him she put on a spurt, slipped and fell. She got up again and turned to face him, her hands raised.

" Not a sound," he warned. " Not a sound and not a movement."

She was breathing heavily. She was small, wiry, about twenty-three, in pullover and jeans. Her thin face was strong and her

grey eyes angry and fearful. Ebony hair as fine as woodsmoke tumbled over her forehead, and she brushed it away. There were half a dozen small freckles over her nose that were probably cute when she smiled. She did not smile. She held one side of her lower lip between her teeth.

" Turn round." The muzzle of his rifle was inches from her.

She turned, still with her arms up. He hesitated, then, " I'm sorry. I have to do this."

She spoke for the first time. " It's all right. Go ahead. I'm not armed."

He made sure, then stepped back. His eyes searched the bush around them. " Turn back again," he commanded. " You can drop your hands."

" Who are you? " Her voice was too shrill to be normal.

" Your name is Lucille Cassidy. Mine doesn't matter."

" You know me. You're the police? "

" That's a fact. I want your brother."

" Where are the rest of you? "

" I'm asking the questions now, Miss Cassidy. Where's your brother? "

She paused. Her eyes showed amazement, along with the fear that was already there.

" You can't take him alone! He'll kill you. You're mad! "

He grinned, but his blue eyes showed nothing. " You're going to help me. I'm glad you came along."

" How did you get here? You'll never get out of this valley. You're surrounded."

The grin still played over his mouth. He allowed the muzzle of his rifle to drop away from her. " Tell me about it," he said, " but make it as brief as a two-shilling telegram."

Her eyes strayed to his rifle and back to his face.

" O.K.," she said, " for all the good it'll do you. There are four of us. Myself, my brother Dean, and the two other men who helped him to escape."

" Richie Hooper and Neville Craig," he said.

" You know about them? "

" Keep talking."

" I teamed up with them a month ago," she continued. " Dean had been on the loose for five months. I knew the police were to bring him in dead or alive. He said they'd never take him alive, and he'd take six cops with him. I was terrified for him.

" He's my younger brother," she explained. " Whatever else he is, he's still my brother. Every time the phone rang, every time I picked up a newspaper, I was frightened.

" Then he got word to me. I knew he was coming here. He broke jail in West Australia," she said, " and spent four months getting east. He knew this south-east corner is pretty rugged, and in places not even mapped properly."

She talked fast and nervously. " I came into the scrub and met him. It was all arranged. The other two were with him. I wanted him to give himself up. I still do. I'm afraid for him. If he doesn't, he'll end up by falling into a police trap and being shot down like a common murderer . . ."

" Which is what he is," interrupted Mike Farrell.

She lowered her eyes. " I know that. Three senseless murders and heaven knows how many dozens of robberies with violence. He's not really my brother any more."

She raised her eyes again. " I still want him to give himself up. He'll get life, and hard labour, but that's better than being shot

down in cold blood. They might even want to hang him, but at least he'll be meeting death fairly and squarely, not running away. And now you're here, with that." She pointed at his rifle. "That's why I ran. I know you have to take him. But alive, please. Not dead."

"That's a fine sisterly sentiment. Dope it with more emotion and you'll go down big with the jury."

"You don't believe me?"

"You've been with him a month. You could have told . . ."

"I *couldn't*!" Her voice rose further. "He wouldn't let me go. This morning, coming down here for a wash in the stream, is one of the few times I've been out of his sight."

"Your freckles get darker when you're annoyed," he said. "So we're getting to the point. Why won't I get out of here?"

"There's only one way out. Down the valley, across open ground. Richie Hooper is stationed on the cliff one side, and Neville Craig on the other. They both have stolen Army rifles. They moved out there just after midnight last night. You'll never get past them now."

"When it gets dark. . ." he began.

"It's full moon these nights, haven't you noticed? Out of this scrub, on the open plains between those two, the valley is so bright that a rabbit can't move without being seen. And if you go out the other way, past the falls, the mountainside becomes just as open. They'll see you as plainly as the nose on your face."

He chuckled. "Everybody makes cracks about my nose. One day I'll wake up with an inferiority complex. O.K., you've had your two-bob's worth, now let's get moving."

"Where?"

"You're going to show me where your brother is."

She shook her head.

Mike Farrell lifted his rifle. "I could make you show me, with this. I don't want to. Your brother's going to be caught eventually, you said it yourself. Either in a gunfight with a mob of police, or now, by me. What'll it be?"

She shrugged. "He's up on the ridge. I'll show you."

Mike Farrell had always maintained that one man, working on his own initiative and with an expert practical knowledge of the bush, had more hope of cornering and holding a cunning, ruthless man like Dean Cassidy than any truck-load of police. If he had been the kind of cop who worked by the book, he would have notified headquarters the moment he heard that Cassidy had been seen in this remote area; and they would have filled the mountains with armed men. But Farrell had never been that kind of cop.

It was a case of taking Cassidy by brute force, or stalking him as a man would stalk a dangerous animal.

Mike had caught the first sight of his quarry through his field-glasses four days ago. It was hard work tailing them without being seen. He had slept only a few hours since he set out, and then only fitfully. He had not lit a fire nor had a hot meal. Now the time was drawing to its climax.

They reached the ridge. Cassidy's camp was in a small clearing on top. To one side stood a derelict shack, nothing more than a tumble-down bark humpy that had seen a few winters since it was erected, probably by some wandering hobo or mountain recluse.

Dean Cassidy was in the middle of the clearing, bending over a small, smokeless fire, round which he had erected a wall of stones and débris so that its few flickering flames would not be visible from any distance. He was a small man, with a tangle of long, uncombed hair as black and fine as his sister's, and he had a patchy growth of beard.

Mike was not deluded by Cassidy's small stature against his own lanky height. He knew Cassidy to be a fit man, a hardened fighter, as much in training as any star footballer. He saw, too, that Cassidy's rifle, one of the stolen Army .303s, was slung loosely over one shoulder, ready for inst ıt use.

Mike stayed hidden in the scrub and motioned Lucille Cassidy to get down out of sight, a few yards from him. He took careful aim at Cassidy's back, then called to him:

" Don't move, Cassidy. This is the police. Drop your rifle, very slowly."

Cassidy straightened up and slowly unslung his rifle as if to drop it. He still had his back to Mike. Suddenly he spun round and fired wild, at nothing. Mike was well hidden.

" You're in my sights, Cassidy. Drop it."

The girl called out, " Do as he says, Dean, it's your only chance." She had to shout to be heard over the roar of the falls that was even louder up here.

Mike fired one shot at Cassidy's feet. Dirt sprayed up against him, and Cassidy stepped back, startled. Slowly he lowered his rifle.

" Now walk away from it."

Cassidy did as he was told. His arms were by his sides, out a little, with his fingers nervously outstretched.

Mike Farrell got to his feet slowly. The girl stood beside him. It had been a pushover. He lowered his rifle to his hip.

Abruptly, without any warning change of expression, Cassidy started running for the dense scrub on the edge of the clearing. Mike fired quickly once, from the hip, then put his rifle to his

shoulder and fired again. He was vaguely conscious of the girl moving away from him too. He crossed the clearing, losing sight of Cassidy on the way. Then, picking him up through the trees, he fired a third time.

Suddenly, over the sound of the falls, he heard another shot, and the girl's voice, shrill and scared as he had first heard it, yet with an edge of hardness and determination.

" Stop, copper. Stop! "

He stopped. He turned around, arms and rifle above his head.

The girl had picked up her brother's rifle, and she had it to her shoulder, her eyes fixed along the sights.

" Put your rifle down carefully," she commanded, " and step backwards away from it."

Mike Farrell growled in his throat. He did as she ordered him.

She walked forward and picked up his rifle.

He told her, " I should have tied you to a tree down there."

" I expected you to," she admitted. " But I'd have screamed blue murder to warn Dean.

" You told me you'd take him alive," she went on. " That was a promise, whether you knew it or not. It was a promise I made myself. Now you're both unarmed, go and get him—*alive*."

Mike had things he wanted to say to her, enough things to fill a thirty-minute riot act. He saved the riot act for some other day, and loped off after Cassidy.

The undergrowth was wild and jungle-like. The ridge rose a little, then twisted and fell to the very lip of the falls. He passed the heavy lumber-jacket that Cassidy must have discarded.

Mike ran out of the bush and halted. Dean Cassidy was halfway across the falls, knee-deep in racing water only feet away from where the torrent tumbled over and plummeted to the pool below. On the other side was tall timber country. If he reached it, he had every chance of staying hidden for days.

Cassidy looked back at Mike Farrell, and when he saw he no longer had his rifle he looked puzzled, then pleased. He continued across the falls, carefully, step by step, leaning over against the great pressure of water. Mike cursed his foolishness in letting the girl get his rifle.

Soon he, too, had plunged knee-deep into the water. The rocks shone like polished black marble, slippery and treacherous, and the roaring current pummelled his legs with icy fists, and did everything possible to make his heavy boots lose their grip.

Over halfway across, a wide, flat rock projected above the water, cutting the stream in two. Cassidy scrambled on to it and balanced unsteadily for a moment. He glanced back to see if Mike was gaining and looked about for something to throw at

him. Then he reached down into a shallow eddy by the rock. The movement unsettled his balance and he slipped.

Mike stopped. He was partially aware of the girl's scream from the bank behind him.

Cassidy made no sound. He clutched at the greasy surface of the rock with ineffectual fingers, grappling for a hold. He slid over the brink and hung suspended above the deadly rocks by the pool a hundred feet below. With both hands he clung tenaciously to a narrow ledge.

He looked down, then up again quickly. His sister was yelling to him, but if he heard her over the noise of the falls he made no sign. He made an effort to swing back to safety and nearly lost his hold.

Mike Farrell reached him and lay flat out on the rock. He stretched down to try and get his hands under Cassidy's shoulders and haul him back to safety. Immediately, Dean Cassidy let go with one hand and made a snatch at Mike Farrell's throat. His face was like a madman's. He missed, and tried again, but Mike pulled away from him. Then he changed hands and grabbed Mike round the wrist.

With quick, violent jerks he used all his energy trying to drag Mike Farrell down with him. His fingers were white and chilled from their effort to support him. As one hand slipped from the rock ledge, the other relaxed its pressure on Mike's wrist. And now an expression of fear flashed through Cassidy's eyes.

Mike made another attempt to hold him, but as his hand swung down he succeeded only in touching fingertips with Cassidy for an instant. It was Cassidy's last contact with the living.

Lucille Cassidy did not look at Mike when he stepped back on to the bank of the stream. Her eyes were fixed on the bundle of twisted rags lying far below in a rock crevice. It was not a pretty sight.

She flinched for a second, but had no time or thought to resist when he went to her side and plucked his rifle from her.

He emptied the water out of his boots and sat a moment on the dry, warm grass a little away from the stream. Patiently, systematically, he regained his breath and forced his hands to cease trembling. Then he stood up and walked back through the scrub to Cassidy's camp.

He returned some time later, with his horse and Cassidy's, both saddled. He also carried Dean Cassidy's big lumber-jacket, and a dirty wide-brimmed hat that he had found in the camp and presumed was the dead man's.

She was squatting now, looking into whatever thoughts she saw above the falls. She stood and faced him as he approached.

His voice was low and even. He said, " Your brother always boasted, Miss Cassidy, that we'd never take him alive."

There was an infinite sadness in her eyes. He had to remind himself that though Dean Cassidy was a brutal, vindictive killer and a danger to decent people, this girl could still think of him as a baby, and a young boy.

" We have to get out of here," he told her. " Now is a good enough time."

She looked startled, but she did not answer him.

" You're both about the same height," he explained to her. " Put these on."

She hesitated momentarily. He held the Army .303 she had threatened him with. She donned her brother's hat and lumber-jacket. Her eyes were puzzled.

" Have the other two got field-glasses? "

She shook her head.

" Fine. Tuck your hair up under the hat," he said. " You are now Dean Cassidy, so far as anyone a reasonable distance away is concerned. In broad daylight, with Hooper and Craig watching, you're going to take me out of this valley at gunpoint.

" Both of us," he continued, "are going to ride straight down the middle of the most open part of the valley. I'll take a chance your ugly friends didn't hear the shooting. Get mounted."

She swung easily into the saddle, then he mounted his own horse. He had tied his blanket roll on behind his saddle.

" Here," he said. " Take the rifle. When we get on the plains, stay behind me. I'm your prisoner. But," he warned, " stay to one side where I can keep an eye on you. No fancy signals to your friends. I'm carrying a service revolver that says you're going to be a good girl and behave yourself."

She took the rifle from him.

" Have it pointing at me all the time. And look dangerous." He grinned. " By the way, it isn't loaded. But the revolver is. Now pull that hat down over your face more and let's go."

Mike Farrell never carried his service revolver in the bush. He hoped she wouldn't get to thinking that if he was carrying one it must be very well concealed.

They walked their horses down out of the trees and on to the open, sunbaked flood plain. Insects buzzed in the mid-morning heat, and somewhere a bird with a harsh note called.

They followed the stream's course, letting the horses find their own casual pace. As he had ordered her, the girl kept behind him and to one side. It was unnerving to see the familiar muzzle and bayonet boss of an old Lee Enfield rifle trained constantly on him.

From under the broad brim of his hat he peered up to the

two rocky points where Hooper and Craig were stationed. There was no sign of one, but the other showed himself openly against the pale sky, a rifle in the crook of his arm.

Mike wondered if they would ride down to see what Dean Cassidy was up to. But the unconcerned pace of the horses, and the figure in the heavy lumber-jacket behind with the rifle, seemed to persuade them that everything was under control.

As they rode past the line between Cassidy's two sentries, the ground became more uneven. It was dotted with low bushes and scrub, and here and there, half-buried, lay great grey boulders, smoothed by the centuries. Mike chose a knob of rock with stunted scrub growing about it. He looked back to check the positions of the other two. It suited him.

When they neared the rock he put his hand in his shirt pocket and said, " Ride up alongside of me."

She did so, the rifle still on him. He handed her two shells.

" Load it," he said.

She looked at him. " You're taking a risk, aren't you? "

" I want those other two out of there. I'll have to flush them out. Just load the rifle."

Sweat tickled his face and ran down his back as he watched. She loaded the rifle and kept it pointing at him.

He dismounted and unsaddled his horse. He carried saddle and blanket roll into the cover of the bushes. The blanket roll was important—his rifle was concealed in it. He walked back into the open where the others could see him, and stood twenty yards away from her.

" What are you doing? " she asked.

" You are Dean Cassidy. I'm a cop. You are going to shoot me and ride away. Your friends up there will be too curious not to come down for a look-see. I'll be waiting for them. I can't get at them where they are now. If I go after one, the other will get me. This way I collect two hoodlums with the one bluff."

" I'm going to shoot you? "

" You're going to fire two shots at me. You're going to miss by a long way. But I'll fall down and be so still you'll think I've had a heart attack. Then you'll drag me into the bushes and scram out of here as fast as racing a horse with six legs."

" Suppose I don't miss? "

" You will. You're not the killer type—that's why you wanted your brother brought in alive."

" But he's dead," she told him grimly.

The sweat made lines down his face, and he could taste it on his lips. Her rifle was very steady. It pointed at his head. She spoke more to herself than to him.

" Apart from the other two, and they wouldn't care, who'd ever know about it if I killed you? "

" You'd know about it. Two killers in the family then."

He added, " You didn't shoot me before, on the ridge, when you had every chance."

" You shouldn't trust humanity so much."

" That's my problem, Miss Cassidy. I'm just a dumb cop with a big nose."

" And a sense of humour at the wrong times, I've noticed." She slipped the safety catch. Twice the rifle disturbed the peace in the valley.

Mike slapped both hands to his stomach. He gaped at her a moment, surprise on his face; then, doubled up, he twisted and collapsed in the dust.

She dropped nimbly off her horse and came over to him. She put her rifle on the ground and dragged him into the bushes. He was a heavy weight for a young girl. She dumped him on his back and stood over him. For the first time that day she almost looked like smiling. It was a thin trace of a smile, and it softened and warmed her face.

" When you smile," he said to her, " those freckles on your nose are as cute as I expected. They should call you Freckles."

" Sometimes they do," she admitted. " I was just thinking, you should get an Academy Award for that performance."

" Two Oscars," he told her. " Hooper and Craig. Now hurry out of here."

She shrugged her shoulders. " And I don't even know the name of the man I just shot."

He sat up and brushed some of the dust off his clothes, then dug into his blanket roll and pulled out his Winchester. He rose.

" Farrell," he informed her. " Sergeant Mike Farrell."

" I've heard of you. I know you. You're supposed to be a crack rifle shot."

" Fact."

" You fired at Dean two, three times. If you're such a good shot you could have killed him. If you wanted to."

" Fact again."

" You wanted him alive, too."

" Do I have to hit you over the head with it? Look, do me a big favour. Get out of here. Maybe I won't bungle the next two like I did the last one."

She stared at him a moment longer, then walked away and picked up her empty rifle.

" I'll be waiting in the town downstream, when you want me," she said.

A DOG'S BEST FRIEND

by GERALD KERSH

One of the world's greatest writers of suspense fiction takes time off from tension to write a shaggy dog story

THE owner of that lonely diner must have spent most of his time composing whimsical signs. For instance, one of them said, LAST CHANCE!!! EAT HERE ONCE AND YOU'LL NEVER COME BACK! But the one that caught my fancy read: I WAS SUNK, IT SEEMED—BUT A LITTLE VOICE WHISPERED: "CHEER UP SON, THINGS MIGHT BE WORSE!" SO I DID AND SURE ENOUGH THINGS GOT WORSE.

Curious to meet the kind of man that dared, on the rim of the desert, thus to defy the gods, I went in and met a jovial, whiskery old fellow in a blue flannel shirt who looked exactly like the frontispiece to the Collected Poems of Walt Whitman; only he had a black patch over one eye.

He welcomed me, saying in a voice that was trained to carry a long way, "Sit down, sir. Fan yourself with this respectable newspaper and cool off. Call me Sam. Folks say I'm the spitting image of the poet Whitman—but I am no poet, sir. No. A natural philosopher, that's me. Have a doughnut with your coffee, sir, and be my honoured guest for only ten cents extra!"

As he talked I could smell the naphtha-flares and hear the calliopes of many a bygone carnival. Handing me a doughnut on a paper plate he continued, "I like your conversation, sir"—although I had not said half a dozen words. "I am taciturn by

nature, which is why I pass the twilight of my life looking at lizards in this desert and meditating. Upon what? Sir, I answer that question with a kind of parable: when I used to ask my venerable father ' why? ' once too often, he used to wallop me on the jaw and say, ' Son, there just ain't enough reasons why to go round '.

" Sir, I have seen life, and found it like that doughnut; indigestion powdered with sugar surrounding nothing. Taste it."

I did. It was. I said, " I'll give you a dime to take it away."

He threw the doughnut to the floor and called, " Hi, Plato! " whereupon a repulsive little grey dog came running up. " Isn't she a beauty? " said Sam. " I found her on a garbage-dump."

I said, " It is a curious dog. If she had four more legs she'd look like a bird-eating spider."

" Ah, I see you are a dog-lover. So am I. Have a drink of whisky . . . Don't be afraid of it—it's pure; I make it myself, but I only drink it these days in honour of a special guest." Lifting his glass he said, " Here's to If and When! "

" If and when what? "

He replied, " It's a philosophical thing to drink to, sir. My philosophy is pure, like my whisky. I make it myself. I know what goes into it."

" Ah, but what comes out of it? "

Smooth as a snake-oil salesman, Sam turned the subject: " That brings us to metaphysics, which, like religion and politics, I do not discuss. Drink up, sir." Stroking his offensive pet, he said, portentously, " Has it ever occurred to you that a dog's best friend is a man? "

Without waiting for an answer he went on—

I owe much of my present prosperity to the fact that I once befriended a lost dog. I called her Abadaba.

Before she picked on me I had had a run of the crummiest luck ever to fall to the lot of man. For a long time I was a salesman of radio-active bath salts, then a demonstrator of potato-peelers . . . *etcetera, etcetera.* But I was always broke. Finally I went into the perfumery business.

In a tank town called North Genesis, Indiana, I met a fellow who called himself Monsieur de Balzac. His racket was trying to sell some fluid called *Essence d'Amour*, but he couldn't have sold a carrot to a hungry mule! A voice like a tin whistle, and the corniest patter you ever heard. But he knew his master when he met me, and I drilled him in a new routine.

After that he gave the mugs all the usual about this being an introductory offer, and all that, but when he got to the words,

" . . . This perfume is worth three dollars per ounce," I came forward looking like a Frenchman, and asked for a sniff of it. I rubbed a drop between my hands, and then got mad, and shouted in a French accent, " Ladeez and gentlemens, zis fellow is—'ow you call 'eem in Engleesh—an *imposteur!* I am a *parfum*-blender for ze firm of Pierre and Pierre of Paris, *la belle* France, and I tell you zis *parfum* is not wort' one *sou* more zan one dollaire an ounce! *Bah!* " Then Balzac would pipe up, " But I am asking only fifty cents for the ounce bottle, my friends! "

That got 'em. We did nicely until we got to Boston, and then Balzac went into partnership with another guy and I was out.

So, with my pockets emptier than our glasses (which you will allow me to refill) I headed for New York City. But a man must eat, and so I stopped at Camp Bultitude—the one they advertise with a motto, *Toujours Gai*, which is French for Never a Minute's Peace. You know?

The mugs pay thirty bucks a day for the privilege of being worried to death—and they like it! Rock 'n' roll for breakfast; pick up a paper and some hairoil-and-toothpaste-ad character snatches it out of your hand and hustles you into a quiz programme.

But here I met the dog Abadaba, who changed my luck.

My first intention was to sponge a meal, but the manager offered me a job. Terms: all my grub and a fine army cot in an old toolshed, plus five dollars a day for the season. Duties? Trivial! A little light gardening, dishwashing, plumbing, carpentering, painting and decorating, car-washing, and so forth. At my leisure, wax the ballroom and conduct the overflow bingo games. He sort of hypnotized me into it. His name was Joe Breeze, and he said I could call him Breezy.

Oh well, I argued, in three months I could easily get together a stake and go south for the winter; so I grinned and I bore it, and made myself indispensable. You see, I was no youngster any more, and I had only one eye that I could see out of—I was born blind in the other and it was only a decoration. And sometimes, at night, I'd wonder, *What'll happen to me if something goes wrong with the good 'un?* Maybe that's why I was always a sucker for dogs.

So, one evening, I'm sitting outside my toolshed easing my feet, when out of the woods comes Abadaba.

Now there was a sight to make your heart ache, sir! It wasn't that she was dirty, and it wasn't that she was nothing but skin and bone and bleeding from a dozen wounds. No, it was the awful look of loneliness that she had—hopeless, without a friend in the world. You've maybe seen a kid's face when his father

forgot his promise to take him to the circus and then whipped him because he cried? Like that. Blamed for all the evil in the world, and not knowing why.

Brother, even my dead eye wept!

She took to me. Like to like? And after three or four days some of the spirit came back into her, only she couldn't bark—she could only make a whispering noise. *All the better*, I thought, *now nobody can complain she's making a noise around here.* But all the same, complaints were forthcoming.

One day this Breezy comes up to me and says, with a look of disgust, " Get that filthy creature out of here, quick."

I kept calm, and said, " What's the matter with her? "

" *Her*? That makes it all the worse. Next thing, she'll be having pups. Call the forest ranger and have her shot."

" Sir," I said, " how would you like it if somebody had said that about your mother? "

" The dog's sick," he said. " Guests will complain. Get rid of her."

As a public speaker I have learned to control myself, sir, so I gave him a mild answer. " Oh," I said, " so that's your mental arithmetic, is it? Feed the fat, but starve the hungry, hey? Doctors for the healthy, but bullets for the ailing, hey? Now let me tell you something, Breezy. The time may come when you will find yourself alone on a lonesome road going through a dark wood—"

Breezy said, " Shut up. Get rid of that dog."

" Shut up yourself," I said. " If my fine dog here had come to this place with a million-dollar dog-tag, you'd have gone down on your knees to her. But because she's wretched you want to see the back of her. Deny that."

" Get her out of here," he said.

I said, " You can't fire me, because there's nobody to fill my place; so now I tell you, sir, as man to beast, if that dog goes, I go! Monday is my day off, and Gino the cook is my dog's friend and mine. Let anybody so much as touch one hair of Abadaba's head and I'll give you this for your information: you may weigh more than me but you are all wind and water, and if I do not put a heavy dentist's bill in your lap, then lay me low! "

He buckled at once, and said, " Well, keep her chained."

" She is already," I told him. " My love is a chain—"

" —Enough, then! " Some of my veiled insults must have sunk in. " Keep that dog out of my sight is all I ask."

There the matter rested but I was troubled. The season would last only until the end of August, when I'd find myself footloose again, and headed south. Now a tramp, all alone, has nothing to

lose but his liberty—and what use is that to him? But a tramp with a dog who gets sixty days on the chain-gang gets sixty days' heartbreak as well and a sore conscience when he gets out. Yes, sir, to the end of his days that forlorn dog will be on his heels, and you'll hear him asking, " Why did you show me heaven, boss, and then kick me back to hell? " No use saying, " Dog, be a man; take the rough with the smooth. Didn't I give you one good season in paradise? " He will only answer, " That makes hell all the worse ".

So I brooded over the fate of Abadaba until I decided to talk it over with my friend Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck, a society lady, who had a fine estate about eighty or ninety miles away. She was a clever woman. Dogs were her hobby and she bred and sold them for ridiculous prices. I made her acquaintance when she was passing through Alresford, Wis., in a cream-coloured limousine with a silver horn that played the opening bars of " My Country 'Tis Of Thee ". I was talking for Professor Miller's Performing Poodles.

She laughed at my patter—she had a laugh like shaking a sheet of iron—and said, " You old crook, I've forgotten more than you ever knew about dogs—even poodles, which are costume jewellery. Here's my card. If ever you find yourself near Bultitude, Mass., look me up and we'll swap yarns."

Sir, I could have loved that woman. I might have married her, only she never asked me.

I had no hesitation about calling upon Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck at eight o'clock in the morning, knowing that she would have been up and about her masters' business since six o'clock; because he who has a dog, sir, has a boss.

And there she was in riding boots and wearing some of those shaggy British tweeds, smelling of the kennels so that it was all I could do not to stroke her ears. She said, " Oh yes, you're the poodle-man from Wisconsin. Sit you down and have some coffee . . . but what the devil do you mean by bringing in that appalling mongrel?

I told her the history of Abadaba and I said, with genuine emotion I believe, that here was the loneliest dog in the world, with every man's hand against her. But she would not let me finish. " —Old Sentimental Sam," she said, laughing. " If this were merely a matter of a handout, I could get the point. But it's not. Also, why bring that shocking cur to me, of all people? "

I said, " War of nerves, lady. Abadaba's absence will make Breezy's heart uneasy. Also, if you don't mind my saying so, I have an idea in mind. You are not only a dog-seller for profit and

for fun, you are also a lady well known as not being in need of money.

" Revenge is partly my motive too. Justice must be done, Mrs. Hobbema van Eyck. I stand or fall by a system of morality. Somebody is going to love and cherish Abadaba when I am a thousand miles away. She is not conventionally beautiful, I admit; but neither was Cleopatra. Neither are you, ma'am, yet—"

" —Did I hear you say that you were working at a place called Camp Bultitude? I know the place. Delivered a chihuahua there, once, to a real estate woman. Scruffy little beast—wouldn't have given it to my worst enemy. But I put a rhinestone collar on it, and sold it for three hundred dollars. Place is run by a detestable character name of Breeze? "

" Loud-speakers in the rest-rooms, ma'am," I said.

She thought for a while and then said, " Right. You leave this dog with me and I'll be along in forty-eight hours. You'll hear me coming by this car. Be in ear-shot. If you see me, you won't recognize me. Neither will you recognize this Abadaba. Leave it to me, and I'll find a fancy home for that dog, and some money for you into the bargain. Now leave her here and scram, my friend. And when you get back, raise twenty different kinds of Cain because your dumb friend is missing. Understand? "

" Not quite," I said.

" You wouldn't—the principle of the idea is too simple for the likes of you. This poor tyke is anybody's dog. There isn't a hand in the world that she won't lick provided it smells of bacon-fat. She'd abandon you for a hunk of horse-meat, even if you'd shared your last crust with her. Sentimental Sam! On your way and listen for my horn. Good morning."

So I did as the lady said and went back to Bultitude.

Gino the cook was looking for my dog. The kitchen hands were beating the bush, crying " Abadaba! " But it was generally assumed that the dog had been disposed of behind my back.

About two days later I heard " My Country 'Tis Of Thee " played on a silver horn, left what I was doing and got a view of the run in.

In came that limousine, driven by somebody like Jack Johnson dressed in tight black and with shiny boots. He opened the door, and out came Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck with a dog at her heels. But what a dog! Sir, I recognized Abadaba only by what the doctors call osmosis. Mrs. van Eyck had shampooed and stripped her, patched her scars, put on her a solid silver collar and held her on a silver chain.

Believe me or not, sir, when I saw that dog swaggering in all its

finery, something like jealousy took hold of my heart. But it was wonderful to see how everyone came out to admire, in their order, the car, the lady's diamonds, the chauffeur's boots, and the dog in its silver collar.

It would have done you good to hear Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck call for the manager and to see Breezy bow. " Milk for my dog," says she, " fresh milk, and let me see the date stamped on the carton. Understand, this is a Barkless Ely. I wouldn't take ten thousand dollars for her. . . "

Breezy brought the milk in a fruit bowl, and now my friend ordered a double armagnac. Oh, sir, I thought I was a showman until I saw that gem of a woman go to work!

". . . Don't touch her," she said, caressing the dog, " she doesn't like it. This is one of the most thoroughly bred rare dogs in the world. Keep your hands off, if you don't mind—she's sensitive. This is Gulftruda of Ely by Hereward out of Alftruda of Lincoln. A swamp dog, better known as a fen-hound. See those big feet? Used to support these dogs in the soft mud of Lincolnshire, England.

" They can't bark, of course. Some experts call them Leofricsson's Watchers. Naturally, they were bred never to bark, but to give you warning by tugging at your sleeve. Rarest dogs in creation. Why? I'll tell you. Bred each to each, they mean nothing. You know the meaning, unquestionably, of what the chemists call a catalyst . . . ? Bless my soul, you don't? Now look here: take potassium chlorate, and heat it. What comes out? Pure oxygen—but slowly. Add black oxide of manganese and your oxygen comes out much purer and more freely. Mysterious thing is, the catalyst manganese dioxide remains unchanged. Get it? This is a catalytic dog."

A man who sold furniture said, " As I get it, ma'am, this dog of yours alters the breed? "

" Pardon me. She keeps the breed pure. It is impossible to breed a true retriever unless one of these has mothered a litter of three-fifths-male pups. It is something in the blood, like haemophilia—the royal disease."

An ash-tray manufacturer said, " Dog like that could be worth couple o' bucks? "

Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck snapped, " Couple o' bucks! Damn it, I lost her sister six months ago, and I'd pay two thousand for the return of her. Ran into the woods—spitting image of this one, except for a chewed ear and two bite scars in her side. Couldn't mistake her—can't bark, none of 'em can. Two thousand dollars reward . . . Waiter, my bill! . . . Come on, darling . . . "

Breezy would not accept payment for the dog's milk. My

friend led that heartless animal out and drove away honking "My Country 'Tis Of Thee". She had bacon-fat on her glove, so Abadaba would have followed her to the ends of the earth; just for licks, just for smells, just for kicks.

So much for affection. It makes you think, hey?

After that, Abadaba was a topic of conversation, like stocks and shares. Gino the cook set out dish after dish of selected scraps, Max the head waiter put down bones—even Breezy, waving a sausage, went to the edge of the woods and called "Abadaba, Abadaba!" in a voice that belonged with a mandolin under a window.

About three days after I had left Abadaba with Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck, my dog was returned to me by the lady's chauffeur. He put her down at the door of my toolshed and Abadaba stood there looking from him to me and making equivocal motions of his tail between us. In half a minute the chauffeur went away, and so Abadaba, wagging her entire spine from the neck down, dragged herself to me and made much of me.

Now I was truly disappointed in the dog Abadaba. There was no enduring faith in the creature. Mrs. van Eyck was right—she *was* anybody's dog. She was out of her make-up now; the wax was off her flank so that the scars showed plainly and she had been brushed the wrong way and rolled in mud. One of her ears was ragged again, and without that collar and leash she flopped all over the place.

Soon Gino the cook came out and said, "I dunno, me I like dissa pup, Sam. I givea you ten bucks for me to keep her."

"Go to hell," I said.

"O.K., my wife she likea dog, a dog likea dis. Look, she likea Gino, see? . . . *Nice* Abadaba, Gino givea you *meat!*" And when he snapped his fingers she went to him, beating the ground with her tail.

Laugh at me, sir, but now it was my turn to feel abandoned.

"No sale," I said, and locked Abadaba in the toolshed.

Then Breezy came and said, "Funny thing, Sam, but my wife took a fancy to that pup of yours. I'll give you fifty bucks for her—can write it off as household expenses. Good house dog—"

"No soap," I said.

But why drag out an old story? Everybody who had been present when Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck had made her speech about what was supposed to be Abadaba's sister made me an offer, each behind everybody else's back, with an eye on the two thousand dollar reward—until I parleyed Breezy's fifty bucks into a cool six-fifty. Here, I thought, I had better stop. I took the money in cash from a manufacturer of brassware who

sold the dog Abadaba at a profit to a fruit-canner. And he, in his gratitude, gave me a ten dollar tip. After that, to avoid argument, I drew my pay and hit the road.

Later, I heard the outcome of this deal from Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck. I knew that the fruit-canner would be on her doorstep with the one-and-only barkless dog with two scars on her flank, and I wanted to know what happened. It was then, sir, when she looked at Abadaba, that Mrs. Nema Hobbema van Eyck sent this speculator on his way with a remark which has since become immortal. "*Too damn shaggy.*" But this is by no means the crux of the story.

Sir, if to live is to have ups and downs, my life has been a ferris-wheel—a very flat oval one with caterpillar treads. I soon managed to get through my money and, after many vicissitudes, grew this beard.

Five years after the occasion I have described, I was walking through Central Park when I saw in front of me the familiar figure of that opportunist dog Abadaba. But now she was fat, and wore a white leather harness studded with silver, attached by a chain to a lady in platinum minks who was Mrs. Irma Hocker, wife of the fruit-canner. Discontent was written big all over mistress and dog.

Odd, but after Abadaba I had sworn I would never have another —yet, in passing, I couldn't help looking down and whispering, "Abadaba!" Whereupon, inspired perhaps by some homesickness for the gutter, Abadaba jumped up and caught me off balance, raking me across my blind eye with her claws. I fell. Abadaba stood over me, licking my face. Luckily I had the presence of mind to scream and seize her by the throat. Mrs. Hocker had hysterics.

A score of people came forward to swear that a fine old man had been mauled by a ferocious dog, and a police car and an ambulance followed shortly. My sightless eye was removed. I sued for damages and came off with five thousand dollars.

Thus I was enabled to come out here and live a contemplative life, and entertain guests.

Whom I speed, when parting. Coffee and doughnuts, twenty cents. Special drinks, sixty cents. Tips. Service. Call it a dollar even. I thank you."

Before I left I said, "This little dog of yours—why do you call her Plato?"

"Because, sir, she is utilitarian and philosophical. She can digest everything. And, first and foremost, she washes the plates . . . Good day, come again!"

My Pal Henry

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

WHEN you've killed a man, you want to run. But you don't run, because you've got to keep cool and hold on to your nerve. You come out of Joe's apartment, walk down the corridor to the lift and stop to light a cigarette when you reach the street. But all the time your mind is shuttling back and forth. Back to Joe lying crumpled on the floor. Forward to things you've got to do.

Sooner or later, somebody will investigate Joe's apartment and call the cops. Maybe that woman in the next apartment; you could hear her coughing clearly enough.

It's all right though. You'll get clear because you've got a cool head and perfect plans. Everything's figured out. You'll grab a taxi to the airport, and the first plane will land you where a ship is leaving for South America. South America is a very big place . . .

From the corner you telephone Henry.

"Hello, that you, Henry? Listen, Henry, get those bags of mine packed and ready. I'll be there in a few minutes. No, Henry, I told you, didn't I, you won't be coming with me this time! Not this time, Henry."

You don't take a dim-wit like Henry to South America with you. You take a girl. A girl like Lou.

"Hello, Lou? I've got everything fixed, like I told you. I'll pick you up in half an hour. No—make that twenty minutes. What's the matter with my voice? There's nothing the matter with my voice, honey. Not a thing. See you soon."

It's tough on Henry, of course. He'll be as lost as a dog whose master's gone away. "While I got you I got a friend, haven't I, Stevie?" Henry would say. "And while you got me you got a friend, too. That's how it is with us, isn't it, Stevie?" Sometimes you get mad with Henry, he's so dumb.

But Henry's tight-mouthed, even if he doesn't think fast. Henry has the dumb loyalty of a dog. If you're in with him, you're in—whatever happens. Tell him anything and he'll believe you. Even the night of the split-up with Joe, when

Henry was supposed to be out for the evening but walked in unexpectedly on you and Joe. And all that money lying there; piles of crisp, new bills. The cops had been searching for it for a month, and Joe said it was safe now; he had brought the stuff in a suitcase, to make the split.

" Say, where you come by all that? " Henry asked.

Joe was in a dangerous mood, but he grinned faintly. " Didn't know we printed our own, did you, Henry? "

And Henry looked at you, his eyes asking, " Is that right? "

Because yours is the only word Henry takes, you nod. One story is as good as another, and you've got other worries.

" Lots more where that came from," Joe said, lighting a cigarette. " Ain't there, Steve? "

You knew right then you were going to kill Joe. Because when you counted the stuff, you knew he was holding out on you; he'd cached the stuff after the bank robbery and now he was pulling a fast one.

" Goin' to tell the cops we make our own money, Henry? " Joe said.

" I guess I'm Stevie's friend, ain't I? "

Henry is like that. He wouldn't tell a soul. You can trust Henry. He's not like Joe—holding out on you, mocking you with his baby-blue eyes, saying in his slow drawl: " You wouldn't want that girl of yours to know, would you, Steve? Because I—" He'd stop and smile bleakly. You knew he meant it. You knew he'd tip off Lou if you made a squawk.

" O.K.," you said. " O.K., Joe." But you knew you'd get even with him. You began to plan it. Henry wouldn't tell Lou . . . even if he knew you'd killed Joe.

Lou doesn't suspect a thing. Not yet. Compared with other girls you've known, she's a dewy-eyed innocent. But she's the kind of girl who'd take a chance for the man she loves. You'll break it to her gradually. She'll learn. She'll have to. South America is a long way from home. You can't walk back . . .

You walk a block from Joe's apartment house and hail a taxi. You don't want to think about Joe lying there with that surprised look on his face. You just want to think about Lou. You keep seeing her as you did that first time, with the lights of the Bargain Basement shining on her gold-bronze hair. " Can I interest you in something? " she'd said.

Sure, she could interest you, with a figure like hers, and her long lashes, and her little-girl mouth, just made to be kissed . . . But you had to go easy with her. She's that kind. It's going to be fun teaching Lou. And South America is a long way from home.

A couple of blocks from your place, you pay off the taxi. Trust those fellows to add up two-and-two—they've been around. No good taking chances. It's the little things that sometimes crack up a perfect plan.

You itch to take it on the run, but you just keep cool and walk along slowly. You let yourself in the outer door of your apartment building, and step into the lift with another man.

You nod to him because he lives on the third floor and he says isn't it nice weather, and you agree it is. Good flying weather, you think, and you wish you were on the plane with Lou beside you, a bit frightened, a bit shy, her long lashes playing tricks with your heart. She's a nice kid, Lou, and with the right kind of connections. None at all. All on her own. Nobody'll ask questions about Lou, except maybe her landlady.

You get off at the fourth floor, walk to your own door and let yourself in. You take a look at Henry, and close the door with a bang. Something has happened to Henry. Something big.

" Stevie," he says, " I guess you got a real friend when you got me. Even if you're not taking me with you this time, Stevie, I don't hold it against you. I'm your friend, ain't I, Stevie? "

" What's happened? " You've got to talk sharp to Henry.

" People think I'm dumb, but I'm not so slow as people think. Am I, Stevie? I knew they was cops—right off, I knew they was cops."

" Cops? " You rap the word out. You push your hat back; your forehead is damp.

" They said they'd be back later, the cops said, Stevie! "

You push past him. You've got to grab that money and get away, fast. You know where you hid all those crisp bills, and you go there and kneel down and put your hand in to get them. Then you turn slowly to face Henry. Henry's face is all lit up. He can see you're worried, but he knows it's all right. You're worried because if that money has gone there'll be no airport, no South America, no Lou—and you can't run far from the cops when you haven't even the price of a taxi fare left.

But Henry knows it's all right. Henry's your friend.

" It's all right, Stevie," he says, beaming at you. " You're looking for all that money you and Joe printed. I'm not so dumb as people think I am, Stevie! I knew what kind of trouble you'd get in if the cops found that. I guess I know all about phony money. But you needn't worry about them finding it, Stevie, because I dumped it all down the incinerator when I knew they was coming back. I wouldn't want you to get in trouble with the cops—see?—because you're a friend of mine . . ."

Suspense bookshelf

"I knew monsieur was a friendly sort," said Gaston. "It is a pity he has to die. This barrel trick is clever, is it not? No one looks twice at a barrel being rolled along the street; it is not like a coffin, which attracts notice. No one stands to attention or takes his hat off when a barrel goes by . . ." Remember *The Happy Travellers*, Manning Coles' witty and delightful crime novel recently serialized in Suspense? Admirers of the irrepressible Hambledon will be interested to learn of this gripping thriller's publication in book form, under the title **Crime in Concrete**. (Hodder and Stoughton, 12s. 6d.)

As headmistress of a large girls' school, Enid Parsons had power—respected and feared, she looked noble and dignified behind the desk in her study. But the wielding of power was her secret passion, and "Everyone has a weak point somewhere" was her favourite adage. Small wonder someone murdered Enid . . . **Stella Claydon's Lesson in Murder** is an unusually good first novel; well-written, convincing, tightly woven, with a satisfying surprise solution. (John Long, 11s. 6d.)

From **John Sawyer** comes **D-Day**, a crisp account of Operation Overlord, from the initial preparation for D-Day and last-minute misgivings about the weather to the actual Normandy landings. The book includes graphic personal anecdotes, sidelights on Hitler's Army Command, and a lively description of the elaborate deceptions practised on the Germans . . . the misleading radio transmissions, the flying to and fro across the Straits of Dover by the Dam Busters Squadron, and the dropping of dummy men in the wrong area to give the enemy something to look for ! Clear and taut, **D-Day** recaptures the suspense of one of the most dramatic days in all history. (Four Square Books, 2s. 6d.)

The Hangman Never Waits is a fast-moving story of gang warfare, caused by the deliberate breaking of a " gentlemen's agreement " not to encroach on rival territory. The extortion of " protection money " is the gangs' racket, and although this is by no means a new theme for a crime thriller, **Maurice Dekobra** adroitly combines action, dramatic crises and moments of comedy to provide good light entertainment. (W. H. Allen, 12s. 6d.)

For new readers of Suspense who missed **Flight into Danger**, that almost unbearably tense thriller by **John Castle and Arthur Hailey**, comes the news that it is now available in a paperback edition. (Corgi Books, 2s. 6d.)

A HEARSE OF ANOTHER COLOUR

M. E. CHABER'S tough, wisecracking private eye Milo March has a weakness for strong martinis and glamorous women. He is also very good at getting himself into tricky situations. In this gripping thriller March finds himself involved with Murder Incorporated, a beautiful blonde Creole girl, and an undertaker who drives a red hearse—an intriguing enough mixture even for him

IT was one of those days when nothing happened. I sat around the office and the phone rang only once. Then it was the phone company wanting to know when I was going to pay my bill. I told them I'd take it up with my board of directors and hung up.

The name is March. Milo March. I'm an insurance investigator, with my own office on Madison Avenue, that little section of New York famous for strong martinis and neat women. I'm for hire. Any insurance company that wants to pay a hundred dollars a day and expenses has me for the asking. But don't make a big thing out of it and confuse me with those private eyes that wander around on your television screen. I wear a trench coat when it's raining. I carry a gun when somebody is trying to shoot me. I chase women sometimes, but only when they get that chase-me look in their eyes.

Finally it was late enough in the day so that I knew there wouldn't be any business calls. I locked the office and went down to the Blue Mill on Commerce Street in the Village. I had a couple of dry martinis and a steak. After coffee I went home to my apartment on Perry Street with the idea of curling up with a good book.

I had a glass of Canadian Club in my left hand and was just opening the book with my right hand when there was a knock on my door. I went to the door and opened it, ready to say that I didn't want to buy whatever was being sold, but I never got beyond opening my mouth.

She was tall, with short blonde hair that curled around her head like golden feathers. Blue eyes that looked like the Pacific on a spring day. And a figure that would have made Jayne Mansfield look like an underfed waif.

" Please," she said. " May I come in for a minute? "

What could I say? I held the door open and she slipped past me, her perfume reaching out to tug at my senses. I closed the door and turned to face her.

" I'm sorry," she said, " but some man has been following me and I didn't know what to do, so I knocked on the first door I came to."

" He followed you into the building? " I asked.

She nodded. " I came in to see a friend on the floor below and the man followed. My friend wasn't at home and I was afraid to go back down, so I came on up here. I hope you don't mind."

" Perish the thought," I said fervently. I was about to ask who her friend was but then realised I didn't know any of my neighbours. " As long as I'm providing the sanctuary, perhaps we ought to introduce ourselves. I'm Milo March."

" My name is Lisette. Lisette Smith."

" A fine old name," I said gravely, but I knew she was lying about the Smith part.

" It's very kind of you to let me come in here."

" Kind? " I said. " It's just that I have good eyesight."

There was a knock on the door.

" Maybe that's the man," she said.

I looked at her and realised there was real fear in her eyes. " You go in the bedroom," I told her, " so he won't see you when I open the door and take care of him."

She walked into the bedroom. She was just as pretty going as she was coming. There was another knock on the door. I went over and opened it.

He was a heavy-set man, wearing a wrinkled blue suit and a battered hat. He stood as if his feet were tired and the expression on his face said he didn't give a damn who knew it. He said, " Did a tall blonde girl come in here within the last few minutes? "

" Do I look the kind of guy who would answer the door if one had? " I said.

" I'll take a look," he said.

" Not tonight, buster. I don't like strange men wandering through my apartment. Go take a brisk stroll for yourself before you get hurt and I have to call the cops to sweep you up."

" Just whisper," he said. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a badge.

Well, that did make it look a little different. And maybe that was the explanation of why the girl lied. I wouldn't help her by fighting the police force.

I stepped away from the door and he walked in. He stood there, sniffing the air.

" Where is she? " he asked.

" I don't know what you're talking about," I said. I wasn't going to obstruct justice, but I wasn't going to help him either.

" There's perfume in this room," he said.

" I always dab a little behind my ears when somebody knocks. One never knows who's going to be there."

" Wise guys," he said. " I get a bellyful of them."

" Is that what makes it stick out that way? " I asked.

He just grunted and walked into the kitchen, snapping on the light. He looked around, then walked out and headed for the bedroom. I followed him. He snapped on the light in the bedroom and I wondered why he didn't say anything. I reached the doorway and found out. No girl. I'd already discovered the reason why. The bedroom window was open. There was a fire escape outside.

He discovered it about the same time. He went over and looked out.

" You always leave this window open like this? " he asked, turning back to me.

" I like a lot of fresh air," I said.

" Sure," he grunted. " What did you say your name was? "

" Milo March."

" Yeah? Well, keep your nose clean, March, or I may see you downtown yet."

He went out of the apartment fast and hurried down the stairs. I closed the door after him. Then I went back into the bedroom and looked out of the window. There wasn't anything to see. I whistled softly, but it didn't bring any response.

Finally I closed the window. I went into the other room and finished my drink. I tried to read the book again, but I kept thinking about the blonde . . .

When I awoke next morning, I was still curious and I decided I'd see what I could find out. I made myself some breakfast and went up to the office. Then I called Johnny Rockland, a friend of mine on the New York police force.

" Do me a favour, Johnny," I said. " You know where I live on Perry Street? Last night there was a cop after a tall blonde girl in that neighbourhood. He was even in my building. I'd like to know what it was all about."

" What was the cop's name and what precinct was he from? "

" He didn't say and I never got around to asking him."

" Milo, you're slipping," Johnny said. " Well, I'll see what I can do. I'll call you back."

I sat around and fiddled with the morning mail—all of it bills. Forty-five minutes later, the phone rang. I scooped it up.

" Yeah? " I said.

" Milo," Johnny said, " I'm afraid you've been taken in by a tin badge."

" What do you mean? " I asked.

" There wasn't any kind of rumble on Perry Street last night. Nobody was looking for a tall blonde girl unless it was on his own."

I cursed with feeling.

" You're getting old, son," Johnny said. " Well, I'll see you around, kid." He hung up.

I put the receiver back on the hook and cursed some more. I knew what had done it. The guy had looked so much like a tired cop that I hadn't looked closely at the badge. But that was no excuse. I wondered if the girl got away all right, then decided there was no way for me to find out.

The phone rang. I picked it up and said hello.

" Milo, boy, how are you? " a voice asked. " This is Martin Raymond."

It was a welcome voice because it probably meant a job. He was the vice-president of Intercontinental Insurance, a company which hired me pretty often.

" I'm fine," I said.

" Got some spare time, Milo? Can you run over here? "

" If it's all right for me to walk, I'll be there in ten minutes."

I called my phone-answering service and told them to take over. Then I went out and walked up Madison Avenue. Ten minutes later I was in Raymond's office.

" Glad you could make it," he said. " Think you can take on a small job for us, Milo? "

" How small? "

" Shouldn't take you more than three or four days to clear this one up."

" Guess I can," I said. Even three or four hundred dollars would be better than what I was jingling in my pocket at the moment.

" Where is it? "

" New Orleans."

" A nice place," I said, thinking what I could do with an expense account there. " What's the case? "

" It's a bit screwy," Raymond said. " It concerns three men who went to New Orleans to hunt for ancient pirate treasure."

" Don't tell me," I said, " that Intercontinental is now insuring treasure hunts."

" Of course not," he snapped. " The men wanted life insurance policies, each one payable to the survivor or survivors of their expedition, each policy to be in force only until they returned. We issued the policies. They were all three responsible businessmen and there seemed to be very little risk in it."

" Let me guess," I said. " Cynical old man that I am. One of the three buccaneers is dead and the other two want to collect. Only you think they may have bumped him off and the treasure they were really hunting is the one in your bank account."

" It's worse than that," Raymond said gloomily. " Two of them have vanished and the third man claims they are dead."

" How much? "

" Each policy was for fifty thousand."

" A hundred grand. Better tell me more."

"The three men," he said, "were John Bryant, Peter Lane and Herman Mack. Bryant and Mack are the two presumedly dead. The story as we get it from the New Orleans police is that the three of them went to an island where a map they had indicated there was treasure. Lane, the survivor, claims that he was separated from the other two. It was night. Then Lane heard a scream and went searching for them but never found them. He thinks they were caught in quicksand."

"The bodies?" I asked.

"Not found yet," he said. "It leaves us with four choices. The men met death accidentally, as Lane claims, or somebody unknown killed them and disposed of the bodies. Or Lane killed the two men and disposed of the bodies, either to collect the insurance or get possession of the treasure they found *and* collect the insurance. Or, lastly, the three men entered into a conspiracy in which the two would disappear and the third would collect for the three of them. We want to know which of the four possibilities is correct."

"New Orleans cops?" I asked.

"They haven't turned up anything. They haven't arrested Lane, but they have requested that he not leave the city, which indicates they are not yet satisfied with his story."

"He made a claim yet?"

"Not a formal claim, but he did notify us that he thought they were dead. We presume that this is preliminary to making a claim."

I nodded. "When do you want me to start?"

"At once."

"The usual hundred a day and expenses?" I asked.

"Okay. But try to go easy on the expenses, Milo. The Board wasn't too happy the last time."

I told him what the Board could do. "They were happy enough about the money I saved them, so tell them not to begrudge a hard-working man one or two martinis on the house. You got anything else on this for me?"

"That's about it," he said. "A Lieutenant Stern of the New Orleans Police has been in charge of the case there. You'll find Peter Lane staying at the Royal House."

"Okay," I said. "But there's still one more thing I want."

"I know," he said wearily. "How much?"

"Five hundred is a nice round sum to start with," I told him.

He buzzed for his secretary and sent her for the money. The girl came back with five crisp bills, each one bearing the beautiful number 100 on it. I tucked them lovingly into my pocket, assured Raymond that he'd hear from me, and left.

I went back to my office, checked in with the answering service and had a drink from the bottle in the desk drawer just by way of celebrating. Then I checked up on getting to New Orleans. I found I could get a late night plane that would get me in in time for breakfast. I made a reservation. I also called and made a reservation at the Royal House. Then I informed Raymond.

I was the first one to board the big plane that night. I found my seat and relaxed, closing my eyes. I didn't open them until after I felt the plane take to the air, and even then it was something else that made me sit up. I couldn't figure out what it was at first. Then I noticed there was a blonde girl sitting in front of me, and I knew what it was that had made me open my eyes. It was her perfume.

Just to make sure, I got up and went to the men's room in the front of the plane. On the way back I got a good look at her. It was the same blonde. I dropped into the seat beside her. "Don't let anybody tell you it isn't a small world," I said.

She looked at me. "Hello," she said. "It's Mr. March, isn't it?"

"I prefer Milo," I said.

"You must have thought me awfully rude," she said. "I'm afraid I didn't get a chance to thank you for last night."

"For which part? I'm sorry, honey, I thought the guy was the real goods. It was only this morning I discovered he was a phony cop. I gather you got away all right."

"Yes." She hesitated. "You're going to New Orleans?"

"Yes."

"Vacation?"

"Business," I said, "but I expect to have some pleasure too."

"What business are you in?"

"Insurance," I said. "I'm what you might call an adjuster." I told her what that meant.

"Oh," she said, looking at me, "that sounds terribly exciting. You're going to New Orleans on a case?"

"Yeah," I said. "What about you? Vacation?"

"No, I live in New Orleans. I've been visiting in New York."

"You live there?" I said. "Maybe you'll show me around the town."

She hesitated, but not long. "I guess I do owe you something for last night," she said. "I'll make a bargain with you—Milo. I'll show you New Orleans and you'll tell me all about your exciting work."

"It's more exciting when I'm not working," I said, "but it's a bargain. We start with dinner tomorrow night?"

"All right."

I flagged a passing hostess and ordered two drinks. I lit a couple of cigarettes for us and leaned back. Maybe New Orleans was going to be even better than I had anticipated.

"I—I have a confession to make," the blonde said after our drinks had been served.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Your name isn't Smith."

She looked startled. "How did you know?"

I said, "You'd be surprised how many people one runs into who aren't named Smith. Besides, you hesitated last night before you got it out."

She laughed nervously. "It was silly of me, I know. But

I had just picked your apartment at random and I didn't know you and I guess I was frightened. If you knew, why didn't you say something?"

"I thought you'd tell me when you were ready," I said.

"It's Dufresne," she said. "The Lisette part was real."

"Pretty," I said. "Creole?"

"Yes," she said proudly. "You know what it means?"

"Sure," I said. "Even Yankees sometimes know something. It means you're descended from the early French settlers of New Orleans."

We talked for a couple more hours and then both of us took a nap. It was daylight when the plane circled over New Orleans.

When we landed there was someone there to meet Lisette. She gave me her address and I promised to call for her that evening. Then I took a cab to the hotel. When I got to my room I called room service and told them to send up a pot of coffee, a bottle of Canadian Club and a bucket of ice. It was still too early to start working. I'd have some coffee, a couple of drinks and maybe grab a couple more hours of sleep.

The boy delivered the coffee and the whisky and departed a dollar happier. I got partly undressed, poured a cup of coffee for my left hand and a Canadian Club on the rocks for my right hand. Then I made myself comfortable.

The phone rang. "Mr. March?" a man's voice asked.

"Yeah," I said.

"This is Lieutenant Stern of Homicide, New Orleans Police," the voice said. "Sorry to bother you, but were you planning on dropping in to see me this morning?"

"I was."

"Fine. Be glad to see you."

"I'll be there," I told him. "Just one thing, Lieutenant . . ."

"Yes?"

"How did you know I was coming and that I would be at this hotel?"

"Your office sent me a wire," he said. "Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "I guess I'm just careful."

I hung up and went back to work on the coffee and Canadian Club. It was about ten minutes later when there was a knock on the door. I went to it, expecting to see a bellboy.

He was something different. He was a small, trim little man, his suit neat and expensive. His hair was dark, as was his face, and his full lips were spread in a smile that wasn't a smile. He was something international; you could find one like him anywhere in the world where there was a quick buck to be made if you didn't care how you made it. I didn't even have to look to see the slight bulge under his left arm. It was just as much standard equipment as his hair.

"You Milo March?" he asked flatly. Without waiting for an answer, he walked into the room.

"I'm Milo March," I said. "Why don't you come in?"

"Funny," he said. "You got any other funny lines?"

"I forgot to bring my writers with me," I said. "I didn't know you were auditioning."

"Funny," he said again.

"You're repeating yourself," I told him. "Okay. Let's stop the ad-libs. You got a name? I don't like to talk to people I don't know."

"Eddie Capo," he said.

"A pretty name," I admitted, "if you like the type. I don't think I do. You got business here or did you just drop in to welcome me because the Chamber of Commerce is busy?"

"Yeah, I got business here," he said tonelessly, "but you ain't. I dropped in to tell you to take the next plane back to New York."

The fast money boys are always the same. They walk in and give their orders and that's supposed to be it. I've run into a lot of them and I know how they tick. But I hadn't expected to run into any of them on this job. It was a simple insurance case—only now maybe it wasn't so simple. I looked at Eddie Capo with interest.

"Who do you work for, Eddie?" I asked.

"Who said I worked for anybody?"

"Okay, we'll try it a different way. Why should I take the next plane back to New York?"

"You're a nice guy," he said, only his heart wasn't in it. "The climate up there is better for you. I just got a feeling that New Orleans ain't a very healthy place for you."

"And did your feelings also tell you that the nice guy's name was Milo March?"

"Maybe they did."

"It's mighty neighbourly of you, neighbour," I said. "I get feelings like that, too. In fact, I have a feeling that this room is going to be unhealthy for you in about two minutes. You might even break out in all kinds of lumps."

"I could take you," he said. Something like excitement was stirring in his black eyes.

"Maybe," I said. "Then maybe you couldn't. But I'll also bet you don't have any orders about trying, and a well-trained rat doesn't squeak unless he's been told to."

The expression in his eyes got a little stronger, but he didn't make a move and I knew I was right.

"Outside, buster," I told him. "And tell your boss, whoever he is, I don't like to be pushed. When it happens, I usually push back."

He walked to the door and opened it. He looked back at me and said a short, hard word under his breath. Then he closed the door.

I went back to my drink. I wondered where Eddie Capo fitted into the picture and had Martin Raymond sent him a telegram too? Or maybe there was a leak in Lieutenant Stern's nice little police department.

I finished my drink and went to sleep for an hour. After that

I got up and took a fast shower. Then I went out and grabbed a cab and told the driver to take me to police headquarters.

Lieutenant Stern turned out to be about fifty, a big smooth-faced man.

"Nice to see you, March," he said, shaking my hand. There was just a hint of Southern accent. "As I told your office when this happened a couple of weeks ago, I'll be glad to give you all the co-operation I can."

"Fine," I said. I lit a cigarette and stared at him. "How many guys you got in here who are also on the payroll of somebody who's on the wrong side of the fence?"

He didn't get it at first. When he did, the colour slid up over his face. He gripped his desk and for a minute I wasn't sure but what he was going to come right over the top of it.

"What the hell do you mean?" he asked.

"You know a little hood named Eddie Capo?" I asked.

"I know him."

"Well, about two minutes after you called this morning, Eddie Capo visited me to say that New Orleans wasn't healthy for me. Now, so far as I know, Martin Raymond notified you that I would be at that hotel, but nobody else knew it."

He sat back in his chair and the colour left his face but the grimness didn't. "There are no crooked cops on my squad," he said. "What else did Eddie Capo have to say?"

"That was about it. He thought I ought to leave town and I couldn't see it that way. An honest difference of opinion. I noticed he was carrying some artillery."

"He has a permit," the lieutenant said curtly. "So Eddie just walked away quietly when you told him to?"

"Yeah. But to be honest, I don't think it was all because of me. I think he had orders not to push it too far. Yet."

"How about you?" Stern asked. "You carrying a gun too?"

I shook my head. "But if things get too rough I may be around asking for a permit."

"Why should they get too rough on you?"

"I don't intend to just sit around and watch you sweat," I said. "I won't step on any toes unless I have to, and if I turn up anything, your department can have all the credit. But I'm going to work . . . Now, where does Eddie Capo fit into this?"

"Damned if I know," he admitted. "I haven't been working on any angle that would have Eddie in it."

"Okay," I said. "Let's get back to our case and find out about Eddie when the time comes. What's the story on the two guys who vanished into the wild blue yonder?"

He gestured irritably. "I don't know why all the damn fools in the world have to come down here to hunt pirate treasure. I guess you know that's what the three men came here for. They had a map that one of them had dug up somewhere and they hired a guide and a diviner."

"What's a diviner?" I asked.

" He finds the treasure—with a forked stick, that sort of thing."

" What about these two guys they hired? "

" All right, so far as we know," he said. " The guide was Narcisse Coillon. He comes from an old Creole family. His diviner was a black boy named Willie Morell. He works as a diviner about three or four months a year, then goes off somewhere—probably to blow his money. He comes back, I guess, when he's broke."

" Okay," I said. " Go ahead."

" Well, the map these men had showed that the treasure was on Placide Island. That's just a small island. Nobody lives on it or could. There's nothing but swamp, a few grubby trees and a lot of quicksand."

" Okay."

" They went there two weeks ago at night, the three men, the guide and the diviner. They went at night because the diviner said that was the best time. Anyway, they landed on the island and started exploring it. According to the story, which the guide and the diviner back up, the method was too slow for two of the men—Bryant and Mack. They wanted to strike out the other way on their own to circle the island and meet Lane, the guide and the diviner on the other side. Lane claims he tried to stop them and the guide warned them about quicksands, but they insisted and took off on their own. It was about half an hour later that Lane heard one of them shout. He stopped looking for treasure and went searching for them. He never found them."

" How did they get to the island? " I asked.

" Hired a boatman. Fellow named West Carroll. Also all right as far as we know. He has a fishing boat and takes out fishing parties and skin-diving parties. He stayed on the boat that night. He heard the shout but didn't pay any attention—thought maybe they'd found some treasure."

" Lane says he thought they got caught in the quicksand and died that way? "

He nodded. " And Coillon, the guide, thinks that's what happened too."

" What do *you* think? "

" I don't know," he confessed. " It's possible. There's a lot of quicksand on that island. And you'd go down fast if you got caught in it. We tried probing in most of the places with poles and didn't find anything. But that doesn't mean too much."

" Suppose they're not there? "

" Well," he said, " I did kind of favour this Peter Lane, but I haven't got anywhere with him. But I can't figure out why anybody else would want to kill the two men."

" Lane have the chance? "

" Both Coillon and the diviner swear that they were with him all the time. But I figure that doesn't rule him out. It's always possible he could have bought them, or that he hired someone else to get rid of Bryant and Mack."

"Yeah," I said. "But what about this? Suppose the two men just wanted to vanish and then have their friend Lane claim that something had happened to them. Could they have got off the island without anyone knowing it?"

"Not by motor-boat," he said. "Carroll would have heard the motor. But I guess they could have. They could have had a rowing-boat hidden there or have arranged to have someone meet them in a rowing-boat. It was night and nobody would have seen them. You think that's what happened?"

"No," I admitted, "but it's a possibility. Men will do a lot of things for a hundred thousand dollars. Now another thing. What could be hidden on that island that nobody would want them to find?"

"Pirate treasure, I suppose," he said bitterly.

"Not pirate treasure," I said. "What else?"

"Not a damn thing. You'll realise it when you see the island. You couldn't hide a tin can there."

"Maybe the two men stumbled on to something."

"Nothing to stumble on, except a little swamp grass and a few snakes."

"Okay," I said. "Well, that seems to be about it for now, doesn't it? I'll start nosing around, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind—up to a point," he said. "But don't try to be a cop too." Just then a phone rang on his desk. He answered it and held it out. "For you."

"Me?" I said.

I took the phone. It was Johnny Rockland, the cop I'd called the day before to check up on the man who had been following the blonde. I wondered why the hell he should be calling me in New Orleans.

"Milo?" he said. "I hoped I might find you there. I'm lucky, eh?"

"You sure are," I said. "I was just leaving. What's on your mind?"

"Remember the guy you checked on with me yesterday? The one who was following the blonde and told you he was a cop?"

"Yeah."

"Well, his name is Lew Manton, and you must've made him mad the other night."

"Why?"

"One of my boys was going home last night. He has to go along Perry Street. He saw this character entering your building and thought there was something wrong about him. He followed. The guy broke into your apartment and was busy hiding a small package of marijuana cigarettes under the mattress of your bed when he was caught. We figure he was planning to call later and give us an anonymous tip."

"A nice guy."

"Yeah. We found a phony badge on him when he was searched and a nice little packet of heroin. I just thought you'd like to know."

" Sure," I said. " Thanks. And wait. You know the name Eddie Capo? "

" Yeah. I know the name. Now there *is* a tough boy."

" What's the picture on him? "

" He used to be with Murder Incorporated. He was one of their triggers."

" Who does he work for now? "

" Well, he always did work for the Syndicate, so it would be a safe guess that he still does."

" But who in the Syndicate? " I asked. " Do me a favour and see if you can find out."

" Okay."

" I'm at the Royal House. Call me there."

" Okay, Milo."

I hung up and turned to Lieutenant Stern. I said, " I guess I need that permit."

Stern nodded. " Come down tomorrow and I'll have it for you. You can pick up a gun near here."

" Good," I said. " I'll see you."

I left and went back to the hotel. It was already lunch-time so I went into the dining room. After lunch I looked for Peter Lane.

I found him in the bar. There was nobody else there, but I think I might have recognised him even if the place had been crowded. He had that Madison Avenue look about him.

He was toying with a drink. I went over and sat next to him. " Canadian Club with a little water," I told the bartender. I waited until the bartender had served me and moved away. I took a drink and said, " You're Peter Lane? "

He started. " Yes," he said. " Do I know you? "

" No, but you're going to," I said. " I'm Milo March. I'm down here at the request of Intercontinental Insurance."

" Oh."

" I want to talk to you," I said.

" Now? "

" Yes."

" All right," he said reluctantly. " But I don't understand it. No claims have been put in."

" They will be," I said. " And we like to know what it's all about when it happens."

" The police are quite competent to handle the case."

" Sure," I said. " Competent, but not as interested as we are. By several thousand dollars."

" I didn't have anything to do with what happened to John and Herman," he said. " My God, they were my friends. We were at school together."

" I didn't say you did have anything to do with it."

" The stupid cops seem to think so, or they'd let me leave here."

" First they're competent, now they're stupid," I said. " You ought to make up your mind."

He looked at me and suddenly grinned. " Sorry," he said. " I

guess it's got me a bit jumpy. What did you say your name was?"

"March. Milo March. And all I want is some information from you."

"Okay," he said. He ran his hand over his short hair. "I'll do my best to help you, of course."

"Good," I said. "For a starter, would you mind telling me just what this pirate treasure bit was?"

"I guess in a way I started it," he said. "My wife likes antiques, so for her last birthday I picked up an old chest in an antique shop. When we opened it, we found this map inside. I showed it to the boys and said we ought to go treasure hunting. We used to kid about it every time we met, which was once or twice a week."

"Until finally it wasn't so much of a joke," I suggested.

"Yes, I guess that's it. But even when we came down here, I don't think we really believed we'd find any treasure."

"Then why did you come?"

He shrugged. "Well, we started thinking it would make an interesting vacation for the three of us. But it was Herman who finally started pushing it. He was in public relations, you know."

I nodded and signalled to the bartender to give us fresh drinks.

"Herman began to get the idea that there'd be a whale of a story in it, and that the publicity would do all three of us a lot of good. He was going to write the story and plant it with one of the national magazines."

I said, "The way it has worked out, you'll probably get a lot more publicity than you expected. Tell me—why the life insurance policies?"

"That was Herman's idea too. He said it would make the publicity even better by making the expedition look dangerous."

"Well, I guess Herman finally went too far with his stage setting," I said. "What did you do when you got here?"

"Herman was running things by that time," Lane said. "He hired a Creole guide and a diviner. Said the diviner would be terrific for the story."

I nodded. "Go on."

"The guide was Narcisse Coillon, and the diviner was Willie Morell. The diviner said we'd have to make the trip at night as around there the spirits were strongest in the daytime. They're superstitious, these black boys, you know."

"Where can those two be reached?" I asked.

He thought for a minute, then gave me Coillon's address, which I wrote down. "We never had an address for Willie," he said. "Coillon got him for us."

"Okay. What did you do then?"

"Well, we hired a boat to take us over that night. It belonged to a fellow named West Carroll."

"Know where he lives?"

"No."

"And when did you hire Eddie Capo?"

"Who?" he asked. There was a puzzled look on his face and

I was pretty sure he wasn't that good an actor. " We only hired the three men. Didn't need any more."

" Forget it," I said. " Go ahead with the story."

He went on to tell me what Stern had told me already, about how Bryant and Mack had gone off on their own.

I decided to leave it at that. I was fairly sure by now that Lane wasn't in on this thing.

" Well, thanks for the talk," I said. " I'll see you around." I finished my drink and went up to my room. When I got there, I put in a call to Martin Raymond in New York.

" Milo, my boy," he said, coming on the phone, " don't tell me you have it all solved already? "

" All right, I won't," I said. " In fact I only called to say you'd better send me some more money just in case I need it."

" What? " he shouted. " We just gave you five hundred yesterday. What are you doing, buying the hotel? "

" No, just the gin at the hotel bar. But tomorrow I'm going to hire the same three men that your policy-holders hired. I don't know how much everything will run to, but send me three hundred more and I'll try to make it stretch."

I put the receiver down before he could object further. I had a small shot of Canadian Club, then I picked up the phone again and left a wake-up call. I stripped off my clothes and tumbled into bed. I was asleep almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The telephone brought me out of it. It was the operator telling me it was time to get up. I struggled out and went to the bathroom and showered and shaved. I dressed and went downstairs, got a cab and gave the driver Lisette's address.

She was ready when I got there and she looked even more beautiful than she had in New York or on the plane.

" What would you like to see? " she asked as we came down the stairs from her apartment.

" I leave it to you, honey," I said. " Wherever you go, you can be sure I'm following."

" Well," she said, " I guess we'll start with the one place every tourist should go. We'll have dinner at Antoine's."

We had a wonderful evening. It was about three o'clock when we finally got back to Lisette's place. She stopped at the bottom of the stairs and looked at me. " Have fun? " she asked.

" The most," I said. " You? "

She nodded. " I did, Milo. Even more than I expected to. And now—goodnight."

" Aren't you even going to ask me up for a nightcap? "

She shook her head. " I have a feeling you're the kind of man who would try to turn a nightcap into a nightgown."

" Well . . ." I said. I had to admit she was right. " We could at least try and find out."

" Not tonight," she said. She reached out and touched my cheek with her hand. It was almost a caress.

" I'll see you tomorrow night? " I asked.

"All right," she said. "Come at the same time. Goodnight, Milo."

It was after three-thirty when I got back to the hotel. I was feeling pretty good. I hummed a song to myself as I unlocked the door to my room.

"Please don't turn on the light, Mr. March," a voice said. "I don't care for too much light. Also Eddie Capo is in a room across the street and he might just shoot if the light is turned on, even though I've told him not to."

I stood for a minute looking around the room. I could make out a figure sitting in the upholstered chair near the foot of the bed. I walked across the room. In the darkness all I could tell about my visitor came from his voice. From that I could guess that he was an old man. Maybe somewhere in his seventies, but well-preserved. I lit a cigarette. "Who are you?" I asked.

"You may call me Eddie's employer for the moment."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came here, Mr. March, out of a quixotic desire to save a life."

"Whose?"

"Yours."

"Oh, we're going to do that bit again," I said wearily. "Everybody is suddenly worried about my health. First Eddie Capo, now you. Why?"

"Because I think you are a dangerous man, Mr. March. You may mix into things which do not concern you and I would be forced to let Eddie have his wish about killing you."

"Why should that bother you?" I asked.

"Because I abhor violence, Mr. March—although I have been fated in my life to be associated with violent men. Many years ago, when I was a young man, I studied painting in Paris. I lived in a section which was frequented by the apaches. Now I am surrounded by men like Eddie Capo."

"Maybe you should get into another line of business," I suggested. "Something like flower-arranging."

He chuckled quietly. "I daresay you're right. Unfortunately, I like money. I doubt if other lines of endeavour would recompense me as well as the one I'm now in."

"And what line is that?" I asked.

"That, Mr. March, is exactly what I consider no concern of yours. If you were to return to New York immediately, you might be no wiser than when you came, but you would be—alive."

"Let's get one thing straight," I said. "Why do you think I'm in New Orleans?"

"I don't think—I know, Mr. March. It's about that unfortunate accident on Placide Island."

"If it were an accident," I said, "why should you be worried about what I find out?"

He sighed heavily. "Mr. March, I will be honest with you, since you are an intelligent man. It was an accident. There

was absolutely no need for anything to have happened to those two men. However, it did occur, and it is best for all concerned that nothing more happens."

"I don't agree," I said.

"I'm sorry, Mr. March. I'm really speaking for your own good."

"Why me?" I asked. "Even if I went back to New York, the police would still work on it."

"For a time," he said. "The police here are very efficient, but they work in ways that do not alarm me. I have reason to believe that you are quite different." He paused. "Mr. March, it seems to me that your insurance company can only be interested in finding out if the third man—Lane, isn't it?—had anything to do with what happened to his comrades. I can assure you that he did not."

"Great," I said. "I'm to go back and tell the company that we have the word of a man who comes in the dark and gives no name."

He sighed again. "I take it, then, that you refuse to give up this futile search?"

"Yeah," I said.

He stood up. "Then I'm sorry, sir, but you leave me no choice."

He opened the door and was gone. There was nothing to see in the light from the corridor but the hat and the bulky overcoat.

I walked over to the window and looked out. Across the street there was a building that looked like an apartment house. All the windows were dark, but a minute later I saw the red glow of a cigarette through the window directly opposite me. I watched. Whoever was smoking got up and moved across the room.

I had a hunch about it and switched my gaze down to the front door of the building. In a little bit Eddie Capo came out. He went down the street and got into a big black Cadillac. The car made a U-turn in the street and then I couldn't see it, but I had an idea it stopped momentarily in front of my hotel.

There was nothing I could do about it right then. I went over and turned on the light. It was four-thirty in the morning. I stripped off my clothes and tumbled into bed. I'd worry about the situation after I'd had some sleep.

I awoke at nine o'clock. When I went downstairs, there was a Western Union order for three hundred dollars from Intercontinental and a telegram from Johnny Rockland waiting for me. I cashed the money order at the desk and read the telegram while I was having breakfast in the coffee shop.

NAME OF THE MAN YOU'RE INTERESTED IN IS NOT KNOWN TO OUR PIGEONS HERE. KNOWN ONLY AS THE PAINTER. NEVER ATTENDS SYNDICATE MEETINGS UP HERE. SAID TO BE ONE OF THE TOP FOUR. LUCK.

JOHNNY ROCKLAND.

I walked out of the hotel and took a taxi down to Police Head-

quarters. Lieutenant Stern had the gun permit ready for me. I went to the shop he told me about and bought a short-barrelled .32 and a shoulder holster. Then I walked back to Stern's office and they made a record of the serial number. I buckled on the holster, put the gun away and was ready for business. Just feeling the gun under my arm made me more cheerful about the future.

"Just be careful who you shoot with it," the lieutenant said.

"I'm always careful who I shoot," I told him.

I went out and got into a taxi, giving the driver the address of Narcisse Coillon that Peter Lane had given me. It was in the old Creole section. I went up and knocked on the door. It opened and a man looked out. He was tall and stooped, with powerful shoulders. My guess was that he was probably about fifty, but his hair was still black. He had a sharp, proud face.

"Narcisse Coillon?" I asked. "My name is Milo March. I'd like to talk to you."

He led the way into a living-room. "I was just having coffee," he said. "Will you join me?"

"With pleasure," I said.

He left the room, soon returning with the coffee. I took the cup and thanked him.

"I am looking for a guide," I said, "and I was told that you are the best."

He accepted the compliment as his due. "May I ask who recommended me?"

"Peter Lane," I said. "I'll be honest with you, Mr. Coillon. I'm from New York and I'm here especially to look into what happened to Mr. Lane's two companions. I want to hire you for at least one trip to Placide Island, and I'd like to hire the same diviner Mr. Lane used."

"I can hire him for you," Coillon said. "I expect him to be here within a few minutes, if you'd like to meet him first."

"Fine." I looked at Coillon. "I understand you believe the two men with Mr. Lane met with an accident?"

"What else could have happened to them?" he asked. "There are many very dangerous pits of quicksand on that island."

"Were you with Mr. Lane all the time you were there?"

"Yes."

"And do you know Eddie Capo well?"

"Capo?" he asked politely. "I'm afraid that is not a familiar name to me."

It was impossible to tell whether he was lying or not.

"When did you wish to go to Placide Island?" he asked.

"I think tomorrow night," I said. "Would that be all right with you?"

"I believe so." There was a knock on the door. "That's probably Willie now."

Coillon got up and left the room. When he came back, there was a husky young negro with him.

"Here he is," Coillon said. "Willie, this is Mr. March. He

wants to hire a diviner for tomorrow night. To go to Placide Island."

"Yes, sir," Willie said.

"Willie is one of the best diviners and spirit controllers in the state," Coillon said. "He's lazy, but he's good."

"You think we might find any treasure, Willie?" I asked.

"If it's there, I finds it," Willie said. "But I don't do no diggin'. I just finds the treasure and fights the spirits. There ain't none of them can mess with me."

"How do you go about finding the treasure?"

"I uses my divining stick to tell me where it is. When I finds it, I drives sticks in a circle and ties clothesline to them. It's gotta be thirteen feet to the north, thirteen feet to the east, thirteen feet to the south, thirteen feet to the west. You gets inside the ring and there ain't nobody can talk or swear or spit. That brings the bad spirits. Then I reads the Twenty-first Psalm and somebody starts digging."

"Sounds real jazzy," I said. "Willie, I have a feeling you should take that bit up to New York. You'd make a fortune on Madison Avenue keeping bad spirits away from the advertising copy. Of course, you'd have to learn to drink very dry martinis."

"Yes, sir," he said. "Sometimes a little liquor is good. Some spirits like to get drunk. But there is lots of things you gotta watch or the bad spirits move in. Can't take no lemon anyways, or maybe you has a big snake standing right over you."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, unless I get in touch with you to change it, meet me at the dock tomorrow night about nine o'clock."

"All right, we'll be there," Coillon said.

I went out and walked up the street until I found a taxi to take me to the dock. I walked along until I came to a boat with a man on the deck. I said, "I'm looking for West Carroll."

He looked me over lazily. "Well, you've found him."

Carroll looked to be about thirty, with a strong, handsome face and curly brown hair. He had enormous shoulders and powerful arms. He was probably a tough man in a fight. His boat was a large white cruiser, well-cared-for.

"I want to hire your boat," I said.

"Skin diving?" he asked.

"No. I want to hire you for tomorrow night. About nine o'clock."

"I don't know," he said. "I'm busy later."

"I won't need you for more than about an hour."

"Where do you want to go?"

"Placide Island," I said.

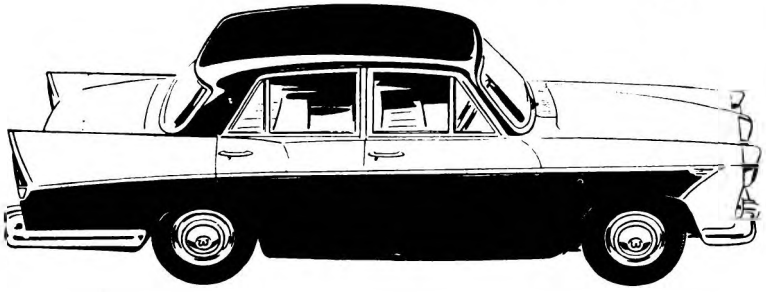
His face darkened. "Are you another cop?"

"No," I said. "My name is Milo March. I'm from the insurance company that had policies on the two men who vanished two weeks ago on Placide Island. I want to go to see the island. I've hired Coillon and Willie Morell to go along."

"Why pick on me?"

'Lovely to look at'

'lively to drive'



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"I want to talk to you. In the meantime, why not throw the business your way? Will you take me?"

"All right," he said. "But I have to be back here by ten-thirty. If you're not ready to leave, I'll come back without you."

"Fair enough," I said. "I'll see you here tomorrow night at nine."

"I'll be here."

I turned and went back the way I'd come. I reached the end of the pier and stopped to see if I could spot a taxi anywhere.

Two women were walking towards me, obviously dressed to go out fishing.

"Everything is fantastic in New Orleans," I heard one of them say to the other. "The other day I saw something you simply wouldn't believe. It was a week ago—no, two weeks ago yesterday—when George made me get up and go fishing with him at six o'clock in the morning."

She paused, then went on, "My dear, it was ghastly. And just as we got here, there was a hearse pulling away from the dock. But it was a bright red hearse. Imagine."

I decided it would be better to walk to where I could get a cab. The idea of a red hearse amused me and I was smiling to myself as I walked along. I had gone a block before I realised that the woman had said something else that interested me even more. She had said she saw the red hearse leaving the dock at six o'clock in the morning. And the morning she had mentioned had been the one after the disappearance of the two men.

I brooded about this while I took a taxi back to the hotel. I had lunch, then hunted up a public phone booth and put in a call to Lieutenant Stern.

I said, "You know anything about an undertaker in New Orleans who drives a red hearse?"

"Yeah, there is a guy," he said, "but I don't remember his name. He does a big business among some of the negro families who don't like to have their funerals too dreary. Why?"

"Somebody told me about it," I said, "and I thought I was being kidded."

"Stay around a few days and you'll probably see it," he said. "I've seen it around on the streets for so many years I guess I'd almost forgotten it is red. Seen any more of your friend Capo?"

"No, but he'll probably be around one of these days. I'll ship the body to you."

"You do that," he said.

"Okay, thanks, Lieutenant. I'll be contacting you."

I hung up and went upstairs to my room. I got out the classified phone directory and started calling undertakers, asking them if they knew the man who had a red hearse. I made it on my third call.

"That's Adam Perrin," the man said. "You'll find him over on Perdido Street."

" Thanks," I said, and hung up. I looked up Adam Perrin's address. Then I went back downstairs and took a taxi over to Perdido Street. When we got to the address, the red hearse was sitting out front. It was a bright red, too.

I paid off the driver and went in. There was a waiting-room filled with potted plants, the walls covered with various little mottoes concocted with the view of cheering up the relatives of the deceased.

After a while the back door opened and a man came out.

" Good afternoon, sir," he said. His voice was smoothly melancholy as though with years of practice. " May I help you? "

" Maybe," I said. " I'm looking for Adam Perrin."

" I am Adam Perrin."

I took a good look at him. He was about forty-five and his hair had already receded some two inches from its original vantage point. He was tall and thin and he wore a black suit, a white shirt and a black shoestring tie. His face was the colour of dough.

" I can provide almost any sort of service you would like," he said. " We start with the *de luxe* service—"

I said, " I'm sorry, Mr. Perrin. I'm not here to arrange a funeral."

" No? " he said. His face hardened subtly. " Then why are you here? "

" For information."

" About funerals? "

" In a way," I said. " That red hearse you have outside. Is that the only one in the city? "

" The only one in the state," he said proudly. " If you know someone who wants to have a different kind of funeral, to get away from dull, conventional black . . ."

" I don't know anyone who *wants* to have a funeral," I said, " although I've become acquainted with a few who may need one. But that's not the kind of information I want."

" What is it, then? " he asked harshly.

" Two weeks ago yesterday morning, at six o'clock," I said, " your red hearse was seen leaving the docks, where the fishing boats are moored."

" What of it? "

" What were you doing there? "

He stared at me. " I don't know that it is any of your business, but I was not at the dock. I had made a call down the street there. Two brothers had died and I was asked to prepare them for burial."

" Isn't that hour of the morning rather unusual? "

" I don't see that it is. I had been requested to do it the night before, but I was unable to go then. So I went early in the morning."

" Where down the street? " I asked. " What address? "

" Do you have a right to ask? "

" If I don't," I said, " I'll go get a policeman who does. What address? "

" Forty-seven."

" What was the brothers' name? "

" Anderson."

" Where did you bury them? "

" Gerod Cemetery."

" Okay, Adam," I said. " Sorry to have bothered you. Maybe I'll send you some business one of these days." I turned and started out.

" Who did you say you were? " he called after me.

" I didn't say," I told him, and went on out.

I took a cab down to the docks. There I walked along the street until I came to forty-seven. It was a small, sagging house. I went in through the gate and across the grass and weeds to the front door. I knocked loudly. There was no answer. I looked in through the window. The house was empty and it looked as if the dust was inches thick.

I took another cab to police headquarters. It was time to bring in the reserves.

" What's the matter? " Lieutenant Stern asked as I came in.

" Remember me asking you about a red hearse? " I said.

" Yeah."

" Well, it belongs to a man named Adam Perrin. He has a funeral parlour down on Perdido Street. Two weeks ago yesterday morning—which was the morning after our two men vanished—his red hearse was seen down by the docks. At six in the morning."

" Who saw it? "

" Some woman. I just happened to hear her telling another woman about seeing a red hearse there that morning."

" Some woman," he said. " What kind of witness is that? "

" But Perrin admitted that he was down there that morning."

" You talked to him? "

" Yeah. He claims he wasn't at the dock. Says he was supposed to pick up the bodies of two brothers named Anderson who lived up the street from the dock. Says he picked them up there and then buried them in Gerod Cemetery."

" What's wrong with that? "

" Just one thing. I pinned him down as to where he picked them up. He gave me the address. Forty-seven. I just came from there. Nobody lives at that address and I'd guess nobody has for many years."

" That's a little different," he said slowly.

" I'll make you a small bet," I told him. " You go out and dig up the Anderson brothers and I bet they turn out to be Herman Mack and John Bryant."

" If you're right about what you're saying, it might be a good bet," he said. " Okay, Milo, you've done your share of this. I'll take over. Want me to call you at your hotel? "

" You'd better," I said.

I went out while he swung into action on the phone. It was now well past the middle of the afternoon and I decided I'd put

in a good day's work. I went back to the hotel and started to relax in the bar with some Canadian Club.

There was still no call for me when it was time to go upstairs and get ready for my date with Lisette, so when I got to my room I put in a call to Stern.

" I thought I was going to hear from you," I said.

" No identification yet," he replied. " We've been trying to get hold of Lane for more than two hours to come and look at them, but we don't know where he is."

" I haven't seen him," I said. " In the meantime, what do you think? "

" I think it's them," he said. " We found two men buried together and they look like the descriptions of Mack and Bryant. And they hadn't died natural deaths."

" How? "

" Knife. A big one too, and used by somebody who knew how to use it."

" What about the undertaker? "

" We brought him in and questioned him. We just let him go home a few minutes ago. I don't know, but he may be telling the the truth. He claims he did get the bodies at that address. Of course, he realised that something was wrong. He saw they'd been knifed and he knew that nobody lived there as soon as he saw the house. He says he got the order for the funeral by telephone and that the money was slipped under his door some time that night. That's why he didn't go until early next morning. He wasn't going until he was paid. He still had the envelope the money came in, with his name cut out of one of his newspaper ads and pasted on it."

" You say you let him go? "

" Yeah. We could charge him with not reporting a crime and withholding information, but it's not a very stiff charge. I think maybe it's better to let him go and sort of keep an eye on him. It won't be too hard. He even uses that red hearse for his personal trips."

" I guess you're right," I said. " Well, I have to go out now. I'll call you later."

I hung up. By the time I was dressed I had only fifteen minutes to get to Lisette's.

It was another wonderful date. We got back to Lisette's apartment block at about two-thirty in the morning.

" It was even more fun than last night," she said. " Would you like to come up for a nightcap? I have some very nice brandy."

" I love brandy," I said gravely and followed her up the stairs . . .

As soon as I got back to the hotel next morning, I called Stern again.

" Well, we finally got Lane," he said. " He got fed up with hanging around the hotel and holed up with a redhead."

" Shocking," I said.

"Isn't it?" Stern said. "Well, you hit the jackpot, Milo."

"It's Mack and Bryant?"

"Yeah. Lane identified them. So now we know at least that they were murdered. Now the question is who."

"What's your next step?"

"Another talk with West Carroll, just in case he heard something else that night and forgot about it. And we'll start checking up as much as we can on small boats, particularly those that can be rowed. We might stumble on to something." He paused. "What are you going to do?"

"Just mess around in my usual fashion," I said. "Maybe it'll push Eddie Capo into doing something and then we might start to get somewhere."

"Well, just be sure you don't push Eddie into killing you. Want me to give you a police guard?"

"Hell, no," I said. "And if you try to stick one on me, I'll lose him fast. I'll keep in touch."

I hung up and went to see if the bar was open. It was. I ordered a Canadian Club and water and began to review the case in my mind.

We now knew that the two men had been murdered. Peter Lane had certainly not done it directly, and I was beginning to feel that he hadn't had anything to do with it. His participation was the only thing that the insurance company would really be interested in, but the only way I could clear him was by proving who *had* done it.

It also seemed unlikely that the two men had been mixed up in anything serious enough to get them murdered. So maybe they had stumbled across something on the island that was being watched. But what?

Then there was Eddie Capo and his mysterious boss. And Eddie Capo had worked for the Syndicate most of his adult life. So what was the relationship between the Syndicate and the two men called Bryant and Mack? It just didn't make sense. Yet it had to, because Eddie and his boss were so anxious to keep me from solving the case.

What was the Syndicate operation in New Orleans? I knew that their main operation was probably drugs. But that again brought up the fact that I couldn't see any connection between the two men and drugs.

In the end I gave it up. I was too tired. I went up to my room and stretched out on the bed and went to sleep.

I awoke two hours later feeling better. I was to pick Lisette up for a late lunch.

I went down to Bourbon Street to meet her. She was just arriving at the restaurant as I got there. We went inside and were shown to a table. The waiter went away to bring us martinis.

"I just read in the paper," Lisette said, "about those two men who were killed on some little island and then secretly buried here in the city. Is that the case you're working on, Milo?"

" That's it, honey. And I wish somebody else had it."

" Aren't you making any progress? "

" Not that you'd notice," I said. " Except I have a theory it's tied in with the drug traffic in some way."

" Drugs? " she said, making a face. " I thought the drug traffic was just something the papers thought up when there was a dull day in the news."

" It's real enough," I said. " Remember the guy that was following you the night you came to my apartment? "

She nodded.

" Well, the cops caught up with him. He was a drug peddler. Also a rapist, so it's just as well you came tapping at my door."

She laughed. " Was he really all that? I thought he was just another of those sick characters one meets every so often."

The waiter came with the martinis. I waited until he had gone. " He was sick all right," I said.

" But those men were here looking for pirate treasure," Lisette said. " Maybe they found it and that's why they were killed."

" I doubt it," I said. I looked at her. " I think I'm the only person who has really found a treasure."

" Why, thank you, sir," she said.

" I'm sorry I can't see you tonight," I told her. " I have to work. But I won't make a habit of it."

" It's just as well, Milo," she said. " I couldn't see you tonight anyway."

" Why? " I demanded. " Another guy? "

" No. I have to go somewhere. And I won't be back until the day after tomorrow."

" Hell, you can't do that to me. That will mean about forty-eight hours that I won't see you."

" You'll live through it," she said, reaching over and patting my hand.

We finished our drinks and had lunch. I took her back to her apartment. She promised she'd call me the minute she returned, then I went back to the Royal House. I stopped near the hotel and bought some clothes that would be suitable for tramping over a swampy island.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the hotel bar. Later I had dinner in the dining room and then I went upstairs and changed clothes. I was down at the docks a few minutes before nine.

Narcisse Coillon and Willie Morell arrived a few minutes after I did. Willie was loaded down with various things, including a forked stick, a number of stakes and a clothes-line. Coillon had brought two powerful electric lanterns. We found West Carroll waiting on his boat. We got aboard and he cast off.

" I see," he said, " they found those two guys."

" Yeah," I said, " so I guess they didn't just fall into the quicksand."

" But who would have thought such a thing would happen? " Coillon said.

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" Well," I said, " you and Carroll both know the island and the locality. Don't either of you have any idea how it could have been done? "

" It is for the police to answer such questions," Coillon said. " I have enough to do to make a living without worrying about such things."

" Me too," West Carroll grunted.

" What do you think about it, Willie? " I asked.

" Many bad spirits on the island, sir," he said. I saw the flash of his white teeth in the running lights of the boat.

" Willie's got the answer," Carroll said.

" They're not just on the island," I said. " If I get an afternoon off one day, Carroll, will you take me skin-diving? "

" If you want to hire me," he said.

" You furnish the equipment? " I asked.

" Yeah. Everything but your swimming trunks. You ever done it? "

" A couple of times," I said.

A few minutes later Carroll swung the boat into shore and we were at the island. I couldn't see to tell how large it was, but it didn't seem to be much. Coillon and Willie jumped over the bow of the boat as soon as she stopped and Coillon held the light while I jumped.

" Don't forget to be back here on time," West Carroll said.

" We'll be back," I told him. I turned to Coillon. " Let's go first to about the spot you were when the two men decided to go their own way."

He turned and tramped off to the right with Willie and me following. We went about a hundred yards before Coillon came to a stop. " We were about here and Willie was using his divining stick when they decided to go the other way," he said.

" Where'd they go? " I asked.

" That way." He pointed.

" They had a light? "

" One just like you're carrying."

" Okay," I said. " Let's go on to the spot you were at when you heard one of them yell."

We walked about another two hundred yards. " Guess it was about here," Coillon said. " It took us longer that night because Willie was divining. Right, Willie? "

" Yes, sir. I was goin' along with my divining rod just like this." He lifted the forked stick until it was parallel with the ground and walked slowly forward. Suddenly he seemed to trip and almost fall. " Well, I'll be jinks swing," he said. " For a minute, I thinks we find that treasure. But I guess it was just one of them bad spirits grabbing at the rod. They does that sometimes."

" Maybe you just tripped," I suggested.

" No, sir. That was a spirit. I knows."

" Okay. Which direction did the yell come from? "

" Over there," Coillon said, pointing again.

" Let's go to where they were when the yell came. As near as you can make it."

" Okay." Coillon led the way.

" You wants me to do a little divining as we goes along? " Willie asked as we followed.

" Not especially," I said. " Will that thing really locate anything, Willie? "

" Yes, sir."

" Did you ever find any treasure? "

" Millions of dollars. Old coins, big sparklers, all kinds of stuff. But gotta watch out for them spirits."

" Is that the truth, Willie? " I asked, grinning.

" Yes, sir. I don't tell nothin' but the truth, because God don't like ugly."

" That's a good reason," I admitted. " Are you married, Willie? "

" No, sir. Married got teeth."

" I know a lot of people who would agree with you," I said, " although I doubt if they could put it so succinctly."

" Maybe they just pushes too many words on top of what they is thinking," Willie said.

" I think you got right, Willie," I said. " How much further, Coillon? "

" Not much," he grunted.

" Where are all the quicksand pits? "

" We've passed six or seven already," he said. " And there are even more over on the other side. I'll show them to you." We walked another three or four hundred yards and then Coillon stopped. " I'd guess the yell came from somewhere near here," he said. " And there are two pits right over there."

He flashed his light to the left. I could see what looked like two big mudholes separated by several feet of dry ground with tufts of grass on it. I walked over to the edge of one of them.

I flashed my light down near my feet and something caught my eye. I bent down and looked at it. There was a dark stain on the ground. I couldn't be sure, but it looked very much like blood. I set my lantern against the trunk of a scrawny tree nearby and squatted down, taking out my handkerchief. I scooped up the dirt with the stain and wrapped it in the handkerchief.

" What are you doing? " Coillon asked.

I reached for my lantern and noticed something move on the trunk of the tree. At first I thought it was hair, but looking closer I saw it was only a few strands of twine. I picked up the lantern and walked back.

" What did you say? " I asked Coillon.

" I wondered what you were doing. Did you find something? "

" No," I said. " Nothing to do with the case. I just saw an unusual rock and I got it to take back with me. Sort of a hobby of mine."

He grunted.

"Let's go and look at the shore-line," I said.

Coillon turned and I fell into step with him. It was no more than thirty yards or so to the edge of the water. I walked along it for several yards, flashing the light at my feet. Then I turned and went some distance the other way.

"No sign of any boat being drawn up here," I said.

"Of course not," Coillon said. There was an edge of contempt in his voice. "If anybody did land here, the marks would have been washed out in the past two weeks."

"I suppose so," I admitted. But I continued to walk along looking at the sand.

Then I saw something. It was only a small mark near the edge of the water, but when I squatted down to look at it there was no doubt but what it was part of a heel mark, as though made by a man walking out of the water.

Coillon had stopped beside me and I pointed to it. He bent down to look.

"Somebody's been here," he said. "But I can tell you that wasn't made two weeks ago. More likely a couple of days ago. Probably somebody else looking for treasure."

He was probably right. Anyway, I knew that there wasn't enough of it for the police to take a cast and find anybody. I straightened up.

"Are there really many people who seriously look for pirate treasure?" I asked.

"Thousands of them," Coillon said. "That's what I mostly guide, people looking for treasure. And sure they take it seriously. Maybe seriously enough to kill."

"You think our two men could have been killed for the treasure they never found?"

"They had a map, didn't they?" he said. "I saw it myself. Maybe somebody else wanted it."

"Why?"

"To find the treasure. Maybe those two men flashed the map around New Orleans and maybe somebody followed us out here. Maybe they even got it. You know where that map is right now?"

I didn't. Personally, I thought the whole treasure-hunting idea was crazy, but I had to admit that people went in for even crazier things and sometimes killed over them.

"Maybe you've got something," I said. "And maybe not. We'll see."

Just then there was a shout from Carroll aboard the boat. "Hey, you want to come back with me, you'd better be coming."

"Coming," I shouted back.

We made our way back to the boat.

"Well, did you find any treasure?" Carroll asked as he started the motor.

"Mr. March found a heel-print," Coillon said with no expression in his voice. "And a rock he liked."

Carroll looked at me and I could see the grin on his face. " Well, that's more than most treasure hunters find."

" And less than two hunters found a little more than two weeks ago," I added. " You know damn well I didn't come out here looking for treasure. And I didn't find much of anything—except Coillon's theory that they were killed for their treasure map."

" Maybe," Carroll said. " Some of these nuts that come down here would do anything if they thought they'd find golden doubloons. Tourists! "

" You must do pretty well," I said. " Boats like this aren't available in any of the cut-rate stores I know."

We were silent the rest of the way to the dock. When the boat nosed up against the pier, I paid Carroll for the trip. Then I followed Coillon and Willie off the boat.

" I'll be seeing you in a day or two to go skin-diving," I called back to Carroll.

" You want us any more? " Coillon asked.

" Not tonight," I said. " If I decide to take another trip, I'll get in touch with you." I paid him and Willie what I owed them for their services. " Willie," I said, " if you have a little time, I'd like to learn more about how you fight off the spirits."

" Yes, sir," he said.

" Well—goodnight," Coillon said.

I watched him walk down the pier and disappear into the shadows. Then I started to walk slowly after him with Willie.

" Willie," I said, " you're a big phony."

" What you means? " he asked.

" You know damn well what I mean," I said. " You're putting on a big act with this business of playing the poor, dumb black boy, ignorant and superstitious. I suppose it's good for trade."

" You is pilin' up them words," he said.

" Drop it, Willie," I said. " I suspected you when you picked me up on that martini bit, and I proved it when you knew what I meant tonight when I used a word like ' succinctly '."

He looked at me for a minute, then started chuckling.

" I'm going to school up North," Willie answered, and his voice had taken on a new clarity. " University of Michigan. I come down here and work as a diviner because I can make more money at it than at anything else I would do, and it's putting me through school. The tourists like their black boys to be colourful characters. You won't give me away, will you? "

" I'm a professional snooper, not a professional squealer," I said. " And the name is Milo."

" Well, you have to admit I do the diviner bit pretty good."

" You sure do," I said. " Tell me, Willie—you were raised in New Orleans? "

" Yes."

" How would you like to work for me while I'm here? "

" I'd like it fine, but I'll have to stay in character when we're around other people."

" I understand," I said. " Okay, you start tomorrow. Call me at the Royal House about eleven o'clock."

" Okay." He grinned at me, then turned and started down the little street that ran along the side of the river.

I went straight up the street, figuring I'd find a cab in a couple of blocks. I'd gone about half a block when a car came sweeping up the street behind me. It swung in to the kerb and braked smoothly to a stop beside me. The front door swung open.

It was Eddie Capo. He was holding a gun, firmly pointed at me.

★ ***The second, concluding instalment of "A Hearse of Another Colour" will appear in next month's SUSPENSE, on sale May 27th***

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