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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *As everyone knows (or should know), Carter Dickson and John Dickson Carr are one and the same. Creator of two of the most famous sleuths in contemporary fiction — Dr. Gideon Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale (H.M.) — John Dickson Carr grows in stature with each passing year. Long ago the English critic who calls himself Torquemada rated Mr. Carr as "one of the Big Five." Torquemada probably meant "one of the Big Five" among English writers; actually it is true among* all *writers of the detective story, past and present. And still John Dickson Carr keeps growing. . . . Born in 1905 at Uniontown, Pa., John is the son of Wooda Nicholas Carr, formerly a United States Congressman. "At the age of eight," writes John, "I was hauled off to Washington. While my father thundered in Congress, I stood on a table in the members' anteroom, pinwheeled by a God-awful collar, and recited Hamlet's Soliloquy to certain gentlemen named Thomas Heflin and Pat Harrison and Claude Kitchin." At the same tender age John sat on "Uncle Joe" Cannon's knee listening to ghost stories, learned the great American game of crap-shooting from the legislative page boys, and met Woodrow Wilson. John's earliest fictional heroes were Sherlock Holmes, d'Artagnan, and the Wizard of Oz, and all three exerted subtle influences on his later creative development. J. B. Priestley has said that John possesses "a sense of the macabre that lifts him high above the average run of detective story writers." Your Editor once wrote that "despite his preoccupation with Anglo-materia, Mr. Carr is in no sense an expatriate. Rather, he occupies the enviable and eminent position of being our first literary lend-lease: he is the perfect example in the field of the modern detective story of Anglo-American unity." In April 1947 we published John's first book of short stories about Dr. Fell. Now we bring you John's first short story about H.M. ever to appear in print — one of the most distinguished "firsts" it has been your Editor's privilege to introduce to American readers. "The House in Goblin Wood" won the Special Award of Merit in EQMM's Second Annual Contest — an honor it literally created for itself because of its outstanding excellence. It is safe to predict that "The House in Goblin Wood" will become one of the anthological favorites of all time.*

THE HOUSE IN GOBLIN WOOD

by CARTER DICKSON

IN PALL MALL, that hot July afternoon three years before the war, an open saloon car was drawn up to the curb just opposite the Senior Conservatives' Club.

And in the car sat two conspirators.

It was the drowsy post-lunch hour among the clubs, where only the sun remained brilliant. The Rag lay somnolent; the Athaneum slept outright. But these two conspirators, a dark-haired young man in his early thirties and a fair-haired girl perhaps half a dozen years younger, never moved. They stared intently at the Gothic-like front of the Senior Conservatives'.

"Look here, Eve," muttered the young man, and punched at the steering wheel. "Do you think this is going to work?"

"I don't know," the fair-haired girl confessed. "He absolutely *loathes* picnics."

"Anyway, we've probably missed him."

"Why so?"

"He can't have taken as long over lunch as that!" her companion protested, looking at a wrist-watch. The young man was rather shocked. "It's a quarter to four! Even if . . ."

"Bill! There! Look there!"

Their patience was rewarded by an inspiring sight.

Out of the portals of the Senior Conservatives' Club, in awful majesty, marched a large, stout, barrel-shaped gentleman in a white linen suit.

His corporation preceded him like the figurehead of a man-of-war. His shell-rimmed spectacles were pulled down on a broad nose, all being shaded by a Panama hat. At the top of the stone steps he surveyed the street with a lordly sneer.

"Sir Henry!" called the girl.

"Hey?" said Sir Henry Merrivale.

"I'm Eve Drayton. Don't you remember me? You knew my father!"

"Oh, ah," said the great man.

"We've been waiting here a terribly long time," Eve pleaded. "Couldn't you see us for just five minutes? — The thing to do," she whispered to her companion, "is to keep him in a good humor. Just keep him in a good humor!"

As a matter of fact, H.M. was in a good humor, having just triumphed over the Home Secretary in an argument. But not even his own mother could have guessed it. Majestically, with the same lordly sneer, he began in grandeur to descend the steps of the Senior Conservatives'. He did this, in fact, until his foot encountered an unnoticed object lying some three feet from the bottom.

It was a banana skin.

"Oh, dear!" said the girl.

Now it must be stated with regret that in the old days certain urchins, of what were then called the "lower orders," had a habit of placing such objects on the steps in the hope that some eminent statesman would take a toss on his way to Whitehall. This was a venial but deplorable practice, probably accounting for what Mr. Gladstone said in 1882.

In any case, it accounted for what Sir Henry Merrivale said now.

From the pavement, where H.M. landed in a seated position, arose in H.M.'s bellowing voice such a torrent of profanity, such a flood of invective

and vile obscenities, as has seldom before blasted the holy calm of Pall Mall. It brought the hall-porter hurrying down the steps, and Eve Drayton flying out of the car.

Heads were now appearing at the windows of the Atheneum across the street.

"Is it all right?" cried the girl, with concern in her blue eyes. "Are you hurt?"

H.M. merely looked at her. His hat had fallen off, disclosing a large bald head; and he merely sat on the pavement and looked at her.

"Anyway, H.M., get up! Please get up!"

"Yes, sir," begged the hall-porter, "for heaven's sake get up!"

"Get up?" bellowed H.M., in a voice audible as far as St. James' Street. "Burn it all, how *can* I get up?"

"But why not?"

"My behind's out of joint," said H.M. simply. "I'm hurt awful bad. I'm probably goin' to have spinal dislocation for the rest of my life."

"But, sir, people are looking!"

H.M. explained what these people could do. He eyed Eve Drayton with a glare of indescribable malignancy over his spectacles.

"I suppose, my wench, *you're* responsible for this?"

Eve regarded him in consternation.

"You don't mean the banana skin?" she cried.

"Oh, yes, I do," said H.M., folding his arms like a prosecuting counsel.

"But we — we only wanted to invite you to a picnic!"

H.M. closed his eyes.

"That's fine," he said in a hollow voice. "All the same, don't you think it'd have been a subtler kind of hint just to pour mayonnaise over my head or shove ants down the back of my neck? Oh, lord love a duck!"

"I didn't mean that! I meant . . ."

"Let me help you up, sir," interposed the calm, reassuring voice of the dark-haired and blue-chinned young man who had been with Eve in the car.

"So you want to help too, hey? And who are *you?*"

"I'm awfully sorry!" said Eve. "I should have introduced you! This is my *fiancé*. Dr. William Sage."

H.M.'s face turned purple.

"I'm glad to see," he observed, "you had the uncommon decency to bring along a doctor. I appreciate that, I do. And the car's there, I suppose, to assist with the examination when I take off my pants?"

The hall-porter uttered a cry of horror.

Bill Sage, either from jumpiness and nerves or from sheer inability to keep a straight face, laughed loudly.

"I keep telling Eve a dozen times a day," he said, "that I'm not to be called 'doctor.' I happen to be a surgeon —"

(Here H.M. really did look alarmed.)

"— but I don't think we need operate. Nor, in my opinion," Bill gravely addressed the hall-porter, "will it be necessary to remove Sir

Henry's trousers in front of the Senior Conservatives' Club."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"We had an infernal nerve to come here," the young man confessed to H.M. "But I honestly think, Sir Henry, you'd be more comfortable in the car. What about it? Let me give you a hand up?"

Yet even ten minutes later, when H.M. sat glowering in the back of the car and two heads were craned round towards him, peace was not restored.

"All right!" said Eve. Her pretty, rather stolid face was flushed; her mouth looked miserable. "If you won't come to the picnic, you won't. But I did believe you might do it to oblige me."

"Well . . . now!" muttered the great man uncomfortably.

"And I did think, too, you'd be interested in the other person who was coming with us. But Vicky's — difficult. She won't come either, if you don't."

"Oh? And who's this other guest?"

"Vicky Adams."

H.M.'s hand, which had been lifted for an oratorical gesture, dropped to his side.

"Vicky Adams? That's not the gal who . . .?"

"Yes!" Eve nodded. "They say it was one of the great mysteries, twenty years ago, that the police failed to solve."

"It was, my wench," H.M. agreed sombrely. "It was."

"And now Vicky's grown up. And we thought if you of all people went along, and spoke to her nicely, she'd tell us what really happened on that night."

H.M.'s small, sharp eyes fixed disconcertingly on Eve.

"I say, my wench. What's your interest in all this?"

"Oh, reasons." Eve glanced quickly at Bill Sage, who was again punching moodily at the steering wheel, and checked herself. "Anyway, what difference does it make now? If you won't go with us . . ."

H.M. assumed a martyred air.

"I never said I *wasn't* goin' with you, did I?" he demanded. (This was inaccurate, but no matter.) "Even after you practically made a cripple of me, I never said I *wasn't* goin'?" His manner grew flurried and hasty. "But I got to leave now," he added apologetically. "I got to get back to my office."

"We'll drive you there, H.M."

"No, no, no," said the practical cripple, getting out of the car with surprising celerity. "Walkin' is good for my stomach if it's not so good for my behind. I'm a forgivin' man. You pick me up at my house tomorrow morning. G'bye."

And he lumbered off in the direction of the Haymarket.

It needed no close observer to see that H.M. was deeply abstracted. He remained so abstracted, indeed, as to be nearly murdered by a taxi at the Admiralty Arch; and he was halfway down Whitehall before a familiar voice stopped him.

"Afternoon, Sir Henry!"

Burly, urbane, buttoned up in blue serge, with his bowler hat and his boiled blue eye, stood Chief Inspector Masters.

"Bit odd," the Chief Inspector remarked affably, "to see you taking a constitutional on a day like this. And how are you, sir?"

"Awful," said H.M. instantly. "But that's not the point. Masters, you crawlin' snake! You're the very man I wanted to see."

Few things startled the Chief Inspector. This one did.

"You," he repeated, "wanted to see *me?*"

"Uh-huh."

"And what about?"

"Masters, do you remember the Victoria Adams case about twenty years ago?"

The Chief Inspector's manner suddenly changed and grew wary.

"Victoria Adams case?" he ruminated. "No, sir, I can't say I do."

"Son, you're lyin'! You were sergeant to old Chief Inspector Rutherford in those days, and well I remember it!"

Masters stood on his dignity.

"That's as may be, sir. But twenty years ago . . ."

"A little girl of twelve or thirteen, the child of very wealthy parents, disappeared one night out of a country cottage with all the doors and windows locked on the inside. A week later, while everybody was havin' screaming hysterics, the child reappeared again: through the locks and bolts, tucked up in her bed as usual. And to this day nobody's ever known what really happened."

There was a silence, while Masters shut his jaws hard.

"This family, the Adamses," persisted H.M., "owned the cottage, down Aylesbury way, on the edge of Goblin Wood, opposite the lake. Or was it?"

"Oh, ah," growled Masters. "It was."

H.M. looked at him curiously.

"They used the cottage as a base for bathin' in summer, and ice-skatin' in winter. It was black winter when the child vanished, and the place was all locked up inside against drafts. They say her old man nearly went loopy when he found her there a week later, lying asleep under the lamp. But all she'd say, when they asked her where she'd been, was, '*I don't know.*'"

Again there was a silence, while red buses thundered through the traffic press of Whitehall.

"You've got to admit, Masters, there was a flaming public rumpus. I say: did you ever read Barrie's *Mary Rose?*"

"No."

"Well, it was a situation straight out of Barrie. Some people, y'see, said that Vicky Adams was a child of faërie who'd been spirited away by the pixies . . ."

Whereupon Masters exploded.

He removed his bowler hat and made remarks about pixies, in detail, which could not have been bettered by H. M. himself.

"I know, son, I know." H.M. was soothing. Then his big voice sharpened. "Now tell me. Was all this talk strictly true?"

"What talk?"

"Locked windows? Bolted doors? No attic-trap? No cellar? Solid walls and floor?"

"Yes, sir," answered Masters, regaining his dignity with a powerful effort, "I'm bound to admit it *was* true."

"Then there wasn't any jiggery-pokery about the cottage?"

"In your eye there wasn't," said Masters.

"How d'ye mean?"

"Listen, sir." Masters lowered his voice. "Before the Adamses took over that place, it was a hideout for Chuck Randall. At that time he was the swellest of the swell mob; we lagged him a couple of years later. Do you think Chuck wouldn't have rigged up some gadget for a getaway? Just so! Only . . ."

"Well? Hey?"

"We couldn't find it," grunted Masters.

"And I'll bet that pleased old Chief Inspector Rutherford?"

"I tell you straight: he was fair up the pole. Especially as the kid herself was a pretty kid, all big eyes and dark hair. You couldn't help trusting her story."

"Yes," said H.M. "That's what worries me."

"Worries you?"

"Oh, my son!" said H.M. dismally. "Here's Vicky Adams, the spoiled daughter of dotin' parents. She's supposed to be 'odd' and 'fey.' She's even encouraged to be. During her adolescence, the most impressionable time of her life, she gets wrapped round with the gauze of a mystery that people talk about even yet. What's that woman like now, Masters? What's that woman like now?"

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Miss Vicky Adams in her softest voice.

She said this just as William Sage's car, with Bill and Eve Drayton in the front seat, and Vicky and H.M. in the back seat, turned off the main road. Behind them lay the smoky-red roofs of Aylesbury, against a brightness of late afternoon. The car turned down a side road, a damp tunnel of greenery, and into another road which was little more than a lane between hedgerows.

H.M. — though cheered by three good-sized picnic hampers from Fortnum & Mason, their wickerwork lids bulging with a feast — did not seem happy. Nobody in that car was happy, with the possible exception of Miss Adams herself.

Vicky, unlike Eve, was small and dark and vivacious. Her large light-brown eyes, with very black lashes, could be arch and coy; or they could be dreamily intense. The late Sir James Barrie might have called her a sprite. Those of more sober views would have recognized a different quality: she had an inordinate sex-appeal, which was as palpable as a

physical touch to any male within yards. And despite her smallness, Vicky had a full voice like Eve's. All these qualities she used even in so simple a matter as giving traffic directions.

"First right," she would say, leaning forward to put her hands on Bill Sage's shoulders. "Then straight on until the next traffic light. Ah, clever boy!"

"Not at all, not at all!" Bill would disclaim, with red ears and rather an erratic style of driving.

"Oh, yes, you are!" And Vicky would twist the lobe of his ear, playfully, before sitting back again.

(Eve Drayton did not say anything. She did not even turn round. Yet the atmosphere, even of that quiet English picnic-party, had already become a trifle hysterical.)

"Dear Sir Henry!" murmured Vicky, as they turned down into the deep lane between the hedgerows. "I do wish you wouldn't be so materialistic! I do, really. Haven't you the tiniest bit of spirituality in your nature?"

"Me?" said H.M. in astonishment. "I got a very lofty spiritual nature. But what I want just now, my wench, is grub. — Oi!"

Bill Sage glanced round.

"By that speedometer," H.M. pointed, "we've now come forty-six miles and a bit. We didn't even leave town until people of decency and sanity were having their tea. Where are we *going?*"

"But didn't you know?" asked Vicky, with wide-open eyes. "We're going to the cottage where I had such a dreadful experience when I was a child."

"Was it such a dreadful experience, Vicky dear?" inquired Eve.

Vicky's eyes seemed far away.

"I don't remember, really. I was only a child, you see. I didn't understand. I hadn't developed the power for myself then."

"What power?" H.M. asked sharply.

"To dematerialize," said Vicky. "Of course."

In that warm sun-dusted lane, between the hawthorn hedges, the car jolted over a rut. Crockery rattled.

"Uh-huh. I see," observed H.M. without inflection. "And where do you go, my wench, when you dematerialize?"

"Into a strange country. Through a little door. You wouldn't understand. Oh, you *are* such Philistines!" moaned Vicky. Then, with a sudden change of mood, she leaned forward and her whole physical allurement flowed again towards Bill Sage. "*You* wouldn't like me to disappear, would you, Bill?"

(Easy! Easy!)

"Only," said Bill, with a sort of wild gallantry, "if you promised to reappear again straightaway."

"Oh, I should have to do that." Vicky sat back. She was trembling. "The power wouldn't be strong enough. But even a poor little thing like me might be able to teach you a lesson. Look there!"

And she pointed ahead.

On their left, as the lane widened, stretched the ten-acre gloom of what is fancifully known as Goblin Wood. On their right lay a small lake, on private property and therefore deserted.

The cottage — set well back into a clearing of the wood so as to face the road, screened from it by a line of beeches — was in fact a bungalow of rough-hewn stone, with a slate roof. Across the front of it ran a wooden porch. It had a seedy air, like the long yellow-green grass of its front lawn. Bill parked the car at the side of the road, since there was no driveway.

"It's a bit lonely, ain't it?" demanded H.M. His voice boomed out against that utter stillness, under the hot sun.

"Oh, yes!" breathed Vicky. She jumped out of the car in a whirl of skirts. "That's why *they* were able to come and take me. When I was a child."

"They?"

"Dear Sir Henry! Do I need to explain?"

Then Vicky looked at Bill.

"I must apologize," she said, "for the state the house is in. I haven't been out here for months and months. There's a modern bathroom, I'm glad to say. Only paraffin lamps, of course. But then," a dreamy smile flashed across her face, "you won't need lamps, will you? Unless. . . ."

"You mean," said Bill, who was taking a black case out of the car, "unless you disappear again?"

"Yes, Bill. And promise me you won't be frightened when I do."

The young man uttered a ringing oath which was shushed by Sir Henry Merrivale, who austerely said he disapproved of profanity. Eve Drayton was very quiet.

"But in the meantime," Vicky said wistfully, "let's forget it all, shall we? Let's laugh and dance and sing and pretend we're children! And surely our guest must be even more hungry by this time?"

It was in this emotional state that they sat down to their picnic.

H.M., if the truth must be told, did not fare too badly. Instead of sitting on some hummock of ground, they dragged a table and chairs to the shaded porch. All spoke in strained voices. But no word of controversy was said. It was only afterwards, when the cloth was cleared, the furniture and hampers pushed indoors, the empty bottles flung away, that danger tapped a warning.

From under the porch Vicky fished out two half-rotted deck-chairs, which she set up in the long grass of the lawn. These were to be occupied by Eve and H.M., while Vicky took Bill Sage to inspect a plum tree of some remarkable quality she did not specify.

Eve sat down without comment. H.M., who was smoking a black cigar opposite her, waited some time before he spoke.

"Y' know," he said, taking the cigar out of his mouth, "you're behaving remarkably well."

"Yes." Eve laughed. "Aren't I?"

"Are you pretty well acquainted with this Adams gal?"

"I'm her first cousin," Eve answered simply. "Now that her parents are dead, I'm the only relative she's got. I know *all* about her."

From far across the lawn floated two voices saying something about wild strawberries. Eve, her fair hair and fair complexion vivid against the dark line of Goblin Wood, clenched her hands on her knees.

"You see, H.M.," she hesitated, "there was another reason why I invited you here. I — I don't quite know how to approach it."

"I'm the old man," said H.M., tapping himself impressively on the chest. "You tell me."

"Eve, darling!" interposed Vicky's voice, crying across the ragged lawn. "Coo-ee! Eve!"

"Yes, dear?"

"I've just remembered," cried Vicky, "that I haven't shown Bill over the cottage! You don't mind if I steal him away from you for a little while?"

"No, dear! Of course not!"

It was H. M., sitting so as to face the bungalow, who saw Vicky and Bill go in. He saw Vicky's wistful smile as she closed the door after them. Eve did not even look round. The sun was declining, making fiery chinks through the thickness of Goblin Wood behind the cottage.

"I won't let her have him," Eve suddenly cried. "I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Does she want him, my wench? Or, which is more to the point, does he want her?"

"He never has," Eve said with emphasis. "Not really. And he never will."

H. M., motionless, puffed out cigar smoke.

"Vicky's a faker," said Eve. "Does that sound catty?"

"Not necessarily. I was just thinkin' the same thing myself."

"I'm patient," said Eve. Her blue eyes were fixed. "I'm terribly, terribly patient. I can wait years for what I want. Bill's not making much money now, and I haven't got a bean. But Bill's got great talent under that easy-going manner of his. He *must* have the right girl to help him. If only . . ."

"If only the elfin sprite would let him alone. Hey?"

"Vicky acts like that," said Eve, "towards practically every man she ever meets. That's why she never married. She says it leaves her soul free to commune with other souls. This occultism —"

Then it all poured out, the family story of the Adamses. This repressed girl spoke at length, spoke as perhaps she had never spoken before. Vicky Adams, the child who wanted to attract attention, her father Uncle Fred and her mother Aunt Margaret seemed to walk in vividness as the shadows gathered.

"I was too young to know her at the time of the 'disappearance,' of course. But, oh, I knew her after-

wards! And I thought . . ."

"Well?"

"If I could get *you* here," said Eve, "I thought she'd try to show off with some game. And then you'd expose her. And Bill would see what an awful faker she is. But it's hopeless! It's hopeless!"

"Looky here," observed H. M., who was smoking his third cigar. He sat up. "Doesn't it strike you those two are being a rummy-awful long time just in lookin' through a little bungalow?"

Eve, roused out of a dream, stared back at him. She sprang to her feet. She was not now, you could guess, thinking of any disappearance.

"Excuse me a moment," she said curtly.

Eve hurried across to the cottage, went up on the porch, and opened the front door. H. M. heard her heels rap down the length of the small passage inside. She marched straight back again, closed the front door, and rejoined H. M.

"All the doors of the rooms are shut," she announced in a high voice. "I really don't think I ought to disturb them."

"Easy, my wench!"

"I have absolutely no interest," declared Eve, with the tears coming into her eyes, "in what happens to either of them now. Shall we take the car and go back to town without them?"

H. M. threw away his cigar, got up, and seized her by the shoulders.

"I'm the old man," he said, leering like an ogre. "Will you listen to me?"

"No!"

"If I'm any reader of the human dial," persisted H.M., "that young feller's no more gone on Vicky Adams than I am. He was scared, my wench. Scared." Doubt, indecision crossed H.M.'s face. "I dunno what he's scared of. Burn me, I don't! But . . ."

"Hoy!" called the voice of Bill Sage.

It did not come from the direction of the cottage.

They were surrounded on three sides by Goblin Wood, now blurred with twilight. From the north side the voice bawled at them, followed by crackling in dry undergrowth. Bill, his hair and sports coat and flannels more than a little dirty, regarded them with a face of bitterness.

"Here are her blasted wild strawberries," he announced, extending his hand. "Three of 'em. The fruitful (excuse me) result of three quarters of an hour's hard labor. I absolutely refuse to chase 'em in the dark."

For a moment Eve Drayton's mouth moved without speech.

"Then you weren't . . . in the cottage all this time?"

"In the cottage?" Bill glanced at it. "I was in that cottage," he said, "about five minutes. Vicky had a woman's whim. She wanted some wild strawberries out of what she called the 'forest.' "

"Wait a minute, son!" said H.M. very sharply. "You didn't come out that front door. Nobody did."

"No! I went out the back door! It opens straight on the wood."

"Yes. And what happened then?"

"Well, I went to look for these damned . . ."

"No, no! What did *she* do?"

"Vicky? She locked and bolted the back door on the inside. I remember her grinning at me through the glass panel. She —"

Bill stopped short. His eyes widened, and then narrowed, as though at the impact of an idea. All three of them turned to look at the rough-stone cottage.

"By the way," said Bill. He cleared his throat vigorously. "By the way, have you seen Vicky since then?"

"No."

"This couldn't be . . . ?"

"It could be, son," said H.M. "We'd all better go in there and have a look."

They hesitated for a moment on the porch. A warm, moist fragrance breathed up from the ground after sunset. In half an hour it would be completely dark.

Bill Sage threw open the front door and shouted Vicky's name. That sound seemed to penetrate, reverberating, through every room. The intense heat and stuffiness of the cottage, where no window had been raised in months, blew out at them. But nobody answered.

"Get inside," snapped H.M. "And stop yowlin'." The Old Maestro was nervous. "I'm dead sure she didn't get out by the front door; but we'll just make certain there's no slippin' out now."

Stumbling over the table and chairs they had used on the porch, he fastened the front door. They were in a narrow passage, once handsome with parquet floor and pine-paneled walls, leading to a door with a glass panel at the rear. H.M. lumbered forward to inspect this door and found it locked and bolted, as Bill had said.

Goblin Wood grew darker.

Keeping well together, they searched the cottage. It was not large, having two good-sized rooms on one side of the passage, and two small rooms on the other side, so as to make space for bathroom and kitchenette. H.M., raising fogs of dust, ransacked every inch where a person could possibly hide.

And all the windows were locked on the inside. And the chimney-flues were too narrow to admit anybody.

And Vicky Adams wasn't there.

"Oh, my eye!" breathed Sir Henry Merrivale.

They had gathered, by what idiotic impulse not even H.M. could have said, just outside the open door of the bathroom. A bath-tap dripped monotonously. The last light through a frosted-glass window showed three faces hung there as though disembodied.

"Bill," said Eve in an unsteady voice, "this is a trick. Oh, I've longed for her to be exposed! This is a trick!"

"Then where is she?"

"H.M. can tell us! Can't you, H.M.?"

"Well . . . now," muttered the great man.

Across H.M.'s Panama hat was a

large black handprint, made there when he had pressed down the hat after investigating a chimney. He glowered under it.

"Son," he said to Bill, "there's just one question I want you to answer in all this hokey-pokey. When you went out pickin' wild strawberries, will you swear Vicky Adams didn't go with you?"

"As God is my judge, she didn't," returned Bill, with fervency and obvious truth. "Besides, how the devil could she? Look at the lock and bolt on the back door!"

H.M. made two more violent black handprints on his hat.

He lumbered forward, his head down, two or three paces in the narrow passage. His foot half-skidded on something that had been lying there unnoticed, and he picked it up. It was a large, square section of thin, waterproof oilskin, jagged at one corner.

"Have you found anything?" demanded Bill in a strained voice.

"No. Not to make any sense, that is. But just a minute!"

At the rear of the passage, on the left-hand side, was the bedroom from which Vicky Adams had vanished as a child. Though H.M. had searched this room once before, he opened the door again.

It was now almost dark in Goblin wood.

He saw dimly a room of twenty years before: a room of flounces, of lace curtains, of once-polished mahogany, its mirrors glimmering against white-papered walls. H.M. seemed especially interested in the windows.

He ran his hands carefully round the frame of each, even climbing laboriously up on a chair to examine the tops. He borrowed a box of matches from Bill; and the little spurts of light, following the rasp of the match, rasped against nerves as well. The hope died out of his face, and his companions saw it.

"H.M.," Bill said for the dozenth time, "where is she?"

"Son," replied H.M. despondently, "I don't know."

"Let's get out of here," Eve said abruptly. Her voice was a small scream. "I kn-know it's all a trick! I know Vicky's a faker! But let's get out of here. For God's sake let's get out of here!"

"As a matter of fact," Bill cleared his throat, "I agree. Anyway, we won't hear from Vicky until tomorrow morning."

"*Oh, yes, you will,*" whispered Vicky's voice out of the darkness.

Eve screamed.

They lighted a lamp.

But there was nobody there.

Their retreat from the cottage, it must be admitted, was not very dignified.

How they stumbled down that ragged lawn in the dark, how they piled rugs and picnic-hampers into the car, how they eventually found the main road again, is best left undescribed.

Sir Henry Merrivale has since

sneered at this — "a bit of a goosy feeling; nothin' much," — and it is true that he has no nerves to speak of. But he can be worried, badly worried; and that he was worried on this occasion may be deduced from what happened later.

H.M., after dropping in at Claridge's for a modest late supper of lobster and *Pêche Melba*, returned to his house in Brook Street and slept a hideous sleep. It was three o'clock in the morning, even before the summer dawn, when the ringing of the bedside telephone roused him.

What he heard sent his blood pressure soaring.

"Dear Sir Henry!" crooned a familiar and sprite-like voice.

H.M. was himself again, full of gall and bile. He switched on the bedside lamp and put on his spectacles with care, so as adequately to address the 'phone.

"Have I got the honor," he said with dangerous politeness, "of addressin' Miss Vicky Adams?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I sincerely trust," said H.M., "you've been havin' a good time? Are you materialized yet?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Where are you now?"

"I'm afraid," there was coy laughter in the voice, "that must be a little secret for a day or two. I want to teach you a really *good* lesson. Blessings, dear."

And she hung up the receiver.

H.M. did not say anything. He climbed out of bed. He stalked up and down the room, his corporation majestic under an old-fashioned nightshirt stretching to his heels. Then, since he himself had been waked up at three o'clock in the morning, the obvious course was to wake up somebody else; so he dialed the home number of Chief Inspector Masters.

"No, sir," retorted Masters grimly, after coughing the frog out of his throat, "I do *not* mind you ringing up. Not a bit of it!" He spoke with a certain pleasure. "Because I've got a bit of news for you."

H.M. eyed the 'phone suspiciously.

"Masters, are you trying to do me in the eye again?"

"It's what you always try to do to me, isn't it?"

"All right, all right!" growled H.M. "What's the news?"

"Do you remember mentioning the Vicky Adams case yesterday?"

"Sort of. Yes."

"Oh, ah! Well, I had a word or two round among our people. I was tipped the wink to go and see a certain solicitor. He was old Mr. Fred Adams's solicitor before Mr. Adams died about six or seven years ago."

Here Masters's voice grew triumphant.

"I always said, Sir Henry, that Chuck Randall had planted some gadget in that cottage for a quick getaway. And I was right. The gadget was . . ."

"You were quite right, Masters. The gadget was a trick window."

The telephone, so to speak, gave a start.

"What's that?"

"A trick window." H.M. spoke patiently. "You press a spring. And the whole frame of the window, two leaves locked together, slides down between the walls far enough so you can climb over. Then you push it back up again."

"*How in lum's name do you know that?*"

"Oh, my son! They used to build windows like it in country houses during the persecution of Catholic priests. It was a good enough *second* guess. Only . . . it won't work."

Masters seemed annoyed. "It won't work now," Masters agreed. "And do you know why?"

"I can guess. Tell me."

"Because, just before Mr. Adams died, he discovered how his darling daughter had flummoxed him. He never told anybody except his lawyer. He took a handful of four-inch nails, and sealed up the top of that frame so tight an orangoutang couldn't move it, and painted 'em over so they wouldn't be noticed."

"Uh-huh. You can notice 'em now."

"I doubt if the young lady herself ever knew. But, by George!" Masters said savagely. "I'd like to see anybody try the same game now!"

"You would, hey? Then will it interest you to know that the same gal has just disappeared out of the same house AGAIN?"

H.M. began a long narrative of the facts, but he had to break off because the telephone was raving.

"Honest, Masters," H.M. said seriously, "I'm not joking. She didn't get out through that window. But she did get out. You'd better meet me," he gave directions, "tomorrow morning. In the meantime, son, sleep well."

It was, therefore, a worn-faced Masters who went into the Visitors' Room at the Senior Conservatives' Club just before lunch on the following day.

The Visitors' Room is a dark sepulchral place, opening on an air-well, where the visitor is surrounded by pictures of dyspeptic-looking gentlemen with beards. It has a pervading mustiness of wood and leather. Though whiskey and soda stood on the table, H.M. sat in a leather chair far away from it, ruffling his hands across his bald head.

"Now, Masters, keep your shirt on!" he warned. "This business may be rummy. But it's not a police matter — yet."

"I know it's not a police matter," Masters said grimly. "All the same, I've had a word with the Superintendent at Aylesbury."

"Fowler?"

"You know him?"

"Sure. I know everybody. Is he goin' to keep an eye out?"

"He's going to have a look at that ruddy cottage. I've asked for any telephone calls to be put through here. In the meantime, sir —"

It was at this point, as though diabolically inspired, that the telephone rang. H.M. reached it before Masters.

"It's the old man," he said, unconsciously assuming a stance of grandeur. "Yes, yes! Masters is here, but he's drunk. You tell me first. What's that?"

The telephone talked thinly.

"Sure I looked in the kitchen cupboard," bellowed H.M. "Though I didn't honestly expect to find Vicky Adams hidin' there. What's that? Say it again! Plates? Cups that had been . . ."

An almost frightening change had come over H.M.'s expression. He stood motionless. All the posturing went out of him. He was not even listening to the voice that still talked thinly, while his eyes and his brain moved to put together facts. At length (though the voice still talked) he hung up the receiver.

H.M. blundered back to the centre table, where he drew out a chair and sat down.

"Masters," he said very quietly, "I've come close to makin' the silliest mistake of my life."

Here he cleared his throat.

"I shouldn't have made it, son. I really shouldn't. But don't yell at me for cuttin' off Fowler. I can tell you now how Vicky Adams disappeared. And she said one true thing when she said she was going into a strange country."

"How do you mean?"

"She's dead," answered H.M.

The word fell with heavy weight into that dingy room, where the bearded faces looked down.

"Y'see," H.M. went on blankly, "a lot of us were right when we thought Vicky Adams was a faker. She was. To attract attention to herself, she played that trick on her family with the hocused window. She's lived and traded on it ever since. That's what sent me straight in the wrong direction. I was on the alert for some *trick* Vicky Adams might play. So it never occurred to me that this elegant pair of beauties, Miss Eve Drayton and Mr. William Sage, were deliberately conspirin' to murder *her*."

Masters got slowly to his feet.

"Did you say . . . murder?"

"Oh, yes."

Again H.M. cleared his throat.

"It was all arranged beforehand for me to be a witness. They knew Vicky Adams couldn't resist a challenge to disappear, especially as Vicky always believed she could get out by the trick window. They wanted Vicky to *say* she was goin' to disappear. They never knew anything about the trick window, Masters. But they knew their own plan very well.

"Eve Drayton even told me the motive. She hated Vicky, of course. But that wasn't the main point. She was Vicky Adams's only relative; she'd inherit an awful big scoopful of money. Eve said she could be patient. (And, burn me, how her eyes meant it when she said that!) Rather than risk any slightest suspicion of murder, she was willing to wait seven years until a disappeared person can be presumed dead.

"Our Eve, I think, was the fiery drivin' force of that conspiracy. She

was only scared part of the time. Sage was scared all of the time. But it was Sage who did the real dirty work. He lured Vicky Adams into that cottage, while Eve kept me in close conversation on the lawn . . ."

H.M. paused.

Intolerably vivid in the mind of Chief Inspector Masters, who had seen it years before, rose the picture of the rough-stone bungalow against the darkling wood.

"Masters," said H.M., "why should a bath-tap be dripping in a house that hadn't been occupied for months?"

"Well?"

"Sage, y'see, is a surgeon. I saw him take his black case of instruments out of the car. He took Vicky Adams into that house. In the bathroom he stabbed her, he stripped her, and *he dismembered her body in the bath tub.* — Easy, son!"

"Go on," said Masters without moving.

"The head, the torso, the folded arms and legs, were wrapped up in three large square pieces of thin transparent oilskin. Each was sewed up with coarse thread so the blood wouldn't drip. Last night I found one of the oilskin pieces he'd ruined when his needle slipped at the corner. Then he walked out of the house, with the back door still standin' unlocked, to get his wild-strawberry alibi."

"Sage went out of there," shouted Masters, "leaving the body in the house?"

"Oh, yes," agreed H.M.

"But where did he leave it?"

H.M. ignored this.

"In the meantime, son, what about Eve Drayton? At the end of the arranged three quarters of an hour, she indicated there was hanky-panky between her *fiancé* and Vicky Adams. She flew into the house. But what did she do?

"She walked to the back of the passage. I heard her. *There she simply locked and bolted the back door.* And then she marched out to join me with tears in her eyes. And these two beauties were ready for investigation."

"Investigation?" said Masters. "*With that body still in the house?*"

"Oh, yes."

Masters lifted both fists.

"It must have given young Sage a shock," said H.M., "when I found that piece of waterproof oilskin he'd washed but dropped. Anyway, these two had only two more bits of hokey-pokey. The 'vanished' gal had to speak — to show she was still alive. If you'd been there, son, you'd have noticed that Eve Drayton's got a voice just like Vicky Adams's. If somebody speaks in a dark room, carefully imitatin' a coy tone she never uses herself, the illusion's goin' to be pretty good. The same goes for a telephone.

"It was finished, Masters. All that had to be done was remove the body from the house, and get it far away from there . . .

"But that's just what I'm asking you, sir! Where was the body all this time? And who in blazes *did* remove

the body from the house?"

"All of us did," answered H.M.

"What's that?"

"Masters," said H.M., "aren't you forgettin' the picnic hampers?"

And now, the Chief Inspector saw, H.M. was as white as a ghost. His next words took Masters like a blow between the eyes.

"Three good-sized wickerwork hampers, with lids. After our big meal on the porch, those hampers were shoved inside the house where Sage could get at 'em. He had to leave most of the used crockery behind, in the kitchen cupboard. But three wickerwork hampers from a picnic, and three butcher's parcels to go inside 'em. I carried one down to the car myself. It felt a bit funny . . ."

H.M. stretched out his hand, not steadily, towards the whiskey.

"Y'know," he said, "I'll always wonder if I was carrying the — head."

ABOUT THE STORY: *Eighteen prizes were awarded in EQMM's Second Annual Contest. The eighteen prize-winning stories represent nearly every type of detective-crime tale: the pure detective story, both deductive and active; the pure crime story, both psychological and physical; the realistic story and the fantastic story; the trick story; the mystical; the humorous; the orthodox and the unorthodox; the tried-and-true and the experimental; the down-to-earth and the supernatural; the story of characterization, of plot, of mood, and blendings of all three; the story of sheer suspense; the literary; the intuitional; the urban and surburban, the native and the exotic, the plain and the fancy.*

From the very beginning we determined to select one story and treat it editorially as a study in technique, as a lesson in craftsmanship. The obvious choice among the eighteen prize-winners — indeed, the obvious choice among all detective-story writers — is Carter Dickson's "The House in Goblin Wood." Why obvious? Because Carter Dickson's first short story about H.M. constitutes in itself, as Dorothy L. Sayers once wrote about Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," almost a complete manual of detective-story theory and practice. It is the perfect story to re-read, re-examine, and re-appraise.

Before we go back and indicate the manner in which the clues were planted, before we reveal the author's superb mastery of form, one point should be made clear. "The House in Goblin Wood" is not only typical John Dickson Carr-Carter Dickson but it is Carr-Dickson at the peak of his prowess. It offers what John, in a dedication to your Editor, once described as the particular kind of "miracle" problem which is perhaps the most fascinating gambit in detective fiction. All that and a "locked room"; all that and John's scrupulous fairplay; all that and John's un-

excelled atmosphere of the eerie, of the supernatural that in the end becomes all too natural, of the "impossible" crime that in the end becomes all too possible. All that and heaven too . . .

Take, for example, the author's introduction of his chief character, the large, stout, barrel-shaped gentleman with the majestic air, the lordly sneer, and the fire-and-brimstone tongue — the great man himself, H.M. How do we first meet him? Slipping on a banana peel and taking a fearful cropper. Why did the author choose this method of introduction? For sheer characterization? Yes. For comic relief? Yes. But there was more to it than that: there was a far deeper purpose than mere humanized characterization. This almost slapstick scene served an important plot *purpose. For what did we actually learn as the result of H.M.'s prattfall? That Bill Sage was not merely a doctor — he was a surgeon. And that fact is probably the most vital clue in the entire story. Yet consider how unobtrusively, how irrelevantly, with what finesse the author slipped this pivotal clue into the story! This deliberate, yet totally fair, misdirection is perfect criminological camouflage.*

A little later the author tells us openly that there were three large picnic hampers — both the number and size are material clues. Still later we are informed, with almost disarming frankness, that Bill Sage took a black case out of the car. Did you connect this fact with the surgeon-fact and ask yourself why Bill Sage needed his "black case" on an ordinary picnic in the country? You should have — the fabric of deduction is now assuming a discernible pattern.

Next we are told that after eating the goodies provided by Fortnum & Mason, "the cloth was cleared, the furniture and hampers pushed indoors." This places the three crucial, indispensable hampers (as H.M. himself says in the third from the last paragraph of the story) "inside the house where Sage could get at 'em." The deductive clot thickens — all by the inconspicuous insertion of a simple, unsuspicious word like "indoors"!

The clues keep emerging, one by one, some brazenly, some stealthily — bits and pieces, all necessary to complete the final mosaic of irrefutable truth. Eve states that she is Vicky's "only relative" — handing the reader the whole motive on a silver platter. Eve admits she is "terribly, terribly patient" — an essential facet of characterization, making credible the fact that "she was willing to wait seven years until a disappeared person can be presumed dead." H.M. (and the reader) hears Eve's "heels rap down the length of the small passage inside" — telling us skillfully and deceptively that it was Eve who could have locked and bolted the back door on the inside. "The bath-tap dripped monotonously" — the adverb artfully draws attention away from the revealing clue. "The large, square section of thin,

waterproof oilskin, jagged at one corner" — what a daring giveaway, and yet how much did it give away?

The author's sense of timing is flawless. When H.M.'s mystification reaches its most profound state, along comes Chief Inspector Masters with a simple, all-inclusive solution — the revelation that one of the rooms in the cottage was equipped with a "trick window." So that's the answer to the impossible disappearance! — just another "gadget"! But the author is merely playing cat-and-mouse with his reader: instead of evoking the supernatural and then dispelling it (the usual procedure, and good enough for most practitioners), the author evokes the natural, only to dispel that and sink the story even deeper in the supernatural. The "trick window" is a straw-man, set up to be promptly demolished. The reader is now convinced beyond all doubt that no obvious solution — therefore, no unsatisfying solution — will be palmed off on him, as a disappointing anticlimax after so meticulous and cumulative a build-up. That, dear reader, is dramatic timing.

And finally, the report that the cupboard contained "Plates? Cups that had been . . ." Here, admittedly, the author skated on thin ice. The words were picked with infinite care — they do not say too much, nor do they say too little. If you think it over, they tell exactly enough — the last little push, added to all the other evidence, to upset the apple-cart and place the reader in possession of all the facts necessary to the one and only correct solution. . . .

How does it feel to look behind the scenes of creative detective-story writing? Do you realize now the enormous intricacies of dovetailing a tightly-knit plot, with no loose ends, and with the intellectual hallmark of the modern detective story, complete fairness-to-the-reader? Do you realize now the talent and integrity that go into the cutting of a truly fine detective-diamond? We hope so — detective-story writers are still held too lightly, especially by critics who have never tried to write one. But master craftsmen like John Dickson Carr, with the help of so many other unwept, unhonored, and unsung heroes of the genre, will ultimately raise the detective story to its just and proper position in literature, win for it the respect and honest admiration so long denied to one of the most difficult literary forms ever invented by the mind of man. . .

In the delicate balance between romance and reality, the detective story mirrors at least one phenomenon of our present civilization. This is the Age of Specialization, and many private detectives in fiction, especially the amateurs and pure-in-heart, achieve some of their most brilliant deductions through the use of specialized knowledge. For example, Victor L. Whitechurch's Thorpe Hazell is a wizard at solving railway crimes. Percival Wilde's Bill Parmelee, a reformed card-sharp, is consultant par excellence in any kind of gambling mystery. Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados, the first modern blind sleuth, has leaned more than once on his expert knowledge of numismatics to crack peculiarly difficult cases, and it is merely a matter of criminological record that Dorothy L. Sayers's ineffable Lord Peter Wimsey owes some of his most glittering successes to his astonishing familiarity with rare books and rare wines. But perhaps the most unusual expert of all is Margery Allingham's Mr. Albert Campion. He has a special bloodhound bailiwick all his own. As Superintendent Oates himself expressed it, Campion is Scotland Yard's Society Expert, and in the case that follows (never previously published in the United States) Mr. Campion proves again that while the upperworld is far from being an immovable object, the underworld is equally far from being an irresistible force. The clash is never a detectival deadlock so long as Albert Campion, the talented toff 'tec, remains Society Expert Extraordinary.

THE NAME ON THE WRAPPER

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

MR. ALBERT CAMPION was one of those useful if at times exasperating people who remain interested in the world in general at three o'clock on a chilly winter's morning. When he saw the overturned car, dark and unattended by the grass verge, therefore, he pulled up his own and climbed out on to the road.

His lean figure wrapped in a dark overcoat was rendered slightly top-heavy by the fact that he wore over it a small traveling-rug arranged as a cape. This sartorial anachronism was not of his own devising. His dinner hostess, old Mrs. Laverock, was notorious both for her strong will and her fear of throat infections, and when Mr. Campion had at last detached himself from her husband's brandy and reminiscences she had appeared at the top of the Jacobean staircase, swaddled in pink velvet, with the rug.

"Either that young man wears this round his throat or he does not leave this house."

The edict went forth with more authority than ever her husband had been able to dispense from the bench, and Mr. Campion had gone out into the night for a fifty-mile run back to Piccadilly wearing the rug, with his silk hat perched precariously above it.

Now its folds, which reached his nose, prevented him from seeing that part of the ground which lay directly at his feet, so that he kicked the ring and sent it wheeling down the moonlit road before he saw it. The colored flash in the pale light caught his attention and he went after it. It lay in his hand a few minutes later, as unattractive a piece of jewelery as ever he had been called upon to consider. It was a circle of different-colored stones mounted on heavy gold, and was certainly unusual, if not particularly beautiful or valuable. He thrust it absently into his coat pocket before he resumed his investigation of the abandoned car.

He had just decided that the departed driver had been either drunk or certifiably insane in the moment of disaster, when the swift crackle of bicycle wheels on the frost behind him made him swing round, and he found himself confronted by another caped figure who came to a wobbling and suspicious halt at his elbow.

"Now, now, there's no use you putting up a fight. I ain't alone, and if I were I'm more'n a match for you."

The effect of these two thundering lies uttered in a pleasant country voice rendered unnaturally high by what was no doubt, excusable nervousness, delighted Mr. Campion, but unfortunately the folds of his hostess's rug hid his disarming smile and the country policeman stood gripping his bicycle as if it were a weapon.

"You're caught!" he said, his East Anglian accent bringing the final word out in a roar of triumph not altogether justified. "Take off your mask."

"My what?" Mr. Campion's startled question was muffled by his drapery, and he pulled it down to let his chin out.

"That's right," said the constable with a return of confidence, as his prisoner appeared so tractable. "Now, what have you been a-doing of? You'll have to come down to see the Inspector."

Mr. Campion's astonishment began to grow visible and convincing, for, after all, the country bobby is not as a rule a night bird of prey.

"Look here," he said patiently, "this pathetic-looking mess here isn't *my* car."

"No, I know that's not." The triumphant note crept into the constable's voice again. "I seen the number as soon as I come up."

"Since you've observed so much," continued Mr. Campion politely, "would it be tasteless to inquire if you've noticed that?"

He swung round as he spoke and pointed to his own car, a few yards down the road.

"Eh?" The Law was evidently taken by surprise. "Oh, you ran into him, did you? Where is he?"

Campion sighed and embarked on

the slow process of convincing his captor that the car ahead belonged to him, his license was in order, and that he was properly and expensively insured. He also gave his own name and address, Colonel Laverock's name and address, and the time at which he had left the house. Finally he was conducted to his own vehicle and grudgingly permitted to depart.

"I don't really know as how you oughtn't to have come along to find the Inspector," said the constable finally as he leaned on the low nearside door. "You didn't ought to have been masked. I'll have to report it. That rug might have been to protect your throat, but then that might not."

"That cape of yours may be buttoned up against the cold or it may be worn simply to disguise the fact that your tunic is loosened at the throat," retorted Mr. Campion, and letting in the clutch, he drove away, leaving a startled countryman with the conviction that he had actually encountered a man with X-ray eyes at last.

On the bypass Mr. Campion ran into a police cordon, and once again was subjected to a searching inquiry concerning his license. Having been, in his opinion, held up quite long enough while the police fooled about looking for stolen cars, he said nothing about the overturned one, but drove peacefully home to his flat in Bottle Street and went to bed. His ridiculous encounter with the excitable constable had driven all recollection of the ring from his head and he thought no more about it until it appeared on his breakfast table the following morning.

His man had discovered it in the coat pocket and, deducing the conventional worst, had set it out with an air of commiseration not altogether tactful; anxious, no doubt, that his employer should remember first thing in the morning any lady who might have refused him on the night before.

Campion put aside *The Times* with regret and took up the ring. By morning light it was even less beautiful than it had appeared under the moon. It was a woman's size and was heavy in the baroque fashion that has returned after fifty or sixty years. Some of the stones, which ran all the way round the hoop, were very good and some were not; and as he sat looking at it his eyebrows rose. He was still admiring it as a curio rather than a work of art when his old friend Superintendent Stanislaus Oates rang up from Scotland Yard. He sounded heavily amused.

"So you've been running round the country in disguise, have you?" he said cheerfully. "Like to come in for a chat this morning?"

"Not particularly. What for?"

"I want an explanation for a telephoned report which has come in this morning. We've been called in by the Colnewych police on a very interesting little case. I'm going over the stuff now. I'll expect you in half an hour."

"All right." Mr. Campion did not sound enthusiastic. "Shall I wear my mask?"

"Come with your head in a bag, if you like," invited the Superintendent

vulgarly. "Keep your throat wrapped up. There's nothing like an old sock, they say. Place the toe upon the windpipe and . . ."

Mr. Campion rang off.

Half an hour later, however, he presented himself at the Superintendent's office and sat, affable and exquisite, in the visitor's chair. Oates dismissed his secretary and leaned over the desk. His gray face, which was usually so lugubrious, had brightened considerably as Campion appeared and now he had some difficulty in hiding a grin of satisfaction.

"Driving round the country with a topper over your eyes and a blanket round your neck at three o'clock in the morning," he said. "You *must* have been lit. Still, I won't go into that. I'll be magnanimous. What do you know about this business?"

"I'm innocent," announced his visitor flatly. "Whatever it is, I haven't done it. I went out to dinner with a wealthy and childless godparent. When I left, my godparent's wife, who once had tonsilitis as a child and has never forgotten it, lent me a small rug. As she will tell you, if you ask her, she safety-pinned this firmly to the back of my neck. On my way home I passed a very interestingly overturned car, and while I was looking at it a large red-faced ape dressed up as a policeman attempted to arrest me. That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

"Then you don't know anything about the crime?" The Superintendent was disappointed but unabashed. "I'll tell you. You never know, you might be useful."

"It has happened," murmured Mr. Campion.

"It's a case of robbery," went on Oates, ignoring the interruption. "A real big haul. The assessors are on to it now but, roughly speaking, it's in the neighborhood of twenty thousand pounds' worth of jewelery and little boxes."

"Little boxes?"

"Snuff-boxes and patch-boxes, enamel things covered with diamonds and whatnot." Oates sounded contemptuous and Campion laughed.

"People of ostentatious tastes?" he ventured.

"No, it's a collection of antiques," said Oates seriously, and looked up to find Campion grinning. "You're a bit la-di-blinking-dah today, aren't you?" he protested. "What is it? The effects of your night on the tiles? Look here, you pay attention, my lad. You were found nosing round the wreckage of a car thought to have been driven by the thief or thieves, and the very least you can do is try and make yourself useful. Last night there was a bit of a do at St. Brede's Priory, about five miles away from your godpapa's place. It was a largish show, and the place, which seems to be about as big as the British Museum and rather like it, was full to bursting."

Campion stared at him.

"You're talking about the Hunt Ball at old Allenbrough's private house, I take it?" he put in mildly.

"Then you do know about it?"

"I don't know about the robbery. I know about the Ball. It's an annual affair. Old Porky Allenbrough's ball is almost an institution, like the Lord Mayor's Show — it's very like that in general effect, too, now I come to think of it. I used to attend regularly when I was young."

Oates sniffed.

"Well, anyway, there seem to have been close on five hundred people gathered together there," he said. "They were all over the house and grounds, cars going and coming all the time. A real party, the local Super says it was. All we know is that about two o'clock, just when the crowd was thinning a bit, her ladyship goes up to her room and finds her jewelry gone and her famous collection of antiques pinched out of the glass-fronted cupboard in the boudoir next door to her bedroom.

"All the servants were downstairs watching the fun, of course, and hadn't seen a thing. The local police decided it must have been a professional job and they flung a cordon round the whole district. They figured that a crook had taken advantage of the general excitement to burgle the place in the ordinary way. They were very smart on the job, but they didn't lay hands on a single 'pro.' In fact, the only suspicious character who showed up during the whole of the evening was a lad in a top hat with a plaid blanket ——"

"What about that overturned car?" interrupted his visitor.

"I'm coming to that," said Oates severely. "Wait a minute. That car belonged to a very respectable couple who went to the dance and stayed at it. They were just going to leave when the alarm was given and it was then they discovered the car had been stolen. The gardeners who were acting as car-park attendants didn't remember it going, but then, as they said, cars were moving in and out all the evening. People would drive 'em off a little way to sit out in. It was a real old muddle by the sound of it. The Super told me on the 'phone that in his opinion every manservant on the place was as tight as a lord the whole evening."

"And every lord as tight as a drum, no doubt," added Mr. Campion cheerfully. "Very likely. It sounds like the good old days. I see. Well, the suggestion is that the car was pinched by the burglar, who used it to escape in. What did he arrive in? A howdah?"

Oates scratched his chin.

"Yes," he said. "That's the trouble. The police are in a bit of a difficulty. You see, her ladyship is howling for the return of her valuables, but neither she nor her husband will admit for an instant that one of their guests might be the culprit. That was the awkward thing at the time. A watch was kept on those guests who left after the discovery of the theft, but no one was searched, of course."

Mr. Campion was silent for a moment.

"These shows are done in parties," he remarked at last. "People take a

party to a ball like that. Porky and his missis would invite a hundred friends or so and ask them each to bring a party. It's a private affair, you see, not an ordinary Hunt Ball. Allenbrough calls it the Whippersfield Hunt Ball because he likes to see a pink coat or two about. He's M.F.H. and can do what he likes, and it's a wealthy hunt, anyway. Yes, I see the trouble. I don't envy the local super if he has to go round to all old Allenbrough's pals and say: 'Excuse me, but did you include a professional jewel-thief in the party you took to the ball at St. Brede's?' "

"I know. That's what it amounts to." Oates was gloomy. "Got any ideas? You're our Society Expert."

"Am I? Well, in that capacity let me advise you that such a course would provoke endless correspondence both to the Chief Constable and the heavier daily Press. You're sure this was a professional job?"

"Yes. The jewelry was in a wall-safe which had been very neatly cracked and the show cupboard had been opened by an expert. Also there were no fingerprints."

"No trademarks, either, I expect?"

"No, it was a simple job for a 'pro.' It didn't call for anything sensational. It was simply far too neat for an amateur, that's all. We're rounding up all the likelies, of course, but with such a field to choose from the right man may easily slip the stuff before we can get round to him."

Mr. Campion rose.

"You have all my sympathy. It's not what you yourself would call a picnic, is it? Still, I'll ferret round a bit and let you have any great thoughts that may come to me. By the way, what do you think of that?"

He crossed the room as he spoke and laid the many-stoned ring on the desk.

"Not very much," said Oates, turning it over with a dubious forefinger. "Where did you get it?"

"I picked it up in the street," said Mr. Campion truthfully. "I ought to take it to a police station, but I don't think I will. I'd rather like to give it back to the owner myself."

"Do what you like with it, my lad." Oates was mildly exasperated. "Keep your mind on the important jewelry, because now Scotland Yard has taken over the case it means the Metropolitan area pays for the inquiry; don't forget that."

Campion was still looking at the ring.

"Anyway, I showed it to you," he said, and wandered towards the door.

"Don't waste your time over trifles," Oates called after him. "You can have that ring. If anybody asks you, say I said you could."

It would have appeared that Mr. Campion took the Superintendent's final offer seriously, for he replaced the trinket carefully in his waistcoat pocket before turning into the nearest telephone booth, where he rang up that unfailing source of Society gossip, old Lady Laradine. After listening to her for a full two minutes, while she

asked after every relative he had in the world, he put the question he had in mind.

"Who is Gina Gray? I've heard the name, but I can't place her."

"My dear boy! So pretty! Just the girl for you. Oh no, perhaps not. I've just remembered she's engaged. Announced last month. Still, she's very charming." The old voice, which was strong enough to penetrate any first-night babel in London, rattled on, and Campion felt for another coin.

"I know," he shouted. "I know she's lovely, or at least I guessed she was. But who, *who* is she? Also, of course, where?"

"What? Oh, *where* is she? With her aunt, of course. She's spending the winter there. She's so young, Albert. Straight down from the shires. The father owns a row of Welsh mountains or something equally romantic."

"Who?" bellowed Mr. Campion through the din. "Who, my good gramophone, is the aunt?"

"What did you call me, Albert?" The famous voice was dangerously soft.

"Gramophone," said Mr. Campion, who was a great believer in the truth when the worst had come to the worst.

"Oh, I thought you said . . . never mind." Lady Laradine, who had several grandchildren and regarded each new arrival as a personal insult, was mollified. "I do talk very fast, I know, especially on the 'phone. It's my exuberant spirit. You want to know who the aunt is. Why, it's Dora Carrington. You know her."

"I do," said Campion with relief. "I didn't realize she had a niece."

"Oh, but she has; just out of the nest. Presented last year. A sweetly pretty child. Such a pity she's engaged. Tell me, have you any information about Wivenhoe's son? No? Then what about the Pritchards?"

She went on and on with the relentless energy of the very bored, and it was not until Mr. Campion ran out of coins that the monologue ended.

It was late in the morning, therefore, when Mr. Campion presented himself at the charming Lowndes Square house which Dora Carrington had made her London home.

Miss Gina Gray only decided to see him after a considerable pause during which, he felt, old Pollard the butler must have worked hard vouching for his desirability.

She came into the lounge at last, looking much as he had thought she might, very young and startled, with frank, miserable eyes, but dark, curling hair instead of the sleek blonde he had somehow expected.

He introduced himself apologetically.

"It's rather odd turning up like this out of the blue," he said, "but you'll have to forgive me. Perhaps you could think of me as a sort of long-lost elderly relative. I might have been your uncle, of course, if Dora had taken it into her head to marry me instead of Tubby, not that the idea ever occurred to either of us at the time, of course. Don't get that into

your head. I only say it might have happened so that you'll see the sort of reliable bird I am."

He paused. The alarm had died out of her eyes and she even looked wanly amused. He was relieved. Idiotic conversation, although invaluable, was not a luxury which he often permitted himself now that the thirty-five-year-old landmark was passed.

"It's very nice of you to come," she said in a polite, small voice. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. I came to return something I think you've lost, that's all." He fished in his pocket and drew out the ring. "That's yours, isn't it?" he said gently.

He had expected some reaction, but not that it would be so violent. She stood trembling before him, every tinge of color draining out of her face.

"Where did you get it?" she whispered, and then, pulling herself together with a desperate courage which he rather admired, she shook her head. "It's not mine. I've never seen it before. I don't know who you are either, and I — I don't want to."

"Oh, Gina Gray!" said Mr. Campion. "Gina Gray, don't be silly. I'm the original old gentleman with the kind heart. Don't deny the irrefutable."

"It's not mine." To his horror he saw tears in her eyes. "It's not mine. It's not! It's not! Go away!"

She turned and made for the door, her slender, brown-suited figure looking very small and fugitive as she ran.

Mr. Campion was still debating his next move when Dora came in, a vision of fox-furs and smiles.

"My dear!" she said. "You haven't been to see us for years and years and now you turn up when I'm due out to lunch in fifteen minutes. Where have you been?"

"About," said Mr. Campion truthfully, reflecting that it was all wrong that the people one never had time to visit were always one's oldest and closest friends.

They drank a cocktail together and were still reminiscing happily when Dora's luncheon escort arrived. In the end Mr. Campion showed his hostess out of her own house and was standing rather forlornly on the pavement, waving after her departing car, when he observed a familiar figure stumping dejectedly down the steps which he had so recently descended himself.

"Jonathan!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

Mr. Jonathan Peters started violently, as if he had been caught sleepwalking, and looked up with only a faint smile on his gloomy young face.

"Hallo, Campion," he said. "I didn't see you. I've been kicking my heels in the breakfast-room. Hell! let's go and have a drink."

In the end, after some half-hearted bickering, they went along to that home from home, the Junior Greys, and Mr. Campion who, in company with the rest of the world, considered himself to be the best listener on earth, persuaded his young acquaintance to unburden himself.

Jonathan was a younger brother of the two Peterses who had been Campion's Cambridge companions, and in the ordinary way the ten years' difference in their ages would have raised an insurmountable barrier between them; but at the moment Jonathan was a man with a sorrow.

"It's Gina," he said. "We're engaged, you know."

"Really?" Mr. Campion was interested. "What's the row?"

"Oh, I suppose it'll be all right in the end." The young man sounded wistful and only partially convinced. "I mean, I think she'll come round. Anyway, I hope so. What annoys me is that I'm the one with the grievance, and yet here I am dithering around as though it were all my fault." He frowned and shook his head over the unreasonableness of life in general.

"You were at Porky Allenbrough's show last night, I suppose?" Mr. Campion put the question innocently and was rewarded.

"Yes, we both were. I didn't see you there. There was a tremendous crush and it might have been a really good bust if it hadn't been for one thing and another. I've got a genuine grouch, you know." Mr. Peters's young face was very earnest, and under the influence of half a pint of excellent Chablis he came out with the full story.

As far as Mr. Campion could make out from his somewhat disjointed account, the history was a simple one. Miss Gina Gray, while enjoying the London season, had yet not wished to give up all strenuous physical exercise and so had formed the habit of hunting with the Whippersfield five or six times a month. On these occasions she had been entertained by a relation of Dora Carrington's husband who lived in the district and had very kindly stabled her horses for her. Her custom had been to run down by car early in the morning, returning to London either at night or on the following day.

In view of all this hospitality, it had been arranged that she should go to the Priory Ball with her host and his party, while Jonathan should attend with another group of people from a different house. The arrangement between the couple had been, therefore, that, while Gina should arrive at the ball with her own crowd, Jonathan should have the privilege of driving her back before rejoining his own host and hostess.

"It was a bit thick," he concluded resentfully. "Gina turned up with a crowd of people I didn't know, including a lad whom nobody seemed to have seen before. She danced with him most of the evening and finally he drove her home himself. He left me a message to say so, the little toot. I felt fed up and I imagine I may have got pretty tight, but anyway, when I arrived at the town house this morning ready to forgive and forget like a hero, she wouldn't even see me."

"Infuriating," agreed Mr. Campion, his eyes thoughtful. "Did you find out who this interloping tick happened to be?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders.

"I did hear his name . . . Robertson, or something. Apparently he's been hunting fairly regularly this season and he came along with Gina's lot. That's all I know."

"What did he look like?"

Jonathan screwed up his eyes in an effort of recollection.

"An ugly blighter," he said at last. "Ordinary height, I think. I don't remember much about him except that I disliked his face."

It was not a very helpful description, but Mr. Campion sat pondering over it for some time after the despondent Jonathan had wandered off to keep an afternoon appointment.

Suddenly he sat up, a new expression on his lean, good-humored face.

"Rocks," he said under his breath. "Rocks Denver . . ." and he made for the nearest telephone.

It was nine o'clock that evening when Superintendent Oates came striding into his office, and flinging his hat upon the desk, turned to survey the elegant, dinner-jacketed visitor who had been patiently awaiting his arrival for the best part of half an hour.

"Got him," he said briefly. "The lads shadowed him to Peachy Dale's club in Rosebery Avenue, and then, of course, we knew we were safe. Peachy may be a rotten fence, but he's the only man in London who would have handled those snuff-boxes, now I come to think of it. It was a lovely little cop. We gave him time to get settled and then closed in on all five entrances. There he was with the stuff in a satchel. It was beautiful. I've never seen a man so astounded in my life."

He paused and a reminiscent smile floated over his sad face.

"A little work of art, that's what that arrest was, a little work of art."

"That's fine, then," said his visitor, rising. "I think I'll drift."

"No you don't, my lad." The superintendent was firm. "You don't do conjuring tricks under my nose without an explanation."

Mr. Campion sighed.

"My dear good Enthusiast, what more can you possibly want?" he protested. "You've got the man and you've got the swag. That's enough for a conviction — and Porky's blessing."

"Very likely, but what about my dignity?" Oates was severe. "It may be enough for the Bench, but it's not enough for me. Who do you think you are, the Home Office?"

"Heaven forbid," said Mr. Campion piously. "I thought you might express your ingratitude in this revolting way. Look here, if I explain, my witness doesn't go into Court. Is that a bet?"

The superintendent held out his hand.

"May I be struck pink," he said sincerely. "I mean it."

Since he knew from experience that this was an oath that Oates held peculiarly sacred, Mr. Campion relented.

"Give me twenty minutes," he said. "I'll go and fetch her."

Oates groaned. "Another woman!" he exploded. "You find 'em, don't you? All right, I'll wait."

Miss Gina Gray looked so genuinely pathetic as she came into the office clinging to Mr. Campion's arm a little over half an hour later that Oates, who had an unexpected weakness for youth and beauty, was inclined to be mollified. Campion observed the first signs of his heavily avuncular mood with relief.

"It's perfectly all right," he said to the girl at his side. "I've given you my word you'll be kept clean out of it. This solemn-looking person will be struck a fine hunting pink if he attempts to make me break it. That's written in the unchanging stars. Isn't that so, Superintendent?"

Oates regarded him with fishy eyes.

"You go and put on your mask," he said. "Now, what is all this? What's been going on?"

Gina Gray required a little gentle pumping, but beneath Campion's expert treatment she began to relax, and within ten minutes she was pouring out her story.

"I met the man I knew as Tony Roberts — you say his real name is Rocks Denver — in the hunting field," she said. "He always seemed to be out when I was, and he talked to me as people do out hunting. I didn't know him — he wasn't a friend, but I got used to him being about. He rode very well and he helped me out of a mess once or twice. You know that sort of acquaintance, don't you?"

Oates nodded and shook his head. He was smiling.

"We do," he said. "And then what?"

"Then nothing," declared Miss Gray innocently. "Nothing at all until last night. We were all getting ready to go to the Priory in three or four cars when he 'phoned me at Major Carrington's, where I was staying, and said his car had broken down in the village and he'd got to leave it and would it be awful cheek of him to ask if one of us would give him a lift to the hall. I said of course, naturally, and when we met him trudging along, rather disconsolate in full kit, we stopped and picked him up."

Oates glanced at Campion triumphantly.

"So that's how he got in?" he said. "Neat, eh? I see, Miss Gray. And then when you got your acquaintance to the party you didn't like to leave him cold. Is that how it was?"

The girl blushed.

"Well, he *was* rather out of everything and he *did* dance very well," she admitted apologetically. "He hadn't talked much about himself, and it was only then I realized he didn't live near and didn't know everybody else. His — his manners were all right."

Oates laughed. "Oh, yes, Rocky's very presentable," he agreed. "He's one of the lads who let his old school down, I'm afraid. Well, then what?"

She hesitated and turned to Campion.

"I've been so incredibly silly," she murmured. It was a direct appeal, and the Superintendent was not unchivalrous.

"There's nothing new in that, Miss," he observed kindly. "We all make errors of judgment at times. You missed him for a bit, I suppose?"

"Yes, I danced with several people and I'd half forgotten him when he turned up at my elbow with a raincoat over his arm. He took me out on the terrace and put it over my shoulders and said — oh, a lot of silly things about being there alone without a soul to speak to. He said he'd found one man he knew, but that he was wrapped up with some woman or other, and suggested that we borrow this friend's car and go for a run round. It was getting rather late and I was livid with Jonathan anyway, so I said all right."

"Why were you livid with Jonathan?" Campion put the question curiously and Miss Gray met his eyes.

"He got jealous as soon as we arrived and drowned his sorrows rather too soon."

"I see." Campion smiled as he began to understand Mr. Peters's astonishing magnanimity, which had hitherto seemed somewhat too saintly to be strictly in character.

"Well, then . . ." Oates went back to the main story, ". . . off you went in the car."

Gina took a deep breath.

"Yes," she said steadily. "We drove around for a bit, but not very far. The car wasn't his, you see, and he had trouble with it. It started all right, but it conked out down the lane and he was fooling about with it for a long time. He got so frightfully angry that I began to feel — well, rather uncomfortable. Also I was cold. He had taken the raincoat off my shoulders and flung it in the back seat, and I remembered that it was heavy and warm, so I turned to get it. Just then he closed the hood and came back. He snatched the coat and swore at me, and I began to get thoroughly frightened. I tried to persuade him to take me back, but he just drove on down the lane towards the main road. It was then that we passed the three policemen on motorcycles racing towards the Priory. That seemed to unnerve him completely and he turned off towards Major Carrington's house, with the car limping and misfiring all the time. I didn't know what to do. I was far too frightened to make a row, you see, because I was a guest at the Major's, and — well, there was Jonathan and Aunt Dora to consider and — oh, you do understand, don't you?"

"I think so," said Campion gravely. "When did you take off your ring?"

She gaped at him.

"Why, at that moment," she said. "How did you know? It's a stupid trick I have when I'm nervous. It was rather loose, and I pulled it off and started to play with it. He looked down and saw me with it and seemed to lose his head. He snatched it out of

my hand and demanded to know where I'd got it, and then, when he saw it clearly by the dashboard light, he suddenly pitched it out of the window in disgust. It was so utterly unexpected that I forgot where I was and made a leap for it across him. Then — then I'm afraid the car turned over."

"Well, well," said Oates inadequately. "And so there you were, so to speak."

She nodded gravely. "I was so frightened," she said. "Fortunately we were quite near the house, but my dress was spoilt and I was shaken and bruised, and I just set off across the fields and let myself in by the stable gate. He came after me, and we had a dreadful sort of row in whispers, out in the drive. He wanted me to put him up for the night, and didn't seem to realize that I was a visitor and couldn't dream of doing such a thing. In the end I showed him where the saddle-room was, off the stable yard. There was a stove there and some rugs and things. Then I sneaked up to my own room and went to bed. This morning I pretended that I'd had a headache and got somebody to give me a lift home. He'd gone by then, of course."

"Of course he had. Hopped on one of those country 'buses before the servants stirred," Oates put in with satisfaction. "He relied on you to hold your tongue for your own sake."

"There wasn't much else he could do in the circumstances," observed Campion mildly. "Once he had the howling misfortune to pick a sick car all his original plans went to pieces. He used Miss Gray to get the stuff safely out of the house in the usual false pocket of the raincoat. Then his idea must have been to drive her a mile or two down the road and strand her, while he toddled off to Town alone. The breakdown delayed him and, once he saw the police were about, he knew the cordon would go round and that he was trapped, so he had to think out other tactics. That exercise seems to have unnerved him entirely. I can understand him wanting to get into the house. After all, it'd be a first-class hiding-place in the circumstances. Yes, well, that's fairly clear now, I hope, Superintendent. Here's your ring, Miss Gray."

As Gina put out her hand for the trinket her eyes grew puzzled.

"You're a very frightening person," she said. "How on earth did you know it was mine?"

"Quite." Oates was frankly suspicious. "If you've never met this young lady before, I don't see how you guessed it belonged to her."

Campion stood regarding the girl with genuine surprise.

"My dear child," he said, "surely you know yourself? Who had this ring made for you?"

"No one. It was left to me. My father's sister died about six months ago and told me in a letter always to wear it for luck. It doesn't seem to have brought me much."

For a moment Campion seemed completely bewildered.

After a while, however, he laughed.

"Your father's sister? Were you named after her?"

"Yes, I was." Miss Gray's dark eyes were widening visibly. "How do you know all this? You're frightening."

Campion took the ring between his thumb and forefinger and turned it slowly round, while the stones winked and glittered in the hard electric light.

"It's such a simple trick I hardly like to explain and spoil the effect," he said. "About fifty years ago it was a fairly common conceit to give young ladies rings like this. You see, I knew this was Gina Gray's ring because it had her name on the wrapper, as it were. Look, start at the little gold star and what have you? Garnet, Indicolite — that's an indigo variety of tourmaline, Superintendent — Nephrite, Amethyst, then another smaller gold star and Garnet again, Rose Quartz, Agate, and finally Yellow Sapphire. There you are. I thought you must know. G.I.N.A. G.R.A.Y., all done according to the best sentimental jewelry tradition. As soon as I came to consider the ring in cold blood it was obvious. Look at it, Oates. What man in his senses would put that collection of stones together if he didn't mean something by them?"

The superintendent sat turning the ring round and round with an expression of grudging astonishment on his gray face. When at last he did look up he expressed himself unexpectedly.

"Fancy that," he said. "Dear me."

When Miss Gray had departed in a taxicab, he was more explicit.

"She had her name on it," he said after a moment or two of purely decorative imagery. "She had her dear little name on it! Very smart of you, Mr. Campion. Don't let it go to your head. I don't know if I'm quite satisfied yet. Who put you on to Rocky? Why Rocky? Why not any other of the fifty first-class jewel thieves in London?"

Campion grinned.

"You said he was a 'pro,' " he explained. "That was the first step. Then young Jonathan Peters told me Gina had met the fellow hunting regularly, and so, putting two and two together, I arrived at Rocky. Rocky is an anachronism in the underworld; he can ride. How many jewel thieves do you know who can ride well enough to turn up at a hunt, pay their caps, and not make an exhibition of themselves? Hunting over strange country isn't trotting round the Row, you know."

Oates shook his head sadly.

"You depress me," he said. "First you think of the obvious and then you go and say it, and then you're proved right. It's very irritating. The ring was a new one on me, though. D'you know, I wouldn't mind giving my wife one of those. It's a pretty idea. She'd like it. Besides," he added seriously, "it might come in useful sometime. You never know."

In the end Campion sat down and worked it out for him.

Anthony Boucher's translations of Georges Simenon's short stories are remarkable for their literary and spiritual fidelity — of tone, mood, and understanding. The last is illustrated by Mr. Boucher's editorial note accompanying the manuscript of "The Little House at Croix-Rousse." The good Tony reminds us that we should never lose sight of Simenon's versatility as a detective-story craftsman: one knows his irony, his humanity, his atmosphere, even his humor. In the story which follows the talented creator of Inspector Maigret presents the simon-pure puzzle at its simon-purest — and all in less than 2000 words.

Mr. Boucher admits that "The Little House at Croix-Rousse" is not one of Simenon's top stories, but he likes it for its neat precision of puzzle and form and for its revelation of Joseph Leborgne, the armchair detective, at his most unpleasant. We think you will like it too — perhaps not for the same reasons, but for reasons of your own. . . .

THE LITTLE HOUSE AT CROIX-ROUSSE

by GEORGES SIMENON

(translated by Anthony Boucher)

I HAD never seen Joseph Leborgne at work before. I received something of a shock when I entered his room that day.

His blond hair, usually plastered down, was in complete disorder. The individual hairs, stiffened by brilliantine, stuck out all over his head. His face was pale and worn. Nervous twitches distorted his features.

He threw a grudging glare at me which almost drove me from the room. But since I could see that he was hunched over a diagram, my curiosity was stronger than my sensitivity. I advanced into the room and took off my hat and coat.

"A fine time you've picked!" he grumbled.

This was hardly encouraging. I stammered, "A tricky case?"

"That's putting it mildly. Look at that paper."

"It's the plan of a house? A small house?"

"The subtlety of your mind! A child of four could guess that. You know the Croix-Rousse district in Lyons?"

"I've passed through there."

"Good! This little house lies in one of the most deserted sections of the district — not a district, I might add, which is distinguished by its liveliness."

"What do these black crosses mean, in the garden and on the street?"

"Policemen."

"Good Lord! And the crosses mark where they've been killed?"

"Who said anything about dead policemen? The crosses indicate policemen who were on duty at these several spots on the night of the eighth-to-ninth. The cross that's heavier than the others is Corporal Manchard."

I dared not utter a word nor move a muscle. I felt it wisest not to interrupt Leborgne, who was favoring the plan with the same furious glares which he had bestowed upon me.

"Well? Aren't you going to ask me *why* policemen were stationed there — six of them, no less — on the night of the eighth-to-ninth? Or maybe you're going to pretend that you've figured it out?"

I said nothing.

"They were there because the Lyons police had received, the day before, the following letter:

"*Dr. Luigi Ceccioni will be murdered, at his home, on the night of the eighth-to-ninth instant.*"

"And the doctor had been warned?" I asked at last.

"No! Since Ceccioni was an Italian exile and it seemed more than likely that the affair had political aspects, the police preferred to take their precautions without warning the party involved."

"And he was murdered anyway?"

"Patience! Dr. Ceccioni, fifty years of age, lived alone in this wretched little hovel. He kept house for himself and ate his evening meal every day in an Italian restaurant nearby. On the eighth he left home at seven o'clock, as usual, for the restaurant. And Corporal Manchard, one of the best police officers in France and a pupil, to boot, of the great Lyons criminologist Dr. Eugène Locard, searched the house from basement to attic. He proved to himself that no one was hidden there and that it was impossible to get in by any other means than the ordinary doors and windows visible from the outside. No subterranean passages nor any such hocus-pocus. Nothing out of a novel. . . . You understand?"

I was careful to say nothing, but Leborgne's vindictive tone seemed to accuse me of wilfully interpolating hocus-pocus.

"No one in the house! Nothing to watch but two doors and three windows! A lesser man than Corporal Manchard would have been content to set up the watch with only himself and one policeman. But Manchard requisitioned five, one for each entrance, with himself to watch the watchers. At nine p.m., the shadow of the doctor appeared in the street. He re-entered his house, *absolutely alone*. His room was upstairs; a light went on in there promptly. And then the police vigil began. Not one of them dozed! Not one of them deserted his post! Not one of them lost sight of the precise point which he had been delegated to watch! Every fifteen minutes Manchard made the round of the group. Around three a.m. the petroleum lamp upstairs went out slowly, as though it had run out of fuel. The corporal hesitated. At last he decided

to use his lock-picking gadget and go in. Upstairs, in the bedroom, seated (or rather half-lying) on the edge of the bed was Dr. Luigi Ceccioni. His hands were clutched to his chest and he was dead. He was completely dressed, even to the cape which still hung over his shoulders. His hat had fallen to the floor. His underclothing and suit were saturated with blood and his hands were soaked in it. One bullet from a 6-millimeter Browning had penetrated less than a centimeter above his heart."

I gazed at Joseph Leborgne with awe. I saw his lip tremble.

"No one entered the house! No one left!" he groaned. "I'll swear to that as though I'd stood guard myself: I know my Corporal Manchard. And don't go thinking that they found the revolver in the house. *There wasn't any revolver!* Not in sight and not hidden. Not in the fireplace, nor even in the roof gutter. Not in the garden — not anywhere at all! In other words, a bullet was fired in a place where there was no one save the victim himself and where there was no firearm! As for the windows, they were closed and undamaged; a bullet fired from outside would have shattered the panes. Besides, a revolver doesn't carry far enough to have been fired from outside the range covered by the cordon of policemen. Look at the plan! Eat it up with your eyes! And you may restore some hope of life to poor Corporal Manchard, who has given up sleeping and looks upon himself virtually as a murderer."

I timidly ventured, "What do you know about Ceccioni?"

"That he used to be rich. That he's hardly practised medicine at all, but rather devoted himself to politics — which made it healthier for him to leave Italy."

"Married? Bachelor?"

"Widower. One child, a son, at present studying in Argentina."

"What did he live on in Lyons?"

"A little of everything and nothing. Indefinite subsidies from his political colleagues. Occasional consultations, but those chiefly *gratis* among the poor of the Italian colony."

"Was anything stolen from the house?"

"Not a trace of any larcenous entry."

I don't know why, but at this moment I wanted to laugh. It suddenly seemed to me that some master of mystification had amused himself by presenting Joseph Leborgne with a totally unlikely problem, simply to give him a needed lesson in modesty.

He noticed the broadening of my lips. Seizing the plan, he crossed the room to plunge himself angrily into his armchair.

"Let me know when you've solved it!" he snapped.

"I can certainly solve nothing before you," I said tactfully.

"Thanks," he observed.

I began to fill my pipe, I lit it, disregarding my companion's rage which was reaching the point of paroxysm.

"All I ask of you is that you sit

quietly," he pronounced. "And don't breathe so loudly," he added.

Ten minutes passed as unpleasantly as possible. Despite myself, I called up the image of the plan, with the six black crosses marking the policemen.

And the unlikelihood of this story, which had at first so amused me, began to seem curiously disquieting.

After all, this was not a matter of psychology or of detectival *flair*, but of pure geometry.

"This Manchard," I asked suddenly. "Has he ever served as a subject for hypnotism?"

Joseph Leborgne did not even deign to answer that one.

"Did Ceccioni have many political enemies in Lyons?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"And it's been proved that the son *is* in Argentina?"

This time he merely took the pipe out of my mouth and tossed it on the mantelpiece.

"You have the names of all the policemen?"

He handed me a sheet of paper:

Jérôme Pallois, 28, married
Jean-Joseph Stockman, 31, single
Armand Dubois, 26, married
Hubert Trajanu, 43, divorced
Germain Garros, 32, married

I reread these lines three times. The names were in the order in which the men had been stationed around the building, starting from the left.

I was ready to accept the craziest notions. Desperately I exclaimed at last, "It's impossible!"

And I looked at Joseph Leborgne. A moment before his face had been pale, his eyes encircled, his lips bitter. Now, to my astonishment, I saw him smilingly head for a pot of jam.

As he passed a mirror, he noticed himself and seemed scandalized by the incongruous contortions of his hair. He combed it meticulously. He adjusted the knot of his cravat.

Once again Joseph Leborgne was his habitual self. As he looked for a spoon with which to consume his horrible jam of leaves-of-God-knows-what, he favored me with a sarcastic smile.

"How simple it would always be to reach the truth if preconceived ideas did not falsify our judgment!" he sighed. "You have just said, 'It is impossible!' So therefore . . ."

I waited for him to contradict me. I'm used to that.

"So therefore," he went on, "it *is* impossible. Just so. And all that we needed to do from the very beginning was simply to admit that fact. There was no revolver in the house, no murderer hidden there. Very well: then there was no shot fired there."

"But then . . . ?"

"Then, very simply, Luigi Ceccioni arrived *with the bullet already in his chest.* I've every reason to believe that he fired the bullet himself. He was a doctor; he knew just where to aim ('less than a centimeter above the heart,' you'll recall) so that the wound would not be instantly fatal, but would allow him to move about for a short time."

Joseph Leborgne closed his eyes.

"Imagine this poor hopeless man. He has only one son. The boy is studying abroad, but the father no longer has any money to send him. Ceccioni insures his life with the boy as beneficiary. His next step is to die — but somehow to die with no suspicion of suicide, or the insurance company will refuse to pay.

"By means of an anonymous letter he summons the police themselves as witnesses. They see him enter his house where there is no weapon and they find him dead several hours later.

"It was enough, once he was seated on his bed, to massage his chest, forcing the bullet to penetrate more deeply, at last to touch the heart . . ."

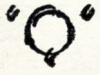
I let out an involuntary cry of pain. But Leborgne did not stir. He was no longer concerned with me.

It was not until a week later that he showed me a telegram from Corporal Manchard:

AUTOPSY REVEALS ECCHYMOSIS AROUND WOUND AND TRACES FINGER PRESSURE STOP DOCTOR AND SELF PUZZLED POSSIBLE CAUSE STOP REQUEST YOUR ADVICE IMMEDIATELY

"You answered?"

He looked at me reproachfully. "It requires both great courage and great imagination to massage oneself to death. Why should the poor man have done that in vain? The insurance company has a capital of four hundred million . . ."



ANNOUNCING QUEEN'S QUORUM

Some time in 1948 — early in the year, we hope — The World Publishing Company will issue, as the first volume of detective stories in their Living Library, an anthology titled TWENTIETH CENTURY DETECTIVE STORIES. *This anthology is edited by Ellery Queen, under the general editorship of Carl Van Doren, and will contain fourteen detective short stories not one of which has ever been previously published in book form in the United States. Fourteen "firsts" — including "unknown" stories about Gilbert K. Chesterton's Father Brown, Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, T. S. Stribling's Professor Poggioli, and other first book-appearances of tales by Cornell Woolrich, C. S. Forester, Anthony Boucher, and John Dickson Carr. As a detective-story dividend, the anthology will also offer a 20,000-word section called* QUEEN'S QUORUM: *A Readers' and Collectors' Guide to The 101 Most Important Books of Detective-Crime Short Stories — complete with critical and bibliographical notes, unfamiliar tidbits, anecdotes, and miscellaneous 'tec trivia — in short, a short history of the detective-crime short story.* QUEEN'S QUORUM *is divided into nine parts, titled as follows:*

I. The Incunabular Period
II. The Founding Father
III. The First Fifty Years
IV. The Doyle Decade
V. The First Golden Era
VI. The Second Golden Era
VII. The First Moderns
VIII. The Second Moderns
IX. The Renaissance

and presents a definitive listing of the 101 key books, or cornerstones, in the field of the detective-crime-and-mystery short story, from the Bible through 1947.

Now, one of the 101 most important books of detective short stories which make up QUEEN'S QUORUM *is C. Daly King's* THE CURIOUS MR. TARRANT, *and despite the book's unusual quality and the added fact that Mr. King is an American living in New Jersey,* THE CURIOUS MR. TARRANT *has never been published in the United States. We have already brought you one of the eight remarkable tales in this volume and now we offer you another adventure in imagination. This is the story of Valerie and how she heard footsteps running behind her and when she looked around, in broad daylight or with the electric lights on, there was no one to be seen! Do you believe in ghosts? Trevis Tarrant didn't . . .*

THE TANGIBLE ILLUSION

by C. DALY KING

MARY threw her golf bag into the rumble of the roadster. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Jerry. Whatever is the matter with Valerie? She looks like a perfect hag."

"Is that so?" I slipped the clutch into second and jerked the car brutally around the curve beside the clubhouse. Mary's my sister.

When the jerks stopped and we straightened out on the drive at about forty-five, she managed to sit up. "You're such a mooing calf about Val you can't see how terribly she looks. What *is* wrong with her, anyhow?"

"I don't know."

"And just after she's got into that darling house. How long has she been there? A couple of months, isn't it? Probably," Mary considered, "it's simply your hanging around so much. Your face at the window twice a day, darling, would give any girl jitters."

For once in her life, though, Mary was right. Something was desperately wrong with Valerie and I couldn't find out what it was. She wouldn't tell me, and if I pressed the question, she got so upset that I had to stop.

Valerie Mopish had come to Norrisville with her brother five years ago when she was eighteen. Although they were orphans and nobody knew them, they were so pleasant, especially Valerie, that they made friends everywhere; within a year they were in all the clubs and on intimate terms with the crowd to which Mary and I belonged. Why she liked me, heaven only knows, but she did, from the start. Why I liked her, is easy; she is the loveliest-looking girl that ever got into a one-piece bathing suit. She has golden-blonde hair and violet eyes — violet, mind you — and she's sweet and sort of fragrant; and she always wears high-heeled shoes and her ankles give you a feeling as if you were tied to a roller coaster.

After lunch I hung around for an interminable hour until I thought it would be all right to walk over and see Val. I came out of the woods and across the field just as she stepped onto the terrace that runs along one side of her new house. I vaulted over the low, stone railing and said, "'lo, Val. Marry me?"

She looked pale and there certainly were little circles under her eyes, but she smiled. "Sorry." And then the smile went out like a light, leaving just trouble. "Oh, Jerry, go away and forget about me. I — I — I can't."

We were pretty close together when she began; when she ended, we were a good deal closer. As my arms went around her, she sort of collapsed and lay back in them. Then she raised her face and kissed me.

"Jerry, let me go. . . . Please."

I felt foolish, standing there all

alone, so I sat down on the railing. Valerie had taken one of the big, wicker chairs and was patting at her hair.

"I called up Dr. Beckenforth yesterday and he's coming out to see me this afternoon; any minute now."

"Huh? Who's he?"

"He's the man who treated me when I had the nervous breakdown, before we moved to Norrisville. He's a psychiatrist."

"A who?"

"A whoozie-doctor, I suppose you'd call him. He got me over a lot of complexes and things once. . . . I know you care for me, Jerry, and I'm going to tell you about this. I think I ought to. . . . Before John and I moved out to Norrisville, I had what they call a nervous breakdown. You know that, but you don't know how bad it was. I felt terribly and I got morbid and it went on and on and got worse instead of better. Finally I began to hear things —"

"*Hear* things?"

"Things that weren't there. Oh, Jerry, it was awful. I knew I was going crazy and there wasn't anything I could do about it. . . . Then, finally, I had Dr. Beckenforth and he showed me how these hallucinations came out of my unconscious mind, and after about six months or so, he helped me to get rid of them. One of the things I heard was someone following me; he showed me why I heard that — because I wanted to — and that went away first. Bye and bye all the other horrors went, too, and I was cured. I never thought another thing about it or worried at all until just recently."

"Why worry now?"

She said simply, "I've got 'em again."

"Oh come on, Val. If ——"

"No," she hurried on, "there's no use saying it isn't so when it is. About a week after I moved in here, the day after John sailed in fact, I began to get frightened of nothing; that's the way it started before. And it's got worse and worse. And I'm so tired of trying to hide it and not tell anyone, and they all see it anyhow. I know there's nothing really to be afraid of, but I am. And now, now I've begun to hear the footsteps again."

A reasonable explanation occurred to me. "Of course you get nervous all alone here," I offered, "no one within a mile of you at night. Why don't you have Annie stay with you instead of going back to the big house every night? Or better yet, go back yourself for a while."

"I can't do that. I can't run away from it, or I'd be licked for the rest of my life. Don't you understand, Jerry? I'm not afraid of tramps prowling around or anything like that. It's just because I know there's no one here that it's so awful. When someone follows me up the stairs and there just isn't anyone there and I can hear him as plainly as I hear you now, I get so that I nearly scream. And then there are other things, too. It hasn't anything to do with living here alone; it would happen to me anywhere."

"Then it's only imagination," I re-

marked inadequately. "You'll be O.K. again in a jiffy. If you'd only marry me, I'll bet you'd never think of this stuff again. We'd go for a swell, long trip and ——"

"I told you this, Jerry, so you'd know why I can't marry you. I can't get married until I'm absolutely sure there isn't something funny about me. And I don't see how I can be sure; maybe I'll never be sure. . . ."

I got up and crossed over to her chair. I said, "Listen, lady. Sooner or later you're going to marry me. Sooner is best, but later is a lot better than never. I don't care if you're goofy as a loon, which obviously you're not." I pushed her over into a corner of the big chair and perched on the edge. . . .

When I left, I was sure that Valerie, in spite of her obstinacy, was feeling a lot better.

Perhaps I should explain about Val's two houses. When she and John Mopish had come to Norrisville originally, they had picked up a place outside the town at a bargain price. It comprised roughly fifty acres of ground, mostly wooded, although there were some farm fields now disused, on which stood an old-fashioned residence, a cut above a farm house but far from modern. It wasn't exactly what they wanted but it was close enough and they moved in with two servants, a cook and a maid. No attempt was made to cultivate the farm.

Valerie, however, was very fond of modern things, appliances and whatnot, and the old house never suited her. So when building costs took a tumble, she decided to put up just the sort of house she had always dreamed of, on a remote part of the land. In a straight line, of course, it was no more than a quarter of a mile away from the former house but, due to the configuration of the ground and the woods that covered it, the actual journey came almost to a mile. She and her brother had mulled over the project for a year before the building was undertaken.

John, being an architect, had naturally drawn the plans and supervised the construction. Everything about it was ultra-modern, but since John was really talented in his profession, it escaped being ridiculous and was a perfect example of what can actually be put into a house under modern conditions. It had flues for air conditioning, of course, in conjunction with its gas furnace; it had the usual electric refrigeration, and more unusual gadgets such as no-shadow lighting in the bathrooms and disappearing wallbeds on the small sleeping porch outside Val's own room. The doors of the little garage underneath opened automatically when you drove up to it and closed again after you were inside. Both inside and outside the style was modernistic, as were the entire furnishings.

Not only to save construction costs but because she wanted it only for herself, the house was very small. Beyond the terrace that stretched across the front was the big, sunken living-

room (radio and electric victrola built into the walls and a concealed modernistic bar, disclosed by a sliding section of panels) where Val could give a reasonable party when she wanted to. Besides this room there were on the first floor only an entrance hallway, with closets and a dressing-room and lavatory off it, and the small but complete kitchen. Between the living-room and the hallway a broad staircase led upward, its upper half spiralled.

The second floor had two comfortable bedrooms, each with a bath, and one smaller room that could be used as a study or a tiny library or for sports equipment or whatever. And that was all there was, with the exception of the garage and the cellar for furnace and storage space. Annie came over in the daytime to prepare the meals and attend to the cleaning, but otherwise, Val lived alone.

Nothing more happened for the next few weeks. Valerie seemed to be much the same — and I saw quite a bit of her. Then, late one afternoon I walked over to the new house for cocktails.

I had already come around the corner of the house and had gone perhaps ten feet along the terrace, before I stopped whistling in the middle of a bar and stood still with my mouth part way open. On the wicker lounge Mary sat with her arms around Valerie and Valerie was sobbing violently; not pretty sobbing but great, wrenching sobs that seemed to come from way down inside of her somewhere.

I stood there for quite a long while, and then I said, "Huh?"

Mary looked up. "Oh, you're here, are you?"

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know what's the matter. She won't tell me. . . . Shut up and go away."

Valerie had stopped sobbing and started gasping. "D-don't make Jerry go. He knows ab-about it."

They were both busy now with powder and stuff out of Mary's vanity case.

"It was terrible last night," Valerie said in a low voice. "It was simply awful. And now tonight's almost here. When the afternoon began going and the sun started to set, I just — I guess I'm no good."

"What was terrible last night?" Mary demanded.

"None of your business," I told her. "And if you open that trap of yours about this ——"

Valerie said, "Jerry!" and Mary looked as if she were going to get mad, then decided not to. She smiled, "God will probably forgive you; and I certainly realize you don't know what you're doing. So far I haven't anything to open, in your elegant phrase, my trap about."

"You won't have, either. . . . Val, you've got to come and spend the night with us."

"I can't run away from it, Jerry."

"See here," Mary announced in her competent voice, "I don't care what it's about if you don't want to tell me.

But I'll stay here with Val tonight, if she wants me."

But Valerie shook her head. "It's sweet of you, Mary; you're swell to me. But I can't let you. Honestly."

The thing was impossible. I started to walk up and down. I growled for a while and then I spoke. "It's no go. You won't come with us and won't let Mary stay here. All right; then I'll stay. I'm here and I'm staying here."

It was Annie's day off and Val and I got our own supper in the little kitchen. She continued to apologize for her outbreak and to urge me to go home, but underneath it I sensed her nervousness increasing as the daylight faded.

After supper we had coffee out on the terrace, while the dusk deepened and a glorious moon, verging toward the full, came up above the eastern trees. We also had liqueurs. The evening was balmy with late Spring and I stretched back in my chair, enjoying myself thoroughly.

The time went before I knew it; it was nearly twelve o'clock when Val ground out a cigarette and stood up. She had been perfectly calm all evening, but now I could almost feel a wave of nervousness sweep across from where she stood. In the moonlight pouring down on the terrace I saw her shiver.

She gave a little shake. "I'm going up, Jerry." There was a forced tone in her voice that made it sound as if she had just avoided adding — to the execution chamber.

"You, you don't have to stay."

"So? . . . I'm staying, Val."

I followed her into the hallway and, at the foot of the stairs, took her hand and kissed it. It was a cold little hand. But she walked up the staircase steadily enough. "Don't you worry," I called after her, "I'll be right here in the living-room all night long. And the lights will be on and I'll be awake. Just you give a yell if there's any nonsense." As she went around the turn of the stairs and disappeared, she forced a smile and gave a little wave with one hand.

If it was half as bad as she imagined, though, she was a brave kid, I thought, as I glanced into the kitchen and saw that the windows were closed and locked. I also turned the bolt inside the front door and inside the door of the steps leading down to the basement and garage. If there was any funny business around, I wasn't going to guess where it came from, anyhow. But of course there wasn't; how could there be? Valerie herself said she was sure nobody was prowling about her house. It was just imagination and overwrought nerves. Nothing at all would happen tonight and the reason it wouldn't happen would be because I was there. I made a note to advance this in the morning as an excellent reason why I should always be there.

Now I was in the living-room, where I turned on the indirect lighting and secured all the windows except two of the French ones giving onto the terrace. I intended to sit

down between these myself when I had picked out a book from the shelves across the room.

This I did, and by the time I had finished, it was after two in the morning. The slight noises of Valerie moving around upstairs and drawing water in the bathroom, had long since ceased. I didn't feel like reading any more and the radio was in the wall right beside me. I turned the volume down low and fiddled with that for an hour.

I tired of that, too. I got up, lit a cigarette, and stood in one of the open windows looking out over the terrace. The moon had got into the west now but it was still shining brightly, a beautiful night, cool and fresh — and peaceful.

Then Valerie screamed.

It broke the quiet, like a ton of rock crashing into a still pool. I jerked up and stood in motionless surprise for a moment; to this day I don't know what happened to the cigarette. But I wasn't motionless for long; if I have any idea of what terror is, there was sheer terror in that cry.

I ran for the hallway, and as I ran, I shouted some stupid thing, like, "What's the matter?" I started to take the stairs two steps at a time, and stumbled; I wasn't familiar enough with that particular stairs. It is important to note that I plunged up them a step at a time, as fast as I could. Because a third of the way up before I had reached where they spiralled, *someone began to follow me!* There was no question about it at all; even in my haste to get to Valerie (and there was no question of that either) the pounding footsteps behind me were so clear and unmistakable that, when I reached the place where the stairs turned, I turned, with an arm drawn back to slug the fellow, who could not possibly have any business there.

And the stairs behind me were absolutely empty!

I couldn't wait; I ran on and dashed into Valerie's room. After the lights in the hall, it seemed pitch black but luckily I knew where the light switch was, and found it. She was sitting up in bed, clutching the blankets and sheets around her, and shaking with fear. I was a little jolted myself, after that business on the stairs.

"Where the devil is it?" I demanded fiercely. Without the slightest idea of what I meant.

But Valerie didn't answer. She had collapsed on the bed and was pushing frightened sobs into the pillows. I suppose if I'd had any sense I'd have gone over to her and taken her in my arms, but I'm not a very wild sort of fellow and I've never been much in bedrooms with beautiful-looking girls like Valerie. So I just stood where I was and kept asking what it was all about. Not that it did me much good; all I could get out of her, even after the sobbing had subsided to whimpering, was that "It" had gone. Curiously enough, she asked me to turn the lights off in order to make sure of this.

Naturally I made a careful search

of the room and went out on the adjacent sleeping porch. I found nothing and came back to look through the other two rooms and the bathrooms on the second floor. Nothing there, either. Valerie had quieted down now and insisted that she would be all right and go to sleep again. I wasn't especially satisfied to leave her but she insisted and, also, I was anxious to go through the rest of the house. I hadn't said anything about being followed as I ran up, but I couldn't see for the life of me how anyone could have come halfway up the stairs behind me and then vanished; there wasn't any place for him to jump to so suddenly. The more I thought of it, the less I understood.

So I went down, still a little reluctantly, and searched through the lower floor. Here again there were no results, no sign of anyone except myself having been in the house, and the windows and doors were all locked just as I had left them. I locked the two open windows in the living-room and descended to the garage and the little cellar. The same answer over again; nothing disturbed, everything fastened on the inside.

I came back and opened one of the windows. Neither head nor tail could I make out of what had happened. Of course I didn't know what had frightened Valerie but what I myself had met on the staircase was beginning to make me doubt that overwrought nerves could any longer be a complete explanation. I simply could not believe that the sounds behind me had been imagined; they had been as clear and distinct, as loud and plain, as any ordinary sounds I had ever heard; they had been unmistakable footsteps, heavy and solid.

And now I heard something else. No scream this time; what came to my ears was the sound of running feet above. For the second time I made for the hall.

I was just in time to see Valerie begin a rush down the stairs, her face once more a mask of terror. She came around the curving steps all right and halfway down the straight steps below them. The lights were on and I could see perfectly plainly. Just about where the footsteps that had followed me had ceased, she suddenly pitched forward, as if someone had given her a shove from behind. There was no person, nor anything else, near her.

She landed at the foot of the steps with a crash, unconscious. As I reached her and raised her body to a sitting position, I saw that her right leg was doubled up under her in a posture that could only mean it was broken. I looked around desperately for someone or something that had attacked her. I saw nothing whatsoever; the lights burned steadily and brightly, there was not a sound in the house.

I carried her into the living-room and laid her on a lounge. I slid back the panel of the bar and drew a glass of water, grabbed a brandy bottle in the other hand. When I got

back to the lounge, she was already stirring; and I gave her a sip of water first, then the straight brandy. She groaned, tried to sit up and clung to me. "Jerry, Jerry, something pushed me." She groaned again.

I was so upset that for some minutes I couldn't think what to do. Valerie had to have a doctor; I couldn't leave her alone, and I mustn't be found with her at an hour like this. What a nasty thing conventions are, anyhow. I laid her back on the lounge as gently as I could and walked over to the telephone. I wouldn't have been much surprised if it had failed to work, but the dial-tone was clear and the little clicks came back in succession as I moved the disk.

"Hello," said a sleepy voice.

My tone was probably fairly strained and excited. "Get a doctor for Valerie! Get him out here as quick as you can! And get here yourself; you've got to get here before him. Do you —"

Mary is pretty quick on the trigger, I'll say that for her. And she isn't one of those silly females who ask a hundred questions when there is something to be done. She said sharply, "I'll get him. Coming, Jerry." And snapped the phone down.

Twenty minutes later Mary walked through the French window and I made another search of the house, once more a futile one. As I jumped over the rail of the terrace, a headlight beam shot up in the dim light above the woods to the south; so the doctor was coming, too.

I walked aimlessly through the trees in the general direction of home. I was bewildered and I was angry, but I hadn't anything on which to focus the anger. What the devil was going on? Something was attacking Valerie, but when you looked, nothing was there to hit back at. Imagination and tricky nerves were out now, definitely. I had heard the footsteps on the stairs and in full light I had seen Valerie thrown down the steps — by nothing. For a time I cursed with vigor and, strangely, it didn't relieve a single feeling. "What the hell, what the hell?" I groaned in a fury of futility. She had been hurt and she would be hurt again, unless something were done. But what could be done? Just the same, it had to be, it —

For no reason that I can think of, a picture formed itself all at once in my mind. Only a month before I had stood in a basement room in the Metropolitan Museum, in complete darkness, facing an ancient Aztec curse contained in an old, a very old manuscript. Several of us had gathered there on a crazy bet, to test the power of the ancient and magic script. A strange thing had happened there — or so it had seemed at the time. The picture I had now was that of the man who had so abruptly appeared at the height of the phenomenon, a clear-cut picture of his steady eyes, his unruffled, even amused calm, his complete unbluffableness.

I remember talking with him at

his apartment later; being impressed with the terrific extent of his knowledge and experience. I remembered his profound and sane utterances on confused and complicated issues. His name was Tarrant, I recalled. . . .

I quickened my steps and my walking took on an intended direction.

I drove into New York in the sedan. At the door of Tarrant's apartment, Katoh, the little Japanese butler who was a doctor in his own country, answered my ring. Despite my dishevelled appearance and the peculiar hour of my visit — it was just six-forty-five — his welcoming grin held no element of surprise.

"How do, Mister Phelan. Come in, please. Mr. Tarrant out now for ride in Park, but back soon. You have breakfast? Yiss."

While Katoh set another place beside the one already prepared, I had time to reflect on the strangeness of my mission and even to become somewhat embarrassed. After all, I had only met Tarrant once; he had been friendly, certainly, but there was no reason to suppose he would wish to interest himself in this affair of mine. Well, I'd put it up to him, anyhow; it was too late to reconsider now. Besides, Valerie's danger was more important than anything else. Then he came in.

He walked through the hallway and stopped in the living-room entrance, in well-worn riding togs. He, at least, looked at me in surprise, then more keenly. "Well, Jerry Phelan. What brings you in so early? Something on your mind, you look worried and dragged out."

"I've spent the night fighting a ghost. And the ghost won."

Tarrant smiled. "It sounds promising," he commented. "But no more now. I'll jump into the shower and then we'll both have some breakfast. After that, I'd like to hear about it."

In an astonishingly short period he reappeared, this time in a lounging robe. We ate Katoh's delicious meal with only a few casual remarks interspersed. After we had finished, Tarrant got up and crossed the room for cigarettes, then stretched out in a big chair opposite me. "Go ahead," he invited, "tell me about it."

I told him about Valerie. Once started, there seemed to be quite a lot to tell, and he interrupted me occasionally with questions. "This Miss Mopish must be rich?" he ventured at one point.

"She is very well off," I replied, "though she isn't tremendously rich. She and her brother are orphans, you see, and they were in very poor circumstances, practically poverty-stricken, she told me, until some distant relative died and left her his whole estate which was considerable."

"Just to her? The brother got nothing?"

"No, John didn't get anything. He is still as poor as he ever was, but his profession will bring him in plenty some day, with the progress he's making now. Meantime Valerie is very generous with him; I'm sure she

makes him a pleasant allowance. They always seem to be very fond of each other."

"I believe I've heard of him. Didn't he design those modern houses they were showing up at Radio City last month?"

"Yes, he did those. He's getting quite a reputation now. Three months ago he went over to Rome as a result of some prize he got. His design won a competition and they wanted him to come across and supervise the finishing touches on the building. . . . He's on his way back now; he'll be landing in another day or so."

I got back then to our real business and told him of Valerie's increasing nervousness after John's departure and how I had come to insist on staying with her the night before. To the best of my ability I described what had occurred, but in Tarrant's living-room, it didn't sound very convincing, even to me.

"But I tell you I heard those footsteps myself! I saw her pushed off the stairs, and I swear that nothing touched her!"

My obvious sincerity impressed him. "Of course," he admitted, "if you are really right about it, it's an amazing performance. There's no need in asking whether you could be mistaken; I can see you are convinced. . . . Well, I haven't any explanation I can offer you from this distance. I don't believe in haunted houses and I've never yet heard of a modernistic house equipped with ghosts."

The crucial moment had arrived. "Will you come out for a few days and see these things for yourself? You said once you were interested in peculiar happenings, and this one is the most peculiar I've ever seen. I can't get anywhere with it and I'm worried to death about Valerie."

"I wouldn't worry too much about the girl," Tarrant said. "Her brother will be back in a day or so to take care of her."

"No. He won't be any more use when he gets here, than I am. He lives at the big house, not with Valerie in the new one. I don't believe she will let him stay with her, anyhow; she has an idea that she has to fight the thing out alone. But it isn't just imagination she's fighting, it's something a good deal more dangerous than that." I knew I was imposing on him but he was the only one I could think of to turn to. "I wish you'd come, if you can."

For some moments he considered in silence. Then he seemed to have made up his mind. He gave an unusual whistle and his valet appeared in the doorway. "Katoh, pack a bag for each of us. We are going to spend a few days in the country."

We stood in the small hallway of Valerie's house. Valerie was upstairs in bed and Annie was with her. We had had luncheon at home with Mary who assured us that everything had been done that could be done. After luncheon we had come over to the new house and I had taken Tarrant up and introduced him. Valerie,

of course, looked perfectly lovely sitting up in bed and I could see that my friend was even startled by her unexpected beauty. Whatever misgivings I may have had about bringing him into the affair vanished at once, for it was clear with the first few words that Valerie liked him and was prepared to trust him. And indeed his calm matter-of-factness and his low, steady voice were reassurance itself.

Now we stood in the hall below, Tarrant and Katoh and myself. Tarrant said, "That sister of yours is a fine girl, Jerry. Most attractive." Then more briskly, "Well, let's make a little experiment and see whether your ghost is still around. See if you can find a ladder, will you, Katoh?"

A tall step-ladder was discovered and placing it beside the stairs, Tarrant mounted it and perched on top. "Apparently the wraith is not afraid of light, so we might as well try to conjure him up now. Jerry, you had better tell them up above that we are making some experiments, so they won't be frightened. And, Katoh, you walk up the stairs while I sit here and observe."

The little Japanese gravely mounted the steps. And nothing at all happened. At the top he turned and came down again. "No ghost," he remarked blandly.

"Now you, Jerry."

I ran up the stairs, and there the footsteps were, about two treads behind me, clear and audible. Tarrant's arm shot out and extended part way across the step I had just passed. *The footsteps went under his arm and continued.* As I had done the night before, I stopped halfway up and turned on my pursuer. Although I had known what to foresee, the recurrence of the phenomenon was so impressive that I really expected to find someone at my back. As I stood there, Tarrant's expression for the first time held more than polite incredulity.

"Hmm," said Tarrant. "He's awake now, evidently. You heard that, of course, Katoh?"

"I hear." The valet's face was expressionless.

"All right, come on down, Jerry. Now I want you to do that again, only go all the way up, this time. Don't stop till you get to the hall upstairs. Katoh, you run up about three or four steps behind him."

We did this and I was followed again. Not only by Katoh. Between him and myself, other footsteps pounded up the stairs. It was a weird feeling, this business of an unknown behind you, and I had all I could do to keep from stopping once more and turning around. The thought of the valet, also behind me, was distinctly pleasant. It may sound incredible but near the top of the flight *he* increased his speed and reached vainly at the empty air at my back. That's how overwhelmingly natural the thing was. The footsteps followed me to the top.

As I watched Katoh returning to the ground floor, it seemed to me that at one point he made a peculiar move-

ment. I looked at him queerly. "Did you feel a slight push on the way down?"

He shook his head. "No. No push."

Tarrant slid down the ladder and stood with his hands in his pockets. "There is no use doing any more of this. There's something here I don't understand. Under some circumstances I'd think of mass suggestion but I happen to know how to avoid that for myself. It's an impressive demonstration of magic." He looked over at the valet. "What do you think, Katoh?"

"Is mahg-ic. But not here. This more like jiu-jitsu, I think. Also might be dangerous."

"It is dangerous." Tarrant's tone was decisive. "There is something here far more objective than imagination. It is objective and it is in this house. Miss Mopish must be moved to the other place. I shall insist on it. We three will spend the night here and we'll spend it alone, except for whatever this intruder is."

Valerie finally consented. I never thought she would, but Tarrant is a persuasive talker. After twenty minutes or so, most of which was spent in pointing out that something was in the house and that it simply could not be a matter of her own subjective nervousness, she agreed.

I stayed a moment after Tarrant had left the room. "Jerry," said Valerie, "please take care of yourself tonight. I couldn't bear it if anything happened to you."

That made me feel grand. "I'll take care of whatever is around here," I said grimly, "if I can once get my hands on it."

That night we divided our forces. Katoh was stationed in the entrance between the hallway and the living-room, where he could observe all of the latter and at the same time be close to the foot of the stairs. I sat in Valerie's own room upstairs; and Tarrant roved through the house, now here, now there.

I was tired — I had had no sleep the previous night. We began our vigil about eleven in the evening and the hours dragged by interminably. Nothing happened; I just sat in the dark and waited. At first the fact that I didn't know what I was waiting for kept me keyed up but finally I decided to lie down on the bed and rest my body, anyhow. Of course I fell asleep.

I don't know how much later it was when I began dreaming of a forest fire. As the flames mounted higher and higher in dazzling brilliance, I woke and sat up. For a moment I had no idea where I was, nor was I concerned with that. Opposite the foot of Valerie's bed a full-length mirror was set in the wall and this mirror was mysteriously bright, although no light in the room was on. That was puzzling, though not especially terrifying; but something else was. In the center of the mirror, illuminated by the unexplained glow, was a clear and gruesome image of a scaffold with a human figure dangling from it!

I gasped and rubbed my eyes. Yes, there it was, no doubt about it. Even as I stared at it, it began to fade — just like a fadeout in the movies. I called to Tarrant, but when he came in, I hardly believed that I had seen anything real myself.

We sat discussing it in the darkness. I made no concealment of the fact that I had been asleep and that when I had first seen it, I had not been fully awake. It hadn't lasted long but it seemed to me that before it had faded out completely, I had been plenty awake. As we went on talking I still sat on the bed, supporting myself with one hand which was buried in the pillow on which my head had rested. Happening to glance down presently, I noticed that the pillow was becoming bright, as if a light were focused on it; and at almost the same instant Tarrant grunted with surprise.

We both saw it this time. The mirror glowed again and we were treated to a close-up of the same previous picture. An agonized face stared out at us, the noose knotted behind one ear, the rope leading upward.

As the image began to fade once more, Tarrant was out of his chair and pressing the electric light button across the room. Instantly the picture vanished. A moment later he was knocking with his fist over the now empty mirror, sounding it and the walls immediately beside it. There appeared no hint of any hollowness, however; both glass and wood gave a solid response to his pounding.

"I shall examine that mirror more carefully in the morning," he promised. "We can't do much now. Let us turn the lights out and see if there is any more."

But though we sat through the next two hours to daylight, no further display occurred. Nothing further of any kind occurred, in fact. The image of that face of agony kept haunting me, nonetheless, and I began to understand the added horror, were I convinced as Valerie had been, that the thing was being projected from my own morbid mind. Even the position of the bed would add to that illusion, for the mirror was directly opposite it and in the natural course of events reflected the bed and its occupant.

I also realized why she had wanted the lights turned off the night before, in order to see if "It" was still there.

The following day I spent at home in my own bed. Sound asleep. Mary drove Tarrant into Norrisville and he returned with various instruments, such as a yardstick, a saw, chisels, and a hammer. He also procured from Valerie the original plans of the house.

"What did you want all that stuff for?" I inquired the same evening, when I was told about it. "Were you looking for hidden passages or recesses in the house?"

"No," he assured me. "Even without the plans, you can see that there is no place anywhere for a secret passage large enough to be used by a monkey. And by the way, I took that mirror out and there was noth-

ing behind it but solid wall. No signs of its being connected with any kind of mechanism at all."

"So what we saw was not the result of mechanical arrangement?"

"No, it wasn't. I am certain that there is no mechanical contrivance in the entire house in any way connected with the phenomena."

"So what? Damn it all, Tarrant, we're completely stymied. What in heaven's name can be causing those sights and sounds?"

"I believe I could tell you the answer to that now," he asserted calmly enough. "Half an hour's more work tomorrow and I'm sure I shall have the whole answer. . . . I'll need a good, high ladder, though."

"I'll see that you get the ladder. But what is the answer?"

He would say no more, however. "I shall tell all of you, say day after tomorrow, when Miss Mopish's brother arrives home. He will certainly be interested in the things that have been going on in his house."

I was bitten with a terrific curiosity, for I felt certain that Tarrant would not have claimed a solution he had not achieved. Nevertheless, try as I would, I failed to get any satisfaction. On the other hand, Tarrant, too, was disappointed. That very evening Valerie received a radio from John, saying that he had been taken ill during the crossing and would have to be transferred directly from the ship to a hospital in New York. Two days later, when it was learned that he was really desperately sick and would be confined for a considerable period at least, Tarrant gave up his notion and summoned us to the new house to exorcise, as he said, the ghost. Valerie was brought back, in a chair, and Mary and Katoh and I were there, of course. Also, at the last moment, Tarrant insisted that Annie, Valerie's maid, should come.

The demonstration was simple.

We all trooped out into the hall after Tarrant and stood grouped about; I noticed at once that a step had been removed from the staircase and through the aperture could be seen a slanting strip of wood, backing it. Valerie's house was certainly well constructed.

"I want you, Mr. Phelan, to walk up those stairs, then turn around and walk down them."

I did so, climbing over the missing step. Somewhat to my own surprise no sound accompanied me other than my own footsteps on the hard wood.

"Now, Mr. Phelan, kindly run up the stairs as fast as you can. But when you come down, walk; please be sure of that, *walk*."

This time there could be no question of it; three treads behind me the ghostly footsteps followed my own to the floor above. Tarrant watched my descent, then spoke quietly.

"One would hardly suppose that so simple a thing could be so terrifying. The sounds that followed Mr. Phelan are, of course, no more than an *echo*. Here" — through the missed step he tapped the slanting wood behind it — "is an ingenious sounding board, so

made that it reflects the echo downward; thus the echoed steps appear always to be just *behind* the person mounting the stairs. When they are taken at a walk, nothing happens; the echo functions only for running footsteps. I am sure that Miss Mopish could be guaranteed to run — at times, anyhow.

"But the staircase is more dangerous than yet appears. In a house where all the furnishings and all the fixtures, even the construction itself, is modernistic, the eye is led away and confused by curious angles, by surfaces and planes at unaccustomed slants. It is not remarkable, therefore, that, seen from this hallway, the various steps appear uniform. *But they are not uniform.* I have measured them carefully and at a point just below the turn in the stairs three steps in succession have such dimensions *as to cause one to slip there.* That is what happened to Miss Mopish a few nights ago. She was not pushed off the stairs — she slipped forward so suddenly that the impression was the same. It happened in a much less degree to my assistant when he came down the stairs and we are indebted to his excellent leg reflexes and his quick recognition for the first hint of what sort of thing was happening here."

He turned suddenly to Valerie, seated in her chair by the living-room entrance. "Both Mr. Phelan and I have seen the apparitions in your mirror, Miss Mopish; you may dismiss entirely any notion that you manufactured them yourself. For these the arrangement is more difficult than in the matter of the stairs, but simple, once one gets on to it.

"At the end of your room upstairs are two French windows opening upon a sleeping porch and above each is a permanent transom of leaded glass. In these transoms are set four prisms. The most interesting are the two which contain tiny replicas of the images seen in the mirror; the other two simply concentrate the moonlight upon the pillow of the bed so that it will frequently happen that anyone sleeping there will be awakened. Then the image-prisms function, concentrating their light and images in the mirror. The angles, of course, are very carefully worked out, to correspond with certain positions of the moon in the sky. To the naked eye the moon's motion is imperceptible but, actually, it is always moving. The prisms, protected by the overhang of the roof, only function fully for a period of seconds, the image then fading out and making it more probable than ever that the vision was due to a disordered imagination. By the time a witness arrives, the picture is gone. I am certain these pictures have appeared at particular times, when the moon has been full, or nearly full, for example."

Valerie nodded.

"As a matter of fact the images are not nearly as clear as they seem to be in the middle of the night, with one's eyes accustomed to darkness after some hours' sleep. The lighting in the room overwhelms them

completely; that is also why the sun, even should it occupy the same relative position as the moon, does not cause them in the daytime when the room is bright.

"There was a somewhat similar arrangement in a temple in Egypt in the old days, called *Het Abtit* or the House of the Net. I do not know whether your brother is interested in Egyptology but, if not, then he has struck upon a very similar arrangement. The temple arrangement ensured that at high noon upon one special day of each year the Net, for which the building was named, should be illuminated through the temple roof in such a fashion that its ordinary outlines vanished and a resplendent picture of the miracle of the Virgin Birth appeared in its place. In the present instance we find the same principles used for a far less worthy purpose. . . . I have taken the liberty of removing the prisms from your transoms. I do not know of any further phenomena in the house. Have there been any?"

"No," Valerie anwered in a low voice, so low as to be scarcely audible. "That is all, the mirror and the stairs. It was enough."

"In the case of a girl only a few years recovered from so serious a breakdown as I understand occurred," Tarrant went on, looking about at the rest of us, "it will readily be appreciated how such apparently inexplicable events would work upon her. Especially as one of them, the footsteps, if not the other phenomena also, were devised to correspond with previous obsessions. She would naturally suppose a return of her former troubles, which this time, however, could be guaranteed not to yield to any subjective technique at all, since they depended upon quite objective arrangements, having nothing to do with her personal imagination. It was a cruel performance; fortunately we have discovered its nature in time."

From my interest in Tarrant's explanation I abruptly awoke to its implications. I cried out, "Why, the damned skunk! But what could he — but what — but why?"

"That is something I do not feel myself commissioned to find out, Jerry. But money has caused plenty of trouble and is still doing it. I do not know who is the beneficiary under Miss Mopish's will, nor do I wish to. I might also point out that, after a few years in a sanitarium, an administrator is usually appointed for the patient's estate."

I was so mad I could have knocked the stairs down with my bare hands; but Valerie was sobbing. So I went to her.

John Mopish died the following week in his New York hospital. And it was damn lucky for him that he did. I don't know whether Valerie was glad or sorry, for we never mention him. I do know, though, that she kept me waiting only a month, the darling.

SPEAKING OF CRIME

A Department of Comment and Criticism

by HOWARD HAYCRAFT

If present trends continue, the year 1947 seems likely to set a new record for the publication of mystery stories in this country. In this department's judgment, this is cause not for jubilation but for concern. For the past several months booksellers, librarians, reviewers, and publishers themselves have been complaining of overproduction in the field, while every reader knows that most of the increased output can only be described as sub-marginal, to use the kindest word. In consequence of this plethora, sales of all mysteries, the good along with the bad, have dropped shockingly (at a time moreover when costs of book manufacture have mounted skyward). Pretty clearly, somebody has been squeezing the golden goose, with the customary results.

Two factors, it seems to me, are principally responsible for this unhealthy situation. Misled by fabulous tales of wartime profits, too many new publishers and too many publishers who did not previously publish whodunits have leaped blithely aboard the gravy-train, without bothering to find out that building a sound mystery list requires specialized knowledge, patience, and unremitting attention. Concurrently, certain established mystery publishers have struggled, unwisely it seems to me, to maintain arbitrary schedules of publication even though not enough first-rate manuscripts were available. Too many beginners have been published before their apprenticeship was up, and too many old-timers have been allowed to get away with second-rate murder. Today innocent and culpable alike are busy paying the piper. That such a state of affairs portends no lasting good to anybody concerned has become increasingly, even alarmingly, evident.

To one well-wisher it seems plain that the cure lies simply in greater care and discrimination in the publishing of crime fiction. The operation will not be painless. Nevertheless not *more* but *better* mysteries is the answer, and if altruism doesn't bring this about, stern economics will.

In the meantime, the best an embattled intermittent reviewer can do is to report on a representative handful among the scores of titles which cross his desk. Of the hundred-odd whodunits (using the term in its inclusive sense) scheduled between late spring when this column last appeared and Labor Day, I found Sylvia Tate's unorthodox NEVER BY CHANCE (Harper) the most exciting — and the most disappointing, because it failed to live up to the high promise of its

early chapters. Miss Tate can write. Indeed, I know of no newcomer since Helen Eustis with so keen an ear for dialogue, who can handle mood and character vignettes so tellingly. Unhappily her striking central idea is dissipated by sprawling, inexpert construction and plotwork. Nevertheless you can find worse reading in this year of dubious grace than this imperfect but challenging first novel.

A few other entrants merit attention in the field of the non-deductive crime novel — popularly and too often inappositely labelled "suspense." Like Miss Tate, Donald Hamilton is an American debutant, and his DATE WITH DARKNESS (Rinehart) is also more notable for promise than actual achievement. Chief virtues of this post-war study in intrigue are its Ambler-like naturalism and understatement. Chief defects: fantastically weak motivation and fuzzy and intrusive political thinking. June Truesdell's BE TRUE MY LOVE (Dodd) is the story of a mousy little college teacher who kills an amorous student in defense of her virtue; then, panicked by fear, fakes the evidence to suggest accident. In addition to pleasingly unforced writing, this novel supplies a pointed object lesson on the folly of tampering with the course of justice. But I'll never believe so fuddled a femme as Wilma could become a professor of psychology. Shelley Smith's COME AND BE KILLED (Harper), a solid and satisfying combination of British sleuthing and the inverted crime story a la Francis Iles, marks the auspicious American debut of an author well-regarded in her native England. Smoothly and literately told, it misses top rating narrowly, on the strength of an unduly melodramatic wind-up. To the best of my knowledge Michael Valbeck's HEADLONG FROM HEAVEN (Mill) is the first South African contribution to the genre to cross the water. You'll probably be more impressed by its picture of Cape Town social life than its overlong depiction of the deleterious effects of murder on the character.

Turning to the more conventional area of puzzle-and-deduction, I have often wondered why greater attention has not been paid to the quietly humorous and effective Saturnin Dax novels of Marten Cumberland. HATE WILL FIND A WAY (Crime Club) illustrates again this author's ability to combine essentially British detection with the most satisfying Gallic backgrounds since Simenon stopped writing about Maigret. In MORE DEATHS THAN ONE (Ziff), Bruno Fischer gives further proof of his versatility and increasing competence. You won't be too baffled by this seen-through-several-minds puzzler, but its cauterant dissection of a mother and daughter relationship will hold your interest. DEAD AND DUMB by Edmund Crispin (Lippincott), concerning homicide during a production of "Die Meistersinger" at Oxford, presents Gervase Fen in considerably soberer vein than his previous adventures. The loss in fabular hilarity, in my opinion, is comfortably offset by the gain in gen-

eral sense-making — if you can swallow the author's murder method. In THE SEVEN DEADLY SISTERS (Crime Club), Pat(ricia) McGerr brings off with technical success another variation on the formula she made her own in PICK YOUR VICTIM; though I confess myself less engrossed by the riddle of Auntie Who than the engaging scoundrels of the earlier novel. Whether Leslie Ford's THE WOMAN IN BLACK (Scribner) qualifies for this group is a matter of some dubiety, for with Col. Primrose hospitalized I find it hard to imagine anything less like deduction than the haps and mishaps of Grace Latham. Nonetheless there *is* a puzzle, narrated in Mrs. Ford's lively feminine fashion to make a hammock holiday. Any resemblance to the American first edition of TRENT'S LAST CASE (issued in 1913 as THE WOMAN IN BLACK) is purely titular.

Topping the action group, Erle Stanley Gardner's THE CASE OF THE FAN DANCER'S HORSE (Morrow) implicates Perry Mason with not one but two fan dancers, both claiming the same name and horse. There is the usual tense courtroom scene, with Mason pulling yet another rabbit out of the hat, and none too soon for comfort. One of the year's more amusing ideas is contained in NINE MORE LIVES by Michael Morgan (Random), whose indestructible hero is a Hollywood stunt man. This conceit lends credibility to some strictly Superman adventures which will keep you reading, even though the rest of the story is a blend of all the clichés the hardboiled fraternity is heir to. Stewart Sterling, known heretofore for the fine fire brigade backgrounds of the Chief Pedley stories, turns his attention in DEAD WRONG (Lippincott) to hotel detection and a "security officer" named Gil Vine. Perhaps inevitably, there is less native excitement in the new subject, but the telling is embellished with all Sterling's prodigality of detail. Kenneth Millar's violent BLUE CITY (Knopf) offers a hardboiled parable of the more earnest variety (and better justification than most); Brett Halliday's COUNTERFEIT WIFE (Ziff) serves up standard grade Mike Shayne, plus a slug-the-sleuth scene of exceptional goriness, if that's your dish of blood; while Frank Gruber's THE WHISPERING MASTER (Rinehart) takes Johnny Fletcher and Sam Cragg back to the scene and mood of THE FRENCH KEY, to make the fastest and funniest Gruber in some time.

The out-and-out mirthful whodunit I always approach with caution, humor being so personal a thing, and the mixing of hilarity and homicide so delicate an alchemy. Nevertheless a minority report seems overdue on Richard Powell's Arab and Andy Blake gay-young-coupling. In their latest, AND HOPE TO DIE (S. & S.), it is painfully evident that the device of Arab's noseyness to motivate and keep the stories going is no longer funny (if it ever was), while the lady herself shows signs of becoming one of detection's least engaging heroines. Even when successful, the detection-

farce is more likely to excel in the latter than the former ingredient. This makes Bill Goode's THE SENATOR'S NUDE (Ziff) something of a man-bites-dog item; for here the process is reversed, and rather strained laugh-making conceals a nicely knit puzzle. Try it straight next time, Mr. Goode. As for Alice Tilton's THE IRON CLEW (Farrar), all the pre-war ingredients of a Leonidas Witherall romp are present, so I have presumably only myself to blame for finding Bill Shakespeare less the gay dog than of yore.

If I were required to predict the 1947 crime title likely to have the longest life, my vote would go not to a novel but to a short-story collection. I refer to Raymond T. Bond's FAMOUS STORIES OF CODE & CIPHER (Rinehart), a brilliant and original "first" which belongs in every mystery fan's library beside the anthologies of Sayers, Wright, Queen, and Starrett. Mr. Bond's Introduction is easily the best short manual on cryptography extant and his taste in selection is impeccable. Only slightly behind, for novelty of pattern and freshness of choice, I would place MURDER BY EXPERTS, edited by Ellery Queen (Ziff), in which twenty members of Mystery Writers of America select their favorite stories — by other writers — and append professional comment. In the true crime field, SAN FRANCISCO MURDERS, edited by Joseph Henry Jackson, achieves a new literary high in Duell's already distinguished regional series (nicknamed by Anthony Boucher "Rivers of Blood"); but the assorted takings-off in LOS ANGELES MURDERS, assembled by Craig Rice, seem curiously the more authentic Americana. Odd how patly the crimes typify the two cities. Or is it the writing? Returning to fiction, regular readers of this magazine will have a special interest in the collected LABORS OF HERCULES by Agatha Christie (Dodd), wherein Hercule Poirot sets twelve valedictory 'tec tasks for himself, in symbolical emulation of his classical namesake.

No seasonal summary should overlook two striking denials of the popular fallacy that loud cheers are in order every time a "legitimate" novelist stoops to the lowly whodunit. In BEFORE THE CROSSING (Macmillan), Storm Jameson — one gathers — has attempted a little thing in the manner of Graham Greene; unfortunately she appears to have no idea of the constituents of good melodrama, exterior or interior; confusion and boredom are her sole achievements. V. Sackville-West's THE DEVIL AT WESTEASE (Doubleday) is measurably less pretentious, but her try at routine puzzling is corn of the purest vintage and will fool no seasoned reader beyond the first chapter or two. These two disappointments share another curious similarity. Both were issued at $2.50 by two of the few remaining publishers who are still — at this writing — asking only $2 for the wares of trained and competent mystery craftsmen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Much too little has been written about the background of Lawrence G. Blochman. He spent the early 1920s in the Far East — first on the "Japan Advertiser," an American newspaper in Tokyo, then barnstorming through China as a sleight-of-hand performer. (It is surprising, by the way, how many magicians have turned into detective-story writers — and vice versa.) Eventually Mr. Blochman wearied of pulling hats out of rabbits in the Chinese hinterland and went back into journalism, taking a position with the "South China Morning Post" in Hongkong. Still later he accepted a roving assignment for the "Far Eastern Review" of Shanghai, enlarging his knowledge of the Orient by working in the Philippines, North Borneo, Java, British Malaya, and Siam. He gave up this interesting job when he discovered that his employer was in reality a Japanese propagandist, and returned to his first love, newspaper work, this time on "The Englishman" of Calcutta, the oldest English-language periodical in India. And all through the years Mr. Blochman was learning more and more about the art of writing, as he proved by the ever-increasing quality of his work. Some of the most authentic tales of the East have come from his peripatetic typewriter. Then, during World War II, the soft-spoken, conscientious Mr. Blochman — by now an exceedingly clever diplomat in the ways of the Orient — unselfishly placed his knowledge and experience at the disposal of his country, serving as Chief of the Radio Program Bureau of the OWI, Overseas Branch. And when, in the early summer of 1947, circumstances compelled the Board of Directors of MWA (Mystery Writers of America, Inc.) to declare the office of Vice-President vacant, Mr. Blochman was unanimously elected to fill that important national post.*

ABOUT THE STORY: *"Red Wine" is universally considered one of Lawrence G. Blochman's finest stories. That grand old lady of the genre, Carolyn Wells, rated the story one of the twenty best detective shorts published in America during the year 1930. Although Miss Wells was careful to iterate and reiterate her belief that "Different men are of different opinions; Some like apples, some like inions," beldam Carolyn never wavered in her appraisal of Mr. Blochman's classic tale. You will understand why when you have read the story.*

RED WINE

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

A RAUCOUS toot from the whistle of the yellow funneled K. P. M. steamer echoed from the jungle covered headlands to arouse Heer Controleur Koert from his afternoon nap. Heer Koert did not swear; the day

was too hot for any such exertion as swearing. He opened one eye and peered through the haze of his mosquito netting. Below his veranda lay a collection of glaring tin roofed sheds, whitewashed Chinese shops, and *attap* huts clinging to the green edge of the low river bank.

Some distance offshore, beyond the muddy swirl made by the river as it pushed brown fingers into the unruffled blue of the sea, the mail steamer was smoking impatiently, the only connection between Tanjong Samar and civilization. And since Heer Koert was the official representative of civilization in Tanjong Samar, he opened the other eye.

He watched the swarm of *praus* and *sampans* streaking for the ship, and estimated that he would have half an hour before being forced to make any further movement. In half an hour he would arise, dash tepid water on himself from a Java bath jar, drink a cup of coffee and button his white duck jacket high about his neck. Thus he would be fit to sit at his desk and properly receive the official communications and two weeks' accumulations of the *Bataviasch Nieuwsblad* which his dusky skinned *aspirant-controleur* would bring ashore.

The *controleur's* leisurely routine was somewhat rushed, however, when he saw that the first boat ashore did not debark his slow moving assistant but a brisk walking white man he had never seen before. The stranger made such a rapid climb to the *controleur's* bungalow that Heer Koert had barely time to make himself dignified before there was a knock on the screen door of the veranda. He waddled ponderously to answer.

A man in a pongee suit and white topee stood there, wiping his perspiring face with a silk handkerchief. He was a well fed appearing man whose movements were good natured and deliberate. His frank smile caused deep dimples to dot either side of a face that gave an impression of virile intelligence — an impression somehow strengthened by the droop of his right eyelid over a vaguely pale eye. The alert vitality of the good eye was penetrating enough for two.

"Are you Mr. Koert?" asked the man in the pongee suit. "My name is Paul Vernier. The governor-general promised me your cooperation. Has he written you?"

"You are here before the mail," said the *controleur*. "But you have my cooperation anyhow. Won't you sit down blease?"

"I'll come right to the point," said Vernier, sinking into a high, fan backed Bilibid chair. "I'm looking for a killer."

"Dayaks, maybe?" said the rotund *controleur*. "You must go far up the river to find them. And they are not killing so much any more —"

"Dayaks don't interest me," said Vernier. "I'm looking for an American — an American murderer named Jerome Steeks. I've traced him to Tanjong Samar."

Koert clapped his hands and shouted something in Malay, which

was answered by a grunt in another room.

"I am offering you coffee," he explained. "This is coffee time. Later is gin time. Where is your baggage?"

"I have all the baggage I need in my inside pocket — extradition papers for Jerome Steeks, approved by the governor-general in Batavia. I'll pick up Steeks as soon as you tell me where he is, and I'll take him aboard the steamer before she sails."

"You can't do that," said the *controleur* simply.

"Why not? I'm positive Jerome Steeks is in Tanjong Samar."

"There is nobody with that name in my district."

"Naturally, he wouldn't be using his own name. But it shouldn't be so hard to locate my man in this bustling metropolis. Isn't there an American here?"

"There are three Americans." Vernier's eyebrows raised slightly as Koert continued, "All three are on the Kota Bharu rubber estate up the river. The round trip to the blantation will take two hours, not counting time for looking for the Americans. The steamer leaves in one hour. Shall I send out for your baggages?"

Vernier's gaze fixed Koert for a moment. Then his pursed lips spread into a smile.

"All right," he said. "If it won't be too much trouble."

Koert clapped his hands again and muttered more Malay. A servant appeared with a tray.

"They will get it for you," said the *controleur*. "And now we can drink our coffee."

There was no coffee pot on the tray — only cups, sugar bowl, a pitcher of hot milk and a small jug. Vernier watched Koert pour a spoonful of black essence from the jug into each cup, then add the steaming milk. The resultant liquid looked and smelled a little like coffee.

"And now," said Koert, passing a cup, "tell me about this man you want to arrest. Does he know you?"

"No."

"Good. In that case he will not suspect. You can arrest him a few hours before the next ship calls. That will save unpleasant makeshifts. We have no good jail here. You will recognize this American? You have his photograph?"

"Jerome Steeks is a very clever man," said Vernier. "He planned a perfect escape from a nearly perfect crime. There isn't a single picture or set of fingerprints of him in existence. I know him only by description; medium height, slight build, pale complexion, dark hair and small black mustache."

The *controleur* suddenly grasped his ample girth with both hands threw back his head, opened his mouth wide and emitted loud cackling sounds. After a moment Vernier decided Heer Koert was laughing.

"You must have come to the wrong *dessa*," laughed the *controleur*. "All three men are medium height, but all are quite strong looking, clean shaven, brown as coffee by the sun,

and none of them has dark hair."

"I told you Steeks was clever." Vernier smiled, a little wistfully. "But I'm positive he is here. He came here from Batavia six months ago."

"All three men came from Batavia six months ago, by the same boat. The estate changed hands and the new owner wanted Americans to run it, because American planters know how to bud the trees and double the rubber yield . . . What sort of man is the murderer?"

Vernier gulped the bitterish coffee.

"Utterly ruthless," he said, "yet a polished gentleman. Strange combination. He has lived a great deal in Europe, where he was known as a connoisseur of music, women, good cooking and fine wines. I heard of him first when I was in France."

"Ah, France," said Heer Koert, looking steadfastly at Vernier's drooping eyelid. "Then it was in France that you —"

He made a vague gesture, as though afraid to touch on a delicate subject. Vernier saw the gesture and smiled.

"Yes," he said. "A piece of shrapnel. It started me on my present career, I guess. One eye isn't enough for the infantry, so they took me off the line and put me into intelligence. I made so many French contacts that after the Armistice I followed them up. Stayed on in Paris to study Bertillon methods with the French Sûreté. Just before I came home I remember reading of Jerome Steeks attending the annual banquet of Paris vintners, entering the usual wine tasting contest and identifying by taste as many unlabeled vintages as the oldest professional taster."

Heer Koert made clucking sounds with his tongue.

"A gourmet," he commented.

"He was rich. Nobody questioned the source of his money, which was undoubtedly — well, extra-legal. Three years ago he married a San Francisco heiress, took her to Europe, brought her back to California. Shortly after their return, Mrs. Steeks' body was found lying on the end of a little used pier, a bullet in the brain. Tire marks on the pier led to a search for the Steeks' car, which was found in the bay. Steeks was supposed to have been drowned in the plunge. A note told of a suicide pact. They had run through the heiress' fortune, lost staggering sums at Monte Carlo and decided on death rather than poverty. Although Steeks' body was never found, in view of the tides, the discovery of two empty shells in a revolver, and the fact that Mrs. Steeks' fortune was indeed dissipated, the police accepted the double suicide theory."

"And of course it was false?"

"Of course. It was a case of cold blooded murder for profit. A year later a prominent shyster lawyer got into a jam, was arrested, and in his safe cops found a letter from Steeks, written from Batavia. The lawyer had apparently been salting away the wife's missing fortune and was to notify Steeks when he could come back safely. Well, the Secretary of

State asked for extradition right away, and I slid out to Batavia to pick up the trail. Clues can get pretty cold in a year, and evidence can be camouflaged. But I've got Mr. Steeks here now. With no steamer for two weeks, he can't very well get away."

Controleur Koert shook his head in a puzzled manner.

"I am not so sure," he said. "There is no gourmet and no bolished gentleman at Kota Bharu estate. There is just Americans."

"One of them is a murderer. When can we go and pick him out, Mr. Koert?"

The *controleur* scratched himself behind the ear.

"First I must attend to the steamer," he said. "Then I will talk with you about best methods."

"In the meantime I'll walk about the town a bit," said Vernier, arising. "It's cooler now. Maybe I can learn something."

"Mr. Vernier, blease don't open that screen door yet," cried Koert, rushing after the detective in a panic. "Wait."

He rolled a newspaper into a small torch, lighted it and waved the flame against the screen to cremate whatever mosquitoes had gathered on the outside waiting a chance to enter.

"Now," he said. "Go. And shut the door quickly. In an hour and a half come back. We will have gin *pahits* and discuss methods."

The *controleur* persuaded Paul Vernier to wait until next morning before starting his man hunt. The sun glinted with hard brilliance on the coffee colored river when the two men — Koert in whites, Vernier in khaki — walked down to the shore. They threaded their way among carved, high stemmed *praus*, drawn up on the beach, with red and blue demons grinning from their leaning masts. The two white men crawled under the palm thatched canopy shading the middle of a long narrow *sampan*. Paddles dug into the brown water, churning the current. The craft swung upstream.

After a few minutes on the river Vernier drew Koert's attention to another *sampan* following them, stroke for stroke.

"Yes," said Koert. "That is your baggages. I had them send by another *sampan* because we are already crowded in this one."

"But I don't need baggage," said Vernier. "I won't have to stay at the plantation. I'll pick my man and come back to stay with you — if you don't mind."

"I would be more than bleased. But I am afraid you will have to stay longer. I know the three Americans. None of them fits your description. You will have to study them closer. The governor-general said I should help you, so I sent word ahead that we would come for *makan* at noon today and that you might want to stay on to see how rubber is made."

The round faced detective's dimples appeared.

"I wouldn't like to do that — ac-

cept a man's hospitality and then clamp the bracelets on him. If I find I have to stay there to complete my identification, I'll tell them so right out. Not likely that my man will escape from this place. That way it will make it an open battle of wits, and I'll feel better about staying."

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed the *controleur*. "You can't do that. I have already said you were a stockholder and for that reason wished to stay on the blantation. You cannot contradict the *controleur*. Besides, it will be easier for you to work quietly like I plan."

"Well, all right. We'll try it for awhile," said Vernier soberly.

A rickety little pier, two tin roofed sheds and a clearing of the jungle to make way for the symmetrical rows of *hevea* trees marked the place where the Kota Bharu rubber plantation reached the river. From the river it was a five-minute walk to the large bungalow, raised on piles, which served as quarters for the white plantation managers.

The three managers puzzled Vernier as they were introduced — Prale, Wilmerding and Doran. The *controleur* had been right. There was nothing of a cultured *bon vivant* among these rough and ready Americans, and all were light. Prale was a bland looking, sandy haired fellow with a smart Aleck twist to the corners of his mouth and a turned up nose. Wilmerding was blond, almost tow headed, with a vigorous handshake. Doran, keen eyed and restless, had light reddish hair. Which one of the trio was the black haired Jerome Steeks? None of them, Vernier would have said, had he not definite information that the murderer was here. One of them *must* be Steeks.

"Hope you don't object to *rystaffel*," said Doran as they filed into a darkened room for lunch. "That's all our cook ever gives us for noon."

"From what I had of it in Java," said Vernier, "I rather like it."

"I don't," said Wilmerding. "*Rystaffel*'s enough to give dyspepsia to a herd of buffaloes."

Whatever the reaction of buffaloes to the national dish of the Dutch colonial in the Indies, Wilmerding was apparently not afraid of dyspepsia for himself. He heaped his plate high with rice and proceeded to decorate it with all the accessories which two servants brought to the table: curried eggs, fried bananas, onions, chutneys, shredded coconut, tiny red dried fish, peppers and various unidentified spiced meats and vegetables. Vernier watched Wilmerding mix the conglomeration in approved Dutch East Indies style. Wilmerding caught Vernier's eye, guessed his judgement on the score of inconsistency, and said — "Well, we have to eat something."

"*Rystaffel*'s not bad with a glass of beer," said Vernier.

"We never have any real cold beer out here," Wilmerding complained. "No ice. And warm beer is nasty."

Vernier studied Wilmerding a moment. He was attacking his *rystaffel* with as much gusto as his two com-

panions, but for a flash, Vernier thought he had detected a styled movement on the lifting of a fork. Perhaps not, inasmuch as Wilmerding wiped his mouth with the back of his hand after taking a draft of beer.

"I ran across some pretty good wine down in Batavia and Sourabaya. Why don't you fellows get some of it sent up?" Vernier suggested.

"Never learned to drink wine," said Wilmerding. "We got plebian tastes. Just beer — and a little gin or Scotch at night. Prale over there talks a lot about the wine he drank, but if you ask me, he'd a lot rather have an ice cream soda. A lot of us would, I guess."

He ran his fingers through his blond hair, thoughtfully sipped some beer, then went after his rice with renewed vigor.

It wasn't until an amazing amount of rice had been consumed that Vernier saw his first indication as to which of the three might be the cultured murderer. The detective pricked up his ears when Wilmerding suggested that Doran give him some music.

"Music?" echoed Vernier.

"Yeh. Doran plays," said Prale. "He plays a mean phonograph."

Yes, the phonograph was his, Doran admitted. What would Mr. Vernier like to hear? Probably nothing, because it was damned hard to keep up a decent repertoire out there in Borneo, where the new records had to be shipped in and half the time arrived broken.

"May I look?" said Vernier.

He slid back the disks, one after the other, expecting to find recordings of operas, symphonies and other more serious compositions — probably French composers dominating. He found only jazz numbers, out-of-date sentimental ballads. No trained, cosmopolitan taste here.

"Play anything," he said.

The phonograph squealed, sang and strummed away. Wilmerding sat smoking a pipe with Heer Koert. Prale walked to the edge of the veranda and looked through the screen toward the river. Doran was sorting over his precious records. Vernier walked slowly about the room, taking in details with his one alert eye. He stopped in front of a bookcase and began reading the titles.

"Hello," he said. "Who owns the French books?"

"They were here when we came," said Wilmerding. "There was a French planter on the estate before us. He left the books."

"Anybody here read them?" Vernier inquired, taking down a volume.

"Prale practically invented the French language," said Doran. "Just ask him."

Vernier was holding the French book close to his face, slowly turning pages.

"I studied French," he said, as if to himself. Then, watching the room over the top of his book, he said, as though reading, "*Il y a un meurtrier dans cette maison.*"

He paused, watching for a reaction to his announcement in French that

there was a murderer in the house. He was disappointed. Prale looked stupidly sheepish as the others overwhelmed him with banter.

"What's it all about, Prale?" demanded Wilmerding.

"Translate for us," ordered Doran.

"Why, it's all about houses," said Prale. "*Maison* — that's French for house."

When the laughter had subsided, Heer Controleur Koert arose.

"You will excuse me, I have to return to the *dessa* for important official business," he said, with as much equanimity as if every one present did not know that the important business was his daily *siesta*. "And you, Mr. Vernier? Are you going to pay a visit of some days to this estate?"

"If I'm not in the way," said Vernier.

"Plenty of room," said Wilmerding.

"Even if there wasn't, we'd make room by putting Doran out to sleep with the mosquitoes," said Prale.

"Which would spare me from listening to Prale's wisecracks," countered Doran.

"I would like very much to have a chance to see how you fellows get a dozen golf balls and a set of balloon tires out of a tree," said Vernier. "But I warn you — " he paused and looked at Koert — "I warn you that you'll have me prowling all over the place, asking questions like a woman at a ball game. I'm curious — about all sorts of things."

He worked his curiosity overtime during the next few days. He prowled and asked questions at all hours. He would follow Prale down the estate in the misty dawn at tapping time, listening as he offered profane suggestions, half English, half broken Malay, to the Javanese who were shaving the diagonal scars on the trunks of the *heava* trees so that the milky latex would ooze out into grooves, through a spigot into tiny porcelain cups. After the sun had become hot enough to stop the flow of sap he would make the rounds with Wilmerding, watching Javanese women in gay *sarongs* collecting latex in buffalo drawn tank carts. Then he would stand, where Doran, at the chemical shack, received the latex, pouring it into vats to be coagulated into rubber.

But in three days he got nowhere. He still believed that one of the planters was Jerome Steeks. And he still did not know whether it was Prale, Doran, or Wilmerding. One thing he did know for certain: Steeks' hair had changed color in the last eighteen months. The dark murderer of San Franscisco had become a blond. Hydrogen peroxide or some other bleaching agent must have been in use here. In use constantly, too, because for three days Vernier had looked closely to find one head of hair that was darker at the roots. Vain search. The new growth was apparently being bleached as fast as it came out. This might be a clue.

The following day, when the three planters had gone out into the steamy morning, Vernier remained at the

bungalow, pleading a headache. He lay on his springless tropical bed until he no longer heard the servants stirring about. Then he arose, went directly to Prale's room and started systematically to examine every corner of it. He ran hurriedly through a chest of drawers, and a steamer trunk green with the quick mold of the tropics. He had little expectation that a man as clever as Jerome Steeks would leave telltale papers around, but he hoped to find that bleaching agent. As a matter of fact, he found nothing but clothes, a photograph of an old woman in a moldy leather case, a catalog from a Chicago mail order house —

He repeated the proeedure in Wilmerding's room. As he was opening a trunk he thought he heard steps outside the door. He arose quickly, listened, looked out. He saw no one. He returned to his task; again fruitless. Doran's room was equally devoid of evidence.

But Doran was in the chemical shack most of the day! Just the place to hide a bleach and a little henna dye. A bottle more or less among the other chemicals would not be noticed. So Vernier went out to do a little noticing. He asked questions of Doran, who was busy with the latex. He picked up bottles and tapped metal drums. Doran gave a satisfactory explanation for everything. Another blind clue.

Prale? Wilmerding? Doran? He shut himself up alone that afternoon to reflect, to work out some plan of attack. He was so wrapped in thought that he was late for dinner. An animated conversation was in progress before he reached the table, but it stopped suddenly as he appeared in the doorway. As he sat down, conversation was resumed on trivial matters, obviously forced in an effort by the planters to cover up a change of subject. Vernier knew they had been talking about him.

After dinner there was a poker game. The four men sat about a table on the veranda. Perspiration glistened on faces and naked arms, golden in the lamplight.

Vernier was unusually quiet. He was studying his three opponents.

Jerome Steeks had been somewhat of a gambler. He might betray himself at the game. One of the three planters did, in fact, display considerable more card sense than the others — Prale. Luck was against him, however, and the chips piled up in front of Vernier. The trio were not good sports about losing, either. At least, Vernier attributed a certain tensity in the hot atmosphere to his consistent winnings. Conversation seemed strained, tonight, and what little talk there was was rarely directed at him.

Finally, when he had raked in a jack pot with four sixes over Prale's ace full, Doran tossed his cards to the center of the table and cleared his throat.

"Say, Vernier," he began, looking the detective full in the face. "Just exactly what are you doing in Borneo?"

"I thought Koert explained," said Vernier. "I'm — "

"We mean the real reason," said Wilmerding. "Of course, the stockholder story is out, because there aren't any stockholders in Kota Bharu rubber. The whole estate belongs to one man. I know that for certain."

Vernier laughed. It was a genuine laugh, for although he felt the situation rapidly growing more uneasy, he could appreciate the joke he had played on himself by accepting the *controleur's* suggestion to act the rôle of stockholder.

"Do you boys think I'm out here to sell you gold bricks or something?" he said genially.

There was an embarrassed silence for several seconds. Then Prale said with a drawl —

"What kind of gold bricks were you looking for in my room this morning?"

"In your room?"

"Yes," said Wilmerding. "We understand you did a little prospecting today — to cure your headache."

"I don't like this business — your coming here lying to us, Vernier," put in Doran. "How do we know what crooked game you're up to? You're probably a spy of some kind."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"He's not ridiculous." It was Wilmerding speaking. "We're living on the frayed edge of civilization here. We've got to look out for ourselves. We've got a perfect right to be suspicious of strangers. There's nothing ridiculous in a man protecting himself against potential enemies."

"How did you just happen to come to Tanjong Samar, which most people never heard of?" demanded Prale. "Why did you pick Kota Bharu estate out of the hundreds of rubber plantations in the East Indies?"

Vernier leaned forward easily on his elbows.

"I'll tell you why I came to Tanjong Samar," he said. "I came here to arrest a murderer."

There was a little movement by each of the three planters. Surprise, perhaps. Resentment —

"I'll be quite frank with you boys," Vernier continued. "I told the *controleur* he'd better pass me off as a stockholder until I found out which one of you three was the man I wanted. I had definite information that the murderer was on the Kota Bharu rubber estate."

Vernier's smile again flashed, and his one eye shone so with frankness that the planters leaned back in their chairs. The tension was eased for a moment.

"I'll bet Doran is the guy you're after," said Prale.

"If you stick around long enough, you can pick me up for killing Prale. I feel it coming on," said Doran.

"What's the murderer's name?" asked Wilmerding.

"Jerome Steeks."

Vernier's keen glance shifted from one face to another, but he detected not so much as the flicker of an eyelash.

"Never heard of him."

"Sounds like a vegetable to me."

"Which one of us is he?"

Vernier leisurely lighted a cigaret over the lamp chimney before he replied.

"None of you," he said. "I hadn't been here long before I decided that the tip I had was wrong. Jerome Steeks had dark hair. You men are all naturally light—nothing phony about your wigs. So I'm going to go back to Java on the next K.P.M. steamer. Then home. I kick myself, though, for having had you all under false suspicion, even if it wasn't my fault. To put myself right, to show there's no ill will on my part, I want to throw a party for you boys. We'll make it on steamer day, and you can declare a holiday, because I know the captain of the *Van Laar* is a real epicure. He has a fine cellar aboard — specializes in Chambertin — and has a great cook. I'll have him lend me the cook and a few rare old bottles for the occasion. You're invited to take a rest from *rystaffel* and have a real feed. How about it?"

There was no immediate response to the invitation. The planters seemed a little bit wary. Wilmerding spoke first.

"Sure, we'll eat your chow," he said.

"Fine," said Vernier. "I'll promise you a banquet you won't forget. How would boar with Madeira and mushroom sauce do for the roast? I'll furnish the wine sauce if there's boar to be had around here. I'll shoot one myself if some one will lend me a gun."

"I'll shoot you a pig," said Doran. "I don't like strangers using my gun."

Next morning Vernier went down the river to Tanjong Samar and called on the *controleur*.

"Mr. Koert," he said, "when does the East Borneo steamer leave Batavia?"

The *controleur* studied red lines on a wall map and consulted books.

"Is there any way for me to get through a communication to the ship before she leaves Java?" said Vernier, while Koert turned pages.

The *controleur* stroked his two chins a moment before replying.

"There is a wireless at Balik Papan," he said. "For twenty-five guilders I can get an *Orang Laut* to paddle up the coast to Balik Papan to the wireless station. Why?"

"I want the U. S. consul in Batavia to get some things on that boat for me. The consul knows a good cellar in Batavia. I want him to get me some Chambertin of the same vintage he produced when I was there. And I'll want other wines, and a cook. He can get me a cook from the Hôtel des Indes, and put him on the boat, too, with ingredients for a menu I'm going to indicate. And ice. We must have ice — "

He sat down and began drafting his message.

"Very good," said the *controleur*. "If you will give me the twenty-five guilders, and the brice of the message, I will see it goes at once. And in the meantime I am glad you are here. If you had not come, I should have gone after you this afternoon. You

must stay with me until your steamer comes."

"Why so?"

"Because your life is no longer safe on the plantation."

"What makes you think so?"

"I know. I hear from natives. Servants talk. Talk travels. In the end, it always reaches me. You told the planters at Kota Bharu of your mission —"

"I protected you. The governor-general will never know anything derogatory."

"But your man will certainly kill you before steamer day."

"Oh, no," said Vernier, smiling. "We're all good friends now. I'm giving this dinner to show there's no hard feelings. Besides, I must go back to the estate. Everything depends upon my being there."

"Well, suit yourself; but remember I warned you."

"I consider myself warned. And in the meantime hurry that SOS for food, wine, and ice. You're invited of course."

Cordial relations were apparently reestablished when Vernier returned to the rubber estate. The three planters gave no outward evidence that they had not accepted Vernier's profession of good faith, yet the detective sensed an undercurrent of suspicion. He had an idea one of the trio was fomenting ill feelings, or at least keeping it alive, for his own private ends. And for that reason Vernier slept lightly and kept his loaded automatic under his "Dutch Wife" — the cylindrical bolster found beneath every mosquito netting in the East Indies, used as an aid to ventilation of the body and to reduce perspiration during sleep.

During the entire week that preceded the arrival of the K.P.M. steamer, Vernier acted as enthusiastic press agent for his farewell dinner. He outlined his menu and told of the wines he would serve with each course — particularly the Chambertin, king of red Burgundies, robust, fragrant, heady, Napoleon's favorite wine —

"Any Chambertin is fine," Vernier would tell the planters, "but 1911 Chambertin is beyond comparison. It is the superlative in wine. You'll see."

Three days before the arrival of the steamer the matter of boar again came up. All three planters decided to go shooting. "Come with us," said Prale to Vernier.

"I haven't a gun," said Vernier.

"I have two rifles," said Wilmerding. "You can take one."

At the last minute, however, Wilmerding found that the packing of smoked crêpe for shipment on the next boat was not going rapidly enough. He decided to stay on the estate to push the coolies a bit.

Prale and Doran accompanied Vernier into the jungle beyond the limits of the plantation. Vernier noticed casually that he was the only one wearing a white topee. The other two wore khaki sun helmets.

"We won't have to go far," said Prale. "Sometimes they come right down in the trees. Just keep plugging straight ahead."

That was the plan. Vernier was to keep on straight ahead, while Prale and Doran were to oblique to the right and left. Several Malays were out in front.

As a matter of fact, as soon as the two men were out of sight in the chest high thicket, Vernier stopped walking. He wanted those two men ahead of him, not behind. Jerome Steeks was a ruthless person —

The detective took off his white topee and perched it atop a *lantana* bush. Then he walked several paces away and squatted down in the damp growth, his rifle between his knees. They could not possibly see him there, but they could see his sun helmet — a flash of white in the dense greenery.

For twenty minutes he waited, whisking away flies and insects. Then he heard a shot, followed by two more. A fourth shot, and his sun helmet leaped spinning into the air, struck a tree, bounded to the ground at his feet. Jerome Steeks could shoot, too. Which was he? Vernier picked up the helmet. Did the shot come from the left — Prale? or the right — Doran? He turned the helmet in the direction it had been facing atop the bush. He looked at the holes. Then he looked again. The shot had come from neither left nor right. It had come from behind. One of the pair had succeeded in circling around behind him, despite his precautions. But which one?

Putting on his helmet he started back toward the estate. He hoped to cross the trail of the man who had fired from behind. But he was disappointed. He reached the bungalow without meeting any one. It was half an hour later that Prale and Doran came back, with their Malays carrying the dead pig.

There was no more stray shooting before steamer day, and when the yellow funneled steamer again hove-to off the river mouth, Vernier was still in the dark as to who fired the shot.

The ship arrived one gray, sweltering afternoon, and the *controleur* got the skipper to lay over until nearly midnight, instead of making the usual hurried call. He could be in Balik Papan by dawn, anyhow.

The cook imported from Batavia came ashore in a *Sampan* loaded with crates, boxes and a huge cake of ice wrapped in burlap. He repaired immediately to the bungalow of Heer Koert where he shooed his Chinese predecessor into a corner and began to exercise his art. In view of the *controleur's* superior kitchen, and the time that would have been lost by transporting the supplies up the river, the three planters had agreed to come down to the *dessa.*

In deference to Dutch colonial custom, the dinner was preceded by a few rounds of gin *pahits* on the veranda. Vernier proudly produced a menu written in French, which he

passed around, watching the expression on the faces of the three Americans as they read:

FOIE GRAS AU PORTO
HOMARD À L'ARMORICAINE
TRUFFLES SOUS LA CENDRE
SANGLIER À LA MADÈRE
POMMES SOUFFLÉES
ZABAGLIONE
PETITS FOURS ROQUEFORT
DEMI-TASSE
MONTRACHET 1904 CHAMBERTIN-CRESIGNY 1911 CHAMPAGNE IRROY 1919

The eyes of the Dutch *controleur* and the steamship captain, who also was a guest, grew large and bright as they scanned the menu. Those of the three Americans did not show a flicker of comprehension.

The planters smacked their lips over the goose liver in port wine jelly, however, and breathed noisily in unison — Ah-h-h — when the lobster appeared, steaming in its savory fumes of white wine, brandy, essence of tomatoes.

Paul Vernier, as he presided over the table, glittering with the crystal ware and cutlery from Batavia, seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself. At times he could be as boisterous as the three Americans. Yet when he mentioned his wines, he spoke reverently in low tones.

"This Montrachet," he said, as he poured the fragrant golden wine that accompanied the lobster, "beats any other white wine in the world. Can't compete with Chambertin, of course, but in 1904 it was as good as white Burgundy ever had been or will be."

The planters approved profanely. There was plenty of white wine, so they drank plenty. And Montrachet is a heady wine. . . . They probably did not fully appreciate the truffles. Each truffle had been imbedded in a potato and baked in live coals. One had only to peel off the charred potato to find the truffle in all its succulence. . . .

Then came the boar, bathed in its mauve wine sauce, studded with mushrooms, exhaling a glorious aroma.

"And now," announced Vernier, "the king of wines. There never was a better wine than Chambertin, and there never was a better Chambertin than 1911. Look!"

Carefully cradled in a special basket with a handle at one end, the bottle was passed around. Vernier called attention to the cobwebs on the bottle. Then he poured a little in his own glass, holding it up to be admired.

"Look at that color!" he said. "Rubies. Clear, leaping flame. The fire of a thousand sunsets. And the bouquet! Just have a whiff of it. Sheer poetry! That's wine for you — Chambertin!"

He held out the glass to the nostrils of each of the guests, watching them as they breathed the spirituous fragrance.

"And now, pass me your large wine glasses, please. Thanks."

Scarcely moving the bottle, he poured each glass three-fourths full. His one keen eye darted quick glances about the table. Then he suddenly

plunged a spoon into a dish of cracked ice and began to tinkle the crystal chunks into each glass of red wine.

Wilmerding instantly half rose from his chair directly opposite, his mouth open as though he had witnessed something horrible.

"My God, man! Don't put ice in that Chambertin!" he said in low, shocked tones.

Vernier dropped the spoon, made a swipe for his pocket and lunged across the table before Wilmerding could sit down again. There was a metallic click, a grunt — and a pair of handcuffs glistened around Wilmerding's wrists.

Straightening up, Vernier said quietly —

"Jerome Steeks!"

The room was immediately in an uproar. The diners were on their feet, shouting, gesticulating. The *controleur* was yelling Dutch at the steamship captain who was nodding his head furiously. Prale was pounding the table and hurling pyrotechnic language at Vernier. Doran had an arm around Wilmerding and was assuring him that everything was all right. Wilmerding continued to stare at Vernier, his mouth open.

"Jerome Steeks!" repeated Vernier.

"Liar!" yelled Doran.

"You can't get away with that stuff!" Prale was advancing toward Vernier with a chair swung above his head.

"Wait!" Vernier made a pacific gesture with both hands. Prale paused. "I'll tell you how I know this man is Jerome Steeks." Prale put down the chair. "Only an epicure, a gourmet such as Jerome Steeks, would have been shocked by my putting ice in Chambertin. Only a man who knows thoroughly how to eat and drink appreciates wines enough to understand that the bouquet of Chambertin would be destroyed, frozen up, by cold. Steeks knows that red wine should always be drunk at the temperature of the room. This, gentlemen, is Jerome Steeks, epicure — wanted in San Francisco for murder."

"How about it, Willy? What's the inside?" demanded Prale.

Steeks, lately Wilmerding, did not turn his head. He was looking forlornly at a growing purple stain on the table cloth. In his excitement of snapping on the handcuffs, Vernier had upset three glasses of wine.

"Say, Vernier," said the manacled man at last. "Will you do me one last and quite reasonable favor?"

"Sure," said Vernier, "if you'll do me one. Tell me how you kept your hair blond without the help of bleaching agents."

Wilmerding-Steeks smiled faintly.

"It was always blond," he said. "When I started living by my wits I figured I'd probably have to hide out some day. So I dyed it black and kept it that way, knowing I could let it grow out blond when I wanted to. And now, will you do me that favor?

"What is it?" asked Vernier.

"Pour me a glass of your Chambertin," came the reply, "without ice."

NEITHER FISH, FLESH NOR FOWL

It is surprising how many famous writers studied hard and long to become doctors, lawyers, and engineers — only to give up their chosen professions, sometimes at the height of their careers, to follow their real hearts-desire. Arthur Somers Roche prepared for the bar, graduated from Boston University in 1904, practiced law for nearly two years — and in 1906 switched, never to turn back, from his vocation to his avocation. He started writing professionally as a newspaperman; in 1910 he challenged the magazine field; in 1917 he broke into "The Saturday Evening Post"; and by the time he died, in 1935, he was one of America's most popular and successful slick-magazine writers. His special literary bent expressed itself in a long series of stories about "emotional life among the exceedingly rich" — thematic material which he derived from first-hand experience. During the fabulous boom days of the 'twenties Mr. Roche was a familiar figure at Palm Beach, on sleek ocean-going yachts, and in the aristocratic clubs of New York.

Occasionally Arthur Somers Roche indulged in a little literary slumming — he tried his hand at the detective story. And it is curious that these excursions, in which Mr. Roche revealed his conception of how the other half lived, usually found favor with the editors of slick magazines. For example, take the story we now bring to you: "Put Him on a Spot" is particularly interesting on two counts — one, the manner in which the tale is written, and two, the date it was first published in "Collier's." The date was July 6, 1929. At that time the hardboiled detective story was just about coming into its own, exerting a powerful influence on all American crime writers. In the early 'twenties "Black Mask" had launched the tough, hard-bitten, shocking style of such pioneers as Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett, and by 1929 (the year in which, if memory serves, THE MALTESE FALCON *appeared serially in "Black Mask") the new type of story and the new style of its telling had penetrated even into the fashionable haunts of slick writers. It is your Editor's impression that in "Put Him on a Spot" Arthur Somers Roche was actually trying to write a hardboiled detective story — but according to such sweet and sentimental standards as would earn the approval of a slick-magazine editor! In other words, "Put Him on a Spot" is a deliberate attempt to wed the pulp story to the slick story, to mix sugary slickness with tart toughness. Can it be done? Read Mr. Roche's "noble" experiment and judge for yourself. Note especially Mr. Roche's "realistic" dialogue. Can a story be half hardboiled and half slick without in the end becoming neither fish, flesh nor fowl?*

PUT HIM ON A SPOT

by ARTHUR SOMERS ROCHE

I WON'T touch it," I said.

"Oh, you won't touch it, eh?" said Murdock.

"You heard me," I told him.

"Sure I heard you," he said.

"Then that's that," I said.

"Yeah, that's that." He lighted another cigarette.

"I'll be getting back to my job," I told him.

"Good job?" he asked. "Sitting all day at a desk?"

"Better than sitting in the chair."

"Aw, be yourself, Curtis," he said. "Who mentioned the chair?"

"I mentioned the chair," I said.

"You never used to think about the chair," he said.

"I never did anything to make me think about it," I said.

"What makes you think about it now?" he asked.

"Your talk," I answered.

"Oh, my talk, eh?" He lighted another cigarette. I never noticed before how many cigarettes he smoked. "Why, you brought the subject up, didn't you, Curtis? Grown kind of jumpy, haven't you?"

"Grown straight, that's all," I said.

He threw his cigarette away.

"Kenney won't like it so much when I tell him you're putting on the high hat," he said.

"He'd rather have me put on those headpieces they clamp on your dome up in the death-house," I answered.

"Ever hear of any of Kenney's lads taking that morning walk?" he inquired.

"I ain't one of Kenney's lads," I said.

"But you were," he said.

"But I ain't," I told him.

"What you making here — forty per?" he asked.

"Thirty — all clean," I said.

"Yeah, you must be clean by Monday morning," he sneered. "You can buy your girl a lot of pretties with what's left from thirty bucks."

"I haven't got a girl," I told him.

"You used to have one," he said. "Seems to me I remember something about her. Nice li'l jane, from uptown somewhere. I was noticing her out the other night."

"What's a fighting word to put before liar, Murdock?" I asked.

"Meaning?" he said.

"You know what I mean," I told him. "I want to call you the kind of a liar that would make you sore enough to go for your rod."

"Meaning you want to bump me off, eh?" he asked.

"Meaning that if you mention her I *will* bump you off," I said.

"Well, all right, Curtis, if you feel that way about it. But she was out with the Digger only night before last."

He had his rod in his hand as he spoke, and I didn't have any rod. But it wasn't that that stopped me. What stopped me was that I knew he told the truth.

My Susie! Out with the Digger! Why, she didn't even know him!

"Murdock, put away your rod. I ain't going to kill you," I said.

He knew me. He'd taken one big chance in the hope that he'd make me believe him. Kenney must need me a lot.

"I thought you'd see it our way, Curtis," he said. "Well, what about it?"

"What about what?" I asked.

I wanted him to go away. I wanted to go away myself. My Susie out with the Digger! And me working for thirty bucks a week because she didn't want me crooked. Me never seeing her! Me dropping right out of her life, never letting her know where I am or anything. Me spending half the night looking at her photograph while the Digger was looking at her real self.

I wanted to cry, that's what I wanted to do.

"You know Mallasson," he said.

"You want me to take him for a ride, eh?" I asked.

"We'll put him on a spot," he said.

"Go to hell," I said.

I got up from the one-armed lunchroom where he'd found me, and started to go.

He grabbed my arm.

"If I take that back to Kenney, he won't take it," he said.

"Well, what the hell's he going to do about it?" I asked.

"That's what I want to talk to you about, Curtis," he said.

"Listen," I said. "I'm off all that. I'm getting me thirty bucks a week and liking it, see?"

"You used to tip a waiter more than that," he said.

"Them birds are overpaid," I said.

I broke loose from him, walked to the cashier and slipped her sixty cents. Sixty cents! It woulda' made me laugh if it didn't come nearer making me cry.

A sixty-cent lunch when I used to pay that for my melon.

I stopped outside the store of Murgatroyd & Williamson. What the hell! Eight in the morning until five at night. Put a packing-case on; take a packing-case off. Smoke two cigarettes at lunch because the package must last until night. A bum dinner and a bum movie. A rotten room in a cheap lodging-house. . . . And my Susie out with the Digger!

Women! Look you right plumb in the eye and talk teary. No, I couldn't love a man that had a racket. No, I wouldn't want the things that kind of money pays for.

Well, what sort of money did she think the Digger spent? God, if she wouldn't stand for a racketeer, what made her go for the Digger? I was outside the law, but the Digger was outside everything.

And sweet my Susie was and all of that, but she knew her way around. Show me a girl nowadays that doesn't.

Clean and straight and all that, but she knew what it was all about. And one look at the Digger would tell her everything about him.

And she was out with him only the other night! Couldn't go out with me because my dough wasn't made square. Gave me the air because I did a little of this and a little of that; because I played the races, and ran a little hooch, and did a little fixing of the right people once in a while. Me out in the cold and the Digger in where it was nice and warm.

I tried to laugh that one off and couldn't raise a chuckle. One o'clock struck. If I wasn't inside that big double door before the note died away a big fat stiff would bawl me out. He'd dock me fifty cents. Fifty cents. I used to give it to a newsboy for a late edition, and now it meant breakfast. Fifty cents!

"Well, what about it?"

I turned and there was Murdock at my elbow. I just stared at him and didn't see him. All I could see was my Susie, and she was close to the Digger, looking up at him. . . . God, she had the bluest eyes. . . .

"I never killed anyone," I said.

"That's the point," said Murdock.

"And I don't know Mallasson," I said.

"Kenney thought of that one, too," he said. He lighted another cigarette. "It's like this, Curtis — "

"They dock me fifty cents every five minutes I'm late," I interrupted.

He peeled a bill off a big roll. It was a grand. He handed it to me.

"Take the whole afternoon off," he said.

A thousand berries! I used to bet that much that I'd make my point, and now I couldn't even shoot craps for dimes.

"That's big money for an afternoon's talk," I said.

"There's nine more waiting for you the minute Mallasson is croaked."

"Why pick on me?" I asked.

I could see Susie! She liked life. What nice girl doesn't? The theaters, the night clubs. . . . And the Digger could spend, too. He didn't mind paying any price for what he wanted. Six months of sticking around the house and she'd had plenty. And I'd 'a' bet my life that I'd 'a' quit before she would have.

"You read the papers, don't you?" I heard Murdock's voice from 'way, 'way off.

"Lay it on the line," I told him.

"The whole town's jake that Mallasson is out to get Kenney. Him just promoted to Chief of Detectives and out to make a record. The papers hollering that Kenney can't be touched by anybody, that he owns the police and the D. A. and all. Well, Mallasson is out to get Kenney."

"Well, he can't do it, can he?" I asked. "What's Kenney sweating about?"

"Well, he's sweating," said Murdock.

I sort of whistled.

"This Mallasson must be quite a man," I said, "if he's got Kenney sweating. What's he got on Kenney?"

Murdock's teeth showed. "What do you care what he's got on him?"

"Not a dime," I told him. "But I'd like to know what Kenney thinks he's got on me."

"Ten grand's a lot of dough," he said.

"I've lost it on one race," I told him.

"That was last year," he said. "This is another June, Curtis."

"I told you to lay it on the line," I said.

Another June. Just a year ago I'm out at Belmont. I have my Susie with me. She's wearing one of them blue hats with a tiny yellow flower on the left side, and she's standing on tiptoe, in a pair of shoes so small that I could use them for cuff-links. I have five grand on the Heenan entry and I don't even watch the race.

"All right, here it is," he said. "Mallasson's gotta be put on the spot."

"You said that before," I told him.

"I'm saying it again," he said. "Do you want to hear the rest of it?"

I took a look at the big open doorway. Inside there were hundreds of packing-cases. Lift 'em off; put 'em on. Now that was a swell racket for Tom Curtis, wasn't it? I looked down at the grand in my mitt.

"Shoot the piece," I said.

"If Mallasson's bumped, the District Attorney will be using a fine-tooth comb on Kenney," said Murdock.

"Go on," I said.

"Suppose I gave that big stiff of a copper the works? Suppose the Digger did? Suppose any one of the lads did it. We couldn't get an alibi air-tight enough."

"Why doesn't Kenney import a couple of lads from Chi or Philly?" I asked.

"You ain't read the papers very careful, have you?" he said. "And you ain't been around for six months. I tell you, Curtis, Mallasson's got this town all sewed up. He's got even Kenney so he's afraid to move. Kenney'd be tied up with any gangsters from Chi or Philly like prohibition is with graft. It's got to be an outsider."

"Like me, eh?" I sneered.

"Yes, like you," he said.

"Just in a friendly way I walk up and put a couple of bullets into the copper, eh?" I said.

"You've got it," he said. "We plant him, Curtis. He's waiting right on the spot where we put him. All alone. You go by. Wham! He gets it. We got your alibi."

"I thought you just said alibis weren't so hot these days," I said.

"For you they're O. K. You ain't got a record. You're working at a regular job. You never were out in the open with Kenney. Why the hell should anyone suspect you'd settle Mallasson?"

"You asked it; you answer it," I said.

"Well, no one would."

"Well, no one will," I said. "Because I won't go for it. I'm no killer."

"You said that before," he reminded me. "And that makes it still

better. Every killer in town will be rounded up within twenty-four hours after we put Mallasson on a spot. Who'll think of you?"

"Kenney must be in a hell of a state," I said.

"Well, all right. You said it. Let it go at that. Are you on?"

I stuffed the grand right in his mitt.

"Got fifty cents?" I asked.

"Why, sure," he said, bewildered like.

He handed me half a dollar.

"Much obliged," I said. "It's only fair you should pay for my being docked."

With that I started for the door of Murgatroyd & Williamson. I was ten feet from him before he got over his surprise. Then he called to me.

"Well," I said.

"About the Digger," he said. "And Susie Turner," he said. "Why don't you give her a ring?"

I walked through the big double doors.

"You're late, Curtis," said the foreman. "That'll cost you just one buck."

I handed him a five-dollar bill.

"Keep the change, feller," I said.

"You're fired," he yelled.

I left him picking himself up. Fired, was I? Well, wasn't that too bad?

And my Susie was out with the Digger, was she? Theater seats at eighteen a brace; cover charge at a night club for two; taxis; and, well, orchids and . . .

Give her a ring, Murdock said. Telephone, eh? Yeah, what could you say to a doll over the telephone? I couldn't say the things I wanted her to hear. She'd cut me off. But if I backed her against a wall she'd listen. I'd make her listen. Oh, God, if I had to get the double-cross why couldn't I get it from a man? Why did I have to get it from Susie?

I walked from the store to my room. I climbed three flights of stairs and tossed myself on a bed.

They'd be off at Belmont in a couple of minutes. I could see the grandstand with the bookies underneath. One year ago, and a nod from me and I'd have a grand on some baby's nose. And the racketeers would give me the nod, and there'd be a date for the evening. . . .

But gambling wasn't exactly honorable. And running hooch was immoral.

Yes, sir, she'd rather cook her own meals and do her own laundry than live off dishonest money.

So she says good-bye to me. And I — well, wouldn't I be a sucker to make a lot of promises that I didn't know I could keep? So I drop right out of her life. In a year or two I'll be making good; I'll come back to her. . . . And she couldn't stand it for six months. Out with the Digger!

But why did Murdock tell me that? Then I got it. He wanted to show me what a sap I was to play it straight on account of a girl. Well, he was right, damn him.

But Kenney must be in a considerable jam. To bring up my girl's name, to send for me. . . . Well, a lot I

cared for Kenney. He could burn twice a day and I should worry.

I got up from the bed, straightened my tie and started uptown. One talk with Susie — so help me, she'd never forget it — and then — well, I didn't look that far ahead. There are some things you don't want to look beyond.

I rang the bell, and her mother let me in. She stared like I was a ghost.

"Where's Susie?" she cried. "What have you done with her?"

I gave her back her stare.

"I haven't seen Susie for six months," I said.

With that she keeled right over backward, and I'm twenty minutes bringing her out of the faint, and an hour longer getting her story.

Susie, two nights ago, got a phone message, and she thought it was from me. She went out to meet me. And she never came back.

"And you," said Mrs. Turner, "a decent lad if I ever met one, so I thought — well, my Susie and Tom Curtis they went off and got married, and maybe the telegram got missent or something. A mother can't think the worst so she hopes for the best. But Susie loved you — "

"She did?" I said.

"Why else would she send you away?" asked the mother. "Sure, a girl can't be asking every lad if the money he spends for theater tickets is honest come by, can she? And she had faith. When she didn't hear from you, she'd say to me that you were off somewhere, living straight and decent — oh, my God, Tom, can't you bring back my Susie?"

"I'll bring back your Susie," I said to her.

So that was why Murdock had said to telephone my girl. He gave me the hint that she was out with the Digger. He didn't know that Susie had told her mother she'd gone out to meet me. I'd think she'd decided to do the best she could, and then I'd be ripe to quit the sucker game of holding down a job. . . .

I went to Kenney.

"I'm not a killer," I said.

"Go on," he said.

"The Digger's got my girl," I said.

"Get another girl," he advised.

"She didn't go willingly with the Digger," I said.

"They all say that," he said.

"She hasn't said it. I'm saying it."

"Get on with it," he said.

"Give me my girl or I'll kill you, me that isn't a killer," I said.

"If I don't have Mallasson nailed to a tree within twenty-four hours I'll fry," he said. "Now shoot. Bullet or burn, it's fifty-fifty with me."

I looked him over. He hadn't got to be the king of all the racketeers by quitting in a pinch. There wasn't any yellow in him. He wouldn't scare.

He'd picked me for the Mallasson job, and if I wanted my Susie back . . .

"I never did any killing, Kenney, but if I do one I'd as soon do two," I said to him. "And I don't mean the Digger, Kenney. I mean you. If my Susie ain't right as rain — "

"If she ain't, Curtis," he said, "I'll

hand you the gun to give it to me with. But — I got to get Mallasson."

"Shoot it," I said.

"He gets a message. An old pal of mine is sore and will give up everything. But Mallasson's got to come alone. Furthermore, Mallasson's got to give his word that he won't tell any one who he's going to meet. One thing about that copper — his word is good."

"It's good," I said.

"Well, you meet him. You give it to him. You walk to where you live and take a smoke. Then you go call upon your girl. She'll be there."

"And the Digger?" I asked.

"Not the weight of his finger on her. My life for that," said Kenney.

"Your life for that," said I.

I smoked a pack of cigarettes while he made his plans. What the hell? Why be economical about a butt any more?

"Your alibi's planted," Kenney finally said. "There's three good lads up in your room playing penny ante and you're with them. Mallasson's given his word he'll not tell a soul you're to meet him."

"Oh," I said, "you gave him my name?"

"Sure I did," said Kenney. "He knows you used to be one of the mob. He knows you've gone straight — "

"If he should tell his men that he went to meet me — " I began.

"He gave his word," said Kenney.

"Then he'll keep it," I said.

"Here's a rod," said Kenney. "Monument and Lincoln, right by the statue. You walk up to him. You shake hands and let him have it. Seven-twenty exact. The nearest cop will be three blocks away."

"My Susie — "

He cut me short.

"She'll be home before Mallasson hits the curb. So long."

I go out on the street, I look at my watch. I've got fifteen minutes to walk ten blocks. A minute and a half to a block. My Susie! In the Digger's hands. And the Digger backed by Kenney. And Kenney never showed mercy to man, woman, or beast. What was a girl to Kenney? If the Digger wanted her. . . . And wasn't my Susie just the girl the Digger would want? The Digger, the rottenest, foulest. . . . What was Mallasson? Just another copper. And what did I care for coppers? What was the life of the best copper that ever lived compared to a hair on my Susie's head?

Fifteen minutes. There's Mallasson.

"You, Curtis. Spill it," he said.

I look at him. Just as easy. My Susie back at home. My Susie loving me, belonging to me. I hitch my left shoulder forward; easier to get my rod out. I'll jam it against his belly, let him have it. . . .

Goddlemighty, am I crazy? Would my Susie let me kill an innocent man to save her from — to save her from even the Digger? God knew she wouldn't, and I knew she wouldn't.

"You're on a spot, Mallasson," I said to him. "Kenney's got my girl — it was her or you, and I thought it was you — "

"Get it out," he yells. His own gun is in his hand.

I turned. A machine was careening down the street. They're shooting from it. Mallasson's down. I'm kneeling over him, letting them have it, letting them have it. . . .

We're in the same room at the hospital, Mallasson and I. He's all bandaged and so am I. He sends everyone out of the room.

"Thought you wasn't coming to, Curtis," he said.

I let out a groan. "I wish I hadn't," I said. "My girl — "

"You got the idea, didn't you?" he asked. "You were to croak me, and the gang was to settle you, and the District Attorney would think it was a private killing that you planned, and Kenney's mob might be blamed for you, but they wouldn't be blamed for me — "

"My girl," I said.

"One of us couldn't have stood them off. Both of us did. We got them all, Curtis. Nice hunting."

"Susie," I said.

"You with a gun in your hand; me with bullets from your gun in me. No tie-up between you and Kenney. What could be sweeter for Kenney? But we got Kenney. Your word to me gave me him."

"To hell with Kenney. I want my girl — the Digger — "

He rang the bell and a nurse comes in.

Mallasson grins at her.

"Fetch the lady," he said.

It's Susie, and she's by the bed, her arms around me. God, but she hurt my shoulder, right where the bullet got me, and I wish it would always hurt like that, hurt from her arms around me. . . .

"My lights didn't go out, Curtis," said Mallasson. "I got them all. Kenney, the Digger — and the lady. Kenney told where the lady was. My men found her, locked in a room in an uptown hotel, with the Digger standing guard outside. You'd told me that Kenney had your girl, and my men — they weren't gentle with Kenney. They made him come through. They weren't gentle with the Digger, either, if that helps. But the girl had come to no harm — just scared — "

I hardly heard him. Susie was moaning.

"Tom — Tom, why did you go away?"

"He wanted to go straight, I guess," said Mallasson. "Wanted to quit the racket. Wanted to get a decent job."

"I was fired today," I said.

"The Magrath people want a good man to handle their race-track protection," said Mallasson. "They got to keep the crooks off the tracks. Twelve grand a year and I can name the lad to get the job. But he has to be a married man."

I looked at Susie and she blushed.

"That's me, Mallasson," I said.

"Fine," he said. "Say," he said, "I think one of them damn' bullets hurt my ear. I wouldn't be able to hear you kids if you kissed each other."

We call to the stand that grand old tale-teller, Frederick Irving Anderson, to introduce his own story. The author writes: "This yarn is the first in which Deputy Parr and Oliver Armiston got together on whodunits. More than a hundred stories were to follow. In fact, they horned in on just about everything I put on paper from 1920 on.

"Bibliotrivially, I don't know what makes a story viable: 'The Phantom Alibi' went through scores of reprints, here and abroad, including, believe it or not, the Scandinavian. I couldn't figure it out. It wasn't the title — which really didn't fit — nor in my opinion was the story itself exceptional. Yet it went on for years and years — just wouldn't sink.

"If it fits in with EQMM . . ."

It fits.

Indeed, it is a great pleasure to bring you the very first combined operation of Armiston-and-Parr — a significant "first" in more ways than one.

THE PHANTOM ALIBI

by FREDERICK IRVING ANDERSON

"No! no!" said Armiston, the extinct author, with the air of a sorely tried man doing his best to be civil. He turned to his desk, made a great to-do of being busy and interrupted. He had an impulse to rise and dismiss the persistent visitor with a bow. But he hesitated to be so abrupt.

"Murder," said the author, "is distinctly not in my line."

Oliver Armiston's visitor smiled, throwing a look of secret understanding at the fat Buddha who reposed among folds of flesh in one corner of the elegant room.

"You turned it to very good account once," he said mildly.

"I recollect your crew did me the compliment to tell me I was guilty," nodded Armiston.

"The guiltiest man unhung!" retorted the visitor, with relish. "You procured that crime! Our moderation on that particular occasion still astonishes me."

He was a man of fierce aspect, but his eyes had the habit of merriment. Parr, the deputy commissioner, for it was that exalted policeman himself, was recalling an incident in Armiston's career several years gone by, when the famous author of thrillers was gulled by a clever stranger into solving as fiction what proved to be a problem of fact. The fertile author not only contrived (on paper) to rob the unprincipled wife of a diplomat, but when the tale was published, tasted the bitter triumph of finding the clever stranger had executed the

crime according to printed direction, not even eliding the murder which to Armiston, engrossed in the plot, had seemed unavoidable. This atrocity, succeeded as it was by a mysterious gift from the grateful perpetrator, had created such a sensation as to drive Armiston into retirement. No! Decidedly murder was not in his line!

Parr rose. Armiston forbore to look up for fear of detaining him. But Parr was not departing. He removed his top coat, remarking it was warm, and sat down again, smiling.

"You inspired that crime," said Parr easily.

"Your moderation on *this* occasion astonishes *me!*" broke in Armiston testily. "You arrest a reputable citizen for murder. You admit that the mere statement of the known facts, to any sane jury, would convict him. And then, as an officer sworn to uphold the law, you come privately to me, and say: 'Please, sir, as a personal favor, prove my prisoner innocent.' Is the man innocent, then?"

"Yes."

"Then why arrest him, why accuse him of murder, if you know that he is not guilty? Does the law require a victim? Do you intend to prosecute him?"

"Certainly. I have no option."

"Even if you know he is innocent?"

"Facts, my dear boy. Facts. I can't go behind facts. *I* can't. You can."

"How do you know he is innocent?" In spite of himself, Armiston was giving heed. Nevertheless he was determined to smash Parr by logic, if insolence failed.

"How does a bird know North, in spring?" answered the imperturbable policeman, to whom nobody, not even his best friend, would have ascribed the smallest touch of imagination. He dealt with facts, as such; he was incapable of going beyond facts. He believed in shoe-leather and elbow-grease, not divination. Thus he had made his reputation as the very Nemesis of the law. And yet today he had come privately to the extinct author, whom he had not seen since that lamented circumstance of long ago, and said, somewhat astonished at his own words: "I am about to convict an innocent man of murder. Indeed I will, I must, unless you can find some way to prevent me." It was a tribute to the cogency of Armiston's fiction mind.

"Just what are the facts?" said Armiston, softening. And Parr, finally convinced that he had struck fire in his quest for subtlety of imagination to oppose his facts, hitched his chair nearer.

"Fingerprints —" he began . . .

"Bosh! Fingerprints are not facts!" cried Armiston, now fairly in the saddle. "Anybody can counterfeit fingerprints. It's merely a process of photography."

"There you are!" exclaimed the deputy, beaming on Buddha. "I didn't know that. I don't know it yet. Can it be done?"

Armiston daubed his thumb with

the ink-bottle cork, and stamped it on a sheet of paper, making his own thumbprint.

"Photograph that, life-size," said Oliver. "Print it on a pellicle of gelatine sensitized with bichromate of potash. Soak the gelatin in cold water. What have you? You will find on that pellicle of gelatine, in relief, the exact duplicate of the lines of my thumb. The lines stand up like type. Smear it with ink, grease, blood, anything — leave the imprint any place you want to — on a revolver handle, safe door, window — any place."

"Marvelous!"

"Not at all. Elemental," corrected Armiston dryly. "So much for your fingerprints! It's as old as the art of photography — it's used as a commercial process, to imitate photogravures. The trouble with you, Commissioner, is that you don't recognize a fact when you see it. You accept somebody's say-so. A fingerprint is gospel to you. It isn't to me. It's the first thing I suspect. I wonder how many poor devils you've sent up, with your facts." He paused, rather pleased with himself. "Now trot out some more facts."

"The murdered man was Sauer — J. H. Sauer," said the deputy.

"A reputable party?"

"No, I believe not. He had a process for making gold out of aluminum. It can be done, I am told."

"Did he do it?"

"Well, he did, and he didn't," said Parr. "He quietly interested a few people — good people — Brown, president of the Elm Park Bank, and Westcott, a technical man employed in the Assay Office, as another. Why is it," asked Parr, "that the clever crook selects the expert for his boob? This one did. Imagine Brown and Westcott, of all men in the world, falling for that sort of thing — the two men who above all others should have been wary. He demonstrated his process for them, and they were convinced he had what he claimed. There would be a pot of money in it, of course. But it meant a costly plant, to start. Well, when he found he had these two hog-tied, when they were willing to back him to the limit, Sauer got cold feet."

"Sauer? That's a new line, for a crook." Armiston, idly whittling a pencil, looked up.

"Wait." Parr was warming up. "After he had convinced the experts, the inventor himself began to have doubts. They were willing to go ahead, but he wasn't. He got the queer idea that he had been fooling himself, that there was a flaw somewhere. There was quite a row, I believe; but he wouldn't go ahead. They repeated that they were satisfied. He told them he didn't think their opinion was worth two whoops. Finally Brown, the banker, who saw riches slipping away from him, asked Sauer if he would be content to call in an umpire and let him decide. Well, Sauer backed and filled, and finally he said if they would call in an expert of unquestioned authority, all right. He would abide by the verdict. He didn't

seem to be worrying over the fact that he might be fooling them. That was their lookout. He was afraid he was fooling himself."

The functionary of police chuckled softly to himself.

"Armiston," he said, "you told me once you were interested in electrolytic work. Didn't you study at the Polytechnic?"

Armiston nodded. He indicated a file of electrolytic journals on the bookshelf as indication that this branch of science was one he pursued from day to day, as a hobby.

"You know the big men in that line," said Parr. "Whom would you pick for umpire? Is there one outstanding man?"

"Pettibone — Dean Pettibone," said Armiston, without hesitation.

Parr nodded, as if he had expected this answer.

"They picked Pettibone," he said.

"And he took one look, and gave them the laugh," put in Armiston. "I know just how he would do — without batting an eyelash. But what has this to do with murder? And your executing a man who didn't commit it?"

"Patience! I am coming to that," said Parr mildly. "Well, they made several dates. Pettibone agreed to come, not because he took any stock in it, but just to humor Brown. Then our friend Sauer contracted a jumping tooth. And for about three weeks he groaned in a dentist's chair, more concerned about saving that tooth, than he was about his million dollars. Finally the tooth was fixed up, and they had a session. Pettibone handed Sauer some aluminum, and Sauer went ahead with his usual hocus-pocus. When the thing was cooked, or pickled, or whatever there was to be done, he opened up the crucible to show the gold. Not a trace!"

Armiston grinned.

"Count on Petty for that!" he said.

"Well, they tried it again, and again. Nothing doing." Parr regarded Armiston with his dry smile. "It seems Sauer had been furnishing his own aluminum, hitherto. Salted it, I suppose. Those two experts never suspected him. You can get a trace of gold out of any sample of commercial aluminum — not enough to pay, but you can show it. Pettibone suspected what had happened. He handed Sauer a piece of chemically pure aluminum. And he didn't give him a chance to dope the brew. Then he laughed at him. There was quite a blowup. Brown quit cold, feeling as if he had been made a fool of. So did Westcott. They left in a huff. But Petty stayed behind, Sauer buttonholing him. The last Brown heard, Pettibone was explaining to Sauer, in words of one syllable, what kind of a crook he was."

"He'd do that — make it a point of honor," agreed Armiston. He yawned. "This is all very thrilling, Commissioner," he said. "But when do you produce the corpse?"

"We don't," said Parr, grimly.

"What? You can't execute a man for murder in this state, without a *corpus delicti*."

"We can't produce it," repeated Parr. "And yet, we are going to send Pettibone to the chair."

"Pettibone!" ejaculated the extinct author, now sitting up stark. "You're going to execute Pettibone?" he repeated. "Oh, my dear fellow! Come, this is too much of a good thing ——"

"Pettibone was the last man seen with Sauer, alive," went on Parr. "Something happened. Nobody knows just what. The engineer in the basement was roused by a racket. Then water began coming through the ceiling as if there was a flood upstairs. He called up the office, and with the nightman broke into Sauer's rooms, and found ——"

"What?" exploded Armiston, for Parr had paused, smiling queerly.

"Nothing," said Byrnes. "Nobody there. The safe was open, a lot of papers were scattered about the floor. A chair or two was upset and broken; and the city water was pouring out of a broken pipe, from a connection that Sauer had had put in for his experiments. There had been a three-foot length of galvanized pipe over a lead sink. This pipe had been twisted off at the elbow, and there it lay on the floor. Somebody had been bludgeoned with it. On one end there was blood and hair. Otherwise — nothing."

"But the body — what became of the body?" demanded Armiston.

"What becomes of a lump of sugar in a glass of water?" retorted Parr. "It dissolves." He said in the same odd tone: "Well, that's what happened to Sauer. He dissolved."

" 'Dissolved?' "

"Pettibone's fingerprints were on one end of that pipe," said the policeman.

"Fingerprints, bah!" cried Armiston, angrily. To think that even police bungling would lay a sordid crime of this sort at the door of a man of Dean Pettibone's prestige was maddening.

"I will allow you that," said Parr. "But they led us to Petty. We searched his place. Why, I don't know. Only a fool would expect to find anything there. Still, he was the last man seen with Sauer alive — and something had happened to Sauer. In his laboratory Petty had a big lead tank full of liquid. We asked him what it was. He said it was residues. We drained that tank, and we found — this!"

He pushed his chubby fingers into a vest pocket and drew out a tiny ball of tissue paper, which he unwrapped carefully. He laid this small object of irregular shape on the desk. Armiston stared at it.

"It's gold, isn't it?" he said, puzzled. Parr nodded.

"It's the residue of our friend Sauer," he said coldly. "It is the *corpus delicti* that's going to convict Pettibone. It is the gold filling out of Sauer's tooth — the sole mortal remains of Sauer, that Pettibone couldn't dissolve in his vat."

Armiston sat down dumbstruck.

"Remember," continued Parr, with painful certitude, "it was only three weeks before, that the dentist made

that filling. He used the amalgam process in making the pattern. He has the matrix — and it fits to a crossed T and a dotted I. Furthermore," said the policeman as he watched Armiston with keen eyes, "the dentist happens to have the preliminary rubber impression he took of Sauer's jaw. "You won't tell me you can counterfeit that. Those are the facts, Armiston," he concluded, and he leaned back in his chair to await the verdict.

In his schooldays Dean Pettibone had been Armiston's kindly guide and friend, one of those rare teachers who achieve something like saintship in the memory of their students.

"It's — preposterous —" Armiston began, and halted. "Are you going to maintain in court that dear old Petty — why he doesn't weigh a good hundred pounds — carried the dead body of Sauer across town, in the middle of the night, to get rid of him in his vat?"

" 'Preposterous?' " said Parr. "Not at all. It was midnight. Sauer's apartment was on the ground floor — with a private entrance in the side street. Pettibone admits he came and went in his coupé, alone. Nobody saw him leave Sauer's rooms. His laboratory is on a lonely road — I believe there was an element of danger in his research work, and a bad smell — and he had to get off by himself. Now do you say 'preposterous?' "

"Cobwebs!" cried Armiston contemptuously. "Use a little reason."

" 'Reason?' " said the deputy. "There is no reason in a crime of violence. But that! —" He pointed to the tiny fragment of gold, every accidental irregularity of whose surface testified incontrovertibly to its identity. He turned fiercely on Armiston. "What are you going to do about that?"

"You can't establish a murder, with only a gold tooth to show," muttered Armiston.

"Can't I? Take the classic Webster-Parkman case as an example."

The deputy commissioner rose and pulled on his coat slowly. "The jury won't leave its seat," he said absently. "Regrettable, yes, to balance a man like Petty against a cheap trickster." He picked up the particle of gold and restored it to its tissue paper and as he put it back in his pocket, he murmured, "It will send your friend Petty to the chair."

Without a leave-taking he stalked out. In the street the police functionary permitted himself a complacent smile as he looked up at Armiston's windows. Unless he was very much mistaken, he had started a fire.

When Armiston emerged, he at once became conscious of something in the air. Not infrequently, even in a city of such involved complexes as this, there comes a moment, an occasion when street-sweeper and apple-woman, milady and her maid, stock-broker and greengrocer, think the same thought, as if an idea had become static, and anchored itself over them like a fog. On this day every street corner had its little group, heads together; in the restaurant where

Armiston lunched, usually decorous people craned their necks over their neighbors' newspapers; the female cashier instead of saying, "It's a nice day," said, "Wasn't it awful about the vat?"

The latest extra blared in large type — "HELD WITHOUT BAIL!" One couldn't escape it; in the quietest side street the eddies of the news danced and swirled, the vat murder was on the tip of the tongue wherever one turned. The sleuth-hounds of the press, long fretting on leash, were loose, full cry. This single obscure crime summoned into being myriad phenomena of human interest and activity.

Momentarily there had been doubt, unbelief. But the facts were overwhelming. Then, as if by some common process of thought, the world of newspaper readers became sophists. At Armiston's club his friend Ballard voiced the tone of public debate when he said:

"The real crime was Pettibone's overlooking that gold tooth. He deserves the chair for that. Pettibone, a chemist, tripping up on a solvent for gold! I condemn his bungling after the blow was struck. But for the grace of God — as someone said somewhere," said Ballard, eying the cultivated circle, "you or I might have struck that blow. In each of us is a moment of blind fury, waiting to be summoned. Most of us escape the summons. Pettibone didn't. What then? Should his career of public usefulness be annihilated, simply because instinct overwhelmed reason, for a split second? I say, no!"

"I say, no!" responded several of the circle.

"Pettibone is a man of rare mind," went on the sophist. "He knew what he had to lose. Therefore the more reason to conceal his act. And he, a chemist," cried Ballard in disgust, "trips up on a problem a schoolboy wouldn't have missed — the solvent for gold."

"What is the defense?" asked Armiston, for Ballard was a famous pleader.

"None!" said the lawyer savagely. "Not yet — not for another hundred years. Sauer was a despicable swindler. A decent man, a righteous man, removes him — kills him. And now we, in the name of justice, purpose to annihilate Pettibone, a man with a brain a thousand years ahead of his time!"

Armiston went through a daily ritual before his typewriter. He inserted a recording sheet, lightly brushed his fingertips, and gazed abstractedly at the keys. He had great faith in this oracle; time and again, with almost clairvoyant powers, it had solved problems for him. It was probable that the cerebral ganglion in Armiston's fingertips led him, on those occasions, through the maze of the keyboard. But now the oracle was mute.

"Petty slipped up, for once in his life," mused Armiston for the hundredth time as he stared at the blank

wall with opaque eyes, his fingers poised above the keys.

Then suddenly, and without admonitory signal, the oracle spoke! Armiston's fingers, moving mechanically, tapped the keys.

"Did Sauer?" demanded the typewriter.

Armiston felt a queer pricking at the back of his neck. There was something uncanny in the way those two words spontaneously formed themselves before his eyes. He let his thoughts drift. Did Sauer? Did Sauer slip up any place?

That was as far as he could get. The typewriter relapsed into Delphian silence, and his fingers refused to move.

"Obviously," said Armiston, "that implies motive, on the part of Sauer."

The oracle refused to be drawn into an argument.

Armiston took a stroll through the Park, conjuring himself to think. But that typewriter had become so necessary to his process of thought in his years of scribbling that without it he found himself stranded.

"Parr," he said to that person of the police an hour later, "who was Sauer? Did he ever really exist?"

"Apparently he was a fact. You might ask Brown, or Westcott," answered Parr.

"Who was he, before he came here?"

"A mining engineer," said Parr. "Brown looked up his references. Sauer wasn't exactly a shade, Armiston. He was flesh and blood enough to be bashed on the head with a bludgeon."

Oliver ignored the sarcasm.

"What did he leave as an estate, besides that gold filling?" he persisted.

"There's a bank balance — about eight hundred dollars."

"That's something. What else?"

Parr drew forth a small bundle of slips, on which J. H. Sauer had, on one insignificant occasion or another, signed his name. It was the handwriting of an habitual draughtsman, as characteristic in its way as that of a telegrapher. Armiston studied the script with the interest of one who, for the first time, comes on the incontrovertible proof of the life and activity of a person who heretofore has existed for him merely as a name. The sprite here nudged Oliver's elbow.

"Did Sauer?" it whispered, out of the thin air. Armiston departed. Late in the afternoon he presented himself at the home of Dean Pettibone, a little red brick house encircled by a veranda, near the University. Parr had given him a line to the policeman in charge, for the Law had put its seals here.

"I'm trying to help," he explained lamely to the dried-up little secretary, a woman who had not aged by a hair in twenty years, as he remembered her. "We are all trying to help. I want to look round."

"His life is an open book," she said. "You remember his 'log.' They've been through it again and again."

It was a life of an open book, a book

of volumes. Dean Pettibone's one marked peculiarity was the desire to set down everything from day to day, as a conscientious navigator would make up his log. Pettibone, with the precise mind of a born scientist, had the habit of saying that, of all the human faculties, one's memory was the least entitled to trust and respect. Endowed with a photographic memory, he never permitted himself to trust it. That Sauer should not have left some premonitory shadow in this human document, which reflected so minutely, seemed absurd — at least from a metaphysical standpoint. But Armiston was not voyaging in the realms of metaphysics, as he turned page after page, under the scrutiny of the sleepy policeman and the anxious little old maid.

A month passed. The rubber band of public interest, measured by the barometer of newspaper circulation, was moving on through other fields of force. The vat murder had subsided. On the side of Pettibone there was nothing to be expected. The Dean had contented himself with a single explicit statement, in the beginning. His respect for words and their uses gave his denial of guilt at once a simplicity and a completeness that were almost classic. Here was a man accused of murder, with no resources save the dignity of his bare word, who made no effort to conceal his contempt for the stupidity of inflexible justice. The little savant passed his days of waiting in a cell amid peace and quiet that he had always craved, but never before achieved, buried in his books.

The mighty voice of the press even found time to record with much humor how Oliver Armiston, the once popular author of thrillers, absent-mindedly dropped his eyeglasses into a mail-box instead of a letter, rendering himself visually helpless until a postman appeared and permitted the author to paw among the letters for his lenses.

"They never come back!" muttered the deputy commissioner with conviction, as he noted this silly item. More and more, as the days dragged on without incident, the police official regretted having exposed his own fallibility to the extinct author in the vain hope of some supernormal help.

"The State rests."

Fielder, the District Attorney, turned to Ballard, counsel for the accused, and as he sat down he muttered under his breath in a tone that carried only to that man's ears:

"God help you! I have done what I could. Facts are facts!"

Parr sat back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, looking glum. Judge and jury turned expectantly to Ballard, famous barrister, who had stepped into the case at the last minute. During the presentation of the State's evidence against his client, Ballard had indulged only in formalities; in several incidents it seemed that he went to extraordinary lengths in inducing witnesses to emphasize the damning facts of their testimony.

"Make a plea. We will accept anything in reason," muttered the District Attorney under his breath. Ballard turned on him a look of slow astonishment, and indicated the placid little figure of the prisoner with a slight nod, as who should say: "Can you imagine such a man as that accepting a mitigation of the charge!"

Ballard rose to his feet, stood for a long time surveying the jury, whose appetite had been whetted for one of the great forensic addresses for which this man was famous, and said only, "The defense will call only one witness in refutation."

A little thrill ran through the room. Ballard looked at his watch and stepped to the bench where he consulted in low tones with the Court and the prosecutor, and a brief recess was declared. Courtroom and jury box, held in vague suspense, waited; the scene wore that tension of dramatic action momentarily halted. The first interruption was the entrance, somewhat breathlessly, of Oliver Armiston; he dropped into a seat beside Ballard, giving the inquiring deputy a scant nod. Parr noted with surprise that the extinct author sported a badly swollen eye. The green doors opened a second time, and two court officers appeared, followed by a middle-aged man, evidently a person of some position in life. He looked neither to right nor left, as he came down the aisle and stolidly took his place in the witness chair, as the court was called to order again. Then he glanced around stiffly, and when he encountered the face of Dean Pettibone, his eyes lingered there for a moment.

"Your name?" said Ballard.

The witness wetted his lips.

"Hilary Jerome Swett."

"Your occupation?"

"I am an inventor," said the man.

"Do you know the defendant, Mr. Swett?" pursued Ballard.

The witness nodded, and turned his gaze again on Pettibone.

"When did you last see him?"

"In 1912," said the witness, without hesitation. "In the Federal Court."

"What was the occasion?"

"A patent suit," responded Swett.

"You were an interested party?"

"I was the plaintiff."

"And Dean Pettibone?"

"He was called to give expert testimony." The man drew a deep breath, and the whole room hitched forward in its seats.

"What was the outcome of the suit?"

"I lost — my case was thrown out of court." The words were so low as to be hardly audible.

"Was the expert testimony responsible for the verdict?"

"Yes," he said; the witness seemed now to have thoroughly recovered his composure. "Wholly," he added.

Ballard picked up one of the exhibits on the table and examined it absently for a moment. Then he raised his eyes to the witness and asked with great gravity.

"Are your teeth entire, Mr. Swett?"

The effect of this question was like

a pistol shot. The Dean, the prosecutor, even the Court, exclaimed audibly. The witness started, violently; he blanched. He grasped the arms of the chair until the veins stood out on his wrists, and turning mechanically, he sought again the now searching eyes of the prisoner.

"Are all your teeth intact, Mr. Swett?" persisted the lawyer, cold and incisive. He held up to view the object in his hand; it was the rubber impression of the upper jaw of the murdered man, one incontrovertible link in the chain of circumstantial evidence that the law had been forging about Dean Pettibone these last three days.

"I ask particularly," continued Ballard, now suddenly stentorian, "about the first bicuspid, of the right upper jaw. Will you please show the jury," he urged, advancing on the witness who seemed to have become stone. Ballard opened his own mouth and indicated with a finger, the tooth.

The answer was unexpected action, almost too swift for the staring eyes to register. With a single bound, Swett was out of his seat; he cleared the steps in a stride and bowled over the obstructing figure of his tormentor. With almost the same gesture he seized a chair, and raising it above his head, charged on Dean Pettibone, crying shrilly:

"You die! You die now! I take you with me!"

It was Armiston, unused to protective reflexes as he was, who fell on the advancing madman as he towered over the little Dean, and the pair went to the floor with a crash. The next instant the court officers had pinioned the struggling Swett.

"Your Honor, and gentlemen of the jury!" rang out the triumphant voice of Ballard over the din of pounding gavel and the shouts of the officers restoring order, "behold the *corpus delicti!* Behold the murdered man, in person!"

"Sauer *was* a phantom," said Armiston, moulding a cigarette with finished care. He was tasting tribute. This was the first time wittingly the author had ever set the stage of his typewriter with real characters and watched them walk through their parts. "Luckily we were able to provide the *corpus delicti* with an alibi. Else," added the beaming author, turning to the little Dean who sat balanced on the end of a sofa, "our conscientious friend here might have added another notch to his gun, Dean."

Parr took his sally woodenly.

"Ninety-nine per cent of my work is common sense," said he. "I leave the ouija-board one per cent to the fiction writers."

"Swett set up the fictitious identity of Sauer, with proper make-up, to be murdered," went on the author. "That was his game from the beginning. He took eight years to do it. Once he established the identity, he plotted to be brought to Pettibone, to quarrel with him, to have Pettibone the last man seen with him alive.

Then he planted his bludgeon, his fake fingerprints, and the gold filling — and vanished, leaving the rest to Parr. That's all there is to it."

"But how — how?" demanded Parr, who had arrived at the state of openly admiring his own perspicacity in enlisting the aid of the hectic author.

"Habit," said Oliver sententiously. "It's the strongest impulse we have. It's not born; it's acquired. It attacks man's faculties in their weakest spot. If you ask the Dean, he will tell you that man's weakest faculty is his memory."

The Dean admitted as much with a nod.

"But how — how did you trace him — how did you catch him?" insisted the deputy, in his hunger for facts.

"He caught himself," said Armiston. "You went ahead on the belief that it was the Dean who erred. It wasn't the Dean. It was Sauer. You had seventy-three copies of J. H. Sauer's signature, Parr. I dug up thirty-six more. Once he signed it 'H. J.,' instead of 'J. H.' There is one thing in the world a man isn't apt to forget — although the Dean won't admit it. That's his own name. J. H. Sauer did. Once! That was enough," Armiston laughed, shaking his head at the deputy. "Parr, it all lay before your eyes, waiting to be picked up."

"Still I don't see," said the deputy. "Swett hasn't a criminal record. How trace one 'H. J. Somebody' among a million?"

"Oh, it wasn't as bad as that," laughed Armiston. "The only 'H. J. Somebody' to interest me would be in Pettibone's log book. I found H. J. Swett's name there. That was enough to go on. Then I found H. J. Swett himself, living obscurely — the discredited plaintiff of a million-dollar patent suit can't exactly lose himself. During the three months J. H. Sauer was dickering with Brown and Westcott to be brought to Pettibone, there was no trace of H. J. Swett. That was another trump card. Then I wanted his handwriting. I schemed all sorts of ways, but failed. Finally I robbed the mails." Oliver shook with merriment. "I saw him mail a letter. After he was gone, I absent-mindedly mailed my own eye glasses in that same drop-box, and then yelled bloody murder, till the postman came along and opened the box for me. Then with a facility that actually alarmed me, I palmed Swett's letter. There was no doubt which one it was when I saw the handwriting."

The little circle, Ballard, Parr, the District Attorney, and the Dean himself, nodded their admiration at this confession of robbery of the mails.

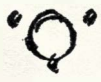
"That brings us to the final curtain. I wanted to ask H. J. Swett one question — about that tooth. He must have pulled it, to extract that gold filling. Then he probably had another put in, in its place. How to find out, stumped me. I consulted Ballard, who has the direct mind of a child, and some lawyers," said Armiston. "Ballard said, 'Put him on the stand as a

material witness, and ask him.' Nothing simpler. Swett might reasonably be called as a witness, because he lost a million dollars through the Dean's expert testimony in that patent suit. It jarred Swett when he found where he was. But he had great nerve, and he carried it through, until Ballard asked him about that tooth. Then you saw what happened."

The author tenderly caressed his swollen eye, now rapidly taking on a violet hue.

"Swett had been living pretty retired," he went on. "He was reading all the papers, and gloating — but he stayed behind his shutters. This morning I think he got nervous. He ran out his car and started off uptown. There was only one way to stop him. Ram him! I rammed him! Then I smashed him in the eyes with my fist, accusing him of wrecking me. We were knocking off each other's hats when a cop pried us apart and took us to jail. He didn't dare ask for bail — so we had him on ice, so to speak."

The little group broke up. Dean Pettibone sat for some time with his hand shading his eyes, as he codified his thoughts. Then, "Miss Pruyn," he called, and his little secretary entered. "Will you please take dictation, Miss Pruyn," he said gently, drawing up a chair for her, and taking up his notes. "We have quite a hiatus to fill, haven't we? One must never neglect such things."



THE NINE POUND MURDER

by ROY VICKERS

SOME superstitions die hard, particularly the superstition that a man can possess "hypnotic eyes," capable of compelling others to do his will — with special reference to women of property. This was said of Joseph Smith, who drowned various brides in their bath: more recently, of Heath, who savagely murdered two women within a month.

It was said in the mid-nineteen-thirties of James Gleddy, an ill-mannered little bounder who exploited his sex appeal. The hypnotic nonsense was dragged in to explain his success in marrying a girl of distinguished family, who apparently thought he was of her own class.

In their honeymoon there was a gap of six months while the bridegroom purged his offense in the matter of a worthless check. But his minor knaveries need not detain us. We can best contact the couple in the third year of their marriage — on a Saturday morning in May 1934, in the offices of the Domestic Animals Charitable Association, of which Margaret Gleddy was the president's secretary: for by this time Gleddy had run through her money and she was supporting the home.

The Association rented a basement suite in one of the best blocks off Parliament Square. On Saturday the staff were not required to work, with the exception of the president and his secretary. The president would leave at eleven-thirty during the summer for his weekend cottage in Dorsetshire. Margaret would generally work on until one, when the porter would enter to sign on the cleaners.

On this particular Saturday, when the porter entered the suite, he smelled chloroform. He ran into the secretary's office where he found Margaret lying on the floor near the big safe, which was shut. A duster hung over the door of the little wall safe, which was open and empty. Over the girl's face was another duster, tied in a simple knot at the back. The porter untied the duster and whipped it away — with it, a wad of cotton wool on which chloroform had been poured. There was a cut on her chin from which a trickle of blood had stained her jumper.

The porter shouted to a constable on point duty at the corner. Margaret was carried on a stretcher the hundred odd yards to Westminster Hospital. In half an hour she recovered consciousness, to be dimly aware of a police sergeant at her bedside.

"Police! That's a good thing!" she exclaimed. "It was my fault, really. I ought to have known it would happen. I ought to have taken special precautions on Saturdays."

"Jest so, Miss! Can you remember anything of what happened?"

"Everything. Until he bumped my face on the back of the chair, and then I passed out. I feel awful. You might call a nurse, will you?"

Some ten minutes later the conversation was resumed.

"It must have been a little after half-past twelve when it happened. I made the mistake of threatening to scream, instead of screaming at once. He collared me from behind and put his hand over my mouth. He's much stronger than you'd think. I'd have bitten his hand if I could, but he had my chin squashed up. I landed a good back-kick with my heel, and I think that toppled him on to the back of the chair — with my face underneath. Ugh! Speaking hurts all over."

She began to laugh.

"If he had come six weeks ago," she explained, "he would have found about a hundred and fifty in that little safe. This morning it was empty."

"The little safe?" echoed the sergeant. "What about the big safe?"

"It's only used as a cupboard. There's nothing in it but photographs and gramophone records."

"We shall want to open it, so as to make a complete check-up. Would the key of that big safe be in your possession, Miss?"

"You'll find it in my desk — the one with the typewriter — top right-hand drawer. But you'll only waste your time."

"Matter o' routine, Miss. You always have to open everything after a robbery, just to make sure."

"On my desk," said Margaret, "there were nine pounds in notes, clipped together, and a four shilling postal order. And he won't even be able to keep that!" She frowned in sudden doubt. "You have caught him, haven't you?"

"Not yet. Who is he, Miss? I can see you know."

"Yes, I know who he is!" She sighed with vast weariness. "He is my husband — James Gleddy. He has been to prison before. I've done my best and I've failed. I'm giving evidence against him, turning on him, betraying him — what's the word crooks use? — ratting on him."

"What's your home address, please?"

She gave it, and added: "If you wait until about four, you'll find him lying on his bed in a drunken sleep. Oh God, I'm all in! Don't think me rude, Sergeant, but please go away."

The Sergeant went back to the suite to report to the local superintendent who had taken charge.

"The key of the big safe isn't in her drawer, where she said it was, sir."

"No hurry about that!" grunted the superintendent. "It's awkward dealing with a half-doped typist. Who runs this place?"

He rang for the porter, who gave the president's London address.

"Did any stranger enter the block about twelve-thirty?"

"Nope. I started doin' me brasses about twelve-fifteen: takes half an hour. No stranger, in or out. There's

very little going on here on a Saturday morning. Half a mo! There's a door in the well, here."

He drew the superintendent to the window. The latter slipped over the sill and examined the door in the well, which was used only to give access to the control chamber of the elevator.

"Locked on the inside!" exclaimed the superintendent. "He didn't use this. You must have missed him when he came and when he left."

"Not me!" said the porter confidently. "I was right across them steps from twelve-fifteen to a couple o' minutes of it striking one. As I was finishing my brasses, a passing gent spotted my medal ribbons: turned out I'd served under his uncle." He added: "No stranger came in or out o' this building from twelve-fifteen to one."

Half an hour after he had left Margaret's bedside, the sergeant returned. The president of the Association, he said, was apparently out of town.

She gave the address of his weekend cottage and the telephone number.

"But it's no use ringing up until about four, because he won't have arrived."

"To come back to the matter of that big safe," said the sergeant, "the key isn't in the drawer. Was the door of that safe open or shut when your — er — when the intruder entered the office?"

"Shut," said Margaret. "I opened it and shut it again about twenty minutes before he came. I kept the key in my hand while I went to the safe, and I remember putting it back in the drawer. Have you arrested my husband yet?"

"We've got a couple o' men at your house, but he hasn't come back yet. By the way, how did he get in?"

Margaret appeared to be puzzled. "Like anybody else," she answered. "That is, through the outer office."

The sergeant reported back to the superintendent.

"Well, the porter missed him, that's all! As to the key, the crook must have taken it out of the drawer after he had doped her and then walked off with it," said the superintendent.

"Rather funny, isn't it, sir — husband doping his wife when he knew she knew who he was?"

"Not so funny as you think. I've been talking to the Yard on the 'phone. He was a crook and she was a Society girl — daughter of a Judge — who fell for him. If he hadn't doped her she wouldn't have let him carry on. And he reckoned that when she came to, she wouldn't give him away. But she did. Anyway, you wouldn't get a put-up job for nine quid. If it *is* only nine quid, of course!"

At four o'clock, when they contacted the president by telephone, he agreed that there had been no more than some such sum in the office.

The superintendent talked about the key to the big safe.

"Well, if you really want to check up, 'phone Renson's. They'll open it without doing any damage. I'll pay their charges, as I don't want to come

back for what appears to be a very small matter."

The sergeant rang Renson's, the makers, who said they would send a mechanic within an hour.

Margaret Whiddon was the daughter of a High Court judge who had made a comfortable fortune at the Bar. He had a town house in Kensington and a country house in Oxfordshire, where his daughter was hostess.

Lady Whiddon had left her money to her husband, but had bequeathed to her daughter a little present of four thousand pounds. In a lakeside hotel in Switzerland, James Gleddy had overheard a friend of the family referring to this modest legacy. It is a tragic circumstance that he misheard "four thousand" as "forty thousand," to discover his mistake a few hours after the marriage ceremony. Thus Margaret was a very great disappointment to him, though he was for a time genuinely attracted.

She was, indeed, a rather exceptionally attractive young woman, though not photogenic. Her few photographs in the sporting and fashionable papers suggest a demure young miss, which she never was. A vital, springy brunette with quick, perceptive eyes and full red lips, she combined a radiant chastity with an intelligent worldliness — a shrewd scale of values with a spiritual generosity.

She had her own way in pretty nearly everything, but she chose to live hard. Two years before her disastrous marriage, her father became Master of Foxhounds. Margaret took over most of the work. She won the admiration of the veterinary surgeon by administering chloroform for him in an emergency operation on a valuable hunter.

At twenty-three she became engaged to Gerald Ramburn, a shipping broker. It was a romance based on companionship. Oddly, she never varied in her feeling for Gerald — held it to the end of her life, though it proved powerless to protect her from Gleddy.

Margaret was staying with her aunt at the hotel in Switzerland, while her father was deer-stalking in Scotland. No one introduced Gleddy. He accosted her with the technique which such men acquire.

It is not true that she thought he was of her own class, though she probably did think there was no reason why he should not be. One would reasonably suppose that a girl like Margaret Whiddon would be the last of all social types to fall for the palpable cheap-jackery of a man like Gleddy, who was not even good-looking. Discarding the hypnotic-eye theory, one is bound to assume that such men have a natural talent for appealing to the maternal instinct under the guise of romanticism.

Poor Margaret followed in the beaten track. To a point, she made a better job of it than most women. She married him in London within three weeks of their meeting. She wrote as honorable a letter as it was possible to write to Gerald Ramburn.

Her father was still in Scotland when he received her telegram.

She made the first draft on her four thousand for the honeymoon. The two detectives, astonished at the sight of Margaret, whose type they recognized, allowed Gleddy to make the usual bluster that the charge against him was a ridiculous mistake. But they took him back to London. When the magistrate refused bail, Margaret rushed home to invoke the powerful aid of her father.

She arrived in the late afternoon. At the door of his study, where the judge was sitting alone, her assurance vanished. Her faith in James Gleddy seemed to glow only when she was in his presence.

"Come in, Margaret." Her father's voice was gentle. "I am very, very glad to see you."

"Oh, Daddy!" She was a child again, climbing on his knee. "D'you think it rotten of me — doing it like that?"

"Not rotten, my dear — impulsive." Presently he asked: "Is your husband here?"

She moved away.

"A perfectly preposterous thing has happened!" She gave the details. "I thought perhaps you could order that fool of a magistrate to grant him bail."

The judge shook his head.

"You say he is charged with obtaining only seventeen pounds. You have made restitution, and you have offered bail in three thousand pounds. The police opposed bail. That means they have a record of at least one previous conviction, possibly more."

"Then it must be mistaken identity! Why, it's utterly absurd! James is a barrister himself, but he couldn't practice because his father died suddenly, leaving no money."

The judge rose heavily, went to his bookcase and consulted a reference book.

"If your husband told you he was a barrister, I am afraid he was not telling the truth." Their eyes met in mutual commiseration. "Between ourselves, dearest girl, what sort of man is he?"

"I don't know, Daddy." The confession was a salute to his success as a father. "But I know what sort of man he is going to be — the sort you would not be ashamed to welcome to this house."

Gallant words of a gallant woman. But gallantry was not enough to save James Gleddy — nor herself.

Margaret had never even seen a typewriter in action. The business college gave her many surprises and one or two shocks, which her wit and courage turned to profit.

When her husband was discharged she was able to welcome him to a small house, bought on mortgage, which she had furnished tastefully and, in the circumstances, a little extravagantly. With her own maintenance and one thing and another, her reserve was reduced to approximately three thousand pounds.

But they spent the first three days of his liberty at a West End hotel to

cheer him up. Not that he was in the least depressed. He had the air of a man returning from a successful business trip. They danced in London, but not as they had danced in Switzerland. She was consciously entertaining him, as part of her program of reconstruction, and he was dimly aware that he had lost glamor in her eyes.

It was a long journey in the Underground to the outer suburb, and nearly ten minutes walk when they emerged. While he carried their suitcases she could feel his spirits sinking. But he was intelligent enough to make appreciative noises when she showed him over the "four room semi-detached, with garden."

"It's a fine little hide-out, darling," he concluded. "But what a ghastly neighborhood! I mean, what do we do in the evening?"

"We shall probably be too tired to go out much, even when we can afford it," she answered. "I have another two months' grind before I get my certificate."

"But, my sweet, why all this strenuousness? Don't tell me you've blown the whole four thousand."

"Of course not! There's a bit over three thousand left, but it's all we have in the world. We mustn't spend a penny on luxuries. I thought I'd better be trained so that I could earn something in emergencies."

"Surely your people would help in an emergency!"

"We shall never ask them!" He looked shocked. "We can pull it off together, James, you and I. We'll make good and earn our own fun."

Without knowing it, she gave him a pep talk, full of kindliness and confidence, which shocked him again, though he barely listened.

"On Monday you must order all the clothes you'll need. That'll help us to work out what it'll cost to get you decently started."

"Started on what?" he asked.

"Earning a living first, James — then a career."

To James Gleddy it seemed sheer lunacy to talk like that when you had three thousand pounds in the bank. The problem, of course, was to detach as much as possible of the three thousand.

He smiled carefully. He had a good smile. A smallish man with a large head and a large face, he could use the smile to suggest that things had somehow gone wrong with him, through no fault of his own.

"That's what I've wanted all my life, Margie! A chance to work. And someone to believe in me. By God, I'll prove I'm worth it!"

Margaret swallowed it whole and was happy for the first time since his arrest. In the first six months he detached six hundred pounds, clear of living expenses.

Beginning as an almost unteachable student, Margaret passed out of the college with a first-class certificate, just short of the star class. She obtained immediate employment at a salary which covered bare living expenses and the wages of a charwoman.

A couple of months after her appointment, she met Gerald Ramburn in the street — by chance, as she thought.

Ramburn had enjoyed all the advantages which Gleddy had lacked. He had made good use of them. Physically, he was a large bony athlete; culturally, he had wide interests.

"Do you know of any reason," he asked, "why you should not have lunch with me?" When she could produce none he carried her off. He settled their relationship by subtly pushing her backwards in time — to the period preceding their formal engagement. He asked no questions, but babbled welcome news of friends, things, and places.

On parting he gave no invitation; but a month later he was at the same spot and again took her to lunch. She told her husband but he evinced no interest. Thereafter their meetings became regular.

In the first phase of detaching the money, Gleddy used the "golden business opportunity" which in due course comes unexpectedly to grief. Margaret believed the first tale and bullied herself into believing the substance of the second, though she detected falsities of detail. Alarm for their rapidly shrinking reserve made her refuse to finance any further "operations." There followed an intermediate phase in which he contented himself with small sponging and by obtaining local credit. Margaret had a dread of bills and always paid at once.

One day he turned up at the office to "borrow" a couple of pounds. She gave it him at once to get rid of him. He repeated the trick, raising the ransom to ten pounds; to avoid argument he had previously drunk himself into a state of noisiness.

"I am leaving the office," she told him that night. "And as you don't seem to be having any luck, I shall look for another job."

She added no word of reproach. For her lack of progress in the reconstruction of her husband she blamed herself. Her job compelled her to leave him too much alone, so that he fell in with bad companions. She began to envisage the possibility of ultimate failure.

She was saved from complete exhaustion by the regular lunches with Gerald Ramburn. His rambling conversations acquired a certain continuity — through them she began to live imaginatively the kind of life that might have been hers. When she told him she had resigned from her job for a formal reason, he registered flat disbelief.

"That man turned up drunk at the office so that you should buy him off the premises. Let me buy him off altogether — and marry me after the divorce."

If she had taken offense he would merely have told her not to be silly. So she answered from her heart.

"I don't think it would work out as we'd want it to, Gerald. He is a sort of moral cripple. You and I would always remember that I had left him

to stagger into the ditch in order to be happy myself."

"You're pulling your own leg," he told her. "He is in the ditch — always has been — and you haven't dragged him an inch out of it. Eventually, he will drag you in. Think it over. Meantime, if you want another job there's one waiting for you with Domestic Animals Charitable Association."

She had not intended to say anything to her husband, but suddenly she said it.

"You seem very unhappy, James. Would you like a divorce?"

"My dear, what a dreadful thing to say! Divorce is immoral — it's against my principles. And I'm not unhappy with you, beloved. I'm unhappy because it looks as if I shall go to prison again. And I don't think I shall survive it this time. I didn't talk much about it before, but — "

"James!" She was terrified. "What have you been doing?"

"Nothing whatever. I backed a bill to help a friend out of a hole. The friend let me down. The bill turned out to be a forgery of some sort — I don't even now understand what happened. We've got to pay up in three days or face the music. And he has bolted."

"How much have you to pay?"

Gleddy had decided on a Napoleonic coup, for the story of the bill to help a friend would not work twice.

"Eight hundred pounds." As she gasped, he hurried on: "What's the use of talking? You've done enough for me. And you work yourself to the limit. You need a holiday from me — and it'll be for five years or so, this time."

The eight hundred brought the reserve below a thousand. His habits steadily pushed the cost of living above her salary. For the first time the protective instinct weakened and she began to think of herself.

The end was in sight, but as yet she had no idea of what form the end would take. For the immediate present she saw only the need to hold down her new job.

The Association held itself at the disposal of any who maintained any living thing for pleasure, and would perform almost any service from paying a pauper's dog license to photographing a pet cobra. It would make gramophone records of a lion's roar or a cage bird's cheep. The president, though honest and capable in his administration, was a fatuous man with immature tastes and affectations.

He engaged Margaret on the spot!

"And now come and meet your new companions!" He patted her hand, drew her arm through his and held it there while he introduced her to the staff. In a month the hand-patting advanced to knee-patting.

One morning when she had stepped inside the big fireproof safe to file a record he shut the door and imprisoned her for a second or so.

"There now! I've saved your life, my dear! Isn't that worth a kiss?"

Margaret took the kiss, imparting to it a degree of indifference that was definitely embarrassing.

"Ah! Now I think you realize, Mrs. Gleddy, that this was just my little joke to impress on you how dangerous it is to step into that safe without first stepping on this automatic stop. Anything might chance to shut the door on you — that very nice skirt might catch it — and within an hour you would be asphyxiated. Remember. that you need a key to unlock it, although it locks on its own spring."

Her conscious mind forgot the incident — she did not even use the automatic stop. But the president's warning was, in a sense, filed away in her subconsciousness.

In January 1934 the reserve had sunk to four hundred, though she had bluffed James that only a hundred remained. She bluffed and lied quite a lot these days. In accepting the patting and the silly, snatched kisses at the office, she had accepted a lowering of her own standards. There were moods in which she realized that the reconstruction problem had become a farce.

One evening, in February, James interrupted one of his own windy dissertations on bad luck.

"We can't go on like this. We must have money!" he proclaimed. "That means I shall have to sell the shares I've been telling you about." A slight hesitation and then: "I wonder if your friend Ramburn would like to buy them."

"I wouldn't care to ask a favor of him," she protested.

"Favor! Sweet child, the favor is the other way round. This time next year those shares will be worth a thousand pounds — easily. Because he's your friend I'll let him have them for what I paid for 'em — that is, two-fifty. No profit to me — only to him."

She was still a little doubtful. He went on:

"Listen, darling!" He made it all as clear as noon-day while he stroked her hair. "If he doesn't jump at it when you have lunch with him tomorrow I know a round dozen of men who will — at that knockout price!"

He began to repeat it all with variations; and Margaret began to believe him.

The share certificates were in her bag when she met Gerald for lunch.

But before she had been with him five minutes she flushed with sudden understanding that she was about to perpetuate an insolent fraud, relying on his personal feeling for her to provide the money and avert the consequences.

After lunch she parted from him at the restaurant. She felt as if she had snatched herself from the brink of a precipice. Before going back to the office she turned into the Park. In dumb misery she faced the fact that she had stultified her womanhood by marrying James Gleddy.

She took out the share certificates, tore them, and dropped them into a waste bin. Then she went to the bank and drew two hundred and fifty pounds from the meagre reserve. It did not matter now. The end was so very near.

"That's quick work!" approved Gleddy when she gave him the cash. "You clever, wonderful girl!"

"Yes, aren't I? Spend some of that on me, please, James. I'd like a dinner and a show."

"Darling, you're waking up at last! We'll have a gorgeous time."

This was a short-lived, intermediate phase, which brought her a certain distraction — the dipsomaniac's final fling. Almost nightly he took her out. He delighted in her company when she encouraged him in idiotic extravagance — was bored and querulous when she behaved as a conscientious housekeeper and breadwinner. It was her fault that, until now, he had spent none of her money on her.

By the end of March the cash was giving out. She had not the funds for any more imaginary transactions, and he apparently could not even lay hands on another parcel of phoney shares.

He began to talk about the subscriptions that flowed into Domestic Animals Charitable Association on Saturday mornings and remained in the office, as the banks closed so early.

"That animal slop is a wicked waste of money that ought to be stopped by law," he asserted. "It's maddening to think of it when human beings, like ourselves, are so terribly hard up."

Soon he was unfolding a plan by which he should come to the office and remove the cash. She would then tidy up, and it would be assumed that the office had been burgled while it was deserted for the weekend.

She listened with cold fear — of herself. Very soon, she knew, she would let him talk her over. She would make herself believe his shoddy nonsense about their having a better claim to the money than had the animals. She might even help him in the burglary.

At the next office kiss she told the president she wanted to ask a favor.

"After you've gone on Saturdays, I get frightened — alone with all that money. If I come up an hour earlier I can get it all listed before you leave — and you can bank it on your way to the station."

When he consented, after making her plead a little, she took another lonely walk in the Park. She was even more desperately miserable than on the previous occasion — and again she came to a pivotal conclusion.

In asking for the cash to be banked, she had taken an artificial precaution against her own weakness. She accepted this as the final degradation — the admission that she could not resist James Gleddy. For this, she did not blame him. The dipsomaniac does not blame the bottle — but he sometimes smashes it.

"I've worked it out, James," she told him that night, "and I find I couldn't cover the traces. I have a safer plan." When she had secured his attention, she explained: "There's an outside door in the basement giving on to an alley. I'll unlock it and you can come in through the window, and

we'll pretend a hold-up man has overpowered me."

"No good, darling! The police always rumble a job like that by the way the knots are tied and so on — "

"Listen! I'm going to be found genuinely unconscious. I learned a lot about chloroform from a vet. I know how to take just enough for unconsciousness without risk to life. And I know how to make out a chit so that the chemist will sell it to you. And I'll tell you where to buy it."

At twelve-twenty on the morning of Saturday, May 6th, 1934, Margaret slithered out of the window and unlocked the outer door that gave on to the alley. At twelve-forty, precisely, James Gleddy came through the door, wearing thin rubber gloves, and entered the office by the window.

"Splendid, James!" she applauded. "You're bang on time!"

Acting on previous instructions he took from his pockets a stoppered bottle of chloroform and a handful of cotton wool, which he placed on her desk, and a screw-driver which he retained. He picked up a wad of nine one-pound notes pinned together and a four shilling postal order, and put them in his pocket.

She led him to the big safe, the door of which was ajar.

"Mind you don't upset any of the records," she warned. "The cash is in one of those two little drawers at the top — I don't know which, but it's generally the end one."

When she heard him scrabbling with the screw-driver, she removed the stopper from the bottle, carefully poured a small quantity of chloroform on to the cotton wool, which she wrapped in a duster.

She glanced at the safe at floor level. The automatic stop was not in action. She crept towards the safe. With her gloved thumb she loosened the stopper and lobbed the bottle inside the safe.

Almost before it struck the floor she had slammed the door of the safe. She felt neither horror nor fear, nor any acute desire to escape the consequence of her act. Her main preoccupation was to prevent that door from being opened before James Gleddy was dead. The key was inside the safe, on the floor, where she had placed it before he arrived.

Back through the window to relock the door giving on to the alley. Next she picked up an upright chair, pressed the wooden back of it to her face then dropped herself forward. The wood cut her flesh round the jaw, and the blow dazed her.

In a few minutes she was able to continue her program. Holding her breath, she tied the duster round her head, after placing the chair sideways on the floor as if she had toppled over while sitting on it.

She removed her gloves, then lay down and inhaled the chloroform. Perhaps she had used too much and it would kill her before she was discovered. She did not care.

Thus the porter found her. In trying to render first-aid before rushing

to the hospital, he destroyed any evidence which Margaret might have left for Scotland Yard.

At about five o'clock the house surgeon told Margaret that he need do no more for her, and suggested that she was now sufficiently recovered to go home.

A hundred yards away, in the office, the mechanic from Renson's was opening the big safe.

"He's dead — don't touch anything!" shouted the superintendent. He hurried the mechanic from the office while the smell of chloroform mounted. To the sergeant he said:

"Society girl married to a crook! And then this little how-d'ye-do and the funny business with the key of the safe. I'm going to pass the buck straight to the Yard."

Medical evidence but faintly illumined the obvious. Even if the chloroform had been released at once, the deceased could still have made himself heard by tapping on the wall of the safe with the screw-driver. In his struggles to attract notice the chloroform bottle might have fallen out of his pocket, its contents greatly accelerating his death.

The key was found on the floor of the safe, leaving the possibility that Gleddy, after drugging his wife, had taken the key from the drawer, opened the safe, removed the key, and dropped it when the door shut on him.

As to how the door had been shut, there was the possibility that the unconscious woman had fallen against it when she toppled from the chair. Or Gleddy, through carelessness or alarm, might have shut the door on himself.

The contribution of Scotland Yard was limited to the discovery of unidentified fingerprints on both sides of the door in the basement giving on to the alley, though not on the key which remained permanently in the lock. The Coroner was uninterested in the door, preferring to believe that Gleddy had slipped by the porter.

Margaret added nothing to the account she had originally given to the sergeant. Her last vague memory, she said, was of the smell of chloroform. As to the preceding circumstances, she admitted that she had described the routine of the office to her husband several months previously. The president's evidence on the banking of the cash eliminated suspicion of collusion in the attempted robbery. Further, the house surgeon testified that she was unconscious when admitted to the hospital.

"You have told us that deceased came into your room from the outer office. Did he assault you the moment he came in?"

"No. He said he had come to 'clean up' — meaning to steal. He said I could leave everything tidy and I would never be suspected. I thought at first he was joking. When he picked up the nine pounds and the postal order, I threatened to scream and he

seized me from behind. He said, 'I'll make everything quite safe for you — all you have to do is forget it was me. I know you'll never give me away once it's done.' Then I kicked him."

It sounded very straightforward. Anyone might guess that Margaret had slammed the door of the safe on a husband who had wrecked her life — whom she loved so little that she was ready to hand him over to the police. But it remained a guess. There was no means of proving that she had actually slammed that door. The police, after tracing Gleddy's purchase of the chloroform and the cotton wool, completed their investigations — with negative result. The fingerprints on the door giving on to the alley remained unidentified.

After the inquest Margaret declined her father's invitation to come straight back to his house. Leaving instructions for the sale of the furniture and her interest in the "semi-detached with garden," she spent several weeks in a cottage in Kent, the paying guest of a Miss Prinfold, who had been her mother's governess.

This may be called the decontamination period, during which her former scale of values returned. When the Long Vacation came, her father took her to Norway, then to his home in Oxfordshire. The nightmare of her marriage was beginning to grow dim. The murder she put completely out of her mind, until Gerald Ramburn turned up in early September.

"How soon shall we get married?" he asked, without any hesitation.

As he spoke, she realized that in a mere four months she had come to believe that the version she had given police was the true one.

"I don't think we can get married at all, Gerald. I'd like to, but I've changed, without your knowing it. You said something once about James being in the ditch. Well, I fell into the ditch myself. And I feel that, if we were married, it would *show* — if you understand what I mean."

"Of course, I understand! You're giving me a hint that you scuppered that fellow. You ought to have let me buy him off. No good going into that — it's all over now. How soon shall we get married?"

She put her hand on his arm.

"Are we both quite sane, dear?" she asked. "Do you *really* want to marry me if you *really* think that?"

"*You* were never quite sane, dear. As to me, I turned up that Saturday hoping to collect you for lunch. While I was hanging about, I spotted Gleddy. Saw him turn up that alley and go through that door. Went to see what he was up to. Opened the door myself. It was unlocked. Found myself in that sort of hole-place. Heard you say: 'Splendid, James, you're bang on time.' Went round to the front to see if one or other of you would come out. Chatted with the porter for a few minutes, then buzzed off." He added: "I read the reports."

"But Gerald! For the first time I feel guilty! I think I'd better confess."

"Haven't you made enough mess

as it is? Why not tell me it's my duty as a citizen to denounce you — for doing what I would have done myself if I could have seen my way clear. Alternatively, how soon shall we get married?"

Together they had not even the sense of sharing a guilty secret. The impact of James Gleddy on their joint lives had been a sordid irrelevance, something so contrary to the current of their thoughts that it had little place even in their memory.

They bought a house within a mile of the judge's, where they lived a normal and happy life — until Margaret won the Ladies Point-to-Point challenge cup. When they moved back to their flat in Bloomsbury, they took the cup with them, and Margaret had her name added to those of the other winners.

One evening, returning to the flat after seeing Gerald off to Manchester for a business conference, she noticed that the cup had been moved — then that the flat had been burgled.

She called the police, who asked all the usual questions and took fingerprints, eliminating those of Margaret and a service maid. There was one unidentified set, identified the following afternoon as Gerald Ramburn's. Thus there were no prints of the burglar.

The police held out little hope of success. Because it would be extremely embarrassing to Margaret to be unable to return the challenge cup, she offered a reward of one hundred pounds.

The reward merely scared the burglar. In two months, during which no clue had emerged, the case was passed to the Department of Dead Ends. A month later, a railway company's official, opening a suitcase abandoned in a cloakroom, found what proved to be the articles burgled from the Ramburns' flat.

Detective-Inspector Rason examined the items. He was reflecting that there was not much chance of obtaining a fingerprint after three months — when a perfect print leaped to his eye, as visible as if it had been made in plasticine. It was made, in fact, on a clotof shaving-soap on a razor case.

"Cor! Happened to put his thumb in the middle of that lovely bit o' soap!" exclaimed Rason. "That's what I call coincidence."

Rason sent the razor case for examination and was duly informed that the print had been matched with an unidentified print found on a basement door adjoining the offices of the Domestic Animals Charitable Association eighteen months previously — which was not in itself helpful.

Following routine, he turned up the *dossier* of the Gleddy case. The main facts were familiar, but there was something new in a postscript.

Margaret Gleddy re-married October 15, 1934, to Gerald Ramburn.

"Looks as if that crook follows the girl around!" mused Rason. "He's close at hand when Hubby One is getting his. Then he loots Hubby Two. That's what I call coincidence — *hullo!* — two fat coincidences in one case!"

After writing to Gerald Ramburn asking him to call and identify his property, Rason looked up the report of the burglary — to see if he could find any more coincidences.

Unidentified print found on shaving mirror, he read: and in the next line: *Later identified as print of Gerald Ramburn, owner.* The photographs of the print were enclosed in the *dossier* — believed to be of no significance, they had not been passed to the register. There was a final, summarizing note.

Prints of owner, owner's wife, and service maid only.

"I'd like to meet this bloke. He doesn't wear gloves the first time — leaves a print on that basement door. When he robs the flat he does wear gloves and he leaves no print. But he suddenly goes haywire, takes off his glove, and puts his thumb on that clot of soap — so as to tell me he is the same bloke who went through that basement door." Rason ran his hand though his hair. "That's the worst of being logical — always leads to something damn silly. Meaning to say, the soap print is *not* the print of the burglar."

He picked up the photograph of the print found on the shaving mirror, identified as that of Gerald Ramburn, and sent it in for identification. He was informed that the print was the same as the one on the razor case, which was the same as the one on the door giving on to the alley. So he hurried round to see the porter who had been discussing his medals with a stranger at the relevant time.

Margaret accompanied Gerald to Scotland Yard and was delighted to regain possession of the challenge cup. But on their way through the corridor the porter had identified Gerald.

"That settles the burglary," chirped Rason. "And now we can discuss the murder. Sorry! I mean, I want you both to carry your minds back to the day when James Gleddy lost his life."

Margaret gasped.

"At the time when Gleddy was making all the noise he could inside that safe, you, Mr. Ramburn, were talking to the porter — about his medals, I think. So the porter heard nothing. As to how Gleddy got inside that safe and as to how he got the door shut on him, with the chloroform and all —" Rason paused, for again Margaret had registered alarm.

"The door in the basement giving on to the alley," resumed Rason, "was found by the district police to be locked — at about one-fifteen. At some time previous to one-fifteen it was unlocked. You, Mr. Ramburn, entered the well by that door. And you left the well by that door —"

"I neither admit nor deny anything," cut in Gerald. "I'll talk to you through a lawyer."

It was one thing to forgive yourself for murdering James Gleddy — quite another thing to involve Gerald.

"My husband," said Margaret, "need neither admit nor deny anything about that door. I unlocked it to admit Gleddy by arrangement. And I locked it again after I had shut him in the safe."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Stuart Palmer, creator of Hildegarde Withers, has been an iceman, supercargo, publicity man, newspaper reporter, special feature writer, apple-picker, advertising copy writer, taxi driver, literary ghost, poet, editor, and Hollywood script writer — and all his varied vocations and avocations have exerted strong influences on his work. He was born in the little town of Baraboo on June 21, 1905, the youngest son of Jay Sherman Palmer, a prominent Wisconsin fruit grower; Baraboo is otherwise famous as the birthplace of two circuses, Ringling Brothers and Gollmar's. He was educated at local schools, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the University of Wisconsin. One year he was awarded the Lewis Prize for the best prose composition and with this feather in his cap, he left the University without a degree to become supercargo aboard the Alaska Steamship Company's "Victoria," which brought back Amundsen and Ellsworth after their flight over the Pole in the "Norge." A long series of different jobs prepared him for the typewriting trade, but it is interesting to note that he was dismissed as a publicity writer for Samuel Insull, the public utility magnate, for daring to contribute to "The American Mercury," and that he replaced Thorne Smith, the creator of Topper, as the chief copy writer for the advertising agency of Doremus & Company. Mr. Palmer's chief hobby is collecting statuettes of penguins — his collection is second only to that of Roland Young, the movie actor. Stu (as most of his friends call him) is six-feet-two, owns one of the readiest smiles this side of paradise, and can read faster than anyone except the late Theodore Roosevelt. His first Hildegarde Withers novel in six years was published in May 1947 as the Crime Club Selection of the Month — it is called* MISS WITHERS REGRETS: *and in case you missed it (which would be a pity) we published his first book of Hildy short stories in February 1947 under the title* THE RIDDLES OF HILDEGARDE WITHERS. *As one of the great female detectives of fiction, Hildegarde Withers will not perish from the earth . . .*

FINGERPRINTS DON'T LIE

by STUART PALMER

THE TRAP — though the policemen who were setting it would have called it a "stake-out" — was set around noon. It was a little before two in the afternoon when a soft knock came at the front door of the little adobe cottage, and then another.

Before either of the two detectives could make up his mind about answering, the knob started to turn — hopefully but without result. Then there was the sound of footsteps scrunching

around through the bedraggled little cactus garden to the rear of the place.

Young Rankin snorted. "This is going to be good!" He was a beefy man who bulged his blue serge, and he had a way of speaking faster than he thought. "It says in the book —"

Detective Tom Macy had been on the Las Vegas force for twenty-one years, and for his money nothing was any good except keeping out of trouble, getting off duty, and going home for supper. "All right, all right. So it says in the book they always return to the scene of the crime. Relax, eager-beaver."

Yet he too was alert, his gnarled red hand hovering near his holster, as there came the soft sound of scratching at the lock of the kitchen door. He caught Rankin's arm and drew him into the hall closet. They listened as the kitchen door opened and closed. There was the creak of light, cautious steps on the linoleum, then tinware rattled and cupboard doors opened. After a while the footsteps came past the breakfast nook and into the living room, and then stopped.

"Now!" Macy said, and they pounced. Rankin had his lead-heavy sap in the air, and narrowly managed to bring it down without damaging their prisoner, who turned out to be an angular spinster of uncertain years. She had no other weapon than her tongue, and needed none.

"I am Miss Hildegarde Withers!" she announced. "Take your big clumsy hands off me at once! What if I did enter this place? I have as much right in this cottage as you have, and perhaps more."

Rankin said that they would see about that. But Macy elbowed him firmly aside. "Lady, we're listening. But give it straight. We're Las Vegas police."

"In that case," Miss Withers said acidly, "I shall try to speak clearly and in words of one syllable. I am here, having interrupted a train journey from New York to Los Angeles, because a girl named Eileen Travis is supposed to be living here. For more than five weeks she has been establishing residence for a Nevada divorce. Her family back East has considerable influence with the powers that be, and they called on the New York police at Centre Street. You see, they were very worried about her —"

"Oh, so you claim to be a policewoman?" Rankin cut in.

"Nothing of the kind. My I.Q. is much too high, for one thing. I am a schoolteacher. But once in a while I fall heir to problems which are too far off the beaten track for Centre Street to bother with. Some friends of mine at Headquarters knew that I was en route to California for a vacation, so after Eileen's mother put the pressure on, she was told to telegraph me, and —"

Macy cleared his throat noisily. "Just why was the girl's mother worried about her?"

"I don't quite know. It was about some threats that George Travis, the girl's husband, was supposed to have made. The King's County Grand

Jury recently indicted him for violation of OPA rules — some sort of Black Market practices — and he felt that his wife was rushing through the divorce so that she would be able legally to testify against him at his forthcoming trial. On top of that, Eileen's mother phoned her long distance last week, and the girl acted strangely — she refused to talk." Miss Withers sniffed again. "Now you know as much as I do. By the way, where is the body?"

"Ah, ha!" cried Rankin jubilantly. "How'd you know about that?"

"I didn't, until you told me. But I suspected it. There's an odor of perfume, stale alcohol, tobacco, and cordite in this room. Besides, why should there be two detectives lurking in the house?"

Macy sighed, and indicated the bedroom door. "She's in there. Around midnight last night, close as we can figure, somebody let her have it with a shotgun, right smack in her pretty face. We're waiting for the ambulance now — only two in town, and both pretty busy." He gestured. "Sorry, but you'll have to come down to the station.

"Illegal, but to be expected. Meanwhile, of course, the real murderer is making tracks out of town. Never fear, I shall go quietly."

"I wish!" Rankin muttered fervently.

"But first," insisted the schoolteacher, "I think I ought to look at the body. Or has it been identified?"

Macy hesitated, and then said "Come on."

In the bedroom there was the grotesquely pitiful remains of a plump, tanned girl in a black négligée, sprawled all akimbo on a white goatskin rug. A lightweight shotgun lay nearby.

"That her?" Macy demanded. "I mean as far as you can tell, without any face."

Miss Withers knelt over the body. "New nylons. Shoes from I. Miller, New York. Négligée from Altman's — the expensive kind that you can draw through a ring. And speaking of rings — "

"We want to know, is that her or isn't it?" Rankin cut in.

"She must have been pretty," Miss Withers said. "Once."

Rankin sighed. "Sure musta. Don't see a figure like that once in a coon's age, even in this town."

"He's an expert," Macy said dryly. "These bachelors! Sure you never were out with her, Rank?"

"No such luck." Rankin was oddly blushing. "Well, ma'am?"

"I don't know if it's Eileen Travis or not," the schoolteacher admitted. "I never saw the girl. I just wanted to find out if there were any clues you'd missed."

Rankin looked angry, but Macy almost laughed. "And were there?"

"Only that her ring is missing." Miss Withers pointed to the narrow pale line around the ring-finger of the dead girl's left hand.

"Pretty sharp," Macy said. "Only there was a ring there when we found her. This one." From his pocket he

produced a heavy white-gold wedding ring. "It says 'From G T to E H Jan 20 '44'."

"From George Travis to Eileen Hampton," Miss Withers said. "He gave himself top-billing, as they used to say in vaudeville. That tells us something about George, does it not?"

"You mean because he put his own initials first?" Macy looked at her with a new respect.

"Uh hmmm." The schoolteacher had opened the closet door and was looking at the rows of expensive clothes, the big leather bag of golf clubs — everything well cared-for and expensive.

"Nothing in here," Macy said, "but the shotgun. And that's just an ordinary 16-gauge, not new, not old."

"Everybody around here has one," Rankin put in. "We use 'em for shooting doves and prairie jacks. Jackrabbits, that is."

They went back into the living room, and Macy showed Miss Withers the bottle of Scotch, part-full, which had been found on the coffee table, beside two glasses. There was also an ashtray with some cigarette butts and ashes, and a half-smoked perfecto, unchewed and still bearing the band decorated with the head and plump bust of a senorita.

"A fifty-center," Rankin said. "Boy, could I go for a box of those!"

"We figure," Macy explained, "that the girl had a caller. She gave him a drink — "

"The cigar means it was a man. A man she knew, or she wouldn't have had a drink with him dressed in that flimsy nightie," Rankin said.

"Yeh? Some of the tomatoes you run around with on your off time would — " Macy gestured broadly. "Sorry, ma'am. Anyway, we figure that this visitor puffs on his cigar and drinks his drink and then ——"

"And then he pulls the shotgun out of his vest pocket and shoots his hostess smack in the face, is that it?" Miss Withers sniffed very dubiously. "Obliging of him to leave fingerprints. By the way, you're welcome to take mine, although I don't drink, smoke cigars, or shoot shotguns."

Rankin guffawed. "Oh, they're not women's prints. Mostly just fragments, but we got a complete thumbprint on one of the glasses, and it was a big one, even for a man. Too bad that dame's husband is in jail back East, or this would be duck soup."

"A man with Black Market connections," pointed out Miss Withers, "could arrange to have someone commit murder for him."

Macy shrugged. "Well, ma'am, we'll look into all that at the proper time. Let's go downtown." He led the way out through the back door, then stopped short. "What were you doing here in the kitchen when you came in?" he demanded.

"Looking for clues. You can tell a lot about a person by her garbage can, and her shelves. Notice the ham, and biscuit dough, and cans of black-eyed peas? A hearty eater, that girl. And if you'll look in her garbage ——"

"I don't see any sense in pawing through old orange rinds and coffee grounds," Macy protested.

"That's the point. There weren't ——"

But he hurried her along to the battered sedan which had been parked in the alley. Macy drove around to the front and down the street, while Officer Rankin looked after them wistfully from a front window. "Guess this is the first time Rankin's been squeamish about being left alone with a blonde," Macy said as they drove.

The schoolteacher was staring back toward the lonely cottage. "If I were you I shouldn't worry to much about his solitude," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I just saw a man step out from behind a billboard across the street heading for the cottage."

Macy drove on automatically for half a block, and then made a quick U-turn which bumped Miss Withers severely against the door. They roared up the street again, brakes screeching as they stopped. "If you're playing tricks — " Macy warned.

But then he saw the cottage door open. They hurried in, Miss Withers no more than three feet behind, and found Rankin rolling on the floor in an undignified but very realistic wrestling match. His opponent turned out to be a pale, unshaven gentleman of about thirty, dressed in a neat, dark, pin-stripe suit which had mopped up a great deal of dust from Eileen Travis's floor.

Seeing that the odds were now three to one against him, he stopped wrestling. But he wasn't talking.

"I do believe it's Mr. George Travis!" Miss Withers exclaimed. And as they all stared at her, she continued: "Elementary. The pallor of his face is the typical night-club tan of Manhattan. The clothing suggests Brooks Brothers. Besides, if you will notice the signet ring on his finger, you'll see the initials 'G T'."

The stranger didn't deny it. "I want to see my wife . . . alone. That's why I waited until I thought you'd gone. Where's Eileen?"

"In here," Macy said softly, and showed him. "This is just the way the cleaning woman found her this morning. Not pretty, huh?"

Travis came out of the bedroom looking pale around the gills. "I — I flew out here to see her," he admitted. "I walked in and this hot-head jumped me. I didn't know she was dead."

"You know it now," Macy said. "Let's go. All of us."

"You're not going to leave her alone like that?" Travis protested.

"She won't mind," Rankin told him. "You worry about yourself."

The house was locked up tight, with a note on the door to the coroner which read "Back in twenty minutes" and they all rode downtown in the police car. Nobody did any talking, although Miss Withers wished that she could be alone with Travis for a moment. He looked like a sulky schoolboy, and she knew how to handle them. Once at the station a mousy but excited little secretary was called

in to take down his statement that he had just got off the Los Angeles plane, that he had come out here in an effort to get his wife to postpone the divorce until after his trial, and that he knew nothing about her murder.

"I risked forfeiting my bond just to talk to her," he went on. "Not that it would have done much good. She was bitter because I made her sell most of her jewels to raise cash so I could hang on to my property. She figured this was her chance to get even. Eileen had a rotten temper — no maid ever stayed with her more than a month, and she even went after one of them with a riding crop."

"Okay, okay," Macy said. "We're holding you. Not for murder, not yet. But if you're wanted in New York —" They took him away.

Miss Withers confidently expected the same fate, but the officers only took her fingerprints, made a few notes, and let her go. "Don't leave town, though," Rankin warned her.

Macy smiled. "Try the Mesa — it's a pretty fair hotel."

Miss Withers nodded, and went to La Mesa. In a little corner room, ornamented with a spittoon and a reproduction of *The End of the Trail* showing a dejected redskin on a more dejected cayuse, she sat herself down and thought her own thoughts. Finally there came a knock at the door.

She opened it, facing a slick-haired young man who introduced himself as "Larry Koontz — I work down at the Wheel of Fortune." Miss Withers told him that she had not come to town to gamble ——

The young man winked at her, lighted a cigarette, and said that he knew very well why she had come to town. "You're out here on this Travis case," he said. "You represent her family ——"

"Do I?"

"Sure, I know. I got connections. You want to know the real lowdown?"

"Curiosity," admitted Miss Withers, "is my besetting sin."

"Huh? Well, anyway, I got the dope. I met Eileen down at the place I work. I'm a sort of shill — that means I play the dice games with the house money whenever there's a lull at the table. I can tell you all you want to know —" here he licked his thin lips — "if I get mine. I figure two grand would be about right."

Miss Withers had to admit that she was not in a position to lay any such honorarium on the line. He smiled. "You could get it from her folks, couldn't you?"

"I don't know. I'd have to have some idea ——"

Mr. Koontz pondered. Then he opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, the telephone interrupted. The schoolteacher answered it, to hear the voice of the desk clerk. "Two gentlemen to see you."

"Sorry, but I'm busy at the moment," she said.

"They're on their way up. It's the police."

"Police? But ——"

Miss Withers heard the door close,

and when she looked around Mr. Koontz had disappeared. She had barely time to adjust her hair and assume an innocent expression, when Detectives Macy and Rankin came into the room. They looked grimly unpleasant. "Now don't tell me you found that my fingerprints matched those on the murder gun!"

They didn't tell her anything. "We want to know why you got into town yesterday and only went out to the Travis girl's apartment this afternoon," Rankin demanded.

"Very simple. I hadn't her address, only the phone number. It took some time to get any information out of the telephone company." She sniffed. "If you gentlemen would turn your suspicions upon Mr. George Travis — after all, he could have committed the murder last night, driven back to Los Angeles, and then flown in on the first plane this morning."

"We thought of that," Macy said wearily.

"But his prints didn't match the ones on the gun and glasses," Rankin finished.

"Fingerprints!" retorted Miss Withers scornfully. "Police put so much faith in technicalities like that that they forget to study motives and personalities. Not to speak of wedding rings."

They both stared at her. "Come, come!" Miss Withers chided, "Don't tell me you didn't notice that the ring you took from the dead girl's finger was too wide for the mark it was supposed to have left!"

"Go on," Macy said.

"You might start wondering why somebody took a narrow wedding ring off Eileen's finger and put on a wide one," the schoolteacher snapped. "In my opinion the girl wasn't wearing her own wedding ring while she was here waiting for her divorce. Or else —" Here she stopped short. "If it's not asking too much, could you tell me whether or not you've officially announced the murder of Eileen Travis?"

They shook their heads.

"Then," continued Miss Withers, "I suggest that you don't. Give out the story that the body has tentatively been identified as somebody else — any girl on your list of missing persons. You can always issue a corrected statement later."

Macy nodded. "So the killer will think he got the wrong girl maybe?"

Miss Withers smiled. "Sometimes it helps to toss a monkey wrench into the machinery."

"Could be, if Sheriff Kehoe will go for the idea." Macy seemed friendlier now. "You know, ma'am, we phoned New York about you, and they said at Centre Street that once in a while you made a lucky guess."

"Bless Inspector Piper's black Irish heart," murmured Miss Withers. Then she shrugged. "Well, here's another guess. Do you know a man named Larry Koontz, who is a shill at the Wheel of Fortune?"

Macy frowned and shook his head, but Rankin brightened. "Sure we do, Tom. That's Molly's husband — the girl who works in the sheriff's office.

They busted up over some dame, and she's been crying her eyes out."

"Really? Things like that make me resigned to my state of single blessedness. Do you know where Mr. Koontz lives?"

They didn't, but said that they could easily find out. "We'll give you a ring," Macy promised.

Alone again, Miss Withers went down to dinner, came back again, and finally was in the midst of giving her hair its requisite hundred strokes preparatory for bed when the call came.

"Hello? Hello, Detective Rankin? Well, did you find Mr. Koontz's address?"

"Why, yes, ma'am, we did." There was an unpleasant overtone in the voice of Detective Rankin. "He was living out at the Iris Apartments. But he moved — a few minutes ago. Or rather, they moved him. Over to Callahan's Mortuary."

"*What?*"

"Acting on your tip, Macy and I went out there. The door was open, the lights were all on, and there was Koontz in the kitchenette with an ice-pick between his shoulder blades."

There was a moment of silence. "Oh, dear!" said Miss Withers.

"Oh dear is right. You can say the rest at the station. We're downstairs, so get a move on."

Miss Withers moved, getting into her dress again and taking two aspirins, fancying that this might be a hectic night. Neither Macy nor Rankin had much to say on the way to the station. "It seems odd to me that none of the neighbors heard or noticed anything," the schoolteacher finally offered.

"Lady, nobody in this town is ever home between ten o'clock and two or three in the morning. The visitors are playing, and the natives are working in the joints." Rankin pulled the car up outside police headquarters. In spite of all the haste Miss Withers found herself cooling her heels in a shabby outer office for some time.

At last the inner door opened and she was beckoned inside, where she faced Detectives Macy and Rankin, a beak-nosed sexagenarian with a sheriff's star pinned to the front of his Stetson, and a thin, freckled woman with red eyes whom she recognized as the one who had transcribed her statement earlier that day. "This is Molly Koontz," the sheriff said. "Ma'am, suppose you tell us why you were so interested in her late husband just before he got stabbed."

"Gladly," answered the schoolteacher, "If you'll answer a question for me, or have Mrs. Koontz answer it." Taking silence for consent, she told of her brief meeting with the shill who worked at the Wheel of Fortune, and who had had so little good fortune himself. "He knew the answer to all this, or he thought he did," she concluded.

The sheriff nodded noncomittally. "Now," said Miss Withers, "it's my turn. Forgive me, Mrs. Koontz, for prying into your family troubles but I understand that you and your husband separated over another girl."

"Girl! You mean girls. Larry played the field."

"Was one of those women Eileen Travis?"

Molly Koontz shrugged. "I dunno. We broke up a couple of months ago. Only we stayed in touch, sort of. Larry used to take me to dinner now and then, or borrow a few dollars when he got to gambling."

"Well, can you name any girl he was interested in?"

"No — only there was one little number who kept phoning him — one of those southern girls who say 'honey-chile' and 'lil ol' me'. Her name was Thelma something."

"Thelma Pringle," Detective Rankin put in. "She's on our Missing Persons list."

"Maybe," Molly said. "I can tell you one thing. Any girl Larry went for was on the *zoftig* side — you know, plump. And well-dressed. Larry went for the dressy ones."

Sheriff Kehoe yawned and stood up, signaling that the session was concluded. "By the way," pressed Miss Withers, "did anyone happen to check Koontz's fingerprints with those on the murder gun?"

"We did," Macy said. "And they weren't. But the prints on the ice-pick matched the prints on the shotgun and glasses."

"Of course!" Miss Withers cried. "Then —" But the sheriff gestured, and she found herself propelled toward the door by Macy.

"Thanks for trying to help," he said, as he led her down the hall, unlocking the door of another office. "You better spend the night here. That couch in the corner isn't too bad."

"But you can't ——"

"Lady, whenever a cop hears anybody say anything about 'you can't do this to me!' he just laughs. Now take it easy. Maybe you'll go to sleep and dream up a solution to this case." He started out, then came back to remove a spare .38 pistol and a pair of handcuffs from the desk drawer. He indicated the door of the washroom, and went out, locking the door firmly from the outside.

Miss Hildegarde Withers sat herself down indignantly upon the rickety couch, and then caught sight of the telephone on the desk. She lifted the receiver and said, "I want to call New York City, collect!"

But the operator, stationed at a switchboard somewhere in the building, said genially but firmly, "Take it easy, ma'am. Tomorrow is another day."

"Really!" Miss Withers slammed down the phone. Leaving the harsh overhead light burning, she flung herself down on the couch, closing her eyes in order to concentrate better.

In her mind's eye she saw the partially-smoked cigar which had left no ashes in the tray, the thin white line around the dead girl's finger. She saw the two whiskey-stained glasses, the Scotch bottle, the shotgun, the ice-pick planted between the dapper shoulders of the man who thought he knew two thousand dollars worth

about the crime. But these clues kept mixing themselves up with other things that didn't matter, like the dead cactus around the adobe cottage, the black-eyed peas in the kitchen, the garbage can without any orange rinds, the golf clubs with the heads in their neat socks, the nylon hose, and the wedding ring . . .

Then she jerked awake at the sound of rapping at the door. She realized that she had a stiff neck and that daylight surprisingly filled the room. But the puzzle was all neatly solved. She knew the name of the murderer — and why. It was as easy as that. She was smiling pleasantly when she opened the door to Detective Macy."

"Mornin', ma'am," he said. "After you get fixed up a little, could you join us in the sheriff's office, please? Somebody we want you to meet." He waited patiently while Miss Withers washed her face and did what she could to straighten her hair. Then he led the way down the hall.

"When did the Travis woman give herself up?" the schoolteacher asked.

Macy stopped dead in his tracks. "How'd you know that?"

"Isn't it obvious? It was clear from the beginning that it was not her body in the bedroom, in spite of the New York clothes. The girl who lived in that cottage had stocked the kitchen with the makings of meals preferred south of the Mason-Dixon line. New Yorkers breakfast on coffee and orange juice, and there was no sign of an orange or an orange peel in the place."

Macy nodded. "I get it. Well, Eileen Travis read about the murder in the Los Angeles papers last night, and she hopped in her car and drove up here. She confessed —"

"Not to the murders?"

Macy laughed jovially. "No, ma'am. But here we are. Come in."

Sheriff Kehoe still sat at his desk, with his Stetson on the back of his head. Officer Rankin leaned against the window, and in the one comfortable chair sat a lovely, lush girl in a bright purple jacket and flannel slacks.

"Mrs. Travis," said the sheriff, half-arising, "this is the lady your mother hired to look you up and see if you were all right."

Eileen said coolly, "You may tell mother that I'm fine."

"Are you?" asked Miss Hildegarde Withers. "I wonder."

"We're sorry, Miss Withers, that we had to keep you here all night," the sheriff went on. "But we didn't want any more killings, and the New York police asked us to take special care of you."

"Thank you so much. And now, what is all this about Mrs. Travis's confession?" Miss Withers beamed brightly at them all.

"I simply admitted," Eileen burst forth, "that I'd taken a cottage here to establish legal residence, and then hired a girl I met in a gambling house to live there in my name."

"A girl with a southern accent, named Thelma Pringle?"

Eileen nodded. "I knew it wasn't

strictly legal, but I didn't want to be stuck here when I could be in Los Angeles. And besides, I had good reason to believe that George would stop at nothing to keep me from getting my decree — to keep me from being able to testify against him legally later on."

"You said 'stuck here'?" questioned the sheriff ominously.

"I didn't mean that." Eileen flashed her soft dark eyes at him. "It's just that I don't gamble, and I love ocean swimming . . ."

"We got pools," the sheriff said glumly. He looked at Detective Macy. "Better get George Travis up here, right away."

Eileen was open-mouthed. "You mean my husband is actually in town? Then that proves ——"

Sheriff Kehoe wasn't listening to her. "And ask Molly to come in with her notebook," he called after the departing detective. There was a long, tense period of waiting, during which Miss Withers saw that Officer Rankin was having difficulty in keeping his eyes off Eileen's slim, bare, brown ankles.

Finally George Travis, even more disheveled and unshaven than before, was ushered into the room. He glared at his wife.

"Hello, George," she said, in a low voice that dripped with acid. "Isn't it a shame that your hired hoodlum shot the wrong girl?"

Travis said nothing, but sank down quickly on a hard chair, his head in his hands. A moment later Detective Macy came in with Molly, who was still puffy-eyed. But she had her pencil and notebook.

"Now that we are all here, nice and cosy-like," began the sheriff, "we'll start at the beginning and see if we can straighten this out."

"I suggest," Miss Withers interrupted pleasantly but firmly, "that we start at the end instead. It will save a lot of time. You see, I know who the murderer is."

She met their blank stares with a bright smile. "It all came to me when I was asleep."

"Dreams, yet!" Detective Rankin muttered softly.

But the schoolteacher had the floor. "It's obvious that Mr. Koontz was killed to cover up the first murder, so when we solve the killing of Thelma Pringle we solve them both. Shall we take up the most important clue — the cigar?"

Rankin moved as if to silence her, but Detective Macy was nodding slowly, and the sheriff made no move. "The cigar," went on Miss Withers, "was obviously a plant. It was left as a false clue, having been smoked beforehand. Moreover, the killer was not used to cigars, for he forgot to remove the band and he held it in his lips, like a cigarette, leaving no teeth marks as real cigar smokers do. I've watched Inspector Piper, back home, mangle a cigar so that I didn't know if he was chewing or smoking it."

The sheriff nodded, looking at his own well-filled ashtray. "Moreover," Miss Withers continued, "Thelma

Pringle was not killed by mistake, in place of Eileen here. She was killed by somebody who knew her and who wanted her dead. She was shot in the face with a shotgun, either by someone who wanted to spoil her looks or who wanted to prevent identification, at least temporarily ——"

There was a brief period of silence, broken when Molly Koontz dropped her pencil and had to grope for it on the floor.

"Now look here," the sheriff said, "you're trying to tell us that the killer walked in with a shotgun, had a drink with the girl, and then ——"

"The drinks could have been set up afterward," Miss Withers pointed out. "There was a distinct reek of whiskey in the garbage."

"But the girl would have yelled for help if she saw somebody come at her with a shotgun," Detective Rankin put in.

"Who would have heard her? The murder was committed at an hour when almost everybody in Las Vegas is away from home. I have my own theory as to how the gun came into the house. It could have been butt-down in a golf bag, with a golf-club stocking over the muzzle. But never mind that for a moment. The point is — *the murderer of Thelma Pringle was a woman!*"

"A woman who left a man's full-size fingerprints?" Rankin argued.

"Some women have large hands." Miss Withers looked at Molly Koontz, who had forgotten to take notes. The woman suddenly jumped to her feet.

"I didn't do it, I didn't! You can take my prints ——"

"Relax, Molly," the sheriff said. "We already got 'em off the compact in your desk, and you didn't do it."

"I wasn't suggesting that she did," Miss Withers said, "even though her husband had been mixed up with Thelma Pringle. However, I think that they got the idea of blackmail separately. You see, the murder was well planned — designed to throw an even heavier weight of guilt on George Travis. The killer did not know that Travis was out on bond, but she did know that if a body identified as that of his wife was found in Las Vegas, he would be suspected of having instigated the murder. Even if the identity of the corpse came to light, it would still appear that his agents had merely struck down the wrong woman. Only one person had a motive to involve George Travis in *more* trouble than he was already in — and that person came into the cottage with a shotgun and killed the girl who was trying to blackmail her, thus killing two birds with one stone."

"Very neat," the sheriff said. "But if you're ——"

"I certainly am," Miss Withers cried breathlessly. "Eileen Travis, I accuse you of a double murder."

It should have been a rousing climax, but it fell flat as a pancake. Eileen was shaking her head, almost pityingly. Macy's expression was sorrowful, and Rankin was almost laughing. The sheriff smiled a weary, patient smile. "All done, ma'am?"

"Isn't — isn't that enough?"

"Plenty. Very ingenious, too. Only I think that you ought to know, ma'am, that when she came in Mr. Travis insisted we take her fingerprints, and they don't match the ones on the gun, glasses, or ice-pick!"

Miss Withers felt slightly faint. "But they *have* to!"

"Officer Rankin here is our fingerprint expert," the sheriff said. "He's read all the books."

Rankin beamed.

"But there must be some mistake!" cried Miss Withers.

"There is, and you've made it." The sheriff looked at a big silver watch the size of a teacup. "Miss Withers, there's a plane out of here at nine o'clock, which gives you just half an hour. Macy you see that she gets packed and on that plane and out of my hair!"

Sheriff Kehoe was standing up now, his voice rising to a deep baritone roar. Miss Withers, the bitter taste of defeat in her mouth, backed hastily out of the door.

There was a long silence. The sheriff sat down again, lighted a cigar, and mopped his forehead. "Now, like I said, we'll start at the beginning, and see if we can straighten this out. You first, Mrs. Travis. We'll take your statement, and Molly will type it out so you can sign it and go."

Eileen spoke carefully and slowly, for some time. Her statement was in the typewriter when the telephone on the sheriff's desk rang shrilly. He picked it up. "Kehoe. What? Oh, Macy. What's the matter, did you let her miss the plane?"

There was a short pause, and then the sheriff heaved a deep sigh of relief. "Good, good. I'm glad you reported — it's a load off my mind." He started to hang up, and then jammed the instrument against his ear "What? What final request?"

The others in the room all strained their ears, but they could hear only a jumble of sounds from the other end of the line. At last the sheriff put down the phone, and said, "Rankin!"

"Yes, sheriff?"

"You're supposed to be our fingerprint expert. This case is at a dead end because we can't find any suspect whose prints fit those on the murder weapons and the drinking glass. Tell me, is there any way a person could deliberately leave false prints?"

The burly young detective swallowed. "There — there's a photographic process on gelatin, but it's easy to detect because it doesn't leave pore marks . . ."

But the sheriff wasn't listening. He turned slowly toward Eileen Travis, who still leaned back in the one easy chair, her bare brown ankles crossed, a cigarette dangling from her full lush mouth. She stared back at him, letting the ashes fall to the floor.

"Mrs. Travis," he asked with ceremonious politeness, "would you mind very much if I asked you to take off your shoes?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came.

"It's been suggested by the lady

who just left," continued Sheriff Kehoe, "that fingers are not the only portions of the human body that have distinctive skin patterns. With your permission — or without it — we'd like to take your *toeprints!*"

ABOUT THE STORY: *Your Editor's first reaction on finishing Stuart Palmer's "Fingerprints Don't Lie" was one of sheer disbelief. If a criminal leaves impressions of her toes on a shotgun, an ice-pick, and a drinking glass, is it possible that the police, trained observers, would assume the prints to be fingerprints? — big ones, even for a man. We sat and thought about it, and the more we stewed in the juice of our own thoughts, the more incredible it seemed. Yet we realized that the entire validity of the story stood or fell on this vital point.*

Being realistic, and blessed with a passionate curiosity, we took off one of our shoes and socks and tried to examine the underparts of our own toes. Not being a contortionist, the results of our investigation were inconclusive. So we decided to send out an S.O.S. (Save Our Story): we telephoned the one person in whose expert knowledge of practical police procedure we have complete confidence — the dean of true crime writers, Ed Radin, whose latest book is TWELVE AGAINST THE LAW *and who is currently doing a weekly series for King Features Syndicate called "Secrets from the Archives of Crime."*

We posed the problem to Ed.

Ed said: Boy, that's hard to swallow.

We said: Well, here's your golden opportunity. You keep preaching that truth is stranger than fiction. Is it? Can the print of a toe be mistaken for an unusually large print of a thumb?

We could feel Ed scratching his head: I don't know. Wait a minute —

We interrupted: Don't look at your own toe — we've already tried that. How about checking with the police lab?

Ed said: I'll do that little thing.

And what do you know? It could!

Yes, unbelievable as it may seem at first shock, a toeprint looks exactly like a large finger- or thumbprint. A toeprint has all the proper characteristics — pattern, ridges, whorls.

Your Editor goes on record here and now that never again will we be skeptical: truth is stranger than fiction — that's why fiction only seems stranger than truth. And all detective-story writers and detective-story readers should doff their collective hats to Stuart Palmer for thinking up a factually accurate and brand-new wrinkle on the old fingerprint chestnut — a neo-classic clue, and "one for the books" . . .

(Continued from other side)

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Up to that point, it had been a simple case of lost property—a complete fan-dancer's wardrobe, consisting of two feather fans and a pair of white slippers. But when the gorgeous Cheri Chi-Chi shows up to claim it, she seems to think she has lost a *wounded saddle horse!* Then—Perry's bewilderment hits bottom when his shapely client suddenly steals his car and disappears . . . and later is found burying a blood-stained fan!

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